

Yazidis: A community scattered in between geographies and its current immigration experience

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Abstract

This study analyzes the forced exile experience of some of the members of the Yazidi population—highly concentrated in Northern Iraq—due to the attacks of ISIL organization. The immigration process including the feelings, thoughts, experiences and expectations of the participants is depicted through phenomenological method. The findings of the research point out that the Yazidi movement from northern Iraq stems from—as it happened many times before—religion-based discrimination rather than economic conditions back at home. Another important finding is that cultural codes coming from distant past and current real life experiences cause the Yazidis to aspire for a country in which they could feel safe. According to the participants, this ideal country primarily needs to hold a Kurdish identity both on cultural and linguistic levels and to embrace all different religious beliefs it shelters.

Keywords: International Immigration; Minorities; Nationalization; Refugees; Yazidis.

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Cultural codes and socio-demographic data

Studies on Yazidis have accelerated within the last few years and most of these studies are anthropology-centric. The first observations and written journals on Yazidis were made and kept by Western travelers and missionaries in the 19th century (Dalyan & Dogan, 2013, p. 114). The first comprehensive scientific research on the Yazidi culture has been conducted by the British historian and archeologist Austen Henry Lavard in 1845 (Suvvari, 2013, p. 25). The French linguist, Roger Lescot carrying out research on Iraqi and Syrian Yazidis (2001, pp. 17-18) discovered that today's Yazidism has very few similarities to Islam. It is determined that Yazidism, containing elements from various religions and traditions, has taken its final form under the influence of Sheikh Adi bin Musafir (the Sheikh of Adawiyya cult) in the 12th century (Guest, 2007) and its beliefs and traditions are based on Zoroastrianism, Shamanism and Islam (Jackson, 1904, p. 181; Arakelova, 2001, p. 183). There are various different arguments claiming that this community, which does not have written traditions (Kreyenbroek, 2014, p. 46), is ethnically Kurdish (Millingen, 1998, p. 168), Arab (descendants of Yezid bin Muaviye, one of the Emevi rulers) or are of Armenian origin. However, according to Jamil Jirido Qasim, the Secretary-General of *Yazidi and Progress Party*, established in 2003 in Iraq, the Yazidis are a unique nation that should not be labeled as an ethnic minority (BBC Monitoring Middle East, March 26, 2007, p. 1). Their common language today is Kurmanji Kurdish. The Yazidi population, which has spread over lands extending from Aleppo to Caucasia, was deemed to be approximately around 200,000 (Joseph, 1909, p. 113). However, according to the records of the *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*, the number of Yazidis in Iraq and the world is currently around 550,000 and 800,000, respectively (UNHCR Report April 2005, p. 6). The Yazidi population is highly concentrated in the Nineveh province of Northern Iraq and is mostly engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry (Fuccaro, 1999, p. 1).

The reasons behind forced exile of Yazidis and the consequences

By a few religions and traditions, the archangel in Yazidism, Tawûsê Melek (the Peacock Angel), is inappropriately and incorrectly identified with Satan, depicted as the angel of evil. Yazidis' unorganized religious and administrative structure and their relatively lower population have also caused Yazidis to be subjected to massacres and alienation throughout their history (Yalkut, 2014, p. 12; Gökçen, 2014, pp. 19-20; Ulutürk, 2013, p. 843; Suvvari, 2013, pp. 30-31, Şarman, 2015, p. 551). Hence, according to the Ottoman archives and unofficial documents, Yazidis are described as 'descendants of Yezid bin Muaviye¹', a 'pervert community,' 'looters' and 'bandits who do not pay their taxes' and they have been constantly subjected to religious assimilation (Gökçen, 2012, p. 7; p. 11). Yazidis who rejected assimilation apparently were under attack and massacred at different times by the Ottomans (Çelebi, 1986, pp. 169-171; Gölbaşı, 2008).

