

Yezidis in Iraq: Demographic Islamisation, Internal Divisions, and Drivers of Perpetual Genocide

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In this article, Majid Hassan Ali explores the origins of the divisions and exclusion of the Yezidi minority in Iraq. He details the factors that led to the genocide of this people and offers an analysis of the Iraqi political landscape in relation to their political participation.

"Our neighbours view us as devil worshippers, so we will continue to be seen in this stereotypical light until fundamental changes are made and a fully secular civil system is established in Iraq," replied a Yezidi resident of one of the towns near Duhok after I asked him about his opinion and outlook for the future of the Yezidis and their survival in Iraq and the Kurdistan region.¹ This stereotype has deep historical roots among certain neighbouring communities and has been exploited and manipulated by some political parties, organisations, and extremist religious groups. It became particularly pronounced after the collapse of the Iraqi state following the American invasion, resulting in genocide, religious, cultural, and social persecution that continue to this day.

Geographical and demographic distribution

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¹ Exclusive interview with a Yezidi citizen living in Sharya, dated May 3, 2023.

The Yezidis are an ethno-religious minority with the majority speaking Kurmanji, one of the main Kurdish dialects, according to researchers. Geographically, they are classified as a dispersed minority in demographic centres where population density is homogenous and concentrated. They are mainly located in contested areas across several residential clusters, notably in the Sinjar region (locally known as Shingal) and the Nineveh Plain, which falls administratively under the central government.² This region includes the Shekhan district, along with numerous Yezidi villages and towns in the Tel Keppe district, as well as the cities of Ba'shiqa and Bahzani in Nineveh province. There are also smaller population clusters in the southern and western parts of Duhok province, which have been part of the Kurdistan region since 1991, including towns and cities such as Sharya, Khanke, Ba'adre, and Derabun.

Despite the limited availability of reliable demographic data on Yezidis in Iraq, unofficial estimates suggest their population ranges between 550,000 and 600,000 citizens throughout the country, including within the Kurdistan Region.³ Yezidis represent the largest religious minority in Iraq after Muslims,⁴ and Iraq is home to the largest Yezidi population in terms of numbers, compared to other countries where they are present, including south-eastern Turkey, northern and north-eastern Syria, Georgia, Armenia, Russia, Ukraine, and Western communities, notably in Germany.

² The name of the complex (plural of complexes) refers to the towns created by the Iraqi government after the displacement and destruction of most Yezidi villages in the Sinjar and Sheikhan regions between the mid-1970s and late 1980s, bringing the inhabitants of a number of villages together in a single complex in order to control them more easily. These complexes became more urbanised than the previous villages following the provision of water and electricity, and were called complexes with Arabic names with nationalist and Islamic connotations, such as the Abu Firas al-Hamdani complex in Sharia, the Bani Umayya complex in Khanki, and others. After the aforementioned complexes became part of the Kurdistan Region in 1991, they were renamed by the local indigenous people after one of their former villages, as was the case for the rest of the complexes in the Nineveh Plain and Sinjar after 2003.

³ These estimates were obtained by the researcher by consulting the published literature as well as unpublished data from the Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation in Iraq, such as the document titled: "Republic of Iraq, Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation, Central Organization for Statistics and Information Technology, number/1/3/1/8/3428, dated 06/05/2010, addressed to the Federal Supreme Court, subject: Declaration of the number of the Yazidi population in Iraq" (unpublished document in the possession of the researcher).

⁴ Yezidism is the second-largest religion in Iraq after Islam, especially following the migration of Jews from Iraq between the 1950s and 1970s, and the ongoing migration of Christians that also began in the 1960s. As a result, the Yezidis have remained the second-largest religious group in Iraq after Muslims.

Since the beginning of the US invasion in 2003, the Yezidi community has been plagued with tragedy, both locally and internationally. Indeed, religious minorities had become the target of organisations labelled "jihadists", as well as other extremist armed groups, targeting members of the Yezidi minority in particular. The situation reached its climax after the invasion by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014, leading to genocidal operations against the group in many of these regions. This resulted in mass departures, dispersal, forced displacement and an exodus to Kurdish areas in the north as well as to Arab areas in central and southern Iraq. The Yezidis were among the most affected minority groups, having fled almost entirely to the cities in the Kurdistan region.

