伊拉克 - 民族

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Profile

The Yezidi religion, with 4,000 year-old origins, seems to be a synthesis of pagan, Zoroastrian, Manichaean, Jewish, Nestorian Christian and Muslim elements. Yezidis are dualists, believing in a Creator God, now passive, and Malak Ta’us (Peacock Angel), executive organ of divine will. They believe they are descended from Adam but not Eve and are thereby different from the rest of humankind. Excommunication, therefore, has dire implications. Conversely, one cannot become a Yezidi and marriage outside of the community is forbidden. The name probably derives from the Persian izard (angel, deity). Historically, they have been subject to severe persecution owing to their beliefs and practices.

Prior to the ISIS advance, Iraq’s Yezidis numbered approximately 500,000 and were concentrated in Sinjar, 150 kilometres west of Mosul, with a smaller community in Shaikhan, the Kurdistan foothills east of Mosul, where their most holy shrine of Shaykh Adi is located. The Yezidis are by and large impoverished cultivators and herdsmen who have a strictly graded religio-political hierarchy and tend to maintain a more closed community than other ethnic or religious groups. Yezidis speak the Kormanje dialect of Kurdish and some identify ethnically as Kurds, while others view themselves as having a distinct ethnic identity as Yezidis.

Historical context

Yezidis traditionally were tribally organized. Some tribes were willing to combine in confederation with Muslim and Christian tribes under an acknowledged paramount chief. Until the nineteenth century they were a formidable presence around Mosul, but endured devastating assaults from Sunni Kurdish tribes and Ottoman troops, partly because of the disorder created by Yezidi tribes but also because of growing religious antipathy, heightened by European interest in the Yezidis.
Following the formation of Iraq, the Yezidis proved resistant to both British and Iraqi efforts to extend direct administration to the region. Iraqi efforts to introduce conscription led to repeated risings, notably 1935-40, critically at a time when the Shammar bedouin were encroaching on traditional Yezidi pasturage. Conscription was closely associated with Ottoman rule, removed vital manpower, and exposed Yezidis to cohabitation in barracks with ‘sons of Eve’.

The Yezidis have always remained on the fringes of Iraqi society, but because of the strategic position of Sinjar Mountain they received unwelcome attention from Hussein’s state security. Under the Ba’ath regime, repeated efforts were made to Arabize the area and also to persuade Yezidis that they were really Arab. Reaction was mixed, but some Yezidis supported the Kurdish national movement. Yezidis reluctantly served in the army against Iran, and the community escaped the Anfal, the Kurdish genocide, in 1987-8.

In the wake of the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, Yezidis faced increased persecution by religious extremists who incorrectly regarded them as ‘devil worshippers’ due to a misinterpretation of their religion. Community members were regularly targeted by extremists, a July 2008 report from Iraq’s Ministry of Human Rights estimating that between 2003 and the end of 2007, a total of 335 Yezidis had been killed in direct or indirect attacks. The effect of these and later attacks on the community were often far reaching. During 2013, for instance, there were numerous attacks on Yezidi students attending Mosul University. By the end of the year, approximately 2,000 Yezidi students had stopped attending their classes at the university.

Under persistent pressure to assimilate with Iraqi Kurds, particularly in the northern territories, abduction and forced marriage were particular risks for Yezidis. Yezidi activists reported that, after 2003, there were numerous cases of Yezidi women being abducted and forced to marry members of the Kurdish security force Asayish. Yezidi families were threatened with reprisals if women and girls refused marriage with militia members. Such marriages effectively sealed off these women from their families and communities as Yezidi beliefs prohibit marriage outside the religion, and those who undertake such vows thereby renounce their faith and must identify as Kurdish.

The advance of ISIS into Sinjar in August 2014 led to the displacement of almost the entire Yezidi community and the capture, killing and enslavement of thousands. The Kurdish Peshmerga forces, who had been protecting the area, withdrew without warning, leaving the local population defenceless. An estimated 200,000 Yezidi civilians fled for their lives, with at least 50,000 heading to Sinjar Mountain, where they were trapped in the scorching summer heat for days without food or water. Those unable to escape or who attempted to defend their villages from ISIS fighters were subsequently murdered or abducted, with large-scale massacres of Yezidi men and boys in the villages of Qiniyeh, Kocho and Jdali. Thousands of Yezidi women and girls were abducted for the purpose of forced marriage or sexual slavery. Large numbers of women were subsequently transported to Syria to be sold or forcibly married to ISIS fighters. ISIS’ treatment of the Yezidi minority has been labeled as genocide by the United Nations and several other international organizations. According to recent estimates by international academics published in POLS Health, released by the KRG authorities, around
6,800 Yezidis were kidnapped and around 3,100 killed as a result of the ISIS advance, primarily over a few days in early August 2014.

Current issues

The majority of Yezidis displaced by the ISIS advance are living in camps and informal settlements in Iraqi Kurdistan, especially in Dohuk governorate. Women and girls who escaped from ISIS captivity, and who faced rape, torture, forced conversion and other serious violations, are deeply traumatized by their ordeals, and their psychological recovery is impeded by the fact that many have family members who are still missing. As of late 2016, an estimated 3,700 Yezidis remained in ISIS captivity.

The reintegration of children captured by ISIS into the Yezidi community is another challenge. Hundreds of Yezidi boys who were captured in 2014 were separated from their families and brought to ISIS training centers where they were indoctrinated in the group’s ideology, given military training and forced to fight for the group. Former child soldiers will require intensive counseling and rehabilitation to overcome the trauma they have endured by being exposed to brutal violence at a young age, and to reintegrate into the Yezidi community.

Sinjar was retaken from ISIS control in November 2015 by a coalition of Kurdish and Yezidi forces. Nevertheless, very few Yezidi civilians have returned to live in the area. The area is under the control of local Yezidi militias as well as forces affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the People’s Protection Units (YPG). The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) authorities have restricted access to Sinjar, preventing the flow of food, water and other materials in and out of the region, ostensibly to prevent the supplying of PKK forces. However, the blockade also affects the movement of humanitarian aid and prevents Yezidi civilians from resettling in their areas.

The future political status of Sinjar remains an open-ended question. Many Yezidis are deeply distrustful of the KRG authorities, since they view the Peshmerga’s withdrawal from Sinjar in 2014 as having paved the way for their genocide at the hands of ISIS. As a result, many are opposed to any attempts to incorporate Sinjar as part of Iraqi Kurdistan. Some Yezidi leaders are advocating for an autonomous zone, possibly with some measure of international protection. However, without concrete guarantees of security and investment in reconstruction, it is unlikely that large numbers of Yezidis will begin returning to Sinjar. Many are instead choosing to emigrate, their recent experience at the hands of ISIS having convinced them that they are no longer safe in Iraq. By mid-2016, it was estimated that around 120,000 Yezidis have sought asylum in Europe since 2014.

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