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The displacement of the Yazidis after the rise of ISIS in Northern Iraq | Irene Dulz[‡]

Abstract

In the summer of 2014 the expansion of “The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” (ISIL/ISIS) from Syria into Iraqī territory triggered the displacement of two to three hundred thousand members of the Yazidi community in Northern Iraq. Displaced from Sinjar and other districts in the Nineveh governorate, the majority of Yazidis are hosted in the Duhok governorate and are living there as internally displaced persons. The article explores the impact of the displacement from different angles and investigates the impact on the Yazidi community as well as the impact on ethnic and religious aspects of social life in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Keywords: Northern Iraq; minorities; Yazidis; ISIS, internally displaced persons.

Abstract in Kurmanji

Koçberbûna Êzdiyan piştî peydabûna DAIŞê li Bakurê Iraqê

Havîna 2014an, belavbûna “Dewleta Îslamî ya Iraq û Şamê” (DAIŞ) ji Surî bo nav axa Iraqê, bû sebebê jicîhbûn û koçberiya dused-sêsed hezar endamên civaka êzdî li Bakurê Iraqê. Piraniya êzdiyên ji Şingalê û navçeyên din ên wîlayeta Mûsilê penaber bûyî, li wîlayeta Duhokê dihewin an jî wek penaberên navxweyî li wir dijîn. Ev gotar berê xwe dide vekolîna tesîra jicîhbûn an koçberbûnê ji nêrînên cuda û tesîra wê li ser civaka êzdî ligel tesîra wê ya li ser aliyên qewmî û dînî yê jiyana civakî li Herêma Kurdistanê ya Iraqê.

Abstract in Sorani

بە لایە کردنی نێزیدییان لە باکووری ئێراق لەپاش هاتنی داعش

لە هاوینی ٢٠١٤ دا کێشانی قەڵەمەرە ی دەولەتی نێسلامی لە ئێراق و شام لە سووریایە بۆ ئێراق بۆیە مایەیی بێلانەبوون و ناواری دووسەد تا سێ سەد هەزار کەس لە نێزیدیەکانی باکووری ئێراق. ناواری بوونەکە زیاتر لە شەنگال و هەندێ ناوچەیی پارێزگای موسڵ بوو بەرەو پارێزگای دوهۆک و لەمۆ و هەک خەلکی بێلانەیی ناوچۆیی حسابیان بۆ دەکرا. ئەم وتارە چەندەمکاتەو لەسەر تێگەشتنێکی جیاوازی بۆ کاربەگەری ئەم ناواری هەبۆنە لەسەر کۆمەڵگەیی نێزیدی و کاربەگەری لەسەر روشنی نایبێتی و رەگەزێتی لە زبانی کۆمەڵە نێزیدی کوردستانی ئێراقدا.

Introduction

On 3 and 4 August 2014, a small minority living in Northern Iraq made it into global headlines: pictures of terrified Yazidi women, children and elderly people, desperately fleeing the onslaught of a group which called itself “The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” (ISIL/ISIS), and later “The Islamic State” (IS) were all over the news.¹

[‡] Irene Dulz is a member of the German Middle East Studies Association for Contemporary Research & Documentation. E-mail: irene.dulz@me.com.

¹ Guthrie (2015) wrote that the term for the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” in the Arab world since 2013 is the acronym “Daesh”, standing for *الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام* “The Islamic State



The displacement wave of hundreds of thousands of Yezidis² from the Northern Iraqi regions of Sinjar and Sheikhhan in summer 2014 was caused by the expansion of ISIS. The rise of the group is closely linked to its first Iraqi territorial gains in January 2014, when it seized parts of the Anbar governorate. As Svoboda et al. (2014: 2) state, ISIS exploited a security vacuum between local tribal leaders and the Iraqi government of Iraq. Other factors were the withdrawal of the US troops from Iraq, which was completed by December 2011. In June, ISIS publicly claimed the cities of Mosul and Tikrit and “declare(d) a caliphate and change(d) its name to Islamic State.” In August 2014, ISIS took control of the Sinjar, Tel Afar, Tel Keyf and Hamdaniya districts triggering mass movements on Mt. Sinjar and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Yezidis, Shabak, Christians and Shiite Turkmen, in addition to Sunni Arabs and Sunni Kurds. The majority of Sinjari Yezidis fled into Syria and from there entered the Kurdistan Region of Iraq via the Syrian/Iraqi-Kurdish border crossing of Pesh Khabur.

