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**The Yazidi Experience: their Struggles as a Minority in a
Muslim-Dominated Region, the 2014 ISIS-led Genocide
against them, and their Consequent Migration to Europe**

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*To all the extraordinary individuals
I had the privilege to meet in Serres*

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the post-2014 migration of Yazidis from Iraq to Europe in the aftermath of the genocidal campaign by the Islamic State. As a minority ethnic and religious group from the Middle East, the Yazidis have long endured historical persecution and discrimination. The study begins by examining the historical, religious, ethnic, and sociopolitical factors influencing Yazidi migration decisions. It subsequently delves into the ISIS genocidal campaign against the Yazidis, revealing the staggering numbers concerning executions, kidnappings, and instances of sexual enslavement suffered by the community. Analyzing the consequences of the genocide on the group, the research reveals the forced displacement of thousands of Yazidis in Kurdistan as internally displaced persons (IDPs) and in neighboring countries like Syria and Turkey as refugees and the harsh living conditions endured by Yazidis in these locations. Lastly, the thesis provides a comprehensive overview of the routes, networks, and strategies employed by Yazidis in their journey from Iraq to northern European countries. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the study integrates firsthand research and interviews conducted at the Refugee Community Center in Serres, Greece, a pivotal transit point of Yazidi migration. Furthermore, through a quantitative methodology, it sheds light on the statistical trends of the Yazidi migration, focusing particularly on three key countries, Greece, Germany, and the Netherlands.

Extended abstract

Questa tesi si propone di esaminare la migrazione degli Yazidi dall'Iraq all'Europa dopo il 2014, concentrandosi sulle complesse dinamiche e i molteplici fattori che hanno influenzato questo fenomeno migratorio. Gli Yazidi, una minoranza etnica e religiosa del Medio Oriente, hanno affrontato gravi persecuzioni e discriminazioni nel corso della loro storia, con l'ultima perpetrata dallo Stato Islamico (ISIS) a partire dall'estate del 2014. Il presente studio si propone di analizzare le radici storiche, religiose, etniche, e sociopolitiche che hanno influenzato le decisioni di migrazione degli Yazidi. Attraverso un'approfondita esplorazione della complessa identità yazida, che ha subito molteplici trasformazioni nel corso dei secoli, si cercherà di comprendere il contesto storico-culturale che ha portato alla migrazione della comunità.

L'analisi si concentrerà successivamente sulla campagna genocida dello Stato Islamico contro gli Yazidi, che ha causato una vasta gamma di atrocità, tra cui esecuzioni di massa, rapimenti e schiavitù sessuale. Si esamineranno dettagliatamente le conseguenze di questa tragedia sulla comunità yazida, con particolare attenzione al massiccio sfollamento che ha coinvolto migliaia di individui, costretti a fuggire dalla loro terra d'origine, il Sinjar, al Kurdistan Iracheno o verso altre regioni limitrofe del Medio Oriente, in particolare Siria e Turchia. L'indagine affronterà anche le sfide e difficoltà affrontate dagli Yazidi all'interno dei campi profughi e nei centri di accoglienza nei quali hanno vissuto nell'ultimo decennio, evidenziando le dure condizioni di vita e le problematiche legate alla reintegrazione economica e sociale.

Infine, la tesi offrirà un'analisi dettagliata delle rotte, dinamiche, motivazioni e strategie migratorie seguite dagli Yazidi nel loro percorso dall'Iraq verso paesi dell'Europa settentrionale, esaminando la loro ricerca di sicurezza, stabilità e opportunità in Europa. Si cercherà inoltre di comprendere meglio le dinamiche sociali e relazionali che guidano le scelte migratorie degli Yazidi e la loro preferenza per determinati paesi di insediamento. Utilizzando un approccio quantitativo, lo studio si concentrerà sulle tendenze statistiche della migrazione della comunità, con particolare attenzione su tre paesi chiave, ovvero Grecia, Germania e Paesi Bassi. Inoltre, attraverso una metodologia qualitativa, lo studio integrerà una ricerca sul campo e interviste condotte presso il Community Center per i richiedenti asilo a Serres, in Grecia, punto di transito cruciale della migrazione yazida.

Abbreviations

AKP – Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*)

Daesh – *ad-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi al-‘Irāq wa-al-Shām*

DIBs – Disputed Internal Boundaries

GoI – Government of Iraq

HDP – Peoples’ Democratic Party (Turkish: *Halkların Demokratik Partisi* / Kurdish: *Partiya Demokratîk a Gelan*)

HPÊ – Sinjar Defense Forces (*Hêza Parastina Êzîdxanê*)

IDP – Internally Displaced Person

IOM – International Organization for Migration

ISIS – Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

KDP – Kurdistan Democratic Party (*Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê*)

KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government

KRI – Kurdistan Region of Iraq

LHI – Lifting Hands International

OHCHR – Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

PKK – Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*)

PMF/PMU – Popular Mobilization Forces/Units (*Hashd Al-Shabi*)

PUK – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (*Yekîtiya Nîştimanî ya Kurdistanê*)

SDF – Syrian Democratic Forces

UN – United Nations

UN HRC – United Nations Human Rights Council

UNAMI – United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

YBŞ – Sinjar Resistance Unit (*Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şengalê*)

YPG – People’s Protection Unit (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*)

ZÊD – Zentralrat der Êzîden in Deutschland

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Introduction

I learned about the existence of the Yazidi community approximately a year ago while looking for curricular internship opportunities abroad. Considering my keen interest in migration studies, I sought to engage in fieldwork on this topic. After extensive online research, I stumbled upon an internship opportunity at the Refugee Community Center of Serres, Greece, managed by the NGO Lifting Hands International (LHI). The informational materials of the internship indicated that the majority of individuals residing in the nearby reception facility, commonly known as a refugee camp, and participating in the center's activities, were Yazidis. N

The Yazidis are an ethnic and religious minority in the Middle East with a rich history and a unique culture deeply rooted in their religious beliefs and practices. Central to their faith is the veneration of Tawusi Melek, a figure often misunderstood as Satan, which has led to centuries of persecution and discrimination by dominant Muslim groups. The last and most lethal persecution took place in the summer of 2014 when the Islamic State launched a genocidal campaign targeting the Yazidi community in the Sinjar district, the Yazidi heartland in Iraq. However, despite facing centuries of oppression, the Yazidis have demonstrated remarkable resilience, preserving their distinct identity and religious practices throughout history. Diasporas and mass migrations have been recurring strategies employed by Yazidi communities to survive. The last ongoing mass migration began in 2014 following the ISIS genocide that involved the execution, capture, and enslavement of thousands of members, and prompted the displacement in Kurdistan of more than 250,000 Yazidis and the migration to Europe of over 100,000 individuals. Many of those who seek refuge in Europe pass through the Serres refugee camp, a structure specifically designated by the authorities to accommodate Yazidi asylum seekers awaiting decisions on their asylum applications in Greece.

Prior to encountering the informational materials provided by LHI stating that most of the residents were Yazidis, I had never heard about this community before. It soon became clear that this obscurity in my awareness stemmed from the limited presence of this community in Italy, my home country. Unlike in countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, and Austria, where sizable Yazidi populations reside, Italy has minimal exposure to this minority group. During my time in Serres, for instance, I conversed with a colleague from Germany who remarked on her familiarity with Yazidis even before her work in Greece, underling the big presence of Yazidis in her country. In contrast, in Italy, only a handful of individuals, including the cartoonist Zerocalcare, are known to have awareness of Yazidis' existence. Zerocalcare, known for his devotion to the Kurdish cause, visited the district of Sinjar (known also as Shengal or Shingal depending on the language, which, for

consistency, I will refer to as Sinjar in the thesis) in Iraq, in the spring of 2021. His experience led him to create a comic titled “*No Sleep Till Shengal*”, which sheds light on the complexities faced by the Yazidis in Iraq following the genocide.

Without further ado, I chose to base my thesis on the Yazidi community and their post-genocide migration to connect it with my internship at the Community Center of Serres, managed by Lifting Hands International (LHI), an American NGO dedicated to supporting refugees worldwide across more than twenty locations. Situated just a short distance from the two asylum seekers’ reception facilities of Serres, the Community Center serves as a safe space where asylum seekers residing in these facilities can gather and socialize, receive psychosocial support, participate in various educational and recreational activities aimed at promoting their well-being, cultivate existing skills, and acquire new ones to enhance their resilience.

It comprehends various elements such as the Children-Friendly Space (CFS), providing children an environment for play-based development; the Female-Friendly Space (FFS), offering women a safe place to re-focus on themselves taking a break from family responsibilities through various activities; the Art and Recreation Space (Art&Rec), providing an inclusive space for teenagers and adults to promote skills and community building through sports, art, music, and more; the Education Program, focusing on providing a positive classroom experience learning English and German; the Professional Development Program, equipping community members with employability skills such as CV building and computer literacy; and the Distribution Program, ensuring access to essential hygiene products and food items for those lacking resources within the camp.

I worked at the Community Center for two months from July to September 2023, while I was actively involved in the Children-Friendly Space, Art and Recreation Space, and Distribution Program. Each day, I facilitated various activities for hundreds of children, teenagers, and adults attending the Community Center, while also ensuring the distribution of hygiene and food items to those who did not have access to them inside the camps. Indeed, upon receiving their asylum application outcomes, regardless of whether the decision is positive or negative, residents of the camps cease to receive food and financial support from the Greek authorities. This method leaves individuals vulnerable during the transitional period between receiving their asylum application response and obtaining the travel documents (in the case of a positive outcome) or reapplying for asylum (in the case of a negative outcome). Recognizing this critical gap, LHI provides weekly distribution of food and hygiene items to these individuals.

During my time in Serres, there was a predominance of Yazidi individuals among the participants in LHI’s activities. Through interactions with them, I gained deeper insights into the Yazidis’ culture,

language, religion, and customs. While I adhered to ethical guidelines that prohibited direct questioning of residents, many voluntarily shared their histories, especially those proficient in English, offering firsthand testimonies of their experiences. Numerous mentioned fleeing their homeland, Sinjar, when they faced the incursion of the Islamic State, and subsequently residing in camps in Kurdistan over the past decade. Someone recounted the difficult living conditions inside these structures, highlighting the vital role of NGO activities for which they translated and worked in alleviating their hardships. Some even shared accounts of intimate experiences such as joining militias to defend Sinjar when ISIS arrived or being captured by police while attempting to cross the border between Turkey and Greece.

A poignant aspect of my experience was witnessing the profound impact of displacement on Yazidi children, many of whom were born and raised in Kurdish camps and affectionately referred to them as “*mal*”, *home* in Kurmanji, their native language. It was evident that their upbringing in such environments had instilled in them a continuous survival mindset; during activities at the Children-Friendly Space, for example, they would take as many materials and objects as possible, uncertain if they would be available the following day. However, enthusiastic to share their cultures, almost every child and teenager, and even adults sometimes, took the opportunity to teach me basic Kurmanji words and phrases. Each day at the Community Center became a vibrant cultural exchange and a journey of discovery about the community. For instance, during one particularly hot and sunny day, we organized a water-based activity for the children. It was then that we learned Wednesday is the sacred day for Yazidis, during which they abstain from washing themselves. As a mark of respect for their beliefs, we promptly discontinued the water activity upon this revelation. In general, everyone desired to share pictures or insights about their cultures, birth towns or villages, favorite meals, and Yazidi and Iraqi customs and traditions. These moments of cultural exchange and connection highlighted the resilience and rich heritage of the Yazidi community, underscoring the importance of sharing their stories.

This immersive experience into the Yazidi culture and individuals’ narrations was possible because the LHI Refugee Community Center was located just around a hundred meters from the two facilities accommodating Yazidi asylum seekers. The first camp (referred to as Camp 1), established in 2016, initially housed around 200-300 individuals. Over the years, its capacity gradually increased, reaching approximately 600 Yazidis by 2018. Notably, Camp 1 was exclusively designated for Yazidi asylum seekers to shield them from discrimination and persecution often encountered in facilities with a Muslim majority. With the influx of new arrivals in the fall of 2019, Camp 1 became overcrowded, necessitating the establishment of a second camp (Camp 2), which opened in September of the same year. Initially, even Camp 2 exclusively housed Yazidis. However, in early 2021, Greek authorities

initiated a shift toward a mixed composition for Camp 2, accommodating individuals of various nationalities, including Afghans, Syrians, Congolese, and Sub-Saharan, who were transferred to Serres from the hotspots in the Greek islands. Authorities tried to maintain Camp 1 for Yazidis only and Camp 2 for a mix of nationalities.¹

The dynamics changed once again with the onset of the war in Ukraine in early 2022. Many individuals from Ukraine sought refuge in Greece, with a significant portion settling in Athens due to the presence of a Ukrainian community. Those without existing networks in Athens were directed to Serres. Consequently, Camp 2 became designated exclusively for Ukrainians, with all residents of that camp being relocated to Camp 1, which became composed of Yazidi, Syrian, Afghan, Congolese, and Sub-Saharan individuals. However, by 2023, several Ukrainians opted to return to their homeland despite ongoing conflict because staying longer in a refugee camp was not an option for them. Additionally, the beginning of 2023 represented the period when most Afghan residents received asylum responses, prompting their departure from the camps, and transfers from the islands ceased. Consequently, from early 2023 until September 2023, when I concluded my tenure in Serres, the demographic composition reverted to predominantly Yazidi residents. Spontaneous arrivals of Yazidis continued, as they were aware that Serres facilities provided a haven specifically established for their community. As of September 2023, approximately 1,500 individuals resided in the two facilities, with around 1,400 being Yazidis and the remaining 100 consisting of other nationalities such as Ukrainians, Syrians, Afghans, and Sub-Saharan.²

The demographic fluctuations within the facilities in Serres are indeed rapid and pronounced. For instance, during the winter months, the average population in the two camps typically ranges between 600 and 800 individuals, while, in summer, this number surges to approximately 1,500 people, nearing the maximum capacity of both Camp 1 and Camp 2 combined. This seasonal influx can be attributed to favorable weather conditions and more activity among smuggling networks, making summer the preferred period for migrants to attempt crossing into Europe. The summer of 2022 witnessed a particularly significant influx of new Yazidi arrivals, resulting in around a hundred people being compelled to sleep outside the camps for approximately two weeks due to the facilities reaching maximum capacity. To avoid a recurrence of this issue, proactive measures were taken during the summer of 2023, when numerous individuals were transferred to alternative facilities across Greece in order to create space for new arrivals. However, to avoid these transfers in the next summers, rumors are circulating regarding the construction of a third camp in Serres.³

¹ Clavel, "Interview 2".

² Clavel, "Interview 2".

³ Conti, "Interview 3".

Period	Facilities	Number of residents	Nationality of residents
2016 – Summer 2018	Camp 1	~ 200-300 people	Yazidis (with some exceptions)
Summer 2018 – Summer 2019	Camp 1	~ 600 people	Yazidis (with some exceptions)
Summer 2019 – January 2021	Camp 1 + Camp 2	~ 1000 people	Yazidis (with some exceptions)
January 2021 – February 2022	Camp 1 + Camp 2	~ 900 people	Camp 1: Yazidis Camp 2: Afghans, Syrians, Congolese, Sub-Saharanans, and others
March 2022 – January 2023	Camp 1 + Camp 2	Between 800 (winter period) and 1,500 (summer period)	Camp 1: Yazidis, Afghans, Syrians, Congolese, Sub-Saharanans, and others Camp 2: Ukrainians
February 2023 – September 2023	Camp 1 + Camp 2	Between 800 (winter period) and 1,500 (summer period)	Yazidis (with some exceptions)

Figure 0.1: Evolution of Serres' Reception Facilities. Source: My own elaboration of data from Clavel, Conti, and IOM Greece.

Between July 2019 and March 2022, the management of the Serres facilities was a collaborative effort between the Greek authorities and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Throughout this period, the camps benefitted from the presence of medical professionals, social workers, and psychologists active in the camps. Lifting Hands International (LHI) partnered with IOM to ensure a safe and supportive environment for the residents. However, in March 2022, as part of a national migration plan, IOM was compelled to withdraw from its involvement in the Serres camps, along with several other facilities across the Greek mainland. Subsequently, for the past two years, the camps have been under the direct management of the Greek Ministry of Migration. Communication between LHI and the camp management has become limited, with the NGO seriously doubting the adequacy of medical and psychological support provided within the facilities.⁴

As soon as I knew that I would undertake the internship at the Community Center in Serres, I made the decision to center my thesis around the topic of Yazidi migration to Europe with the aim of integrating my academic pursuits with my practical experience. However, it was during my time at the center that my determination was further fueled, as firsthand exposure to the challenges faced by the Yazidis deepened my understanding and heightened my motivation. Therefore, the aim of the thesis is to explore the dynamics of the post-2014 Yazidi migration to Europe. To achieve this aim, four are the main objectives: examine the historical, religious, ethnic, diasporic, and cultural background of the Yazidis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the community and assess their potential influence on migration decisions; investigate the impact of the 2014 genocide perpetrated by ISIS as the primary catalyst for Yazidi migration to Europe; analyze the socio-

⁴ Conti, "Interview 3".

economic, political, and security factors motivating Yazidis to migrate from Iraq to Europe, along with the attractions and opportunities that draw them to specific European countries; and explore the migration routes, networks, dynamics, and trends of the Yazidi migration to Europe.

The thesis is structured into four chapters, each aimed at achieving specific objectives. The first chapter delves into the Yazidi community, examining various aspects: their lack of a dedicated nation-state, resulting in widespread dispersion, migrations, and diasporas; their complex and evolving identity shaped by historical, political, diasporic, and ethnic factors; Yazidism, their unique monotheistic religious and social system centered around Tawusi Melek, often misinterpreted and erroneously associated with Satan, leading to persecution; and the challenges inherent in their rich historical narrative, marked by persecution and oppression, from the establishment of the first Yazidi community in the 11th century to the division of the Yazidi groups between Iraq and Kurdistan in the 21st century. However, despite adversities, the Yazidis have consistently demonstrated resilience and developed strategies to overcome challenges.

The second chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the genocide perpetrated against the Yazidis by the Islamic State, commencing in August 2014. ISIS targeted Yazidis to eradicate non-Islamic groups and establish a Caliphate in Iraq and Syria. This chapter examines the physical and psychological suffering endured by Yazidis under ISIS captivity and the hardships faced by those who managed to escape to Kurdistan. It highlights the staggering scale of the massacre, categorized by the United Nations as genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and serious violations of international human rights law. Lastly, the chapter delves into the immediate aftermath of the genocide, including the strained relationship between Yazidis and Kurds, the forced displacement of over 250,000 Yazidis to internally displaced persons (IDP) and refugee camps, the challenges of reintegrating women survivors of sexual violence into the community, and the individual and collective psychological trauma endured by Yazidis.

The enduring repercussions of the genocide, particularly the significant long-term consequence of the mass migration of Yazidis to Europe, are examined in the third and fourth chapters of the thesis. The third chapter explores the factors compelling Yazidis to leave Iraq. This includes an analysis of the harsh living conditions of Yazidis in IDP camps in Kurdistan and refugee camps in Syria and Turkey; the obstacles preventing Yazidis from returning to their homeland, Sinjar, such as the complex political, military, and social landscape that emerged following its liberation from the Islamic State; and the widespread loss of trust in authorities, particularly the Iraqi, Kurdish, and Yazidi leaderships, that should protect minorities' rights and allow security and justice in Iraq. For these reasons, an increasing number of Yazidis are seeking refuge, stability, and safety in Europe.

The fourth chapter focuses on a comprehensive understanding of post-genocide Yazidi migration to Europe, whose routes, destination choices, and strategies are shaped by a complex interplay of historical, socioeconomic, and geopolitical factors. The chapter explores both the limited legal channels available for Yazidi IDPs to be resettled in Western countries and the numerous informal routes taken by Yazidis from Kurdistan to Turkey, Greece, and ultimately to northern European countries, covering the informal methods utilized by Yazidis to navigate the dangerous journey to safety, including engagement with smugglers, reliance on networks, and strategies to secure double asylum. Subsequently, the trends of these movements are analyzed in Greece, Germany, and the Netherlands, three key countries for the Yazidi migration. Finally, the migration is analyzed through the lens of network theory, underlining the reasons behind Yazidis' preference for resettlement in specific European countries over others.

The thesis employs two methodological approaches: quantitative data analysis and qualitative research through interviews conducted during fieldwork.

The quantitative approach utilizes data provided by official organizations specialized in migration and refugee studies, notably Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Commission, as well as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Incorporating data from these sources can pose challenges in estimating the precise numbers of Yazidis in Iraq before and after the genocide, as well as those in diaspora, in displacement, and migrating to Europe. However, the analysis, interpretation, and visualization of these data in personal graphics offer a foundational framework for understanding trends and patterns.

In contrast, the qualitative approach involves integrating firsthand research conducted at the Community Center adjacent to the reception facilities hosting asylum seekers in Serres, Greece, a pivotal transit point utilized by Yazidis in their migration from Iraq to northern European countries. This research draws upon insights and reflections gleaned from the diary I maintained during my time in Serres, documenting every significant event and observations, as well as interviews conducted with three directors of Lifting Hands International (LHI), the NGO managing the center. I had intended to conduct interviews with residents of the refugee camps to gather their perspectives and experiences firsthand. Unfortunately, due to ethical considerations and management restrictions, this proved unfeasible. Nevertheless, the interviews with LHI directors, conducted between August and September 2023 in Serres, Greece, provided valuable insights into various aspects of Yazidi migration and displacement. Questions and transcripts of the interviews can be found in the appendix at the end of the thesis.

The interviewees included Tara Clavel, who currently serves as the Country Director for LHI and has been with the organization since 2018, Harvey Gray, the current Human Resources Director and former Community Engagement Manager, and Rossana Conti, who is now the Director of Research and Development and previously served as the Art and Recreation Manager, both having been with LHI for approximately two years. Various topics were covered in the interviews, including the demographic composition of asylum seekers in the camps, the journey of Yazidis to Serres, the employment of smuggling networks, the household structures of arriving Yazidi asylum seekers, an overview of the asylum process, the significance of community networks in destination selection, and strategies employed by Yazidis to facilitate relocation to their desired countries. By addressing diverse themes, these interviews contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities encountered by Yazidis throughout their migration journey, underlying their experiences and decision-making processes as they seek safety and security in Europe.

Integrating these firsthand perspectives alongside the official data from authoritative sources enriches the thesis analysis and offers a valuable understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding Yazidi migration in the post-genocide era. Additionally, the thesis draws upon a range of existing research papers, books, and chapters written by scholars who have extensively studied the Yazidi community. Despite the challenge of locating literature on Yazidism authored directly by Yazidi writers, likely exacerbated by limited translations of Yazidi texts, there are notable academics who have contributed significantly to the understanding of Yazidi history, culture, religion, and migrations. Christine Allison is a British anthropologist who provided a comprehensive understanding of the Yazidi social organization, kinship structures, and religious practices through her fieldwork among Yazidis. Eszter Spät, a Hungarian anthropologist, has contributed valuable perspectives on identity, migration, and social change among Yazidis, drawing from her research among Yazidi refugees and diaspora communities. Irene Dulz, a German anthropologist, has conducted extensive research on Yazidi groups in Iraq and Germany, focusing on Yazidi religious practices, social organization, and migration experiences.

While not a traditional scholarly institution, a crucial role in advancing knowledge of the Yazidi community is provided by Yazda, a non-profit organization founded in 2014 in response to the Yazidi genocide perpetrated by ISIS in Iraq. Along with a vast range of advocating and humanitarian initiatives, the organization also engages in research efforts related to Yazidi history, culture, and migration experiences. The thesis employs the works of these scholars and institutions, along with other researchers in Yazidi studies, to provide a comprehensive understanding of Yazidi history, culture, genocide, and migrations.

In summary, the journey of discovery and engagement with the Yazidi community in Serres, Greece, coupled with the pressing need to shed light on their migration experiences following the 2014 genocide, has profoundly influenced the trajectory of this thesis. Through firsthand experience at the Refugee Community Center, interactions with Yazidi individuals, and interviews with people who have worked with Yazidis for many years, as well as data from official sources and studies of prominent scholars and institutions, a deep understanding of the Yazidi cultural, social, and historical background has been cultivated. This immersion not only reveals the complexities of their existence preceding the genocide but also underscores their resilience amidst the ISIS attack and the subsequent challenges encountered during displacement and the pursuit of refuge in Europe.

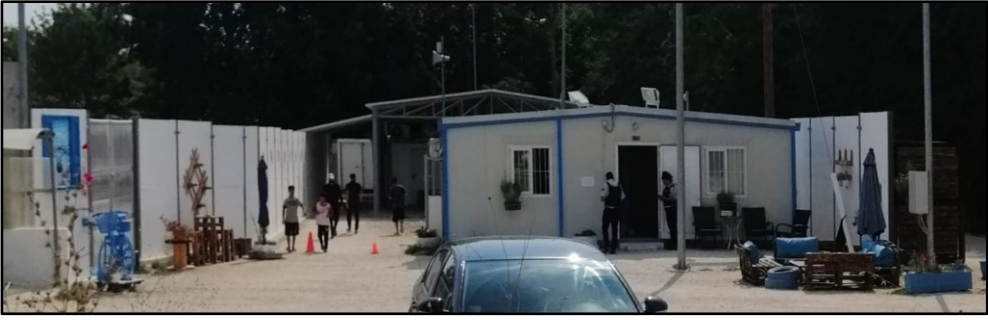


Figure 0.2: In order: Entrance of Serres Camp 1; External view of Camp 1; Internal view of Camp 1; Overview of the Community Center; External view of FFS tent; Internal view of CFS tent; Internal view of Education tent. Source: Personal Photos.

1 The Yazidis: Identity, Religion, History, and Diasporas of a Minority

1.1 Introduction to the Yazidi Community

The Yazidi community is among the oldest indigenous ethnic and religious groups in the Middle East. Traditional Yazidi settlement areas are primarily situated within Kurdish territories, spanning Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. Throughout their history, various diasporas have dispersed them globally, and, today, they are present in over 20 countries. Unlike other communities, the Yazidis have never had a dedicated nation-state. Instead, they have been ruled by different empires and nations. Currently, the global Yazidi population is estimated to range between 800,000 and 1,000,000 individuals, highlighting the widespread and diverse nature of this ancient community.

They refer to themselves using the terms *Yazidi*, *Yezidi*, or *Ezidi*. In this work, for consistency, I will use the term Yazidis, reflecting the prevalent word used among Yazidi individuals I met in Serres, Greece when asked about their ethnicity during my internship. There is no accordance regarding the origin of the name; some argue that it stems from the Sumerian root “*Ezidi*”, signifying “the ones who are on the right path and have the good and unspoiled spirit”. In contrast, others claim it originates from the word “*Yezdai*”, meaning “the creator” in Kurdish, or “*Ezdan*” which translates to “God” in Farsi.⁵ Furthermore, on the word of certain Ottoman archives, Yazidis, considering their name, are described as descendants of Yezid bin Muaviye, the second caliph of the Islamic ‘Umayyad caliphate. According to this account, a movement known as *Yazidiyya* existed in what is now northern Iraq during the 11th and 12th centuries. However, this group probably did not constitute the same people later recognized as Yazidis.⁶ The new Iraqi government also used this interpretation after the fall of the Ottoman Empire to distance the Yazidis from the Kurdish community by declaring them to be descendants of the Arab ‘Umayyad dynasty. Nevertheless, very few Yazidis accept this classification.⁷ Instead, scholars and the Yazidi community itself are confident about the modern community's connection to Sheikh 'Adi Bin Musafir, the founder of the '*Adawiyya* order, who settled in Lalish, an area in modern northern Iraq, at the turn of the 11th and 12th centuries.⁸

The official language spoken by the Yazidis is Kurmanji, a Kurdish dialect. However, due to their proximity to Arab neighbors and the Arabization campaigns led by Saddam Hussein in the 1970s and

⁵ Hawre, “The last genocide against the Yazidi people”, 111.

⁶ Allison, “The Yazidis”, 2.

⁷ Maisel, “Social Change Amidst Terror and Discrimination,” 3.

⁸ Allison, “The Yazidis”, 2.

the 1980s, many Yazidis also speak Arabic.⁹ In my observations in the refugee camps of Serres, I noticed that Kurmanji is a prevalent oral language, and, considering it is a dialect and not a formal language, most Yazidis are not able to write it down. Kurmanji can be written in both Latin and Arabic alphabets, but, given that most young Yazidis in Iraq attended schools in Arabic, they often opt to write in the Arab alphabet.

Yazidis practice Yazidism, a monotheistic and syncretic religious system centered around the figures of God and the revered Peacock Angel, known as Tawusi Melek. The Peacock Angel's veneration has led to unfounded accusations by outsiders of being devil worshippers due to the association of the peacock with the Devil in Islamic folklore, where it is believed to have helped Iblis enter paradise and seduce Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit.¹⁰ Because of accusations of being devil worshippers, they have been subjected to continuous persecution. Yazidis claim to have endured 72 *fermans*, or genocides, with the most recent and brutal one occurring in 2014 at the hands of the Islamic State (ISIS). Yazidism is a closed faith, prohibiting the conversion of proselytes and marriages outside the community. This exclusivity reflects the Yazidis' commitment to preserving the integrity of their religious, cultural, and social heritage.

Yazidism implicitly regulates the cultural and social structure of the Yazidi community, organized into three endogamous, hereditary, and separated classes with strict prohibitions against interclass marriages. Historically, Yazidis have conducted a simple rural life engaged in shepherding, farming, and breeding. However, during the second half of the 20th century, Yazidis faced difficult challenges in terms of social, political, and living conditions. Forced migrations imposed by Saddam Hussein's regime obligated Yazidis to abandon their rural properties and live and seek employment in urban areas, often resulting in high rates of unemployment and subsequent poverty. In response, many young Yazidis have joined the military forces of either Iraq or Kurdistan, while others have temporarily migrated to larger cities for seasonal jobs.

In the next paragraphs, various aspects related to Yazidis and Yazidism are investigated. The focus is on their global distribution and population estimates, the dichotomy in their identity regarding Kurdish affiliation, examination of their religious, cultural, and social system, and a historical overview spanning from the birth of the community to the tragic events of the 2014 ISIS genocide.

⁹ Van Zoonen and Wirya, "Perceptions and Reconciliation and Conflict", 8.

¹⁰ Spät, "The Role of the Peacock Sanjak," 109.

1.2 The Global Dispersion of the Yazidis

Exploring the global dispersion of the Yazidi community reveals a story richly entangled with historical migrations, diverse settlements, and the enduring spirit of a unique religious and ethnic group. Due to the drawing of political borders after the First World War and the numerous violent attacks and prosecutions throughout history, the community spread over several Middle Eastern countries and globally across different times diasporas. Today, according to some estimates by Tagay and Ortac, there should be between 800,000 and 1,000,000 Yazidis worldwide. The traditional settlement areas of Yazidis are situated within the Kurdish distribution area, spanning northern Iraq, northeastern Syria, southeastern Turkey, and western Iran. Beyond the Middle East, Yazidis also inhabit Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Russia regions (*Figure 1.1*). The majority of Yazidis originating from Turkey and Syria, but also a growing number of Yazidis from Iraq, now live in Germany. Additionally, Yazidis can be found in various other countries, including the United States of America, Canada, Australia, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, and Austria. This global dispersion reflects the complex patterns of migration and resettlement among the Yazidi community.¹¹

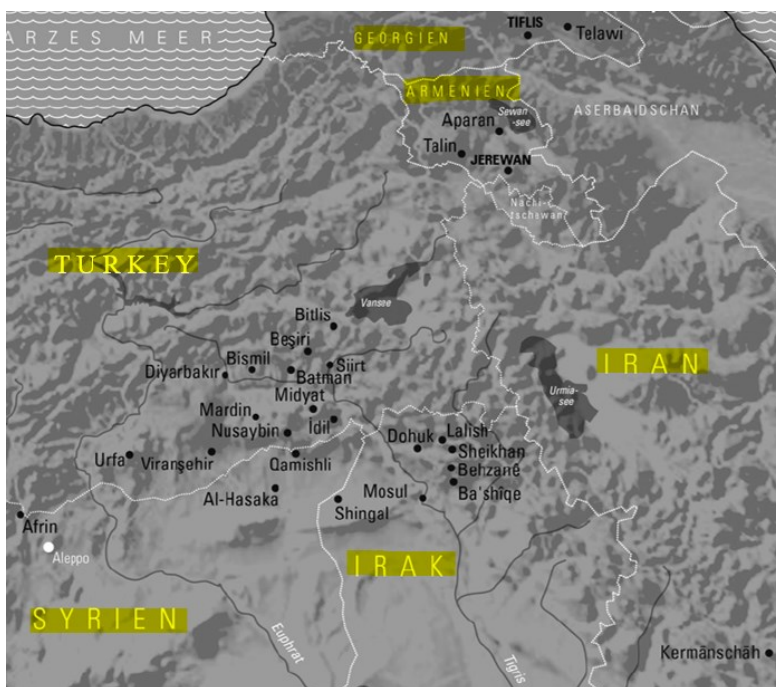


Figure 1.1: Settlement areas of Yazidis in the Middle East and Caucasus. Source: Tagay and Ortac, 2014.

Before the 2014 ISIS-led genocide and the subsequent displacement of Yazidis, the primary settlement area was in the north of Iraq, particularly in the districts of Sinjar or Shingal (respectively in Arabic and Kurdish) and Sheikhan, with an estimated population between 600,000 and 700,000.

¹¹ Tagay and Ortac, "Die Eziden," 29.

The Sinjar region hosted around 400,000 to 450,000 Yazidis, Sheikhan had approximately 60,000, Dohuk had another 50,000, the twin cities of Bahzane and Ba'shiqe housed 80,000, and around 10,000 resided in the capital city of Iraq, Baghdad.¹² After the ISIS genocide, approximately 96% of the Sinjari Yazidis fled the Sinjar region and now reside in refugee camps or private accommodations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) as internally displaced persons (IDPs). Most are in the Dohuk governorate, where eighteen IDP camps are holding around 350,000 Yazidis.¹³

Regarding other Middle Eastern countries, there are smaller Yazidi communities in Syria, Iran, Turkey, and Afghanistan. Before the onset of the civil war in 2011, approximately 150,000 Yazidis lived in Syria, especially in the regions of Aleppo and Al-Hasakah. However, their numbers likely decreased significantly due to the conflict. The Yazidi community faced various challenges, including the rise of fundamentalist Islamist groups and the systematic persecution against them. According to Yazda reports, Yazidis in Syria suffered systematic oppression in the religious, legal, and political spheres: they were denied the right to build religious centers and freely practice their faith, they were compelled to follow Islamic Sharia with their testimonies not accepted in court, and they were not allowed to obtain Syrian nationality, relegating them to the status of foreigners in the country. Presently, the Yazidi population in Syria has decreased to less than 5,000 individuals.¹⁴

Iran has a small Yazidi community with estimates ranging from one thousand to several thousand, mainly concentrated in the city of Kermanshah. However, due to the repressive religious policies of the country, they do not openly profess their faith, and little is known about them. In Turkey, only a few hundred Yazidis remain today, as most fled between the 1960s and the 1980s due to persistent religious and ethnic discrimination and received asylum in Germany.¹⁵ During the summer of 2023, while working in the Serres refugee camps, I encountered a couple of families who identified themselves as Yazidis and hailed from Afghanistan. This suggests the presence of a small Yazidi community in Afghanistan as well.

In the former Soviet countries, there are approximately 100,000 Yazidis, with significant populations in Armenia, Georgia, and Russia. This Yazidi community fled persecution in the Ottoman Empire during the 19th and 20th centuries and sought refuge in the Russian Empire. They were officially recognized as a distinct ethnic group in the censuses of both the Russian and Soviet empires during these two centuries. According to the 2011 census in Armenia, there were 35,272 Yazidis, primarily residing in the regions of Aragazotn and Armavir. In Georgia, due to the weak economy after the

¹² Ibid., 30.

¹³ Nicolaus and Yuce, "Sex-Slavery: One aspect of the Yazidi genocide", 200.

¹⁴ Yazda, "An uncertain future for Yazidis," 27.

¹⁵ Tagay and Ortag, "Die Eziden," 30-31.

collapse of the Soviet Empire, the Yazidi population has significantly decreased, and it is currently estimated at around 6,000, particularly in the cities of Tbilisi and Telavi.¹⁶ In Russia, Yazidis are particularly present in the region of Krasnodar Krai. The 2010 census reported 40,586 "*Yazidi Kurds*" and 23,232 "*Kurds*." However, Yazidi activists argue that the actual Yazidi population in Russia exceeds 60,000. This discrepancy arises because some Yazidis chose to be categorized as Kurds, avoiding specifying their religious affiliation to Yazidism. Additionally, others are classified as Armenians due to the "*Armenian*" endings of their surnames, reflecting the migration to Russia of many Yazidis from Armenia and Georgia following the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹⁷

The global Yazidi population outside the abovementioned regions ranges from 100,000 to 150,000. The largest diaspora community is in Germany, estimated at around 100,000 to 200,000, with significant populations in the federal states of Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Hesse, and Berlin.¹⁸ In North America, there are currently around 10,000 Yazidis, distributed between the United States and Canada. As mentioned above, little Yazidi communities can be found also in Australia, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, and Austria. The number of Yazidis in these countries will probably increase in the coming years considering that they have become destinations for refugees, making the emergence of a new Yazidi diaspora in Western societies likely.¹⁹

In conclusion, the Yazidi dispersion around the world emerges as a mix of resilience, adaptation, and the continuous pursuit of cultural and religious preservation regardless of historical and modern challenges. It serves as a testament to the strength of Yazidi identity, transcending borders and forging connections across different countries and continents.

1.3 The Identity of the Yazidis

The identity of the Yazidis is a complex matter in which historical, political, and diasporic influences converge to shape a narrative that transcends borders and challenges easy categorization. Yazidism is a religious as well as an ethnicity, and the issue of whether religious identity or ethnic identity is primary for Yazidis is contested. Some promote the Yazidi identity as distinct in both terms of religious and ethnic individuality, while others argue that being Yazidi automatically aligns with

¹⁶ Nicolaus and Yuce, "A Look at the Yezidi Journey," 88-91.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Tagay and Ortag, "Die Eziden," 30.

¹⁹ Nicolaus and Yuce, "A Look at the Yezidi Journey," 92-93.

Kurdish identity. Considering Yazidis speak the Kurdish dialect Kurmanji, and their settlement areas historically overlap with Kurdish territories, completely detaching from Kurdish identity has always been complex.²⁰ Commander Shesho of Sinjar Defense Forces (HPÊ) said: “We as Yazidis see ourselves as Kurdistani and not as Kurds, but our language is Kurdish, and we don’t want to isolate ourselves from Kurdistan, which is our homeland”.²¹ At the same time, Yazidis have always been surrounded by Arab communities, and, consequently, interactions and connections with these neighbors have not been infrequent.

In the classical definition, an ethnic group signifies a population that perpetuates itself biologically and shares fundamental cultural values, including institutions, beliefs, and behaviors. This involves individuals within the group identifying themselves, and external actors being able to categorize them, as a distinguishable group. Key factors such as language, politics, religion, and culture play a crucial role in maintaining ethnic boundaries, within social actors emphasizing these differences at the core of their perception of diversity. This definition could be perfectly applied to Yazidis, who view themselves as a distinct group in the Middle East due to differences in religion, language, and culture, a sentiment reciprocated by other groups. However, the essence of ethnic identity goes beyond superficial characteristics such as skin color, language, or shared values. Ethnic identity is a collective construct defined by both self and others, and, once constructed, it is not a permanent reality. Instead, it evolves through processes influenced by external interactions, group competition, and social, political, and cultural contexts. Identities are not independent actors but rather they always require an opposite, the *other* on to which the image of the *self* is projected.²²

Defining Yazidi identity is complicated not only for Yazidis themselves but also for scholars who usually contradict each other. Ackerman defines Yazidis as a double minority in the Middle East as a different cultural group as well as a different religious group: “First, as Kurds they represent an often-persecuted ethnic minority within their countries of origin; second, as followers of Yazidism they are a religious minority within the Muslim majority”.²³ In contrast, Nicolaus and Yuce assert that “The Yazidis base their identity entirely and exclusively upon religion. Their system of faith differentiates them from their neighbors. They may share language and certain aspects of culture with them, but any common interests and feelings of unity are noticeably fading”.²⁴

²⁰ Kavalek, “Competing Interests in Shingal District,” 15.

²¹ Nicolaus and Yuce, “A Look at the Yezidi Journey,” 101.

²² Fabietti, “L’identità etnica,” 42-50.

²³ Ackermann, “A double minority,” 156.

²⁴ Nicolaus and Yuce, “A Look at the Yezidi Journey,” 88.

The most important feature defining Yazidi identity and distinguishing it from the other groups has always been religion. However, there have been instances in their history where Yazidis opted to temporarily set their religious identity aside for political, economic, or survival considerations. This nuanced approach highlights the dynamic nature of identities, as described by Fabietti. He emphasizes that identities are not fixed but rather fluid realities and the cultural traits shaping an identity can undergo transformation over time, driven by processes of redefinition, adjustment, adaptation, or fusion.²⁵ Consequently, a comprehensive exploration of Yazidi identity requires an investigation of historical debates, political dynamics, and the diasporic experience. The interplay of these factors serves as a background to understand the evolution of Yazidi identity, highlighting how it responds to external influences and adapts culturally, contributing to the shaping of their collective identity.

1.3.1 The Evolution of Yazidi Identity in Iraq

In Ottoman times, the matter was simple since religion, rather than language or other ethnic factors, served as the basis of communal identity. Consequently, Yazidis and Sunni Muslim Kurds constituted two clearly distinct communities.²⁶ Radical changes arrived with the emergence of modern Kurdish nationalism; with the creation of a Kurdish autonomous area in Iraq in the 1990s, key figures of the Kurdish National Movement began referring to Yazidism as the original religion of the Kurds to establish a narrative of a common pre-Islamic religion, emphasizing the uniqueness of Kurdish identity. Kurdish political parties actively encouraged Yazidis to identify as ethnically Kurds, with Yazidism serving as a defining religious component. Consequently, Yazidis started to sympathize with Kurdish nationalism, and the Kurdish identity of several Yazidis strengthened.²⁷

This shift was particularly notable among Yazidis residing in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), whereas those from Sinjar were more reluctant. Several factors contributed to this distinction: Yazidis in the KRI had historically interacted more with Kurds due to their geographical proximity, they became integrated into the new Kurdish state structure, and they experienced the relative prosperity of Kurdistan that fostered the development of a Yazidi middle class influenced by Western education, wherein ethnic identity was primarily based on language rather than religion. Despite the increasing self-identification of Yazidis in Kurdistan as Kurds, social intermingling with Muslim Kurds was often limited.²⁸ The relationship between Yazidis and Muslim Kurds in the KRI was less candid than

²⁵ Fabietti, "L'identità etnica," 96-98.

²⁶ Spät, "Yezidi Identity Politics and Political Ambitions," 425.

²⁷ Savelsberg et al., "Effectively Urbanized," 106.

²⁸ Spät, "Yezidi Identity Politics and Political Ambitions," 427.

often portrayed by politicians. Statements such as “*I used to be an Arab, now it’s better to be a Kurd*” or “*I am half Kurdish, half Arab*” are not uncommon to hear.²⁹ According to Human Rights Watch, in the KRI, Yazidis who defined themselves as Yazidis and not Kurds risked persecution. Even the majority of moderate Muslim Kurds believed the Yazidis were unclean infidels. For instance, a Yazidi man who moved to Kurdistan in the mid-1980s stated that he encountered there a more systematic form of persecution than he experienced in the southern regions of Iraq:

“The Kurds would not buy from us or sell anything to us, so we became even poorer. Then they came and burned all our religious centers. They said we were traitors and secret police for Saddam, and so they killed us, too”.³⁰

Conversely, Yazidis from Sinjar were less willing to adopt a Kurdish identity. They have historically been surrounded by Arab tribes, developing with them social and cultural interactions. The challenges escalated with the Arabization campaigns promoted by Saddam Hussein in the 1970s and 1980s. Sinjari Yazidis were compelled to identify as Arabs in the Iraqi censuses of 1977 and 1987, they were forced displaced in Arab villages and towns, and they were prohibited from speaking Kurmanji. Paradoxically, the attempt to impose an Arab identity produced the opposite result, as most Yazidis from Sinjar maintained their Yazidi identity and, despite learning Arabic in school, continued to speak Kurmanji in familiar contexts. Notably, their dialect incorporated Arabic words, they started to use the Arabic alphabet, men wore Arab-style clothing, and other various customs reflected Arab influence.³¹ Nevertheless, even in Sinjar, some Yazidis aligned with the Kurdish cause from the 1990s, evident in many villages supporting the Peshmerga during the Iraq-Kurdistan conflict. Most Sinjari Yazidis were not against the Kurds, they just insisted on an exclusive Yazidi identity because, since the Kurds were Muslims, they found it illogical to label Yazidis as Kurds, asserting that religion plays a more pivotal role than language in shaping ethnic identity.³²

So, before the 2014 genocide, the Yazidi community presented a diverse variety of identities, ranging from one based on religion to another centered on a modern sense of nationalism with a shared language as a common denominator. However, the aftermath of the genocide brought a significant shift, driven by two key factors. Firstly, between 15 and 20% of Muslim Kurds sympathized with ISIS, welcoming extremists by showing them Yazidis’ homes. Secondly, the Yazidis perceived the withdrawal of the Kurdish Peshmerga from Sinjar during the ISIS onslaught as a betrayal, fostering resentment toward the Kurdistan Regional Government. Those who had embraced a Kurdish identity

²⁹ Savelsberg et al., “Effectively Urbanized,” 106.

³⁰ Anderson and Pellegrini, “The Iraqi Diaspora”, 70.

³¹ Savelsberg et al., “Effectively Urbanized,” 103-104.

