

In Search of the Holy Light: Survival and Resistance among Yazidi People After the ISIS Invasion of Mosul Area

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A Yazidi refugee man and his daughter looking at the Lalish Valley in a late afternoon. Many Yazidi did not have the chance to escape from the hands of ISIS.

The Yazidis are an ethno-religious Kurdish minority in Northern Mesopotamia, mainly living in Northern Iraq and in the Shingal mountains of the Mosul area.¹ Their religion, Yazidisim (or Ezdiyatî), is rooted in ancient Mesopotamian pagan beliefs and combines aspects and rituals of Zoroastrianism, Islam, Christianity and Judaism.² Their total population is around half a million. They have lived in the Kurdish regions of Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Armenia throughout history. However, most of the Yazidi population in Turkey, Syria and Armenia have migrated

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¹ Birgul Acikyildiz, *The Yezidis: The History of a Community, Culture and Religion* (IB Tauris 2010).

² Eszter Spät, *Late Antique Motifs in Yezidi Oral Tradition* (Gorgias Press 2010).

to Europe (especially Germany and Sweden) due to having been subjected to various massacres, political violence, discrimination and assimilation policies throughout their history.³ The most recent massacre took place when the so called Islamic State (ISIS) invaded Mosul and the surrounding areas in 2014. During the invasion, thousands of Yazidis were massacred, women were enslaved and tens of thousands fled to other cities in Iraq as well as Turkey and Europe.⁴



A depiction of Lalish Valley; amulets and names drawn on the picture with the hope of good fortune. As a very ritualistic system of belief, Yazidism gives a particular importance to wish making and amulets.

The Islamic State invasion of Mosul should be contextualized in the long history and the colonial legacy of what is now Iraq, and the subsequent Ba'athist regime's segregationist policies, which fragmented society along sectarian lines and led to an increasing ethno-religious conflict in the 20th century. Western interventions have deepened the sectarian divide in the country and caused more violent forms of Islamist extremism among the diverse

³ Philip G. Kreyenbroek et al, *Yezidism in Europe: Different Generations Speak about their Religion* (Harrossowitz 2009).

⁴ UN News Centre 'UN Human Rights Panel Concludes ISIL is Committing Genocide against Yazidis' (16 June 2016) <<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=54247#.WSMPuFKZNP>> accessed 22 May 2017; Patrick Wintour 'UN Condemns Isis Genocide against Yazidis in Iraq and Syria' The Guardian (16 June 2016) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/16/un-condemns-isis-genocide-against-yazidis-in-iraq-and-syria>> accessed 22 May 2017.

components of the population.⁵ The formation of the Islamic State was an outcome of this historical trajectory,⁶ and led to the most radical form of extremism and violence not only in the Middle East, but also in Africa and Europe. However, the impact and consequences of the Islamic State's invasion of the Yazidi populated areas have not yet been well documented nor studied. Hence the available scholarship falls short of observing and analysing the everyday dimension of war on minorities.



A Yazidi child is tied to a tree by his mother. Like this child, many Yazidi children were born with mental health issues following the recent massacres.



Yazidi Refugee children.

⁵ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (CUP 2007).

⁶ Patrick Cockburn, *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the new Sunni Revolution* (Verso 2015).

Keeping this background in mind, I visited Lalish Valley in Dohuk Province of Iraqi Kurdistan in the spring of 2016 for a documentary film project. As a documentarian and a scholar working on Islamist extremism in the Middle East⁷ based at the International State Crime Initiative⁸ (ISCI) at Queen Mary University of London, my aim was to document the everyday life of Yazidi people who have sought refuge in their most sacred valley of Lalish after the ISIS invasion. My main goal was to acquire a deeper comparative understanding of the consequences of violence, Islamist extremism and war⁹ on the lives of minorities and the way in which the victims develop survival strategies. Inspired by state crime scholarship, which emphasises the involvement of state and state agencies in war crimes,¹⁰ I especially focused on how state and non-state actors have operated during the last few years and the impact of their policies and strategies on minorities such as the Yazidis.



Leisure time for a Yazidi family in a late afternoon; Leisure time for Yazidi girls.