Reference map of Northern Iraq



Source: MapAction PowerPoint Maps – Iraq, MapAction, 2015.

Within days of the ISIS invasion, the terror, human rights abuses, executions and killings led to a mass exodus of Yezidis, which left all their collective villages

in Iraq and the Levant”. Coined by the Syrian activist Khaled al-Haj Salih, the term signifies a refusal to acknowledge the “Islamic State” as such and mocking it at the same time.

² In Kurdish, referred to as *êzîdî* or *êzîlî*.

and towns depopulated and either occupied by ISIS-fighters and their affiliates, or deserted.³ As a result, the demographic distribution and make-up of the Yezidi community in Northern Iraq has changed dramatically.

This article describes the wave of displacement of the Yezidis in Northern Iraq in August 2014, which was accompanied by atrocities committed by ISIS including the mass execution of boys and men, forced conversions, boys forced into ISIS training camps and the kidnapping of thousands of Yezidi women and girls being sold at slave markets and held in sexual slavery by ISIS fighters. These events revive cultural memories of traumatic experiences in the history of the community, such as mass persecution and exodus from the Yezidi ancestral land, and are experienced as a collective traumatic event.

The majority of displaced Yezidis found immediate refuge as internally displaced persons (IDPs) within the borders of the Kurdistan Region in public buildings, unfinished and abandoned buildings, in community centres, with host families and later in camps established for the specific purpose of hosting the displaced. Two years after these events some individuals and families have settled in better camps than others. Spät (2008: 397) concludes:

(F)or long centuries, the Yezidi community was relatively isolated, and had limited contact with its – often hostile – Muslim neighbours, and even less with the world outside the Kurdish mountains. Today there is an ever-increasing contact with the external world, and what is more important, a growing participation in it (both in Europe and in Iraq).

This article will give an overview of the geographical distribution in Northern Iraq, and of historical perceptions of this minority. The next section examines the significant developments under the Ba'ath Regime, namely the collectivisation of Yezidi villages from the 1960s into the 1980s. The main part of the article will discuss the depopulation of Yezidi territories in Northern Iraq in the course of the ISIS invasion and the current situation of Yezidi IDPs in the Kurdistan Region, especially in Dohuk as this smallest Iraqi-Kurdish governorate hosts the vast majority of Yezidi displaced persons. Finally, the article explores some aspects of the emerging communal implications, i.e. the impact on the community itself.

It is too early to understand what the impact of the displacement of the Yezidi community in Northern Iraq will be with regards to demographic changes in the middle or longer term; will there be social cohesion and integration into the host community, or rather a return to the homelands? What will the impact be of the societal changes that may accompany, or be triggered by these developments?

The role of ISIS as a terror organisation has been thoroughly documented. However, little scientific research has been done on the impact of the displacements caused by ISIS, including that of the Yezidi community in 2014

³ For further information on collective villages and towns see background in this article.

and its consequences within the society. In-depth research and the collection of empirical data on this topic remains a desideratum, as research dealing with these aspects has not been published to date.

Background

The Yezidi community is one of the most prominent minorities in Iraq. It is part of the ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity of the country. Like the Christians of various confessions, the Shabak and the Kaka'i, the Yezidis are members of a small religious minority in Northern Iraq.

It is widely held that the Yezidis are ethnically Kurds and most Yezidis regard themselves as Kurds. However, there are voices of dispute as to whether Yezidis are indeed Kurds, form a distinct ethnic group, or are Arabs. These questions remain contested even within the community.

Fuccaro (1999) notes that in the context of Northern Iraq, Yezidis speak Kurdish as a first language and use the Kurmanji dialect with a substantial input of Arabic words. However, exceptions exist such as Yezidis from Be 'shiqe and Behzane, near Mosul city whose first language is usually Arabic.

Reliable primary data on the population numbers of Yezidis in Northern Iraq do not exist; the estimated number of Yezidis varies, and is based on secondary data rather than officially recognised population census. Yezidis are mainly found in Iraq and Syria, but also in Turkey, the Caucasian states and the Diaspora. Members of the community suggest that half a million to one million live in Iraq. Spät (2008) estimates that perhaps 200,000 to 300,000 Yezidis live in Northern Iraq; Maisel (2008) puts their numbers at 400,000. The Central Intelligence Agency statistics (2015) show that the total of the Iraqi population is 37 million. Possibly, therefore, the Yezidi minority makes up 1 to 1.5 percent of the population.