³² Spät, “Yezidi Identity Politics and Political Ambitions,” 426-428.

were profoundly affected by the withdrawal, especially since the Peshmerga left without warning the local population. Consequently, most Yazidis distanced themselves from Muslim Kurds, increasingly viewing themselves as both religiously and ethnically distinct from their Kurdish neighbors.³³ In present-day Northern Iraq, only about 5 to 10% of Yazidis identify as Kurds, primarily those receiving a salary from the Kurdistan Government or politicians compelled to declare themselves as Kurds for political representation. A pervasive mistrust of Muslim Kurds persists among Yazidis, fueled by fears that, despite current assistance, Kurds might betray them again in the future.³⁴

Hence, while shared values such as religion, social rules, and collective memory form the core of Yazidi identity, it is essential to recognize that their sense of self is also shaped through interactions and differentiations with other groups of the Middle East, especially with Kurds and Arabs, but also with Christians, Turkmens, and various other ethnicities. This is particularly true in a complex social system, like that in which the Yazidis live, where various ethnic groups strive for survival. This dynamic identity construction reflects the understanding that once ethnic identity is established, it is not an eternal reality; instead, it is driven by external factors and the competition among groups competing for access to material or symbolic resources.³⁵

The idea that cultural differences result only from social and geographical isolation was rejected by Barth, who introduced the notion of the *ethnic paradigm*: a group's ethnicity is not a product of isolation, but rather it is intricately tied to its interactions with other groups, and the boundaries persist despite the movement of individuals across them. Ethnic distinctions do not result from a lack of mobility, contact, and information but rather involve social processes of exclusion and incorporation that maintain distinct categories. Interethnic contacts between groups traverse these boundaries and, therefore, ethnic distinctions do not depend on a lack of social interaction; instead, they often constitute the foundation elements of complex social systems. Interaction within such a social system does not lead to its dissolution; rather, cultural differences endure despite contact. Identity, therefore, is dynamic and continually subject to reformulation, responding to dynamic processes and social transformations, which in turn ensure the preservation of ethnic boundaries.³⁶

³³ Nicolaus and Yuce, "A Look at the Yezidi Journey," 95-101.

³⁴ Spät, "Yezidi Identity Politics and Political Ambitions," 426-428.

³⁵ Fabietti, "L'identità etnica," 95-100.

³⁶ Ibid.

1.3.2 The Evolution of Yazidi Identity in the Diaspora

Even the diaspora plays a very important role in the evolution of the identity of the Yazidis. Yazidis in the diaspora, whether in Georgia, Armenia, Germany, or other countries, continually negotiate their identity with modern environments, societies, and groups. Traditionally, being Yazidi always meant belonging to an oppressed minority and having to hide their identity and religion. However, Yazidis in the diaspora are experiencing a different paradigm in which, for the first time, they are not subjected to persecution and no longer need to hide their religious beliefs and practices. Consequently, conventional identifications and specified belonging of identity are progressively losing relevance in this new environment.³⁷ Moreover, the diasporic experience is generating the emergence of a new dynamic ethno-religious identity among Yazidis, further distancing them from the Kurdish mainstream. Depending on their geopolitical location, each Yazidi community is situated at a different and distinct stage of this process. The diaspora, therefore, serves as a pivot for the evolution of Yazidi identity, shaped by interactions with diverse cultural landscapes and the freedom to openly express their beliefs.³⁸ In the globalized world characteristic of diaspora communities, the interaction between Yazidis and outsiders, as well as how external individuals understand and depict Yazidi culture, is likely to play an important role in the self-definition of Yazidis.³⁹

For example, Yazidis in Transcaucasia, especially in Georgia and Armenia, have gradually distanced themselves from the Muslim Kurds. This shift became particularly evident during the armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan from 1992 to 1994 in which Yazidis chose to align with the Armenians, while Muslim Kurds supported Azerbaijan. Armenian Yazidis drew a clear demarcation between themselves and the Kurds, insisting they had nothing in common with them. Consequently, the Armenian political system acknowledged this distinction by granting separated minority seats in the parliament to both Yazidis and Kurds. Similarly, Georgian Yazidis followed an analogous process, distancing themselves from the Kurds.⁴⁰

Several Yazidis who live nowadays in Germany fled Turkey between the 1960s and the 1980s due to persecution, and Kurds also followed a similar path. Both groups perceive themselves as victims of Turkish oppression. Following these shared sentiments, Kurdish organizations in Germany sought to reintegrate Yazidis into the Kurdish community. Tensions and hostility persisted for several decades between Yazidis identifying themselves as a distinct ethnic-religious group and those aligning with

³⁷ Ackermann, "A double minority," 160.

³⁸ Nicolaus and Yuce, "A Look at the Yezidi Journey," 88.

³⁹ Kreyenbroek and Omarkhali, "Introduction to the special issue," 126.

⁴⁰ Nicolaus and Yuce, "A Look at the Yezidi Journey," 89-90.

Kurdish identity. Two organizations represented these divergent perspectives: the *Föderation der Ezidischen Vereine in Deutschland* (FKÊ), which focused on the “common Kurdish cause” and was connected to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), and the *Zentralverband der Êzîdîschen Vereine e.V.* (ZYD), which emphasized Yazidism as a distinct ethnicity and religion. In January 2017, these entities decided to merge and establish a new organization named *Zentralrat der Êzîden in Deutschland* (ZÊD) with a predominant pro-Yazidi identity orientation. This shift was likely influenced by the withdrawal of the KRG by Sinjar at the arrival of the Islamic State.⁴¹

As seen in this paragraph, the Yazidi identity is a complex and evolving concept, influenced by various factors. Ongoing historical debates about the primacy of religious versus ethnic identity, political dynamics that effort to incorporate Yazidis into the Kurdish community, and the diasporic experience, wherein various communities negotiate their belonging and adopt distinct perspectives, collectively impact Yazidi identity. As Barth underlines, the ethnic identity of a group is not a fixed entity but rather it has a fluid nature, dynamically shaped by interactions and differentiations with other groups.

1.4 Yazidism, the Religion of the Yazidis

Yazidism is a monotheistic and syncretic religious system that, while sharing doctrinal similarities with other major Abrahamic religions born in the Middle East, such as baptism, pilgrimage, and certain saints, remains a distinct and separate religious tradition. A peculiarity that sets Yazidism apart from other monotheism, for example, is the belief in reincarnation. Yazidis adhere to the concept of the transmigration of souls after death from one body to another. Nevertheless, they also believe in the existence of heaven and hell, which souls can reach upon achieving spiritual maturity.⁴² Yazidis assert that their religion is among the most ancient monotheisms in the world, dating back to the era before Christ. The roots of Yazidism are traced back to pre-Islamic times, ancient Iranian traditions, Zoroastrianism, and earlier Mesopotamian religions.⁴³ According to Mamu Farhad Othman, among the most important Yazidi intellectuals and former Iraqi Minister, Yazidism is the original faith of all the Kurds; with the Arab conquest of the Middle East, many Kurds converted to Islam, but Yazidis were the only ones who preserved the original faith and have continued to protect the religious tradition until today.⁴⁴ However, it was during the 11th and 12th centuries that Yazidism assumed a

⁴¹ Nicolaus and Yuce, “A Look at the Yezidi Journey,” 91-92.

⁴² Zoppellaro, *Il genocidio degli Yazidi*, 59.

⁴³ Maisel, “Social Change Amidst Terror and Discrimination,” 2.

⁴⁴ Zoppellaro, *Il genocidio degli Yazidi*, 46.

distinct shape. A crucial role was played by the mystic Sufi Sheikh ‘Adi Bin Musafir and his followers, who reinforced the hierarchical structure of clerics and laymen.⁴⁵

This religious tradition gained public and academic attention in the Western world from the 1850s with the publications of accounts by travelers and missionaries portraying Yazidis positively and romantically. However, perceptions shifted with the publication in the 1880s of “*Wild Kurdistan*” by the German author May, who depicted Yazidis as devil-worshippers. Even if this label was wrong and based on inaccurate speculations, it deeply influenced the Yazidis’ perception of outsiders. In the 1930s, Guidi defined Yazidism as an aberrant form of Islam, labeling Yazidis as “Muslims who do not profess Islam”. This definition gained widespread acceptance in the academic world, leading to a gradual loss of interest in Yazidi affairs. A renewed curiosity emerged in the 1990s when Yazidis themselves started to actively participate in discussions about their religion, sharing their sacred texts, which had always been only orally transmitted and kept secret from academics.⁴⁶

1.4.1 Religious Practices and Symbolism

Having explored the historical and cultural aspects of Yazidism, delving into their religious practices provides a deeper understanding of the faith’s complexity. Yazidis perceive God as a relatively remote and distant figure, and the connection with the divine takes place through Seven Holy Angels. Although called angels, they are not angels in the sense Christianity or Islam utilizes this word; they are considered emanations of the Godhead, who came into being. Throughout history, the Holy Angels appeared in human form at various points, most recently as Sheikh ‘Adi Bin Musafir, as well as in the form of prophets and mystics recognized in various other religions such as Adam and Jesus. The leader of the Angels is Tawusi Melek, known as the Peacock Angel, who is the most venerated among the Yazidis. Tawusi Melek is regarded as the Demiurge, designated by God for overseeing the world and responsible for all that happens on earth, both good and bad. Unfortunately, due to a misinterpretation of Tawusi Melek, often wrongly associated by outsiders with the figure of Satan, Yazidis have been accused several times of being worshippers of the devil. Nonetheless, Yazidis do not see Tawusi Melek as anything but divine.⁴⁷ Another reason why Yazidis have faced accusations of devil worship was that they don’t believe, as common, in God as a source of good and Satan as a source of evil; instead, they adhere to the belief in a singular source, God, encompassing both good

⁴⁵ Maisel, “Social Change Amidst Terror and Discrimination,” 2.

⁴⁶ Kreyenbroek and Omarkhali, “Introduction to the special issue,” 123.

⁴⁷ Allison, “The Yazidis”, 5.

and evil. It's individuals' choices through the heart, spirit, and mind that determine the locus of good and evil on Earth. A fundamental characteristic of Yazidism is the power of choice, and Tawusi Melek plays a crucial role in guiding humanity's decisions between good and evil.⁴⁸

Tawusi Melek holds such important significance in Yazidism that the most sacred object for Yazidis is the *sanjak*, a representation of the Peacock Angel. It is a metal statue depicting a peacock-like figure mounted on a candlestick (see *Figure 1.2*). To avoid any misconceptions, the religious leader in the mid-19th century was meticulous in clarifying that it is “only looked upon as a symbol, and not as an idol”: it serves as a symbol of a deity, not as a deity itself. According to religious tradition, there were seven bronze peacock *sanjaks*, corresponding to the seven Yazidi districts. These artifacts were believed to have been passed down from Salomon the Wise, handed down from king to king until they eventually came into the possession of Yezid bin Muawiya, the sixth caliph identified by Yazidis as an incarnated divinity. He, in turn, left them for his people, the Yazidis.⁴⁹

The *sanjaks* were traditionally kept in the house of the Yazidi Mir, contributing to the preservation of the Mirs' spiritual legitimacy as representatives of the Peacock Angel. Once or twice a year, the *Parading of the Peacock* ritual was performed, involving a tour to visit Yazidi villages, each situated in its designated district, accompanied by the *qewwals*, the sacred hymns singers. This procession played a crucial role in reinforcing the Mir's authority as political and spiritual leader among believers. For a long time, it was strictly forbidden for non-Yazidis to look at the *sanjaks*; the first European granted this privilege was the archeologist Layard, the discoverer of Nineveh, in the 19th century. His assistance in persuading the Ottoman Empire to exempt Yazidis from military conscription earned him esteem among the community. Layard described a *sanjak* as “a fanciful image of a bird supported by a stand resembling a candlestick, the whole being of bronze”.⁵⁰

The *sanjak*, embedded in its associated rituals, played an important role in preserving Yazidism. As noted by Spät:

“Sacred objects do not merely have the power to evoke religious feelings, but through their symbolism and physical presence they are closely connected to perpetuating religious traditions and lore through memory and connections to a constructed past. [...] It plays (or played) a vital role in helping perpetuate Yezidi oral traditions, and through this communal religious memory”.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Van Zoonen and Wirya, “Perceptions and Reconciliation and Conflict”, 8.

⁴⁹ Spät, “The Role of the Peacock Sanjak,” 105-109.

⁵⁰ Spät, “The Role of the Peacock Sanjak,” 105-109.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

This is particularly true for a faith that has historically been a strictly oral religion. It was forbidden to transcribe sacred texts, hymns, and myths, with this knowledge primarily transmitted orally, often by religious leaders of *qewwals* who embodied the living memory of the community. Unlike other major religions with formal sacred texts, such as Christianity with the Bible or Islam with the Quran, Yazidism lacked a definitive theological system, relying on rituals and processions for religious standardization.⁵²

For example, the *Parading of the Peacock*, one of the most important rituals, facilitated continual interaction between the religious core and periphery, maintaining a relative religious unity and preventing independent religious development at the periphery. It served also as a crucial social occasion for reinforcing relations and alliances between Yazidi and non-Yazidi tribes, as, in earlier times, the peacock was visited even by Muslims and Christians.⁵³ The absence of an official written religious book contributed to the historical oppression of the Yazidi community, evident during the Ottoman Empire, where Yazidis, as not classified among the privileged religious minorities known as “People of the Book” such as Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, could not benefit from the associated privileges.⁵⁴

In recent decades, the oral tradition of Yazidism is gradually changing, influenced by changing socio-educational dynamics. The gradual elimination of illiteracy, the widespread availability of elementary school, and the emergence of a Yazidi professional educated class are reshaping traditions. Especially Yazidis in the diaspora are experiencing the impact of literacy, modernity, and increased contacts with other religions, resulting in a shift from oral traditions toward the written transcription of sacred texts. Originating in Germany in the 1970s, this trend has also influenced Yazidis in the Middle East.⁵⁵

The introduction of religious books has profoundly affected the role of material culture within the religion. The authority of the *qewwals*, once perceived as the religious knowledge’s custodians, is declining, and rituals are slowly losing their former significance, transitioning from keepers of memory to mere traditional performances. In contrast, the *sanjak* has not experienced a loss of prestige; instead, it is adapting to new circumstances. The peacock has evolved into a symbol of “Yazidiness”, representing Yazidi identity, religion, and culture. The *sanjak* has changed its historical role as a tool for the preservation of Yazidi oral tradition through rituals to become a symbol of a conscious effort to perpetuate the memory of Yazidism in modern times. It is, for example, used by

⁵² Ibid., 111-113.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Maisel, “Social Change Amidst Terror and Discrimination,” 2.

⁵⁵ Spät, “The Role of the Peacock Sanjak,” 113-115.

most Yazidi websites and publications, serving as a unifying emblem for Yazidis across different global locations.⁵⁶

1.4.2 Traditional Practices in Communal Life and Rituals

As explained above, Yazidism places greater emphasis on orthodox practices and right living rather than on strict dogma. The religious practices of Yazidis not only shape their spiritual identity but also contribute significantly to their broader cultural and social identity. The most important aim for a faithful Yazidi individual is to integrate into society following communal religious life, which is based on three principles: a social structure based on distinct castes, a concept of “honour” linked to religion and women, and adherence to rituals and observances. The first aspect is that Yazidi society is structured around three endogamous, hereditary, and separated “castes”: the castes of clergy, *sheikhs* and *pîrs*, and the caste of laymen, the *mirîd*. On the top of the social structure, there are the *Mir*, the prince of all the Yazidis with religious and political powers, and the *Baba Sheikh*, the spiritual leader of the faith. These castes are characterized by mutual links and obligations, and the religion is closed to outsiders with no conversion of proselytes permitted. Playing the appropriate role within this social structure is considered a key aspect of being a good Yazidi.⁵⁷

Each individual is expected to have both a *sheikh* and a *pîr*, who act as spiritual guides. These religious leaders guide their followers by composing prayers, imposing taboos, and representing them in religious rites. In return, each *mirîd* pays them an annual fee and shows them great respect. Although both *sheikhs* and *pîrs* have similar roles, the status of *pîrs* is considered somewhat inferior to that of the *sheikhs*, as evidenced by the fact that the monetary contribution to *pîrs* is usually half of that given to *sheikhs*. Kreyenbroek notes that families of *sheikhs* usually have names of Arabic origin, while families of *pîrs* tend to have Kurdish names. This suggests that any distinction in status between the clergy classes may be based on ancestry, with *sheikhs* being direct descendants of ‘Adi Bin Musafir, while *pîrs* being descendants of his major followers.⁵⁸

The second characteristic regards “honour”, known as *namûs*, a concept deeply connected to religion and women. Since it is forbidden to marry outside the community, and women are regarded as bearers of the community’s honour, a woman engaging in what is perceived as an improper relationship could

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Kreyenbroek and Omarkhali, “Introduction to the special issue,” 124.

⁵⁸ Ackermann, “A double minority,” 159.

be excluded from the community and the family.⁵⁹ Moreover, every Yazidi is required to seek a suitable partner within their own social class; for *sheikhs* and *pîrs*, rules are even more restrictive, requiring them to choose a spouse from specified families.⁶⁰

Thirdly, observances and rituals are essential; Yazidis place a significant emphasis on their connection to their homeland, and this is a crucial part of their faith. Shrines, some of which can also contain the tomb of a saint, are built in places where the Holy Angels are believed to have descended to earth. The most important spiritual center for Yazidis is Lalish, situated in the Sheikhan district.⁶¹ In Lalish there are numerous shrines and sacred spots dedicated to the 365 Yazidi Holy Beings (see *Figure 1.3*). Ideally, every Yazidi should make a pilgrimage to Lalish once a year. Furthermore, the White Spring in Lalish is the exclusive site for baptizing Yazidi children. However, particularly in the past, when travel was more difficult, for the far communities it was impossible to reach Lalish. Consequently, the *qewwals* undertook the task of carrying water from the spring to the villages of newborns.⁶²

Even in recent decades, visiting Lalish has not been easy for many Yazidis due to political, security, and economic reasons. Despite these obstacles, the number of pilgrims increased rapidly after 2003, especially because of the slackening of the internal border between Kurdistan and Iraq, the construction of a new road to Lalish, and the increasing ownership of cars by the Yazidi community. According to Spät, a ceremony in the spring of 2011 saw thousands of pilgrims in Lalish. The most important religious festival in Lalish is the Autumn Assembly, a one-week event at the beginning of October when crowds of pilgrims assemble in the valley to participate in the rituals.⁶³ Families set up camps, organize picnics, reunite with old and new friends, enjoy the holiday atmosphere, and participate in the most important religious rituals. Additionally, Lalish hosts other minor religious festivals throughout the year, such as the Yazidi New Year, celebrated on the first Wednesday in April.⁶⁴

Numerous smaller shrines dedicated to Holy Angels or other important figures in the Yazidi tradition, such as *sheikhs*, are present in both the Sheikhan and Sinjar regions. Allison provides insight into the internal space of a shrine and describes how believers conduct their prayers:

“Inside there is normally an anteroom where the guardian may sit and talk with guests, and an inner sanctum where prayers and requests for divine help can be made. The earth of this place may be sacred,

⁵⁹ Kreyenbroek and Omarkhali, “Introduction to the special issue,” 124.

⁶⁰ Ackermann, “A double minority,” 160.

⁶¹ Allison, “The Yazidis”, 6.

⁶² Spät, “Hola hola Tawusi Melek,” 158-165.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Allison, “The Yazidis”, 8.

and tiny amounts may be taken away by believers. [...] The offering of a prayer or intention is often symbolized by small tasks or games performed on the sacred sites; one may tie a knot in a drape kept within the sanctuary to symbolize one's prayer. [...] These activities have a religious purpose but are also part of the fun and festivity of visiting holy places".⁶⁵

Yazidis in the diaspora, who are distant from the main spiritual land of Iraq, practice their religious rituals by offering prayers and sacrifices at natural sites such as caves and springs. Additionally, they may use "portable" shrines as focal points for devotion. In Georgia and Armenia, since the early 21st century, Yazidis began to construct several shrines resembling those in Lalish. These, unlike those in Iraq that mark locations where Holy Angels descended to earth, are built in places of significance to the donors funding them, such as in their home villages.⁶⁶

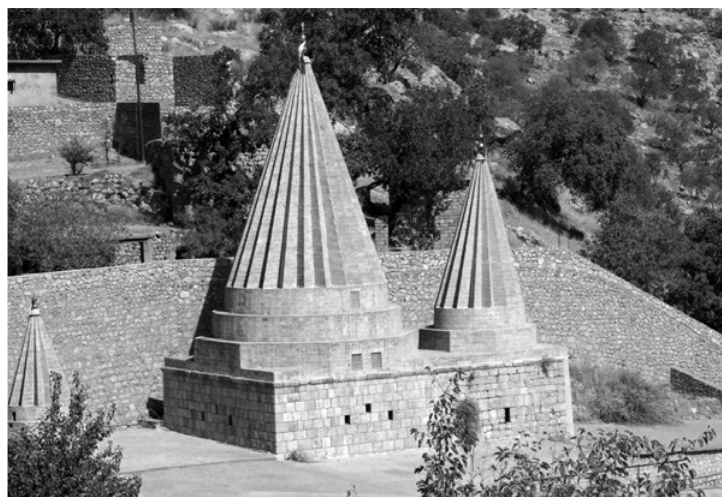


Figure 1.2: Sanjak representing the Peacock Angel. Source: Spät, 2009.

Figure 1.3: Shrines in Lalish Valley. Source: Tagay and Ortag, 2014.

1.4.3 Internal Syncretism and Diaspora Challenges

Another aspect of Yazidism is its internal syncretism. Over the centuries, different Yazidi communities in Sinjar, Sheikhan, Syria, Turkey, and Soviet territories have developed distinct customs and rituals. As previously noted, in recent decades, the transcription of religious texts, the production of centrally produced books, and the introduction of religious education in schools have gradually led to the uniformization of these distinct traditions. Spät noted, for example, that the mixing of different groups due to the 2014 genocide and the consequent forced migration of Sinjari Yazidis to Kurdistan, may result in the adoption of each other's traditions. After 2014, many Yazidis

⁶⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 7.

in Kurdistan started wearing a woven bracelet of red and white threads called *dêzikê Batizmî*, made popular by the Sinjari refugees. *Batizmî* is a ritual celebrated exclusively by the *Çêlka* tribe, who fled persecution from Turkey and migrated to Sinjar during the 20th century. Even if not being descendants of the *Çêlka* tribe, many Sinjari Yazidis adopted the tradition of wearing and gifting the red-and-white bracelet. Sinjaris introduced this custom to Kurdistan, where it was previously unknown, and it became very popular.⁶⁷ Based on my personal experience in the Serres refugee camps, I can confirm that the majority of Yazidis there were wearing this red-and-white bracelet and often gifted them to workers at the Community Center.

As Yazidis face the challenges of diaspora life, their religious practices undergo adaptations, reflecting the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. Yazidism has always been characterized by internal syncretism, and nowadays as well religious and traditional beliefs are being questioned by the diaspora communities. This is particularly evident in Germany, home to the majority of Yazidis outside Iraq, where an open discussion about religious, social, and political issues is taking place. Tagay and Kus conducted a study between 2013 and 2016, examining various dimensions of Yazidi identity. When surveyed about their adherence to Yazidism, 82% responded affirmatively, and 90,5%, when asked if they would change religion, asked negatively. However, when questioned about potential changes within Yazidism, endogamy was mentioned most frequently at 31,4%, followed by traditional norms incarnated in the dowry system (20,1%), and the caste system (19,5%). There is a growing demand for social reforms, particularly concerning marriage rules. Only 45,1% of respondents agree without restriction with Yazidi marriage rules, while around 15% reject them entirely. Marriage rules concern endogamy within the Yazidi community, a topic widely debated especially considering the limited marriage opportunities in the diaspora, as well as the dowry system, which involves substantial sums of money being demanded and paid by the groom's family to the bride's family. Younger Yazidis reject this norm, considering it incompatible with individual dignity.⁶⁸

Another critical regulation regards the caste system and the consequent social class endogamy. While the caste structure was historically viewed as a means of ensuring cohesion among the Yazidis, the younger generation in the diaspora is challenging this traditional system. Only 43,2% completely agree with the traditional caste system, 25,7% believe it should be reformed without restrictions, and the remaining respondents are critical but not in complete disagreement. Another concern regards the role of spiritual guides; while, historically, figures of *sheikhs* and *pîrs* played a fundamental role in instructing people in Yazidism, the younger generation in the diaspora is increasingly learning

⁶⁷ Spät, "Hola hola Tawusi Melek," 170-171.

⁶⁸ Tagay and Ortag, "Die Eziden," 118-137.

Yazidism independently and perceives the connection with *sheikhs* and *pîrs* as not crucial as in the past. The discussion is primarily centered on the hesitation of many Yazidis regarding paying them annual fees. In summary, while most Yazidis in the diaspora remain sure about their religion and identity, substantial discussions are emerging about the potential possibility of modification of some of the traditional norms and customs that are perceived as incompatible with modern landscape and values.⁶⁹

1.5 The History of the Yazidis from the 11th Century to the 2014 Genocide

1.5.1 The Birth of the First Yazidi Community in the Lalish Valley

Yazidis claim to be one of the oldest religions and communities in the world with a history of thousands of years. Religious history views the roots of Yazidism in pre-Islamic times; however, as mentioned above, Sheikh 'Adi Bin Musafir was crucial in giving the Yazidi community and religion an organization and structure. He was a Sufi who settled in Lalish in northern Iraq at the turn of the 11th and 12th centuries and established the 'Adawiyya order.⁷⁰ Sufi orders, originating since the birth of the Muslim religion, blend mystical belief and practice, with devotees seeking the truth of divine love and knowledge through the direct personal experience of God.⁷¹ Although 'Adi's teachings were initially orthodox according to Islam, his followers' beliefs eventually amalgamated with local traditions.⁷² Thus, according to the most prevalent historical interpretation, Yazidism's origins are linked to Islam, even though Yazidis themselves may not agree. Nonetheless, several followers of the order were local non-Muslim individuals who practiced ancient local religions. As a result, Sufi Islam intermingled with various cults, giving rise to the emergence of Yazidism.⁷³

During the 13th and 14th centuries, the geographical spread and political power of the Yazidis continued to increase, with an expansion far beyond the Sheikhan region where it originated. The political development, together with a constant divergence from Islamic norms, led to the beginning of repressions of Yazidi communities, destined to repeat itself until the present day periodically. By the early 15th century, Muslim rulers who surrounded Yazidis' settlements viewed them as apostates

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Allison, "The Yazidis", 2.

⁷¹ Schimmel, "Sufism".

⁷² Allison, "The Yazidis", 2.

⁷³ Zoppellaro, *Il genocidio degli Yazidi*, 48-50.

in religious terms and rivals for political powers, resulting in escalating persecutions, massacres, and forced conversions, and causing a decline in Yazidi numbers.⁷⁴

Yazidis label these numerous persecutions and massacres as *fermans*. According to tradition, there were seventy-two *fermans* against them in their history. The term, which is present in Persian, Turkish, and Kurmanji languages, refers historically to an order issued by the Ottoman Empire against a minority to ensure its massacre, abduction, and destruction. Later, it was used by the Yazidis to designate and conceptualize the recurring persecutions they faced during their existence, and it can be translated as “pogroms” or “genocide”. Spät suggests an interpretation of the number of *fermans*:

“This is a symbolic number, for according to Yezidi mythology the nations of the earth are seventy-two, corresponding to the seventy-two sons and seventy-two daughters of Adam and Eve. The Yezidis, created in a unique way, are not included in this number. So repeating the number seventy-two is a way of expressing the Yezidi sense of constant persecution by all outsiders”.⁷⁵

However, Fisher, Zagros, and Mustafa found that the Yazidis nowadays number the *fermans* seventy-four, after the 2007 terrorist attack on the two Yazidi towns of al-Qahtaniya and al-Jazirah and the 2014 Sinjari genocide by ISIS. Following Spät's interpretation, the sum implies not just recurring persecution by all other nations but has surpassed the borders of any typical calculation.⁷⁶

In the initial centuries of Yazidi existence, despite the fact they tended to live separated from the broader Muslim society, a few Yazidi rulers governed over larger areas. Notable figures include the Yazidi Sheikh ‘Izz al-Din who was named Emir of the Kurds in 1516; the Yazidi Hussein Beg who, beginning in 1534, ruled over the Shiite Soran Tribes of Erbil; and the Yazidi Mirza Beg who was named governor of Mosul in 1649.⁷⁷

1.5.2 The Yazidis under the Ottoman Empire’s Rule

In the early 16th century, the Ottoman Empire started to control the region of the Yazidis’ settlements, and, during that century and the one that followed, Yazidism remained widespread and influential in the politics of the area of modern Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran (*Figure 1.4*).⁷⁸ It represented a pivotal moment in the history of Yazidis as the Ottoman Empire's administration revealed a complex interplay

⁷⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Yazīdī”.

⁷⁵ Fisher et al., “Palliative prophecy,” 260.

⁷⁶ Fisher et al., “Palliative prophecy,” 260.

⁷⁷ Allison, “The Yazidis”, 2.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 3.

of religious identity, political resistance, and the resilience of a community navigating the challenges imposed by the rule.



Figure 1.4: Expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th-17th centuries. Source: Wikipedia.

Although little is known about the relationship between the Yazidi communities and the Ottoman administration, there was typically strong resistance to military conscription.⁷⁹ This resistance stemmed from the fact that Yazidis were not considered “People of the Book” such as Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, religions based on divine books rather than divine revelations. These religions enjoyed many privileges, such as freedom of worship, exemption from forced conversion to Islam, and payment of a special tax to avoid military service.⁸⁰ In contrast, Yazidis were forced to join the army. As highlighted by Fuccaro, the Yazidis’ aversion to military service was rooted in tribal and religious reasons:

“If conscription were rigorously applied, the tribes would have been deprived of their strongest, most capable, and most economically productive young men. [...] Moreover, young Yazidi recruits would also be exposed to pressure to convert to Islam, given the discriminatory treatment they usually received at the hands of the Muslims”.⁸¹

This opposition against military conscription, deeply rooted in tribal and religious convictions, manifested the Yazidis’ determination to preserve their distinct identity in the social changes imposed by the Ottoman Empire.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, Yazidis faced a decline in influence and numbers due to Ottoman Empire reforms that adversely affected religious and political minorities not considered “People of

⁷⁹ Fuccaro, “Ethnicity, State Formation, and Conscription,” 566-567.

⁸⁰ Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Ahl al-Kitāb”.

⁸¹ Fuccaro, “Ethnicity, State Formation, and Conscription,” 566-567.

the Book”. Excluded from this status, Yazidis lacked religious rights under the Ottoman millet system.⁸² A millet was “an autonomous self-governing religious community, each organized under its own laws and headed by a religious leader, who was responsible to the central government for the fulfillment of millet responsibilities and duties, particularly those of paying taxes and maintaining internal security”.⁸³ Therefore, they tended to be targeted as apostates by the surrounding Muslim communities and rulers, and they were exposed to the danger that the person in authority might think he was legitimated to maltreat, convert, persecute, and exterminate them. An example is the 1832 killing of the Yazidi Prince Ali Beg, along with thousands of other Yazidis, in the Sheikhan area by the Kurdish Prince Mohammed of Ravanduz who ruled the region.⁸⁴

The Yazidis’ status officially changed in 1849 with an Ottoman edict granting them legal recognition. Nevertheless, as stated by Allison:

“Attempts at forced conversion were still not prevented at higher levels, and local tribal politics remained dynamic and often uncertain, especially for the settled Yazidis in the Sheikhan area, who were less able to defend themselves than the tribally organized semi-nomads of Mount Sinjar, Van, and Kars provinces”.⁸⁵

1.5.3 The Yazidi Emigration from the Ottoman Empire to the Russian territories

An example of the intricate tapestry of displacement, survival, and cultural resilience of the Yazidi community is provided by their emigration from the Ottoman Empire during the 19th and 20th centuries due to persecution. Many Yazidis, particularly those residing in the districts of Van, Kars, Bayazid, and Igdir (located in today’s border region of Turkey with Iran and the Caucasus) fled the Ottoman Empire in three waves, seeking refuge in Russian territories (*Figure 1.5*). The first two waves occurred during the Russo-Turkish wars of 1828-1829 and 1877-1878, while the third took place after the Armenian genocide of 1915, during which Yazidis of these areas, along with many Armenians, collectively fled into the nowadays Georgia and Armenia.⁸⁶

⁸² Allison, “The Yazidis”, 3.

⁸³ Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Millet".

⁸⁴ Allison, “The Yazidis”, 3.

⁸⁵ Allison, “The Yazidis”, 3.

⁸⁶ Allison, “The Yazidis”, 3-4.



Figure 1.5: Yazidi Emigration from the Ottoman Empire to the Caucasus. Source: Rañoa and Schleuss, 2014.

Although there is no official data about the number of Yazidis, Assyrians, and Armenian victims during the First World War, estimations by Six-Hohenbalken suggest that up to 200,000 people were killed by the Ottoman Empire. In the third wave, approximately 12,000 Yazidi refugees arrived in the territory of present-day Armenia, establishing a community spread across about forty villages and towns, a consequence of the deliberate and strategic destruction of entire Yazidi villages and tribes by the Ottoman Empire. Violence escalated from mass killings of men, women, and children to include sexual violence against women.⁸⁷

In 2015 and 2016, Six-Hohenbalken conducted interviews with Yazidis in some Armenian remote villages; during one such interview, G., a Yazidi woman in her 70s, narrated her grandmother’s experience:

“My grandmother sought refuge with Armenians. The Armenians protected her and warned her, saying: ‘Take your three children and run with us because if you remain, they will come and kill you. Run with us, your two sons and other family members will save themselves’.”

G.’s grandmother knew that her husband had been killed, but she had never received information on the fate of her two elder sons left behind. One characteristic that emerges in these interviews is that several ancestors, while claiming to be the only survivors of a big family or village, had never been able to find out what happened to their family members who could not cross the border and were forced to stay in Turkey.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Six-Hohenbalken, “May I be a sacrifice for my grandchildren,” 163.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 171-172.

Indeed, after the First World War, the border between Turkey and Armenia was closed, isolating Yazidi communities in Russian territories from the other Yazidi groups in the new Middle Eastern nations formed after the fall of the Ottoman Empire.⁸⁹ Once crossed the River Arax to reach Armenia, these refugees encountered severe challenges to survive, including hunger and disease. Furthermore, during the 1918 Battle of Bash Abaran, Turkish soldiers invaded the territory of today's Armenia, once again implementing a genocidal policy of persecution against the population, which included both established inhabitants and new Armenian and Yazidi refugees. However, in the same year, during the Battle of Sardarabad, Armenia expelled the Turkish Army and officially gained independence. Historical accounts highlight the participation of 700 Yazidi warriors alongside the Armenian army.⁹⁰

The post-war era unveiled a glimmer of hope as Yazidi refugees found themselves navigating the landscape of Soviet ideology. Following the challenging initial period, the condition of Yazidi refugees gradually improved. According to the Soviet ideology of ethnicity, they gained cultural rights granted to the minorities including school education in their mother tongue, Kurmanji, and access to newspapers and other print media. Soviet Yazidis were experiencing ethnolinguistic promotion and cultural rights in the same period in which these were denied to Yazidis in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran.⁹¹ Despite the initial difficulties of starting a new life as refugees in a foreign territory and the political tensions and purges under Stalin's regime, as underlined by Allison:

“Soviet education policies brought literacy to the villages and created an educated professional class of Yazidis. Many were active in publishing and broadcasting; a few became historians, ethnographers, or folklorists, at a time when few of their co-religionists in Iraq attended school”.⁹²

In Armenia and Georgia, Yazidis experienced safety, security, and access to education. The juxtaposition of the Yazidi experience under Soviet rule revealed a paradoxical reality; while facing political tensions and purges, Yazidis in Russian territories flourished under education policies that cultivated literacy and empowered a professional class.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the difficult social and economic situation in Armenia and Georgia forced both locals and Yazidis to search for employment and better opportunities in other former Soviet states or Europe. Primary destination countries included Russia, Germany, Belgium, and France. Today, as observed by Six-Hohenbalken during her fieldwork, numerous Yazidi villages

⁸⁹ Ibid., 164.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 167.

⁹¹ Ibid., 164.

⁹² Allison, “The Yazidis”, 4.

in Armenia are abandoned and deserted.⁹³ Additionally, the 1992 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Mountainous Karabagh led to the mass exodus of the majority of Muslim Kurds of Armenia who were seen as suspects by Armenians. Within the Armenian Yazidi community, a division emerged between those who identified themselves as both ethnically Kurdish and adherents of the Yazidi religion, and those who regarded Yazidism as a distinct ethnicity; many of the first group left Armenia.⁹⁴ The Yazidi community showed also in the exodus to the Russian territories the echo of adaptation, resilience, and the enduring quest for identity. From persecution and displacement emerged a community that focused its narrative on survival, education, and cultural resurgence.

1.5.4 Yazidis' Dispersion across Nations after the Ottoman Empire's Fall

The period after the First World War was challenging for Yazidis because they found themselves entangled in the web of geopolitics with borders redrawn and identities reshaped. With the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the region inhabited by predominantly Kurdish groups, and among them several Yazidi communities, were arbitrarily divided by the new international borders decided by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne and the 1926 Treaty of Ankara. Most Yazidi territories were assigned to Iraq, but Syria and Turkey also obtained smaller communities; these groups had limited exchange and contact with the communities in the Iraqi heartland and developed a semi-independent sense of identity subject to internal arrangements. These small and weak communities were pushed to the bottom of the social hierarchy of Syria and Turkey.⁹⁵

The 20th-century history of the Yazidis of Syria is barely known because of the lack of sources available. Syrian Yazidis have been subjected to the general marginalization policies applied to the Syrian Kurds with a lack of formal recognition and sometimes a privation of citizenship. These policies determined the migration of many Syrian Yazidis during the whole 20th century, and the ones who remained left Syria after the beginning of the 2011 civil war.⁹⁶ Similarly, the majority of Turkish Yazidis fled Turkey between the 1960s and the 1990s due to persecution and received political asylum in Germany.⁹⁷ The initial wave of Yazidi immigrants to Germany in the late 1960s were mainly guest workers from Turkey. In the 1980s, a second wave of refugees fled due to the dual ethnic and religious persecution they faced in Turkey; in fact, they were not only part of the Kurdish ethnic minority but

⁹³ Six-Hohenbalken, "May I be a sacrifice for my grandchildren," 165.

⁹⁴ Allison, "The Yazidis", 4.

⁹⁵ Maisel, "Social Change Amidst Terror and Discrimination," 3.

⁹⁶ Allison, "The Yazidis", 4.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

had also the status of a non-Muslim religious minority. Only a few hundred Yazidis, mostly elderly people, did not join the exodus and remained in Turkey.⁹⁸

In 1989, the German Minister of the Interior of North Rhine-Westphalia visited Turkey to have an impression of the living conditions of the Yazidis, and his intervention represented a turning point, as the standard of living of Yazidis in Turkey came under scrutiny. Following his trip, he ordered a ban on the deportation of Yazidis from Turkey who sought asylum in the region and advocated for a permanent right of residence for Yazidis in Germany. His decision was influenced by the complex situation Yazidis faced in Turkey, marked by denial of political rights, lack of opportunities for social participation, persecution based on religious affiliation, and widespread poverty. In many Turkish villages, Yazidi lands were intentionally destroyed or transferred to Muslim colonizers without the approval of Yazidi owners. Lastly, Yazidis were forced to hide their religion in public and practice it in secret “for reasons of self-preservation and pure survival”.⁹⁹

The first generation of Yazidis from Turkey who settled in Germany encountered numerous challenges. Firstly, they had a shallow level of education with most of them, especially women, being illiterate due to the fear of being harassed or persecuted in Turkish schools. The majority of them worked in the agriculture sector in Turkey. Additionally, they lived in constant fear of the threat of deportation until the end of the 1980s, when they were officially recognized as victims of “religiously motivated group persecution” and they were granted the right to stay in Germany. Lastly, even if for the first time were experiencing in Germany a life without fear and defamation due to their religion and ethnicity, Yazidis were afraid that their religion and traditions could be lost in this new freedom. Nonetheless, most Yazidis quickly and successfully integrated into German society, while simultaneously tried to preserve Yazidism through the establishment of associations.¹⁰⁰

Over time, the second generation demonstrated increasing levels of education, supported by the first-generation parents who had limited access to schooling in Turkey. Yazidis of all social classes and castes developed a strong emphasis on education, viewing it as crucial for social participation, material independence, and cultural freedom. This shift in attitude toward education became a characteristic of the whole Yazidi community in Germany.¹⁰¹ Ranging from the geopolitical establishment of new nation-states to the challenges faced in Syria and Turkey and the subsequent

⁹⁸ Tagay and Ortac, *Die Eziden*, 93-94.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 94-97.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

migration to Germany, the diaspora of Yazidis revealed their strong adaptation and resilience, and the complex interplay between preserving identity and embracing newfound freedoms.

1.5.5 Iraqi Yazidis during the New Monarchical Iraq

With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, most territories inhabited by Yazidis were assigned to the new Iraqi nation-state. In the middle of the complexities of state formation, national integration, ethnic, linguistic, and religious issues, conflicts between the sedentary and tribal societies, and ideological shifts, Yazidis faced a changing landscape that would have profoundly impacted their existence in the coming decades. This complexity became evident in the decade following independence from the British Mandate, particularly in Sinjar between 1935 and 1940. The monarchy established between 1921 and 1958 was an artificial creation of Great Britain, which held the Mandate over the area between 1920 and 1932. Consequently, it was not a homogeneous ethnic, social, and political system. Iraq was composed of several pre-national communities characterized by group solidarity rooted in primordial loyalties such as kinship, religion, and group endogamy.¹⁰²

The majority of Iraqi people had responded for centuries to different local authorities, such as local notables, tribal sheiks, and religious leaders, rather than the centralized rule of the Ottoman Empire. This dynamic operated within the context of a traditional and tribal society, particularly prevalent in rural areas. Indeed, there were persistent conflicts between the sedentary world of the cities and the tribal world of the countryside. In the countryside, religion and ethnicity served as potent forms of communal identification. At the same time, in urban areas, the emergence of a new class consciousness gradually diminished people's awareness of belonging to distinct religious and ethnic groups. New ideologies emerged between the 1920s and the 1940s, among these were Arab nationalism, Kurdish nationalism, and communism.¹⁰³

In order to consolidate the Iraqi monarchy, the introduction of conscription into the national army played an important role. During the British Mandate, recruitment was voluntary. However, with the absence of British military support following their withdrawal and the necessity to maintain peace in the country, the Iraqi government introduced the National Service Law in 1934. It required compulsory service for eighteen to twenty-four months and a subsequent period of reserve service period of eight years for all nineteen-year-old Iraqi men. The application of conscription faced

¹⁰² Fuccaro, "Ethnicity, State Formation, and Conscription," 559-566.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 560-562.

resistance throughout the tribal communities of the countryside with numerous revolts repressed by the Iraqi army. Sinjar, where 85% of the population consisted of Yazidis organized under a tribal system, became the focal point of resistance. Sinjari Yazidis repeatedly rebelled and took up arms against state authorities. To contrast these uprisings, the government repeatedly sent military expeditions to restore peace in the area, especially because Sinjar was a strategic and vital region for Iraq considering its position on the borders with Syria and Turkey.¹⁰⁴

The most significant revolt happened in September 1935 when Yazidi tribesmen launched attacks on functionaries and caravans traveling close to the Sinjar Mountain. The Iraqi Army intervened destroying eleven villages, killing two hundred Yazidis, and imposing martial law with the capture of more than three hundred Yazidis. The military repression brought the first wave of migration of Yazidi tribesmen to Jazira, a Yazidi settlement in Syria located west of the Sinjar Mountain. Taking inspiration from this migration, many Sinjari Yazidis became increasingly attracted to the prospect of departing Iraq looking for better living conditions and security, and avoiding the conscription elsewhere, especially in Syria where joining the army was voluntary.¹⁰⁵

The migration of Yazidis from Iraq to Syria continued in the following years, with thousands crossing the border until 1942. However, most Yazidi refugees who tried to settle permanently in Syria, around 1500 families, were forced to return to Iraq. This happened because, despite the Franco-Syrian government viewed positively the arrival of very skilled farmers as the Yazidis, it was generally not inclined to accept requests for asylum and permanent settlement from those who crossed the border illegally. The Syrian government aimed to avoid complications with the Iraqi government, prevent reinforcing the Syrian Kurdish movement with the arrival of thousands of Kurdish Yazidis, and preclude potential issues if conscription was ever to be enforced in Syria at any time in the future. Yazidis had to face the reality of a new international context wherein influential actors such as the Iraqi government and the Franco-Syrian authorities played a decisive role in determining their future, often ignoring their traditional practices.¹⁰⁶

1.5.6 The Establishment of Collective Towns for Yazidis

Saddam Hussein assumed power in Iraq between 1968 and 2003, leading an internal campaign of Arabization targeting ethnic (non-Arab) and religious (non-Sunni Muslims) minorities and

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 563-565.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 568-570.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 571-573.

implementing operations of forced demographic change in northern provinces, impacting the lives of thousands of Yazidis living in the Sinjar and Sheikhan regions.¹⁰⁷ Starting in the early 1970s, these areas witnessed the destruction of villages, depopulation, and forced deportations. The Yazidis were deported from their rural villages and relocated to designated "collective towns". Initially presented as a *modernization project* aimed at development, agricultural reform, the inclusion of the rural population into Iraq's oil-driven economic prosperity, and improvement of the living conditions in disadvantaged villages by providing them electricity, water, and sanitation, it soon became clear that these forced migrations were part of a *security project*.¹⁰⁸ The primary government aims were to prevent Yazidis from supporting the Kurdish National Movement led by Mullah Mustafa Barzani, and from allying with Iran against Iraq after the 1975 Algiers Agreement which designed the border between the two countries. The establishment of collective towns facilitated population control for this purpose.¹⁰⁹

The project started in 1974 when the Committee of Northern Affairs of Iraq ordered the confiscation of Yazidis' properties in the Sinjar and the Sheikhan districts: in Sinjar, 137 Yazidi villages located in or close to the Sinjar Mountain were destroyed, and the population was forcibly resettled in eleven collective towns with Arab names located 30 to 40 kilometers from Sinjar Mountain; in Sheikhan, 147 out of a total of 182 villages were demolished, and the population was forced to move in seven collective towns. Yazidis' lands were distributed to Arabs. The plan also mandated the registration of Yazidis as Arabs in the censuses of 1977 and 1987, along with a prohibition on speaking Kurdish.¹¹⁰ Many shrines were also destroyed by the Iraqi Army when Yazidis were expelled from their villages.¹¹¹

As underlined by Dulz, the long-term consequence (prior to the 2014 ISIS invasion of Iraq) of the forced displacement during the Baath regime has been that:

“Rural communities have permanently deserted their indigenous villages to live in so-called collective villages and towns. [...] The majority of Iraqi Yezidis are now effectively urbanized in collective settlements. [...] Residents of collectives have not returned to their villages of origin either in large numbers or in a systematic or organized manner. The “collective” pattern of settlement persists for the areas inhabited by Yezidis in the Sinjar and the Sheikhan region”.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ Abouzeid, “When the weapons fall silent,” 15.

¹⁰⁸ Dulz, “The displacement of the Yezidis,” 136.

¹⁰⁹ Savelsberg et al., “Effectively Urbanized,” 101.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 103-104.

¹¹¹ Spät, “Hola hola Tawusi Melek,” 159.

¹¹² Dulz, “The displacement of the Yezidis,” 137.

