Arab Culture and the Yazidi Tragedy: Context and Accountability

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Articles & Testimony

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Yazidism is a separate religion. It is not "Umayyad Islam," and neither is it an off-shoot of Sufism. Islam, notably in its ecstatic rituals, is evidently part of the Yazidi universe — to which Yazidism has contributed, and from which it has adapted. Still, Yazidism is not Islam. This is not an attempt at determining the religious pedigree of Yazidism, but merely a fundamental rejection of an irredentist idea intended, in part, to "protect" Yazidis and spare them a dark fate. Now that such dark fate has become a reality, it became clear that accepting Yazidis on the basis of presumed Islamic credentials was the point of entry for genocide. By debunking these credentials, the perpetrators removed all protection offered to Yazidis and laid the ground for their crime.

Yazidi men were tortured and killed by the thousands. Yazidi women were enslaved, abused, and raped; price tags were affixed to them, and they were traded as a common commodity in the obscene markets of the Islamic State. Yazidi children were savaged, terrorized, excised from family and home, and were forcibly converted to Islam. Some of them were made complicit in the atrocities of their captors. Yazidi homes were burnt, property looted, shrines destroyed, and relics desecrated. The perpetrators have now retreated from Sinjar, the focal point of Yazidi presence in Iraq. Yazidi wounds, however, may never heal.

It is a grave crime that has not been met with a proportionate response in Arab discourse. The crime commands punishment. The inadequate Arab response requires examination, as it reveals persistent tensions within Arab culture.

Undoubtedly, Arab culture is multiple and diverse. Yet common threads across it have contributed to the current muted response to the Yazidi tragedy.

The first such thread is a context of desensitization. Reference to it may not always be explicit, but it is always present. The plight of the Yazidis, in such context, is part of the overall calamity that has befallen on the region. The uniqueness of Yazidi suffering, and the subsequent need to address it separately, are thus diluted. What the Yazidis have endured is a crime; what the Syrians have equally endured is a hundred-fold more of a crime — whether on account of the sheer numbers, or the unspeakable horrors inflicted upon them.

Furthermore, it is increasingly clear while some horrors touch the global conscience and solicit sharp rebukes from the international community, others are confined to mentions in reports issued by human rights watchdog groups. The uneven scale of reaction is not random. Crimes against Western victims change policies and mobilize armies. "Minorities"—as designated by the West whether or not the group itself desires this label—occupy a second tier of Western concern. Their plights, that of the Yazidis included, command political and media examination, condemnation, and categorization. While Yazidis can gain little solace from their catastrophe's new label of genocide in Washington D.C. and elsewhere, such recognition is in fact a rare "privilege." Those without this privilege are the "generic indigenous" — not Western, not minority. Their hellish experiences prompt passing indignation and little political imperative.

Documentation has shown beyond a reasonable doubt that the Damascus regime has tortured tens of thousands of Syrian opposition militants, and that this regime engages in systematic mass killing in areas outside of its control while systemically eliminating suspected activists in areas under its control. But these documented perversions have apparently failed to garner a reaction from the West in any way proportional to the outrage for the plight of the Yazidis and other minorities in the Middle East. Instead, some have issued calls to rehabilitate the regime as part of the solution to the Syrian crisis. From the local point of view, it appears that Sunni Arab blood is less precious, Sunni Arab dignity less worthy of consideration, and Sunni Arab pain less subject to empathy. Consequently, the reluctance in condemning the Yazidi plight is recast as an action of self-respect: there would be no compliance with the summons to condemn the part, when the condemnation of the whole is not forthcoming.

Beyond the immediate context, in both Syria and Iraq, the reception of violence has been conditioned by the historical record. For long decades, Iraq has witnessed escalating savagery. The perpetrators have changed, but the victim has consistently been the Iraqi civil order. Saddam Hussain initiated a pattern of exclusion, expelling Fayli Kurdish Iraqis by questioning the ancestry of their citizenship. His following incremental steps were the execution of suspects of militancy, the forced relocation of whole communities, procedural elimination of potential opponents, all the way to chemical extermination and genocide, in Halabchah and in the course of the Anfal operations.