Until the summer of 2014, approximately 10 percent of Iraq's Yezidis lived in the Kurdish-administered north of Iraq, in recent years referred to as the Kurdistan Region. Within the Region, Yezidis predominantly reside in the Dohuk governorate, which has been controlled by the *pêşmerge* forces⁴ since the 1990s. Sharing borders with Syria and Turkey, Dohuk constitutes the smallest of the three Iraqi-Kurdish governorates, Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaimaniya.

Until August 2014, the majority of the Yezidi community (around 90 percent) lived within the so-called disputed internal boundaries (DIBs) of the Nineveh governorate,⁵ being demographically dominant in certain districts. The

⁴ *Pêşmerge* literally means "Those who face death". The Kurdish *pêşmerge* forces, although part of the new Iraqi Army, are controlled through the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

⁵ The term "disputed internal boundaries" refers to territory within Iraq's boundaries which are disputed by the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). These are usually ethnically and religiously diverse governorates. This applies in particular to parts of Nineveh and Kirkuk, but also to smaller areas within Salah ad-Din and Diyala governorates. "Disputed territories in the Nineveh Plain" refers to territories to the north and east of the Mosul

DIBs consist of 15 districts which stretch across the four northern governorates of Nineveh, Kirkuk, Salah ad-Din and Diyala (Shanks, 2015). The author's study (Dulz, 2001) found that the Yezidi community of Iraq were settled in two enclaves in the Nineveh governorate, in areas around Mt. Sinjar as well as in the nearby Sheikhan region. These areas were subject to the former regimes' Arabisation campaigns, as a result of which the residents were persecuted and displaced. Mt. Sinjar was depopulated in four waves (in 1965, between 1973–1975 and 1986–1987), during which the residents of some 400 Yezidi villages were forced to live in collective villages and towns (*mujamma'āt*); the most recent displacement occurred in August 2014. Similarly, Sheikhan was “Arabised” in 1975.

From the time of Ottoman rule, under the British Mandate, during the 1958 revolution and the establishment of the Republic of Iraq, and under the Ba'ath Regime, the Yezidi community lived in Northern Iraq, generally in relative isolation. The Advisor at the General Board for Kurdistan Areas Outside the Region, KRG (M. Dinnayi, p. c., 25 November, 2015) explains that the persistence of seclusion is due to religious reasons, for the sake of protection, and ultimately a result of the fear of persecution.

The 14th-century Syrian jurist Ibn Taimīya discussed the heretical status of the followers of the Yezidi religious reformer, the Sufi Sheikh 'Adī bin Musāfir, as “excessive”. Fuccaro (1999: 2) notes that “the Yazidis, in the same way as other primordial groups have often been perceived as closely-knit, self-contained and inward-looking communities”. Accounts produced by Western scholars, travellers and journalists in the 19th and early 20th century “view them as a rigid social and cultural entity”. Layard (1873) observes that the Yezidis were stigmatised as “devil worshippers”; their religious difference from other groups offering one central reason for their retreat to the seclusion of Sinjar. Fuccaro (1999) explains that the Yezidis from Sinjar devoted themselves to agriculture and making a living from livestock-farming. Living conditions in Sinjar are harsh, marked by extreme heat in summer and difficult agricultural conditions, including severe water scarcity and drought. Fuccaro (1999: 11) states:

(A)s a result of increasing religious Ottoman persecutions, the marginalisation of the Yazidi religion determined the dramatic expansion of one of the two major Yazidi enclaves of Northern Iraq, that of Jabal Sinjar. This mountainous area located in the middle of the Jazira plateau developed a distinct diaspora settlement since the early Ottoman period and over time a retained tribal character. The other major Yazidi settlement which was located in the Shaykhan district north of the city of Mosul and was the seat of the Yazidi Emirates.

city which were controlled by Saddam Hussein's military up to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and subsequently came under the control of the Kurdish *pêşmerge* forces.

Throughout history, the Yezidi community has faced persecution due to its religious and linguistic identity as well as its ethnic affiliation as Kurds. On the basis of orally transmitted accounts, S. Tagay (2015) states that the Yezidis remember 74 incidents of mass persecution or genocide.⁶ As Allison (2001: ix) states, “oral tradition is the vehicle for transmission of most Kurdish history and almost all specifically Yezidi history.” Some stories of mass persecution that were handed down in oral transmission predate Ottoman rule, while others refer to latest exodus of the Yezidi community from Sinjar in August 2014.