1.5.7 The Establishment of the Autonomous Kurdistan Region

Warfare between Iraq and the Kurdish territories of Iraq perpetuated since the establishment of the new nation-state. After the beginning of the First Gulf War in January 1991 between Iraq and an international coalition led by the United States, a large Kurdish uprising took place in March of the same year. The revolt was brutally suppressed by the Iraqi regime and, at the end of April, more than 1.5 million Kurds, among which many Yazidis, sought refuge and escape persecution by crossing the border into Turkey and Iran. Therefore, the international coalition applied “*Operation Provide Comfort*” instituting a no-fly zone north of the 36th parallel and a security zone inside the Iraqi state to protect the civilian population. This “safe haven”, a *de facto* autonomous zone established in Kurdistan by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 688, included the areas of Dohuk, Zacho, and Amadiya.¹¹³

The Kurdistan Front, formed by the opposition parties Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), began the negotiation with the Iraqi regime on the creation of an autonomous Kurdish region, and which areas to include in the region. The Kurdistan Front asked for the inclusion of both the Sheikhan and Sinjar regions; however, in the end, only the northern part of Sheikhan, including the Lalish valley became part of the Kurdistan autonomous region, while the southern part of Sheikhan as well as Sinjar remained under the Iraqi control.¹¹⁴ Consequently, numerous Yazidis migrated to the safe zones in the Kurdistan Region.¹¹⁵ This internal border between the Kurdish autonomous region and Iraq cut the Yazidi community in half. As a result, people on either side of the border could no longer participate in each other’s religious rituals. It especially became extremely difficult for the Yazidis living in the area under Baghdad’s control to travel to Lalish, the spiritual center of the Yazidis. Between 1992 and 2003, Yazidis under Iraqi control were officially forbidden from crossing the border for pilgrimage to Lalish.¹¹⁶ This situation remained the same until 2003, when the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime brought the recognition of an autonomous Kurdistan Region by Iraq, and the so-called disputed areas were established.¹¹⁷

With the establishment of the Kurdish Autonomy Zone, new freedoms for the Kurds allowed Yazidis to inaugurate cultural centers and publish Yazidi textbooks in Kurmanji. Kurdish parties supported Yazidi education by approving religious classes on Yazidism and allowing the use of Kurmanji in the villages with a significant Yazidi population. Unfortunately, approximately 90% of Yazidis resided

¹¹³ Savelsberg et al., “Effectively Urbanized,” 104-105.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Allison, “The Yazidis”, 5.

¹¹⁶ Spät, “Hola hola Tawusi Melek,” 160.

¹¹⁷ Ali, “The Forced Displacement of Ethnic and Religious Minorities,” 80.

outside this safe territory, and, during the same period, villages under Iraqi control suffered from a shortage of schools and educational infrastructure. For instance, Maisel noted that in al-Jazirah, where 25,000 people lived, only two elementary schools with six teachers operated for a thousand students, and there was a complete absence of secondary schools. Additionally, the language of instruction in public schools remained only Arabic.¹¹⁸ The consequences of the internal border that divided the Yazidi community have persisted until the present, marking a chapter in Yazidi history shaped by the complex interplay between geopolitical changes and the quest for cultural recognition.

1.5.8 Yazidis in post-2003 Territories Disputed by Kurdistan and Iraq

In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq, leading to the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. Consequently, the Yazidi community found itself entangled in a complex web of political, economic, and security challenges within the territories disputed by Kurdistan and Iraq. The territories within the Internal Disputed Boundaries (DIBs) consisted of 15 districts that stretched across the four northern governorates of Nineveh, Kirkuk, Salah ad-Din, and Diyala. Yazidis were settled especially in two enclaves in the Nineveh Governorate, the Sinjar and the Sheikhan districts.¹¹⁹ Many issues emerged with the change of regime, contenting with political fragmentation, economic neglect, and escalating security concerns.

1.5.8.1 Political Challenges in DIBs

A new Constitution was promulgated in Iraq in 2005, defining the nation as a federalist state consisting of Regions and Governorates, and recognizing Kurdistan as an Autonomous Region governed independently by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). However, issues emerged concerning disputed territories, areas claimed by the KRG but not explicitly covered by Article 40 of the new Constitution. It specified that the KRG was legally responsible for governing the territories controlled by itself and the PUK on March 19, 2003, when the United States Army invaded Iraq. These territories included parts of the governorates of Dohuk, Erbil, Sulaimaniya, Kirkuk, Diyala, and Nineveh (*Figure 1.6*). However, in the case of the Nineveh Governorate, as well as others, the KRG claimed

¹¹⁸ Maisel, "Social Change Amidst Terror and Discrimination," 7.

¹¹⁹ Dulz, "The displacement of the Yezidis," 135.

certain territories, such as the Sheikhan and Sinjar districts, asserting that, before Arabization, they were entirely or predominantly inhabited by Kurds.¹²⁰

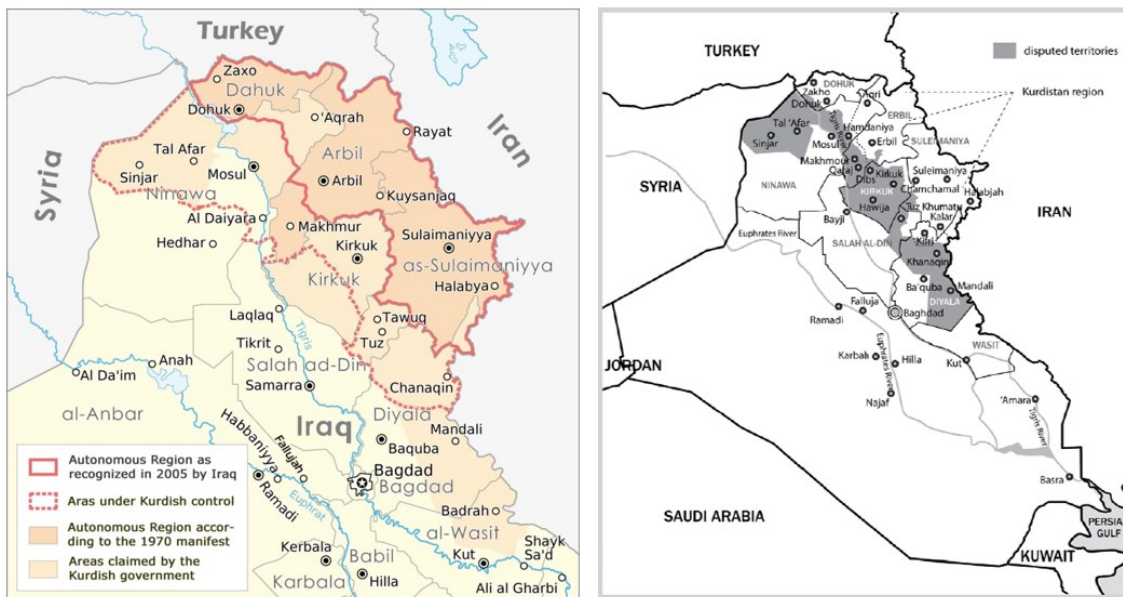


Figure 1.6: Borders between Iraq, Kurdistan, and disputed territories. Source: Zoppellaro, 2017; Ali, 2022.

Hussein’s regime in Iraq was replaced by the United States with “a sectarian quota system that made religious and ethnic identity the major organizing principle of Iraqi politics”. Significant changes followed, including the formal recognition of ethnic and national minorities.¹²¹ However, as underlined by Abouzeid, the problem with this new system was that:

“It simultaneously guaranteed political representation to small minorities such as the Yazidis and limited the nationwide role they could play. The system ensured that their number alone and resulting political influence were unlikely to effect change without the support of stronger patrons from other ethnic and sectarian groups”.¹²²

This dynamic affected how powers such as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), the Government of Iraq (GoI), the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) tried to attract Yazidis, leading to increased divisions within the groups and intense pressure to identify as either Kurds or Arabs, mining their distinct religious identity.¹²³ For example, the KDP adopted a dual strategy toward the Yazidis in order to expand its sphere of influence in the area. On one hand, it invested significant amounts of money to support the cultural and religious activities of the group. For instance, the party covered the salaries of the *Lalish Cultural Center* employees, a Yazidi

¹²⁰ Savelsberg et al., “Effectively Urbanized,” 105.

¹²¹ Černý, “Tracti jezide,” 11.

¹²² Abouzeid, “When the weapons fall silent,” 16.

¹²³ Ibid.

organization with branches in many towns. On the other hand, it promoted the Kurdish origin of the Yazidis, trying to influence public opinion to force the creation of a common sense of Kurdish identity.¹²⁴ It acknowledged Yazidism as the original religion of the Kurds, creating the myth of a common pre-Islamic religion, and stressing the uniqueness of the Kurdish cultural identity distinguished from the other nations of the Middle East.¹²⁵ However, many of them, especially in the Sinjar districts, did not accept the common Kurdish origin but underlined the different and unique character of the Yazidis.¹²⁶

In the Yazidi community, different political opinions and affiliations emerged, with some allied with the KDP or the PUK and aligned with Kurdistan politics, while others looked toward Baghdad. Among Yazidis, there were no leaders with significant legitimacy and influence to make decisions on behalf of the entire community, and, consequently, they struggled to integrate into the fragmenting Iraqi society.¹²⁷ Furthermore, local Yazidi representatives were usually ignored and forbidden to attend important meetings, and city councils rarely included Yazidi members. As reported by Maisel, during the 2005 elections, Yazidi voters faced strong interference and discrimination with many cut out of the election process.¹²⁸

Moreover, both in Kurdistan and Iraq, Yazidis were not entitled to have reserved seats in their respective Parliaments, and requests for quotas were always ignored. In Iraq, they were considered ethnically Kurdish rather than a distinct minority, resulting in a single seat shared with the Kurds. Similarly, in Kurdistan, the number of reserved seats for non-Kurdish minorities, totaling 11 out of 111, was designed for Christians, Armenians, and Turkmens, excluding Yazidis who were considered Kurdish. Consequently, the only way for Yazidis to acquire political representation was to affiliate themselves with one of the major Iraqi or Kurdish political parties which was more focused on the disputed territories. Problems emerged particularly when the aspirations of the Yazidis did not align with the objectives of these powerful political entities.¹²⁹

The position of the Yazidi minority became even more complex because of the conflict between the GoI and the KRI for the disputed territories. Nineveh Governorate, where the majority of Yazidis resided, has been always part of the competed territories between these two forces. Although a referendum according to Article 140 of the new Iraqi Constitution to decide the legal status of the

¹²⁴ Maisel, "Social Change Amidst Terror and Discrimination," 5.

¹²⁵ Savelsberg et al., "Effectively Urbanized," 105.

¹²⁶ Maisel, "Social Change Amidst Terror and Discrimination," 5.

¹²⁷ Abouzeid, "When the weapons fall silent," 16.

¹²⁸ Maisel, "Social Change Amidst Terror and Discrimination," 5.

¹²⁹ Van Zoonen and Wirya, "Perceptions and Reconciliation and Conflict", 11-12.

territories was planned in 2007, it never took place, resulting in a chronic legal administrative vacuum. The responsibilities of the population living within the Disputed Internal Boundaries (DIBs) have continuously shifted among the KRG, the GoI, and the Provincial Government. This unclear division of duties has resulted in administrative chaos, especially in the sectors of investment, infrastructure development, and minority protection. As a result, minorities usually received interest from rival actors only when one party tried to use them for its own advantage.¹³⁰

1.5.8.2 Economic Challenges in DIBs

Another challenge faced by the Nineveh Governorate was the economic neglect of the area by the federal government, contributing to its status as one of the poorest provinces in Iraq after 2003. As neither Iraq nor Kurdistan could be sure they would control these territories in the future, they suffer from economic underdevelopment, lack of infrastructure and housing, scarcity of job opportunities and consequent rising unemployment, lack of education, extensive poverty, and systemic negligence in public investment and service provision.¹³¹

The infrastructure in the collective towns was notably deficient with unpaved streets and main roads, a lack of proper sewage, and a scarcity of drinkable water. This was particularly true for the district of Sinjar, while in Sheikhan, due to the safer security situation, the KRG introduced several measures aimed at improving infrastructure. Significant investments were made in road construction, electricity, water projects, and cultural centers specifically for Yazidis.¹³² Even when considering access to healthcare and higher education, as highlighted by van Zoonen and Wirya, the situation was dramatic. Yazidis from Sinjar had only one hospital with approximately 15-20 beds and no universities for a population of over 600,000 people. The closer university was located in Mosul, where Yazidis were frequently subjected to intimidation and violence by their Muslim colleagues. According to the scholars, only in 2013, approximately 1,300 Yazidis decided to renounce their studies for fear of harassment.¹³³

Additionally, considering that the primary source of income for Yazidis had always been agriculture but their estates were located at a considerable distance from the collectives impossible to reach for security reasons, residents of the collective towns had to explore alternative ways to address their

¹³⁰ Černý, "Tracti jezide," 11-12.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹³² Savelsberg et al., "Effectively Urbanized," 110.

¹³³ Van Zoonen and Wirya, "Perceptions and Reconciliation and Conflict", 11.

economic needs. Initially, they depended on the delivery of food rations, fuel, and other supplies provided by the KRG in agreement with the Nineveh Provincial Council. However, deliveries were notably scarce in 2007 and at various other times. Even Yazidis residing in rural areas encountered challenges in sustaining traditional agricultural activities due to the lack of an efficient irrigation system, arid climate, several years of drought, water shortages, and poor soil, even if it remained the primary source of employment.¹³⁴

Consequently, Yazidis began to migrate to work as labour migrants in major cities. Starting in 2004, young men from the Sinjari collectives began migrating to cities such as Baghdad or Mosul in search of employment, while their families continued to live in Sinjar. However, this migration to Baghdad and Mosul lasted briefly due to the lack of security for religious reasons; as a result, labourers began to seek job opportunities in large cities of Kurdistan, such as Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaimaniya.¹³⁵

1.5.8.3 Security Challenges in DIBs

Security concerns also represented a big obstacle in the disputed territories. Nineveh Governorate has been for the last three decades the most dangerous governorate in Iraq with daily violence.¹³⁶ The official security forces in the Nineveh Governorate, represented by the Federal Army of Iraq, were not independent, followed a sectarian logic, were characterized by incompetence and corruption, and practiced harassment of civilians according to their ethnicity or religious affiliation. Among the Sunni population, this army was seen as either an occupier or a puppet of the Iranian Shiite regime.¹³⁷

Therefore, with the rise of the perceived inadequacy of state security forces, various groups began forming militias for their protection aligned with their ethnic, religious, or political affiliations. Private militias representing Sunni Muslims, Kurds, and other communities emerged.¹³⁸ Parts of Sunni Muslims began to get closer and entrust extremist militias associated with *al-Qaeda*; other Sunni Muslims established tribal militias with financial support from the United States to combat *al-Qaeda*. The KRG opposed the emergence of both types of Sunni militias and the sectarian violence between Sunni and Shiite Arabs deploying its own security forces in Nineveh and gradually establishing political and administrative structures to assert control.¹³⁹

¹³⁴ Savelsberg et al., “Effectively Urbanized,” 107-109.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Savelsberg et al., “Effectively Urbanized,” 107.

¹³⁷ Černý, “Irači jezide,” 11-12.

¹³⁸ Černý, “Irači jezide,” 11-12.

¹³⁹ Savelsberg et al., “Effectively Urbanized,” 107-108.

In Sinjar, security responsibilities were shared among the Iraqi Army, Iraqi police, and Kurdish Peshmerga affiliated with the KDP. The Iraqi Army managed checkpoints on the main roads, while the Peshmerga provided static security for collective towns. In Sheikhan, the security situation was comparatively better, with Kurdish Peshmerga responsible for the security of the areas south and east of Baadhra and the Iraqi army present in the western areas.¹⁴⁰ According to Černý, the combination of political, economic, and security vacuum, combined with the lack of will to protect the minorities, created a perfect environment for the rise of the Islamic State which promised to the population to restore security and order after years of instability and lawlessness.¹⁴¹

Furthermore, the absence of a clear authority led to a culture of impunity within the disputed territories. Sunni and Shiite extremists operated without fear of punishment for their terrorist acts against minority groups. The absence of security affected all the inhabitants of the province, regardless of their ethnicity or religion; nonetheless, minorities gradually became the most vulnerable, lacking the support of state forces or their own militias.¹⁴² The major terror attack against the Yazidis, before the 2014 genocide, occurred in 2007, but this event was not an isolated incident, given the pervasive climate of violence against them. As previously noted, the Yazidis welcomed the arrival of the coalition forces in 2003, hoping this would bring them security, prosperity, and recognition; unfortunately, the political and security situation deteriorated, with a significant increase in attacks against them, including killings, intimidations, and public campaigns to force conversions.¹⁴³

Between 2004 and 2007, the attacks against Yazidis in Iraq were numerous and alarming. They included the distribution of flyers in Mosul promising divine rewards for killing Yazidis, the execution of a young Yazidi child from Bashiqa, a bomb attack survived by the leader of the Yazidi community Mir Tahsin Beg, killings of Yazidis in Sinjar due to their religion, several Yazidis kidnapped and tortured for involvement in the alcohol business, and a wall execution of all twenty-three Yazidis in a bus carrying migrant workers to Mosul.¹⁴⁴ The most devastating assault on the Yazidi community occurred on August 14, 2007, when the two Yazidi collective towns of al-Qahtaniya and al-Jazirah were attacked by trucks loaded with dynamite, killing 326 Yazidis and injuring 530.¹⁴⁵ Even if no terrorists were arrested, it is presumed that *Al-Qaeda* was behind the bombings.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Černý, "Irači jezide," 11-12.

¹⁴² Ibid., 13.

¹⁴³ Maisel, "Social Change Amidst Terror and Discrimination," 3-4.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Savelsberg et al., "Effectively Urbanized," 108.

¹⁴⁶ Van Zoonen and Wirya, "Perceptions and Reconciliation and Conflict", 9-10.

Following this tragic event, an increasing number of Kurdish Peshmerga took on the responsibility of better protecting the area, even though it officially remained under the control of the Government of Iraq.¹⁴⁷ Savelsberg, Hajo, and Dulz underline that the KRG opted to send Peshmerga forces to protect the territories instead of relocating Yazidis to more prosperous areas within the Kurdistan Region due to political considerations. The KRG had an interest in keeping as many Kurds, including Yazidis, as possible in the disputed territories like Sinjar to ensure their votes, particularly at the time of a potential referendum, in favor of attaching the disputed territories to the Kurdistan Region.¹⁴⁸

In conclusion, the post-2003 era resulted in a turbulent period for the Yazidis in the disputed areas between Iraq and Kurdistan. Amidst political ambiguity, economic challenges, and constant security threats, they struggled to integrate into a fractured Iraqi society. The absence of a clear administrative framework in the disputed areas further exacerbated their troubles, with Yazidis facing discrimination, political marginalization, acts of violence, and extremist attacks. As the paragraph underlined, it became evident that the resilience of the Yazidis was truly tested in a complex environment dominated by competing interests.

1.6 Conclusions

The first chapter delves into the Yazidi community and their complex identity, unique religious system, and the challenges embedded in their rich historical narrative. The Yazidi traditional settlement areas are in Kurdish territories across Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran; however, due to the absence of a dedicated nation-state and various historical persecutions by the Muslim majority, they have experienced migrations and diasporas worldwide.

The first issue analyzed in the chapter is the evolving identity of the Yazidis, influenced by historical, political, and diasporic factors. Yazidis' interactions and collisions with Kurds, Arabs, and other communities, coupled with historical and political dynamics, have contributed to a diverse range of identities within the community. The diasporic experience has further influenced its evolution, exposing Yazidis to modernity challenges. Another matter examined in the chapter is Yazidism, the religious, cultural, and social system that governs the Yazidi community. Yazidism, a monotheistic religion, encompasses various practices and symbolism, with a central role assigned to Tawusi Melek, the Peacock Angel, often erroneously associated with Satan and a recurring justification for the

¹⁴⁷ Allison, "The Yazidis", 5.

¹⁴⁸ Savelsberg et al., "Effectively Urbanized," 113.

persecution of Yazidis. The three principles central to Yazidism – social classes, the *honour* concept, and commitment to rituals – are being challenged by the diaspora communities as they are experiencing the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity.

Lastly, the chapter delves into the rich history of the Yazidis, marked by challenges, persecutions, and migrations. The first community emerged in the Lalish Valley in the 11th century, extending its influence in the Middle East over the subsequent centuries. Yazidi territories were conquered by the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century, bringing about a period of repressions and forced conversions. In response to Ottoman persecution, many Yazidis migrated to the Caucasus. With the fall of the Ottoman Empire, new geopolitical borders divided Yazidis among different nations. Yazidis in Syria and Turkey faced marginalization which prompted to mass migration, particularly to Germany. Meanwhile, in Iraq, Yazidis encountered complexities arising from sedentary, tribal, ethnic, and religious conflicts. Obstacles increased with the forced Arabization campaign, leading to the destruction of Yazidi villages and forced deportations. More challenges emerged in the 1990s with the establishment of an autonomous area in Kurdistan, dividing Yazidis between Iraq and Kurdistan. With the official recognition of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), the complex geopolitics continued to negatively impact Yazidis. The majority residing in disputed territories faced political, economic, and security challenges, creating a chaotic environment, one of the main factors that facilitated the capture of Sinjar by ISIS in the summer of 2014.

Throughout its history, the Yazidi community has demonstrated resilience in the face of persecution, above all through migrations and diasporas, always attempting to maintain their strong Yazidi identity and sense of community. Those who migrated to the Caucasus during the Ottoman period, for instance, renegotiated their identity balancing it with the gain of cultural rights and educational opportunities. Similarly, Yazidis who sought refuge in Germany experienced the liberty to freely profess their faith, thus their traditional values were challenged by the dynamics of contemporary society. The transformations and adaptations of the identity of the Yazidis stem from understanding, as underlined by Barth, that identity is not merely shaped through internal definitions of cultural features but is equally influenced by contacts, interactions, and contrasts with the external environments, societies, and communities. The identity of Yazidis has been shaped by interactions and collisions with Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, Russians, Germans, and various other communities. From the Middle East to the Caucasus and Western nations, each chapter of the Yazidi history reflects the adaptive and dynamic nature of their identity in response to evolving socio-cultural landscapes, while resolutely preserving their distinct cultural markers.

2 The ISIS Genocide Against the Yazidis and its Direct Consequences

2.1 ISIS's Territorial Expansion and Ideology

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also known as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) or Daesh (*ad-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi al-'Irāq wa-al-Shām*), emerged from the remnants of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, a local branch of Al-Qaeda, in 2004. Remaining relatively obscure during the presence of United States troops in Iraq, the group resurfaced in 2011 amidst growing political instability in the region. Between December 2013 and June 2014, ISIS expanded its control through the Anbar, Nineveh, Salah al-Din, and Diyala Governorates in Iraq conquering Mosul, the second-largest city of the country, and the areas around Aleppo and Raqqa in Syria. Despite the Iraqi and Kurdish security forces and associated armed groups trying to contain ISIS's advance, on June 29th, ISIS leader Al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of a caliphate extending from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala in Iraq. At its zenith, ISIS held approximately 40% of Iraq and 30% of Syria (*Figure 2.1*).¹



Figure 2.1: ISIS control of Iraq and Syria in September 2014. Source: Fischer and Beauchamp, 2014.

In August of the same year, a coalition of international forces led by the United States began bombings against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Over the subsequent years, the coalition executed more than 8,000 airstrikes contributing, alongside the Kurdish Peshmerga in Iraq and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Syria, to the progressive reconquest of the territories occupied by the Islamic State. By December 2017, ISIS had lost 95% of its territories, including its two largest cities, Mosul in Iraq and

¹ Glenn et al., "Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State". OHCHR/UNAMI, "A Call for Accountability and Protection," 6.

Raqqa in Syria. In December 2018, it was officially declared that ISIS was defeated in both Iraq and Syria, even if branches around the world persisted in their activities.²

During the summer of 2014, ISIS seized control of the Nineveh governorate, historically inhabited by numerous Iraqi minority groups, including Yazidis, Assyrians, Christians, Turkmens, Shabaks, and Kakais. The Islamic State systematically targeted these minorities as part of its campaign to purify the region from non-Islamic groups. Yazidis faced particularly brutal treatment due to being considered theologically impure and devil-worshippers. They predominantly inhabited the district of Sinjar, which became surrounded by ISIS's territories, including Mosul and Tel Afar in Iraq to the east of Sinjar, as well as Al-Shaddadi and Tel Hamis in Syria to the west. Consequently, Yazidis were effectively trapped in Sinjar within the ISIS-conquered territories.³

The ideological worldview of the Islamic State was binary, dividing people into righteous Muslims and perverse infidels, apostates, and idolaters. Its mission was the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate founded on its singular interpretation of Islam, and the violent actions to reach it were grounded on citations of the Quran. Based on its unique interpretation of the Quranic principles and Islamic history, ISIS developed differential rights, obligations, and criteria for the persecution and annihilation of Yazidis. According to the Islamic State, the missions of a good Muslim included implementing the Law of God on earth and conquering territories to universalize the Word of Allah, justifying the destruction of the infidel populations as acts of purification and sacrifice.⁴

2.2 Political Factors facilitating ISIS's Conquest of Sinjar

The violence perpetrated by ISIS against the Yazidis was facilitated, in part, by the passivity and indifference of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the Government of Iraq (GoI), and the International Community. As broadly described in the previous chapter, at the time of the ISIS takeover, Sinjar was part of the disputed territories between the KRG and the GoI. The Iraqi Government officially held political and economic authority, while military power was in the hands of the Kurdish Government, which deployed there around 10,000 Peshmerga. Peshmerga literally means "*Those who face death*" and are well-trained forces controlled by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).⁵ The administrative and political ambiguity represented a challenge in Sinjar, compounded by economic difficulties and constant security threats. In a 2008 article, Maisel

² Glenn et al., "Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State".

³ Cetorelli et al., "Mortality and kidnapping estimates for the Yazidi population," 3.

⁴ Moradi and Anderson, "The Islamic State's Êzidî Genocide in Iraq", 123-125.

⁵ Dulz, "The displacement of the Yezidis," 134.

expressed concern about the possible annihilation of Yazidis and called for international intervention, which never materialized:

“While in the areas with larger Yezidi communities a fragile coexistence endures, in areas with smaller communities Yezidis are forced to hide their religion, flee the region, or surrender to the attacks of radical Muslim terrorists and their supporters. Without international intervention, the survival of one of the oldest religious communities in the Middle East is very uncertain”.⁶

2.2.1 Responsibilities of the Kurdistan Regional Government

As extensively argued in the previous chapter, the ambiguity played by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in the treatment of the Yazidi community and the disputed territories of Sinjar played a significant role in creating the conditions that led to the ISIS genocidal attack in 2014. The deployment of Peshmerga forces to protect the area, but, at the same time, the decision to prevent Yazidis from relocating to Kurdistan for political reasons, further intensified the precarious situation. The failure to consistently protect Sinjar can be traced back to the weeks preceding the assault in August 2014 when Yazidis urgently appealed to the KRG for additional Peshmerga reinforcements and increased weapon supplies. However, their requests were rejected by KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) leader Masoud Barzani, who decided to abandon the Yazidis to their fate.⁷ Additionally, in the days preceding the ISIS takeover, Yazidis affiliated with the Peshmerga were disarmed, and Peshmerga forces were instructed to leave the area. A Yazidi who fought against the Islamic State on Mount Sinjar recalled:

“Just a few days before the arrival of Daesh, into the Ezidi villages, Peshmerga told us that they would fight alongside us and that they would never abandon us. Sarbast Bapiri, the head of all Peshmerga in Singal told us, ‘I promise to protect you. Daesh can only pass over my dead body.’ We knew what had happened in other villages, but still we had to trust him. In Kursi the fight started at around 2-3 a.m. and we found out that there was not a single Peshmerga left. I received a call from Ezidis who were Peshmerga themselves, telling me that they have been disarmed and that the Peshmerga are leaving and taking all heavy weapons too. The question I cannot stop asking myself is: why did they do this to us? Why did they leave us in the hands of the IS? Why did not they protect us from Ferman 74?”⁸

Yazidis saw the withdrawal of the Peshmerga as a betrayal because Sinjar was left without any armed protection. The ambivalence toward the Yazidi population remains a matter of concern, as they were

⁶ Maisel, “Social Change Amidst Terror and Discrimination,” 9.

⁷ Travis, “Why Was Benghazi “Saved,” but Sinjar Allowed to Be Lost?,” 147.

⁸ Moradi and Anderson, “The Islamic State’s *Ēzidî* Genocide in Iraq”, 127.

not defended by the KRG forces but those who survived were later hosted as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Kurdistan.⁹ The official motives for the Peshmerga withdrawal from Sinjar included the surprise nature of the ISIS invasion, the weaponry insufficient to combat the powerful Islamic State, and the collapse of the front line. However, Mosul had fallen two months before Sinjar's invasion, making it evident that ISIS was advancing, thereby undermining the credibility of the surprise justification. Furthermore, the Kurdish Peshmerga took the weapons of the Iraqi army that fell in Mosul, and, consequently, they were likely well-equipped.¹⁰

Nicolaus and Yuce argue that at least four other reasons should be considered to explain the Peshmerga withdrawal. Firstly, 15 to 20 percent of the Muslim population in the KRI sympathized with ISIS, and even the majority of moderate Kurdish Muslims believed the Yazidis were unclean infidels. Secondly, the potential loss of Sinjar (under the direct administration of the Government of Iraq) without the protection of the Kurdish forces, might have influenced the KRG's decision to withdraw the Peshmerga. There is a suggestion that leaving Sinjar under ISIS control could position the KRG to assert future claims for its annexation to Kurdistan since the Iraqi government was unable to protect the area.¹¹ Two factors support the claims made by Nicolaus and Yuce plausible: firstly, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) controlled the Kurdish government at the time of ISIS's takeover, and the KDP had consistently pursued the annexation of Sinjar since the establishment of the autonomous region; secondly, the Peshmerga, who were responsible for defense, were aligned with the KDP rather than being a national army dedicated to serving the public interest.

The third reason is connected to the second, as the KRG may have ordered the Peshmerga retreat to emphasize that the Yazidis of Sinjar had no chance to survive without the Kurdistan support unless they officially declared themselves Kurds and became part of the KRI.¹² Nonetheless, the result of this ultimatum was quite the opposite. In the aftermath of the perceived betrayal of Kurdish authorities, Yazidis in northern Iraq shifted their approach toward their ethnic identification. They have increasingly viewed themselves as ethno-religiously distinct from the Kurds, sharing nothing more than a common language with them. Post-genocide, around 90% of Yazidis no longer identify themselves as part of the Kurdish community.¹³ Lastly, the decision might have been taken aiming to maintain the control of Kirkuk, rich in oil, rather than prioritizing the fight for the economically underdeveloped Sinjar.¹⁴

⁹ Moradi and Anderson, "The Islamic State's *Êzîdî* Genocide in Iraq", 127.

¹⁰ Nicolaus and Yuce, "A Look at the Yezidi Journey," 96.

¹¹ Nicolaus and Yuce, "Sex-Slavery: One aspect of the Yazidi genocide", 215.

¹² Nicolaus and Yuce, "A Look at the Yezidi Journey," 97.

¹³ Nicolaus and Yuce, "Sex-Slavery: One aspect of the Yazidi genocide", 216-217.

¹⁴ Nicolaus and Yuce, "A Look at the Yezidi Journey," 97.

2.2.2 Responsibilities of the Government of Iraq

Before the genocide, the Iraqi government faced significant challenges in establishing political stability, ensuring security, and fostering economic development in Sinjar. This failure manifested in three critical aspects: the inability to build an inclusionary political system that allowed the participation of diverse ethnic and religious communities; the incompetence of its army, unable to effectively monopolize the use of force, thus legitimizing a culture of impunity against the extremists and failed to protect minorities; and the incapacity to adequately deliver essential services, create job opportunities, and achieve satisfactory levels of economic and social development, resulting in Sinjar being one of the poorest regions in Iraq. The combination of these factors, coupled with the local populations' resentment against the central government, created an ideal environment for the rise of the Islamic State which promised the restoration of security and order after years of instability and lawlessness.¹⁵

Additionally, Yazidis blamed the Iraqi Government for the collapse of its modern and numerous army near Mosul in the summer of 2014, without engaging in a serious fight against the Islamic State. The Iraqi State failed therefore in its primary function, the physical protection of its citizens.¹⁶ However, insights from a member of the Iraqi Parliament, as reported by the organization *PAX*, provide a nuanced perspective. According to the parliamentarian, ISIS possessed the necessary resources for capturing Mosul: "ISIS had people (supporters), money, and weaponry." Notably, four key groups facilitated ISIS during its advance: ex-Baathist army commanders and high-ranking bureaucrats who developed resentment toward the new government after their dismissal following the fall of Hussein's regime; Sunni extremists aligning with ISIS's ideology; some Arab tribes, particularly those displaced in the surroundings of Mosul by Kurdish land reclamations, seeking revenge for their displacement; and some opportunistic individuals supporting ISIS for personal gains. Consequently, despite the Iraqi army counting over 40,000 soldiers equipped with advanced American weaponry, the fall of Mosul was significantly influenced by ISIS strength and strategic alliances.¹⁷

2.2.3 Responsibilities of the International Community

In the years leading up to the ISIS assault on Sinjar, Yazidis repeatedly sought support from international actors. From 2006 to 2011, the United States, which occupied Iraq after the fall of

¹⁵ Khedir, "After ISIS," 55.

¹⁶ Cerny, "Iracti jezide," 11-13.

¹⁷ Khedir, "After ISIS," 58-60.

Hussein's regime, rejected plans for local protection armies in Yazidi areas threatened by *Al-Qaeda* and declined Yazidis' claims for the restitution of the lands seized during the Arabization campaign in the 1970s and 1980s. The U.S. also played a role in the release of around 100,000 detainees from the prison Camp Bucca, among which the head of ISIS Al-Baghdadi and other eighteen leaders.¹⁸

Since 2003, various tools available under international law had not effectively been utilized to protect the Yazidis from Islamic extremist attacks and ISIS. By 2004, the terrorist actions against Yazidis in northern Iraq had escalated to a point where international intervention should have taken place. However, this did not occur. As detailed in the first chapter, the acts against Yazidis included religious persecution, indiscriminate executions, kidnappings, bomb attacks, and other terrorist actions. Even during the 2007 bombing of Yazidi villages, which stands as one of the largest campaigns targeting civilians on religious grounds in recent history, the United Nations did not take punitive measures.¹⁹

The violence successively culminated in the summer of 2014 with the genocidal attack on Sinjar. In that case, tools that were not employed to save the Yazidis included imposing a blockade on ISIS to prevent the flow of money, arms, and recruits from abroad, securing a UN Security Council Resolution authorizing the use of necessary force against individuals undermining Iraq's security and integrity, conducting comprehensive bombardments of major cities controlled by ISIS, delivering defensive armaments to threatened populations, and deploying UN ground forces to restore order.²⁰

Travis argues that one of the reasons why the United Nations avoided utilizing these tools was the "CNN Effect", a theory stating that global television networks, with their modern capacity to offer 24-hour news coverage from any part of the world, significantly influence the decisions policymakers make and the outcomes of events. The concept originated in the 1990s when CNN provided real-time coverage of American military intervention in Iraq in 1991, Somalia in 1992, and Bosnia in 1995. The extensive media coverage of these humanitarian crises was widely perceived as a major factor driving interventions by the United States, the United Nations, and NATO. The international community may have allowed Sinjar to be destroyed because the media's attention was not consistently focused on the crisis. A kind of "Reverse CNN Effect" occurred: for instance, images from Iraq were censored on television, and, in the summer of 2015, research on CNN's website retrieved 2,100 documents on Yazidis and 1,500 on Sinjar, compared to 37,000 on Benghazi and 17,000 on Palestinians.²¹

¹⁸ Travis, "Why Was Benghazi "Saved," but Sinjar Allowed to Be Lost?," 148.

¹⁹ Ibid., 140-144, 149-150.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Travis, "Why Was Benghazi "Saved," but Sinjar Allowed to Be Lost?," 140-144. Wikipedia, "CNN Effect."

In summary, the combined failures of the Kurdistan Government and the Iraqi Government, along with insufficient international intervention, significantly contributed to the tragic events in Sinjar. Both governments, before the genocide, failed to address the political, economic, and security issues crucial for the well-being of Yazidis in Sinjar. Moreover, at the arrival of ISIS, the Peshmerga withdrawal and the collapse of the Iraqi army in Mosul, both inadequately confronting the Islamic State, facilitated its conquest of Sinjar. Finally, despite repeated requests for assistance, Yazidis faced the refusal of the United States and the United Nations to employ available tools to address the escalating extremist threats and to directly combat ISIS. The limited global attention given by the media to the Yazidi crisis also played a role in unfolding the tragedy in Sinjar.

2.3 ISIS's Attack on Sinjar in August 2014

ISIS assaulted Sinjar with the intent to destroy and annihilate Yazidis, who were unprepared for the attack, the extreme violence employed by ISIS, and the profound consequences that ensued. On the day preceding the assault, Sinjari Yazidis carried on with their daily routines, engaging in work and usual activities. However, within 24 hours, on the 3rd of August 2014, their lives and the course of Yazidi history changed forever.

The offensive was meticulously organized from the operational center of Mosul, with hundreds of ISIS fighters executing synchronized actions to seize control of towns and villages surrounding Mount Sinjar. Upon entering Sinjar, the ISIS fighters encountered minimal resistance as most of the Kurdish Peshmerga, the only security force in the area, withdrew in the face of ISIS advancement, leaving the area without defense. As underlined in the previous paragraph, the decision to withdraw was not communicated to the local population, who initially remained unaware of the deteriorating security situation. Consequently, no evacuation orders were issued for the civilians.²² Additionally, ISIS's attack was facilitated by the positive reception from certain Arab tribes and individuals who were previously neighbors and had good relations with Yazidis. They collaborated with the fighters, aiding them in identifying Yazidi villages and houses.²³

Upon learning of the Peshmerga's withdrawal, around 1,400 Yazidis, most of them veterans of the Peshmerga or Iraqi forces, took the few weapons left and formed fighting units, attempting to defend Sinjar and hoping to give more time to others to escape. Rapidly fleeing their homes in fear and panic, Yazidi families took little with them and tried to reach Kurdistan or the upper plateau of Mount Sinjar.

²² UNHRC, "They came to destroy," 6-7.

²³ OHCHR/UNAMI, "A Call for Accountability and Protection," 9.

Those who had no cars decided to walk, and long lines of men, women, and children were formed. ISIS established checkpoints to search for fleeing Yazidis.²⁴ A woman recounted her experience to OHCHR/UNAMI²⁵, describing how she fled her village, Tal Azer, with her husband and six children, joining a long line of Yazidis escaping in cars. When they arrived close to Sinjar Mount, they were stopped by individuals who appeared to be Peshmerga due to their clothes and accents. They told them to get into trucks. It became apparent, after boarding, that these people were actually ISIS members disguised as Peshmerga. Subsequently, her family was abducted by the Islamic State.²⁶

However, tens of thousands of Yazidi men, women, and children managed to reach the mountain, and a humanitarian crisis occurred. ISIS trapped Yazidis in the mount without water, food, and medical care, and with temperatures rising 50 degrees Celsius. Hundreds of Yazidis died there. After four days of siege, on August 7th, the Iraqi Government asked the international community for military action to assist between 50,000 and 130,000 Yazidis trapped on the mountain. A coalition comprising American, Iraqi, British, French, and Australian armies attempted to airdrop water and supplies to the besieged Yazidis. However, food packages dropped from the air landed far away, and trapped Yazidis were afraid of going down to take the food due to the risk of being captured. Moreover, ISIS fighters fired at planes delivering aid and helicopters evacuating the most vulnerable individuals.²⁷

The coalition led by the United States aimed to “degrade and destroy” ISIS and rescue the Yazidis; however, after the initial efforts to break the siege on Mount Sinjar, the U.S. asserted that the siege was lifted, and no evacuation was necessary. In reality, tens of thousands of Yazidis were still stranded there. Subsequently, most political pressure from the U.S. focused on providing more arms to the Kurdish armies or the Sunni tribes to fight ISIS, even though Sinjar remained under ISIS control for over a year after August 2014.²⁸ The crucial role in saving most Yazidis on the mount between August 9th and 13th and continuing to battle ISIS on the field was played by the People’s Protection Unit (YPG) which is based in Syria and military linked and supported by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). They established for around two months a safe corridor to evacuate Yazidis from the mountain to northern Sinjar and westward into Rojava, the self-administered region of northeast Syria. Subsequently, Yazidis reached Nawroz Camp in Northern Syria or crossed into the Dohuk Governorate in Iraqi Kurdistan (*Figure 2.2*). Travel within Syria was facilitated also by some local Muslim tribes, notably the Sunni *Shammar* tribe present on both sides of the Iraqi-Syrian border.²⁹

²⁴ UNHRC, “They came to destroy,” 7.

²⁵ OHCHR – Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. UNAMI – United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq.

²⁶ OHCHR/UNAMI, “A Call for Accountability and Protection,” 9.

²⁷ UNHRC, “They came to destroy,” 9. OHCHR/UNAMI, “A Call for Accountability and Protection,” 10.

²⁸ Travis, “Why Was Benghazi “Saved,” but Sinjar Allowed to Be Lost?,” 152.

²⁹ Abouzeid, “When the weapons fall silent,” 7. REACH, “Displacement from Sinjar, 3-14 August 2014” 1.

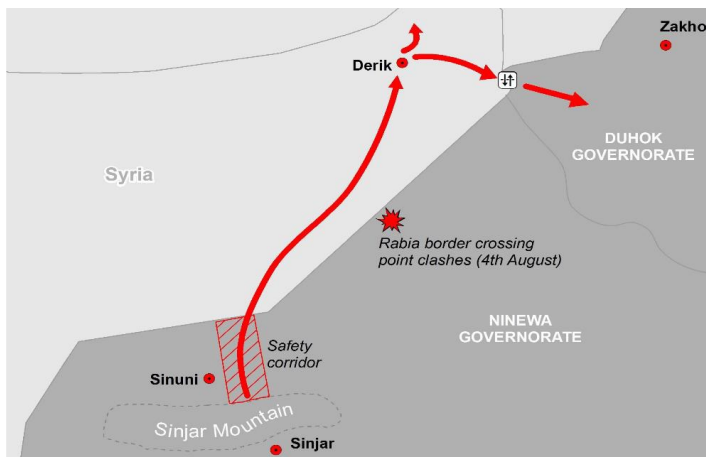


Figure 2.2: Safe corridor from Mount Sinjar to Syria. Source: REACH, 2014.

Yazidis who could not flee in time remained in their villages, where the head of the community was convened and given two to three days to gather the population. Around 85 Yazidi villages were emptied within 72 hours of the attack, except for Kocho village, which remained without inhabitants on August 15th. Along with villages, Yazidi temples and shrines were demolished. Yazidi residences were marked with offensive symbols to distinguish them from Muslim houses, then ransacked, damaged, or destroyed. Yazidis were forcibly transferred out of Sinjar and systematically separated into three distinct groups: men and boys 12 and above; women and girls aged 9 and above and children under 7; boys aged between 7 and 12. Each group endured targeted and systematic violations, underscoring the calculated nature of the atrocities committed against the Yazidi population.³⁰

2.3.1 Treatment of Men and Boys aged 12 and above

Men and boys aged approximately 12 and above formed the first group. ISIS compelled them to convert to Islam, and those who resisted faced summary executions through gunshots to the head or having their throats cut, often with their family members forced to witness. The lifeless bodies were frequently left in public spaces, such as streets, roads, or checkpoints. While most executions targeted groups ranging from two to twenty individuals, larger mass killings occurred in the two villages of Kocho and Qani, where four hundred men were executed in Kocho and around eighty in Qani.³¹

In Kocho, a village located in the southern part of Sinjar, ISIS militants gave Yazidis an ultimatum, allowing them around ten days to decide between conversion or facing death. Upon the refusal to convert, 1,740 residents of the village were gathered into a school. All women and children, except for 67 women and 16 children, were forcibly transferred to Tel Afar. The remaining 67 women, all of

³⁰ UNHRC, “They came to destroy,” 7-8.

³¹ UNHRC, “They came to destroy,” 8-9.

whom were elderly, were executed, while the fate of the 16 children remains unknown. Nearly 400 men and boys were executed by gunfire, with only 19 managing to survive, sheltered under the fallen bodies of those who did not.³² A survivor of the massacre recounted:

“We were taken 300-500 meters away from the school; it was at the edge of the village. [...] They told us to stretch on the ground and to put our hands behind our heads. I did not know where I was when I woke up but I saw that my left arm was bleeding. All that I remember is that I was in search of a place to hide, it was as if the bleeding arm was not mine. It took a while before I felt pain. I walked for about two kilometers to a neighboring village; I hid myself inside a cattle pen from 11 am to 8 pm. [...] While hiding there I found my own brother and another person from our village also looking for a place to hide. They had also survived a massacre. We knew the area quite well, and walked non-stop until we arrived at Mount Sinjar at six o’clock in the morning”.³³

Men and older boys who forcibly converted to Islam became ISIS captives. They were relocated to sites in Tel Afar and Mosul with the prohibition of leaving them. They were subjected to forced labor, including construction projects, excavation of trenches, street cleaning, and cattle care, and to live as Muslims, adopting Islamic practices such as prayers and clothes. Those who tried to escape were beaten at the first attempt and executed on the second. By the spring of 2015, ISIS appeared to have decided that Yazidi conversions were false, and towns with converted men were emptied. The fate of Yazidi men and boys beyond that point remains unknown.³⁴

2.3.2 Treatment of Women and Girls aged 9 and above and Children under 7

The second group comprised women and girls aged 9 and above along with their children under 7. Elder women of approximately 60 years and older were probably executed, as evidenced by a mass killing in Kocho, where 67 older women were executed. Younger women and their children were forcibly taken to various centers in Iraq and Syria, including Tel Afar, Mosul, and Baaj in Iraq, and Raqqah in Syria, where thousands of women were held to be sold as sexual slaves. In these centers, surrounded by armed ISIS fighters, they were initially forced to consign valuables like gold, money, and mobile phones. Subsequently, they were registered with details such as names, ages, village of origin, photographs, and married and unmarried females were separated. Scarce food and water were provided, and many, particularly children, became very sick with no access to medical care.³⁵

³² Abouzeid, “When the weapons fall silent,” 7.

³³ Moradi and Anderson, “The Islamic State’s Êzîdî Genocide in Iraq”, 129-130.

³⁴ UNHRC, “They came to destroy,” 8-9.

³⁵ UNHRC, “They came to destroy,” 10-17.