On August 14, 2007, Yazidis suffered the 73rd massacre with a death toll of 800 (Yalkut, 2014, p. 14) and started withdrawing from other communities and leading an isolated life. Upon pressures from the neighboring communities—mainly Arabs and Muslim Kurds—, regional wars and the

¹ Known as the perpetrator of Karbala Incident and his name does not have a positive connotation among Shiite, Alevi and Sunni Muslims.

excruciating politics, Yazidis had to migrate to different geographies (Gökçen, 2012, pp. 11-12). The community members, who had to spread to the lands of Syria, Armenia, Georgia, Iran, the Soviet Union (today's Russia), Turkey and Iraq, have relocated from time to time and as of the 1970s, they have been immigrating to Western Europe—exclusively to Germany—in search for a peaceful land (Gökçen, 2014, p. 174). Yazidis, who had been tormented during the reign of the Ottoman Empire as they are not followers of a monotheistic religion, were also exposed to pressures of the Turkish-Islam synthesis project implemented by modern Turkey. Hence, approximately 99% of the Yazidis in Turkey used their right of asylum and took refuge in Western Europe (Yalkut, 2014, pp. 43-46; p. 111). There are still very few Yazidi families² living in Turkey, mostly in the provinces of Urfa, Mardin, Diyarbakır and Batman of Southeastern Anatolia (Gökçen, 2014, p. 185). Yazidis who took refuge in Western Europe are undergoing a double-sided adaptation process during which they have to adapt to the economic and social dynamics of the countries they migrated to and also not to lose contact with their own religious and ethnic groups (Yalkut, 2014, pp. 114-116).

In August 2014, of 500,000 Yazidis residing in Iraq, 350.000 * took refuge in Duhok and Zakho regions of Iraq, 120.000* fled to Syria and 30,000* emigrated to Turkey to escape the attacks of ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and Levant) against non-Muslim locals in the region (Support to Life Report, October 16, 2014, p. 1). The majority of the Yazidi refugees who took temporary shelter in Turkey are residing at deserted buildings and social facilities in the city centers of the provinces in Southeastern Turkey, specialized camps established by municipalities and an AFAD camp established for Assyrians in the province of Mardin, and more than half of this population are children under the age of 17 (Support to Life Report, October 16, 2014, pp. 1-2).

Certain NGOs (Support to Life Report, October 16, 2014, pp. 6-7; IMPR Humanitarian Report, September 2, 2014, p. 4; Turkish Human Rights Foundation Report, August 22, 2014, pp. 3-7; Immigration Platform Report, August 25, 2014, pp. 1-4) have observed the accommodation conditions for Yazidi refugees and issued reports on this matter;

- A lot of Yazidis were subjected to massacres and violence such as decapitation, being buried alive, rape, losing family members, being taken captive and getting broken off from their families during ISIL attacks.
- *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees* remained unresponsive to the requirements of the Yazidi refugees. And while many NGOs were providing aid for Syrian refugees, they were not doing so for the Iraqi refugees.
- It was observed that there were too many problems in camps in terms of basic needs of the refugees such as food, accommodation and health services.
- While the majority of Yazidi refugees were children, youngsters and women, there were no specialty facilities to provide services to these specific groups.

² It is estimated that their total number does not exceed 500.

* These are approximate numbers.

- The refugees in general were not considering returning back to their homes as the Sunni Arabs who live in the vicinity of their homes tend to support ISIL. A part of the refugees interviewed noted that they wanted to immigrate to Europe while the others were wishing to return to their homes once the threat is over.
- It was determined that due to the extreme atrocities and stress the Yazidi refugees experienced, they were sad, tired, worried and furious.

Method

Studying the effects of forced exile experienced by Yazidi refugees; in other words, analyzing the inner worlds and the perceptions of this community is crucial for sociology of immigration. Therefore, phenomenological method was deemed as appropriate for this research study. The phenomenological method requires literature research to be performed before the field research (Goulding, 2000, p. 24). Therefore, available scientific research and reports on the Yazidis were reviewed and research questions were prepared accordingly.

Semi-structured interviews were held with the participants at Bişeng camp, located inside the city limits of Şırnak and managed by the Municipality of Şırnak, between February 4th and 6th, 2015. The interviewer is an expert in qualitative research and is fluent in both Kurdish and Turkish. The interviewer held 12 interviews that took 6 hours and 46 seconds in total; deciphered the voice recordings in Kurdish afterwards; then these decipherments were translated into Turkish. The participants at the Bişeng camp consist of refugees who arrived in Turkey between August and October of 2014. These refugees are individuals who escaped ISIL attacks and who arrived in Turkey through different routes. 7 out of the 12 participants were male, 5 were female. 9 participants were primary school graduates or had no school education; the 3 youngest members of the group were single individuals who are either high school or university graduated. In line with codes of conduct, written consents were obtained from the participants and pseudonyms were used in the study instead of real names.