Certain factors have likely made the Yezidis a more frequent target compared to other minorities. These reasons are often tied to doctrinal differences within their religion and society, which set them apart from mainstream religious beliefs. This has fostered a negative perception of the group within major Muslim communities, primarily due to the theological accusation that they worship the devil, '*Iblis*'. Additionally, biased narratives in literature and the influence of social media have exacerbated hate speech against the minority group. For instance, during a peak in anti-Yezidi sentiment, the Hate Observatory documented 4 million hate messages directed at them. This surge followed a rumour that they had burned a mosque in Sinjar, an allegation linked to the return of certain Sunni residents from the southern part of this city, whom the Yezidis accuse of collaborating with the Islamic State.⁵

Throughout recent history, Yezidis in Iraq have endured discrimination, neglect, and violence. This has occurred on a limited scale despite the relative stability they experienced from the 1920s until 2003 with the formation of the nation-state.⁶ In terms of racial discrimination, the granting of rights, and representation in Iraqi state institutions, some Yezidi leaders articulated their deep

⁵ Masarat Foundation, Monitoring Hate Speech, April 27 - May 11, 2023, Sinjar Crisis, Baghdad, 2023.

⁶ See, for example, Saad Salloum, Yazidis in Iraq: Memory, Beliefs, Genocide (Rome: UPP, 2016), pp. 23-67.

sense of injustice regarding their legal and constitutional rights, as well as in the allocation of administrative and political positions.⁷ They argue that these should be community rights under the consensus system used to manage the Iraqi state. This issue will be examined in further detail in the section on political participation.

Demographic Islamisation and ethnic fault lines between Arabs and Kurds

Following the 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, the country underwent major political and social transformations that created a new reality for all Iraqi communities. Sectarian tensions escalated among various groups, particularly between Shiites and Sunnis and between Arabs and Kurds. Conflicts and divisions based on religion, sect, and nationality also intensified within certain communities and minorities, profoundly impacting non-Muslim religious minorities.

In this evolving landscape, the Yezidis faced disproportionate targeting compared to other minorities across Iraq. They endured killings and threats, especially in disputed territories such as the Nineveh Plain, Mosul, and Baghdad, while experiencing less violence in Yezidi-populated villages and towns due to their communal unity.

Prominent examples include targeted assassinations, attacks, and the destruction of Yezidi temples and shrines, resulting in significant internal fragmentation and divisions within Yezidi social and religious spheres. This fragmentation weakened both their spiritual and worldly leadership.

Furthermore, Yezidi regions continue to face demographic shifts,⁸ with the Arabisation and Kurdification leading to the Islamisation of Yezidi areas in Duhok, the

⁷ Private interviews conducted by the researcher with Yezidi intellectuals and academics in the cities of Sharia and Khanke, in displaced persons camps, and among residents in Germany, on various dates in 2023.

⁸ See, for example, the situation of demographic changes in Christian areas in:

Nineveh Plain, Sinjar, and other disputed regions.⁹ This demographic assimilation entails the confiscation of lands and properties belonging to non-Muslim minorities, followed by their settlement with Muslim populations, a process often facilitated by authorities before and after 2003. These actions have eroded the historic demographic identities of these regions, imposing an Islamic identity on them.

The new reality in Iraq, marked by considerable suffering and destruction, has displaced hundreds of thousands of people. This includes massive internal and external migration, as well as the displacement of religious and ethnic groups. One consequence of these conflicts is the division of areas between forces and parties aligned with the dominant Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish groups. This has given rise to the so-called disputed areas between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the central government, forming a dividing line between the Arabs in the south and the Kurdish region in the north. These areas are characterised by ethnic, religious and sectarian diversity, and are home to most religious and ethnic minorities, notably the Yezidi minority. Their territories stretch from the Sinjar district to the Sheikhan district, including numerous villages, towns and communities, notably in the Nineveh Plain and Duhok Governorate.¹⁰

Social activism and social fault lines

The power vacuum that followed the American invasion had significant consequences, including the emergence of armed resistance groups that adopted Islamic extremism within both Shiite and Sunni branches. These groups formed

Majed Eshoo, "The Fate of Assyrian Villages Annexed to Today's Dohuk Governorate In Iraq And The Conditions In These Villages Following The Establishment Of The Iraqi State In 1921", retrieved on 22/9/2023 at: <http://www.aina.org/reports/avod.htm>.