A man and his two wives.

⁷ See further Mehmet Kurt, *Kurdish Hizbullah in Turkey: Islamism, Violence and the State* (Pluto Press 2017).

⁸ See International State Crime Initiative <<http://www.statecrime.org/>> accessed May 16 2017.

⁹ Randy Borum, 'Radicalisation into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories' (2011) 4(4) *Journal of Strategic Security* 7.

¹⁰ Penny Green and Tony Ward, *State Crime: Governments, Violence and Corruption* (Pluto Press 2004).

The day I arrived with a small documentary crew, local people informed me about the security conditions of the Lalish Valley, only 10 kilometres away from the territory invaded by ISIS. That same day, ISIS had attempted to besiege the nearby Christian town of Teleskof, which resulted in tens of deaths and air strikes causing destruction in the area.



A Yazidi man waiting for his dinner on his balcony.



A Yazidi woman giving her blessing to one of the many holy shrines in Lalish; Yazidis stand and show their respect to the distributed candles and light of god.

Despite the danger and possibility of a mass slaughter, Yazidi people in the Lalish Valley seemed at peace, practising their highly ritualistic beliefs, blessing the Sheikh Adi Shrine and numerous others located in every corner of the small valley. Being amazed at the humanistic and naturalistic aspect of this minority religion, I realized how communal religious rituals could support the wellbeing and recovering of traumatized people. In the Lalish Yazidi's case, religious rituals are providing a common ground and a narrative to cope with the

ongoing conflict. Most of the Yazidis whom I interviewed expressed the view that the ongoing conflict was a continuation of a broader narrative, framing the current slaughter as the 72nd in the Yazidi history and clearly indicating that this was perpetrated on them due to their beliefs and minority situation. The Yazidis, as my interviewees expressed, have a long history of massacres perpetrated by regional dynasties, empires and states. As a result, the Yazidis, as a small ethno-religious minority, are dispersed all around the world and their long suffering has become the main component of their belonging and identity.



Voluntary servants of Lalish. They clean all streets before the evening sermons. This service is considered as one of the most important task for an ordinary Yazidi. This ritualistic cleaning takes place every afternoon, right before the distribution of candles. The main idea behind this ritual is to keep Yazidi God's, Xwedê, blessing on earth and protect living creatures from the darkness of the night.



Servants of Lalish taking a break from street cleaning.



Distributor of light. Light and sun represent the holiness of the Yazidi god. A middle-aged man distributes 365 candles to all corners of Lalish and blesses the valley every day during the year.



The distributor of the holy light.

However, practising religious rituals is not the only way for them to cope with the consequences of the violence. Yazidis have adopted a more politicised discourse and started to organize resistance and protection units around their towns and villages to fight against ISIS. Many of the Yazidi refugees in the Lalish Valley told me how their Muslim Arab neighbours joined the Islamic State's forces and participated in murdering and enslaving Yazidi women. This has deeply affected intercommunal relations, as complicity and collaboration in crime have jeopardised the possibility of a peaceful coexistence.



A Yazidi mother and her two year old child, who was born two days before the ISIS invasion of the Shingal Mountain. The woman has lost most of her relatives and some of them were slaughtered in front of her eyes. Her husband committed suicide after seeing his brother being beheaded. She told me of the nightmares that she has every single night.

The conflict and resistance have also attenuated the strict stratification of the Yazidi society, which does not normally allow any transition or marriage between Pîr, Sheikh and Murîds.¹¹ Moreover, traditional gender roles have been questioned, as many Yazidi women have participated in the armed unit to fight against ISIS.

I have photographed and produced a documentary film on the human conditions of Yazidi refugees during my visit,¹² hoping that through these projects the unheard voice of Yazidi people may arouse the attention of the international community and human rights organisations.

¹¹ Pîr meaning old and/or wise person and is the highest level in Yazidi society. Sheikh is the second highest stature in the Yazidi community. Murîd means follower and it is the lowest level among Yazidis. Most of the Yazidis are Murîd.

¹² The documentary will be screened on the Turkish documentary channel TRT Documentary in 2017.