Table 1. Characteristics of Participants

#	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Marital Status	Number of Children
1	Davut	Male	32	Primary School (6 years)	Security guard at Iraqi Kurdistan Federal Zone	Married	1
2	Aram	Male	44	No school education	Shop owner/Wholesaler	Married (with two wives)	13
3	Dilba	Female	55	Primary School (6 years)	Housewife	Married	10
4	Nijdar	Female	21	High School	Student	Single	0

				(11 years)			
5	Temo	Male	33	Primary School (6 years)	Driver (Passenger transportation)	Married	4
6	Rizgar	Female	18	High School (11 years)	Student	Single	0
7	Xebat	Male	45	Primary School (6 years)	Farmer	Married	8
8	Berfo	Female	19	Primary School (6 years)	Housewife	Married	1
9	Qenco	Male	30	University	Doctor	Single	0
10	Şivan	Male	57	Primary School (6 years)	Farmer	Married	7
11	Revin	Female	63	No school education	Housewife	Married	9
12	Tajdin	Male	40	Primary School (6 years)	Attendant	Married	6

Analysis and findings

In the analysis section, the experiences, perceptions and expectations in three different times (current, past and future) will be discussed in relation to the related available theories in the literature.

Current experiences

It is evident that the forced exile journey of the refugees was realized under very demanding and tragic conditions. Yazidis, who arrived in Turkey through different routes, were not protected by the military forces of Iraqi Kurdistan Autonomous Region in Sinjar area where they reside; therefore, they preferred to arrive in Turkey, which they deemed as a safe country. The participants also noted that on their journey they received help from PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and YPG (People's Protection Units).

We came from Sinjar. It's been seven months since we arrived. ISIL came and took over Sinjar. They threw cannons to our garden. They started attacking us at three in the morning. First, we thought that the government would come to our rescue so we didn't flee until seven in the morning. Then, the Peshmerga withdrew so we escaped. We took refuge on Sinjar Mountains. We remained there for 7-8 days. We had no food, nothing to drink; the children were hungry. 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. They took us to a Syrian village. PKK brought 50 vehicles and took us to a camp in Syria. We stayed there in tents that night. Then, they brought us to Zaho. There, we stayed for 7 days at the house of a family friend, who were 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. (Dilba, Female, 55)

[On the third of August] terrorist came; we were unprepared and in a bad situation. Neither the central Iraqi government nor the Kurdish government backed us and fought for us. All our people had to flee. Some went to Duhok, some came to Zaho. We stayed in Zaho for seven days and then came to Turkey through a place called Roboski. There, we stayed at a (village) school in a place called Ziravikê. Then, the residents came with vehicles and took us from there and placed us at another school, which we stayed at for 8 days. And then we arrived at this camp in Şırnak. (Davut, Male, 32)

We were informed in Sinjar that ISIL was coming. So, we escaped to the mountains and stayed there for 7 days. Things we suffered were so awful, we wished to die instead. They were grabbing one-month old babies from the arms of their mothers and throwing them around. They took our daughters; they raped them, took them to Raqqa and Mosul and sold them there. They were selling a Yazidi girl for \$50. After spending 7-8 days on the mounts, we were told that YPG had opened the roads, so we arrived in Syria by using that road. After spending the night, we came to Kurdistan. We stayed at the camp there. Then, we heard that ISIL were to attack Zaho. We realized that we were still in the danger zone so we decided to come to Turkey. (Xebat, Male, 45)

We came here out of fear of death for ourselves and our children; we thought maybe we will be safe here. (Aram, Male, 44)

Past knowledge and experiences

It was determined that relatively older participants have a perception of historical migration due to the stories that have been passed down from generation to generation.