⁹ We can mention some of the historical areas of Yezidi presence, such as the Sheikhan district, which was predominantly Yezidi in terms of demographics in previous periods, but has gradually lost its historical demographic makeup to become a city with an almost entirely Muslim population, and so on in many other areas and cities.

¹⁰ The Iraqi constitution of 2005 defined the mechanism for resolving disputes over these areas according to Article 140, but this article has not been implemented and normalisation mechanisms are still unresolved, which in itself constitutes an element of ongoing suffering for the Yezidis in the ambiguity of their future.

military organisations and militias, which fueled an increase in religious, sectarian, and ethnic-nationalist hate speech, widening social fractures among citizens that had not been evident before the occupation. This trend intensified as many Shiite and Sunni Arabs and Kurds joined these armed organisations for various reasons, including religious, sectarian, and extremist motivations. The resulting armed violence led to the displacement, flight, and migration of hundreds of thousands of people, particularly affecting non-Muslim minorities who lacked protection.

The belief that Yezidis worship the devil has taken root among some religious groups and jihadist organisations in Iraq, including in Kurdistan. Consequently, ongoing persecution has led to the mass forced displacement of Yezidis from their native regions to safer areas, primarily in the Kurdistan region. From there, many have continued to migrate out of the country. Since the Islamic State attack in 2014, most Yezidi areas in Sinjar remain uninhabited, destroyed, and abandoned, with the majority of the population residing in camps in the region. According to the latest 2019 official estimates from the Department of Humanitarian Affairs and Relief in Duhok province, their population is estimated to be between 250,000 and 300,000 people.¹¹

Factors of the ongoing genocide

The ongoing power struggle and conflicts between the central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) over Yezidi areas in Sinjar and other regions maintain conditions conducive to genocide.¹² This is largely due to the lack of agreement on the future status of disputed areas.¹³

¹¹ This number includes all the Yezidis from the Sinjar region and the Nineveh Plain, according to a census conducted by the Board of Relief and Humanitarian Affairs (BRHA) of Duhok Governorate, detailed report for 2019.

¹² Saad Salloum, "Genocide Continues: The Dynamics, Dimensions and Actors of Division in the Yezidi Community," Al-Bayan Centre for Studies and Planning, Baghdad, 2022.

¹³ On the nature of violence and conflict in contested areas, see, for example, the following report: Dlovan Brwari, Ernesto Londoño, "Blasts Kill at Least 53 in Iraq", Washington Post (2009-08-11).

These developments are accompanied by ongoing quasi-systematic demographic changes in various Yezidi regions, as well as in other minority and indigenous areas. Despite the inclusion of Article 140 in the 2005 Iraqi constitution, which outlines measures for normalisation and the return of lands and properties to original owners displaced or expelled in the past, Yezidis have not succeeded in reclaiming their lands and properties. The reasons for this include political and military conflicts over control of these areas, lack of security, and factors related to stability. These issues have led to continued discriminatory practices by dominant political actors, resulting in further displacement and migration to other regions. Here are some events and developments that have had lasting impacts:

1. Girazir and Siba-Sheik khidir attacks of 2007

In 2007, a wave of car bombings targeting Yezidi residential complexes in both Garazir and Siba-Sheikh Khidir in the Sinjar region were attributed to Al-Qaeda organisation. These led to the near-total destruction of both towns and caused the death and injury of over 500 people, with entire families decimated. This operation was considered one of the largest operations and suicide attacks to occur in Iraq since 2003.¹⁴ However, the violence did not stop there; in the same year, there were a series of targeted attacks and retributive violence against Yezidis in neighbouring towns and villages, including the murder of about 24 Yezidi workers in the villages of Ba'ashiqah and Bahzani, who worked in Mosul. A video of the crime, which was attributed to Al-Qaeda, was widely circulated. This forced thousands of Yezidi students and teachers to leave Mosul University, marking the prelude to the large-scale attack by ISIS in August 2014 on Sinjar and the Nineveh Plain, leaving thousands dead, injured, abducted, and Yezidi women and children enslaved.¹⁵

2. ISIS attack on Sinjar and Nineveh Plain in 2014

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, World Report 2008, Washington: Events of 2007, p. 479.