For all of his crimes, he faced scant worldwide objections. The world did mobilize against his invasion of Kuwait, but, in 1991, when he engaged in the bloody repression of the uprising following the Gulf war, the international community refrained from any action. In the subsequent decade, the world community was even complicit in subjugating Iraqi society, through sanctions that the regime maneuvered to its local advantage. Saddam's fall did not end the savagery. Through omission and commission, the United States-led occupation exacerbated the effects of the unraveling of the old order.

In Syria, the regime of Hafez al-Assad adopted a similar doctrine of brute force and savagery. In 1982, the city of Hamah was collectively punished and much of it destroyed for a rebellion that the regime sought to eradicate. In Lebanon, under de facto Syrian occupation, wanton massacres and targeted assassinations were both tried and true tools used by the Syrian regime. This regime's magnum opus to savagery may however have been its prison system, a deliberate laboratory of depravity, with many of its graduates occupying today choice executive positions in the Islamic State.

The world may have been derelict in its moral duty in Iraq and Syria, but Arab political culture was especially culpable. In fact, Arab political culture was rather charitable towards both Saddam Hussain and Hafez al-Assad. Arab political culture generally treated Saddam and Assad as leaders who promoted the values of "resistance", "steadfastness", and "progressivism" — primordial within normative discourse, even when it criticized some of their regimes' "excesses." Their respective police state systems were viewed as not qualitatively different from the expected or desired norm.

Arab political culture meticulously followed the victimization of Palestinians, but it effectively normalized and even

justified this violence and oppression practiced by the Syrian, Iraqi and other Arab regimes. There was little outrage expressed against the killing fields of Darfur, little anger for the Algerian "black decade," and little objection to the institutionalization of oppression in Arab states. Any denunciation of these acts was often selective, polemical, and cynical, targeting political rivals while sparing allies.

Silence was not the bottom of the degeneration of Arab political discourse. While calling upon sundry conspiracy theories, narratives of justification and defense were formulated to deflect the accounting of blatant violations. The real purpose of exposing the tragedy of Darfur would thus be the dismantlement of Sudan (apparently for the sake of Israel). Invoking the massacre of Halabchah or the Anfal genocide would be an attempt to weaken the government of Saddam Hussain for his support for the Palestinian cause. Instead of scrutinizing crimes committed against humanity, Arab political culture often indulged in zealously supporting the perpetrators as heroic figures.

This was not a question of media manipulation. It was, and still is, a moral choice.

The public supportive of Hezbollah in Lebanon, for example, is amply aware that the Syrian regime, which Hezbollah supports, massacres civilians and silences any call for freedom and dignity. This public also understands that the currently circulating counter-image of a Syrian opposition consisting of radical foreigners and mercenaries is exaggerated.

However, support for Hezbollah necessitates a suspension of critical approach to the Syrian revolution, and a nominal acceptance of the claim of a "conspiracy" — reactionary, Takfiri, American, imperialist, Zionist, in any combination, as warranted by particular events. Factionalism, sectarianism, or ethnic tribalism, are contributing factors in such moral choice. In this case, it is a summoning of Shi'i martyrology. Through it, many Hezbollah supporters transition in their self-image from the status of perpetrators, since their own sons are participating in the Syrian tragedy on the side of the oppressors, to that of the "victims", merely engaged in a pre-emptive action to avoid the onslaught of Sunni radicals bent on killing them. Believing this narrative is not necessary. It is sufficient to have it in circulation, as a plausible narrative of absolution, to justify factional choices as moral. Narratives are thus not transacted for their explanatory power, but for their polemical potential.

Almost ubiquitously, Arab political discourse adopts utilitarian reductionism, imposing on the factional others a unity that they may lack. In the Hezbollah narrative, little allocation is made for differences between the Lebanese Future Movement, a mostly Sunni self-styled liberal secular political formation, and the Islamic State (ISIS), both being monolithically "Sunni."