Collectivisation under the Ba’ath regime

Savelsberg et al. (2008: 103–104) document the areas inhabited by the Yezidi community in Iraq until the early 1960s and 1970s as follows:

- a) 137 villages located in or close to Mt. Sinjar (Kurdish: *Çiyayê Şingalê*),
- b) 5 Yezidi neighbourhoods within Sinjar city, and
- c) 182 villages spread over the Sheikhan region and Nineveh Plain.

From the mid-1970s onwards the Ba’ath Regime under Saddam Hussein initiated a process of forced displacement. The residents were displaced either to so-called “collective” villages and towns (sg. *mujamma’*, pl. *mujamma’ât*) or to other parts of Iraq. The persecution of ethnic (non-Arab) and religious minorities (non-Sunni Muslims) such as Kurds and Shia Muslims in Iraq is well documented. Van Bruinessen (1994: 172–175) defines the persecution of Kurds in Iraq during the so-called *Anfal* campaigns as a series of brutal offensives which amounted to genocide. The *Anfal* campaigns were carried out by the regime, in particular by Ali Hassan Al-Majid, nicknamed “Chemical Ali”. The genocide is well documented by Human Rights Watch (1993; 1995) and recognised by Iraq and some western states.

The Yezidi minority was targeted by the Iraqi regime primarily owing to its affiliation and definition as ethnic Kurds. As the author (Dulz, 2001: 68–75) has shown, the Yezidi people in Iraq were subsequently persecuted and became victims of the *Anfal* campaigns. In the course of the *Anfal* campaigns the Yezidi community was forcedly displaced from their indigenous villages and resettled into collective villages and towns.

The establishment of collective villages in Iraq from the late 1960s until the early 1980s is an example of the carrot-and-stick policies conducted by the Iraqi regime: agricultural reform and infrastructure development on the one hand, state control and displacement on the other. The aim of the first generation of collective villages, the Ba’ath government claimed, was development, agricultural reform, and through this the inclusion of the rural population in the economic dynamics and prosperity of oil-rich Iraq (Reccia, 2014). Alkazaz (1981) and Wirth (1982) record that the agricultural reform was implemented

⁶ Tagay Sefik, speech at the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide, St. Jacobi, Hamburg, Germany, 25 April 2015.

throughout Iraq in the late 1970s and early 1980s, before the Iran-Iraq war had a devastating impact on the country.

The second-generation collective villages were intended to control the rebellious population opposed to the regime, specifically the Kurds and Shiites, minorities and other opponents. The inhabitants of collectives were easily controllable, a modern “Iraqi” way of life was imposed on the inhabitants, and rural life was standardised. Recchia (2014) states that “the spatial reorganisation of communities made them easier targets and more malleable objects of administration through the disruption of traditional livelihoods...”

Subsequently, many of the village-sized collectives have grown and developed into sizable towns and small cities. Examples include the large Yezidi collective towns Mahat, Khatara and Qahtaniya in the Sheikhan and the Sinjar region. More examples throughout the Kurdistan Region exist such as Baharka, Binaslawa, Daratu and Kasnazan which are Muslim populated. Observing the landscape of Iraqi Kurdistan in recent years, Recchia (2014) concludes that collective towns have become the main contributory factor to contemporary urbanisation and they were ultimately absorbed by larger urban centres or turned into independent urban cores.

Some characteristics are specific to collectives throughout Iraq: they were initially populated by ethnically, linguistically and religiously homogenous groups during the Ba’ath Regime. After 2003, when sectarianism erupted, in the case of the Yezidi community and the Christian minority alike, the concept of homogeneity has provided a sense of protection.

The long-term result of the forced displacement by the Ba’ath Regime is that rural communities have permanently deserted their indigenous villages to live in so-called collective villages and towns. This applies to all minorities, ethnic and religious, and as Savelsberg et al. (2011) conclude, the majority of Iraqi Yezidis are now effectively urbanised in collective settlements. The author’s fieldwork shows that residents of collectives have not returned to their villages of origin either in large numbers or in a systematic or organised manner.⁷ The “collective” pattern of settlement persists for the areas inhabited by Yezidis in the Sinjar and the Sheikhan region.