¹⁵ Saad Salloum, "Return to Sinjar: Opportunities, Challenges and Dimensions of Conflict," International Crisis Organization, 2020.

After taking control of Mosul and vast Sunni areas in northern Iraq, ISIS adopted a distinct approach by distinguishing what they call the “Ahl al-Kitab” (People of the Book), the “Ahl al-Dhimma” (Christians), and the “Kuffar” (Yezidis, Shia Turkmen, and Shia Shabaks). They forced the latter group to convert to Islam under the threat of death, without giving them the option to pay the jizya (protection tax) or flee, as they did with Christians inside Mosul who, upon their entry, were given the option to pay the jizya or leave the city if they did not pay as ‘People of the Book’.

After the massive attack on the Sinjar and Nineveh Plain regions, the terrorist organisation, ISIS, committed a genocide against the Yezidis. On the night of the 2nd to the 3rd of August 2014, the organisation attacked Yezidi areas after the withdrawal of Kurdish security and defence forces who had been defending and protecting the region. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Yezidis fled from villages, towns, and complexes in Sinjar, with those who escaped ISIS taking refuge in the fortified mountains of the city. Those who could not escape were captured by ISIS members. Men and the elderly who refused to convert to Islam at the beginning of the invasion were executed, while between six thousand and nine thousand Yezidi women and children were captured and subjected to sexual slavery. The fate of more than three thousand Yezidi women and children remains unknown to this day. As a result of the violations and repercussions after the ISIS invasion and its subsequent developments, new forces and military factions emerged, taking control of vast geographical areas in the disputed zones, especially in Sinjar and the Nineveh Plain. This complicated the security landscape and led to armed conflicts, displacement operations, and additional violations and property confiscations.

Divisive geopolitics and assessing political participation

Yezidi political participation has been ineffective since the formation of the Governing Council in Iraq after the American invasion, due to some Islamic religious factions in Iraq refusing to allow them to participate. They were previously banned from

participating in Iraqi opposition conferences abroad, before the American invasion, on the pretext of their allegiance to the Ba'ath regime and their involvement in suppressing the 1991 uprisings against the Shia in the south and Kurds in the north.¹⁶ However, these accusations were largely exaggerated for political purposes.¹⁷ Since the practical political developments from 2005 onwards, Yezidis have been allowed to participate in successive elections for the Iraqi Parliament and provincial councils, where they have won representative seats. Nonetheless, the issue of candidacy and voting remains controversial, with Yezidi demands to obtain the seats on the basis of their demographic density.

According to the law for recognised minorities' political representation which allocates one seat for every hundred thousand people, only one seat has been granted to the Yezidis, although several censuses indicate they could exceed 500,000 people and have more than one quota seat. In the 2010 elections, the Yezidis won seven seats in the Iraqi Parliament thanks to Yezidi votes in the disputed areas, with the exception of the zones under the Kurdistan region, indicating they are more numerous than officially declared. The Yezidis have been unable to present themselves to the central government and the KRG as a distinct minority based on ethno-religious identity criteria due to the political dominance of major groups, particularly the main Kurdish parties like the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, as well as internal social fragmentation and the loss of influence of their spiritual and worldly leaders. Thus, the Yezidi community has remained politically heterogeneous, which inevitably translates or reflects in their representation as a minority in state institutions, its organs, and their political and electoral participation.

¹⁶ Kanan Makiya, *Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising and the Arab World*. New York, London : Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data, w. w. Norton and Company 1993, p. 97.

¹⁷ Ali, Majid Hassan, "Religious Minorities in Early Republican Iraq (1958-1968): Between Granting Rights and Discrimination," PhD thesis, University of Bamberg, 2017, pp. 268-269.

In Iraq, where elections are still relatively new, and in Kurdistan where there is a historical political experience, the Yezidis do not have a unified entity to represent them independently in state institutions and organs. Thus, the Yezidi voter is influenced by the advertising, organisational, and ideological machinery of major political parties that work to nominate certain individuals within their ranks to win their votes, rather than represent them as Yezidis.

Most dominant parties in central and southern Iraq use religious, sectarian, and denominational issues and slogans, while Kurdish parties use national issues and propaganda to define Yezidi identity according to the national agenda they promote. Conflicts over the parameters of Yezidi national or ethnic identity, such as their consideration as Kurds, Arabs, or Yezidis, influence their participation, electoral behaviour, and voting manner in elections. Thus, the Yezidi voter becomes an instrument, whether there are positive or negative criteria for the candidate. Consequently, voting for a party becomes more important than voting for a candidate.