In the polemics of narratives, the collective label is handled both aggressively and defensively. In many Sunni contexts, acknowledging the victimization of Yazidis is tantamount to an acceptance of a collective "Sunni" responsibility for the crime. The objective nature of the Yazidi tragedy is thus lost to a polemical debate, with one side seeking to display it as proof of Sunni perfidy, and another seeking to dismiss it as selective highlighting aimed at perjury.

It does not seem that the Arab cultural world today is capable of managing a tragedy of the magnitude of the Yazidi genocide away for utilitarianism. The personal individual suffering is accorded little recognition outside of such purpose. Muhammad Jamal al-Durrah, a Palestinian child victim of a tragic confrontation, has wide name recognition and declared sympathy across Arab culture. No such privilege is extended to the victims of the Anfal genocide yesterday, or the victims of the Yazidi genocide today. Neither their names nor their fate breaks into the collective consciousness. The memory of al-Durrah seems more informed by the identity of his killer than by any innocence or humanity he may have displayed. Invoking a victim is thus not a call for a reflection on the human condition, but first and foremost a denunciation of the perpetrators and anyone who resembles them.

Arab political culture has little incentive to address the dominance of polemics on its moral choices when, as noted,

Western discourse engages in a parallel utilitarianism, in its variable allocation of importance and gravity to crimes and abuses — recognizing the magnitude of the crime committed against Yazidis, but in effect socializing itself to the normalcy of the wider crimes committed against others in the region. This selectivity has real consequences: Washington and its allies have requested that Syrian opposition militants focus solely on combating ISIS, the killer of thousands, and suspend the fight against the Syrian regime, the killer of hundreds of thousands.

The frustration in Arab political culture may thus be understandable, but should not be allowed to shape the reaction. The injustice inflicted on the Yazidis ought to be condemned, irrespective of context.

There is, in addition, a unique aspect to the Yazidi tragedy that needs to be addressed. ISIS issued religious edicts to authorize its genocide, enslavement, and rape. The Arab public media deplored this as a distortion of the Islamic faith and its tenets, but was less forthcoming in denouncing the failure of religious institutions to formulate a categorical rejection of the ISIS edicts. In fact, bound by atavistic jurisprudence traditions, religious institutions may be unequipped for such an endeavor. Accordingly, the Arab cultural voice ought to be underline the primacy of universal values, human rights, and civil solidarity.

Societal responses may be ahead of cultural ones in this respect. Many individuals, clans, and groups, of diverse identity backgrounds have tried to alleviate the plight of Yazidis, women in particular. Still, the sad fact remains that Arab culture has not acknowledged the tragedy of Yazidis, men and women, in line with its self-image of honor — a virtue often posited as a shared value in the common identity. The existence of this shared identity is thus increasingly under question.

Hassan Mneimneh is the Contributing Editor at Fikra Forum. This item was originally published on ***the Fikra website (http://fikraforum.org/?p=9316&lang=en#.VyNO-PkrLIU)*** . ❖

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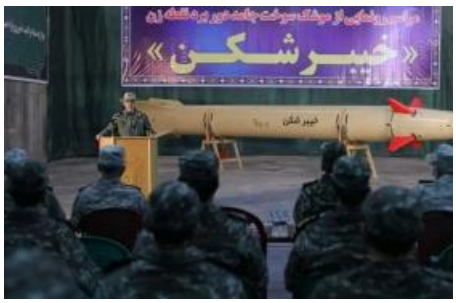

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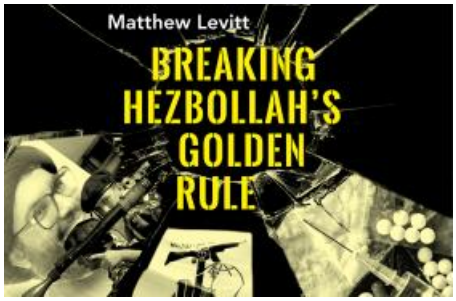

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