

Serenity for Sinjar: Resiliency and Reconciliation

Written by Ariel Harris

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In August of 2014, ISIS attacked the Yazidi-occupied mountain of Sinjar, killing thousands of men while taking thousands of women and children into sex slavery. A little over five years later, up to 200,000 Yazidi peoples are still displaced throughout northern Iraq and the world and over 3,000 people are still missing. Some villages are still unreachable and little to no effort has been made to restore the Yazidi way of life. Coupled with minimal humanitarian and governmental effort and lack of resources for reparation and repair, since the liberation of ISIS in later 2015, multiple militias have poured in, “creating a leadership vacuum that threatens the region’s stability” (Mednick 2018).

The history of the Yazidi population has been filled with strife and struggle since their inception. Regularly targeted, the Yazidi population has been constantly persecuted, often ignored, and ostracized for their differing religious beliefs from their predominantly Muslim neighbors. Located in northern Iraq, they have become an epicenter for violence, often overlooked and underrepresented by the quasi-independent region of Kurdistan and the Iraqi government. Left with little international recognition, continuing to be neglected and underrepresented, the Sinjar region and Yazidi population is left vulnerable to attack, isolated, and alone. With the perpetuation of subversive narratives (“Devil Worshipers”) around the Yazidi religion and the unsteady relationship between the Yazidi and their Kurdish and Iraqi neighbors, these actors have become complicit with the hate and violence that is sought against the Yazidi population.

A Strategic Approach Summary: Serenity for Sinjar

Reconciliation can be considered a transformational and social process rather than a definitive outcome in finding peace (Lederach 1997). Transformational being that it seeks to move away from relationships enmeshed with distrust and violence to one of mutual help and peaceful coexistence. The ability for multiple communities to coexist without resorting to violence is a small part in efforts of reconciliation. Respect and social equality takes some part while elements such as reflection and acknowledgement of the past can help to further instill trust in relationships allowing expiation and forgiveness to eventually take place. While reconstruction is crucial in the Yazidi case, sometimes smaller steps of reconciliation such as peaceful coexistence and mutual respect for basic human rights constitute significant outcomes and is the most that can be asked for in societies recovering from severe conflict (van Koonen, Wirya 2017).

This strategy (“Serenity for Sinjar”, Harris 2018) works to promote agency in changing the surrounding narrative of the Yazidi population and bringing peace to the Sinjar region through rehabilitation efforts between the Yazidi and their neighbors — Iraqi and Kurdish peoples. This strategy is broken up into three parts: justice, security, and reparations. It is based off of a study conducted containing interviews with the Yazidi population and their wishes following the 2014 Daesh (ISIS) attack. This strategy does not propose to solve all of the many issues the Yazidi population is plagued with but to begin the path to reparation and reconciliation to circumvent future violence. Members of the Yazidi and international communities have already begun to work to physically repair the Yazidi homeland, but there are seemingly no tangible efforts in reconstruction, and, while reconstruction is vital, it is not enough. By repairing relationships with the Kurdish and Iraqi population as well as building a community support system, this strategy aims to bring stability to a region that remains turbulent and vulnerable.

Justice

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This strategy defines justice as legal and social — fair and just trials of those who perpetrated war crimes against the Yazidis and the continuation of mass grave exhumation while working to diffuse collective guilt through community engagement and education of the Yazidi in schools. Efforts will also move to further repair infrastructure in the Sinjar region with partnership between local and international aid and, most of all, the Yazidi people. Great examples of those who are already working towards this goal — and those who can support this effort — are Nadia Murad, a Yazidi Daesh survivor who works to advocate for the Yazidi genocide through her organization *Nadia's Initiative* and Amal Clooney, who is an international human rights attorney who already works closely with Nadia as her representation. Rather than turning to local courts in Iraq that are deeply influenced by *sharia* — Islamic Quranic law — this strategy proposes all trials of ISIS war crime perpetrators be processed through the International Criminal Court. The international community has already asked the international tribunal to try ISIS members and, with partnerships to those who are already fighting this fight, the goal is to benefit the Yazidi in a fair and just outcome, freeing all impositions of Islamic belief which has created a great deal of strife in the Yazidi community in the past. These trials would hold perpetrators accountable and give peace of mind by providing rightful justice to the Yazidi people as they continue on a path to restitution.