Our ancestors are from Syria; then they migrated from Syria to Turkey. There was an imperial order (massacre), then, they came to Mosul. There were 3 brothers. Another order was issued and one of them got lost. Another went to Iran; we still have relatives there. And the other settled on Sinjar Mountains because it's safe there. (Revin, Female, 63)

Mine and my father's generation lived in Sinjar. Of course, we were living on the mountains. They made us settle on the flatlands in 1975, during the reign of Saddam; right next to the Arabs. I never met my grandfather but my father said that my grandfather came from Kobanê near Turkey and Syria. (Aram, Male, 44)

We have been in Sinjar for a long time. I have not heard my father or my grandfather talk about it, but in the past there have been many massacres. My mother told us that her father had lived through a massacre. Just like now. She said an imperial order was issued. Then, they took the women and the girls; they captured the men. I don't know. All I know is the massacre that's happening now. (Dilba, Female, 55)

We have been in Sinjar for the past 200 years. Our great grandfathers told that they came from Turkey. Some in our village say they're from Şırnak. They came from Turkey because of a massacre at that time. (Xebat, Male, 45)

They used to talk about a place called Kelemerani; which I believe is around here somewhere. They were saying that we came from here. Then, an order was issued; again it was all due to religion. Just like today. So there was an order (massacre) issued for Yazidis so they fled. (Qenco, Male, 30)

Expectations from future and dynamics determining the future

It was understood that the participants who took refuge in Turkey out of fear for their lives were not living safely in the geography they resided in. The participants noted that they wanted to live in Europe because they currently live in a location where there is no peace, in a discriminatory environment (living with Sunni Arab neighbors) and not being able to own properties officially and that Europe is perceived as a democratic and peaceful place by the participants. In accordance with the social network theory (see: Hugo, 1981; Taylor, 1986); another reason why Europe is relatively attractive for the participants is that they have relatives and acquaintance who immigrated to Europe before. When compared to Turkey, which has a high Sunni population and many administrative problems, the European countries are perceived as being more democratic and livable.

All the Arabs around us were helping them; they knew every place. As we ran, Arabs informed ISIL about where we were. (Dilba, Female, 55)

Let me tell you why I want to go to Europe. If I go back, there are the Arabs, then there's that and this. (Şivan, Male, 57)

If I had the chance, I wouldn't allow any Yazidis to return. I wouldn't leave any Yazidis in Iraq. I would take all out of them away from there. There is no life left for us in Iraq. There are always massacres. What I want is to stay away from Iraq. (Berfo, Female, 19)

I would remove all the Yazidis out of that region. They can fight between themselves there. We don't want war. We don't want death. (Qenco, Male, 30)

If I could believe that we could actually live in Turkey, I wouldn't go anywhere else. But in Turkey, there's dictatorship. People should be able to speak out; say what they want to say without fear. (Temo, Male, 33)

I would like to get away from here. I want to go far away. We've got friends abroad. We would want to go. But if Sinjar is freed and if we were to live in peace, there wouldn't be any place better than Sinjar. If we go back now... They have knocked down houses, looted everything we had. Plus, we owed properties since my dad's, my granddad's and my great granddad's generations but they have never been registered in our name⁴. In other words, they have not been ours for all this time³. If your house is not in your name, what good would it do? You buy a car, a house, but they are not in your name. It is like they are someone else's property. If we could legally own our property, then there is nowhere better than Sinjar. If there is finally peace in Sinjar, I would go but I don't believe in it anymore. Just Europe. Not for myself, for these little ones. It is hard to cry and eat at the same time and I've done that many times now. (Aram, Male, 44)

Nationalistic elements were highly present in the discourse of the participants who highlighted that PKK and YPG have helped them during their escape to Turkey; they have frequently verbalized that they were Kurdish; they spoke Kurdish; they are members of the Kurdish nation and that they want to be ruled by a Kurdish leader. The idea of a united Kurdistan that is democratic towards different religious or the notion of a homogeneous autonomous state was supported by the participants. One of the conditions; the condition that "the people are willing," out of the two conditions asserted as required for establishing nation states by John Stuart Mill (Hobsbawm, 1991, p. 24) is pretty dominant among Yazidis. Harold Isaac explains ethnic identity through origins and history of a group, group dynamics, language, religion and location of the birthplace (Thompson, 1989, p. 56) and according to this explanation, all these elements except religion can enable Yazidis to become a part of a democratic Kurdish state. When it is considered that ethnic solidarity arises due to meeting economic, security and status requirements, (Esman & Rabinovich, 1988, pp. 12-13), Yazidis' wish to live in safety and to be accepted within the geography they live in becomes meaningful.