There was a rigid ideology at the base of the sexual violence, slavery, and trafficking of Yazidi women, meticulously organized, prescribed, and sanctioned by ISIS. Upon purchasing a Yazidi woman, referred to as “*sabaya*” or “slave”, an ISIS fighter acquired complete ownership rights, enabling him to use, resell, or gift her, as he wished. This entitlement derived directly from a singular interpretation of the Quran by ISIS. Consequently, only who *owned* the woman was allowed to rape her. In the holding sites, even if dozens of young armed men surrounded Yazidi women, mass rapes were not reported, as the system governing the treatment of these women adhered to strict rules.³⁶

Yazidi women were traded as sexual slaves to fighters who visited the holding centers, in physical slave markets known as “*souk sabaya*”, or online through encrypted platforms. Prices ranged between 200 to 1,500 American dollars depending on marital status, age, number of children, and beauty. Trying to appear less attractive to potential buyers, some women started to self-harm, scratching, and injuring themselves. A woman held for 11 months in captivity described:

“Men would come and select women and girls. Women would lie and say we were older. Girls would say they were younger. We tried to make ourselves less appealing. We would scratch ourselves and rub dirt on our faces. These things did not work”.³⁷

Fighters who bought Yazidi women came from various countries, including Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Sudan, Belgium, Uzbekistan, and Australia.³⁸ According to testimonies of women who escaped captivity and were interviewed by Amnesty International, most militants were in their 20s and 30s, with some older individuals up to their mid-50s. However, not all buyers were affiliated with ISIS; certain individuals were local Sunni Muslims such as businessmen who had good relations with the Islamic State and participated in the practice of marrying abducted Yazidi women.³⁹

Selling Yazidi women and girls to non-ISIS members was prohibited in order to prevent their return to their families; however, there were instances where women were sold back to their families for amounts ranging from 10,000 and 40,000 American dollars. In these cases, Muslim middlemen pretended to be buyers of Yazidi slaves for their own use and took money from the family. Following the purchase, these women were covertly smuggled into Kurdistan, out of ISIS control. Despite the Kurdistan Regional Government’s establishment of the *Directorate of Yazidi Abductees Affairs* to aid the poorest families in purchasing back their relatives, numerous Yazidis got into significant debt.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Amnesty International, “Escape from Hell,” 9.

The efforts to rescue family members from captivity had a devastating impact on the already economically strained Yazidi households.⁴⁰

Yazidi women and girls endured brutal sexual violence marked by daily rapes by their owners with some of them handcuffed behind their backs and others with their hands and legs tied during the violence. Most reported injuries, experiencing bleeding, cuts, and bruising due to the abuses. Women were intimidated by their captors warning that any resistance or attempt to escape would result in punishment through gang rapes.⁴¹ Some women committed suicide or attempted it to escape the horrors of captivity and sexual violence. A 27-year-old girl told Amnesty International she and her sister tried to kill themselves while being held in Mosul. She described:

“The man who was holding us said that either we marry him and his brother or he would sell us. At night we tried to strangle ourselves with our scarves. We tied the scarves around our necks and pulled away from each other as hard as we could, until I fainted. Two girls who were held with us woke up and stopped us and then stayed awake to watch over us”.⁴²

Furthermore, Yazidi women were locked inside the apartments or houses where they were held and coerced to work as domestic servants for the fighters’ families. Scarce food was provided to them, leading to significant weight loss. Continual verbal abuse was directed at them by ISIS fighters, with insults directed at their Yazidi faith and referred to them as “*dirty kuffar*” or “*devil-worshippers*”.⁴³

Yazidi children under the age of 7 were sold together with their mums as a package. They endured similar harsh living conditions, including a lack of food, water, medicines, and heating. They were subjected to physical punishment by their captors if they cried or caused disturbances. A woman narrated:

“When he would force me into a room with me, I could hear my children screaming and crying outside the door. Once he became very angry. He beat and threatened to kill them. He forced two of them to stand outside barefoot in the snow until he finished with me.”⁴⁴

Additionally, they were exploited as a means to punish their mothers and ensure compliance; for instance, children were beaten if their mothers attempted to escape. By the age of nine, girls were forcibly separated from their mothers and sold as sexual slaves, while boys at the age of seven were sent to ISIS training camps.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Nicolaus and Yuce, “Sex-Slavery: One aspect of the Yazidi genocide”, 207-208.

⁴¹ UNHRC, “They came to destroy,” 10-17.

⁴² Amnesty International, “Escape from Hell,” 8.

⁴³ UNHRC, “They came to destroy,” 10-17.

⁴⁴ UNHRC, “They came to destroy,” 10-17.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

2.3.3 Treatment of Boys aged between 7 and 12

Boys aged between 7 and 12 formed the third group. They were forcibly separated from their remaining families and relocated to training centers or military camps in Mosul, Tel Afar, and Baaj in Iraq, and Raqqah, Tabqa, Tel Abyad, and Suluk in Syria. In these locations, they were treated as ISIS recruits and compelled to acquire Arab names, participate in religious and military training sessions on the importance of ISIS's war against the unbelievers, and view propaganda videos depicting ISIS battles and suicide missions. Yazidi boys were integrated with Sunni Arab boys, as all children were regarded as potential recruits irrespective of their background. This involved canceling their past as Yazidis and all ties with their family and community, and imposing a new Muslim identity, intending to destroy their religious identity. A 12-year-old boy trained in Syria said:

“They told us we had to become good Muslims and fight for Islam. They showed us videos of beheadings, killings, and ISIS battles. My instructor said: ‘You have to kill *kuffars* even if they are your fathers and brothers because they belong to the wrong religion and they don't worship God’.”⁴⁶

After completing their training, these individuals were assigned to the battlefield, centers, bases, or other locations according to ISIS's operational needs. Simultaneously, Yazidi mothers were forced to watch videos of their sons undergoing training to become ISIS militants.⁴⁷

2.4 Quantifying the Genocide: Numbers of Victims and Kidnappings

The United Nations has reported by Kurdish authorities and various human rights organizations that between 2,000 and 5,500 Yazidis were killed, and more than 6,000 were kidnapped by the Islamic State. However, the UN could not independently verify these figures. To address this, in 2015, Cetorelli, Sasson, Shabila, and Burnham conducted a retrospective household survey aimed at providing a population-based estimate of the number and demographic profile of Yazidis killed and kidnapped by ISIS. The survey focused on residents in Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), randomly selecting 100 households per camp, totaling 1,300 families.⁴⁸

Sinjari Yazidi interviewees reported 43 killings and 83 kidnappings of household members by ISIS. Among them, 22 Yazidis were executed, while 21 died due to injuries or lack of food and water during the ISIS siege on Mount Sinjar. Of the 83 kidnapped, 45 had escaped ISIS captivity by the time of

⁴⁶ Ibid., 18-19.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Cetorelli et al., “Mortality and kidnapping estimates for the Yazidi population,” 4-5.

the survey, leaving 38 still missing. Assuming a Yazidi population of 400,000 in Sinjar at the time of the ISIS attack, the overall estimated number of killed or kidnapped Yazidis is 9,900. This includes an estimated 3,100 Yazidis killed (1,400 executed, 1,700 died on Mount Sinjar), and an estimated 6,800 kidnapped (at the time of the survey, 4,300 Yazidis had escaped captivity, 2,500 were still missing). It is important to note that since nuclear families with no survivors had zero probability of being selected for the survey, the study acknowledges that the number of killings and kidnappings is probably underestimated. According to the study's findings, approximately 2.5% of the Yazidi population in Sinjar was either killed or kidnapped in the span of a few days.⁴⁹

The study suggests that Yazidis were indiscriminately targeted by ISIS, irrespective of age and sex. Among the 126 reported members of households killed or kidnapped, 71 were adults and 55 were children, while, in terms of gender, 68 were females, and 58 were males. Additionally, the study reveals that the majority of those who perished on Mount Sinjar due to starvation, dehydration, or injuries were children, emphasizing their vulnerability (19 out of 21). This result aligns with the statement released by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) on August 5th, 2014, expressing extreme concern for the approximately 25,000 children trapped on the mountain at that time.⁵⁰

Taking into account estimations from the United Nations, Kurdish authorities, and various human rights organizations, the study conducted by Cetorelli and others, which suggests 3,100 killings and 6,800 kidnappings, appears to be reliable. The alignment of estimates from multiple independent sources enhances the credibility of the reported numbers concerning Yazidi victims and abductions.⁵¹

2.5 The Legal Dimension of the Yazidi Genocide

In June 2016, a United Nations Human Rights Council (UN HRC) Commission released a report categorizing the atrocities committed by the Islamic State from August 2014 onward against the Yazidis of Sinjar as crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and serious violations of international human rights law. The term "genocide" was legally defined in Article II of the 1948 Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide:

"The crime of genocide is committed when a person commits a prohibited act with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group as such. Prohibited acts are: (1) killing members of the group; (2) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (3)

⁴⁹ Ibid., 8-12.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (4) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (5) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group”.⁵²

ISIS committed all the prohibited acts against members of the religious protected group of Yazidis:

- (1) *Killing members*. Upon arriving in Sinjar, ISIS intentionally killed hundreds of Yazidis, executing men and boys upon capture, causing numerous casualties during the siege on Mount Sinjar, and murdering Yazidis held captive in Iraq and Syria. Between 2,000 and 5,500 Yazidis were killed.
- (2) *Causing serious bodily or mental harm*. Acts include rape, sexual violence, enslavement, torture, and inhuman treatment. Yazidis experienced all of these atrocities: Yazidi women and girls were systematically raped, and treated as sexual slaves with registration, sale, purchase, and ownership as chattel; both Yazidi women and men were subjected to enslavement, with women being deprived of their liberty and forced to endure rape, cooking, cleaning, and washing clothes for militants, and men compelled to labor on ISIS projects; Yazidi women and children faced daily beatings for refusing orders or attempting to escape, being insulted as “dirty *kuffar*”, resulting in torture and inhuman treatment against them.
- (3) *Deliberately inflicting conditions of life to bring about physical destruction*. ISIS inflicted on Yazidis conditions of life with the intent of annihilating them. The UNHCR estimates that between 20,000 and 50,000 were besieged on Mount Sinjar, deprived of essential resources, enduring temperatures exceeding 50°C. Helicopters attempting to deliver aid and rescue vulnerable individuals were attacked. Harsh living conditions, marked by a scarcity of food, water, medical care, and enslavement were intentionally imposed on Yazidi women, children, and men in order to cause their deaths over an extended period.
- (4) *Imposing measures to prevent births*. ISIS imposed the separation of men from women to prevent the continuation of the Yazidi faith, which requires both parents to be Yazidi. Moreover, abortions were performed on captured pregnant women, and several Yazidi women reported the loss of their honor after being raped, deterring them from marrying or having children in the future.
- (5) *Forcibly transferring of children*. ISIS forcibly relocated Yazidi children from their families and communities to other locations depending on sex: girls of more than 9 years were sold as sex slaves, while boys of more than 7 years were trained to follow Islam and fight.⁵³

The report asserts that ISIS committed these several prohibited actions with the explicit intent to destroy the Yazidis purely because of their religious identity. The actions of the Islamic State against

⁵² UNHRC, “They came to destroy,” 3-4.

⁵³ UNHRC, “They came to destroy,” 21-28. Hawre, “The last genocide against the Yazidi people”, 112-120. Yazda, “Working against the clock,” 9.

the Yazidis reveal its evident intent to destroy the group. Furthermore, this intention is clearly stated in various documents, articles, and interviews released by ISIS militants.⁵⁴ In an article that appeared in the official ISIS magazine *Dabiq* entitled “*The Revival of Slavery: Before the Hour*”, the Islamic State describes in detail how Yazidis should be treated once captured:

“Upon conquering the region of Sinjar, the IS faced a population of Yazidis, a pagan minority existent for ages in the region of Iraq and Sham. [...] They never accepted Islam nor claimed to have adopted it. Accordingly, the IS dealt with this group as the majority of Islamic jurists have indicated. [...] After capture, the Yazidi women and children were then divided according to the Shariah among the fighters of the Islamic State who participated in the Sinjar Operations. [...] The enslaved Yazidi families are now sold by the Islamic State soldiers as the *mushrikin* [*Arab polytheists who opposed Islam in the 7th century*] were sold by the Companions. Many of the *mushrik* women and children have willingly accepted Islam and now race to practice it with evident sincerity after their exit from the darkness of shirk”.⁵⁵

At the end of the examination of ISIS’s actions and intentions against the Yazidi community, the UN HRC Commission concluded that the Islamic State was guilty of having committed the crime of genocide against the Yazidis.⁵⁶ The report categorizes the acts perpetrated by ISIS not only as genocide but also as crimes against humanity, war crimes, and serious violations of international human rights law. Crimes against humanity include murder, extermination, sexual slavery, rape, sexual violence, enslavement, torture, inhumane acts, and deprivation of liberty. War crimes involve attacking a civilian population, murder, rape, sexual violence, sexual slavery, torture, cruel treatment, outrages upon personal liberty, and using and conscripting children. Violations of international human rights law encompass breaches of the right to life, liberty, and security of the person, the prohibition against torture and other cruel and inhumane acts, the freedom of religion or belief, the prohibition against slavery and human trafficking, and the crime of enforced disappearance.⁵⁷

2.6 Direct Consequences of the Genocide

The aftermath of the genocide brought immediate but profound consequences on the Yazidi community. These included the transformation in the Yazidis’ sentiments toward Kurds, leading to a redefinition of their identity. As deeply explored in the paragraph relative to the Yazidi identity in the first chapter, the collaboration of approximately 15-20% of Muslim Kurds with ISIS and the betrayal

⁵⁴ UNHRC, “They came to destroy,” 28-31.

⁵⁵ Moradi and Anderson, “The Islamic State’s *Êzîdî* Genocide in Iraq”, 131.

⁵⁶ UNHRC, “They came to destroy,” 28-32.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

by the Peshmerga in Sinjar prompted a distancing from Kurdish identity, with currently around 90% of Yazidis no longer identifying as Kurds. The second immediate outcome involved the forced displacement of the almost entire Yazidi community of Sinjar from their homeland to Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps in Kurdistan or refugee camps in Syria and Turkey. The third consequence pertained to the challenge of reintegrating into the conservative Yazidi community women who experienced sexual violence and were perceived to have lost their honour. Lastly, the psychological trauma endured by the Yazidi community, witnessing and experiencing horrific events, has left enduring scars and impacted the mental and emotional well-being of several individuals.

2.6.1 Yazidi Displacement in IDP and Refugee Camps

One of the direct and most significant outcomes of the ISIS invasion of Sinjar was the profound shift in the demographic distribution of the Yazidi community in Northern Iraq. In August 2014, over 250,000 Yazidis fled their homes in Sinjar with the majority who managed to escape from ISIS capture seeking immediate refuge as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the Kurdistan Region. Initially housed in temporary shelters like public buildings, abandoned constructions, and community centers, they later transitioned to camps specifically established for displaced Yazidis. A smaller portion of those affected chose to find refuge in Syria and Turkey. The impact of ISIS extended beyond the Yazidi community, as not only 96% of the Yazidis present in Sinjar escaped, but also thousands of Christians, Turkmens, Arabs, and Shabaks fled the area following the ISIS capture.⁵⁸

The displacement of the Yazidi unfolded in two distinct phases. Firstly, on August 3rd, an initial wave of Yazidis fled their homes in Sinjar, primarily utilizing cars and heading directly along the Syrian/Iraqi border towards the Dohuk Governorate in the KRI (*Figure 2.3*). By August 4th, the road became inaccessible due to the escalated fighting at the Rabia border crossing, leaving approximately 130,000 Yazidis stranded in Sinjar. The second phase of displacement took place with the evacuation of thousands of Yazidis thanks to the establishment of a safe corridor from Mount Sinjar to Syria. Subsequently, most of the displaced Yazidis entered Iraqi Kurdistan via the Syrian-Iraqi border crossing at Pesh Khabur (*Figure 2.3*).⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Dulz, "The displacement of the Yezidis," 139.

⁵⁹ REACH, "Displacement from Sinjar, 3-14 August 2014", 1.

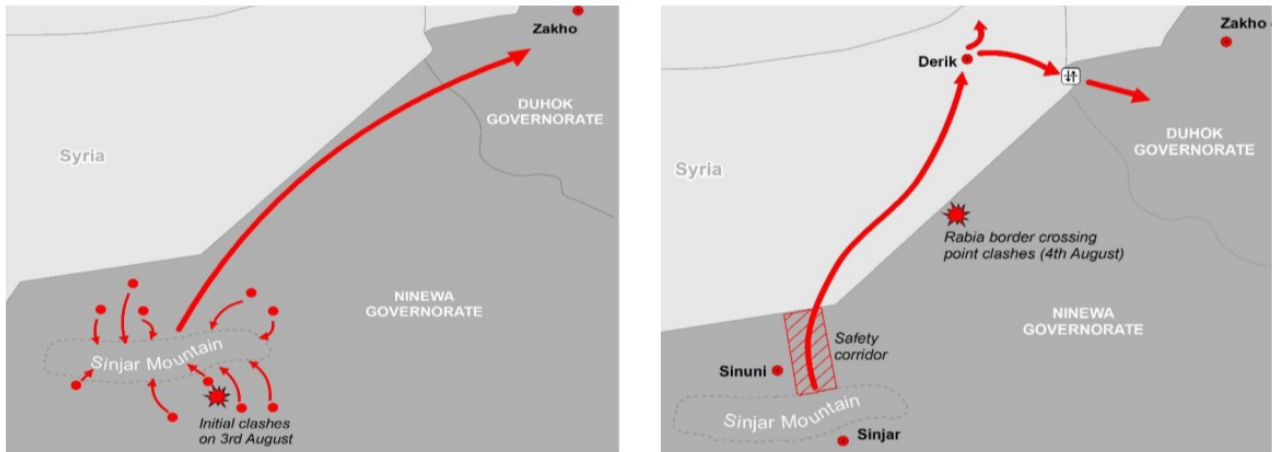


Figure 2.3: Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the displacement of Yazidis. Source: REACH, 2014.

As a result, between 250,000 and 360,000 Yazidis were displaced from Sinjar. While a small number, around 5,000 Yazidis, remained on Mount Sinjar due to either the impossibility or unwillingness to leave, the majority sought refuge in Kurdistan, Northern Syria, and Turkey. Those who chose not to flee were mainly men, including goat herders and farmers, who opted to stay closer to their homes and livelihoods, and elderly individuals with limited mobility.⁶⁰

Between 4,000 and 13,000 Yazidis, after crossing into Syria, decided to stay in Nawroz Camp, situated close to the town of Derik in the canton of Cizîrê in North Syria (see Figure 2.3). It was difficult to estimate the actual population of the camp due to the daily fluctuations in the immediate aftermath of displacement, including several returns to Syria by Yazidis who initially settled in Dohuk Governorate. They believed it would be easier to return to Sinjar from there once the area was recaptured from ISIS. The refugee camp was established by the self-administered government of Rojava on August 11th, following the Yazidi displacement. The report published by the *Roj Women's Associations* in September 2014 stated that, although 25 internally displaced Arab families from Idlib and Aleppo resided in the camp, 96% of the people in the camp were Sinjari Yazidis. Additionally, up to 12,000 Yazidis, after having entered Syria, fled to Turkey using both official and unofficial border crossings.⁶¹

The majority of Yazidis crossed into Kurdistan, seeking shelter in the areas of Zakho, Dohuk, and Khanke (Figure 2.4). Most of them sought refuge in different types of shelters because, in the immediate aftermath of the displacement and prior to the establishment of official IDP camps, only 23% of Yazidis found a place in the already established reception facilities. Of these, around 10,000 individuals settled in the Bajed Kandala Camp, situated close to the border between Iraq, Kurdistan,

⁶⁰ Ibid., 2-3.

⁶¹ REACH, "Displacement from Sinjar, 3-14 August 2014", 2-3. Roj Women's Associations, "Rojava's Êzîdî Emergency", 3, 19.

and Syria. The majority sought temporary shelter in diverse locations, with 37% finding refuge in school buildings, 22% in parks and public spaces, and 17% in churches and unfinished buildings. Only 1% of displaced Yazidis were hosted by friends or families already present in Kurdistan.⁶²

Yazidis left their homes in a rush, carrying little or no possessions with them; consequently, most required immediate humanitarian assistance for essential needs such as food, water, medicines, and official shelter. According to key informants interviewed by the association REACH shortly after displacement, upon the arrival of thousands of IDPs in Kurdistan, authorities swiftly activated food and water distribution. In response to the urgent need, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) designed plans to establish camps across the Dohuk Governorate, specifically catering to internally displaced Yazidis.⁶³ By early September 2014, IOM (International Organization for Migration) observed that the Dohuk Governorate hosted the largest IDP population in Iraq, comprising more than 465,000 individuals. Among them, between 286,000 and 345,000 were Yazidis, underscoring the large scale of the humanitarian crisis.⁶⁴

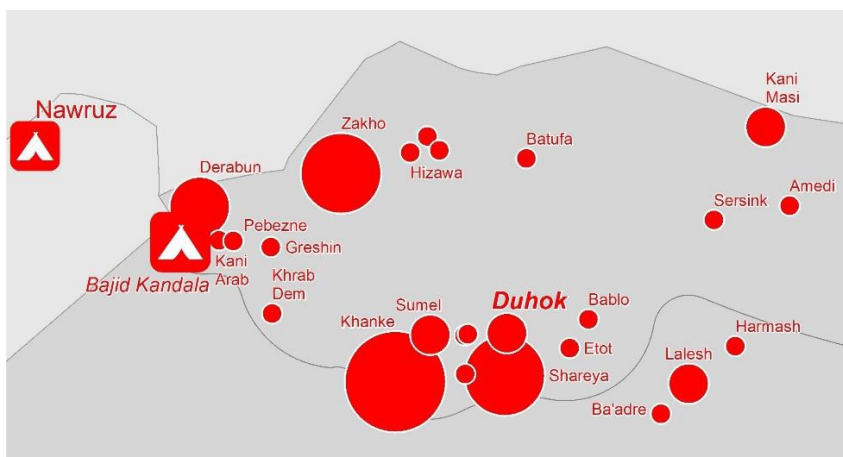


Figure 2.4: Distribution of displaced Yazidis. Source: REACH, 2014.

The third chapter will delve into a detailed examination of the establishment and administration of official IDP camps dedicated to Yazidis in the KRI, with a focus on how the difficult living conditions inside these camps represent one of the factors encouraging Yazidis to opt for migration to Europe.

2.6.2 Reintegration of Raped Women in the Yazidi Community

As already mentioned in the first chapter, the concept of honour, known as *namûs*, holds significant importance in the Yazidi community. Marrying or engaging in sexual relations outside the Yazidi

⁶² REACH, “Displacement from Sinjar, 3-14 August 2014”, 2-3.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Dulz, “The displacement of the Yezidis,” 140.

group is strictly forbidden, and women are regarded as custodians of the community's honour. Consequently, the sexual slavery of Yazidi women by ISIS was perceived by some members of the community as a loss of honour and the reintegration of these women represented a challenge in the aftermath of the genocide. However, the response of the Yazidis' spiritual and secular leadership was admirable. The *Yazidi Religious Council* adopted a progressive and revolutionary policy, breaking with the traditional norms. Baba Sheikh, the spiritual leader of the Yazidis, issued an edict on February 6th, 2015, proclaiming that individuals returning from ISIS captivity, regardless of gender, must be accepted as pure members of Yazidi society.⁶⁵

This inclusive approach was used since Yazidis in captivity were coerced into actions against their will, such as being raped by Muslims or converting to Islam, and, consequently, they should not face repercussions or judgment in their own community. Baba Sheikh further prohibited any hostile measures against the returning women based on the perceived loss of honour. The surviving women were also individually reached out by Baba Sheikh, who comforted and invited them to undergo a ritual cleansing in Lalish. Even Mir Said, the secular leader of Yazidis, supported this approach, emphasizing the community's commitment to providing mental and health support to all women who escaped the ISIS atrocities, encouraging families to respect and support these survivors.⁶⁶

It is not completely clear how the possibility of procreating offspring with Yazidi women was treated by the Islamic members. Many women reported being forced to take birth control through pills, injections, or coitus interruptus, and numerous illegal abortions were performed in the case of pregnancies. For instance, a woman narrated that an ISIS fighter sat on her stomach to kill her unborn child because it was an infidel. Conversely, other women experienced denial of access to contraceptives intending to procreate free-born children.⁶⁷ This approach sought to not only decrease the birth rate of legitimate Yazidis but also boost the caliphate's population by ensuring that newborns would inherit the status of their fathers. According to an article that appeared in *Dabiq* in 2014:

“It has been stated that the conquests of the lands of *Kufr*, multiply as well as enslavement, and thereby concubines increase in numbers, until the slave women give birth to their masters, this is because the child of the master has the status of the master, and thereby she has given birth to her master from this angle”.⁶⁸

As a result, some women experienced pregnancies or gave birth while in captivity or upon their escape. According to Akub, the Governor of Nineveh Province, there were approximately 3,000

⁶⁵ Nicolaus and Yuce, “Sex-Slavery: One aspect of the Yazidi genocide”, 209-212.

⁶⁶ Nicolaus and Yuce, “Sex-Slavery: One aspect of the Yazidi genocide”, 209-212.

⁶⁷ Hawre, “The last genocide against the Yazidi people”, 119.

⁶⁸ Jaffal, “Rape as Genocide Crime in International Criminal Law,” 239.

newborn children with unknown parentage as a consequence of the sexual slavery in the territories controlled by ISIS. However, the integration of these children into the Yazidi community appeared impossible due to its incompatibility with a fundamental pillar of Yazidism (both parents must be Yazidis). Despite Baba Sheikh's endorsement of the returning women as pure members of the Yazidi society, he explicitly stated that it was unacceptable to incorporate any children into the community without both parents being Yazidis. In an interview with *Voice of America English News*, he stated:

“The victims are our daughters and sisters, but it is unacceptable in our religion to allow the birth of any children if both parents are not Yazidis. It is also tribally unacceptable and a source of shame. If such children are born, wouldn't people ask who their fathers are? Are they Afghans? Are they Europeans?”.⁶⁹

Therefore, pregnant women or mothers faced two options: either being expelled from the Yazidi community or undergoing abortion and, if the child was already born, abandoning the baby. This posed a significant challenge as abortion was not legal in Iraq and Kurdistan, even in cases of rape. Nonetheless, Dakhil, a Yazidi lawmaker in the Iraqi Council of Representatives, mentioned an unwritten agreement among Iraqi authorities to allow the procedure for Yazidi rape victims, given the forceful circumstances they experienced. Consequently, victims sought backstreet abortion clinics. According to Ghafouri, the President of the Swedish-Kurdish NGO *Joint Help for Kurdistan* which supported displaced Yazidis in the KRI, abortion was the only choice in all cases she encountered. In situations where babies were already born, Yazidi women often chose to give them to Muslim families. However, instances where women wanted to keep their babies existed and were not uncommon. An emblematic situation was described to *Voice of America English News*:

“A Yazidi woman who was pregnant for eight months when she escaped IS, she wanted to keep her baby, but her husband insisted on divorcing her if she refused to have an abortion. The couple finally separated. The woman is now living in a refugee camp with her 5-month-old child”.⁷⁰

2.6.3 Individual and Collective Traumas among Yazidis

The aftermath of the genocide has left an enduring mark on the Yazidi community, both at the individual and collective levels. Numerous studies show the heightened vulnerability of Yazidis who survived or escaped the ISIS persecutions and massacres, indicating a substantial risk of mental disorders, acute emotional distress, and health issues. Yazidis from Sinjar endured the violence of

⁶⁹ Hussein, “Pregnant IS Rape Victims Face Challenges.”.

⁷⁰ Hussein, “Pregnant IS Rape Victims Face Challenges.”.

war, either fleeing, being abducted, or falling victim to ISIS atrocities. The loss of family members and the challenging conditions in IDP camps characterized by restrictions on essential resources such as food, water, medicines, hygienic conditions, and adequate accommodations further intensified their high levels of stress, trauma, and susceptibility to diseases. Yazidis, as individuals, experienced multifaceted traumas, such as ISIS captivity, torture, sexual slavery, guilt for having survived, and harsh living conditions in IDP camps. Furthermore, the genocide shook the Yazidi community to its core with collective traumas, including a perceived loss of honour and a persistent sense of helplessness toward continuous massacres.⁷¹

For women and children who managed to escape captivity, the trauma was particularly severe. Women suffered from nightmares, fear of being abducted again, and frequent flashbacks of the experienced rape and torture. They often had feelings of anxiety, insecurity, nervousness, hopelessness, shame due to rape, and suicidal thoughts.⁷² A high prevalence of probable PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (50,9%), and complex PTSD (20,0%) was observed among Yazidi women who endured sexual abuse and torture.⁷³ Children who survived the genocide also faced significant traumatization, manifested in physical and psychological symptoms. Many suffered from migraines and bedwetting, and their personalities underwent profound changes. Many traumatized children often struggled to develop healthy relationships with other people, displaying traits of low confidence, reservation, and nervousness. Integrating into society became a challenge, as some developed aggressive and unassertive behaviors.⁷⁴

However, as unfolded by Dr. Ilhan Kizilhan, a Yazidi transcultural psychologist residing in Germany, trauma often extends its impact to health issues, alongside chronic psychological disorders:

“In the clinical and individual areas, this traumatization often brings about physical suffering in addition to chronic psychological disorders. This includes diarrhea and frequent colds, but also psychosomatic illnesses such as skin diseases, asthma, or aches”.⁷⁵

A study conducted by Jäger in May 2017 further delved into this intersection of trauma and health among displaced Yazidis. The majority of participants in the research (78%) had experienced at least one traumatic event with 65% reporting lack of food, water, or shelter, 45% subjected to capture, 17% physically hurt, and 9% enduring sexual violence. More than half of the women reported that their self-reported general health was *poor* (59%) and only 3% described it as *very good*, while the rest fell within a range from *fair* to *good*. The study revealed high stress levels, concurrent with reduced values

⁷¹ Amnesty International, “Escape from Hell,” 13.

⁷² Omarkhali, “Transformations in the Yazidi tradition after the ISIS attacks,” 151.

⁷³ Jäger, “Stress and Health of Internally Displaced Female Yezidis,” 258.

⁷⁴ Omarkhali, “Transformations in the Yazidi tradition after the ISIS attacks,” 153.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

in both physical and mental health. Associated with elevated stress levels, Yazidi women exhibited a high prevalence of diseases such as hypertension, musculoskeletal conditions, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases. Jäger's research demonstrated the profound impact of chronic stress not only on the psychological sphere but also on various health issues.⁷⁶

Another aspect to take into consideration is the fact that the Yazidi community, as a whole, experienced collective trauma following the genocide. As described in the previous paragraph, the perceived "loss of honour" due to sexual slavery resulted in a combined personal and communal trauma. The exemplary reaction by Yazidi leadership, choosing to reintegrate raped women into society as pure members, has begun to address this collective trauma. Another layer of collective trauma stems from the reactivation of Yazidi communal memory of earlier massacres, leading to a realization of their vulnerability against Islamic terror. This has significantly increased Yazidis' antagonism toward Islam, fostering collective feelings of diffidence, anxiety, impotence, and helplessness. According to Dr. Ilhan Kizilhan, overcoming this collective trauma may take several generations, with an estimated half of Yazidis likely to develop post-traumatic disorders.⁷⁷

The Kurdistan Regional Government made an effort to provide health and psychological services to Yazidis, with a focus on women and girls who escaped ISIS. However, the provision of psychological support has been insufficient in the region. According to Human Rights Watch, several Yazidis in April 2015 expressed that there were not enough psychosocial therapists available for those in need.⁷⁸ As of today, individual and collective traumas persist among the Yazidi population, which continues to suffer. The psychological support provided by the KRG is not adequate, and a significant number of Yazidis from Sinjar are still living in difficult conditions in IDP camps or attempting to migrate to Europe. The ongoing difficulties faced by the Yazidi community make it challenging for them to address their trauma effectively. Only after a period of rest and stability, it will be possible to assess whether the individuals and the community can overcome the traumatic events.

2.7 Conclusions

The chapter extensively explores the 2014 genocide faced by Sinjari Yazidis at the hands of the Islamic State (ISIS). Seeking to establish a Caliphate in Iraq and Syria, ISIS specifically targeted Yazidis for their religious identity as part of its campaign to purify the region from non-Islamic

⁷⁶ Jäger, "Stress and Health of Internally Displaced Female Yazidis," 257-260.

⁷⁷ Omarkhali, "Transformations in the Yazidi tradition after the ISIS attacks," 153-154.

⁷⁸ Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: ISIS Escapees Describe Systematic Rape," 8-10.

groups. The Sinjar conquest was facilitated by the indifference and inaction of the Kurdistan Regional Government, the Iraqi Government, and the International Community. The ISIS attack on Sinjar occurred in August 2014. Despite attempts by Yazidis to flee to Kurdistan, thousands were trapped in Mount Sinjar. Only the combined efforts of different forces were able to rescue them, continuing later to fight against ISIS until its defeat in 2018. Those Yazidis unable to escape faced severe consequences: executions, captures, enslavements, sexual slavery, physical abuse, forced conversions to Islam, and indoctrination.

The quantification of the Yazidi genocide revealed staggering numbers, with estimates of 2,000 to 5,500 killed and over 6,000 kidnapped by ISIS. The UN Human Rights Council Commission's 2016 report unequivocally categorized ISIS's actions as genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and serious violations of international human rights law. The consequences of the genocide were profound: a distancing of Yazidis from Kurdish identity, the forced displacement of over 250,000 Yazidis, the reintegration challenges for Yazidi women who survived sexual violence, and the psychological trauma endured by the community. The genocide inflicted deep wounds on the Yazidi community. Once again in their history, they faced genocide because of their religion. On the day before the assault, Yazidis spent their day in Sinjar like any other, engaging in work and routine activities. However, within 24 hours, their lives changed forever. The 3rd of August 2014 became a point of no return.

My personal experience at the Serres Refugee Camps reveals the enduring impact of the date of August 3rd on the Yazidi community. In the week leading up to this significant day in the summer of 2023, during our regular meeting to coordinate activities, the directors emphasized the importance of the date for Yazidis, and we were asked to show more patience, care, and sensitivity. A demonstration organized by some Yazidis from the camps took place in the streets of the city of Serres to commemorate and honor the victims of the genocide. At the Community Center, several individuals wore t-shirts and headscarves adorned with phrases remembering the tragic event. The atmosphere was palpably tenser than usual, and people approached us, international workers, to share their personal experiences and reflections on what that particular day meant to them.

Along with the four short-term consequences analyzed in the second chapter, one long-term outcome emerged as the most significant legacy of the genocide, the migration of surviving Yazidis to Europe and other Western countries. After having experienced ISIS atrocities, Yazidis from Sinjar dealt with terrible conditions in IDP camps in Kurdistan and the impossibility of coming back to their homeland, Sinjar. For many, migration became the better option.

3 Factors Influencing Post-Genocide Yazidi Migration

3.1 Factors Driving Yazidi Migration

The ISIS-led genocide inflicted deep scars upon the Yazidi community. In a 2016 article, Dulz posed critical questions:

“It is too early to understand what the impact of the displacement of the Yazidi community in Northern Iraq will be with regards to demographic changes in the middle or longer term; will there be social cohesion and integration into the host community, or rather a return to the homelands? What will the impact be of the societal changes that may accompany, or be triggered by these developments?”¹

Attempting to address Dulz’s inquiries, one long-term legacy of the genocide is undoubtedly evidenced by the migration of thousands of Yazidis to Europe and other Western countries. It started immediately after the Islamic State conquered Sinjar, compelling Yazidis to seek refuge in Kurdistan, Syria, or Turkey, and persists to this day. For many Yazidis, it represents the only feasible option for attaining security and stability. ZÊD, the Central Yazidi Council in Germany, estimates that some 100,000 Yazidis have emigrated from Iraq between 2014 and 2022.²

Despite the complexity of migration analysis, scholars have attempted to present various migration theories, conceptual frameworks aimed to explain the causes, patterns, processes, and outcomes of human migrations. These theories provide analytical tools for understanding the reasons behind individuals’ movements from one place to another, the shaping of migration flows, and the factors influencing migration decisions. The third and fourth chapters of this thesis aim to elucidate the post-genocide migration of Yazidis to Europe by employing diverse migration theories. Given the intricacy of the topic, different theories can prove useful in explaining various aspects of Yazidi movements.

Different typologies of migration theories have been formulated. Samers and Collyer distinguish between determinist and integrative theories of migration. Determinist theories focus on external factors such as economic conditions and political circumstances in driving migration. These theories suggest that individuals migrate in response to forces beyond their control and emphasize the importance of push factors (conditions compelling individuals to leave their place of origin) and pull factors (conditions attracting individuals to a destination) in explaining migration. Conversely, integrative theories of migration concentrate on internal factors, highlighting the role of individual

¹ Dulz, “The displacement of the Yezidis,” 133.

² Ali, “The Forced Displacement of Ethnic and Religious Minorities,” 83.

aspirations, social networks, or household dynamics in shaping migration decisions. These theories suggest that migration is influenced not only by external conditions but also by individual and personal factors.³

Applying determinist theories to the Yazidi case study, the external factor that represented the last straw initiating a cascade of events that collectively compelled Yazidis to flee Iraq en masse was the ISIS genocidal campaign against them. Consequently, three factors associated with the area of origin precipitated the push of Yazidis to leave Iraq: the protracted permanence and the harsh living conditions in IDP camps in Kurdistan and refugee camps in Syria and Turkey; the near impossibility of returning to their homeland, Sinjar, due to the complex political, military, administrative, and social situation that emerged after its liberation from ISIS; and the pervasive loss of trust in authorities that should protect minorities' rights and allow security and justice in Iraq, particularly toward the Iraqi, Kurdish, and Yazidi leadership. The subsequent paragraphs delve into a comprehensive examination of these push factors driving Yazidi migration to Europe.

While these external factors provide valuable insights into why Yazidis sought to leave Iraq, they do not fully account for Yazidi migration patterns alone, as they fail to elucidate why some Yazidis opt to migrate to Europe while others remain in camps. Escaping from Sinjar was indeed a forced decision for Yazidis because they did not have the realistic option to remain due to the genocidal campaign of the Islamic State against them. However, upon finding safety in Kurdistan or neighboring countries, Yazidis are confronted with the decision of whether to migrate to Europe or to remain.

Determinist theories tend indeed to often depict migrants as mere pawns pushed and pulled by external forces, or as passive victims of global capitalism, left with no alternative but to migrate. However, it is essential to acknowledge the agency of individuals in the choice of migrating or not. Agency represents the limited yet real capacity of individuals or social groups to make independent choices and effect change in the world, reshaping the structures that dictate and constrain their opportunities. Integrative theories attempt indeed to give more importance to individuals' agency. Nevertheless, once again, agency alone cannot fully account for migration patterns, as social structures such as states, class, religion, and ethnicity also play pivotal roles in shaping individuals' migration choices, constraining their agency and access to economic, social, and cultural resources.⁴

In response to these complexities, De Haas proposes a framework that amalgamates determinist and integrative theories, simultaneously incorporating individuals' agency and social structures in explaining migration processes, the aspirations-capabilities framework (*Figure 3.1*). According to this

³ Samers and Collyer, "Migration", 54-147.

⁴ De Haas, "A theory of migration," 14-16.

theory, migration is conceptualized as “a function of people’s capabilities and aspirations to migrate within given sets of perceived geographical opportunity structures”. Migration decisions are shaped by the interplay between individuals’ aspirations, comprising personal desires and goals, and their capabilities, encompassing the resources and opportunities available to them. The framework aims to conceptualize how migrants exercise agency within broader structural constraints, wherein the connection between agency and structure is represented by positive and negative liberties. Aspirations and capabilities are indeed contingent on positive liberties, which serve as enabling factors facilitating mobility, and negative liberties, which denote the absence of obstacles and constraints inhibiting mobility. Positive and negative liberties jointly influence individuals’ aspirations and capabilities, thereby influencing their mobility, which is the capability to choose where to live, including the option to stay in their current location.⁵

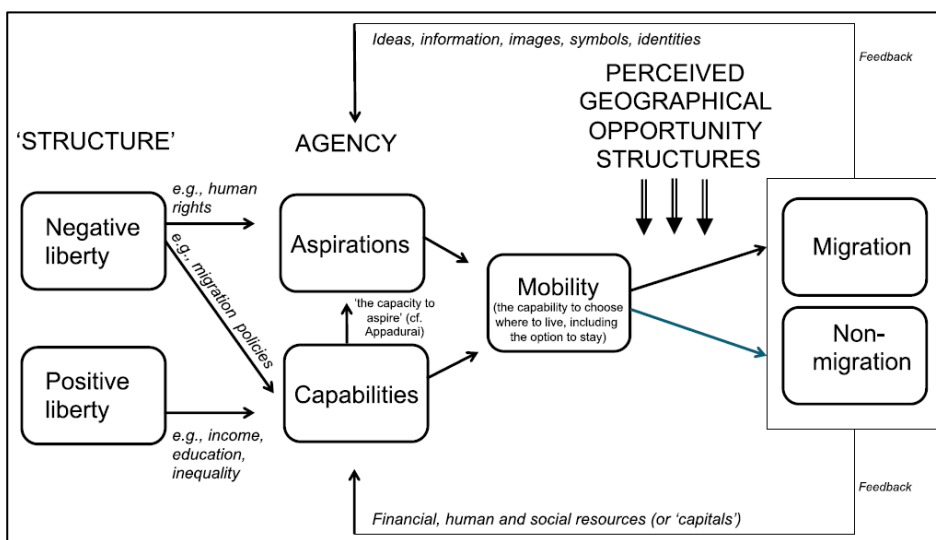


Figure 3.1: De Haas' aspirations-capabilities framework. Source: De Haas, 2021.

In the Yazidi case study, the presence or absence of positive and negative liberties can significantly influence their decision to migrate. Positive liberties encompass, for example, access to education, economic opportunities, and freedom of movement, while negative liberties include protection from discrimination, legal protections against human rights violations, and others. The availability or lack of these liberties shapes individuals’ aspirations and capabilities to migrate. For Yazidi individuals, aspirations to migrate may include seeking safety, economic prospects, educational opportunities, or reuniting with relatives already residing in Europe. Their capability to migrate depends on factors such as financial resources, education, social networks, and legal rights.

The decision to migrate is thus shaped by the alignment or nonalignment between individuals’ aspirations and their capabilities. Only those who possess the necessary resources and opportunities

⁵ Ibid., 16-18, 22-25.

to pursue their migration aspirations are more likely to migrate, a concept termed “voluntary mobility” in De Haas’ framework. Conversely, those facing constraints or limitations, despite a desire to migrate, may be less inclined to do so, a condition referred to as “involuntary immobility”. This situation applies to Yazidis stranded in IDP camps who wish to migrate but lack the necessary economic resources, education, social networks, legal rights, or a combination thereof. However, there are also Yazidis who, despite potentially having the resources to migrate to Europe, choose not to do so for personal reasons such, such as attachment to their community or willingness to return to Sinjar once liberated. This phenomenon is classified as “voluntary immobility”. Finally, some Yazidi individuals may fall into the category of “acquiescent immobility”, where they neither possess the capabilities to migrate nor desire to do so because they have considered it as an option.⁶

Conclusively, emphasizing the agency of Yazidi individuals in making personal migration choices is essential before analyzing external factors driving their migration. By acknowledging the importance of individual agency, a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics driving Yazidi migration decisions can be attained. The subsequent paragraphs will now provide a deep analysis of the external factors compelling Yazidis as a collective to leave Iraq.

3.2 Displacement of Yazidis in Kurdistan, Turkey, and Syria

As illustrated in the second chapter, in the immediate aftermath of the displacement from Sinjar, Yazidis sought refuge in various temporary shelters such as school buildings, parks, public spaces, and unfinished buildings across Kurdistan, Syria, and Turkey. As soon as authorities grasped the extent of the Yazidi displacement, official camps were reorganized or built from scratch to accommodate them. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), the government constructed eighteen IDP camps, while in Turkey, Yazidis found shelter in six refugee camps. In Syria, the Nawroz camp became the primary destination for displaced Yazidis (locations of camps in *Figure 3.2*). However, the terrible living conditions in these camps represent one of the factors pushing displaced Yazidis to leave Iraq and seek refuge in Europe.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22-23.



Figure 3.2: Locations of IDP and Refugee Camps for Yazidis in Kurdistan, Turkey, and Syria. Source: My own elaboration of Yazda (2016) and Dulz data.

Estimates suggest that approximately 300,000 Sinjari Yazidis sought refuge in Kurdistan, 120,000 in Syria, and 30,000 in Turkey. However, quantifying the exact number of Yazidis in these countries poses significant challenges. Firstly, upon arrival, many Yazidis did not register with official authorities, choosing instead to find accommodations in unconventional shelters. This undocumented population complicates accurate enumeration, as they fall outside the registration system maintained by authorities. Furthermore, in Turkey and Syria, not all individuals residing in official refugee camps were able to register with the UNHCR due to financial issues considering that traveling to the nearest United Nations office required between 20 and 26 hours by bus.⁷ Secondly, Yazidis often face identity categorization challenges, with their status not recorded according to their ethnicity but simply as Iraqi individuals, further hindering precise enumeration efforts. Thirdly, most Yazidis are in continuous movement between camps and across borders, often bypassing formal registration processes and legal paths. This transient nature makes tracking their movements and estimating their numbers difficult. Despite these challenges, data from official authorities, NGOs, and scholars offer valuable insights into the broader patterns of Yazidi displacement following the genocide.

3.2.1 IDPs in Kurdistan

According to the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, internally displaced persons (IDPs) are:

⁷ Yazda, “Yazidi Refugees in Turkey and Syria,” 2.

