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A Community in Crisis: The Systematic Genocide of the Yazidis by ISIS and the Global Response

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ABSTRACT

The Yazidi genocide carried out by ISIS in 2014 stands as one of the most severe humanitarian crises we've faced in the 21st century. This paper delves into the brutal campaign of extermination, sexual slavery, forced conversion, and cultural destruction aimed at the Yazidi community, an ethno-religious minority mainly found in northern Iraq and Syria. Through a much misunderstood religion, Yazidis were branded as "devil worshippers" and became targets of wholesale massacres, abduction, and atrocities. While men and boys were massacred on a mass scale, women and girls were reduced to sexual slavery, and boys were indoctrinated and trained for warfares. The attack was directed with genocidal intent, as described in Article II of the 1948 Genocide Convention. This paper furthermore exposes an insufficient, often sensationalized global media and humanitarian response, largely focusing on sexual violence to the detriment of broader community suffering. By affording attention from the UN and the International Bar Association, the paper also stresses the importance of victim-centered justice, due process, and institutional reform. It also highlights the continued insecurity of the Yazidi diaspora in Europe due to the repatriation of ISIS fighters and ongoing discrimination, adding to their trauma. The study thus ends with a call to a Proposition of a full-scale transitional justice system based on truth, reparations, and rehabilitation, inviting the international community to meet its moral and legal obligations to ensure that "never again" is not just an empty phrase but a promise secured in prevention of persecuted communities going forward.

Keywords: Yazidi Genocide, ISIS Atrocities, Sexual Slavery, Transitional Justice, International Human Rights Law

Over 3,200 Yazidi women and children are still held by ISIS. Most are in Syria where Yazidi females continue to be sexually enslaved and Yazidi boys, indoctrinated, trained and used in hostilities. Thousands of Yazidi men and boys are missing."

'The genocide of the Yazidis is still going-on.'

- Report by the UN High Commission³

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³ UNITED NATIONS OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Doc>

I. INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2014, ISIS, a wicked terrorist organization, perpetrated a deliberate campaign of terror against the Yazidis—an ethno-religious minority primarily situated in northern parts of Iraq and Syria.⁴ What transpired was not just another tragic interlude in Middle Eastern history but a ghastly exhibition of genocide. Thousands of Yazidis were systematically exterminated, enslaved, or displaced in what the United Nations has deemed genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.⁵ The massacre was carved and pierced with such an unimaginable cruelty that it targeted not only individuals but the very existence of a community.

The Yazidis stand for a monotheistic community whose beliefs are drawn from Islam, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism.⁶ Peace-loving and highly spiritual⁷, their religion was always misunderstood and sometimes maligned—most fatally by ISIS which labeled them as "Devil Worshipers"⁸ to justify mass violence. This dangerous mischaracterization laid the foundation for the wholesale extermination.

On August 3, ISIS launched a meticulously coordinated attack on the Yazidi stronghold of Sinjar in northern Iraq, and Al-Shaddadi and the Tel Hamis region in Syria⁹. They seized towns and villages on all sides of Mount Sinjar.¹⁰ With little resistance and no prior evacuation orders, thousands were caught unaware. Yazidi families were trapped and a humanitarian crisis unfolded as many were stranded without food, water, or shelter in the scorching heat rising above 50 degree Celsius.¹¹ On Mount Sinjar, hundreds of Yazidis perished, including small children and babies. Between August 3 and August 5, ISIS forces on the ground caught thousands of Yazidis in their villages or on the roadways while they were fleeing.¹² Those captured were separated by gender: men and elderly women were executed, while younger women and girls were abducted, sold, and subjected to sexual slavery.¹³

uments/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf (last visited May 6, 2025).

⁴ INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR COUNTER TERRORISM, <https://icct.nl/publication/ten-years-yazidi-genocide-searching-redress-war-against-isis> (last visited May 6, 2025).

⁵ UNITED NATIONS OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/08/ten-years-after-yazidi-genocide-un-syria-commission-inquiry-calls-justice> (last visited May 6, 2025).

⁶ *Who Are the Yazidis and Why Is Isis Hunting Them? | Iraq | The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/07/who-yazidi-isis-iraq-religion-ethnicity-mountains> (last visited May 6, 2025).

⁷ *Yazidis – Inclusive Citizenship and Human Rights*, <https://www.inclusive-citizenship.no/yazidis/> (last visited May 6, 2025).

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Supra* note 4.

¹⁰ *Supra* note 2.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

ISIS have committed Genocide as per Article II of the 1948 Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide¹⁴, to which Syria and Iraq are parties, which requires that the perpetrator have a special intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a protected group. With the overall objective of destroying the group.¹⁵ The Yazidi genocide is a haunting reminder of the world's failure to prevent such crimes, and the enduring need to reckon with the consequences of silence in the face of targeted extermination.