During Saddam's rule, they have relocated us from the mountains to the cities. We were under oppression for 37 years. They forcefully enlisted us in the army. When Saddam overthrown, we felt cheerful and happy because now Kurdistan was freed. (Temo, Male, 33)

This place treated us well. Everyone speaks Kurdish. Everyone is Kurdish. We wanted to stay here. (Rizgar, Female, 18)

They told us that there was a state camp in Midyat. They told us we could go there. We told them we didn't want to do so. Everyone (here) speaks our language. Everyone is Kurdish. We said this is better for us. (Xebat, Male, 45)

⁴ According to the additional information provided by the participants, the Iraqi government does not allow Yazidis to officially own properties (through title deeds, etc.).

We want Kurdistan. But Kurdistan without any discrimination. If there would be discrimination against other religions we wouldn't want it. This is the truth. But Kurdistan will be established. So, we hope that there will be democracy in Kurdistan; your religion is yours and mine is mine. (Şivan, Male, 57)

I want to have a country. A country that is named after the Yazidis and Kurds. Maybe a Yazidi region in Kurdistan. A democratic region. A Kurdistan where no one is unfair to anyone. (Xebat, Male, 45)

We saw Bashur (North Iraqi Kurdistan Federal Region). We were one but realized that there were differences there. We want to be ourselves. I wish that there would be country named after Yazidis. (Qenco, Male, 30)

We don't want anything else other than Kurdistan. We have been comfortable since Kobanê had been rescued but now they're heading towards Sinjar Mountains. ISIL will head forward and we will withdraw. There's only a little time left. So we pray to our God. I don't know about us. It's vague. I don't know. I don't know what will happen tomorrow. We want a government that speaks our own language so I don't have to say "Selamın Aleyküm" (Peace be upon you in Arabic), but I can say, "Çaxê te bi xêr (Have a good day, have a good time)". Our government should be Kurdish not Arabian. (Aram, Male, 44)

We used to say we were the Kurds of Barzani. Peshmerga woke us up, they said we would fight all together. But they ran away on their vehicles, taking their guns with them. We were left alone there. Why didn't Barzani say we were also a part of his nation? Why didn't he say, "I should save my own nation from the enemies?" We don't want Barzani as a leader. We want Abdullah Öcalan as a leader. We don't want anyone else. (Berfo, Female, 19)

There should be one leader for all Kurds. What good is a home without a father? One leader. Someone who would act democratically. Someone who wouldn't care about better clothes or more money. (Şivan, Male, 57)

Conclusion and suggestions

The tragedies experienced by the Yazidi refugees having participated to the research and their stories of immigration passed down from generation to generation indicated that the Yazidis are a population still in search of peace and security. Europe, which offers a democratic living environment and is the home of familiar immigrants, is attractive for these refugees in the short-term. However, in the long-term these immigrants dream of being citizens of a democratic country that has adopted the Kurdish or Yazidi-Kurdish identity.

Foundation of a united Kurdistan with the support from the United States of America and the European Union might initiate remigration of the Kurdish and Yazidi diaspora currently located in European countries. In what ways this new nation state, which is likely to rise based on the

notion of Kurdish nationalism, will resemble Turkey should be discussed. It is evident that Turkey, a nation state founded on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire and which has tried to melt different ethnic elements in the same melting pot throughout its history, and a united and relatively homogenous Kurdistan founded by Kurdish communities by uprising against the century-long assimilation policies will have different dynamics. When it is considered that majority of Kurds are Muslims and Sunnis, how the local community and government officials will treat citizens of different religions is the first question coming to mind. A research study on the perception of Sunni Kurds who reside in South Eastern Anatolia on the Yazidi refugees would complement this study. Additional research studies that offer a comparison of perceptions on refugees from Syria and Iraq with different religious backgrounds would also contribute to the literature of immigration.

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