



Goal 16, Religious Freedom and The Yazidi Genocide

Genocide is fundamentally a crime that diminishes our collective humanity. Defined as targeting individuals with the intent to destroy specific communities, it threatens the very existence of specific ethno-religious groups. In 2014, these heinous acts of genocide became a reality for the Yazidi community of Sinjar in northern Iraq when the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) launched a targeted campaign against Iraq's ethno-religious minorities. As its regional dominance grew, so too did its targeting of indigenous Yazidis, Christians (including ethnic Assyrians), Turkmen and other religious minorities, including members of the Sunni community who were deemed insufficiently supportive of ISIS ideology. The attacks on ethno-religious minorities demonstrates the connection between genocide and the impeding of religious freedoms over time.

While SDG16 seeks to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels,¹ this goal is particularly challenged by the ongoing barriers to religious freedom on the ground in Iraq. This presents an acute challenge to SDG16 that requires adequate justice mechanisms to preserve and establish religious freedom and equality in Iraq, which in turn will prevent future atrocities.

This submission thus presents three dimensions of religious persecution against the Yazidis in the context of preserving SDG16's principles: it firstly explores the ongoing discrimination in law and practice of Iraq's second largest religious minority.² There has been longstanding systemic and legal discrimination that has targeted the Yazidi community in the years leading up to the genocide, and through the recent years of gruesome persecution. Second, this piece explores the widespread impacts of ISIS atrocities on the Yazidi community. This includes the current displacement of the Yazidi community, the ISIS system of modern slavery that has traded in the lives of countless Yazidi women and girls, the impact of ISIS recruiting or killing young Yazidi boys, not to mention the impacts that persecution have had on the preservation of Yazidi culture altogether.

This piece thus concludes with outlining good practices that respond to the immense harms to religious freedom in Iraq. Good practices include human rights advocacy that utilizes new technologies like the Nobody's Listening Virtual Reality and Art project, as well as incorporating Yazidi survivors in advocacy projects that support SDG16's principles, such as the Yazidi Survivors Network (YSN). In sum, this piece outlines that despite the devastating effects of ISIS crimes on Iraq's minority populations and the Yazidis, there is promise to implement strong peacebuilding and justice initiatives that spur concrete action from NGOs, advocacy networks, and the UN alike to realize SDG16 and protect freedom of religion and belief in Iraq.

¹ UN Sustainable Development Goals. "Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions: Why They Matter."

<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/16.pdf>

² Zoonan, D. and Wirya, K. 2017. "The Yazidis Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict," Middle East Research Institute. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Yazidis-Perceptions-of-Reconciliation-and-Conflict-Report.pdf>

Discrimination in law and practice

Since the time of the Ottoman empire and for decades leading up to the 2014 attack on Sinjar, the Yazidi community has endured systemic discrimination in Iraq. This historical and present violence is fostered by a deep misunderstanding of Yazidi culture among Arab groups and amongst Iraq's Arab-nationalist majoritarian rule. This has manifested in recent history as an active effort to exclude information and wide education for a better cultural understanding of the Yazidi. For instance, Iraq's public-school curriculum does not recognize Yazidi history or culture, contributing to the spread of misinformation about the community has led to their marginalization by framing the Yazidi as "devil-worshippers". Since 2003, Yazidi villages and religious objects, including temples, have been repeatedly targeted.³

The European Parliament, US House of Representatives, United Kingdom, French Senate, Canadian Government⁴, as well as a UN Independent Commission Inquiry⁵, and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum⁶ have acknowledged that the attacks against the Yazidi community constitute genocide; according to a UN Human Rights Council report from 2016 examining ISIS crimes against the Yazidis, ISIS fundamentally attempted to cut the Yazidi community off from its own beliefs and practices to destroy the population. The organization killed thousands of Yazidis during the attack on Sinjar and afterward across various villages, launching targeted mass killings and creating over 60 mass graves and kill sites.⁷ This highlights another systemic barrier to religious freedom in Iraq: while Yazidi and other religious minority families cannot feel safe returning home until trials take place to hold perpetrators of violence accountable, there is a glaring lack of justice on the international stage, not a single ISIS fighter has yet been prosecuted in Iraq for the Yazidi genocide. The UN Human Rights Council in 2016 affirmed that the genocide against the Yazidi community of Sinjar is ongoing. The continued religious discrimination against and persecution of Yazidis contravenes SDG 16's mission for peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.