However, examples of the rebuilding of and the return to villages exist for other areas in the Kurdistan Region. As Fischer-Tahir (2010) has demonstrated, Qaradagh, an area consisting of 86 villages and a centre named Qaradagh to the southwest of Sulaimaniya city, was completely destroyed during the *Anfal* campaigns in 1988, but after the Kurdish uprising in 1991 many inhabitants returned to rebuild their villages.

⁷ The author conducted research on the situation of the Yezidis in the Kurdistan Region, in particular amongst the displaced Yezidis in the Dohuk governorate from August to December 2014 and June 2015 onwards. The research results are included in this paper.

Depopulation of nineveh in the course of the isis invasion

The majority of Iraqi Yezidis are originally from the Nineveh governorate, whilst 10 percent are from the Dohuk governorate.⁸

Since 1957 no official population census has been carried out in Iraq that would show the ethnic and religious breakdown of the disputed territories. The district of Sinjar has the highest concentration of Yezidis and includes Mt. Sinjar, the territory to its south and north, the city of Sinuni to its west and Sinjar city, which is the district capital and has an ethnically and religiously mixed population. According to the International Organization of Migration (2011) the population of Sinjar district numbered approximately 350,000 people in 2011, an estimated two thirds of whom were Yezidis. ‘Ein Sifne or Sheikhan, the capital of Sheikhan district, is ethnically and religiously mixed. The largest Yezidi collective town of Sheikhan district is Mahat with approximately 13,500 inhabitants, while there are also numerous Yezidi collective villages and small towns.



IRAQ: Ninewa Governorate

Source: MapAction PowerPoint Maps – Iraq, MapAction, 2015.

⁸ The Nineveh governorate has 5 districts accommodating Yezidis which are the districts of Sinjar, Tel Afar, Tel Keyf, Sheikhan and Hamdaniye, including Be’shiqe, Qahtaniya and the Sinuni sub-districts. An estimated 90 percent of the Yezidi population in Iraq used to live in these districts.

Since the US-led invasion into Iraq in 2003, vast territories inhabited by the Yezidi community have more or less come under the control of the *pêşmerge* forces. Firstly, Sheikhan and subsequently other areas in the disputed districts such as Tel Afar, Tel Keyf and Hamdaniya, and periodically parts of Sinjar district were *de facto* incorporated into the Kurdistan Region and widely governed by its administration, the KRG.

In early 2014, ISIS occupied Mosul, and advanced across the Nineveh governorate. The wave of displacement from the north-west of the Nineveh governorate in August 2014 is the result of a security vacuum which was exploited by ISIS. In addition, according to van den Toorn (August 2014), a researcher who spoke to a number of Yezidis in the area, the *pêşmerge* forces and the political leadership of the Kurdistan Region abandoned Sinjar once it came under attack.⁹ The mass exodus of the Yezidi community left Yezidi collective villages and towns either under the control of ISIS or abandoned.

Reach Initiative (2014), which aims at facilitating planning by aid actors and supports inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms, suggests that from early to mid-August 2014 up to 200,000 people fled their homes in Sinjar city and the surrounding towns and villages in two phases of displacement. Reach Initiative comes to the conclusion that: “On August 3rd an initial wave of IDPs fled their homes directly along the Syrian/Iraqi border towards Dohuk Governorate, mainly by vehicle. The road became inaccessible to IDPs from August 4th following intensification of fighting on the Rabia’a Crossing, on the Syrian/Iraqi border. Approximately 130,000 IDPs were stranded on Mount Sinjar...”

Based on numerous interviews with survivors, religious leaders, etc., the Human Rights Council of the Office of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights (15 June 2016: 7) describes the subsequent days as follows:

Those who fled early enough to reach the upper plateau of Mount Sinjar were besieged by ISIS. A humanitarian crisis quickly unfolded as ISIS trapped tens of thousands of Yazidi men, women, and children in temperatures rising above 50 degrees Celsius and prevented them from accessing water, food or medical care... American, Iraqi, British, French, and Australian forces were involved in airdrops of water and other supplies to the besieged Yazidis. ISIS fighters shot at planes airdropping aid, and at helicopters attempting to evacuate the most vulnerable Yazidis.

The second phase is described by Reach Initiative (2014): “Evacuation of the stranded population began on August 4th following the establishment of a safe corridor by Kurdish armed forces. The majority of people left Mount Sinjar between August the 9th–13th and travelled through Syria in order to reach

⁹ This much discussed issue and the perception of many displaced Yezidis from Sinjar that they were abandoned was also repeatedly reported to the author in the months following the event.