“Persons, or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border”.⁸

By the end of 2014, the global number of displaced persons due to armed conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations reached 38,2 million individuals, the highest figure since 1989. This marked an increase of 8,6 million new IDPs compared to the previous year, with significant surges in countries such as Iraq, Syria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. By the end of 2015, the situation worsened further, with the global number of displaced persons rising to 40,8 million individuals. Among the most affected nations were Yemen, Syria, and Iraq.⁹

Iraq was one of the most affected countries in terms of internal displacements starting in 2014, driven by the emergence of armed conflict and violence perpetrated by the Islamic State. *Figure 3.3* illustrates the annual influx of new internally displaced persons from 2013 to 2022. The conflict in Iraq resulted in 2,18 million new internally displaced individuals in 2014, followed by 1,11 million in 2015, 660,000 in 2016, and 1,38 million in 2017. The situation began to improve after the defeat of ISIS in 2018, with fewer than 150,000 new individuals displaced annually.¹⁰

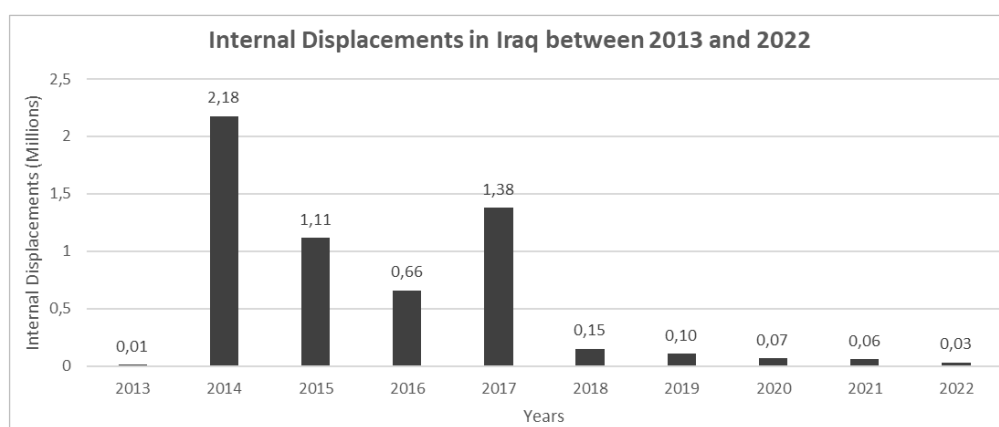


Figure 3.3: Internal Displacements in Iraq 2013-2022. Source: Global Internal Displacement Database.

Figure 3.4 depicts the total number of IDPs in Iraq at the end of each year, comprising both existing IDPs and those newly displaced during that year, as well as the difference from IDPs who managed to return to their homes during the same period. The total number of IDPs, after having reached peaks in 2014 and 2015, gradually declined each year, reflecting the absence of significant new displacement flows and many former IDPs returning home. Nonetheless, challenges persist, with still 1,2 million IDPs recorded at the end of 2022, meaning that many were unable to return to their

⁸ IOM Iraq, “Understanding Ethno-Religious Groups in Iraq,” 5.

⁹ UNHCR, “Global Trends 2014,” 23-25. UNHCR, “Global Trends 2015,” 29-30.

¹⁰ Global Internal Displacement Database.

homeland.¹¹ As of the last available data in December 2023, there are still 1,1 million IDPs in Iraq, with over 80% located in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the Governorate of Nineveh.¹²

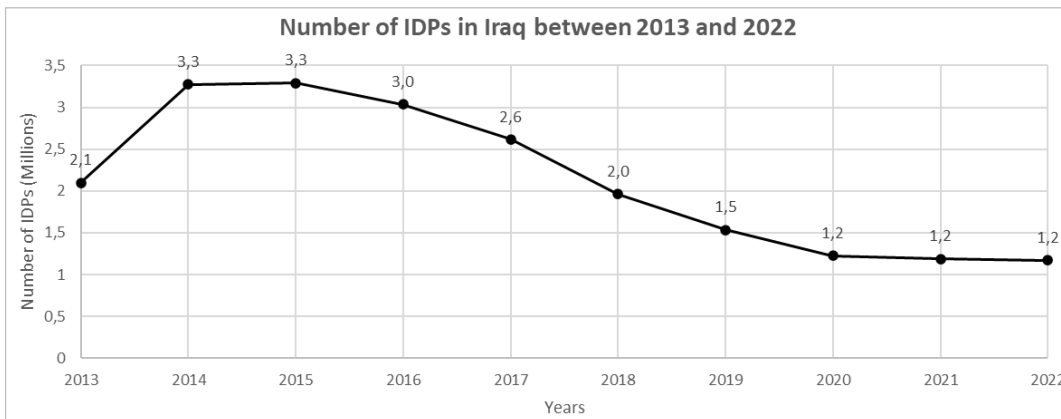


Figure 3.4: Number of IDPs in Iraq 2013-2022. Source: Global Internal Displacement Database.

Considering the IDPs' areas of origin and displacement, Anbar and Nineveh are the two governorates from where the largest majority of IDPs have been displaced. In 2014, the conquest of large areas of the Nineveh Governorate by ISIS led to the displacement of over 120,000 families from Nineveh to areas outside the governorate. Additionally, smaller proportions of families were displaced within the governorate in areas not controlled by the Islamic State (Figure 3.5). The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) serves as the primary host for IDPs, with Nineveh following closely behind. Together, these regions have accommodated over two-thirds of all Iraqi IDPs. In the aftermath of displacement, the KRI provided shelter for nearly 160,000 families (Figure 3.6). Considering the timeline, displacement began gradually in early 2014 but escalated significantly in the latter half of the year when the Islamic State conquered large areas of northern and central Iraq. Subsequent waves of displacement resulted from military operations to recapture these territories.¹³

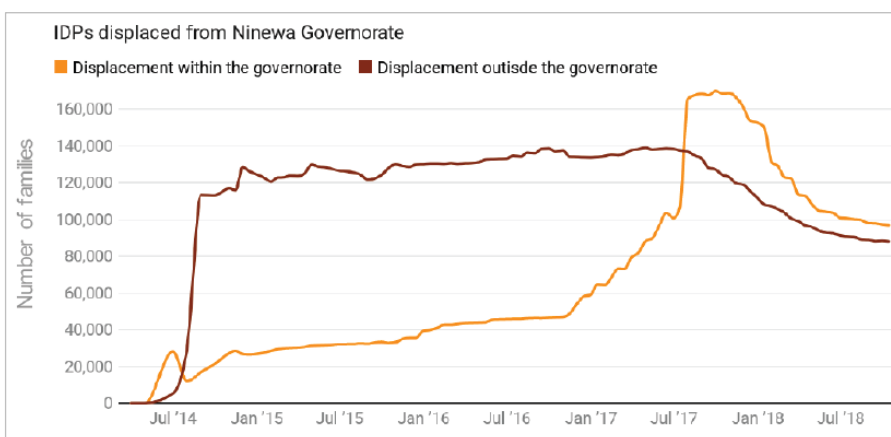


Figure 3.5: IDPs displaced from the Nineveh Governorate 2014-2018. Source: IOM, RWG, Social Inquiry, 2018.

¹¹ Global Internal Displacement Database.

¹² UNHCR, "IDPs and Returnees Population," 2024.

¹³ IOM, RWG, Social Inquiry, "Reasons to remain," 6-10.

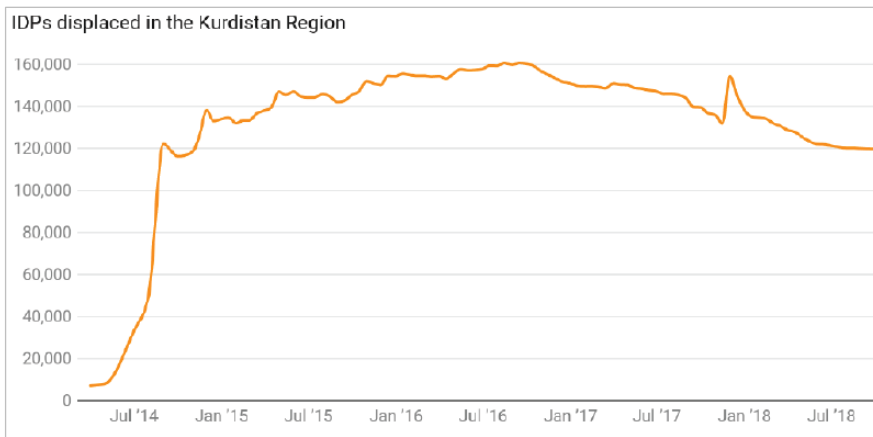


Figure 3.6: IDPs displaced in the Kurdistan Region 2014-2018. Source: IOM, RWG, *Social Inquiry*, 2018.

Approximately 409,170 IDPs from the Nineveh Governorate, where the Sinjar District is located, were hosted in the Dohuk Governorate in the KRI. According to estimates by IOM, between 70% and 85% of these IDPs displaced from Nineveh to Dohuk were Yazidis, translating to roughly 286,500 to 345,000 individuals.¹⁴ Analyzing the demographic composition of the IDP population in the Dohuk Governorate, it was found that 13% were already displaced prior to 2014, while the remaining 87% were displaced following the onset of the 2014 conflict in Iraq. 54% of IDPs arrived from Mosul City, 39% from Sinjar, and the remaining 7% from Telkaif, Hamdaniya, and Telafar. 85% of IDPs in the governorate were defined as Kurds (70-85% Yazidis, the remaining Sunni Muslims), while the remaining 15% comprised Arabs, Christians, Turkmens, Shabaks, and other minority groups.¹⁵

Initially, Yazidis fleeing the conflict sought shelter in unfinished buildings or with host families in urban centers. Later, those with means opted to rent apartments in cities, while the majority eventually transitioned to IDP camps or chose to remain in informal shelters. The following paragraphs further explore these decisions and their resulting living conditions.

3.2.2 Yazidi IDPs in Urban Areas

Despite the establishment of IDP camps, some displaced households chose to seek refuge in urban areas. A UNHCR-coordinated study conducted in June 2016 found that 68% of internally displaced persons in the Dohuk Governorate in the KRI lived in urban settings, amounting to an estimated 426,000 individuals out of 625,000.¹⁶ However, in a 2019 study conducted by IOM to analyze the displacement trends across Iraq among four ethnoreligious minorities (Yazidis, Christians, Shabak

¹⁴ Dulz, “The displacement of the Yezidis,” 140-141.

¹⁵ UNHCR, “Displacement as challenge and opportunity,” 11-14.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Shias, and Turkmen Shias), it was observed that the percentage of Yazidis hosted in camps was higher compared to the average of total IDPs. Specifically, approximately 47% of Yazidis were hosted in camps, while only 5% of Christians, 8% of Shabak Shias, and 3% of Turkmen Shias were similarly accommodated.¹⁷

In contrast, the most common shelter for these three ethnoreligious groups was rented accommodation (Christians 71%, Shabak Shias 61%, and Turkmen Shias 56%), while only 18% of Yazidis opted to rent houses, as they were not able to afford an independent life for economic reasons, as the next paragraph will mention. Even the percentage of Yazidis living in informal, unfinished, or abandoned buildings was higher (25%) compared to Christians, Shabak Shias, and Turkmen Shias. Lastly, less than one-tenth of IDPs from each community were welcomed by host families, while religious buildings provided shelter for a substantial number of Turkmen Shias (27%) and Shabak Shias (11%), although this was not a common practice across the other two groups (*Figure 3.7*).¹⁸

Yazidis, Christians, Shabak Shias, and Turkmen Shias all faced displacement as a result of the Islamic State crisis, yet disparities in their capabilities, as outlined in De Haas' framework, were evident among these groups. While education levels were relatively similar across the other groups, Yazidis stood out with notably lower levels of education, with almost half of the respondents having received no formal education (49,5%). In comparison, individuals with no education represented 12,2% of Christians, 19,9% of Shabak Shias, and 14,1% of Turkmen Shias, with the majority having attained primary, secondary, or higher education levels. Additionally, unemployment rates, though widespread across all groups, were significantly higher among Yazidi IDPs, with almost half of interviewed Yazidis unemployed (49,6%), compared to an average of 24% among Christians, Shabak Shias, and Turkmen Shias.¹⁹

Consequently, the lower education levels and higher unemployment rates among Yazidis likely influenced their housing choices and displacement patterns. These factors may have limited Yazidis' financial resources, making it more difficult for them to afford rented accommodation. Additionally, lower levels of education might have restricted their access to certain job opportunities, further exacerbating their economic situation and hindering their ability to secure stable housing outside of camps. As a result, Yazidis predominantly relied on unfinished and informal buildings soon after displacement and later on IDP camps due to resource scarcity. In contrast, Christians, Shabak Shias, and Turkmen Shias, characterized by higher levels of education and employment, had greater personal resources to secure private accommodation. Furthermore, Shabak and Turkmen Shias could rely on

¹⁷ IOM Iraq, "Understanding Ethno-Religious Groups in Iraq," 12-13.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 10-12.

existing networks within their religious communities, as a significant portion of displaced Shias were hosted in religious buildings. The greater availability of resources and capabilities, including economic and network resources, enabled these groups to pursue better housing options. Overall, these disparities highlight the influence of socioeconomic factors on housing choices and displacement outcomes among the different ethnoreligious groups affected by the Islamic State crisis.

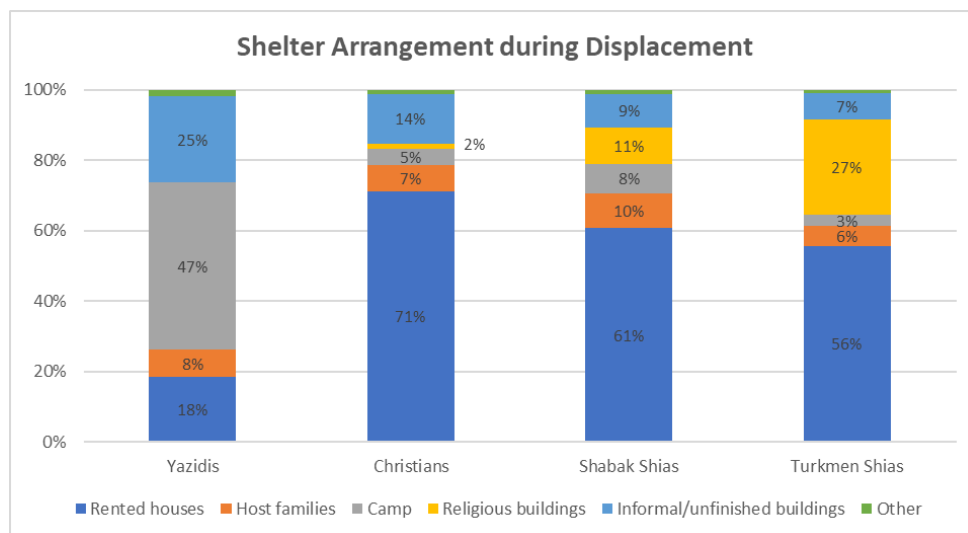


Figure 3.7: Shelter Arrangement during displacement. Source: My own elaboration of IOM Iraq (2019) data.

Reasons leading IDPs to reside in urban areas stemmed from a desire to capitalize on the opportunities available in urban areas, including access to employment, services, and possibilities, despite challenges due to ongoing conflict, financial crisis, and significant development challenges in the KRI. The UNHCR-coordinated study delves into various aspects of IDPs’ living conditions in the urban areas of the Dohuk Governorate. Initially, the primary factors influencing IDPs’ resettlement decisions post-displacement were safety (38% of respondents) and the presence of relatives, friends, or fellow community members in the area (25%). Over time, safety remained paramount, but even considerations such as affordability (25%) and employment opportunities (15%) gained importance.²⁰

Three critical areas are identified by the research: housing, employment, and social cohesion. Despite generally favorable housing conditions in Dohuk Governorate’s urban areas, a significant portion of IDPs, particularly in medium and low-density areas, lived in inadequate shelters, including informal structures or unfinished buildings. This situation contrasted starkly with the local populations, among whom 99% resided in appropriate houses. In terms of employment, the IDP population faced high unemployment rates in 2016, with only 63% of men and 11% of women employed. Construction and

²⁰ UNHCR, “Displacement as challenge and opportunity,” 17-19.

daily waged labor in agriculture were the most common occupations among displaced individuals, reflecting limited job opportunities.²¹

Regarding social cohesion with the local community, in the beginning, the host community was willing to support the displaced people by helping them with food and accommodation; however, it quickly became clear that the situation would become protracted, and, consequently, the initial welcoming gradually turned into distrust as the displacement became prolonged. Language barriers, perceptions of differential treatment between host and displaced groups, and underlying distrust and fear further strained interactions between different ethnic groups and between local and displaced households, which became minimal or even negative. Due to the economic crisis in Kurdistan, even the local population, which has been used to a relatively high standard of living, is facing challenges in securing employment, often attributing their difficulties to the presence of IDPs. For example, IDPs are frequently blamed for contributing to inflation and the increased prices of essential commodities such as food, petrol, electricity, services, and rent.²² A local Kurdish guy stated:

“No one expected this huge number of IDPs coming to our city, everything became a mess. There was no plan to take care of the IDPs and, honestly, they should all be in camps instead of staying in the urban areas. [...] Their camps should have been separated. Everywhere you go, you will see places that are left and dirty. There are new people, more IDPs, they are strangers to us”.²³

Despite facing numerous challenges and difficulties related to housing, employment, and community cohesion, the potential opportunities available in urban areas and personal resources to rent private accommodations played a role in the decision of some Yazidis to be displaced there.

3.2.3 IDP Camps for Yazidis in Kurdistan

Camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) played a crucial role in providing refuge for displaced Yazidis from Sinjar. They were primarily situated in the Dohuk Governorate in the KRI (Kurdistan Region of Iraq), even if some of them were located in the disputed territories of the Nineveh Governorate but directly managed by Dohuk. The Board of Relief and Humanitarian Assistance (BRHA), serving as the local governmental authority responsible for addressing humanitarian needs was the entity in charge of managing these eighteen camps, comprising over 42,500 shelters. Direct oversight of the camps was carried out by various entities: eight camps were overseen by United

²¹ Ibid., 20, 31-34.

²² Černý, “Iracti jezide,” 15-16.

²³ UNHCR, “Displacement as challenge and opportunity,” 19, 25.

Nations agencies, seven by the Dohuk Governorate, two by the Turkish Aid Agency (AFAD), and one by the Kurdish NGO Rwanqa Foundation.²⁴

The eight camps of Bajid Kandala 1, Bajid Kandala 2, Dawidiya, Khanke, Bersive 2, Germawa, Sheikhan, and Darkar were managed by the UN and owned 11,274 shelters, representing 26% of the total. The camps managed by the Dohuk Governorate were Kabartu 1, Kabartu 2, Chamishko, Eryan, Bardarash, Mamilyan, and Mamrashan, comprising 52% of the available shelters with 22,000 tents or cabins. The Turkish Agency AFAD oversaw the camps of Sharia and Bersive 1, providing 6,500 shelters (15% of the total), while the Rwanqa Foundation managed the camp Qadya with 3,000 shelters (7% of the total). Notably, camps of Sharia, Khanke, Eryan, Bajid Kandala 1, and Bajid Kandala 2 were exclusively inhabited by Yazidis, whereas the others accommodated families with different ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, including Yazidis, Kurds, Kurds, Shabak Shias, and Turkmen Shias. The locations of the camps are highlighted in *Figure 3.8*.²⁵



Figure 3.8: Locations of IDP Camps for Yazidis in Kurdistan. Source: My own elaboration of Dulz data.

Living in an IDP or refugee camp profoundly impacts all aspects of an individual's life. Beyond the obvious challenges of limited access to basic necessities, education, employment opportunities, and overall well-being, it also entails intensified difficulties in managing daily routines, coping with trauma, maintaining good mental health, and navigating relationships with family, tribe, and neighbors. Yazidis residing in IDP camps encounter a spectrum of restrictions and issues. Firstly, there are concrete material deficiencies such as inadequate provision of water, food, hygienic and laundry facilities, suitable shelter, basic medical care, and infrastructures. Furthermore, Yazidis face social challenges within the camps, including conflicts among members of different families or tribes

²⁴ Dulz, "The displacement of the Yezidis," 140-141.

²⁵ Ibid.

and tensions with other communities cohabiting in the same IDP camp. The educational, social, cultural, and religious needs of Yazidis are often disregarded within the camp environment.

3.2.4 Difficult Living Conditions in IDP Camps

Despite the initial efforts of humanitarian organizations, the Kurdish government, and volunteers in supporting Yazidis in their displacement, the level of humanitarian assistance in the following months and years has not been sufficient. As revealed by Černý in his interviews conducted in the IDP camps of the Dohuk Governorate in March 2016, the persistent lack of capacity remained a pressing issue, with demand for camp accommodations surpassing available space. Some Yazidis spent their savings to sustain themselves outside the camps after the displacement, residing in informal structures. However, once their funds finished, their only possibility was to seek placement in the camps and rely on humanitarian assistance. Yet, the issue of insufficient capacity persisted, rendering many unable to gain entry, and resulting in overcrowded conditions within the IDP camps for those who managed to seek refuge inside.²⁶

The overcrowding exacerbated competition for limited resources, with individuals lamenting especially scarce access to water, food, toilets, showers, electricity, school places, and employment. For instance, the availability of electricity is limited to just a few hours each day, exacerbating the challenges in the harsh climate of Kurdistan, characterized by hot summers and cold winters.²⁷ The scarcity of electricity and other resources stems from inadequate aid distribution by the Kurdish Government and other managing entities. In this context, political affiliations have become a prominent factor. Many Yazidis complain about preferential treatment and better and faster aid for families linked to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which controls the government. Conversely, those lacking ties to this party often find themselves marginalized, with IDPs sympathetic to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) experiencing the most severe deprivation, as they typically receive no access to aid from the Kurdish government.²⁸

Given that the food rations and other assistance provided by the government's public distribution system are inadequate to serve as the only means of subsistence, additional aid and support to people are often provided by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). However, there is a notable absence of international support, with larger NGOs like Save The Children or Oxfam absent from Kurdish

²⁶ Černý, "Iracti jezide," 11-14.

²⁷ Yazda, "An Uncertain Future for Yazidis," 20.

²⁸ Černý, "Iracti jezide," 11-14.

IDP camps. Instead, only small and local organizations are present, and they frequently expire their limited resources rapidly. During the early stages of displacement, numerous NGOs were engaged to assist Yazidis by providing food, aid, and support. Nevertheless, over the years, many of these have withdrawn. The transient nature of NGOs presence in the camps means that long-term solutions are rarely offered, contributing to a growing sense of frustration among IDPs toward these organizations.²⁹

Even access to healthcare is deficient. Firstly, sanitation, access to clean drinking water, and sewage system in the camps are substandard, leading to outbreaks of diseases such as diarrhea, respiratory infections, and skin diseases. Respiratory illnesses are exacerbated by the camps' proximity to oil wells and areas where garbage is burned, resulting in poor air quality. Additionally, as underlined in the second chapter, numerous Yazidis suffer from chronic illnesses and post-traumatic distress as a result of the genocide. However, addressing these conditions within the camps is challenging due to the lack of essential medicines, medical supplies, and specialized staff in the camp health centers. Consequently, individuals are forced to seek care at private clinics if they can afford the expenses, or simply renounce treatment altogether. Even those Yazidis who were previously financially independent have entered poverty, accumulated debt, and become reliant on aid to cope with their trauma.³⁰

Furthermore, the camps often lack essential infrastructure, including adequate shelters, paved roads, transportation links to urban areas, heating systems, recreational areas, social centers, and schools. It was reported that the tents allocated to Yazidi households were in deplorable conditions, insufficiently warm for winter survival, and had not been replaced for many years.³¹ Recreational facilities like playgrounds for children, sports fields for teenagers, and community centers for adults, are conspicuously absent in IDP camps. The privation of meaningful activities contributes to a sense of despair and depression among the population. Some teenagers attempt to escape these conditions by seeking refuge on university campuses or dormitories. But gaining admission to universities is arduous, and, even if accepted, it is usually challenging for teenagers to study in overcrowded tents. For instance, a girl recounted to Černý the difficulty of studying in her tent, as her younger siblings constantly disrupt her attempts to concentrate by playing inside without regard for her need for a quiet environment.³²

²⁹ Travers, "Seven years in camps," 3-5.

³⁰ Černý, "Iracti jezide," 11-12. Yazda, "An Uncertain Future for Yazidis," 20.

³¹ Yazda, "An Uncertain Future for Yazidis," 20.

³² Černý, "Iracti jezide," 11-12.

Lastly, a significant challenge is the dearth of employment opportunities within the camps. IDPs want to work not only to sustain themselves financially but also to alleviate their trauma. Several Yazidis mentioned that, while working, they are able to momentarily forget the suffering endured under the Islamic State and regain their sense of dignity and usefulness. However, Yazidis often encounter barriers when seeking formal employment in Kurdistan, thus forcing them to rely on the informal sector, such as working in the fields of Kurdish farmers located near the camp.³³

There are notable differences between camps, especially concerning management and funding. For example, Qadiya Camp, overseen by the Barzani family, leader of the KDP, is colloquially nicknamed by Yazidis as a *five-star* camp with IDPs residing in containers rather than tents and enjoying superior living conditions compared to other facilities. By contrast, in nearly all other camps, Yazidis repeatedly riot, block traffic, or set fire to houses and cars as an outlet for their frustrations as well as a strategic method to draw attention to the inadequate humanitarian conditions and put pressure on the Kurdish government to improve the welfare of IDPs.³⁴ The IDP camp of Sharya, established in 2015 and run by the Kurdish government with funding from the Turkish emergency organization AFAD, is regarded as one of the direr camps. Approximately 18,000 Yazidis call the camp their home. Conditions are extremely challenging, characterized by poor sanitation, absence of air conditioning amidst temperatures reaching 40°C, accumulation of rubbish, and plastic waste pits surrounding the camp. One teenager vividly described the harsh reality of life in the camp:

“Imagine in winter, when it is too cold and rainy and windy. Your tent is full of water. You don’t have electricity or oil to make your tent a little warm, you are in the tents every day for seven years. In the summer, children burn in the tents. There is nothing in comparison for how tough it is”.³⁵

3.2.5 Social Struggles in IDP Camps

The scarcity of resources has fueled not only political dynamics to determine who is entitled to receive more aid but also chronic tensions and conflicts among members of different Yazidi families, villages, and tribes within the same camp. In a situation where state institutions collapsed, traditional and tribal networks have re-emerged, leading to an environment where camps often resemble microcosms of traditional social structures. Consequently, residents often find it challenging to form new social connections beyond their immediate familial and tribal circles. As Černý noted, “Although many

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Travers, “Seven years in camps,” 2-3.

people live in a small space, their physical proximity is accompanied by social distance,” indicating a division among residents despite months or years in proximity.³⁶

The social distance is influenced by the historical organization of Yazidi communities around blood family and tribal kinship. This traditional order was disrupted in the aftermath of the genocide with the forced separation of traditional families and tribes and the compelled cohabitation of members of different ones. Unresolved and old tensions have re-emerged in the camps as a sort of “tribal war”, exacerbated by the absence of authorities capable of peacefully mediating conflict. However, it is worth noting that many younger and educated Yazidis do not support clashes based on traditional tribal identities, signaling a desire for a more inclusive and pacific coexistence.³⁷

Clashes and social distance are not confined to tensions between different Yazidi tribes but also extend to interactions with members of other religious and ethnic communities within the IDP camps. One notable issue that emerged in Focus Group Discussions conducted by Dulz in 2016 was the absence of inter-community cohesion in mixed facilities. While participants did not report negative experiences with individuals from other communities, neither did they mention engaging in visits to other groups for religious festivities or other traditional practices. Interactions primarily occur out of necessity and practicality, such as purchasing goods or accessing education, medical services, and employment opportunities. Consequently, inter-community relations often remained superficial, presenting a challenge to the integration perspectives of displaced Yazidis into the host society.³⁸

3.2.6 Refugee Camps for Yazidis in Turkey

As explained above, estimating the post-genocide Yazidi displacement poses significant challenges, often resulting in divergent data reported by various authorities, NGOs, and scholars. For instance, while Basci estimates that around 30,000 Yazidis migrated to Turkey in the aftermath of the genocide, Yazda offers a different perspective, indicating that, in October 2015, there were 11,270 Yazidis housed in six refugee camps in Turkey.³⁹ Upon arriving in Turkey, many Yazidis initially took temporary shelter in abandoned buildings and social facilities in urban centers located in the Kurdish areas of the country. Subsequently, many were relocated to specialized camps established by municipalities with support from the emergency organization AFAD. Some of these camps were already established to accommodate previous waves of refugees, while others were built in response

³⁶ Černý, “Iracti jezide,” 13-14.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Dulz, “The displacement of the Yezidis,” 142-144.

³⁹ Basci, “Yazidis: A Community scattered,” 342. Yazda, “Yazidi Refugees in Turkey and Syria,” 6.

to the influx of Yazidi refugees. Most of the camps are managed by local Kurdish municipalities and overseen by the pro-Kurdish HDP party (Peoples' Democratic Party).⁴⁰

Yazidis opted to migrate to Turkey perceiving it as a safe country compared to Iraq and Kurdistan, still threatened by the Islamic State. Recounting her journey, a woman who resided in the Şirnak refugee camp in February 2015 described the arduous series of movements before reaching Turkey:

“We took refuge in the Sinjar Mountains. We remained there for 7-8 days. [...] Then, the word came that PKK had cleared the roads. We used that road and arrived in Syria. Vehicles of PKK welcomed us near the Syrian border. [...] PKK brought 50 vehicles and took us to a camp in Syria. We stayed there in tents that night. Then, they brought us to Zakho. There, we stayed for 7 days at the house of a family friend, who was also Kurdish but it wasn't safe there either so we came to Turkey. we stayed inside a school for seven days then, again they came and took us with vehicles and brought us here”.⁴¹

However, Yazidi refugees have not always received a warm reception in Turkey, often facing persecution and discrimination due to their religious identity. The refugee camps are not exclusively populated by Yazidis, sharing them with individuals of various nationalities, particularly Muslim Syrian refugees. Consequently, residing in mixed camps with a significant Muslim population poses risks for Yazidis, and reminds them of the persecution they faced in their homeland.⁴² Echoing this sentiment, one refugee expressed his view:

“We don't want to live with Arabs, we don't want to see them again. My neighbors were Arabs, and those who wanted to kill me were Arabs. I lived in Iraq with Arabs for 30 years. Even if I have to fight 20 more years, I will not have my children go back and live with them again”.⁴³

Yazidis were initially hosted in six refugee camps in Turkey, with the largest population of 4,000 individuals residing in the Nusaybin camp. Following closely were the Diyarbakir camp with 3,200 individuals and the Midyat camp with 2,040 residents. Smaller numbers of Yazidis were accommodated in the Şirnak (950 individuals), Batman (550), and Serte (290) camps (*Figure 3.9*). Over the subsequent years, some camps have closed while new ones have been established.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Jones, “Yazidi Refugees at Center of Political Fight.”

⁴¹ Basci, “Yazidis: A Community scattered,” 342-345.

⁴² Yazda, “Yazidi Refugees in Greece, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq,” 6.

⁴³ Jones, “Yazidi Refugees at Center of Political Fight.”

⁴⁴ Yazda, “Yazidi Refugees in Turkey and Syria,” 6.

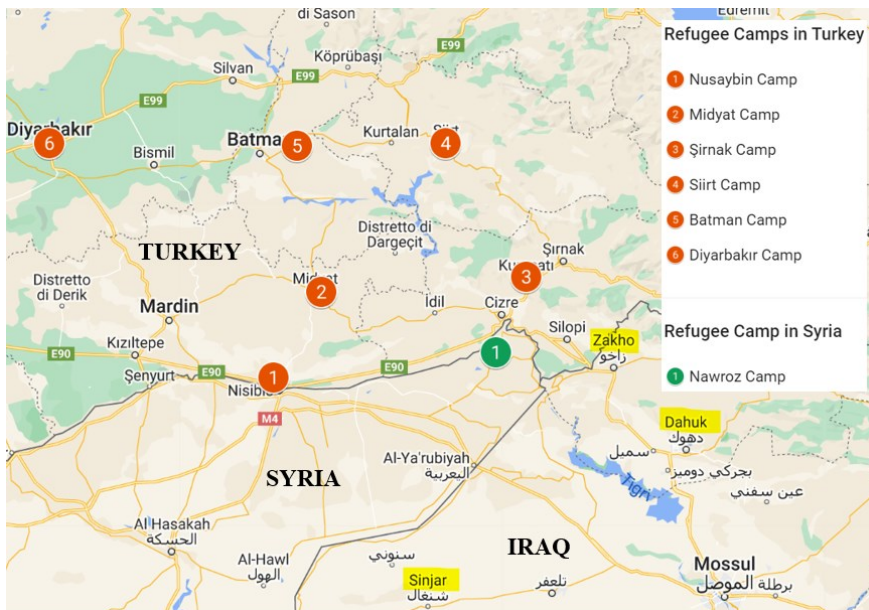


Figure 3.9: Locations of Refugee Camps for Yazidis in Turkey and Syria. Source: My own elaboration of Yazda (2016) data.

However, the camps established by Kurdish municipalities have encountered numerous challenges in meeting the basic needs of the refugees. Health care and humanitarian aid remain insufficient, children have no access to education, and there are shortages in adequate shelters, running water, toilets, cooking facilities, and food supplies. It is reported that, for example, conditions in the Diyarbakir refugee camp were particularly dire that thousands of Yazidis attempted a mass journey on foot towards the Bulgarian border in the summer of 2015. However, they were intercepted by the Turkish police and forcibly brought back to the camp.⁴⁵

Furthermore, Yazidis residing in Turkish refugee camps have voiced dissatisfaction with being treated as second-class refugees, noting that many NGOs prioritize aid for Syrian refugees while providing minimal support to Yazidis. Even the UNHCR has been unresponsive to their needs. According to Yazda, out of more than 16,000 Yazidis displaced in Syria and Turkey who applied for resettlement projects between August 2014 and October 2015, seeking to relocate to safer Western countries, only a dozen were successfully resettled. It is evident that immigration authorities have failed to address the crisis faced by Yazidi refugees and establish safe and legal immigration pathways to third countries. To exacerbate the situation, some Yazidis who applied for asylum with the UNHCR reported significant delays in their interview processes, with appointments scheduled up to six years after their initial request.⁴⁶

Yazda reported that conditions in Turkish refugee camps deteriorated notably after September 2015, coinciding with the escalation of political and military conflicts in Turkish-Kurdish areas between

⁴⁵ Yazda, “Yazidi Refugees in Turkey and Syria,” 7.

⁴⁶ Yazda, “Yazidi Refugees in Turkey and Syria,” 1-2. Basci, “Yazidis: A Community scattered,” 342-343.

pro-Kurdish parties and the Turkish government and army. Since refugee camps in the region were managed by local municipalities under the control of the pro-Kurdish HDP party (Peoples' Democratic Party), the ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) accused the HDP of exploiting these camps to promote the Kurdish rights agenda among residents. These allegations stemmed from the observation that, for instance, lessons for children were conducted in Kurdish, which is also the mother tongue of most Yazidis. As a result, Yazidi refugees found themselves at the center of a political fight between Turkey and Kurds. Oncu, the AKP national committee, stated to *Voa News*:

“They are trying to get a political profit out of this. Our priority should be the safety of these refugees, but they turn it into a show for international media. We are still Turkey. There is no other country here”.⁴⁷

In response to this situation, the Turkish army established a military base within the Nusaybin refugee camp in September 2015, deploying around five thousand soldiers. Similar military bases and actions were reported close to the other refugee camps for Yazidis, exposing them to significant danger.⁴⁸

3.2.7 The Refugee Camp for Yazidis in Syria

As explained above, the post-genocide Yazidi displacement presented significant challenges in estimating the extent of their migration, with varying data reported by different sources. While some estimates suggested a substantial migration to Syria, other figures provided a more nuanced perspective. For instance, Basci estimated around 120,000 Yazidis migrated to Syria, while Yazda's data in October 2015 indicated a smaller population of 5,373 concentrated in the Nawroz camp, situated in Rojava, the self-administered region of Northeast Syria (see *Figure 3.9*). However, Yazda's figures do not encompass the Yazidi population residing in informal shelters throughout the rest of the country.⁴⁹ Numerous NGOs and associations worked initially in the Nawroz camp including UNHCR, UNICEF, International Rescue, Save the Children, Heyva Sor, Yekitiya Star Union for Women's Affairs, and Asayiş, each contributing to various aspects of camp management, resource allocation, humanitarian aid efforts, education, and medical aid.

In September 2014, Roj Women, a Kurdish grassroots women's rights association, conducted a study at Nawroz Camp aimed at identifying the perceived needs of the camp residents. Firstly, residents expressed satisfaction with the support received from the People's Protection Unit (YPG) during their

⁴⁷ Jones, “Yazidi Refugees at Center of Political Fight.”

⁴⁸ Yazda, “Yazidi Refugees in Turkey and Syria,” 2.

⁴⁹ Basci, “Yazidis: A Community scattered,” 342. Yazda, “Yazidi Refugees in Turkey and Syria,” 6.

rescue, and the aid and food supplies provided in the camp. However, three critical problem areas emerged from the study: the first was “*Clothes, shoes, bedding and blankets*” as many residents had left their belongings in Sinjar and expressed concerns about inadequate winter clothing and footwear; the second issue was “*Being displaced from home*”, highlighting the cultural and religious significance of Sinjar and the distress caused by being away from their homeland; the third was “*Place to live*” with residents expressing worries about living conditions, shared living spaces, and apprehensions about the approaching winter.⁵⁰

Additionally, several other areas were identified as serious issues by some residents. These included “*Education for your children*”, as there were no schools in the camp, although UNICEF was organizing primary-age activities at the camp and plans of building a school with 55 classrooms were underway; “*Distress*” with many residents experiencing various forms of trauma due to the loss of family members, displacement, and witnessing violence; “*Income or livelihood*” was also a worry, as residents had lost their sources of income, homes, businesses, and properties, leading to doubts about their ability to economically support themselves; and “*Separation from family members*” which posed a significant problem, with some family members killed, kidnapped, or dispersed, leaving residents traumatized by the uncertainty surrounding their loved ones’ fate.⁵¹

3.2.8 Long-Term Displacement as a Driver of Migration

Yazidis have endured a humanitarian displacement crisis in the aftermath of the genocide perpetrated by the Islamic State in 2014, characterized by profound challenges and inadequacies in addressing their basic needs and rights. Across various regions such as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Turkey, and Syria, Yazidis have been forced to seek refuge in camps that, despite initial efforts, have struggled to provide adequate living conditions, healthcare, education, and livelihood opportunities. In Kurdistan, despite the presence of local governmental authorities and humanitarian organizations overseeing the IDP camps, deficiencies persist in essential services such as water, food, healthcare, and shelter. Additionally, social tensions within the camps, exacerbated by ethnic and tribal divisions, further compound the challenges faced by Yazidi residents. Similarly, in Turkey, the establishment of refugee camps by Kurdish municipalities has been marked by inadequate resources and support, and tensions with other refugee populations have increased the difficulties for Yazidis in accessing essential services and integration opportunities. Moreover, bureaucratic delays in asylum processing and

⁵⁰ Roj Women’s Associations, “Rojava’s Êzidi Emergency,” 8-15.

⁵¹ Roj Women’s Associations, “Rojava’s Êzidi Emergency,” 8-15.

limited resettlement options have left many Yazidi refugees in a state of prolonged uncertainty. In Syria, Yazidis sought refuge in the self-administered region of Rojava, where the Nawroz Camp has served as a focal point for humanitarian efforts. While various NGOs have provided aid and support, challenges such as inadequate shelter, trauma, lack of education, and livelihood opportunities persist. The primary challenge facing Yazidi IDPs is the lack of any prospects for the future, as the majority have been living in camps since 2014. For a decade now, people have called these camps their home. Before the genocide, most Yazidis enjoyed a decent standard of living, but today they endure unbearable conditions within the camps. Yazidis find themselves in a state of internally protracted displacement, described as:

“A condition in which IDPs are unable to reduce the vulnerability, impoverishment, and marginalization that may be caused by displacement. The result of this kind of displacement is the inability of IDPs to progress toward finding a resolution to their displacement, whether it is eventual return, integration, relocation, or some combination thereof”.⁵²

Prolonged displacement subjects IDPs to hostile environments in both their place of origin and displacement due to various factors such as weak state functioning post-conflict, social dynamics, government policies, and fragmented international response. This condition, influenced by numerous factors including inadequate housing and infrastructure, lack of property restitution or compensation, absence of social protection against discrimination, fear of encountering perpetrators of violence, and insufficient reconciliation efforts, leaves IDPs in a state of uncertainty and vulnerability about the future. Yazidis stand out as among the most vulnerable protractedly displaced IDPs since they belong to an ethnoreligious group that has been historically marginalized and excluded within wider society. This combination of factors compounds the challenges faced by Yazidi IDPs, further exacerbating their already dire circumstances.⁵³

The sustainable resolution of displacement, as outlined by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), is a long and complex process necessitating close collaboration between governments and various humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors.⁵⁴ However, in the case of Yazidis, these efforts often fall short, leaving them trapped in a state of immobility with limited options for integration into host communities, the difficulties of returning to their homeland of Sinjar, and the impossibility of being legally relocated to safer western countries due to the limited capacity of IDP resettlement programs. Consequently, many Yazidis view migration to Europe as the only viable option once they have the capabilities and resources to do so. A guy interviewed by Travers in

⁵² IOM, RWG, Social Inquiry, “Reasons to remain,” 1-3.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

2021 highlighted: “We have lived in the camp now for seven years; we are like other people, we want to live”. Even Bozani, the Kurdistan Regional Government’s chief representative for Yazidi affairs, acknowledged in 2016 the unsustainable nature of long-term camp living, stating, “It is possible to stay in the modest makeshift camps for weeks or months. But not for years. That’s why people see emigration to Europe as a rational alternative to camp squalor”.⁵⁵

3.3 Yazidis’ hindered return to Sinjar

The conflict with the Islamic State resulted in the displacement of over 5 million Iraqis within a span of four years. However, by the end of 2023, the number of IDPs in Iraq had decreased to around 1 million individuals (see *Figure 3.3* and *Figure 3.4*). The gradual reconquest of areas previously occupied by the Islamic State began in 2015, culminating in the official defeat of the group in Iraq and Syria in 2018. While many Iraqis have been able to return to their homes in liberated areas, it has not been possible for most of the Yazidis of Sinjar. Sinjar, as extensively detailed in the first chapter, lies within territories classified as disputed by both the Iraqi government and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Before ISIS’s takeover, it was officially administered as a part of the Nineveh Governorate by the Iraqi government, but the KRG *de facto* controlled the district from 2003 until the summer of 2014. Moreover, its strategic location near the borders with Syria and Turkey made Sinjar a focal point of political and security interests for various entities even before 2014, with these interests intensifying following its liberation from the Islamic State between 2015 and 2016.

Sinjar remains one of Iraq's most complex and disputed areas, encompassing political, security, and conflict management issues. According to the latest data provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as of December of 2023, 128,538 individuals have returned to Sinjar (*Figure 3.10*). While there has been improvement in the last three years, only a very small fraction of the population that resided in Sinjar prior to 2014 has chosen to return. The ongoing inability to stabilize Sinjar from security, economic, and social perspectives, thereby facilitating the return of its displaced inhabitants, remains a significant factor driving more Yazidis to seek migration to Europe.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Černý, “Iracti jezide,” 11.

⁵⁶ IOM DTM, “Return Trends”.

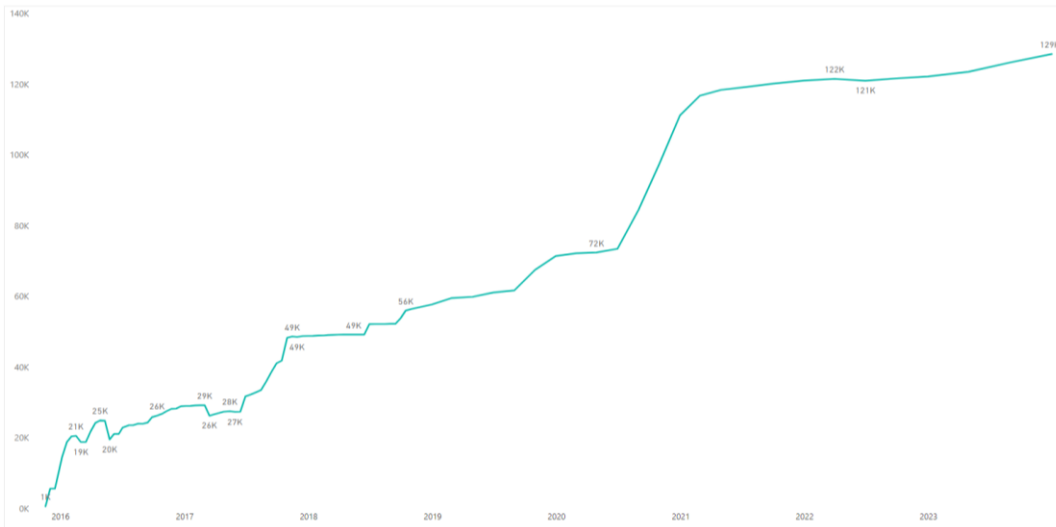


Figure 3.10: Returnees in Sinjar 2016-2023. Source: IOM DTM.

In 2019, two studies were respectively conducted by the institution REACH and IOM Iraq among internally displaced persons (IDPs) to measure their movement intentions. Both studies yielded similar results regarding the low percentage of Yazidis intending to return to Sinjar and the underlying reasons for their reluctance to do so. According to the REACH research, a mere 3% of the displaced population from Sinjar expressed intentions to return within the subsequent year, with 69% preferring to remain in their current location and 28% undecided. Similarly, findings from the IOM Iraq research echoed this trend, with only 4,8% of Yazidi IDPs indicating an intention to return to Sinjar within the following year, while 90% expressed a preference for staying in the current location (Figure 3.11).⁵⁷

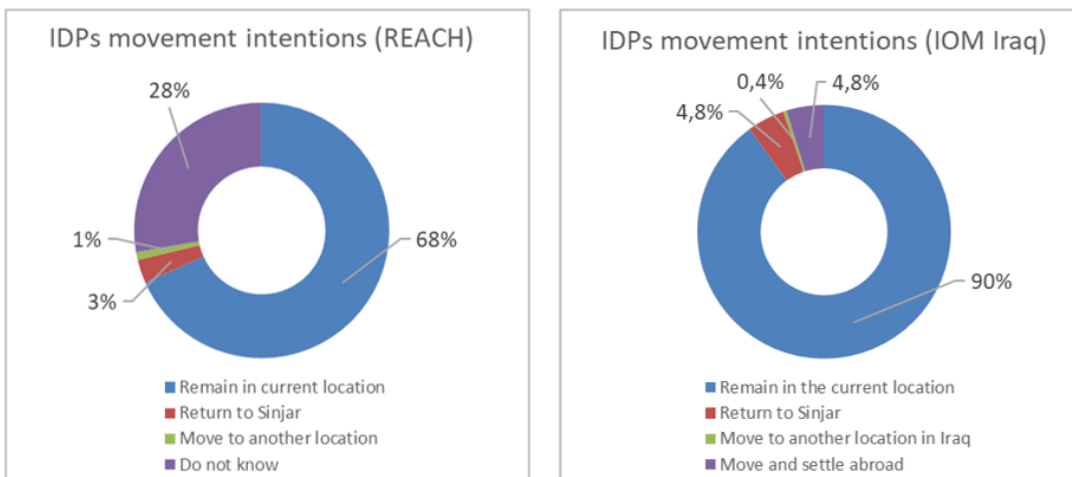


Figure 3.11: IDPs movement intentions. Source: REACH, 2019; IOM Iraq, 2019.

