

Refugees in Limbo

An Update on the Yazidi People

In north-western Iraq, the city of Sinjar once served as a haven for peaceful followers of the Yazidi religion. In August of 2014, ISIS attacked the Yazidis in what the UN Human Rights Panel officially declared a genocide. Now, 70 percent of the previous population remains displaced. Yazidi homes, holy sites, and temples were tragically destroyed.

Almost a decade after this genocide, ISIS's caliphate has collapsed; the Yazidi community, however, is still navigating the aftermath. Because of competing armed groups and a lack of legitimacy in local government, Sinjar is not safe for the return of displaced Yazidis. Many Yazidis hang on to hope of reuniting with family in Sinjar and do not want to migrate elsewhere. Sadly, the Yazidi people have become refugees in limbo seeking justice, familial reunions, and a chance to rebuild their community.

Who are the Yazidi people?

As one of the Middle East's minority religions, there are between 200,000 and 1,000,000 adherents to Yezidism scattered worldwide. Regarded by adherents as both a religious tradition and an ethnicity, Yezidism is organized with a chief Sheikh

as the supreme religious head and an Emir (similar to a prince) as the secular head. Most Yazidis speak Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish), though some Yazidi people predominantly speak Arabic.

What do they believe?

Yazidis believe that they descended from Adam, but not from Eve. They do not, however, reject that Eve is the mother of the rest of humanity; they just believe that their people were created separately, namely through Adam's son, Shehid bin Jer. Seen as the ancestor to the Yazidis, Shehid bin Jer is said to be from Adam's seed exclusively, not from procreation. Because of this lineage, Yazidi people do not marry outsiders. This is part of the reason why co-existence is important to the Yazidis.

Similarly, Yezidism does not have a printed book of scripture; instead, their divine law and doctrine is exclusively passed down orally, which is why the practice of passing hymns generationally is so integral to their belief system. Living in close proximity is also essential for this reason.

Yezidism incorporates elements of ancient Persian religions, Christianity, and Islam. Adherents





pray upwards of five times a day, but instead of facing Mecca like Muslim adherents do, Yazidis pray facing the sun. This, the Polar Star, is seen as an immovable and unchanging source of light in the world's darkness; the universe is believed to revolve around the sun.

Yezidism is a monotheistic religion that believes in God as the supreme deity. The Yazidi people believe that God interacts with us through seven angels. One of these angels is Melek Taüs: the peacock angel. In Yezidism, Melek Taüs convinced Adam to leave the garden of Eden. Due to the Judeo-Christian belief that the devil tricked Adam, this angel has been

widely misconstrued as the devil and the Yazidi people as devil worshippers. Ironically, Yezidism fully rejects the concept of the devil or hell, avoiding any mentions of the name or similar sounding words. This misunderstanding, however, is the basis for much of the persecution that the Yazidi people endure. Because of the Yazidi's strong commitment to their faith, and their reluctance to convert to Islam, Al-Qaeda determined that the Yazidi people were a threat to ISIS.

How were they displaced?

ISIS attacked the Yazidi people in August of 2014. By August 3rd, 2014, ISIS had Sinjar under total control. Soon after, ISIS began capturing and separating Yazidi families. Men and boys were forced to either convert to Islam or face execution. Women and girls were abused and sold into sexual slavery.

Some Yazidis who managed to escape the killings and kidnappings fled to Mount Sinjar where they lived without food, water, or medical attention. These people found themselves trapped on a mountain—many Yazidi men, women, and children died in the excruciating Iraqi heat. Iraqi, American, British, and French military helicopters tried to help the Yazidi people by dropping aid onto Mount Sinjar. The United States even



Ruined photo from a destroyed home in Sinjar following the war with the Islamic State.



launched a series of targeted airstrikes to help give the Yazidi people a safe path off of the mountain. Then, the Peshmerga (Iraqi Kurdish military force) and the Syrian Kurdish security force established a path through which the Yazidi people could pass into Syria.

Since this attack in 2014, around 5,000 Yazidi people have been killed by ISIS, and an additional 3,000 remain slaves. The rest of the displaced Yazidi people escaped, either to Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps or to other nations.

What can be done?

The survivors of the 2014 genocide largely reside in IDPs. There, they live in parking-spot-sized tents with only a thin layer of PVC separating them from the dirt. Meeting the basic survival needs of the Yazidi people requires constant humanitarian intervention by United Nations organizations and the governments of other countries. This is simply not a sustainable living option.

As time progresses, the possibility for the displaced Yazidi people to return home is diminishing rapidly. Instead, Sinjar increasingly finds itself at the violent center of Iraq-Turkey conflicts as the Kurdish Regional Government and the Iraqi federal government disagree on who governs it.

For the few Yazidis who have returned home to Sinjar, life is still neither easy nor safe. They are struggling to access education and necessities such as healthcare, reliable electricity, and running water. Reconstruction in Sinjar is slowed largely by complicated power struggles. Hopes for progress, return, and stability are diminishing as time passes.

Thus, the Yazidi people have been living in limbo for ten years, and still very few people internationally are aware of ISIS's attack on the Yazidis or their long-term

IDP status. Donating to Lifting Hands International or spreading awareness for the Yazidis may help them reunite with family members and rebuild community in Sinjar or another safe location. The international community ought to recognize the human rights violations taking place in these living conditions. We must create legal frameworks to prevent these violations from occurring in the future. The Yazidis need to feel seen, heard, and, most of all, helped during this extended time of crisis.

— Lia King

Resources:

- <https://scholarship.law.nd.edu/ndjcl/vol13/iss2/5/>
- <https://www.lhi.org/stories/2022/10/27/beneficiary-spotlight-the-yazidi-people>
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Yazidi>
- <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/yazidis-decade-after-isis-genocidal-campaign/>
- <https://www.stephen-shoemaker.com/102/texts/yezidi.htm>