In conjunction with the trials, mass grave exhumation is imperative to fostering resiliency and security. There are reportedly 202 mass graves from the ISIS attacks on Sinjar. In March 2019, the UN began exhuming these grave sites and Iraq has begun to identify victims, which are estimated to be between six to twelve thousand. While exhumation is a strenuous and emotionally taxing process, these graves create a leverage to the Yazidi people under the Government of Iraq. Under laws derived from international human rights law and international humanitarian law — both treaty and customary international law and international criminal law — the Iraqi government must: (a) investigate, prosecute, and punish those accused of serious rights violations; (b) search for and identify the dead; (c) reveal to victims and society at large all known facts and circumstances of past violations and abuses; (d) provide victims with appropriate reparations, including measures for restitution, compensation, rehabilitation and satisfaction; and (e) ensure repetition of such violations and abuses is prevented (OHCHR). These obligations by law hold the Iraqi government responsible for aiding the Yazidi in a legal framework. This is the foundation of the strategy, as each legal step will build off of this. While the government and the UN continue to exhume mass graves, the Yazidi people will be able to hold proper burials of members of their community. Intergroup interaction between the Muslim-Iraqi members and the Yazidi also provides an “olive branch” for the broken population. Given their trust in the national and territorial government is severed, these small steps can work to show that the Iraqi government is on their side. While this may be fairly optimistic as the Iraqi government and the Kurdish government both want the territory the Yazidi occupy while generally disregarding the people, these laws force some relationship that is beneficial to the Yazidi regardless of the actual intentions of the relationship.

Additionally, the Yazidi population has expressed the desire for their Muslim neighbors to denounce ISIS beliefs. Much of the Yazidi population believes in the collective guilt of their Sunni-Arab neighbors. By involving Sunni-Arab tribe leaders and fellow community members, publicly combatting the idea that they are ISIS sympathizers through local authorities and media provides the Yazidis with a comfort they have often not felt from their neighbors. In 2016, the Al-Shammar tribe dismissed ISIS ideologies and defended the Sinjar region, becoming a Yazidi ally. By following this example, other tribes can begin to reject these ideas and the label of “sympathizer.” These denouncements do not have to directly address the Yazidi, but rather the general public, to collectively combat ISIS radicalism which will foster a sense of security in the Yazidi population and their neighbors in a mutually beneficial way.

Finally, social justice is imperative to a peaceful way of life for the Yazidi. An imperative place to start is revising the education system, starting in the Sinjar region and growing across Iraq within ten years, to a less Islamic-centric and more secular approach. *Yazda*, a NGO fighting to combat future Yazidi violence, already has education projects in place. They are partnered with *IOM* (International Organization for Migration) and *USAID* (United States Agency for International Development) to provide schools in Sinjar and the surrounding region with 35 lecturers to supplement for the lack of teachers and schools, providing a computer lab and a robust learning environment that teaches English, science, critical thinking, and public engagement (*Yazda*). By creating a curriculum that is holistically approached, designed around factual Yazidi history and beliefs, *Yazda* can help to combat the “devil worshipper” narrative that haunts this population. By repairing relationships through aid in the previous steps, debunking this narrative should be easier.

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Security

Traditionally, the Yazidis uphold very strict beliefs on who can and cannot enter (or re-enter) their religion and structure their community around their religious actors. Following the 2014 ISIS takeover, the Baba Sheikh (“Pope”) and the Yazidi spiritual council ruled — those who serve around Baba — they would welcome back those who were captured, taking back women who were sold into sex slavery, or forced to convert. The welcoming back of these women has created a revolution in their religion (Otten 2018). By partnering with *Free Yezidi Foundation*, which works to protect and support the Yazidi community through international awareness and projects, they can continue to provide support through women’s and children’s centers to help heal those who were severely traumatized in the 2014 attack.

The Yazidi population has also expressed the need for armed defense. While giving untrained people firearms is not ideal, with the help of the UN Formed Police Units and their UN training, proper basic training of firearms for some Yazidi could be beneficial. A possible alternative would be partnering with key actors to communicate with the Iraqi officials to utilize the Peshmerga as defense for the Yazidi. The Peshmerga has done this in the past. Written in the aforementioned laws under justice, the government of Iraq is obligated to protect and prevent recurring crimes of this nature. With legal obligation and intergroup contact already being established, this is more realistic given the political climate and the divided territory of the Shingal region until the Yazidi can achieve autonomy in their security efforts.

Reparations

Finally, partnering with key organizations such as *Nadia’s Initiative* and *Amnesty International*, this strategy calls to continue the rebuilding of infrastructure with the aid of the Iraqi government. This will establish jobs to alleviate psychological stress and encourage further intergroup contact while building resiliency. This will build intercommunity business transactions by these established buildings. Funds for rebuilding will come from NGOs who have already started this work; these simple projects will lead to companies and businesses being built which both communities can profit off of. This also creates work programs with NGOs to rebuild the community how the Yazidis want it rebuilt, giving them agency in their community and fostering relationships to rebuild trust. These obligations from Iraq fall back on the aforementioned laws, once again, since they are obligated to provide appropriate measures of restitution and rehabilitation while NGOs can continue to advocate for the Yazidi cause, rallying support internationally.

Root of the Problem

Persecution is not a new phenomena in the Yazidi community. There are two possibilities for their perpetual condemnation: pathological dualism and scapegoating. Pathological dualism creates the idea of “us versus them,” splitting the world into good versus evil (Sacks 2015). A narrative has been created around the Yazidis, constructing them as satanists (an “evil” group) and, in order to protect themselves from the pervasive evil of this belief, surrounding Muslim groups have isolated the Yazidis and left them vulnerable and unprotected. The Yazidis have been dehumanized by their neighbors’ continuous persecution due to their difference in religiosity, remaining a minority, and termed as devil worshippers. Although there has been no recent direct attack by Arab/Muslim neighbors on the Yazidi, they are complicit with the violence against the Yazidis and have failed to protect them in times of distress. In 2014, Iraqi and Kurdistan governments withdrew troops before ISIS attacked, leaving the Yazidis further exposed to invaders. This has largely been an influence in radicalism in the area, and, with the power vacuum left by the withdrawal of ISIS, it has been easy to use the Yazidi in scapegoating.

