

The Yazidis in Sinjar: When Politics Controls the Fate of Minorities

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Brief Analysis

The greatest concern for small communities in Iraq is the failure of the state to regain its strength and ability to manage the country independently.

Sinjar, located in northwestern Iraq, is not just a geographical area but the soul and final refuge of the Yazidis. Among the Yazidis, you often hear the phrase, "Sinjar is our last fortress; our survival is tied to this land." This geographical spot has always held strategic importance, from their existence in Mesopotamia to the present day. Historically persecuted, this peaceful minority chose isolation and neutrality to protect themselves from the tragedies and abuses they faced throughout the ages. In the early 20th century, they suffered genocides under Ottoman rule, once for defending Armenians fleeing genocide in Turkey, and multiple times due to differences in religious beliefs. After the Ottomans left and the British Mandate arrived, their situation did not improve much, as tensions persisted in some areas, leading to more victims.

With the establishment of the modern Iraqi state, the Yazidis continued to be marginalized. During the Ba'ath era, Sinjar witnessed significant demographic changes, with its inhabitants being displaced from their villages and relocated to complexes lacking basic services. After the fall of the regime in 2003, the situation regarding infrastructure and poverty levels did not improve until 2014, when ISIS occupied Sinjar, causing a deep wound in the heart of the Yazidi community.

The Yazidis in Sinjar feel that many have abandoned them, except for the mountain that protected them from the genocide carried out by the terrorist organization ISIS. This horrific experience left a deep mark on the Yazidi psyche, as they witnessed significant neglect from both the international community and the entirety of Iraq when they were facing their fate in an area surrounded by enemies on all sides.

With the tenth anniversary of the Yazidi genocide this month, August 3, 2014 remains a painful memory etched in Yazidis' minds. In this period, they were subjected to a brutal attack, where ISIS carried out ethnic cleansing against them, leading to the killing and enslavement of thousands of inhabitants of this area. Women were sexually enslaved,

and the majority of them continue to be haunted by the effects of this genocide, which left deep psychological, social, and economic scars on this authentically Iraqi community.

Estimates suggest that more than 10,000 Yazidis were killed. According to the Office for Yazidi Kidnapping Victims Rescue in 2023, over 60 mass graves have been documented and discovered, and 70 religious shrines were destroyed. A total of 6,417 people were captured by the organization, with 3,554 of them being liberated, including 1,205 women, 333 men, and 1,992 children, while the others remain missing. The genocide led to the displacement of more than 200,000 people from Sinjar to the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Estimates indicate that 160,000 Yazidis have migrated to countries around the world, and the region was almost completely destroyed.

No society is free from internal conflicts, and over time, the Yazidi community in Sinjar has become a victim of political conflicts. These conflicts are not due to an appreciation for the ancient and authentic nature of this religion but are mainly due to the geographical location these people inhabit and the electoral votes that could change the political map in areas like Nineveh Province. In this context, the issue of international sympathy for the Yazidis is exploited for the political agendas of competing parties. There is no doubt that this situation is an extension of a broader regional conflict over this area, a conflict that intensified after the major changes brought by ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

It is essential to recognize that these conflicts go beyond the local dimension and intersect with regional and international interests, further complicating the political and social landscape. Exploiting the Yazidis' plight for political purposes does not serve the cause of justice and fairness; rather, it exacerbates their suffering and fuels internal conflicts that threaten to destroy the social fabric of this vital region.

The genocide has significantly impacted the behavior of the individual Yazidi, making them more sensitive compared to the period before the emergence of ISIS. They now live in an identity crisis, torn between the belief in being an original Kurdish group and an ethnoreligious group, and the belief that they are Yazidis religiously and nationally only. There is no doubt that the latter belief is more accepted by the current generation. This trend reflects the Yazidis' response to their historical suffering, as they strive to preserve their religious and cultural identity as a fundamental element of their national identity.

Their communities require continuous support and enhanced security to ensure that such humanitarian disasters do not recur in the future. The responsibility falls on the Iraqi government, which the Yazidis—like other small Iraqi communities—call upon to take full responsibility for protecting them in order to prevent a repeat of the tragedies they suffered due to ISIS's control over their areas. This includes involving the people of those areas in security and administrative institutions, rebuilding infrastructure, stimulating the local economy, achieving transitional justice for the victims' families, and compensating the residents financially for the losses incurred on their properties.

If Baghdad truly wishes to embrace the Yazidis and other minorities who have not yet received their due rights, it must ensure that Yazidis are granted their full rights in the Iraqi parliament according to their actual numbers. They should also be appropriately represented in other positions within sovereign institutions, and Yazidis should have real representatives in parliament who express their opinions and interests, rather than being affiliated with other political entities that do not reflect their true views.

The greatest concern for small communities in Iraq is the failure of the state to regain its strength and ability to manage the country independently. There is a fear that they will be continually threatened by terrorist organizations and armed militias, and that they may become another factor in the outbreak of local sectarian conflicts among rival forces vying for influence and control over the geography of areas that include minorities. Additionally, there are repeated attempts to change the demographics of those areas, and they fear becoming victims of dubious political deals among the Iraqi parties that have controlled the political scene since the fall of the Iraqi regime in 2003.

Religious minorities feel that human rights issues, including minority rights, are no longer of great importance to the dominant forces in the region, excluding regional powers that do not care about these issues in the first place. Perhaps this is because the Middle East no longer holds the same significance, or that priorities have shifted due to risks and the interests of the countries that control the international scene. ❖

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