In most elections held in Iraq and the Kurdistan region, Yezidi candidates and voters are not unified in their political orientations but are rather subjected to the wills of the major political parties and blocs that dominate their regions. For example, the majority of Yezidis in areas under Duhok province are supporters or members of the main Kurdish nationalist parties, notably the Kurdistan Democratic Party, due to the integration of their areas into the Kurdistan region since 1991.

As for the Yezidis in disputed areas like Shekhan, the Nineveh Plain, and Sinjar where they constitute the majority of the population, since 2003, they have been subjected to pressures due to conflicts and the overlapping administration of their areas, placing them under the competing influence of Kurdish parties and the central government. Their unstable security and the absence of institutions dealing with their cultural and educational affairs, except for the propagation of partisan and organisational culture under this parallel administration, have contributed to their

subordination to political, security, clientelist, and coercive pressures, as well as manipulation and even fraudulent practices.

Effective mechanisms exist to influence Yezidi voters' opinions, including the media, religious leaders, tribal chiefs, and elders. All this has impacted individual Yezidi consciousness and, consequently, their electoral behaviour in elections and in choosing candidates to represent them politically in key administrative positions at all levels of the state.

The creation of identity dynamics and dualities in political orientations has left a deep division and internal disintegration within the Yezidi community, ultimately leading to increased fragmentation among affiliations and tendencies that divide them along national and religious lines. In other words, the Yezidi citizen and individual have only two choices: to be "for" or "against", and they must choose between these two contradictory options, even if their choice goes against their beliefs and political inclinations, or if they do not subscribe to any of the opposing ideologies.

Yezidis are often chosen for administrative positions without due consideration of their skills and specialisations. Most of those appointed or chosen to represent the Yezidi minority range from ministers, undersecretaries, diplomatic representatives, and general directors to advisors in all branches of the state, whether within the central government or the Kurdistan regional government.

Weak Yezidi party effectiveness in a polarised political context

Due to the consequences of the fight against ISIS, many military forces and militias composed of minority members from these regions have been formed by conflicting parties. This has resulted in internal division within each minority group regarding their loyalty and allegiance, whether to locally and regionally supported militias or

to the central government, the regional government, and their influential parties. This situation is a major obstacle to the return of the majority of displaced Yazidis, which will have long-term repercussions on the reconstruction of the social fabric and on encouraging the return of the displaced, as well as any innovative initiative aiming to achieve lasting civil peace.

The Yazidis have established several political parties since the American invasion. The first Yazidi political group was created in 2003 under the name "Yezidi Movement for Reform and Progress". It was followed by other organisations such as the "Yezidi Democratic Movement Party" (TEVDE), which later changed its name to the "Yezidi Freedom Party." Additionally, the "Yezidi Progress Party" was formed, and in 2014, the "Yezidi Democratic Party" was created.¹⁸

The Yazidis did not have armed parties before the invasion by Islamic State forces. However, after this incursion, organised and armed Yazidi factions and military units emerged, affiliated with Yazidi political parties as well as Kurdish parties and the Shia Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Each armed faction or military unit currently controls specific geographical areas in the Sinjar region. Among the most influential military forces and units are the Protection Forces of Ezidkhan (Ezidkhan being a historical term used by the Yazidis to refer to their land and Yazidi identity wherever they may be found). Similarly, the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ) were formed by Yazidi fighters with the support and encouragement of the Kurdish Protection Units in Syria. This group is often accused by opposing parties of being linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

In addition to these two forces, there are other military units affiliated with the central Iraqi government as well as units loyal to the PMF, and the Peshmerga forces affiliated with Kurdish parties, particularly the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

¹⁸ Majid Hassan Ali, "The Identity Controversy of Religious Minorities in Iraq: The Crystallisation of Yazidi Identity after 2003," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 47(5), 811–831. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2019.1577129>

Most of these forces compete with one another for strategic reasons and are linked to political, regional, and international agendas, aiming to control geographical territories. This is due to the strategic nature of the Sinjar region with its geographic location near the Syrian and Turkish borders, as well as its untapped mineral and oil resources.¹⁹

