

Tensions in Sinjar Continue to Threaten Yazidis' Return

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Brief Analysis

Iraq's Yazidis need assertive international support to protect their rights and well-being.

Almost seven years after the ISIS invasion of Sinjar, many internally displaced Iraqi Yazidis still hope to return to the areas in Sinjar they were forced to leave against their will. However, their hopes of return—and current Sinjar residents' hopes for stability—have again been dashed, this time by Turkey's escalating threats of a military operation in the region. In response to the recent Turkish threat, the Popular Mobilization Forces have [sent three brigades to the Sinjar district \(https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/13022021\)](https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/13022021), setting up bases in Mount Sinjar and spreading across the Syrian border.

The potential escalation has halted a trend of Yazidis returning to Sinjar; in recent months, dozens of families have suffered from the region's [poor infrastructure \(https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/six-years-after-sinjar-massacre-support-vital-returning-yazidis\)](https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/six-years-after-sinjar-massacre-support-vital-returning-yazidis) and a lack of access to many basic necessities upon their return. Yet even these efforts at return have waned in the past month as the number of Yazidis returning home has fallen significantly due to heightened political conflict and the presence of illegal armed factions in Sinjar. Many Yazidis contend that it will be necessary to remove these military factions from Sinjar in order to restore security in the region, ensure the safe return of internally displaced Yazidis to their homes, and allow local people to protect their property.

To make matters worse, the current situation of Yazidis outside of Sinjar is similarly untenable. Thousands of internally displaced Yazidis [live in camps in the Kurdistan region \(https://www.npr.org/2020/12/03/941976085/with-no-options-displaced-iraqi-yazidis-return-to-homes-destroyed-in-isis-fight\)](https://www.npr.org/2020/12/03/941976085/with-no-options-displaced-iraqi-yazidis-return-to-homes-destroyed-in-isis-fight) of Iraq, still hoping to return to their homes. Within the camps, they face dire humanitarian situations brought on a lack of aid from humanitarian organizations and the Iraqi government. Most internally displaced Yazidis feel that living conditions in the camps are difficult and that the deteriorating economic situation in the Kurdistan region has significantly affected their lives, exacerbating poverty in the camps that has in turn led

to higher incidences of suicide, domestic violence, and abandonment of children. While regional tensions continue to simmer in Sinjar, relevant international and local actors must isolate and address the needs and rights of Yazidis as well as stability in Sinjar in order to allow for Yazidis to return home.

The Sinjar Agreement and Divisions Among Yazidis

The uptick and subsequent end to Yazidis returning to Sinjar occurred in the context of the [Sinjar agreement \(https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/10/1075102\)](https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/10/1075102) between Baghdad and Erbil, ratified in October 2020 under the auspices of the United Nations. The agreement was designed to restore security and stability to the Sinjar district.

Despite the successful signing of the agreement, the Yazidi reception to the agreement was split. While optimists felt it was important to normalize the situation in Sinjar in order to establish peace in their region, [others were concerned \(https://www.aei.org/op-eds/iraqs-sinjar-agreement-is-doomed-to-fail/\)](https://www.aei.org/op-eds/iraqs-sinjar-agreement-is-doomed-to-fail/) about the difficulty of implementing the agreement because of the political and regional conflicts there between political parties and armed factions. Many Yazidis believe that the last thing with which opposing sides in those conflicts would concern themselves was the living conditions of the Yazidi population. They refused to turn over their security to the Peshmerga, noting that the Peshmerga had once abandoned them overnight, leaving thousands of Yazidis to be killed at the hands of ISIS. Therefore, many Yazidis feel that their only possible salvation is international protection, which is also difficult to implement because major powers not having a stake in Sinjar.

What many Yazidis agree on is that the involvement of political parties, particularly Kurdish parties, in the political and religious life of Sinjar has led to further suffering for the Yazidi people and contributed to the ongoing conflict over what governing vision would best serve Sinjar and its people. Many feel that the KRI's rival Kurdish parties have deliberately widened the gap in Yazidi public opinion for their own political benefit. Many Yazidis now see the rhetoric of these parties supporting Yazidis as a disingenuous effort to exploit the humanitarian situation for their own agenda in the local and international political arena. Kurdish parties are also seen as using Yazidi figureheads as a false representation of Yazidi public opinion.

For their part, the Yazidi political parties have been at the mercy of major Arab and Kurdish parties and have not had the opportunity or political clout to act independently. Furthermore, Yazidi representation in the Iraqi parliament is effectively nonexistent—Baghdad's quota system allocates just a single seat to Yazidis, which is not proportionate to the Yazidi population in Iraq according to the Iraqi constitution's assignment of one parliamentary seat per hundred thousand in population. The Iraqi Supreme Court has since [ruled that Yazidis should be given more seats \(http://yazidis.info/en/news/431/the-supreme-court-of-iraq-decided-to-grant-more-quotas-to-yazidis-in-parliament\)](http://yazidis.info/en/news/431/the-supreme-court-of-iraq-decided-to-grant-more-quotas-to-yazidis-in-parliament) in the Iraqi parliament. This trend of exclusion and marginalization in Baghdad and in the Kurdistan region have existed since the Iraqi state was established almost a century ago.

What Do the Yazidis Want?

Despite disagreements, there are issues that clearly unite most Yazidis. Iraqi Yazidis continue to insist on legitimate demands to recognize their suffering and support the Yazidi community in spite of efforts to push them aside. These demands include prosecuting ISIS elements before an international court and those responsible for the humanitarian disaster in Sinjar accountable, as well as acknowledging the Yazidi genocide. They also demand to find out what happened to the [2887 women and children \(https://kirkuknow.com/en/news/62929\)](https://kirkuknow.com/en/news/62929) who have been lost, according to the most recent official statistics from the Kidnapped Yazidis Rescue Office.

Yazidis have also called for all armed factions to leave the Sinjar district except the Iraqi forces, i.e. the police and

army, and that the Yazidis should be integrated into official security and military institutions. Furthermore, they demand the return of internally displaced persons to their homes, the increase of Yazidi representation in parliament, and the official designation of Sinjar as an Iraqi governorate under the central government. This stability will help calm the tensions within Sinjar that are triggering the Turkish threats to the area and allow for more Yazidis to return home.

A breakthrough in the near future would allow the internal Yazidi diaspora to return home, but the current situation in Sinjar looks increasingly bleak. Advocating for Yazidi security and stability outside of Iraq's political conflicts will require enormous effort from both Yazidis and their international allies. International awareness of the issue will likely prove particularly important for Yazidis to help them push Baghdad, Erbil, and other foreign elements to address the problem more effectively. Either way, the Yazidi issue must be separated out from the conflicting interests inside Iraq and treated as a separate and discrete issue of human rights. ❖

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