The most cited reasons for Yazidi IDPs opting not to return to Sinjar revolve around security, services, and discrimination concerns, as highlighted in both the REACH and IOM Iraq studies. In the REACH inquiry, security factors such as the presence of landmines (42%) and the absence of security forces

⁵⁷ REACH, “Intentions Survey Ninewa,” 1-4. IOM Iraq, “Understanding Ethno-Religious Groups in Iraq,” 35.

(41%) are cited prominently, followed by issues like damaged or destroyed housing (33%) and fear of discrimination (29%). Similarly, the IOM Iraq inquiry identifies lack of safety (79%), inadequate services (76%), and limited job opportunities (66%) as the top deterrents. Notably, emotional factors related to negative associations with Sinjar (50%) and fears of not being welcomed in the homeland (43%) are also significant. Finally, concerns about the financial weight associated with return are feared by 13% and 47% of Yazidi IDPs, respectively (*Figure 3.12*).⁵⁸

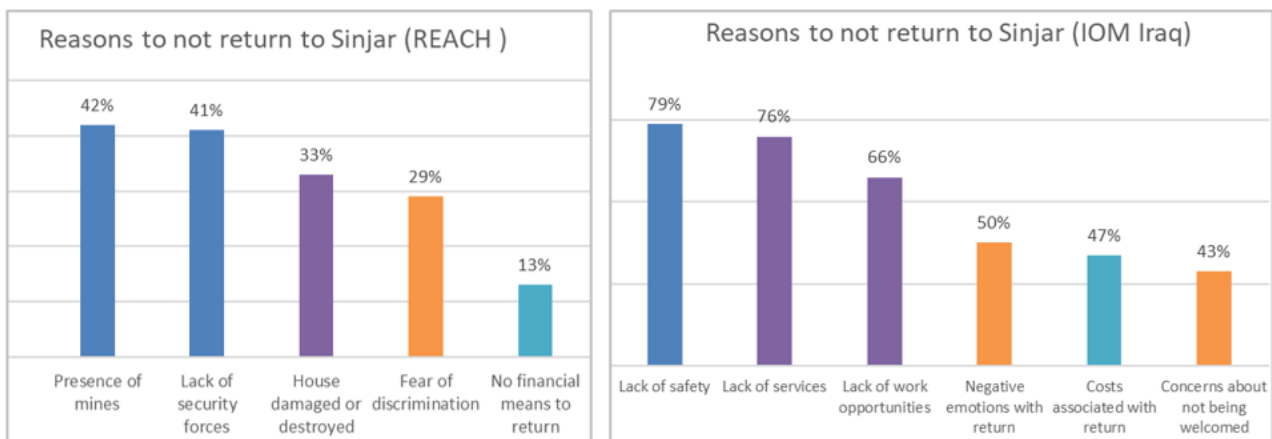


Figure 3.12: Reasons to not return to Sinjar. Source: REACH, 2019; IOM Iraq, 2019.

In conclusion, despite a strong desire among Yazidis to return to Sinjar from IDP Kurdish camps, three primary obstacles hinder their ability to do so. Firstly, ongoing insecurity and distrust in security forces persist due to the presence of multiple armed factions competing for control in Sinjar. Secondly, the extensive destruction of infrastructure and homes by the Islamic State, the absence of essential services and compensation for Yazidi families, and the pervasive presence of landmines in the district, further deter their return posing safety risks. Thirdly, deep anger and fear toward their Arab neighbors exacerbate Yazidis’ reluctance to return, highlighting the complex interethnic dynamics at play in Sinjar’s post-conflict landscape. These factors are deeply investigated in the following paragraphs.

3.3.1 Sinjar’s Political and Military Insecurity

The political landscape following the liberation of Sinjar between 2015 and 2016 has contributed to the impossibility of Yazidis to return. Sinjar remains a highly militarized conflict zone, with multiple factions competing for control of the region. These include the ongoing rivalry between the Iraqi government and the Kurdish government over the administration of Sinjar, as it remains part of Disputed Territories. Additionally, there is competition among Kurdish parties such as the Kurdistan

⁵⁸ REACH, “Intentions Survey Ninewa,” 1-4. IOM Iraq, “Understanding Ethno-Religious Groups in Iraq,” 19.

Democratic Party (KDP) and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Numerous local and regional militias, including the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and various Yazidi factions, have also emerged to combat the Islamic State. Moreover, international actors such as Turkey and Iran have vested interests in influencing the strategic area of Sinjar.⁵⁹ As underlined by a Yazidi IDP interviewed by Černý, the intense competition for control over Sinjar intensifies the risk of armed conflict:

“Our territory is seen as strategic by multiple parties. Therefore, they all want to control it. Kurdish Peshmerga. The Iraqi Armada. Various Islamists, including the Islamic State. Yazidi guerrillas. And, most recently, the Syrian Kurds linked to the Turkish PKK. Everyone has now brought in weapons, set up checkpoints, and there is a sense of tension in the air. And I'm supposed to go back to this madhouse and start a family with my wife?”⁶⁰

The withdrawal of the Peshmerga forces from Sinjar created a power vacuum, leading to the emergence of various local, regional, and international actors competing to achieve influence in the area. These forces, each with distinct ideological and political backgrounds and agendas, played crucial roles in combating ISIS. Different factions liberated different parts of Sinjar, with the northern sector freed by PDK and PUK-affiliated forces, the western areas by PKK-linked militias, and the southern section by Shia PMF forces (*Figure 3.13, part 1*). All these military and political entities started to claim over the district. According to the institution Yazda, there are nowadays at least eleven armed groups representing different internal and external interests, each controlling different areas of Sinjar (*Figure 3.13, part 2*). These diverse actors, including governments, political parties, armed factions, and international actors, are further explored in the subsequent section.⁶¹

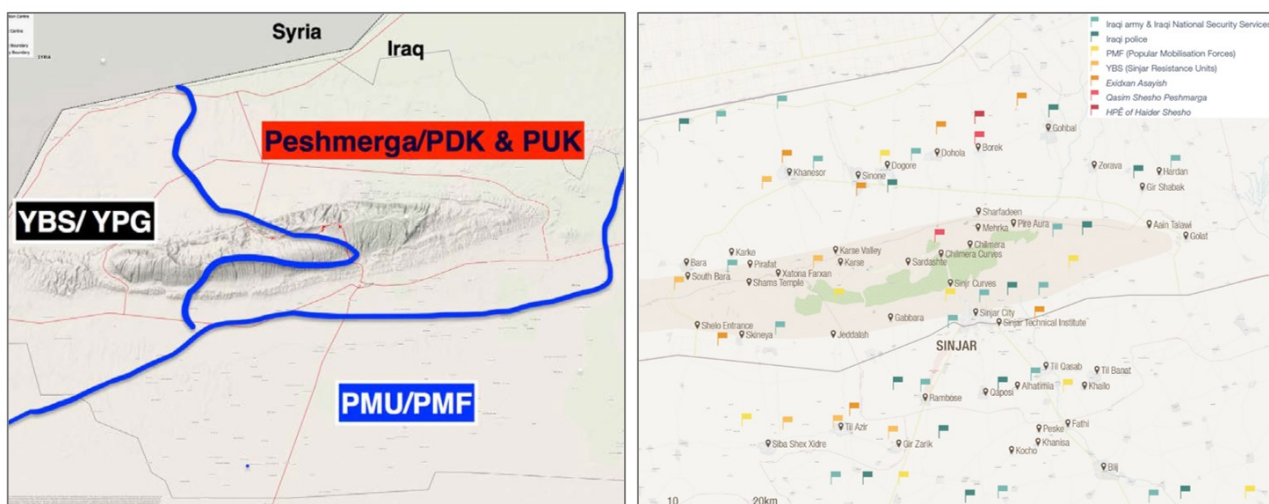


Figure 3.13: Sinjar District's occupation forces in 2018 and 2022. Source: Yazda, 2018; Yazda, 2022.

⁵⁹ Abouzeid, “When the weapons fall silent,” 2-3.

⁶⁰ Černý, “Iracti jezide,” 19.

⁶¹ Yazda, “An uncertain future for Yazidis,” 32-33. Yazda, “We cannot return,” 9-10.

3.3.1.1 Political and Military Entities in Sinjar

The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), despite the events of 2014, still retains a strong presence in Sinjar, monopolizing all administrative positions within the local government, including mayoral and municipal leadership roles. In the absence of elections since 2003, the KDP maintains absolute control, effectively silencing the voices of Sinjari communities in the political decision-making process. According to the institution Yazda, the KDP prolongs the stay of Yazidis in IDP camps under its jurisdiction to foster political alliances with the Yazidi community, thereby promoting its own political benefit. Under the KDP's sphere of influence, two armed groups have emerged: Farmanda Shingal, a force consisting of 7,000 Yazidi fighters led by Qasim Shesho, a former KDP politician, which played a crucial role in liberating Sinjar; and the Rojava Peshmerga, comprising 2,000 foreign fighters sourced of Syrian Kurdish origin who initially sought refuge in Kurdistan after the Syrian civil war and later participated in the conflict in Sinjar against the Islamic State.⁶²

The Patriotic Kurdistan Union (PUK), KDP's coalition partner in the Kurdistan Government, has comparatively less influence in Sinjar. Nonetheless, it maintains a presence in the district with offices and several thousands of PUK Peshmerga fighters. Associated with the PUK there is the Yazidi Peshmerga force, a militia comprising 3,000 fighters.⁶³

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is actively operating in Sinjar in conjunction with various political and military groups formed not only by Yazidis but also by Kurds from Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. While many Yazidis acknowledge the PKK's crucial role in securing a corridor from Mount Sinjar to Syria during the ISIS siege, there is widespread hope within the community for the PKK's withdrawal from Sinjar. Its continued presence exacerbates tensions with the KDP and the Iraqi Government, compromising the safety and security of the region. Groups affiliated with the PKK operating in Sinjar include the People's Protection Unit (YPG), the Sinjar Resistance Unit (YBŞ), and the Exidxan Asayish, along with the political parties Yazidi Democratic and Freedom Party (PADÊ) and Yazidi Democratic Movement (TEVDA). The most important PKK-linked force in Sinjar, the YBŞ, comprising 3,000 Yazidi fighters, emerged after the withdrawal of the Peshmerga by Yazidis themselves. Most of the fighters have joined the force to defend Sinjar rather than for ideological affiliation with the PKK. While it is often linked with the PKK, the YBŞ denies ongoing affiliation, and the salaries of several fighters are paid by the Government of Iraq, emphasizing their status as an Iraqi force rather than a foreign unit.⁶⁴

⁶² Yazda, "An uncertain future for Yazidis," 34-35.

⁶³ Yazda, "An uncertain future for Yazidis," 35.

⁶⁴ Yazda, "An uncertain future for Yazidis," 36-41. Yazda, "We cannot return," 9-10.

The Central Government of Iraq (GoI) appears to be the least involved political actor in the area of Sinjar, maintaining a disengaged stance toward the region's politics and geopolitics. It has shown no inclination to assert influence or authority in the territory, renouncing from establishing new military forces for territorial control, providing security to facilitate the return of IDPs, or combating external pressure from third countries. In the past five years, the Iraqi army, the Iraqi National Security Services, and the Iraqi police have begun to reassert their presence in Sinjar, although generally not challenging the Kurdish influence over the area with a mutual agreement of coexistence.⁶⁵

The Popular Mobilisation Forces or Units (PMF/PMU), also known as Hashd Al-Shabi, is predominantly composed of Shia fighters and ranks as the second most influential force in Sinjar. Approximately 2,000 Yazidi fighters combat into a Yazidi force affiliated with the PMF, with prominent Yazidi commanders like Murad Shero and Naif Jaso actively participating in the militia operations. In 2018, the PMF appeared to endorse Yazidi objectives, promising self-rule for Yazidi areas, the formation of a force under Yazidi leadership, and the prosecution of all individuals involved in the genocide. However, these promises remain unfulfilled.⁶⁶

The Sinjar Defense Forces (HPÊ) emerged directly from the Yazidi community in response to the attack on Sinjar, initially protecting numerous villages and holy sites in the district. Comprising approximately 7,000 Yazidi fighters, this force was established by Haider Shesho, a former PUK political leader. As an independent Yazidi force without the backing of major political parties, Shesho was arrested by the KDP in April 2015 on charges of attempting to establish an illegal militia. He was subsequently released under the condition that he would operate under the influence of the KDP Peshmerga. In return, he was promised the opportunity to establish his own Yazidi political party, leading to the official registration of the Yazidi Democratic Party in 2016.⁶⁷

The geopolitical dynamics of Sinjar are significantly influenced even by two international entities: Turkey and Iran. Turkey's involvement in Sinjar is driven by its desire to consolidate control in the region and combat the PKK. Since Turkey considers the PKK a terrorist organization, Turkish President Erdogan publicly stated his opposition to Sinjar falling under its control, leading to a series of airstrikes by the Turkish Air Forces targeting PKK fighters in the district. These airstrikes, including over twenty conducted in February 2022, have resulted in civilian casualties and infrastructure damage, exacerbating instability for returning Yazidi civilians. Iran's influence in Sinjar operates indirectly through the Shia PMF forces. Despite it is not directly involved in Yazidi politics,

⁶⁵ Yazda, "An uncertain future for Yazidis," 38. Yazda, "We cannot return," 9.

⁶⁶ Yazda, "An uncertain future for Yazidis," 38-40.

⁶⁷ Yazda, "An uncertain future for Yazidis," 38-40. Yazda, "We cannot return," 9. Spät, "Yezidi Identity Politics," 430.

it utilizes the PMF forces to achieve two objectives: establishing a corridor in disputed areas of southern Iraqi Kurdistan and limiting Kurdish and Turkish influence in the region.⁶⁸

The lack of security and fragile rule of law poses significant obstacles to the return of thousands of Yazidis who remain stranded in IDP camps. It also significantly impacts the lives of families who have attempted to return to Sinjar, often resulting in their re-displacement. Although the militias and parties mentioned above were initially formed to defend Yazidis and protect their historical areas, their presence now poses additional risks rather than facilitating the return of Yazidis to Sinjar. Even the fact that Yazidis are operating under the umbrellas of different political parties does not contribute to stability in the region and cohesion within the scattered Yazidi community.⁶⁹ In order to address the complex situation in Sinjar and stabilize the area, the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Government of Iraq signed the *Sinjar Agreement* in October 2020. It aimed to remove all non-state armed factions, appoint 2,500 Sinjar community members to the Internal Security Forces, and eliminate PKK presence in the area. However, its implementation has not been activated, and different militias continue to militarily and politically compete for control of Sinjar.⁷⁰

3.3.1.2 Yazidi Aspirations of Self-Governance in Sinjar

Some Yazidis advocate for the establishment of an autonomous area in Sinjar under the safeguard of international troops, such as the Blue Berets of the United Nations. Others, particularly the more nationalist members, aspire to create a secure and administratively independent region. Spät observed in her fieldwork in 2018 that the idea of a self-rule Sinjar is not uncommon among Yazidis, even among those not aligned with PKK ideology. Most believe that Sinjar should be militarily, politically, and administratively governed by Yazidis.⁷¹

A Self-Administration Council, also referred to as Meclis, was established in Sinjar in January 2015. While the PKK provided support for its formation, the idea of creating an institution to coordinate the Yazidi military and political efforts originated locally. It takes inspiration from the ideology of democratic autonomy of Öcalan: “An autonomous bottom-up communal self-organization as an alternative to the state-oriented doctrines of both liberal capitalism and Bolshevik communism”. The

⁶⁸ Yazda, “An uncertain future for Yazidis,” 41. Yazda, “We cannot return,” 10.

⁶⁹ Ali, “The Forced Displacement of Ethnic and Religious Minorities,” 82-86.

⁷⁰ Yazda, “We cannot return,” 10.

⁷¹ Spät, “Yezidi Identity Politics,” 429-432.

Meclis focuses on self-administration and self-defense (through the YBŞ forces), diverging instead from more radical leftist ideologies seen in Rojava's project.⁷²

At the central level, the Council consists of six main committees responsible for various practical aspects of administration and service delivery, including defense, diplomacy, mobilization, finance, women, and youth. Branches of the Meclis exist at the local level in towns and villages across Sinjar, striving to provide essential public services such as food, water, electricity, healthcare, education, humanitarian support, and bureaucratic activities. Numerous schools with curricula in Kurmanji and medical clinics were opened in the areas. Despite efforts, the Meclis faced challenges in large-scale infrastructure and housing reconstruction due to limited resources. The main challenge the entity encounters is indeed the shortage of resources for reconstruction and salaries for the administration. Nevertheless, the structures of the Meclis are open to everyone, welcoming also non-Yazidi people who have not previously opposed them, including Arab individuals, and aiding even the population not aligned with PKK ideologies. The Meclis has found considerable popular support on the ground and asserts its commitment to self-administration and self-defense within the framework of Iraqi law, inspiring at upgrading the status of Sinjar district to that of a governorate. However, this remains a hopeful prospect amidst the ongoing instability in Sinjar.⁷³

The intricate web of political, military, and international interests in Sinjar has created a complex and unsafe environment, hindering the return of Yazidis to their homeland. The presence of multiple militias and political entities, along with the geopolitical strategies of regional players, exacerbates tensions and insecurity. Yazidis desire a secure and stable Sinjar, aiming to lead better lives than before the ISIS invasion, free from the constant threat of insecurity and the lack of protection for minorities. Should their homeland remain unsafe, they prefer to migrate to safer countries.

3.3.2 Obstacles in Rebuilding Sinjar's Infrastructure and Services

The possibility of Yazidis returning to their homeland is severely impeded by the widespread destruction inflicted upon villages, towns, infrastructure, and houses in Sinjar, coupled with the absence of comprehensive rebuilding projects. In April 2016, the Iraqi Parliament designated the town of Sinjar as a *disaster city* and acknowledged that approximately 80-85% of the district had been razed.⁷⁴ Abouzeid visited Sinjar City in 2018, describing it:

⁷² Kavalek, "Competing Interests in Shingal District," 19-21.

⁷³ Ibid., 26-32, 38.

⁷⁴ Yazda, "An uncertain future for Yazidis," 24-25.

“Today, Sinjar is a ghost town, with entire neighborhoods reduced to rubble. Around 52,000 people, or 12 percent of the district’s pre-ISIS population, have returned to Sinjar city and the villages north of it. [...] The streets of Sinjar’s main city are quiet, save for the occasional sound of a power generator in some areas. Basic public services such as water, electricity, and healthcare are insufficient and inconsistent. By September 2018, schools had not reopened. A dizzying array of competing security forces, including US troops operating out of a base on Mount Sinjar, remain in the area”.⁷⁵

In 2018, Iraq’s National Reconciliation Committee established an office in Sinjar to establish direct communication with the few returning residents. A local “council of elders” formulated a roadmap focused primarily on infrastructure reconstruction to incentivize repatriation, with priorities including restoring security, reopening public facilities such as schools and medical centers, and establishing a criminal court to register complaints.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, still nowadays, critical services such as running water and electricity remain inaccessible in large parts of the district. Roads, schools, and houses are still destroyed with no progress in reconstruction and no compensations for rebuilding.⁷⁷

In addition to reinstating public services and infrastructure, some Yazidis stress the importance of job creation and economic opportunities in fostering intergroup cohesion and alleviating stress and frustration among Sinjari citizens. Despite calls for work or financial compensation, as advocated by a politician of Erbil in 2016, progress remains elusive. The politician’s words resonate:

“Compensation from the government, either work or financial, is going to reduce stress. Of course, financial compensation should be given to all Iraqis, not just Yazidis. It’s going to let people work, and build. Provide working opportunities to help young people, the jobless people and those who don’t go to school ... then there will not be any more terrorists”.⁷⁸

Furthermore, the pervasive threat of mines exacerbates the challenges facing returning Yazidis. The Mines Advisory Group, a British de-mining NGO, characterizes the contamination in the entire Sinjar district as “extensive”. Unexploded munitions and booby-trapped buildings continue to endanger residents, with no comprehensive demining programs. Even the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) persists in demining operations, highlighting the ongoing risk posed by explosive remnants of war.⁷⁹ Given these hazardous conditions, alongside the absence of housing, infrastructures, public services, and job opportunities, Yazidis encounter enormous barriers to returning to Sinjar.

⁷⁵ Abouzeid, “When the weapons fall silent,” 8.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 12-14.

⁷⁷ Van Zoonen and Wirya, “Perceptions and Reconciliation and Conflict”, 18-19. Ali, “The Forced Displacement of Ethnic and Religious Minorities,” 86.

⁷⁸ Van Zoonen and Wirya, “Perceptions and Reconciliation and Conflict”, 18-19.

⁷⁹ Abouzeid, “When the weapons fall silent,” 8. Yazda, “We cannot return,” 9-10.

3.3.3 Post-ISIS Complex Relations between Yazidis and Arabs

Sinjar has historically been inhabited by both Yazidis and Arabs, who coexisted in adjacent villages and mixed towns, fostering positive relationships for many generations. However, the dynamics between the two groups began to change during the 20th and the 21st centuries. The forced Arabization campaigns, the establishment of the Kurdish autonomous area, and numerous terrorist attacks targeting minorities led Yazidis to grow suspicious of their Arab neighbors. The situation reached a breaking point with the emergence of ISIS, as Yazidis accused Arab tribes of not only welcoming the Islamic State but also actively supporting it. Allegations included aiding in identifying Yazidi residences, facilitating kidnappings and executions, and even having some members join the extremist group. Arabs are accused of having, at best, failed to resist ISIS and, at worst, actively contributed to its violence.

As a result, Yazidis widely perceive reconciliation with Arab and Kurdish Sunni Muslims as almost impossible. Deep-seated anger and fear make it challenging to restore coexistence and old friendships. A Yazidi resident in the Khanke Camp expressed these sentiments to Černý in 2016:

“A lot of blood has been shed, I cannot imagine reconciliation. As soon as we get weapons, we will retaliate hard and drive them out. And the only way we’re gonna get guns is by not giving money to smugglers to get us to safety in Europe. but we will use it to buy weapons. And then we’ll make our homes safe on our own”.⁸⁰

Moreover, many Yazidis consider it premature to discuss reconciliation and return while some of their persecutors remain in freedom, and thousands of kidnapped Yazidis still endure captivity. Official statistics from May 2022, provided by the Office for the Rescue of Abductees dedicated to freeing Yazidi slaves, indicated that 2,908 captured individuals were still in captivity.⁸¹

However, not all Arab tribes are accused of aiding the Islamic State; some, like the *Shammar* tribe, played a role in assisting Yazidis during the siege, facilitating their escape from Mount Sinjar to Syria. Consequently, the *Shammar* tribe was involved in mediation efforts between Yazidis and other Arabs, even if, reconciliation faced significant obstacles. The involved Sheikh asked Yazidis for a list of demands to send to Baghdad. This included disclosing the names of ISIS members within the local Arab tribes, aiding in the retrieval of missing Yazidis, and establishing a court in Sinjar to handle ISIS-related cases and compensation claims.⁸²

⁸⁰ Černý, “Iracti jezide,” 21.

⁸¹ Ali, “The Forced Displacement of Ethnic and Religious Minorities,” 83.

⁸² Abouzeid, “When the weapons fall silent,” 21-27.

While some Arab tribes deny involvement with the Islamic State, such as the *Imteywits*, the *Khatoonys*, and the *Jahaysh* tribes, accusations persist. The leader of the *Imteywits*, Sheikh Salah, stresses their innocence, providing evidence of their assistance to Yazidis and sharing their demand for justice against those who joined ISIS. Despite this, concerns remain about the treatment of his tribe, as Yazidi militias have conducted revenge attacks against the tribe and hindered its return. He underscores the need for state intervention to restore security and facilitate the coexistence of all ethnic groups:

“We understand they are in pain, but why are we paying for the crimes of others? They want and deserve justice from Daesh, but we are not Daesh. [...] The *Imteywits* have not returned home because of the armed Yazidi presence and dominance in the area. The state must resolve this so that the displaced can return. There must be security. [...] We are ready and serious to sit at the negotiating table to give everyone their rights, but the Yazidis are not one voice, one head. There are big disagreements among them, and until the state controls Sinjar, there is no stability”.⁸³

Yazidis advocate for the relocation of the Arab tribes as a condition for their return to Sinjar. One Yazidi woman who decided to come back to Sinjar City in December 2015 expressed her opposition to the return of Muslim neighbors:

“They are traitors to us and to the state. If they want to return to their villages, this is a very difficult thing. Let them go live somewhere else far from us; otherwise, the trouble will never end between us. If they return, people will seek revenge. Their men and their girls will not be safe. If they return despite our objections, the troubles will not end. Our pain is great. We are wounded. This is very difficult”.⁸⁴

The complex situation between Yazidis and Arabs in Sinjar requires time, patience, and careful consideration to be addressed. While efforts at reconciliation have been initiated, deep-seated suspicions, unresolved grievances, and the absence of trust continue to hinder progress. Without trust between the two communities, Yazidis do not feel secure in returning to Sinjar, prompting many to seek refuge in safer environments where they can rebuild their lives without fear.

In conclusion, the intricate web of political, military, and international interests in Sinjar has created a complex and unsafe environment, hindering the return of Yazidis to their homeland. The proliferation of multiple militias, the absence of comprehensive plans for rebuilding infrastructure and restoring essential public services and work opportunities, and the pervasive lack of trust between ethnic communities continue to impede progress in Sinjar.

⁸³ Abouzeid, “When the weapons fall silent,” 10, 21-27.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

3.4 Erosion of Trust in Iraqi, Kurdish, and Yazidi Leadership

Another significant factor driving Yazidis to leave Iraq is the pervasive distrust in both the Iraqi and Kurdish governments, as well as among their own Yazidi leaders, having no longer faith that these entities will adequately care for and protect them as a vulnerable minority. Yazidis perceive a consistent absence of justice, security, and rights for minorities within Iraq. Firstly, they believe justice is lacking in Iraq, claiming for legal justice, hoping for fair trials and appropriate sentences for perpetrators of war crimes against Yazidis. However, they express grave concerns about the Iraqi justice system's efficacy and willingness to investigate and prosecute offenders. Despite the pursuit of accountability for ISIS's atrocities remains unfulfilled in Iraq, Yazidis hope even for broader social justice, such as ensuring rights to social, cultural, and economic inclusion to minorities, as a long-term objective. They advocate for an end to the sectarian model in Iraq and an equal representation in political, social, and educational systems irrespective of religious affiliation. However, even in this case, achieving social justice for minorities in Iraq appears distant.⁸⁵

Secondly, Yazidis experience pervasive political, economic, and military discrimination throughout Iraq due to their religious affiliation. The targeting of their religion by the Islamic State has heightened Yazidis' sense of vulnerability, leading to a rise in Islamophobia within their community, fearing the resurgence of Islamic radicalism. Thirdly, Yazidis feel a profound lack of security in Iraq, where they face persecution for their religious beliefs and are constantly threatened with further attacks by extremist groups. The Kurdish politician Bakasri highlighted in 2016:

“The main reason for the Yazidis' flight to Europe is not economic. From their point of view, the wealth of Europe is the enforcement of law and justice. They see Europe as safe because there they are sure that no one will deprive them of their property, their land, their jobs, their wives, or their lives with impunity. No one in Iraq guarantees them such legal protection”.⁸⁶

Finally, the failure of Iraq to provide refuge for Yazidis after their displacement from Sinjar, coupled with the absence of a comprehensive plan for post-war reconstruction of the region, further exacerbates their disillusionment with remaining in the country.⁸⁷

Yazidis have lost trust even in the Kurdistan Regional Government, accused of letting them be discriminated against within Kurdistan due to religion. Moreover, they perceive widespread corruption and clientelism within the Kurdish government. A Yazidi teenager shared with Černý in 2016 the disappointment of his family toward the government:

⁸⁵ Van Zoonen and Wirya, “Perceptions and Reconciliation and Conflict”, 15.

⁸⁶ Černý, “Iracti jezide,” 21-22, 16-17.

⁸⁷ Černý, “Iracti jezide,” 16-17.

“My family are not refugees, we are from Duhok in Iraqi Kurdistan. But we still leave for Europe because of corruption and discrimination. One of my uncles left for Germany back in 2007. The other uncle served for a long time in the Peshmerga. But his salary there was too low, not enough to feed his family. And the risk of fighting and discrimination was too high again. So he left in annoyance and now lives in Germany”.⁸⁸

This sentiment is echoed even in the community’s perception of their own elites. Many Yazidis believe their leaders failed to adequately represent their interests during and after the ISIS attack when the community was in most need of their help. Tribal chiefs and politicians aligned with the Kurdistan Regional Government are perceived as having abandoned Yazidis to their fate, betraying them and trading their loyalty for personal safety as they secretly left their homes with the Peshmerga at the ISIS arrival. Yazidis felt abandoned even after the attack when they were left displaced in horrific camps while their leaders were residing in safe places in Kurdistan. Even the highest secular Yazidi authority, Mir Tahsin, is criticized for his perceived inactions and detachment from the suffering of his people, residing in a comfort palace in the safe Sheikhan. A resident of the Khanke refugee camp told Černý in 2016:

“The tribal chiefs are not helping us at all. Our chief lives in peace in the town of Zacho, where he fled. But because we are from a different political party than him, he has never visited us. [...] During the refugee crisis, Mir Tahsin is not visible, he does not receive Yazidi delegations at his residence, he does not appear in the media, he does not draw attention to suffering, he does not travel the world asking for help”.⁸⁹

Concluding, the narrative of Yazidis reveals a profound sense of betrayal, abandonment, and discrimination against them by various entities, including the Iraqi government, Kurdish authorities, and even their own elites. They lost their faith in those entities meant to safeguard their rights, protection, and well-being. In this context of grim reality and the absence of perspective of a country where they can feel safe and secure, Yazidis see migration to Europe as the most suitable solution to gain security, protection, and opportunities that Iraq has failed to provide.

3.5 Conclusions

The chapter provides an overview of the multifaceted crisis marked by profound challenges and complex socio-politic dynamics that emerged for Yazidis in Iraq following the ISIS genocidal attack. Despite the gradual reconquest of areas previously occupied by the Islamic State, the return of Yazidis

⁸⁸ Ibid., 17-19.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 19-20.

to their homeland of Sinjar remains hindered by political instability, military conflicts, and the widespread destruction of infrastructure. Moreover, the strained relations between Yazidis and Arabs, fueled by anger and fear, further complicate prospects for reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. Yazidis are still stranded in internally displaced persons and refugee camps characterized by difficult living conditions, overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, limited access to essential services, and a lack of economic opportunities. Additionally, the erosion of trust in Iraqi, Kurdish, and Yazidi leadership exacerbates the sense of disillusionment and abandonment among Yazidis, who perceive a consistent absence of justice, security, and rights for minorities within Iraq. This pervasive distrust, coupled with the lack of prospects for a secure and stable future in their homeland, has driven many Yazidis to seek refuge in Europe, where they perceive the promise of security, protection, and opportunities that Iraq has failed to provide.

However, not all Yazidis have migrated or are currently doing it. Some choose to remain in refugee or IDP camps, while others return to Sinjar despite difficulties. This underscores the limitations of determinist theories in fully explaining migration patterns. While external factors play a significant role in influencing migration decisions, individual agency is equally crucial. Without personal willingness and capabilities to migrate, individuals are unlikely to do so. Yazidis were compelled to leave Sinjar and relocate to Kurdistan or neighboring countries due to the ISIS violence and lack of viable options for remaining. However, once gained safety in these areas, Yazidis are faced with the choice of whether to migrate to Europe, stay in camps, or return to Sinjar. This decision is shaped by their aspirations and capabilities: those who choose to migrate are typically individuals who possess both the desire and the necessary resources to undertake the journey. Conversely, those who opt to remain in camps or return to Sinjar may lack either the aspirations to migrate, the capabilities, or both.

Conclusively, the complex phenomenon of Yazidi migration, along with the myriad factors driving it, necessitates both determinist and integrative approaches to be comprehensively explained. By integrating external factors with individual agency, as well as considering the role of networks, as the subsequent chapter will delineate, it is possible to gain a more nuanced understanding of Yazidi migration patterns.

4 Dynamics of Post-Genocide Yazidi Migration to Europe

4.1 Trends of Iraqi Asylum Applications across Europe

The United Nations has identified migration as one of the most pressing challenges of the 21st century. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the global population of forcibly displaced individuals has continued to rise steadily. By the end of 2022, their number reached 108,4 million individuals worldwide due to various factors such as persecution, conflict, violence, and human rights violations. This trend is depicted in *Figure 4.1*, which illustrates a consistent annual increase in the number of people forced to flee worldwide since 2012, rising from less than 50 million initially to over 100 million by 2022. Among these 108,4 million displaced individuals in 2022, there were 35,3 million refugees, 62,5 million internally displaced people, 5,4 million asylum-seekers, and 5,2 million other individuals in need of international protection.¹

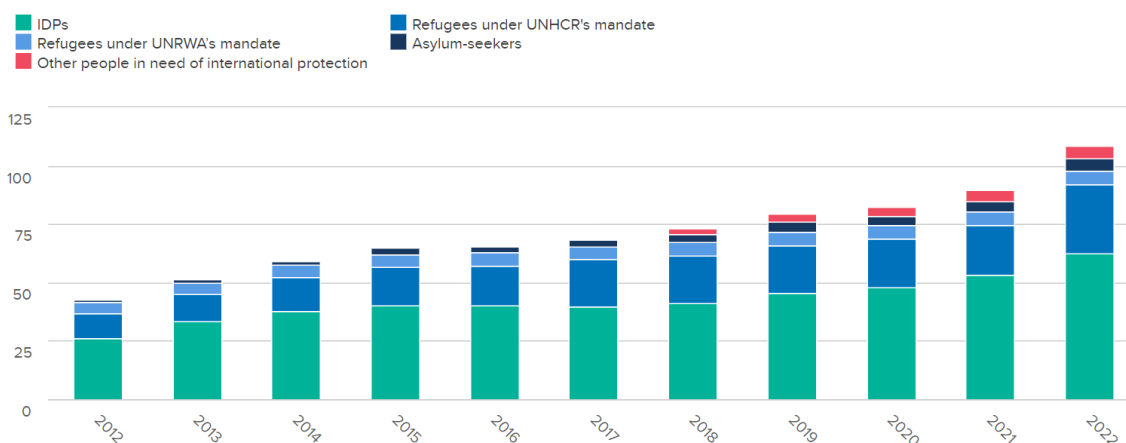


Figure 4.1: People forced to flee worldwide in millions 2012-2022. Source: UNHCR, 2022.

Contrary to the narrative that all migrants seek asylum in Europe, 76% of refugees worldwide are hosted by low and middle-income countries. Turkey is the country hosting the most refugees, with 3,6 million, followed by the Islamic Republic of Iran (3,4 million), and Colombia (2,5 million). With 2,1 million refugees, Germany stands as the sole European country among the top hosts, ranking it fourth in the world.² In Europe, the influx of asylum seekers remained relatively low until 2014, with fewer than half a million arrivals annually. The number of non-EU nationals seeking asylum in Europe surged dramatically in 2015 and 2016, exceeding a million asylum applications each year, within what is known as the *refugee crisis*. Subsequently, there was a notable decrease in asylum applications

¹ UNHCR, “Global Trends. Forced Displacement in 2022.” 2-3.

² Ibid.

from 2017 and 2020. However, in 2021, there was a new resurgence, with the number of asylum applications continuing to rise in 2022, nearly reaching a million applications. Despite official data has not been released yet, there is the suggestion that this trend has persisted into 2023 and 2024 (Figure 4.2).³

Considering Iraq, asylum applications from Iraqi individuals were minimal in 2014, seeing a significant increase in 2015 and 2016. While the total number of asylum applications from extra-European countries doubled from 2014 to 2015 (from 594,180 to 1,282,690, a growth of 116%), Iraqi applications quintupled during the same period (from 20,420 to 122,300, a growth of 499%), remaining relatively stable in 2016. Consequently, Iraq played a substantial role in contributing to the overall increase in asylum seekers in Europe, particularly at the beginning of the *refugee crisis* in 2015 and 2016, representing around 10% of the total extra-EU asylum applications each year. Subsequently, the number of asylum applications from Iraq decreased annually, with an average of approximately 33,000 applications per year in the period 2017-2022. While there was a resurgence in asylum requests from extra-EU countries in 2021, this trend was not observed for Iraqi asylum seekers (Figure 4.2).⁴

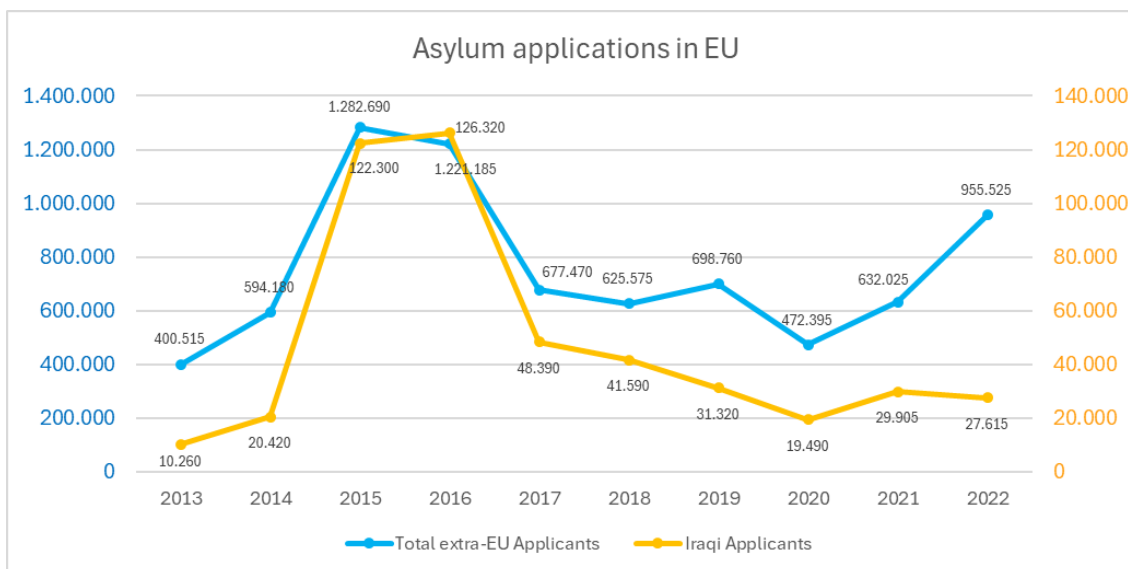


Figure 4.2: Asylum applications in the EU. Source: My own elaboration of Eurostat data.

Regarding the European countries where Iraqi nationals had sought asylum more frequently, it emerges that there were notable shifts within the period analyzed. In 2015, there was a significant diversification of countries involved in processing the 122,300 asylum applications from Iraq, with a notable proportion seeking asylum in the Nordic countries of Finland and Sweden (34%), countries involved in the Balkan route, with Bulgaria, Hungary, and Austria combined forming 24% of the total

³ Eurostat, “Asylum applicants by type, citizenship, age, and sex”.

⁴ Ibid.

applications, and other European nations (16%). Germany accounted for 26% of applicants. In contrast, in 2016, the landscape radically changed, with a staggering 77% of the 126,320 applicants from Iraq seeking asylum in Germany. Concurrently, applications in the Nordic countries and the nations along the Balkan route collapsed (Nordic countries: 3%, Balkan route countries: 9%). Of particular interest is the trend in Greece: while the country saw negligible asylum requests in 2015 and 2016, there was a significant increase starting in 2017, following the closure of the Balkan Route. On average, from 2017 to 2022, around 14% of the Iraqi applications were deposited in Greece. Generally, since 2017, the trend has stabilized, with Germany consistently receiving over half of Iraqi applications, and the remainder divided between Greece and other European countries (*Figure 4.3*).⁵

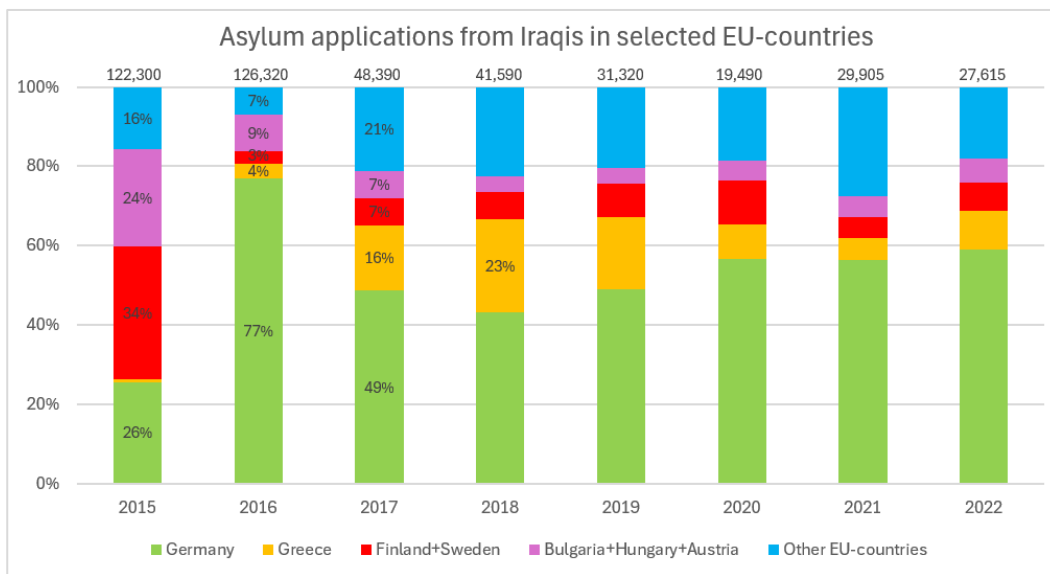


Figure 4.3: Iraqi asylum applications in Europe. Source: My own elaboration of Eurostat data.

4.2 Perception of Europe as a Haven of Safety and Opportunities

While the previously presented data addressed Iraq as a whole rather than specifically focusing on the Yazidis, it is important to highlight that significant insights regarding Yazidi migration to Europe after 2014 can be gleaned from the broader Iraqi dataset. Collecting data exclusively on Yazidis in Europe can be challenging, thus analysis of Iraqi data is conducted, recognizing that a portion of it comprises Yazidis. The Central Yazidi Council in Germany, known as ZÊD, estimates that over 100,000 Yazidis have emigrated from Iraq between 2014 and 2022.⁶ Additionally, Dobani, the Director of Yazidi Affairs in Dohuk (Kurdistan Region of Iraq), estimated that between 3,000 and

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ali, "The Forced Displacement of Ethnic and Religious Minorities," 83.

5,000 Yazidis were leaving Kurdistan each month in 2015.⁷ This implies that between 36,000 and 50,000 Yazidis departed Iraq in 2015 alone. Although the flow may have diminished in subsequent years, the figure of 100,000 Yazidi individuals probably underestimates the total number of Yazidis who have emigrated from Iraq since 2014.

The migration started immediately after the Islamic State conquered Sinjar and persists to this day. Yazidis began utilizing both official and unofficial channels for migration. However, the official pathways for *legally* migrating to Western countries were restricted, uncertain, and subject to lengthy processes and various conditions for acceptance. Examples of official channels include the *Special Quota Project*, which facilitated the relocation to Germany of a thousand Yazidi women and children victims of sexual abuse, and similar initiatives of the governments of Canada and Australia. Nevertheless, these opportunities were reserved for a few, excluding the majority. Consequently, numerous Yazidis have opted to rely on informal networks to migrate to Europe, akin to the approach adopted by many individuals from Asia and Africa since the early 2010s.

Many are still resorting to migrating to Europe through unofficial networks, as evidenced by my experience working in the refugee camps established specifically for Yazidis in Serres, Greece. During the summer of 2023, when I was there, the two reception facilities were so overcrowded that the manager decided to transfer some residents to other camps across Greece. This relocation posed a significant challenge for the Yazidis, given that the Serres camps were specifically designed for them, as I will deeply elaborate on later, to mitigate past instances of discrimination experienced in other camps predominantly inhabited by Muslims. Consequently, the Yazidis held a strong attachment to the Serres camp, making the transfer to facilities with predominantly Muslim asylum seekers profoundly distressing for most of them. Nevertheless, it was a necessary measure implemented by the camp management to prevent a repeat of the situation witnessed in the summer of 2022, when hundreds of Yazidis arrived in Serres within a couple of weeks, overwhelming the capacity of the camps and forcing around 120 individuals to sleep outside for two weeks. Rossana Conti, the current Director of Research and Development for Lifting Hands International (LHI) in Serres, elaborated on the situation:

“This summer, because of the high number of arrivals, residents of the Serres camps are being transferred to other camps. The Greek Government took this decision to prevent a repeat of the emergency situation that occurred in September 2022 when people were left sleeping outside the camps for a few weeks due to overcrowding and lack of space. The hygienic conditions deteriorated, with many people suffering from scabies. There have been people sleeping outside also during this

⁷ Paraszczuk, “Yazidis Thwarted In Bid To Reach Europe.”

summer, but the camp management informed LHI that these individuals decided to come back to Serres after being assigned to a different camp. For this reason, they couldn't be allowed back into the camp, as it would set a dynamic where individuals could actually choose their location, posing a dangerous risk. In the end, after a week outside, this group went back to the camps they were assigned. This happened because the Yazidi community is very connected, and people perceive these transfers as a trauma and a sort of second genocide".⁸

This reveals that the flow of Yazidis from Iraq to Europe has not diminished nearly a decade after the genocide. Tara Clavel, the actual Country Director for LHI in Greece who has worked in Serres since 2018, explained that the flows and the demography of Yazidis coming to Europe transformed over the years. The earlier wave of Yazidis who arrived in Europe between 2014 and 2018 was driven by the urgent need to escape the genocide. Between 2018 and 2021, the flow of migrants slowed with many Yazidis considering the idea of staying in Kurdistan and waiting for returning to Sinjar. However, the situation collapsed in 2021, leading to notable fluctuation in the influx of Yazidi asylum seekers to Serres. Tara Clavel explained:

"In 2018, when I arrived in Serres, we had a big group of Yazidi people arriving, while then the flows slowed down, until the summer of 2021, when the flows increased again. What they told us is that there were arrests and tensions in Iraq; probably, some people had the idea that they could stay there, but then there were tensions again with some groups of people including Yazidis, and so they decided to leave. My impression is that a lot of people who have arrived starting in 2021 were planning to stay in Iraq, but, then, after so many years they lived in refugee camps in Kurdistan and could not come back to their houses, they decided it was time to leave. On the contrary, for the group arriving in Europe between 2014 and 2018, it was different because they were fleeing from the genocide".⁹

For many Yazidis, migrating to Europe represents the only feasible option for attaining security and stability. They perceive Europe as a democratic and peaceful place where they can finally be able to profess their religion without fear, not be persecuted for ethnic grounds, and live in security and safety. It is attractive for Yazidis because of its democratic living environment, legal protections for minority rights, and comprehensive social support systems that offer assistance and integration opportunities for refugees fleeing persecution. The respect for human rights, rule of law, and cultural diversity prevalent in European societies further reinforce the perception of Europe as a haven where they can rebuild their lives free from the traumas of persecution and conflict.