Due to the region's geostrategic advantages and the polarising policies of influential parties, entities, and groups, in addition to the ongoing problem of dual administration between the central government and the Kurdistan regional government, the conflict for control of the Sinjar region persists. This hampers the return of approximately 250,000 to 300,000 displaced Yazidis from camps in the Kurdistan autonomous region. On the other hand, some Kurdish political forces within Kurdistan do not wish for or "allow" the return of the displaced, fearing they might bolster other forces present on the ground, particularly competing forces such as the YBS and the PMF units, which have a strong presence and are well-organised. The fear is that it could reduce the influence and impact of the Kurdish parties, especially the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Sinjar. This is particularly the case if a referendum on the status of the disputed areas is held, given that Sinjar is central, just like Kirkuk province, to the Kurdistan Region in accordance with Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution, which permits a referendum to be held in these areas to decide their loyalty to the central government or that of the Kurdistan region.

It is worth mentioning that all the aforementioned forces and parties publicly claim to defend the existence of the Yazidis in the country, and that their formation aims to defend and protect the Yazidi presence in their historical regions. However, the presence of these armed forces in the form of military units and militias in Yazidi areas can be interpreted as an additional risk factor for them. Indeed, there are deep disagreements among many forces present in Sinjar, as well as among political

¹⁹ Saad Salloum, *Genocide Continues: The Dynamics, Dimensions and Actors of Division in the Yazidi Community*, Al-Bayan Centre for Studies and Planning, Baghdad, 2022.

parties and organisations active on the national and regional scene, with intense competition between some PMF factions and the Kurdish Peshmerga. Some Yezidi units might be distributed among these parties or subjected to attempts by some factions to gain their loyalty. These forces were poised for armed confrontations at any time, given the fierce competition for control of these territories. Thus, some of these Yezidi units could be used for the agendas of these forces, or they could be pushed to side with one of the factions despite the religious, sectarian, and national differences that separate them from these parties and factions.

However, ethnic front lines and sectarian divides continue to impact the return of displaced Yezidis to their regions. The conflict between the ethnically-oriented Kurdistan region and Baghdad, along with the persistence of sectarian conflicts and competition between Shia and Sunni groups, including the presence of Turkmens in nearby Tal Afar, divided between Shia and Sunni, leaves a deep imprint. The majority of Sunni Turkmens joined the "Islamic State" organisation and were accused of committing massacres against Shia Turkmens and Yezidis.

The intertwining of interests in the Sinjar region, along with broader alliances amid the ongoing regional and international turmoil in Iraq and Syria, has ensured that the international and regional dimensions remain significant in the Yezidi context due to the polarisation of axis politics. Several forces, parties, and states have formed political blocs to compete for Sinjar, including a Sunni bloc led by Turkey and a Shia bloc led by Iran. Both blocs utilise local forces and militias, while the United States maintains a balance in its relations with local actors active within the aforementioned blocs. This complex equation itself constitutes an additional factor and obstacle to resolving the issue of stability and a return to normalcy for Yezidis.²⁰

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²⁰ The researcher examines the details of Turkish and Iranian influence and impact in the book: Saad Salloum, *Genocide Continues*, as previously mentioned, pages 88-99.

The recent events in Sinjar illustrate the persistence of tensions and challenges in the region. Despite repeated efforts to allow the return of some Sunni families accused of joining Daesh, as well as the reconstruction of mosques damaged during the fights against the terrorist group, the Yezidis of Sinjar have expressed their categorical refusal to see Sunni Arabs return to the region before the return of the Yezidis, who they consider to be the true landowners. This opposition has been exacerbated by media propaganda, misinformation, and the spread of false information on social media since May 2023.

For example, Yezidis were responsible for the arson of the Al-Rahman Mosque in Sinjar, yet images of mosques burned in Diyala in 2016 were presented as those of the Al-Rahman Mosque. Despite the lack of credibility of this information and attempts at media manipulation, Sunni Kurdish mullahs and clerics in the provinces of the Kurdistan region attacked the Yezidis, accusing them of having burned the mosque and labelling them as Satanist devil worshippers. These accusations even led to calls for attacks on Yezidis living in camps for displaced persons, thereby reviving the fear of a new genocide against the group and reinforcing their decision to migrate out of fear for their safety.