Nawroz Camp in Northern Syria, or camps and communities in Dohuk Governorate, KRI.”

The corridor was established by armed forces of the People’s Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG) which are militarily linked and supported by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkeerên Kurdistanê*, PKK). YPG played the most significant role in rescuing Yezidis and others fleeing ISIS from Sinjar and opening a safe passage to flee north across the Iraqi border into Syria and Rojava, the self-administered region of northeast Syria. By September 2014, the Roj Women’s Association (2014: 3) reported that 4,000 Yezidi refugees were living in the Nawroz camp in northeast Syria. By early September 2014, the International Organization of Migration (IOM: 2014) observed that the Dohuk governorate hosted the largest IDP population, comprising more than 465,000 individuals.

The current distribution of Yezidi IDP population in Dohuk

Dohuk is the smallest of a total of 18 Iraqi governorates, with an estimated population of less than 500,000 in 2004 (Iraq Central Organization for Statistics and Information Technology, 2005: 16). As a result of economic prosperity, relative security and the proximity to Turkey and Syria, the population density in Dohuk has increased by 168% between 1997 and 2009. This is the highest increase of all 18 Iraqi governorates over this period (Iraq National Population Commission, 2012: 39).

The International Organisation of Migration (IOM: 2015a) states that in April 2015, the Dohuk governorate hosted approximately 452,500 internally displaced persons (IDPs), mostly originating from Nineveh governorate, and in smaller numbers from the Anbar and Salah ad Din governorates.

By September 2015, 18 camps were built to accommodate IDPs from the displacement waves in June to August 2014 in more than 42,500 shelters (in tents and cabins). Camps were established by United Nation agencies and international non-governmental organisations, the Turkish Aid Agency (AFAD), and the Dohuk governorate (BRHA, 2015: 14).

The Board of Relief and Humanitarian Assistance (BRHA) is the local governmental authority appointed to respond to the humanitarian needs for refugees, IDPs and host community in the Dohuk governorate. Statistical data on the demographic composition in IDP camps in Dohuk according to ethnic and religious groups was published by BRHA. Accordingly, 85% of camp inhabitants in Dohuk governorate are Yezidis. The concentration of Yezidis is obvious in camps which are located in or close to Yezidi villages, towns or collective villages such as Sharia, Khanke, Eryan, Bajid Kandala 1 and Bajid Kandala 2. These IDP camps are exclusively inhabited by Yezidis. The other IDP camps (such as Bersive 1, Bersive 2, Chamishko, Dawidiya, Kabartu 1, Kabartu 2, Mamilyan and Qadya) accommodate IDP families with different ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds such as Yezidis, Sunni Kurds, Shia Kurds and Shabak (BRHA, 2015: 17).

Table 1. Implementing agencies of camps

Implementing agency	Camps	Shelters	Total number of shelters in percentage	Names of camps
UN agencies and INGOs	8	11,274	26%	Bajid Kandala 1, Bajid Kandala 2, Dawidiya, Khanke, Bersive 2, Germawa, Sheikhan and Darkar
Turkish agency (AFAD)	2	6,500	15%	Sharia, Bersive 1
Rwanga Foundation	1	3,000	7%	Qadya (Rwanga Foundation)
Dohuk governorate	7	22,000	52%	Kabartu 1, Kabartu 2, Chamishko, Esyar, Bardarash, Mamilyan and Mamrashan
Total	18	42,774	100%	

Source: BRFLA, 2015: 14.

Living in a camp or in temporary accommodation is experienced as a caesura impacting all aspects of life, putting strains on coping with the trauma, on the gender roles and on the relations within the nuclear and the extended family. Relationships within the family change, family members and relatives have been abducted and have gone missing, neighbours have settled in other camps or have returned home. In Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Yezidi women report that it also makes daily life more difficult.¹⁰ As household roles and responsibilities continue to be gender-specific, female roles, such as housework, cooking, fetching water, caring for children, elders and the disabled, are taking up more time.

In December 2015, the International Organization of Migration (IOM: 2015b) recorded 409,170 IDPs in Dohuk governorate, making up some 12–13% of the total of 3,195,000 IDPs in Iraq from April 2014 to December 2015. An estimated 70–85% of the IDP population in Dohuk governorate (286,500 to 345,000) are Yezidis from Sinjar.