A massive part of the religious discrimination against Yazidis included the establishment of a perverse system of sexual slavery: an industry organized by the top of the ISIS command chain which traded in Yazidi women's bodies and lives. Currently, the Commission for International Justice and Accountability (CIJA) has found that ISIS fighters planned to enslave and rape Yazidi women as a means of eradicating the birth rate of Yazidi children. However, while the international accountability for these crimes against humanity is ongoing, so too is the persecution of the Yazidi community.⁹ Today, progress toward religious freedom conditions within Iraq is still impeded by

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Yazda. "Genocide Recognition International Recognition of the Yazidi Genocide."

<https://www.yazda.org/genocide-recognition>

⁵ UN Human Rights Council 2019, "Report on the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic." A/HRC/42/51

⁶ Kikoler, N. 2015. "'Our Generation is Gone.' The Islamic State's Targeting of Iraqi Minorities in Ninewa," US Holocaust Memorial Museum: Simon-Skjoldt Center for the Prevention of Genocide.

<https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/Iraq-Bearing-Witness-Report-111215.pdf>

⁷ Yazda. "Working Against the Clock." 2018.

https://www.academia.edu/37174833/Yazda_Mass_Grave_Report_03.08.2018

⁸ UN Human Rights Council 2016, "They came to destroy": ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis. A/HRC/32/CRP.2

⁹ The Associated Press. "Building a Genocide Case for IS Crimes Against Yazidis" *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2020/05/21/world/middleeast/ap-ml-is-yazidi-slaves-justice-abridged.html?auth=login-email&login=email>

the presence of systemic religious discrimination. More than any single factor, the presence of militias and the lack of security they present for Iraq's diverse religious minorities stands as the biggest barrier to conditions of religious freedom.¹⁰

Effects of Discrimination

The effects of this religious discrimination against Yazidis are widespread and intergenerational: today, 250,000 Yazidis remain displaced. A major barrier for the displaced to return home remains the crippling insecurity in a state where religious freedom is torn down rather than guaranteed. Approximately 2,500 Yazidis are missing or in captivity, with scores of women and children thought to be still under the control of ISIS. Communal cohesion in the region has been significantly undermined, and there is a considerable risk that cultural identities, heritage and religious traditions of the Yazidi and other minorities may disappear forever. This stark reality is one that 250,000 civilians in squalid IDP camps across northern Iraq must face daily. Many of the displaced are too fearful to return to their ancestral lands for fear of religious persecution. They live with the trauma of having witnessed their loved ones murdered, community devastated, and countless shrines, temples, and holy sites having been destroyed; destruction of cultural heritage that itself constitutes a war crime.¹¹ Indeed, in many cases it may be impossible to fully revive communal life in the villages of Sinjar: inhabitants have either been killed, are missing, or have fled to newly formed diasporas in Western countries. The process of return has been dubbed the most pressing issue still facing religious minorities in northern Iraq due to the difficult conditions of return and the ongoing risk of persecution upon returning home.¹²

Despite that ISIS has been territorially defeated, remnants of the extremist group pose a grave threat to communities and their insidious ideology and hate speech continue to proliferate in Iraq and beyond. Troublingly, there has been a rise in the rate of suicide among the Yazidi community especially in recent months¹³ – this is a reflection of the tremendously harmful impact that trauma has on persecuted populations. Women who have survived sexual enslavement likewise lack sufficient gendered support to begin trauma-healing processes in settings of displacement; Yazidi families are struggling to deal with their trauma despite a jarring lack of psychosocial supports on the ground in IDP and refugee camps. These widespread effects of years of religious persecution underscore the urgent need for SDG16-oriented goals to strengthen justice and peace mechanisms focused on Iraq. Today, few countries have recognized ISIS attacks against minorities of Iraq as international crimes, and even fewer pursue universal jurisdiction to prosecute ISIS fighters. Ensuring the protection of religious freedom within Iraq necessarily requires addressing these long-term effects of religious persecution. Improving religious freedom is linked to holding perpetrators of genocide accountable, providing secure conditions of return to allow for minorities

¹⁰ US Government Commission on International Religious Freedom. 2020. "Policy Update: Iraq" https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2020%20Iraq%20Policy%20Update_0.pdf

¹¹ "Destroying the Soul of the Yazidis Cultural Heritage Destruction During the Islamic State's Genocide Against the Yazidis. 2019. https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/92f016_b5b37c3356754ba8b30e0f266e5b58d4.pdf

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ The Associated Press. "Building a Genocide Case for IS Crimes Against Yazidis" *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2020/05/21/world/middleeast/ap-ml-is-yazidi-slaves-justice-abridged.html?auth=login-email&login=email>

to live and express religious freedom without fear of persecution, and supporting those who have experienced the trauma of religious violence that drove them from Iraq to begin with.