⁸ Conti, "Interview 3".

⁹ Clavel, "Interview 2".

In the interviews with the LHI directors who have worked for many years with Yazidis, they mention many times the word *safety* as the most important factor driving Yazidis to Europe. Harvey Gray, currently Human Resources Director, and Rossana Conti, respectively told me:

“Elements that led Yazidis to choose Europe are a better life for their children that can go to school, the opportunity to go to university, and work opportunities. Mostly, people tell me that they want safety. Iraq was not a safe country for Yazidis because they were a religious minority; they are not necessarily seeking opportunities but just rest, safety, and the feeling of being secure”.¹⁰

“Yazidis take the journey for a better life, education, work, and safety. A lot of people mentioned safety; there have been some tensions with Kurds because they generally say that they don’t feel safe anymore there. There was a research in the Community Center of Serres that asked “*What does a good life mean to you?*” and a lot of people said that already being in Serres and being safe was a good life for them”.¹¹

4.3 Resettlement Programs for Yazidis in Western Countries

Despite the predominant use of informal pathways by Yazidis to reach Europe over the last decade, there have been notable efforts to provide sanctuary for the most vulnerable individuals in Western countries, particularly in the three years following the genocide. Initiatives led by the governments of the German Federal State of Baden-Wuerttemberg, Canada, and Australia aimed to resettle Yazidis who had suffered trauma due to the conflict in Iraq. Between 2015 and 2016, these governments launched programs to offer psychological, healthcare, and educational support to thousands of Yazidi victims of the Islamic State who were stranded in IDP camps in Kurdistan without access to adequate care. These programs are unique as they targeted internally displaced persons (IDPs) rather than registered refugees, as is typical of most resettlement initiatives.

Responding to advocacy efforts by the Central Council of Yazidis and the broader diaspora community in Germany to assist Sinjari Yazidis, the German State Government of Baden-Wuerttemberg initiated the humanitarian admissions program *Special Quota Project Baden-Wuerttemberg “Vulnerable Women and Children from Northern Iraq”* in March 2015. This program went beyond the usual admission requirements of the state to provide safety, psychological support, education, and new life opportunities for approximately one thousand women and children from northern Iraq.¹² Doctor Ilhan Kizilhan, a German psychotherapist of Yazidi descent whose family migrated from Turkey in the 20th century, was appointed as the advisor to the Federal State

¹⁰ Gray, “Interview 1”.

¹¹ Conti, “Interview 3”.

¹² Hillebrecht, Zeiss, Bengel, “Psychological and Organizational Aspects,” 357-360. McGee, “Saving the Survivors,” 87.

Government and responsible for psychological management. Selection criteria included a special need for psychological treatment, being a victim of traumatic events, being a minor or female relative of a victim, residing in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, suitability for travel, and integration capacity. Dr. Kizilhan explained:

“My task was to psychologically examine people in Northern Iraq as well as to offer vocational training, focusing on Yazidi cultural background and transcultural aspects, for the treatment, care, and consultation of traumatized people in several cities of Baden-Wuerttemberg. I talked to hundreds of young women and even children, and listened to what they had gone through. [...] I had to listen to even more tragic and horrible stories that were beyond human comprehension”.¹³

Women and children admitted to Germany through the program were prepared for the journey and accompanied to Lalish, the spiritual center for the Yazidis, by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Baba Sheikh, the community's spiritual leader, personally blessed them and ensured their dignity would not be compromised by their experiences of sexual abuse and enslavement. Of the 1100 Yazidi refugees, 37,5% were women and 63,5% were children. Inspired by the efforts of Baden-Wuerttemberg, some municipalities in the states of Schleswig-Holstein and Lower Saxony also welcomed one additional hundred Yazidis. Upon their arrival in Germany between March 2015 and June 2016, the 1,200 Yazidi women and children received comprehensive support, including free medical, psychological, and psychosocial assistance, accommodation, financial support, and access to education. After three years of living there, refugees became eligible to apply for permanent residency in Germany.¹⁴

Following Germany's example, Canada and Australia launched programs to resettle IDPs from Iraq, with Yazidi women and children being prominently represented among beneficiaries. Between 2015 and 2016, the Canadian Government admitted to Canada approximately 1,200 Yazidis, mainly comprising female-headed households and their children.¹⁵ Similarly, between 2016 and 2017, approximately 700 Yazidis resettled in Australia. In 2018, Australia extended its support by welcoming 12,000 refugees affected by the conflict in Syria and Iraq, including a significant number of Yazidis, although the precise proportion is unspecified.¹⁶

These initiatives have undoubtedly had positive impacts on the lives of thousands of women and children involved. However, adult men, including adult sons or husbands of the selected women, were often *a priori* excluded despite meeting the preconditions for acceptance into the programs. Some of

¹³ Omarkhali, “Transformations in the Yazidi tradition after the ISIS attacks,” 151.

¹⁴ Hillebrecht, Zeiss, Bengel, “Psychological and Organizational Aspects,” 357-360.

¹⁵ Government of Canada, “Helping vulnerable Yazidi women and children”.

¹⁶ Yazda, “Mapping the Yazidi diaspora in Australia,” 4.

the selected women attempted to apply for family reunification for their stranded relatives in Kurdistan but often faced negative outcomes. Moreover, governments emphasized that these initiatives were not intended to resettle a large number of Yazidis, as the majority preferred to remain in their homeland. Instead, they focused on a limited number of traumatized women and children for whom resettlement and access to psychological and health care were deemed essential.¹⁷

While this approach may have been suitable in the immediate aftermath of ISIS's conquest of Sinjar and the displacement of Yazidis in Kurdistan, the prolonged stay in IDP camps or urban areas without the possibility of returning to Sinjar or integrating into the host community has led many Yazidis to prefer migrating to safer and economically developed Western countries. However, programs aimed at legally resettling registered Yazidi IDPs or refugees are severely limited in capacity. Furthermore, as underlined above, the exclusion of men from these programs, despite their vulnerability, further complicates the situation of Yazidi households, necessitating the exploration of alternative pathways to safety in Europe.¹⁸

According to a 2019 survey by IOM, 25,6% of Yazidi respondent IDPs expressed a desire to migrate abroad in the long term (more than twelve months following data collection). In contrast, 43,2% wished to return to their area of origin, while 30,8% preferred to stay and integrate into the displacement location. Compared to other ethnoreligious communities, Yazidis, alongside Christians, showed a higher inclination toward migration abroad. The primary reasons cited for wanting to move abroad included better economic opportunities (54,6% of respondents), improved security (46%), trust in the future (39,5%), better public services (28,3%), and greater tolerance for ethnoreligious differences (25,7%).¹⁹ These findings highlight that the resettlement programs provided for Yazidis did not fully address the situation. Instead, an increasing number of people have expressed a desire to migrate abroad rather than remain in their displacement location or return to their dangerous homeland. To address this demand, various informal pathways and routes have been established, which will be elaborated on in the following paragraph.

4.4 Insights into Yazidi Migration to Europe

Through my observations, informal conversations with camp residents, and interviews with directors of Lifting Hands International (LHI) in Serres, I gained insight into the informal methods and

¹⁷ Hillebrecht, Zeiss, Bengel, "Psychological and Organizational Aspects," 357-360.

¹⁸ McGee, "Saving the Survivors," 101-104.

¹⁹ IOM, "Understanding ethno-religious groups in Iraq," 32-36.

strategies Yazidis employ to migrate to Europe as asylum seekers from Iraq. Yazidi migrants typically clearly know their ultimate destination before embarking on the journey, thanks to information gathered from relatives, friends, or community members who have previously undertaken the trip and await their arrival. According to my observations in Serres, it was evident that individuals are well informed about each stage of the journey, including the timeline for asylum processing, required travel documents, preferred smugglers, and strategies to minimize time and risks *en route* to their final destination. This is disseminated through networks of friends or family members already situated at the destination, offering guidance and insights on the necessary steps.²⁰

However, unexpected events and obstacles often arise, endangering their journey to safety. These challenges may include encounters with border authorities, risks during border crossing via boat, trucks, or on foot, increased demands for money by smugglers, complications with documents or asylum applications, and various others. Because of these obstacles and risks associated with illegal migration to Europe, households sometimes opt to send only the male head or, to a lesser extent, a minor, to the dangerous journey, while the rest of the family remains in Iraq. Households employ this strategy not only out of security concerns but also due to the exorbitant costs associated with irregular migration to Europe. Typically, a family of four must spend over 10,000 US dollars to undertake the journey from Iraq to Europe. This strategy assumes that the household will later reunite with him through legal channels. Once the man or minor secures refugee status in Europe, he can initiate the process of family reunification, enabling his family to join him legally and safely. However, the reality often diverges from expectations, as obtaining authorization for family reunification proves to be a slow process. Faced with prolonged waiting periods, even families usually resort successively to irregular travel to Europe.²¹

Based on my observations in Serres, interviews with LHI's directors, and data from IOM Greece regarding the composition of residents in the Serres reception facility, it appears that Yazidi migration encompasses a variety of scenarios that include solo men embarking on the journey with members of the extended family while leaving others behind hopeful for eventual reunification, as well as entire families undertaking the journey together, including children. Despite the prevailing narration of the typical asylum from the Middle East or Africa being perceived as a solitary male, Yazidis more commonly travel as families compared to individuals from other nationalities. Rossana Conti and Harvey Gray gave their impression of the composition of Yazidi migration:

²⁰ Gray, "Interview 1". Clavel, "Interview 2". Conti, "Interview 3".

²¹ IOM, "Assessing the risks of migration," 26.

“I think most of the men who come to Serres arrive with a member of their family. Usually, there are some members of their extended family such as a cousin. Some men told me that they have their family back in Iraq, and they moved first, did the trip earlier for security reasons, and then maybe applied for family reunification in Germany or in the Netherlands, which is a very long process that takes years. So it happens that men do the journey before leaving behind other members of the family. One of the community volunteers told me yesterday the contrary: he stayed behind in Iraq, while his mother and wife did the journey before, and he hadn’t seen his family for 8 years. But he finally received his travel documents to go to Hannover. So, there is a bit of both, alone men who take the travel with some members of the extended family and leave behind other members hoping for family reunification, and some men who come with the whole family”.²²

“People usually start their journey from Turkey with other members of their community. Usually, they already know these people from Sinjar or Kurdistan, and they don’t do the journey alone. Generally, in other communities with which I worked were just men, but Yazidis are mixed. Some groups are just men, some groups are families with children. I saw both. [...] I would say that people who try to go to the Netherlands are seeking family reunification and are generally single men because it is easier to seek family reunification. I think young men are sent because they are less vulnerable than women and children so they are sent first and then the family can apply for family reunification arriving with a more direct and less dangerous path than being smuggled from Turkey. In contrast, people who are going to Germany are usually a family group. They usually already have family members in Germany”.²³

Indeed, the trend of mixed migration, encompassing both single individuals and entire households, is evident within the Yazidi community, as reflected in data provided by IOM Greece, which oversaw the reception center of Serres in collaboration with Greek authorities from 2019 to 2022. *Figure 4.4* illustrates this trend, depicting the composition of residents in Serres, focusing on the flows of singles and households concerning their nationalities. During the first period, from July 2019 to January 2021, households represented a significant proportion of the total residents, outnumbering single individuals. Notably, Yazidis (in the graph identified as people from Iraq) comprised an average of 93% of the total residents during this timeframe. Starting in April 2021, there was an increase in Serres reception centers in individuals from Afghanistan, Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and other countries, with Yazidis decreasing in percentage to around 50% of the residents. While the number of households remained relatively stable, the number of single individuals experienced a marked increase. This highlights a distinction in migration patterns, with non-Yazidi asylum seekers

²² Conti, “Interview 3”.

²³ Gray, “Interview 1”.

tending to migrate as singles, whereas the Yazidi community exhibits a mix of both single individuals and households with a prevalence of the last typology.²⁴

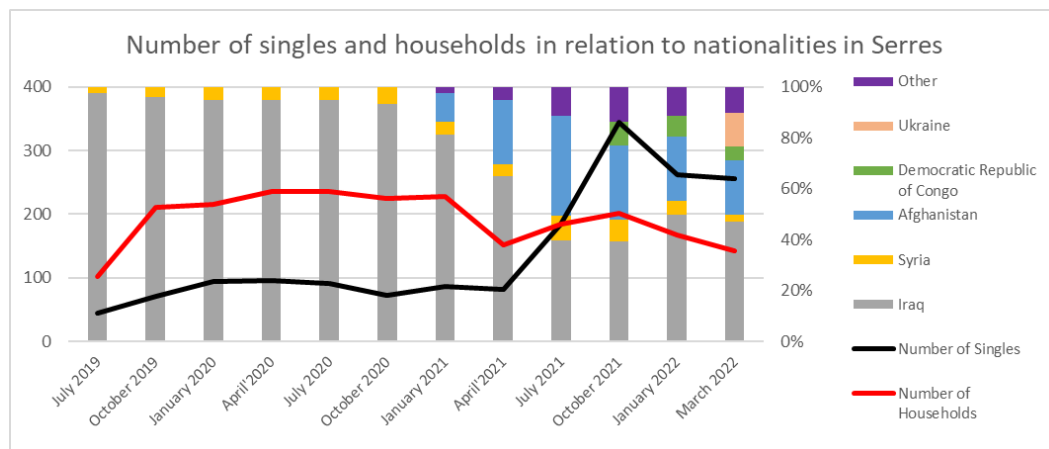


Figure 4.4: Singles, households, and nationalities in Serres. Source: My own elaboration of IOM Greece data.

The journey of Yazidis from Iraq to Europe typically unfolds in four stages (Figure 4.5). Initially, Yazidis embark on a journey from the IDP camps or urban areas where they are residing in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to Turkey, where they encounter smugglers. In the second phase, individuals are clandestinely transported from Turkey to Greece. During the era of the Balkan Route, they traversed Greece as a transit point and proceeded through the Balkan countries to reach northern European countries. Presently, the third step involves lodging an asylum application in Greece and awaiting responses in Greek reception centers. Finally, upon receiving refugee status, the fourth step entails the journey from Greece to northern European countries, particularly Germany and the Netherlands, utilizing travel documents released by Greek authorities. Upon arrival, Yazidis seek secondary asylum. If granted, they can commence integration into German or Dutch society.²⁵



Figure 4.5: Journey of Yazidis from Iraq to Europe. Source: My own elaboration.

²⁴ IOM Greece, “Supporting the Greek Authorities” Factsheets 2019-2022.

²⁵ Gray, “Interview 1”. Clavel, “Interview 2”. Conti, “Interview 3”.

The following paragraphs will explore in detail the routes and strategies employed by Yazidis in their travels, shedding light on the dynamics of their movements and the asylum policies that affect them.

4.4.1 First Step: Routes from Kurdistan to Turkey

A report compiled by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in 2016 outlines three primary routes for individuals seeking to exit Iraq (refer to *Figure 4.6*). The first route involves flying from Iraq’s international airports to Istanbul or Bodrum in Turkey. However, this option entails risks such as potential checkpoints along the way to airports and the necessity of a valid passport and visa for entry into Turkey, which can be challenging to obtain. The second route consists of traversing through the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) to reach Turkey either by land through the Ibrahim Khalil border crossing or by air through Erbil or Sulaymaniyah airports. This route is typically accessible only to residents of the KRI due to Kurdish checkpoints. Even traveling by bus or air from the KRI to Istanbul necessitates a valid passport and visa which cost approximately 600 US dollars and are not easy to obtain. Those lacking these documents often resort to clandestine travel with smugglers in private vehicles. The third route presents the highest risk, involving travel via the Syrian Arab Republic. Iraqi migrants cross the border between Iraq and Syria with the assistance of smugglers, a process that often entails multiple attempts, particularly when the area was under ISIS control.²⁶

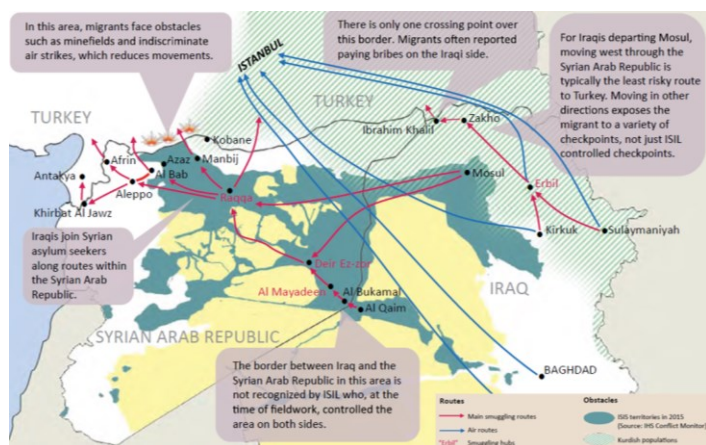


Figure 4.6: Paths to exit Iraq. Source: IOM, 2016.

Most Yazidis predominantly opt for the second route to depart from Iraq, as they are already residing in the KRI. To enter Turkey, they must obtain a valid passport and visa, difficult to get. If they receive the documents, they take a bus or a plane to reach Istanbul in Turkey. In cases of denied documentation, some Yazidis choose to utilize smugglers to exit Iraq.²⁷

²⁶ IOM, “Assessing the risks of migration,” 20–23.

²⁷ IOM, “Assessing the risks of migration,” 20–23. Gray, “Interview 1”. Clavel, “Interview 2”. Conti, “Interview 3”.

4.4.2 Second Step: Routes from Turkey to Greece

Yazidis and migrants of various nationalities typically engage with smugglers in Istanbul, as the assistance of these individuals is essential for reaching Greece. Upon arrival, migrants often negotiate with a broker known as *samsar*, who usually shares their country of origin. Successively, they are directed to a holding location where payment is made to the main smuggler, known as *muhareb*. Migrants remain in these holding areas until there are favorable conditions of weather and security, and the number of people to make the journey is profitable for the smuggler. They are then transported in smaller groups to the coast or across the land border, aided by intermediaries known as *muhareb*. Most migrants are connected to smugglers through friends or referrals. They typically opt for smugglers recommended by trusted acquaintances who have previously completed the journey, emphasizing the importance of networking at this stage.²⁸

Two primary routes are commonly followed: one involves crossing the Aegean Sea by boat, while the other entails crossing the land border. The maritime route begins in Turkish coastal cities such as Izmir or Bodrum, with boats transferring migrants to the Greek islands of Lesbos, Samos, or Chios. People are gathered by the smuggler close to the coast, where they usually wait up to twenty days, sleeping in the forest, before the sea crossing. Following their arrival and registration on the Greek islands, they proceed to Athens via ferry. Alternatively, the land route involves crossing the border between Turkey and Greece or between Turkey and Bulgaria, either on foot or concealed in truck compartments (*Figure 4.7*).²⁹

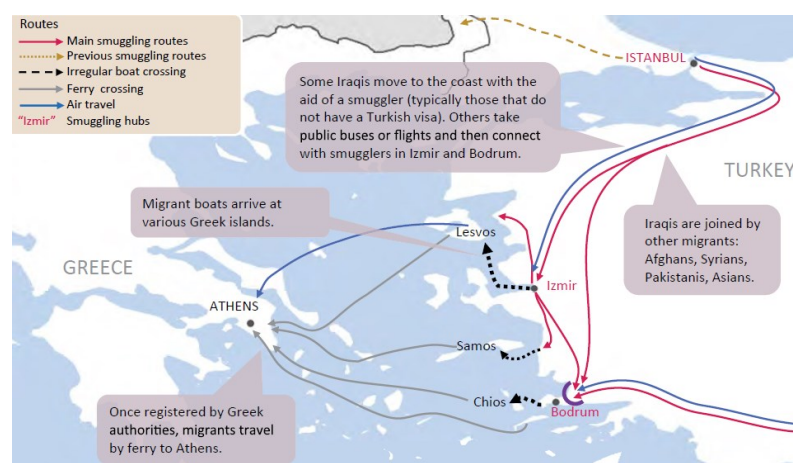


Figure 4.7: Routes between Turkey and Greece. Source: IOM, 2016.

Upon arrival in Greece, either by sea or land, migrants previously utilized the Balkan Route to reach northern Europe. This route was generally quite straightforward, involving various public

²⁸ IOM, "Assessing the risks of migration," 24-28, 34.

²⁹ Ibid.

transportation, traversing paths on foot, and registering at temporary reception centers or transit camps across the Balkans. It is possible to see the countries involved, routes, transports, obstacles, and border crossings in *Figure 4.8*. However, the closure of borders and the implementation of daily asylum application quotas by several countries along the Balkan Route in 2015 and 2016, drastically altered the landscape of migration, making this route seriously dangerous and violent for people seeking asylum.³⁰ Its closure forced many asylum seekers, including Yazidis, to seek alternative pathways. An illustrative incident highlights the dangerousness faced: in June 2015, approximately 3,000 Yazidi refugees attempted to cross the border between Turkey and Bulgaria in a convoy of thirty buses. However, they were blocked on the border by Turkish authorities, subjected to violence, and ultimately reported to the refugee camps they had fled. Following the closure of the Balkan Route between 2015 and 2016, thousands of asylum seekers found themselves stranded in Greek reception facilities, facing uncertain futures.³¹



Figure 4.8: The Balkan Route. Source: IOM, 2016.

Figure 4.9 highlights the evolving migration routes utilized by Iraqi nationals seeking asylum in Europe after the closure of the Balkan Route, analyzing their asylum application patterns in three key countries along the route: Bulgaria, Hungary, and Greece. While both Bulgaria and Hungary experienced peaks in asylum requests in 2015, coinciding with the period asylum seekers traversed this route to northern destinations, Greece saw its peaks in 2017 and 2018, following the closure of borders in other countries along the Balkan Route. The year 2016 marked a transitional period characterized by the closure of borders in Bulgaria and Hungary, albeit with continued attempts by asylum seekers to traverse them. Concurrently, there was a notable redirection of Iraqi asylum seekers toward Greece as their initial point of entry into Europe. During this critical year, Bulgaria, Hungary, and Greece recorded relatively equal numbers of Iraqi applications (Bulgaria: 5,350, Hungary: 3,450,

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Paraszczuk, “Yazidis Thwarted In Bid To Reach Europe.”

Greece: 4,810). Subsequently, from 2017 onwards, the number of asylum applications from Iraqis in Bulgaria and Hungary consistently remained below one thousand per year. In contrast, Greece experienced a steady increase in Iraqi asylum requests each year from 2015 to 2018. This divergence reflects the dynamic nature of migration routes and the shifting patterns of asylum-seeking behavior.³²

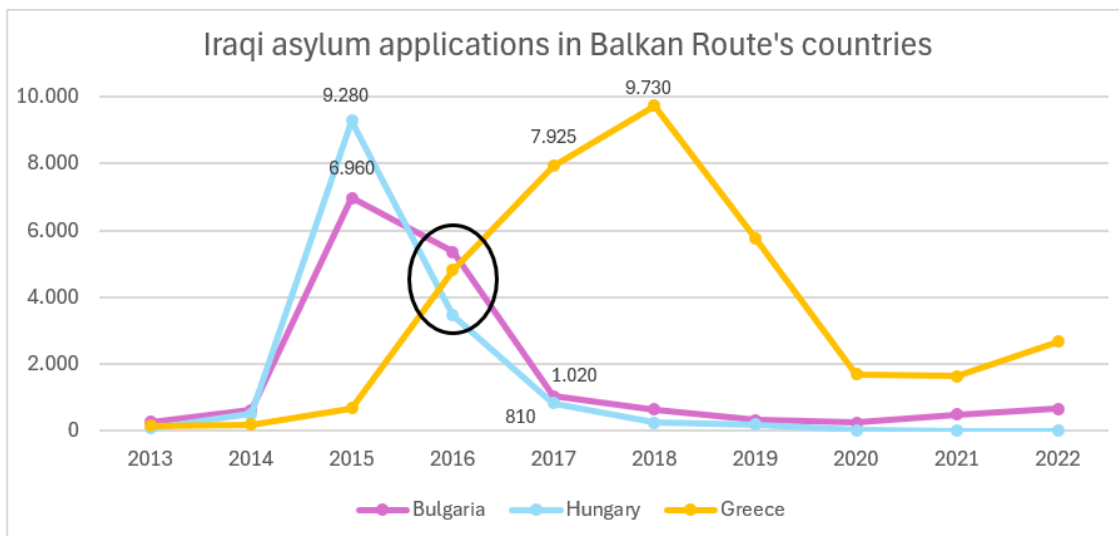


Figure 4.9: Iraqi Asylum applications in Bulgaria, Hungary, and Greece. Source: My own elaboration of Eurostat data.

To circumvent the impasse of the closure of the Balkan Route, Yazidis have begun to use another strategy to arrive in northern European countries. Most residents of the Serres camps reported they were smuggled from Turkey to Greece via land, traversing the forested border between the two countries on foot or being transported in concealed compartments within trucks. Some migrants spent months in Turkey, residing in refugee camps or urban areas, while waiting for favorable conditions to continue their journey to Europe, gain money, and establish connections with smugglers. Timing also plays a crucial role, with migrants typically undertaking the journey during the summer months when smuggling networks are more active and the weather conditions are favorable.³³

Upon entering Greece, Yazidis register with authorities and initiate the asylum application process, which can take from three months to a year to receive a response. During this period, they are hosted in reception facilities or refugee camps established to accommodate asylum seekers awaiting responses to their applications. Presently, smugglers guide Yazidis directly to the Serres because of the presence of a camp specifically established to accommodate Yazidi asylum seekers. However, before the creation of this dedicated facility, Yazidis were dispersed across various refugee camps in Greece.³⁴

³² Eurostat, "Asylum applicants by type, citizenship, age, and sex".

³³ Gray, "Interview 1". Clavel, "Interview 2". Conti, "Interview 3".

³⁴ Ibid.

In 2016, the institution Yazda reported that 4,650 Yazidis were residing in eight refugee camps across Greece (*Figure 4.10*). Among these reception centers, Petra Camp in northern Greece housed the largest Yazidi population with 1,400 individuals. In the northern part of the country, following closely were the Serres Camp, already hosting 430 Yazidis, the Katsikas Camp in Ioannina with 240 individuals, and the Giannitsa Camp with 216 Yazidis. In southern Greece, camps near Athens accommodated Yazidis with the Scaramanga Camp hosting approximately 800 individuals and smaller numbers in Ritsona and Lavrion Camps (38 Yazidis in total). Additionally, 146 Yazidis were hosted in the hotspot on the island of Leros.³⁵

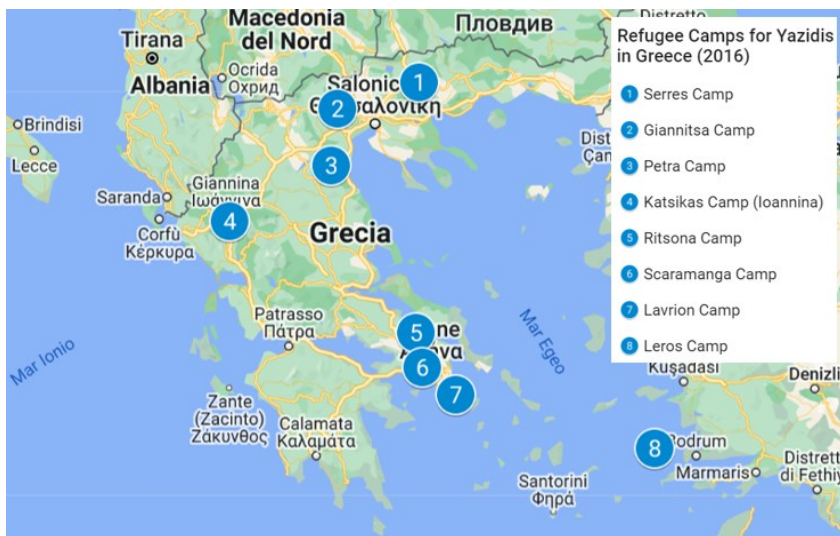


Figure 4.10: Locations of refugee camps for Yazidis in Greece. Source: My own elaboration of Yazda (2016) data.

However, as widely described in the first and second chapters of the thesis, sectarian tensions and discrimination against minorities persist in Iraqi society, creating further obstacles for Yazidis even outside their homeland. Many reported feeling unwelcome and faced persecution from other Iraqi or Muslim individuals at various accommodation centers along their route.³⁶ Recognizing the need for a safe haven exclusively for Yazidis and in response to discrimination experienced, the Greek authorities established the Serres camp. This dedicated facility aimed to provide security and essential services to Yazidis, shielding them from renewed marginalization and oppression within the broader Muslim refugee population. Tara Clavel, in her analysis, highlights the significance of the Serres camp as a crucial measure to safeguard Yazidis:

“Before the camp in Serres existed, Yazidi people were sent to different refugee camps in Greece mixed with people from Afghanistan, Syria, and so on. There were some discriminations and incidents against the Yazidi community because, especially among Muslim communities, sometimes there was the belief that Yazidis were the impersonation of the devil, so they were discriminated against even in the camps.

³⁵ Yazda, “Yazidi Refugees in Greece, Turkey, Syria and Iraq,” 9-11.

³⁶ IOM, “Assessing the risks of migration,” 30.

This is the reason why the government created the Yazidis-only camp. And the presence of a camp entirely reserved for Yazidis is the reason why Yazidis are smuggled directly to Serres. So probably it is both sides: there was discrimination coming from the other communities against the Yazidis so the camp was created, but also the fact that there is a camp just for Yazidis in which they can feel safe represents a pull factor. The presence of a big community with your own language, culture, and religion, being surrounded by people that you understand, you feel comfortable. It is so important for all communities, and especially for a community that needs to feel safe after a genocide. [...] In fact, Yazidi people all come spontaneously to Serres with no exceptions. There is such a strong community, and it is known to be a good camp for Yazidis, so the message started to spread, and they came directly to Serres”.³⁷

4.4.3 Third Step: Granting Asylum in Greece

In the third step of the journey, once Yazidis are smuggled to Serres, they proceed to apply for asylum in Greece, with the procedure being a long process. For all asylum seekers, the journey begins with registration at a local police station, where they provide their fingerprints and receive temporary documentation. However, this initial step can be challenging as some police stations may not be cooperative. Following registration, refugees are directed to two designated camps for official processing, Malakasa Camp close to Athens for the southern part of Greece, and Diavata Camp close to Thessaloniki for the northern area. They are later assigned to smaller refugee camps within the Greek territory, where asylum seekers await their appointments for interviews, divided into two stages. During the first interview, individuals must articulate reasons why they left Turkey, while the second interview requires them to prove their status as refugees. This process can be particularly difficult for certain groups, with Syrians, for example, often failing to demonstrate why Turkey was not safe for them, leading to rejection at this stage. In contrast, Kurdish people have typically an easier time passing the initial stage due to the well-documented risks they face in Turkey.³⁸

Following the second interview, asylum seekers must wait for a decision on their application, which can vary in length, ranging from months to years. If granted asylum, individuals are officially recognized as refugees in the European Union. For those whose asylum application is rejected the first time, there is the possibility of recourse for appeal; however, if rejected three times, individuals are theoretically subject to deportation, although, in practice, they are rare. Instead, many rejected refugees end up living in precarious conditions as undocumented migrants in Greece, with some

³⁷ Clavel, “Interview 2”.

³⁸ Ibid.

attempting to cross into other European Union countries to seek asylum there, not knowing that the system of asylum in Europe is integrated and, if you are rejected in one country, you will automatically be rejected in all.³⁹

This is the general way to apply as a refugee in Greece. However, Yazidis benefit from a fast-track procedure because they are officially recognized as an ethnic group victim of genocide by the United Nations. Their asylum application is faster, and the result is positive in almost all cases, with Yazidis acquiring their status as refugees without the need for extensive interviews or documentation to prove their refugee claims. Tara Clavel explained:

“Yazidi people have a fast track, and it takes less time for them. They usually arrive directly at Serres camp, and they are sent to the police station to make the registration with their fingerprint, then they come back to Serres camp and are hosted there. Before it was different because the Serres camp management made an appointment for them in Diavata camp, they were often sent there for around one week for the official registration and the interviews, and then they came back to Serres and waited for the decision. Now it is different because they don’t have to do any more interviews, the Greek government makes clear that Yazidis are refugees. The asylum procedure is quite easy for them compared to other nationalities, and they receive always asylum, or at least in 99% of the cases”.⁴⁰

4.4.4 Fourth Step: Routes From Greece to Germany or the Netherlands

Once Yazidis receive asylum in Greece, they face the decision of where to settle permanently. Despite the option to remain in Greece, the overwhelming majority express a desire to move on to Germany or the Netherlands. Both Rossana Conti and Harvey Gray mentioned that, in around two years of working in Serres, they had never met any Yazidi who wanted to stay in Greece after receiving status as a refugee. This preference is rooted in perceptions of racial prejudice against strangers and resulting limited security for refugees, inadequate educational and employment opportunities, and lack of provision of basic needs for recognized refugees such as food and accommodation in Greece. Consequently, Yazidis view the country as a transit point rather than a suitable long-term home.⁴¹

Since Yazidis desire to reach these destinations, they employ a strategic approach to reach them. The European Union law allows third-country nationals with valid residence permits and travel documents, including beneficiaries of international protection of both refugee status and subsidiary protection, to travel freely within the Schengen Area for up to 90 days in any 180-day period. There

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Gray, “Interview 1”. Conti, “Interview 3”.

are some conditions: holding a valid travel document, justifying the purpose of stay, and not being considered a threat.⁴² So, after receiving asylum in Greece, Yazidis are granted travel documents that are used to fly to their preferred countries. Upon arrival, they submit new applications for international protection, claiming that Greece, despite granting them asylum, failed to provide essential support such as adequate food, housing, and schooling despite their status. Tara Clavel explained the legal strategy used by Yazidis to travel to northern countries:

“They can be away from Greece for three months every six months, and then they are supposed to come back. What you see usually is that people pretend to come back but they don’t. There are a couple of countries that are now aware that Greece is not providing the basic needs for recognized refugees, so they are not allowed to send people back to Greece as the Dublin Regulation would impose. The Netherlands is one of these countries. [...] This means that people can apply for asylum again in the Netherlands, and they do the same process again, and probably the procedure is even longer than in Greece. In Germany I think it’s the same, it doesn’t send people back. Even Switzerland and Belgium have similar rules. In this sense, Italy and Greece are facing big flows of migrants arriving, and they are not able to provide the basic needs, so the Courts of these countries say that it is not possible to send the recognized refugees back”.⁴³

This approach exploits a legal loophole, as European Union law does not prohibit the lodging of a second application, opening an opportunity to bypass the rules. While most Member States typically do not examine subsequent applications if international protection has been already granted in another Member State, exceptions arise in cases where fundamental rights may be at risk in the first state. Recently, some Member States have noted an increase in secondary applications from individuals already recognized as refugees. The primary countries where refugee status was initially granted are Greece, Italy, and Bulgaria, reflecting the Dublin Regulation framework, wherein the first Member State entered by an asylum seeker is responsible for examining the application. Studies investigating the living conditions of refugees suggest various motivating factors for seeking secondary migration opportunities. These include inadequate living conditions and housing, limited opportunities for integration, and challenges accessing work, study, healthcare, and social security in the initial host country, as well as the presence of ethnic and family networks in another Member State.⁴⁴

There have been recent EU case laws in which the exceptions made under exceptional circumstances for secondary applications were applied. These circumstances arise when there is a risk that the applicant, as a beneficiary of international protection, would face treatment incompatible with fundamental rights in the first State. Certain national courts have in the recent past acknowledged the

⁴² EMN, “Secondary movements of beneficiaries of international protection”, 3.

⁴³ Clavel, “Interview 2”.

⁴⁴ EMN, “Secondary movements of beneficiaries of international protection”, 1-3, 7-8.

admissibility of second applications due to the serious risk of inhuman and degrading treatment in the initial host country. For example, the courts of Germany and the Netherlands reported on decisions of second applications' admission related to Greece. These judgments indicated that returning refugees to Greece would likely result in an inability to meet their basic needs, leading to a prolonged struggle for independent livelihoods and a heightened risk of extreme material need without adequate accommodation.⁴⁵

Consequently, what Yazidis do is seek again international protection in Germany and the Netherlands, proving that Greece failed to provide them with essential support. These countries refuse to send refugees back to Greece, considering it unsafe for refugees, and allow these individuals to apply for asylum again in their countries. However, the secondary migration of Yazidis to northern European countries presents numerous challenges. Firstly, there can be obstacles and pushbacks by authorities at airports or borders, complicating their journey and increasing vulnerability. Secondly, they must restart the asylum process upon arrival, enduring lengthy waits of months or years in temporary accommodation centers without the ability to work. Thirdly, while their status as victims of genocide recognized by the United Nations aids their case, there is no guarantee of receiving international protection in their new host countries. Despite these challenges, Germany and the Netherlands are perceived as welcoming to the integration of the Yazidis, providing hope for a better future.⁴⁶

4.5 Asylum Trends in Greece, Germany, and the Netherlands

The paragraph examines two distinct sets of data provided by *Eurostat* for Greece, Germany, and the Netherlands, the countries that are primarily impacted by Yazidi migration based on my fieldwork. These datasets include the total number of asylum applications and the annual approval of first-instance refugee status for individuals from Iraq, spanning the period between 2014 and 2023. A comparison of these datasets with my firsthand observations and interviews in Serres reveals a correspondence between the data and on-site research for Germany and Greece, while the trends observed in the Netherlands do not entirely align with observations.

Regarding the dataset of Iraqi asylum applications (*Figure 4.11*), in Germany, the numbers reveal a notable influx of Iraqi applicants, with 31,380 applications in 2015, escalating to 97,125 in 2016, and subsequently stabilizing to an average of around 16,300 applications per year in the period between 2017 and 2023. Conversely, Greece initially saw minimal asylum applications from Iraqis in 2015

⁴⁵ Ibid., 7-9.

⁴⁶ Clavel, "Interview 2". Conti, "Interview 3".

(660), as the country primarily served as a transit point along the Balkan Route to northern countries without officially seeking asylum there. However, there was a gradual uptick in Iraqi asylum requests from 2016 to 2018 (respectively, 4,810, 7,925, and 9,730), coinciding with a shift in migrants' strategy following the closure of the Balkan Route. Finally, in the period between 2019 and 2022, the average number of applications in Greece was around 3,000, with a final peak of 6,455 in 2023. It is plausible that a significant portion of the Iraqi applications in Germany and Greece may be from Yazidis.⁴⁷

In contrast, the Netherlands recorded 3,240 applications from Iraqi individuals in 2015, with numbers remaining relatively stable thereafter, averaging around 960 applications annually between 2016 and 2022. In 2023, however, there was an uptick, with 1,605 applications. Despite the relatively low numbers, as interviews with LHI directors will elucidate later in the chapter, the Netherlands has emerged as a relatively recent destination for Yazidis, gaining popularity only in the past two years. Hence, the modest increase in asylum applications from Iraqis observed in 2023 may signify this emerging trend.⁴⁸

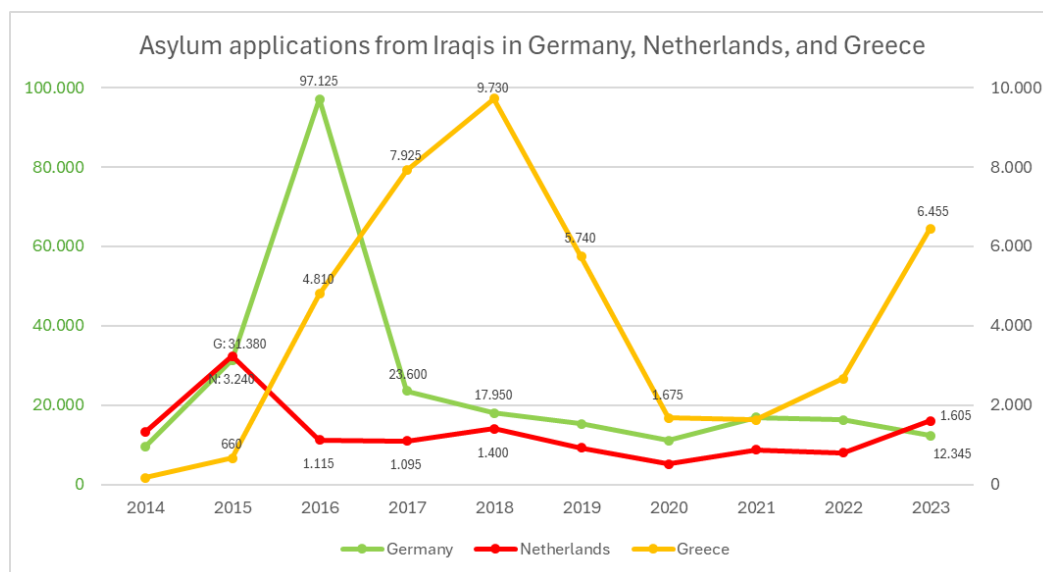


Figure 4.11: Iraqi asylum applications in Germany, Netherlands, and Greece. Source: My own elaboration of Eurostat data.

After analyzing the asylum applications, the study proceeds to examine the dataset regarding the annual approval of first-instance refugee status under the Geneva Convention for Iraqi asylum seekers in the same three countries (Figure 4.12). Given that Yazidis are recognized as a persecuted ethnic group by the United Nations, they are likely to receive asylum under the Geneva Convention. In the European Union context, refugee status is granted to:

⁴⁷ Eurostat, “Asylum applicants by type, citizenship, age, and sex”.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

“A third-country national who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group, is outside the country of nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country”.⁴⁹

Moreover, as underlined in the interview with Tara Clavel, Yazidis typically receive positive decisions in the first instance, making it pertinent to analyze these outcomes. However, once again, while the data appear consistent for Germany and Greece, they appear significantly lower and implausible in the Netherlands. In Germany, between 2015 and 2017 there were numerous positive decisions in the first instance for Iraqi applications, in particular 14,510 in 2015, 46,800 in 2016, and 24,320 in 2017. Subsequently, from 2018 to 2022, the number of positive decisions gradually decreased, averaging around 3,300 per year. Conversely, Greece initially saw minimal granting of refugee status in 2015 and 2016 (respectively 60 and 80) but experienced a gradual increase in positive decisions in the following years, with 1,260 in 2017 and 2,240 in 2018. In the period between 2019 and 2022, Greece saw an average of around 2,000 positive decisions annually, with a final peak of 5,135 first-instance refugee status granted to Iraqi individuals in 2023.⁵⁰

The Netherlands exhibited consistently low numbers of positive decisions for granting Geneva Convention refugee status to Iraqi asylum seekers throughout the whole period between 2015 and 2023, with an average of 80 per year. This discrepancy between the on-site research and the dataset raises questions about the presence of a significant Yazidi community in the country. A first valid hypothesis can be that data in the Netherlands are recorded differently compared to the other European countries, with Yazidis potentially receiving other types of international protections or not in the first instance but through subsequent appeals.⁵¹

A second hypothesis is that the low number of asylum approvals (but also of asylum applications as seen in *Figure 4.11*) of Iraqi individuals in the Netherlands can be elucidated through the lens of migrants' mental maps. Mental maps of migration refer to the cognitive representations or internalized perceptions that individuals or groups hold regarding migration patterns, processes, and destinations. These mental maps are shaped by a multitude of factors, including personal perspectives, social networks, and information sources. Yazidi migrants have specific ideas or images of particular destinations based on their mental maps, perceiving them as places full of opportunities or with desirable living conditions. However, it is important to note that mental maps do not always perfectly align with reality, accurately reflecting those countries' actual conditions or opportunities. In the case

⁴⁹ European Commission, “Definition of refugee”.

⁵⁰ Eurostat, “First instance decision on applications”.

⁵¹ Ibid.

of the Netherlands, despite being perceived as a potential destination by Yazidi migrants, the reality of the asylum approval rates suggests that the country may not offer the expected level of opportunities or support for asylum seekers from Iraq. Therefore, while mental maps provide valuable insights into migrants' perceptions and decision-making processes, it is essential to critically evaluate how these perceptions align with actual migration results and conditions in destination countries.⁵²

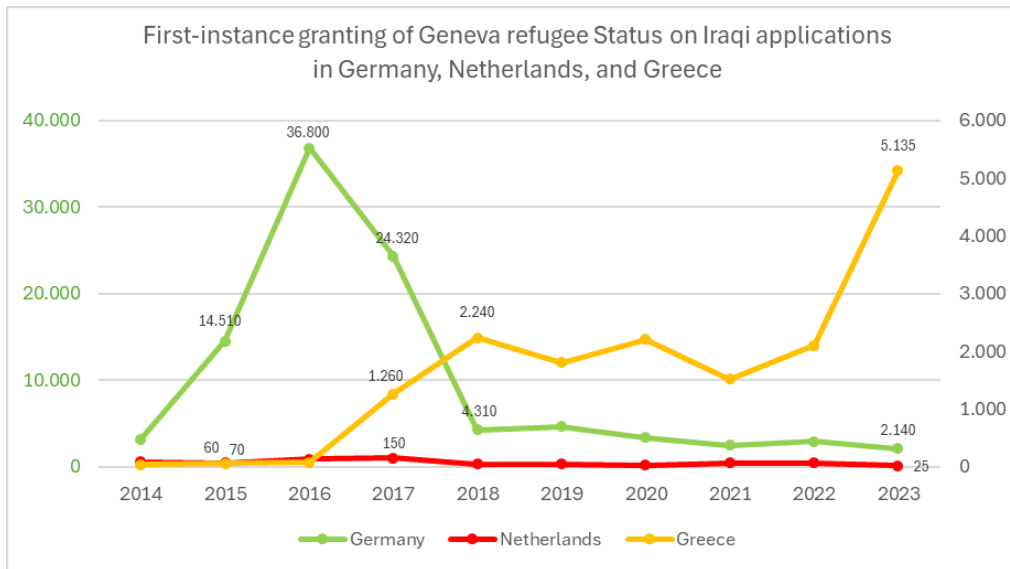


Figure 4.12: First-instance approvals of refugee status for Iraqis in Germany, Netherlands, and Greece. Source: My own elaboration of Eurostat data.