¹⁰ FGDs with Yezidi women from Sinjar (Khana Sor, Sinuni, Tel Azer, Gohbal, and Sîpa Sheikh Khidir) living in IDP camps in Dohuk were carried out by the author in March 2016. The participants were aged from 17 to 50 years and of different marital status (single, married, and widowed).

Inter-community cohesion and integration into the host society

The impact of the ISIS occupation on Nineveh's society goes beyond displacement. Other problems, such as demographic engineering, are expected to occur on a large scale whether the balance of power in Nineveh remains as it is now, or if the power shifts to another force.

The ethnic, religious and linguistic fabric of Northern Iraq is characterised by diversity. The communities of Nineveh are polarised and deep divisions exist between Sunni Arabs, Kurds and minorities. One perception is that the Kurds and minorities perceive Sunni Arabs as aggressors (PAX: 2015). In interviews, Yezidis who were displaced from Sinuni and Be'shiq, two ethnically and religiously mixed towns, recount stories of their Sunni Muslim neighbours turning against them in the event of the ISIS invasion.¹¹

Divisions are observed between Kurds and the minority groups. It seems that the *pêşmerge* forces failed to protect the Sinjari Yezidis from ISIS in August 2014. Van den Toorn (August 2014) suggests that the *pêşmerge* forces and the KRG leadership misled the Yezidi community about the threat, and abandoned them once they came under attack. The militia groups fighting against ISIS on and around Mt. Sinjar are (1) the Sinjar Defence Units under Haider Shesho, a non-active member of the PUK, (2) the Yezidi militia group of Qasim Shesho under the auspices of the KDP affiliated *pêşmerge* forces, and (3) the Sinjar Resistance Units headed by Hayri Demir, affiliated with the PKK. These three militias or military groups are pro-Kurdish, pro-Yezidi, and their motives, political affiliations and military capacity to confront ISIS differ.

In addition, rifts are apparent within the minority communities. The Yezidi community of Northern Iraq is no exception and characterised by differences within the community. Divisions exist along lines of politics and party affiliation (the KDP *versus* the PUK), self-definition of ethnic affiliation (Kurdish *versus* Yezidi *versus* Arab), social class and the religious caste system (Sheikhs and Pirs *versus* laity), gender (male *versus* female) and language (Kurmanji *versus* Arabic).

Cordeman (2010) anticipates that "... the risk of new forms of ethnic and sectarian violence – especially ethnic conflict between Arab, Kurd and other minorities in the North" as one of the key challenges Iraq faces. The Livelihood and Social Cohesion cluster of the United Nations has pointed to a lack of consistent data, allowing one to track tensions or proxy indicators of social tensions (OCHA, 2015: 7). Escalations in inter-community relations are sporadically documented in the media.

In a report Amnesty International concludes that the forced displacement of Arab residents in Northern Nineveh and other contested areas in Northern Iraq contribute to "further aggravating inter-communal tensions and violence in the country, with grave implications for (social cohesion) and the security of the different communities" (2016: 42).

¹¹ Interviews with Yezidis living in IDP camps in Dohuk were carried out by the author in March 2016.

The several hundred thousand Sinjar Yezidis living in the Kurdistan Region (including Northern Nineveh) as IDPs have found shelter in camps, informal settlements, publicly run schools, unfinished and abandoned buildings and religious communal buildings, with relatives, or in rented accommodation. Since their displacement in August 2014 changes have occurred at many levels. The new living environment with mixed ethnic and religious demographics brings new experiences and encounters with members of other communities. It requires redefinitions concerning social and inter-community cohesion, freedom of movement, coping strategies and gender as well as protection issues. A consequence of the displacement is the discontinuation of a secluded lifestyle in the Yezidi villages and collective villages of Sinjar region. Encounters with other communities *viz* Muslim Kurds, Muslim Arabs and Turkmen, take place on a daily basis in the new living environment and apply to all members of the Yezidi community, girls and boys, women, men and elders.

In March 2016, FGDs were carried out by the author with Yezidi women living in camps in Dohuk to gain a better understanding of inter-community cohesion in the new environment.¹² One outcome of the FGDs was that “inter-community cohesion” was defined as the absence of hostilities or negative experiences with members of other communities (including other displaced persons and the host community). Some women mentioned that they felt respected by the host community. Proactive encounters for social reasons such as visits to other ethnic and religious displaced communities on the occasion of religious festivities, holidays and other traditional practices were not reported. Inter-communal cohesion arises from necessary and practical encounters with the host community, for example to purchase goods, for education, for medical care and other services, and for work.