Scapegoating is defined as the purposeful blame placed onto one particular group for a host of issues that are neither all fair to attribute to them nor solely fixable by changing said group (Sacks 2015). The friction between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Baghdad Government for territory has made the Yazidi an easy target since the Shingal region is within this disputable land. The Yazidi do not fit into the sectarian mosaic of Iraq, and, thus, have isolated them, shaping attitudes towards, and from, the Yazidi. They also identify as an independent ethno-religious group which further isolates them. Persecution has almost become a core component of their identity, and, already being remotely secluded geographically and accustomed to this discrimination, it has forced them to become an “insular culture” (*National Geographic*). These concepts prove that efforts must combat the narrative surrounding the

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Yazidi and gain the support of, and repair the relationship with, the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Iraqi Government. It is important to note that if the KRG becomes dominant then the Iraqi Government will play a smaller role and vice versa. This strategy is calling on the Iraqi government to play a forefront in actors since they have more obligations to the Yazidi for aid. It is imperative to show the Yazidis and Iraqi government can mutually benefit from each other with rehabilitation efforts and creating a better life for the Yazidi people.

Religious Actors, Community, and Heritage

Since the Yazidis are an ethno-religious group, they are bound by both their religion and their ethnicity, further separating them from their Arab-Muslim neighbors. Religious actors such as the Baba Sheikh can work with Imams to change the narrative surrounding the Yazidi by identifying similarities between Yazidism and Islam. By speaking their neighbors language, identifying shared beliefs on acceptance in both religions, and building trust, this can bridge the gap in miscommunication and misinterpretation between these two communities. They also can participate in the five daily prayers together, something both Yazidism and Islam share. Qawwals are also important members of the Yazidi community as they are responsible for educating members of the Yazidi community on history and traditions. They not only can continue to create a unifying factor within their own communities but go into the Muslim communities with the Baba Sheikh and permission of Imams and tribal leaders to educate others on the Yazidi traditions to defeat the devil worshipper narrative. They can also partner with *Yazda* to create education initiatives to change others' perceptions and transcribe traditions and history so there are physical texts, aiding in building consistency and bettering educational efforts.

Policy Makers and Community

Past prime ministers have worked closely in mass grave exhumation and U.S. officials, past and present, on personally investigating security and economic conditions that would prevent displaced minorities from returning to Iraq, including the Yazidis. The new prime minister, Al-Kadhimi, has shown a great interest in creating a peaceful Middle East and Iraq. He plays a huge role in how much can be done in aiding the Yazidis but has strongly condemned the violence that has occurred and has called on international aid to rebuild Iraq. He has stressed the importance of the Yazidis role in rebuilding their community and urges Yazidi women to share their stories of their violence with the world. His condemnation and call on aid is a promising step in unifying Iraq in the cause for helping the Yazidis.

Past and current Kurdistan prime ministers have also made promising steps in unifying Kurdistan and Iraq in the Yazidi cause. Both former and current prime minister Barzani have openly pledged to continue aid to rebuild homes and free abducted peoples in the destroyed Yazidi regions, calling on the Iraqi government and international community for aid. Their humanitarian policies and concern with rebuilding Kurdish territories as well as their open condemnation of the Yazidi violence is encouraging. The current prime minister has also acknowledged the strength of the Yazidi population and applauds them for the continued defense of their identity and religion. Although he and the KRG will likely take a lesser role if the Iraqi government steps up, the steps that both Al-Kadhimi and Barzani have taken an auspicious approach to a better future for not only the Yazidis but all of Iraq.

Stakeholders and Veto Players

With this strategy being completely balanced between justice, fact, and the community, the biggest stakeholder is the Yazidi population. This strategy is completely based on what the Yazidi people want so they are completely in control of what aid to accept, how to accept it, and what to do with it. The religious actors can refuse aid by the local and international communities but have expressed an explicit desire to be recognized and helped by their neighbors, both nationally and internationally. Repairing the severed relationships with their neighbors is paramount in feeling validated, secure, and keeping the integrity of the cause by involving those affected. Both prime ministers have the power to block aid from coming through but based on their open condemnation of the violence and their urgency from local and international communities to help rebuild their territories, this is very unlikely to happen. NGOs such as *Yazda*, *Free Yezidi Foundation*, *Amnesty International*, and *Nadia's Initiative* also have the power to cut off aid but, since most of these organizations are Yazidi-centric, this is unlikely. There has been no talk from any of these

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stakeholders for the complete eradication of aid and, until rehabilitation efforts are met to their fullest degree, these causes will back the Yazidi population.

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