4.6 Understanding Yazidi Migration Through Networking Theory

As underlined above, before embarking on their journey, most Yazidis already have clearly in mind their sights set on Germany or the Netherlands, drawn by the promise of stability and opportunities for prosperity and security. Both countries are seen as offering favorable conditions for refugees, with robust economies, strong educational systems, and supportive integration programs. Moreover, existing networks of relatives, friends, and community members in these countries further facilitate the integration process for Yazidi migrants. Concluding, these countries are perceived by Yazidis as the most convenient for a combination of two factors: the best living conditions for good economic, employment, and education opportunities, and the presence of an already established Yazidi community.⁵³

Germany, with Hannover as the preferred city, followed by Berlin and Hamburg, has historically been the ideal destination for Yazidis. The Yazidi chain migration after 2014 was helped by the existence

⁵² Harzig, Hoerder, Gabaccia, “What is migration theory,” 79-82.

⁵³ Gray, “Interview 1”. Clavel, “Interview 2”. Conti, “Interview 3”.

of an already established diaspora in Germany, dating back to migrations from Turkey in the mid-20th century, as deeply illustrated in the first chapter of the thesis. Members of the diaspora, providing a supportive community and precedents of successful integration after escaping persecution, positively influenced Yazidi migration to Germany. The fact that other Yazidis who faced the same persecution some decades before were accepted and integrated into German society represented a factor in why the first Yazidis who fled Iraq after August 2014 tried to seek refuge there. ZÊD, the Central Yazidi Council in Germany, announced in 2019 that there were 230,000 Yazidis in Germany.⁵⁴ The presence of Yazidis has likely increased in the last five years. In contrast, the Netherlands, especially the cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam, has emerged as a newer destination of choice for Yazidis in recent years. This shift is attributed to perceptions within the community that family reunification procedures are more straightforward in the Netherlands compared to other European countries. Overall, the desire to settle in Germany or the Netherlands reflects Yazidis' aspirations for stability, security, and prosperity, as well as the presence of supportive networks.⁵⁵

About the networking system of Yazidis in Germany, especially in the city of Hannover, Rossana Conti explained:

“They want to go to Germany or the Netherlands because they have already connections, family ties, or friends there. For example, having a family member who is already settled there represents a pull factor. Yazidi community is huge especially in Hannover in Germany. I was talking to a guy who is leaving for Hannover in a couple of days, and he said that there is a part of Hannover that is entirely composed of Yazidis, a little Sinjar in Germany. They naturally go to these areas because they have a network there, other people in their community have already done this journey so it is easier for them to do it, and they have also someone who can help when they arrive. [...] I think having someone who can help you with information about the journey and once you arrive at your destination is naturally an important factor for everyone, but I definitely notice it represents a major factor for the Yazidi community, they need to have networking in the place they go. I worked with other nationalities before, and I noticed that a lot of people were actually on their own, and they also moved a lot before finding the final destination suitable for them. In contrast, Yazidis usually already know their final destination at the beginning of their journey”.⁵⁶

Even Tara Clavel underlined the importance of networking for Yazidis, highlighting, at the same time, how usually Germany or the Netherlands are perceived as safe havens for refugees. Still, sometimes they risk not meeting the expectations:

⁵⁴ Ali, “The Forced Displacement of Ethnic and Religious Minorities,” 83.

⁵⁵ Gray, “Interview 1”. Clavel, “Interview 2”. Conti, “Interview 3”.

⁵⁶ Conti, “Interview 3”.

“Germany has been for a very long time the destination Yazidis wanted to go with the idea that the community was already there, and this was true also for Afghan people. Hannover is a trendy destination for Yazidis because they have there other members of their families or friends, they consider the city a safe place to live. The Netherlands became a really popular destination for Yazidis recently, around one year or one year and a half ago. The reason is once again the presence of their community there, and also the good living conditions for refugees because the house is provided, the school system for children is good, and there is financial support as well. There is in general the idea that the financial support is very good, but, actually, the living cost is more expensive in the Netherlands so of course you are given more money. Sometimes I wonder whether people think about this. I think they chose Germany and the Netherlands as favorite destinations for a combination of two factors: community-based reasons and job and living possibilities. For a lot of people Germany or the Netherlands represent a dream, and I wonder how they really find them when they arrive and live there”.⁵⁷

As seen, relation networks have a big impact on shaping the post-genocide migration of Yazidis to Europe. The network theory seeks to explain how connections among actors, particularly with family members and employment opportunities, significantly shape migration decisions, both before and after their relocation. These networks, comprising interpersonal ties based on kinship, friendship, and community origins among former migrants, migrants, and non-migrants, facilitate the exchange of information. Typically, migrants rely on these networks to gather information about their destination, build social capital, and mitigate the risks associated with moving to a foreign country.⁵⁸

As more individuals migrate from one particular location to another, the network expands, reducing the costs and risks of migration and increasing the probability of further movement. This expansion perpetuates additional migration, leading to a self-reinforcing cycle. Over time, once networks have been established in a specific area, they can become the primary driver of migration, even though other determinants that affected the pioneers’ migration have lost their significance. Consequently, once formed, migrant networks operate somewhat independently of external factors, making it challenging for governments to control migration flows. However, certain immigration policies, such as family reunification programs, can strengthen migrant networks by granting members of kin networks special rights of entry. This further reinforces the influence of networks on migration patterns, highlighting the complex interplay between policy interventions and the dynamics of migrant networks.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Clavel, “Interview 2”.

⁵⁸ Bean and Brown, “Demographic Analyses of Immigration”, 72-73. Massey and others, “Theory of International Migration,” 448-450.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

The network theory, originally formulated for labor migration, extends its applicability to the asylum system, introducing the concept of the *asylum cycle*, proposed by Koser. This theory highlights the influence of networking across three key stages of the migration process: decision-making, destination selection, and adaptation in host societies. Usually, new migrants exploit social networks during each stage of the asylum cycle.⁶⁰

During the decision-making stage, social networks play a crucial role, with three main hypotheses guiding their impact: the affinity hypothesis states that the higher the density of the network of friends and relatives in the origin society, the lower the probability of migration; the information hypothesis focuses on the way that information about potential destinations provided by contacts abroad can promote further migration; and the facilitating hypothesis focuses on how networks can facilitate migration. These hypotheses can be applied to the Yazidi case, where decreasing densities of Yazidis in Iraq because of previous movements, information provided by contacts abroad, and previous successful migrations within the community facilitate new flows and influence migration decisions.⁶¹

In the second stage, networking significantly influences the choice of the final destination. For Yazidis, as widely described in the last paragraph, Germany and the Netherlands emerge as preferred destinations for a combination of factors: better prospects for employment and education, along with the presence of existing networks of acquaintances already settled there. In the third stage, networks continue to play a vital role in facilitating adaptation and integration in host societies. For Yazidis, they provide essential assistance with asylum applications, housing, employment advice, and long-term support for integration efforts.⁶²

Overall, networking remains a central aspect of the asylum cycle, shaping migration decisions and aiding migrants throughout their journey and settlement in host countries. While the network theory alone cannot fully explain Yazidi international migration, its application offers valuable insight into establishing stable migration patterns over space and time. These patterns reveal the emergence of distinct international migration systems characterized by a core receiving region and a network of specific sending countries connected by significant flows of immigrants.⁶³ In the context of the Yazidi community, this phenomenon is evident as large numbers of Yazidis, displaced from Sinjar and residing as IDPs in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, increasingly migrate to Germany, notably the city of Hannover, and the Netherlands, particularly Amsterdam and Rotterdam.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Koser, "Social Networks and the Asylum Cycle," 594-600.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 600-603.

⁶³ Massey and others, "Theory of International Migration," 454.

⁶⁴ Gray, "Interview 1". Clavel, "Interview 2". Conti, "Interview 3".

By recognizing the importance of broader socioeconomic and political factors shaping migration patterns, as well as personal agency, aspirations, and capabilities of individuals in choosing to migrate, the network theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the migration dynamics of the post-genocide Yazidi migration to Europe.

4.7 Conclusions

The chapter on post-genocide Yazidi migration deeply delves into the multifaceted journey of Yazidis seeking refuge in Europe from persecution and violence in Iraq. Sources utilized include personal field research in Serres, Greece, interviews with directors of the NGO Lifting Hands International managing the Serres camp, and data from organizations like IOM, UNHCR, and Eurostat. Despite estimating the number of Yazidis in Europe being challenging, and at times, the data may not align precisely with on-site research and interviews, these sources provide a suitable general overview of the phenomenon.

The chapter examines the intricate routes taken by Yazidis, detailing their passage from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to Turkey, Greece, and ultimately to northern European countries like Germany and the Netherlands. It reveals the informal methods employed by Yazidis, including engagement with smugglers and the reliance on networks, to navigate the dangerous journey to safety. Moreover, it explains the asylum process in Greece, shedding light on the challenges faced by Yazidis in their quest for international protection, despite their unique status as victims of genocide confers them a fast-track procedure for asylum. The research also reveals a diverse array of migration patterns within the Yazidi community, with some individuals embarking on the journey alone, leaving family members behind with the hope of applying for family reunification later, while others undertaking the journey as entire households, including children, with a prevalence of the last typology.

Subsequently, it analyzes the dataset comprising Iraqi asylum applications and refugee status approvals for Iraqis in Greece, Germany, and the Netherlands, the most significantly affected countries by Yazidi migration. Data align for Greece, showing how asylum applications and approvals increased from 2018 following the closure of the Balkan Route and the redirection of asylum seekers toward this country, and for Germany, the country with the highest number of asylum applications and approvals in the whole post-genocide era. Conversely, data in the Netherlands exhibit notably low and inconsistent figures, stemming probably from variations in the recording methods of asylum requests and approvals in the country, or because the migrants' mental maps concerning preferred destination countries do not always reflect reality.

Lastly, the chapter reveals the reasons behind Yazidis' preference for resettlement in specific European countries, emphasizing factors such as perceived opportunities for integration and the presence of pre-existing networks. The Yazidi migration is indeed analyzed through the theoretical framework of network theory, demonstrating how interpersonal connections and community networks significantly influence migration decisions and establish migration patterns. In conclusion, the chapter provides a comprehensive understanding of Yazidi migration to Europe, whose trajectories, dynamics, destination choices are characterized by the complex interplay of historical, socioeconomic, geopolitical, networking, and individual factors.

5 Conclusions

This thesis has provided a comprehensive exploration of the migratory dynamics of Yazidis, a minority ethnic and religious group of Iraq who began to leave the country after the ISIS genocidal campaign of 2014 to seek refuge in Europe, fulfilling the aim outlined in the introduction. Four main results have emerged from the study.

The first result consisted of the understanding of how historical, religious, socioeconomic, ethnic, and geopolitical factors have influenced Yazidi migration decisions. The first chapter has indeed provided an overview of the background of the Yazidi communities in the Middle East, underlying the multitude of challenges they have experienced, including persistent oppression by the Muslim majority, religious persecution, neglect of minority rights, and geopolitical instability. Throughout history, Yazidi communities have successfully employed numerous times mass migration as a strategy to escape persecution and annihilation, as evidenced by diasporas to safer regions like Georgia, Armenia, and Germany between the 19th and 20th centuries in response to various threats. Even in the case of the post-2014 migration to Europe, despite the last straw being represented by the arrival of the Islamic State in Iraq, the decision to migrate was further fueled by longstanding conditions of persecution, oppression, and insecurity in Iraq.

The second major finding underscored the profound impact of the ISIS genocidal campaign targeting the Yazidis of Sinjar, serving as the primary catalyst for displacement and following abandoning of Iraq. The second chapter has revealed the staggering scale of the massacre, with an estimated 2,000 to 5,500 lives lost, over 6,000 individuals captured, and more than 250,000 displaced from Sinjar in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in Kurdistan or refugee camps in neighboring countries. Consequently, the ISIS genocidal onslaught against Yazidis triggered a cascade of events that collectively compelled them to flee Iraq en masse.

The repercussions of the genocide translated into a multitude of factors driving Yazidi migration, constituting the third key result of the thesis. The harsh realities of life in IDP and refugee camps, compounded by the long-term displacement and inability to return to Sinjar due to complex political, security, and social dynamics, exerted immense pressure on Yazidis to seek refuge elsewhere. However, these factors alone do not fully explain Yazidi migration patterns because it is essential to consider the agency of individuals. The decision to migrate is thus shaped by the alignment or nonalignment between individuals' aspirations (safety, stability, opportunities, etc.) and capabilities (financial resources, education, social networks, legal rights, etc.). Those who possess the necessary

resources and opportunities to pursue their aspirations may be more likely to migrate, while those facing constraints or limitations may be less inclined to do so, remaining stranded in camps.

Finally, the fourth major finding offered insights into the trends, routes, strategies, and networks utilized by Yazidis to depart from Iraq and reach northern European countries. The fourth chapter has indeed given an understanding of the complexities faced by Yazidis during their journey to Europe, often relying on informal networks, smugglers, and dangerous strategies. The research revealed a diverse array of migration patterns within the Yazidi community, with some individuals embarking on the journey alone, leaving family members behind with the hope of applying for family reunification later, while others undertaking the journey as entire households, including children, with a prevalence of the last typology.

Furthermore, the chapter has offered a comprehensive overview of Yazidi migration trends in specific European countries, demonstrating how official data on asylum applications and refugee status approvals for Iraqi individuals correlate with on-site research for some countries and do not for others. Data align for Greece, showing how asylum applications and approvals increased from 2018 following the closure of the Balkan Route and the redirection of asylum seekers toward this country. Similarly, data align for Germany, a preferred destination for Yazidis since the previous century, which has witnessed the highest number of asylum applications and approvals in the whole post-genocide era. Conversely, data concerning Yazidis' aspiration to move to the Netherlands on a one hand and Iraqi asylum applications and refugee status approvals in the Netherlands on the other, exhibit notably low and inconsistent figures. This disparity may stem from variations in the recording methods of asylum requests and approvals in the Netherlands, or it may be attributed to the phenomenon where migrants' mental maps of preferred destination countries do not always align with reality. Lastly, the study has shown how Yazidis are drawn to specific European countries such as Germany and the Netherlands by a combination of three factors: perceptions of safety and security, access to better economic, education, and employment opportunities, and existing networks of family, friends, and community members already established in these destinations.

While the thesis has significantly advanced the understanding of the dynamics of post-2014 Yazidi migration to Europe, it has not been without limitations. A first limitation has arisen from the inability to directly interview Yazidi individuals residing in the Serres facilities due to ethical considerations and management restrictions. Instead, interviews were conducted with directors of Lifting Hands International, the NGO managing the Refugee Community Center, who have extensive experience working with Yazidi communities. While these interviews provided valuable insights into the experiences of Yazidis, they may have been influenced by subjective perspectives and interpretations

of the directors about the situation faced by Yazidi asylum seekers. A second challenge has been the difficulty of conducting quantitative analysis due to the limited availability of precise data on Yazidi migration patterns. Discerning Yazidi-specific trends within the broader Iraqi migration patterns and variations in data reporting across different countries has complicated the task of presenting a comprehensive overview of the migration trends. Despite challenges, interesting results have emerged, as underlined above.

Considering the multifaceted dimensions of Yazidi migration, it is evident that numerous avenues for future research exist to further deepen the understating of this complex phenomenon. Strictly connected to the topic of this study, two potential areas include investigating the integration experiences of Yazidi refugees in Germany and the Netherlands, including the role of Yazidi community networks, host communities, and government policies, and exploring the transnational networks and connections maintained between Yazidi communities in these host countries and the ones in Iraq, providing insights into the ongoing ties that shape their migration experiences. Furthermore, future research could adopt a gender perspective, exploring the gender-specific experiences of Yazidi men, women, and children in the context of migration, or a comparative approach, conducting comparative studies between Yazidi refugees and other refugee populations to identify similarities and differences in their migration experiences, trajectories, and coping strategies.

In conclusion, this thesis has shed light on the intricate dynamics of post-genocide Yazidi migration to Europe. Focusing on the experience of a marginalized community like the Yazidis, the study has highlighted the importance of amplifying the narratives of usually ignored minorities in migration studies. Additionally, by underlining the challenges faced by Yazidis during their movements, this study has contributed to a deeper understanding of the broader forced migration patterns and refugee crisis, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive and inclusive approaches to address the needs of forced displaced populations. Lastly, this research may serve as a call to action for policymakers and humanitarian organizations to prioritize finding sustainable solutions to enable forced displaced populations to reach safer places without dangers along their journey. This involves allowing the creation of legal pathways for resettlement and asylum, as well as strengthening international cooperation to ensure the protection of vulnerable communities like the Yazidis. By addressing these issues, it would be possible to work toward more fair and humane responses to the global refugee crisis, ultimately fostering greater stability, security, and dignity for all displaced populations.

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Annexes

Interviews' questions.

1. Can you please introduce yourself and describe the LHI Refugee Community Center?
2. What is the ethnic, gender, and age composition of people in the two refugee camps of Serres?
3. Do people usually arrive directly in the refugee camp of Serres or are moved from another camp and why do you think they choose Serres camp?
4. Focusing on the Yazidi community, did most of them live in refugee camps in Kurdistan before arriving in Greece? Where do usually Yazidis get to know about the possibility of migrating to Europe?
5. Do you think for Yazidis it is more important to go to a place where they know there are other members of their community compared to other communities?
6. In the last months, many people have been transferred to other camps around Greece. Do you know why this is happening and who took this decision?
7. Do individuals usually arrive as singles or with members of their family as a household?
8. Can you explain how the asylum procedure works in Greece?
9. When Yazidis are granted asylum in Greece, do the majority of them want to stay in Greece or go elsewhere in Europe?
10. Where are the most requested places for Yazidis and why do they choose these destinations?

Interview 1: Harvey Gray

Interview with Harvey Gray, Human Resources Director for Lifting Hands International, conducted on August 31st, 2023, at 1 p.m. in Serres, Greece.

1. I'm Harvey, I've been the Human Resources Director for the last three months, while before I was the Community Engagement Manager for a year. My role now concerns the recruitment and well-being of volunteers who work at the Community Center, while the role of Community Engagement before was the recruitment and well-being of community volunteers with a refugee background. The main goal of the project in Serres is to provide psychosocial support for people and a safe space in which they can develop skills they have and build new skills to become more resilient. It comprehends several different psychosocial support elements such as the Children-Friendly Space to create a positive environment for children, the Female-Friendly Space to develop the empowerment of women, the Art&Rec Program to promote skills and community building, and the Education Program focuses on providing a positive classroom experience, especially for people that have never had a positive classroom experience.
2. The camp management doesn't give the demographic of the camp to LHI. When I arrived in April 2022, the camp had around 300 people, 175 people from a Yazidi background, 50 Ukrainian people, 40 or so Afghan people, lots of pockets of different communities such as a few Syrians, and people from different parts of Africa such as Somalia. Now in the two camps, there are around 1500 people, among which around 1400 or more are Yazidis, 30-40 Ukrainians, small pockets of different communities from Africa, and a couple of Syrian families.
3. People tend to be dropped off by the smugglers near the refugee camp, everyone aims to come to Serres' refugee camp because it is known as a Yazidi majority camp, it has been this way for at least 10 years. Yazidi people wouldn't feel comfortable being a minority in a Muslim majority camp due to the genocide

and the prejudice they experienced back in Iraq. They want to come to this camp for many reasons, and one is of course family ties, but mostly just for safety.

4. My perception is that the majority of people since the genocide spent several years in refugee camps in Kurdistan. The young kids grew up there, and it's the only thing they know. Most Yazidi people are from Sinjar but have spent many years in Kurdistan. It feels that it is normal. Now Yazidis are less welcomed in Kurdistan, the Kurds don't want to pay any more for refugee camps for Yazidis, even if many people told me that their families are still there.
5. It's kind of human nature that you want to stay, and you feel safer, with people you identify with and understand more. I think in particular for Yazidis it's important to stay with their own community due to Yezidism which is an ethnicity and religion. You can't convert to Yezidism, you have to be born Yazidi. It was told to me that if the community is separated it's another genocide because they are not able to marry within their own community and they are not able to have Yazidi children, and ethnicity and religion die out.
6. I don't know who exactly took this decision, the camp manager said that it was not her. Essentially, last year in the summer there were so many Yazidi people that arrived at the camp and wanted to stay in this camp. This meant that for several weeks hundreds of people were sleeping outside the refugee camp with poor hygiene, it was not a safe situation, also because it was a stormy season. Everyone was sleeping outside, including women and children. In order to try to avoid this situation repeating, several people have been moved to other camps during the summer. People arrive more in summer because it is much safer to make the journey from Turkey to Greece through the forest during summer.
7. People usually start their journey from Turkey with other members of their community. Usually, they already know these people from Sinjar or Kurdistan, and, usually, they have a group, they don't do the journey alone. Generally, in other communities with which I worked were just men, but Yazidis are mixed. Some groups are just men, some groups are families and children. I saw both. The majority of community volunteers with whom I worked had families in Kurdistan they hoped to bring over. I would say that people who try to go to the Netherlands are seeking family reunification and are generally single men because it is easier to seek family reunification, while people who are going to Germany are usually a family group. They usually already have family members in Germany. Coming to Europe also for a single Yazidi man I think it's usually a family decision. Yazidis are a patriarchal society in which men have a great influence in the family decision-making. I think young men are sent because they are less vulnerable than women and children so they are sent first and then the family can apply for family reunification arriving with a more direct and less dangerous path than being smuggled from Turkey.
8. I understand the asylum process hearing from community volunteers, but I don't have a broad idea. My understanding is that Yazidis come here, they have to register their fingerprint, and then they apply for asylum. When I arrived, the process required a very long time, and it was not guaranteed that they get asylum. Then there was a campaign by the Yazidis, and now they automatically get asylum granted without an interview, while other nationalities have to do an interview and the process is much longer. Other communities have to wait years to get a decision, for Yazidi people, it is usually 3-6 months to get a decision, and then they wait another 3-4 months to get their passports and documents, and then they generally leave. There have been Yazidis who stayed in Serres for 5 years because their asylum was not processed, and it was not clear why. Now, these cases forgotten or deleted on purpose have been solved. I don't know any Yazidi who was rejected. I worked with other nationalities such as Moroccan people. It's quite unlikely that they get asylum because Morocco is considered a safe country. When they are rejected once, they can apply a second time, if they have another rejection, at this stage they are supposed to leave the country, but the majority of them don't and stay there illegally. This is very difficult because they live in a country in which they don't have rights, they can't apply for an official job, it's not a good situation. Yazidis apply for asylum in Greece, and then they want to go to Germany or the Netherlands so they must apply again for asylum there, and they have to prove that Greece was not a safe country for them. In this case, they have a double asylum. I'm not sure how successful is the second asylum, some people said they

were accepted, and some people rejected in Germany. Greece was not a safe country for them because they didn't have a dignified life, Greece is a racist country and there are no opportunities. This asylum process is probably harder than the one in Greece. When they have a Greek passport, they are entitled to move around Europe, but they are not supposed to relocate. Sometimes they are stopped by boarding police.

9. I've never met anyone who wanted to stay in Greece. I think it's true that Greece is not a safe country because of race prejudice and the opportunities are limited. It is limited what they can achieve, and what they hope for their children, especially in comparison with Germany, the Netherlands, or the UK.
10. The Yazidi people definitely are going to Hannover in Germany because their community is there. A lot of people are now going to the Netherlands because it is easier there to ask for family reunification. There is not a specific city in the Netherlands, they go there because of the opportunities. Elements are a better life for their children, children can go to school in a German classroom, opportunity to go to university, and have work opportunities. Mostly, people tell me that they want safety. Iraq was not a safe country for them, particularly for Yazidi communities, they are not necessarily seeking opportunities but just rest, safety, and the feeling of being secure.

Interview 2: Tara Clavel

Interview with Tara Clavel, Country Director for Lifting Hands International, conducted on September 1st, 2023, at 11 a.m. in Serres, Greece.

1. I'm the Country Director for LHI in Greece, I work remotely in Athens. I try to support the team in Serres with project development and management. I work with the team in the US trying to see what kinds of collaboration we can do, and then I work on the finance aspect. I have worked for LHI in Greece for five years. Before, I was field-based doing different kinds of activities in the camp in Serres. The Community Center in Serres is located next to the two refugee camps. The main goal is providing psychosocial support to the people of the camps, and it can take different shapes. We try to work in a community-based and lead environment. The activities are flexible and adjustable based on what we see but the main focus is on PSS not only on individuals but on the community as a whole, and material support for vulnerable people.
2. We don't have collaboration with the camp manager who doesn't allow us to share information. The information that the camp manager gives us is very little, unfortunately. At the moment, there are around 1500 people at the camp. Our impression is that there are around 100 people from a different nationality than Yazidi, while everyone else is Yazidi. From these 100, we assume around 30-40 are still Ukrainian, some Afghan people, some Syrian people, and some people from Sub-Saharan Africa such as Ethiopia, and Congo. But it's not so clear. At the moment, the camp is trying to be a family camp, so they try to keep families in the camp and send single men to other locations. A lot of new arrivals have been single men who came alone, sometimes men who left their families behind or have their families somewhere else. Over the years, I arrived in September 2018, and there was only one camp where there were around 500-600 people. Before that time, the camp was smaller with around 200-300 people, all Yazidis. From the start, the camp was built for Yazidis only. Starting in the fall of 2019, a lot of people arrived, and they actually had to send people to hotels in order to have enough space for everyone. That was a population that stayed in the camp for a long time, around 1 year and a half/2 years or even longer, it was a very stable population of around 600 Yazidis. In the summer of 2019, the second camp was built. At the start, it was also only Yazidis, so there were two camps for Yazidis. However, it became clear that there was the idea that the second camp could become mixed, and this happened at the start of 2021 because there were a lot of transfers from the islands to Serres of people of every nationality. What they did then was try to keep Camp 1 a Yazidi camp and Camp 2 a mixed camp. In Camp 2, there were mostly Afghan people but also other nationalities such as Syrians and Sub-Saharan Africans. What is clear is that spontaneous arrivals in

Serres are done only by Yazidis, while people of different nationalities are transferred for a government decision. This is also why over the last 2 years, the camps have been populated by a majority of Yazidi people again because they have arrived spontaneously. When the war in Ukraine started, there were also a lot of Ukrainians in the camps. This happened because there was a spot close to Serres where Ukrainians could come to register as refugees. There is a big Ukrainian community in Athens, and so many people had family members and friends and they could be welcomed in houses. But people who hadn't had family support were sent to Serres. They made Camp 2 empty, so the people of Camp 2 were transferred to Camp 1, and Camp 2 became only Ukrainian. During the first 6 months of the war, it was the moment in which there were more Ukrainians in the camp. Now a lot of people have decided to just go back to Ukraine, it's not an option for them to stay longer in Serres. The start of 2023 was the period in which the majority of people from Afghanistan received their papers, and so they left the camps. In the same period also Ukrainians starting to come back to Ukraine, and now, since September 2022, there are just spontaneous arrivals of Yazidis and no more a lot of transferring of other communities, even if there are some exceptions. Refugee camps in Greece. In the North of Greece, there are a lot of small camps with around 200-300 people. On the island, there are the bigger camps. The rumor is that the Greek government wants to close down the smaller camps and give shelter to people in big camps. Greek government points out four camps on the mainland that should be the bigger camps that host as many people as possible: Nea Kavala in the north, Diavata close to Thessaloniki, Malakasa and Ritsona next to Athens, and three hotspots in the islands in Lesbos, Samos, and Leros. Around these camps, they started to build walls, electric gates, and scan a card to enter. There was initially this idea, but, actually, the small camps around Greece are still open, so the process is probably now stuck. The project and these camps are financed by the European Union.

3. Yazidi people all come spontaneously to Serres with no exceptions, and it's because people they know in Serres. There is such a strong community, and it is known to be a good camp for Yazidis, so the message started to spread, and they came directly to Serres. It happened that the camp was empty enough to fill it with people of other communities, but over the years it happened just once in 2021 when there had been a lot of transfers from the islands to Serres. Besides that, there are just spontaneous arrivals of Yazidis. It happened other time the other way round because the camp was full so people had to be transferred to hotels or other camps in Greece. Before the camp in Serres existed, Yazidi people were sent to different refugee camps in Greece mixed with people from Afghanistan, Syria, and so on. There were some discriminations and incidents against the Yazidi community because, especially among Muslim communities, sometimes there was the belief that Yazidis were the impersonation of the devil, so they were discriminated even in the camps. This is also the reason why the government created the Yazidis-only camp. So probably it is both sides: there was discrimination coming from the other communities against the Yazidis so the camp was created, but also the fact that there is a camp just for Yazidis in which they can feel safe represents a pull factor. The presence of a big community with your own language, culture, religion, etc. being surrounded by people that you understand, you feel comfortable with is so important for all communities, and especially for a community that needs to feel safe after a genocide. In September 2021 there were a lot of new arrivals, and the camps were so full that couldn't take more people. There was a group of 200 people sleeping outside the camps and refusing to go to other camps. The camp manager said that there was a place for them in a different camp, but they refused. It took two or three weeks of sleeping outside to decide to go to a different camp. It is so important for them to stay with their community.
4. I think the path is from a camp in the North of Iraq to Turkey and then Greece. In 2018 when I arrived in Serres, we had a big group of Yazidi people arriving, while then the flows slowed down, until last year in 2021 when the flows increased again. What they told us is that there were arrests in Iraq, probably some people had the idea that they could stay there, but then there were tensions again with some groups of people including Yazidis, and so they decided to leave. My impression is that a lot of people who have arrived since 2021 were planning to stay in Iraq, but then after so many years they lived in refugee camps

and could not come back to their houses, they decided it was time to leave. On the contrary, for the group before it was different because they were fleeing from the genocide.

5. The presence of a big community with your own language, culture, religion, etc. being surrounded by people that you understand, you feel comfortable with is so important for all communities, and especially for a community that needs to feel safe after a genocide. In September 2021 there were a lot of new arrivals, and the camps were so full that couldn't take more people. There was a group of 200 people sleeping outside the camps and refusing to go to other camps. The camp manager said that there was a place for them in a different camp, but they refused. It took two or three weeks of sleeping outside to decide to go to a different camp. It is so important for them to stay with their community.
6. The camp manager made clear to me that this decision was taken by the Greek Ministry of Migration, and she just followed the rules. The reason why many people have been moved to other camps is because they needed to create space for new arrivals, and they didn't want to face the situation of September 2021. Last year, I had the feeling that they were not prepared to take many people to the camp. This year there were rumors from the community members since March that once the weather became better, a lot of people would come. Also the camp manager heard this news, and so they made a plan to deal with this situation and moved several people to other camps. Summer is the best period to take the journey, so a lot of new arrivals are in summer. All the migration flows increase during the summer period, it's a pattern not only for Yazidis but for the majority of flows.
7. I think on average most people who come are men. There are male groups, usually, they are family groups like cousins. There are also family units coming, for example, mum, dad, and children, but on average men are coming. I've heard people saying that their family is still back in Iraq. I don't know the average, but I can imagine that there is also a financial question because coming to Europe is not cheap. I see both ways, so people come together with their families and people who have still relatives in Iraq. There are also cases in which children or minors arrive alone.
8. How the asylum procedure works for Yazidi people is different than everyone else because they are officially considered victims of genocide by the United Nations. When you arrive in Greece, you go to a police station, get registered with your fingerprint, and get a temporary paper. This is already a difficult step sometimes because some police stations are not collaborative. After the registration, you are sent to a camp for official registration, and on the mainland, the two camps for registration are Malakasa close to Athens, and Diavata close to Thessaloniki. The idea is that in one of these camps, you get an appointment for an interview. There are two interviews: in the first, you have basically to show why you left Turkey, and, if you pass the first, there is the second in which you have to prove why you are a refugee. We see that the first interview is the moment in which a lot of Syrians are stuck and receive rejection because they are not able to prove that they are not safe in Turkey. Afghan people are sometimes stuck after the first or second interview. On the contrary, it is easier for Kurdish people to pass the first interview because it is clearer that Kurds in Turkey are not safe. After the second interview, you need to wait. It can take a very long time to receive a decision, but Yazidi people have a fast track, and it takes less time for them. Then it happens that on your first try, you can get asylum. If you get asylum, you can apply for a passport, and, then, when they have their travel documents, actually a lot of people leave Greece and apply again for asylum somewhere else in Europe. To have the travel documents usually you have to wait from 3 months to one year. There is also the chance that your asylum request is rejected. If you are rejected the first time, you can appeal, and apply again. If you are rejected twice, you can appeal a third time but now you must go to the court and find a lawyer who can support you, and this is a part in which some people don't have the financial means to do this. The Greek government would like to make a change in this part of the procedure to make it faster because it doesn't make sense for people to wait so long. With the Yazidi people, there is a difference. They usually arrive directly at Serres camp, and they are sent to the police station to make the registration with their fingerprint, then they come back to Serres camp and are hosted there. Before it was different because the Serres camp management made an appointment for them in Diavata camp, they were often sent there for around one week for the official registration and the

interviews, and then they came back to Serres and waited for the decision. Now it is different because they don't have to do any more interviews, the Greek government makes clear that Yazidis are refugees. The asylum procedure is quite easy for them compared to other nationalities, and they receive always asylum, or at least in 99% of the cases. In Serres, the procedure is easier compared for example to Athens. There, it is difficult even to enter the first step because the police doesn't want to give you the police registration documents, then they are said that you have to make an online appointment by yourself to register in one of the camps, but then the system was out for many months, and so it was very complicated for people to find a camp which allowed them to host them. So even the first part of the procedure is difficult sometimes. I know an Afghan guy who arrived in Greece in 2015, and he is still waiting for his documents because they spelled his name in the wrong way. When I work in Athens, sometimes minors arrive and tell me that they don't know where to go because there are no camps that accept them. So, in this sense, Yazidis are lucky because there are not these kinds of problems for them. If you arrive on the islands, the procedure is similar to Serres because you are registered directly in that camp, and then moved to the mainland by the authorities. If your asylum application is rejected three times, you are supposed to be deported, but, actually, I've never heard of anyone being deported. Usually, these people just end up on the streets or staying illegally in Greece. In Athens and Thessaloniki, the police know that there are areas in which there are a lot of illegal people without papers, they do regular checks, and, if they find people without papers, they bring them to detention camps, but a very minority of people are deported. Other people just try spontaneously to walk to other European Union countries and ask again asylum there. Recently, a lot of Afghan people got their rejections and decided to walk and try that way.

9. When they have their travel documents, they can move wherever they want in the Schengen Area. They can be away from Greece for three months every six months, and then they are supposed to come back. What you see usually is that people pretend to come back but they don't. There are a couple of countries that are now aware that Greece is not providing the basic needs for recognized refugees, so they are not allowed to send people back to Greece as the Dublin Regulation would impose. The Netherlands is one of these countries. The Court in the Netherlands said that the country can't send them back to Greece because food, houses, and schools for children are not provided so it's not a safe country for recognized refugees. This means that people can apply for asylum again in the Netherlands, and they do the same process again, and probably the procedure is even longer than in Greece. In Germany I think it's the same, Germany doesn't send people back. Also Switzerland and Belgium have similar rules. In this sense, Italy and Greece are facing big flows of migrants arriving, and they are not able to provide the basic needs, so the Courts of these countries say that it is not possible to send the recognized refugees back.
10. Germany was for a very long time the destination Yazidis wanted to go with the idea that the community was already there, and this was true also for Afghan people. Hannover is a very popular destination for Yazidis because they have there other members of their families or friends, they consider the city a safe place to live. The Netherlands became a really popular destination for Yazidis recently, around one year or one year and a half ago. The reason is once again the presence of their community there, and also the good living conditions for refugees because the house is provided, the school system for children is good, and there is financial support as well. There is in general the idea that the financial support is very good, but, actually, living cost is more expensive in the Netherlands so of course you are given more money. Sometimes I wonder whether people think about this. I think they chose Germany and the Netherlands as favorite destinations for a combination of the two factors: community-based reasons and job and living possibilities. When they arrive in the new country, the process for receiving asylum is once again very long. It also takes a long time before people are settled in and can start to work and integrate into society. For a lot of people Germany or the Netherlands represent a dream, and I wonder how they really find them when they arrive and live there.

Interview 3: Rossana Conti

Interview with Rossana Conti, Director of Research and Development for Lifting Hands International, conducted on September 2nd, 2023, at 1 p.m. in Serres, Greece.

1. I'm the Director of Research and Development for LHI, and I started three months ago. Before this, I was the Art&Rec Manager at the Community Center for a year, so I have been working for LHI since April 2022.
2. There are two camps in Serres. When I arrived in April 2022 and for the summer, there used to be a majority of Yazidis, however, the second camp used to be more mixed. Around May 2022, several Ukrainian families moved into the second camp, there were some Afghan families, and different African residents from Eritrea, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Right now, there are only a couple of Afghan people left, very few Ukrainian families, two families of Syrians, and a few African groups, so right now it has become a lot more Yazidis' again. In the past, the first camp was built only for Yazidis because of their high level of vulnerability due to the genocide and to prevent internal tensions in the camps because they were persecuted in Iraq by some Arab groups and also in other refugee camps around Greece. The idea was to have a very homogenous camp. The first camp I think was built in 2016, while the second camp was opened in 2019, and it became more mixed, but, from my understanding, also the second camp was for people and families with a high level of vulnerability, even if not Yazidis, such as single parents or people with vulnerabilities to protect them. At the moment, there is a large majority of Yazidis with a lot of new arrivals registered. Last summer in 2022, at the end of August and beginning of September, there were a large number of arrivals. After that, there have been different flows of arrivals with an increase during the summer of 2023, all Yazidis. People arrive more during summer because it is easier to make the journey during summer, and the network that informally brings them to Greece is more active during the summer. A lot of people usually spend a long time in Turkey before coming, and, in general, summer is the best period to cross the border. Generally, the only time we heard someone was left outside was when they arrived on Saturday night or Sunday night because the police office for their registration and fingerprint was closed. Things change really fast in Serres, even in just a year, the demographics have changed, the number of people have changed, etc. For example, in winter usually the average of people in the two camps is between 600 and 800, while right now there are more than 1500 people which is the maximum capacity of the two camps. They used to have a gym in the camp or a sort of communal kitchen, but right now it is used to host people, so definitely in summer months the capacity grows, and some areas are used to host people. In winter, never less than 600 people. There are rumors that they are going to extend the camp and create a third camp because they are sending people to different camps to create space for new arrivals, but if they have more capacity, it is better for the Yazidis. Something that dramatically changed has been the management of the camp. It has been managed by IOM since March 2022, then they left the camp, and today the camp is managed directly by the government. All the decisions implemented in the camp are taken by the Greek Ministry of Migration. This change of management impacted LHI a lot because, in the past, LHI could refer people inside the camp, while now it's not possible. For example, if someone disclosed at the Community Center that was a victim of domestic violence, or we saw a child with a sign of abuse or someone with mental health problems, in these cases we could report to IOM, and we knew that there were doctors, social workers, and psychologists active in the camp who could help them. Now, we barely have communication with the camp management, it is not clear if there are some social workers active in the camp, and, in the case, there are, we don't have any contact with them. We asked to collaborate with the camp management, but they refused. We don't know what kind of medical or psychological support people receive in the camp. It is also hard to understand which kind of medical assistance they have in the camp because some people talk about a doctor being in the camp, other people talk about nurses being there, and most of the people talk about assistance in the morning and early afternoon but not the whole day. It is so difficult for us to give people any advice because

we don't know which kind of assistance they have in the camp. We also heard that the doctor doesn't have any translators, so it is challenging for people to have assistance with privacy and confidentiality because they don't want people in their community to know about their diseases. Especially for more vulnerable people, because they are in such a close community, it is difficult to have a certain degree of privacy. I don't know why IOM left, it was part of a national plan of migration. IOM left a lot of camps on the mainland in Greece. This plan included other procedures, for example, now there is a different platform for applying for asylum, and there is in general more control by the government.

3. When they arrive in Greece, their destination is usually directly Serres. The reason why they came here directly is because the camp was built for the Yazidi community, and it's a journey that a lot of members of the community have done in the last 9 years. Yazidi community is a very close community, they can marry just with other Yazidis, so it makes sense that they reach their family members and friends. Even people who don't have relatives or friends in Serres know that there is a community support network.
4. Everyone fled Sinjar, it was the area in Iraq where they lived. A lot of the children grew up in a refugee camp; they have very huge refugee camps in Kurdistan just for Yazidis. There are kind of little refugee towns for Yazidis where they have lived since 2014, the year of the genocide by ISIS. People usually get to know about the possibility of coming to Europe from friends or members of the family that have already done the journey. Life in these refugee camps is not good, they take the journey for a better life, education, work, and safety. A lot of people mentioned safety; there have been some tensions with Kurds because they generally say that they don't feel safe anymore there. There was research in the Community Center asking "What a good life means to you?" and a lot of them said that already being in Serres and being safe for them was a good life.
5. I think it is naturally an important factor for everyone, but I definitely notice it represents a major factor for the Yazidi community, they need to have networking in the place they go. I worked with other nationalities before, and I noticed that a lot of people were actually on their own, and they also moved a lot before finding the final destination suitable for them. Also because usually, it is usually easier for Yazidis to receive a positive decision after their asylum request compared to other nationalities; usually other nationalities are not able to enter the asylum procedure very soon, and it's difficult for them to find a place where they can formalize their refugee status, or they ask for but don't receive asylum so they end up staying "illegally" in Greece. On the contrary, in Greece all Yazidis receive asylum. Yazidis have also today a different asylum process than the others, they don't have to do any interviews, and they have a fast-track process. In the past, some of them used to stay in Serres also four years, while now in six months or a maximum of one year, they receive their asylum in Greece. I would say that in Greece 100% of Yazidis receive asylum, or at least more than 95%. Even people who have been in Serres for a very long time because there were some difficulties in the asylum request, for example, they had a connection with the Iraqi government or other reasons, in the end, receive asylum as refugee status.
6. A different dynamic compared to the previous year, because of the high number of arrivals, people in the camps are being transferred to other camps, it is a very difficult dynamic because the Yazidi community is very tied, and people live these transfers as sort of second genocide, it represents a trauma. The Greek Government took this decision to prevent the emergency situation in September 2022, when people were sleeping outside the camps for a few weeks because the camps were full and there was no space for them. The hygienic conditions weren't good, and there was a lot of scabies. There have been people sleeping outside also during this summer, the camp management explained to us that these people decided to come back to the camp in Serres after being assigned to a different camp, and for this reason, they couldn't allow them to go inside the camp because then it would have been created a dynamic in which people could actually decide their location, so it was dangerous. In the end, after being outside for a week, this group went back to the camps they were assigned.
7. Thinking about men who come to Serres, I think most of them arrive with a member of their family. Generally, they usually have some family members with them. Sometimes, I know a man in Art&Rec, and then I discover that his wife is in FFS or children in CFS, and I didn't know it before. Usually, there are

some members of their extended family such as a cousin. Some men told me that they have their family back in Iraq, and they moved first, did the trip earlier for security reasons, and then maybe applied for family reunification in Germany or in the Netherlands, which is a very long process that takes years. So it happens that men do the journey before leaving behind other members of the family. One of the community volunteers told me yesterday the contrary: he stayed behind in Iraq, while his mother and wife did the journey before, and he hadn't seen his family for 8 years. But he finally received his travel documents to go to Hannover. So, there is a bit of both, alone men who take the travel with some members of the extended family and leave behind other members hoping for family reunification, and some men who come with the whole family. It depends very much on the age because we work with several young men but also with adults. After all, Art&Rec works with people from 13 to 70 or more years old. The younger men have more motivation to study, have a better life, and work according to their studies because some of them already have a university education. They don't feel that in Greece it's possible to feel their ambitions, so they move to Northern Europe in general, especially Germany or the Netherlands, because they can go to school or university, and they can have a better future. Of course, they want also safety, and connection with their community or some member of their family or friends who is already there and can help them to settle. We don't have contact with them when they leave Serres, so we don't know what actually happens to them when they arrive in the Netherlands or Germany. We don't want to create false expectations about the life they will have there. Also because, technically, when they travel from Greece to the North of Europe, they are doing something illegal because what they do is use their Greek passport to travel (they can travel for 3 months in the Schengen Area), but then, once they get in Germany or the Netherlands, they apply for asylum again there, and they have to prove that Greece was not safe for them. Then, the process starts again, they need a lawyer, and it is long. To prove that Greece was not safe, probably they say that they were not able to sustain themselves in Greece or feel marginalized, but I'm not sure about the motivation they give. In the beginning, in Germany they used to be hosted in a sort of refugee camp until their asylum application was processed, now it's different. There is a community volunteer who contacted me after leaving Serres saying that his asylum request in Germany was refused which was a little bit shocking. In the large spectrum of migration, for the Yazidi community, it is easier, but it is still full of uncertainties. It's hard to tell if they will be able to get the job they dream of or integrate and be part of society. Several of them are forced to join the informal sector. Someone mentioned to me that sometimes also traveling to the North of Europe is hard because there are policemen in the airport, and, if they find out that they are flying from Greece, they are kind of pushed back by the police. I don't remember if they say that traveling to Germany or the Netherlands is trickier because of the pushing back, so they fly to one or the other to avoid it, but they are aware of the possibility of being pushed back. I'm not sure about how often it happens. From what I understood, it happens that sometimes police push back everyone who is not from the European Union, so in this group also Yazidis are pushed back, rather than being specifically targeted. I heard from other NGOs working in Germany that Germany is quite welcoming to the Yazidi community, there are cities with big communities, and I think they can quite integrate into the society. I'm not sure about the Netherlands. The city with the biggest community in Germany is Hannover, but also Hamburg and Berlin. In the Netherlands, the cities are Amsterdam and Rotterdam.

8. They have to register and do the fingerprint at the police station. Then they are sent to one of the two closer registration camps of the mainland that are Filakio in the North of Greece or Diavata close to Thessaloniki (the other is Malakasa near Athens). Generally, they spend around a week in one of these camps in which they officially request asylum in Greece, and then they get a document called "Aushvies" which is a temporary ID card, and it proves that their asylum is being processed.
9. No one wants to stay in Greece after having received the asylum. Actually, many mentioned that they are not unhappy in Greece, several can speak Greece, they have their friends, kids go to school, and they are connected to the place, but in general in Serres, I haven't heard anyone who wants to stay, maybe in Athens it is different. They don't think about building a life in Greece, they see Greece as a transit place.

10. I have the same impression also about their final destination. They want to go to Germany or to the Netherlands because they have already connections, family ties, or friends there. For example, having a family member who is already settled there represents a pull factor. Yazidi community is huge especially in Hannover in Germany. I was talking to a guy who is leaving for Hannover in a couple of days, and he said that there is a part of Hannover that is entirely Yazidi, a little Sinjar in Germany. They naturally go to these areas because they have a network there, other people in their community have already done this journey so it is easier for them, and they have also someone who can help them when they arrive. Regarding the job aspect, while they are in Serres, most of them work in the informal sector; the camp management knows for sure about this because many told me that the farmers go outside the camp to recruit workers. Regarding the freedom of movement, I think they are allowed to leave the camp without justifying where they are going. They have to show their ID card, and they can go. I'm not sure if there are opening hours and a time in which they have to be back.