The divisions within the Northern Iraqi society pose a challenge for the integration perspectives of IDPs into the host society of the Dohuk governorate as inter-community relations remain superficial. Further research is required to understand the impact of the demographical changes on such parameters as education, income and living standards, employment, social and eco-social cohesion, gender, and public health.

It should be noted that such a deep and widely-felt impact as was caused by the spread of ISIS in the Yezidi spiritual heartlands, has never yet been documented in the long history of Yezidi persecutions. The resulting trauma is felt at the individual, familiar and communal level. The documented forms of persecution have never been so diverse and horrific: from physical attacks to terror, murder, rape, forced conversion, abduction and sexual enslavement, without taking into account the impoverishment of those who were displaced. Never, it seems, has the persecution of Yezidis touched so many and left their futures so uncertain.

¹² See note 11.

Turning to the future, the situation remains unresolved despite the recent military gains that have been made against ISIS, notably the recapture of Sinjar city by *pêşmerge* and allied forces, including Yezidi militias, in January 2016. At the time of writing it is too early to speculate about the prospect of return as a durable solution while ISIS continues to pose a real threat from the key city of Mosul.

The subject of whether and when to return is widely discussed in the Yezidi community. It was a topic discussed in FGDs carried out with Yezidi women from Sinjar living in camps in Dohuk.¹³ The desire to return home was consistently expressed by all participants. The lack of security and the lack of trust in securing Sinjar and other areas of return are prominent subjects in the discussion. Security, the experience of failure by the *pêşmerge* forces to secure Sinjar from the invasion of ISIS, the trauma caused by the persecution by ISIS, the loss of family members and the lack of confidence that Sinjar is secure from future invasions by ISIS are the main subjects that come up in discussions on whether and when to return to Sinjar. The question of security is paramount. Other factors are food supply, economic considerations such as herding of livestock, the farming of agricultural lands, homesickness, the lack of perspectives in the new living environment, and the continuation of children's education.

Certainly some long-term demographic changes have been triggered, the scale of which are yet to be determined. Further social and demographic change can be anticipated, since currently displaced Yezidis will have to decide whether to return to their places of origin or not and when this becomes viable. As with all people in the region, and most particularly persecuted minorities that were affected by the actions of ISIS, the implications for the future are likely to be long-lasting and wider than may have been anticipated by many. The sense of insecurity and persecution has intensified, and despite efforts of the KRG authorities to support a return to the homeland, the political perspective remains unpredictable. One positive corollary to the damage ISIS has caused is the reaction of the Yezidi spiritual leader, the Baba Sheikh, who issued a proclamation urging the community for the first time to accept the return to the community of Yezidi women who have been forced to renounce their faith and convert to Islam (UNHCR, 2015). This shows the ability of the religion itself to recognise, and indeed begin to undo the damage it has suffered by allowing the possibility of change.

Conclusion

The advance of ISIS into Sinjar and the Nineveh Plains in August 2014 led to dramatic demographic changes in Northern Iraq. An estimated 286,500 to 345,000 Yezidis, originating from various districts in the Nineveh governorate, are currently living as IDPs in the Dohuk governorate and the disputed

¹³ See note 11.

territories in the north of the Nineveh governorate. At the time of writing it remains uncertain if, when and in which numbers Sinjar Yezidis will return to their homeland, and whether it will be possible to return to the demographic situation that existed prior to August 2014. By May 2016 the International Organization of Migration-Iraq (IOM-Iraq, 2016) found that only 3,220 families had returned to their location of origin in Sinjar, mostly living in informal camps in the north of Mt. Sinjar. Sinjar is the scene of, or at least affected by a proxy war which is taking place in Iraq. In the Kurdistan Region after the fall of the Ba'ath Regime, a system of self-protection was set up by establishing local militias formed by minority groups. Sinjar falls squarely within the territories disputed by the central Iraqi government and the KRG. Rescuing it from ISIS will not resolve the pre-existing political dispute.

It is equally uncertain to what extent the displaced Yezidi population will be able to integrate and prosper in the host community in Dohuk. Nor can it be foreseen whether a durable solution can be found for some outside the traditional Yezidi territories, either inside Iraq or elsewhere.

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