Further internal divisions and societal fragmentation

The Yezidi people in Iraq face not only the looming threat of genocide and forced migration, but also other dangers, such as internal divisions and community fragmentation. When comparing the internal unity of the Yezidi people in Iraq before and after 2003, setting aside geographical considerations, it is evident that social cohesion was stronger before the American invasion. Despite some divisions within the princely family between the branches of Ismaïl Jol Bak and Ali Bak which influenced communal division in Sinjar and Sheikhan for a certain period in the early 20th century, a relative stability in the leadership of the Yezidi community, both

religious and worldly, was established under the reign of Prince Tahseen Beg (1930-2019).

During this period, the Yezidi community experienced considerable political divisions with the emergence of political parties and polarised cultural centres. Socially, these divisions were influenced by the role of tribes and cultural elites, as well as by religious leadership represented by the Council of Clerics and the central moral authority of the prince, which were sometimes used for partisan political agendas. Analysing the role and impact of religious leadership embodied by the positions of prince and Baba Sheikh, as well as the interaction between religious and worldly leadership represented by the position of prince, is essential for understanding the social cohesion of the Yezidis.

Developments post-2003 have been deeply divisive for the Yezidi community, with a clear and systematic segmentation following the extension of control by political parties and security systems over most of their regions. Tribal chiefs subsequently joined competing Kurdish and Yezidi political parties, differing in their thought and ideology, thereby reinforcing community divisions and creating personal animosities between tribal chiefs and social figures. As a result, some community divisions crystallised around partisan affiliations and ethnic identities between Yezidis belonging to parties that adopt Kurdish nationalism in their political programs and those belonging to parties advocating Yezidi nationalism or recognising the Yezidi identity as distinct and specific.

The crisis of religious and worldly leaders

After the announcement of the death of Prince Tahseen Sa'id Beg, the spiritual leader of the Yezidis in Iraq and worldwide on January 28, 2019, a leadership and management crisis of Yezidi minority affairs, both religious and secular, emerged. Previously, several Yezidi elites had highlighted this impending crisis and the subsequent consequences for the Yezidis in the future. During this time, the Yezidi

minority faced several internal crises on religious and social levels, endangering the protection of their existence and identity.

Although there have been initiatives and serious efforts to address these crises and undertake at a minimum, the first steps towards reform, such as establishing Yezidi institutions and adopting internal methodologies and systems to manage secular leadership—for instance the position of prince, as well as religious leadership like that of Baba Sheikh and other religious and administrative positions—it is necessary to expand the Spiritual Council to include and represent all Yezidis dispersed around the world. All these measures aim to establish accepted legitimacy and restore confidence within and outside the Yezidi community in Iraq.²¹

The Yezidis, like other minorities in Iraq, are undergoing significant transformations and changes, especially after the events of 2014, with an increase in emigration and exposure to substantial new social challenges. These challenges can only be met if Yezidi leaders firmly adopt urgent reforms both religiously and organisationally.

In previous eras, historical circumstances led to the imposition of the position of prince and its religious and secular legitimacy on the Yezidis. If Prince Tahsin Beg and the last Baba Sheikh Khato Haji Ismail held significant religious and secular authority, as well as charisma that profoundly resonated with the Yezidi community, replicating such influence today has become challenging due to the temporal and geographical shifts affecting the Yezidis.

Thus, the Yezidi public no longer readily accepts this. The customs that granted significant power to former Yezidi princes under the reign of Prince Tahsin Beg or earlier, cannot be applied in the same way today. The lives of the Yezidis have

²¹ The draft of the unified constitution of the global Yezidi entity, presented by the Yezidi Spiritual Council Association in Georgia, a religious institution recognized by the Georgian state and legitimised by a special decree from Pasha Sheikh in 2016, was submitted to the Yezidi Spiritual Council in Iraq on April 7, 2019. For more details, see: Majid Hassan Ali, "Declaration of the Unified Constitution of the Global Yezidi Entity," published on the Ezidi24 website on June 30, 2019, <https://ezidi24.com/ar/?p=20473>.

undergone radical changes, with a significant proportion of Yezidis living in Germany, exceeding 220,000 people, as well as about 100,000 others in the former Soviet states in addition to tens of thousands scattered in other countries. Furthermore, several prominent Yezidi religious leaders reside in these countries, having the right to vote and determine religious and secular positions that concern the lives of the Yezidis there, and this can no longer be limited exclusively to the Yezidis in Iraq.