Good Practices

Given the wide effects of discrimination that have impacted the Yazidi community, good practices have arisen from various international actors, including the UN, international organization, and especially from the Yazidi community in Iraq and abroad. In this case, good practices have entailed initiatives that provide survivor support, as well as initiatives that support cultural cooperation and combating misinformation in Iraq. Following the genocide in 2014, the Yazidi community mobilized globally to create Yazda, a global organization built to support and empower survivors of the genocide.¹⁴ This multi-national organizing led to success in raising awareness of the genocide and pushing for its formal recognition internationally. Iraqi Yazidi Nadia Murad was awarded the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize for efforts to end the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and armed conflict. She is assisted in her influential advocacy by prominent Human Rights lawyer Amal Clooney. In 2017 the United Nations responded to calls from the Iraqi government to bring ISIS members to justice, establishing a new Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh (UNITAD). Meanwhile, several governments around the world, have formally recognized the genocide. This work was grounded in the spirit of SDG16's precepts of peace, justice, and strong institutions, and stand to make a positive impact for the Yazidi community's future. However, this work likewise illustrates a gap in specific measures that address helping survivors. As such, innovative initiatives have been launched in recent years that seek to fill this gap.

One such initiative is Nobody's Listening, a ground-breaking Virtual Reality experience and immersive exhibition programme that commemorates the genocide of the Yazidis and other ethno-religious minorities initiated by ISIS by August 2014. Using cutting-edge Virtual Reality (VR) technology and visual art, the exhibition explores the consequences of the genocidal campaign by ISIS in terms of its devastating effect on persecuted communities and their cultural heritage.

Above all, Nobody's Listening pays tribute to the courage, determination, and agency of the survivors, and gives them a space where they can be heard by people around the world. Together they are one voice, calling for international recognition and justice. The project focuses on four advocacy objectives for its mission: recognize, redress, rehabilitate, and remember. It accordingly seeks to i) utilize new and evolving technology to encourage more governments to recognize the genocide and to implement policies that reflect the severity of the crimes committed, ii) advocate for the Iraqi government to include atrocity crimes in its penal code as well as encourage governments to take action to prosecute ISIS perpetrators, iii) encourage governments and individuals to provide financial support for women and children victimized by ISIS, including to bolster the provision of trauma-sensitive health care and assist the reuniting of families as well as the resettlement of the displaced (in this vein, the project seeks as well to help raise awareness of the need for psychosocial therapy and support for traumatized communities, particularly for children and former child soldiers), and iv) to encourage the collection and preservation of survivor accounts for a future memorial centre in Sinjar. In partnership with the Sulaimani Polytechnic University, the project is investigating the impact of the VR in changing perceptions and

¹⁴ Yazda. "About Yazda." <https://www.yazda.org/about-us>

behaviours of Iraqis in terms of how they view the Yazidis, an academic finding that can be used for peacebuilding, countering violent extremism, as well as for genocide education that has potential to reach Iraqi populations through public schools, student groups, Muslim youth groups, and institutions. The mobility of this type of initiative is part of its massive scope of potential impact; VR headsets, printouts of survivor artwork, and educational material can be moved between various regions and reach a variety of demographics inside Iraq and around the world.

With vital advocacy campaigns like this one creating an international dialogue to pursue SDG16's principles, a crucial question is how involve survivors in the process of peacebuilding and justice advocacy. For this, initiatives like the Yazidis Survivors Networks (YSN) hold potential to play a central role in engaging survivors and effecting change in Iraq. The YSN is a program created by Yazda that supports and empowers survivors of the Yazidi genocide by ISIS, helping them to speak out about their experiences, express their needs, fight for justice, and pursue accountability and Human Rights on national and international levels. This network of survivors stands to challenge the common lapse in international advocacy, which often fails to include survivors in decision-making processes on issues that directly concern them, such as humanitarian programming, access to justice, and peace negotiations. This new program addresses non-inclusion of survivors and communities and will allow understanding, recognizing, and re-building societies who have experience collective trauma and conflict. New initiatives like these enforce SDG16 by providing avenues for religious minorities to partake in advocacy to Iraqis, by promoting understanding and cooperation between various groups in Iraq, and by engaging international actors in justice and reconciliation projects for the Yazidis. Since the protection of religious freedom at large in Iraq is inextricably tied to genocide prevention, the international community has a responsibility to partake in concrete genocide prevention for Iraq, so that the Yazidis and other religious minorities can truly enjoy religious freedom.