When Prince Tahsin's son, Hazim Tahsin Beg, crowned himself prince on July 27, 2019 at the Lalish temple, it sparked a strong reaction within the Yezidi community, leading to deep divisions within the princely family²² and the community itself.²³ The main reason for this is the interference of some Kurdish political parties in this internal religious matter, which has contributed to eroding the Yezidi community's trust in its traditional leadership.

Indeed, the intervention of political parties in the appointment of religious and worldly positions, such as that of prince after the death of Prince Tahsin Beg, and in the selection of the Baba Sheikh²⁴ (the highest religious position) after the death of the previous one, has led to a loss of trust from many layers of Yezidi society towards the Spiritual Council and the positions of prince and Baba Sheikh. Some candidates for the position of prince, like Hazim Tahsin Beg and Herman Mirza Beg, as well as some members of the Spiritual Council, have repeatedly announced their affiliation and allegiance to the Kurdistan Democratic Party, which has contributed to a loss of trust in them from vast sectors of the Yezidi community, as well as a lack of respect for the dignity of the prince as a leading figure of Yezidi society. This has even led to disdain for the sanctity of the position of Baba Sheikh as the supreme religious post.

²² Abbas Karizi, "Religious Leaders and Chiefs Announce establishment of a New Emirate in Sinjar," published on August 5, 2019.

²³ The statement refers to a video posted on social media announcing the installation of a new prince in Mount Sinjar, Prince Nayef Dawood Bek, published on August 4, 2019.

²⁴ Transcription of an interview with Majid Hassan Ali, in: Saad Salloum, book mentioned above, pp. 73-74.

Conclusion : the Yezidis and the prospect of their gradual disappearance from Iraq

Non-Muslim minorities in Iraq have been seriously threatened by the constant targeting from extremist religious groups that emerged after the 2003 invasion. The rise of political Islam in its Shia and Sunni branches, as well as the increased influence of extremist Islamist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS, have exposed minorities to grave danger.

Historical factors, religious and sectarian conflicts in Iraq, and the failure of active political parties to guarantee citizens' rights, along with the rise of religious hate speech, particularly after the American invasion, have largely contributed to internal displacement and migration out of Iraq, severely affecting members of religious minorities. Despite the liberation of Sinjar and other regions of Iraq from ISIS since 2017, conditions for stability and a return to normal life remain insufficient. Political instability, persistent insecurity, widespread destruction of homes and infrastructure, lack of access to water and electricity, social tensions, and hostilities between certain Muslim clans who joined ISIS and the Yezidis, as well as military control by various units, factions, and armed militias in Sinjar, compounded by media disinformation and hate campaigns on social media against the Yezidis, have created a complex situation. Moreover, the intensification of political rivalries and conflicts due to the diverse political agendas of each military unit or armed faction contributes to preventing displaced persons from returning home or pushes them to migrate, thereby emptying their areas of origin and facilitating their resettlement by other groups, leading to significant demographic changes.

Regarding internal divisions and the role of Yezidi religious and secular leaders, it can be said that the hierarchy of religious and secular leadership is trending

towards more chaos, deviating from all organisational structures and showing signs of fragmentation and deepening divergences, especially after the death of both Prince Tahsin Beg and Baba Sheikh Khurto Ismail. For example, some members of the Spiritual Council have attempted to intervene in political affairs beyond their competencies and the responsibilities entrusted to them within their religious functions in the Spiritual Council, even exceeding the powers defined by inherited traditions.

In conclusion, this analysis explores the absence of sustainable programs and solutions for the return of displaced Yezidis residing in camps in the cities of the Kurdistan region to their areas of origin. There are no legal deterrents to prevent religious discourse against the Yezidis in Iraq in general and in the Kurdistan provinces in particular. Most displaced Yezidis prefer to migrate outside of Iraq due to their lack of trust in neighbouring communities, partisan exploitation, political marginalisation, unjust representation in state institutions, absence of social justice, and the persistence of trauma caused by the crimes committed by the Islamic State against the Yezidis. In summary, the new reality resulting from all these factors threatens the gradual disappearance of the Yezidis from Iraq and the Kurdistan region.

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