II. PRACTICES OF YAZIDIS THAT MADE THEM A TARGET OF GENOCIDE

Freedom of religion was recognized by Franklin D. Roosevelt as an essential attribute of life way back in 1941, but still in a part of the world in 2014, a community was prosecuted for their way of practising religion or for their set of beliefs around their Lord.

Labelled as the “Devil Worshipers” by the Islamic State, this monotheist religion's people are subjected to prosecution for their set of beliefs. There is a parallel story in the stories of Yazidism and Islam. There was the Peacock Angel of Yazidis named as Malek Taus, who refused to bow to Adam to show his loyalty towards the creator. Malek Taus, according to Yazidism, was one of the seven holy beings to whom the world was entrusted. There's a similar character in Islamic story known as Iblis (Satan) who refused to bow to Adam. Thus, ISIS equated Malek Taus with Satan and conferred upon them the aforementioned title.

Yazidism is a religion drawing heavily from oral traditions rather than codified or sacred texts, unlike other religions, thus making it a subject of gross misinterpretation. A person should be born as a Yazidi to be a part of this monotheist faith. They practise endogamy, marrying within the same caste in the religion. Any violation of this custom could lead to exclusion. They mainly have three castes- Murids (the General Community), Pirs (Spiritual leaders), and Sheikhs (Religious leaders). This practice, by which no one can convert to Yazidism or their distinctiveness or sacredness, makes them aloof from their close Muslim neighbours, making them an easy prey to Daesh.

Yazidis recognize the existence of Jesus or Muhammad, but do not consider them as their central element. Their practices do not resemble anywhere Abrahamic prophetic traditions and thus were easily charged as being kafir or non-believers at the hands of the ISIS. These practices were nowhere causing any harm to the beliefs and benefits of the Sunni-based ISIS organization, but were simply used as their tool to showcase their heinous actions as legitimate to their Sunni world.

¹⁴ CONV. ON THE PREVENT. & PUNISH. OF THE CRIME OF GENOCIDE, art. 2.

¹⁵ Prosecutor v. Rutaganda, ICTR Trial Judgment, 6 Dec. 1999 (“Rutaganda Trial Judgment”), ¶ 59.

III. STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY ISIS

ISIS persecuted Yazidis in such a thorough manner that it seemed as if they used the criteria for genocide as a guideline to decimate the group. They carried out several brutal practices to systematically eliminate the Yazidi population, beginning with the mass killing of Yazidi men and elderly women who were buried in over 80 mass graves scattered throughout Sinjar¹⁶.

Women and children were abducted by the thousands: young girls were sold into sexual slavery and mercilessly abused; boys were indoctrinated and trained to serve in the militant corps of ISIS. They were subjected to brutal physical abuse and sexual violence, leaving the survivors very deep psychological scars and traumatic experiences that could never be reversed¹⁷. The rape of Yazidi women was also meant as a genocidal weapon destined to forcibly assimilate future generations: under Iraqi patrilineal nationality laws, children born of these rapes would be considered Muslim rather than Yazidi, thereby erasing Yazidi lineage¹⁸. Other than compared with the human toll, ISIS wanted to destroy the very base of Yazidi existence by destroying homes, schools, and hospitals, places of worship, setting farms ablaze, destroying the electrical grid and contaminating water sources, thus almost expunging the very possibility for the Yazidi people to come back and rebuild their lives in Sinjar. Let's analyze in more detail.

Children: The mind of the child is like a moulding pot; the way you shape it, it will take that form. The ISIS knew that they could easily brainwash children with their ideology and make them future soldiers of furthering their propaganda. They abducted young buds¹⁹ who were with their mothers and were forcibly separated from them and took children to their controlled areas in Syria and other locations. Almost half of these kids were killed during the initial wave of assaults and out of hunger and starvation in Mount Sinjar. And left young children were not only inculcated with their rakish ideology but also taught them techniques of war fighting and heinous offences²⁰ like beheading. The result was evident in the documentary circulated on YouTube, where a lad barely 6 years old, who was brainwashed by ISIS, developed such a violent temper that he disrespected and abused his mother, beheaded dolls, and was also in a constant mood to hamper things around him.²¹

¹⁶ *The Genocide*, NADIA'S INITIATIVE, <https://www.nadiasinitiative.org/the-genocide> (last visited May 27, 2025).

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Supra* note 15.

¹⁹ *YAZIDI CHILDREN STILL LIVING IN FEAR 8 YEARS AFTER GENOCIDE*, SAVE THE CHILDREN INTERNATIONAL (Sep. 22, 2022), <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/yazidi-children-still-living-fear-8-years-after-genocide>.

²⁰ *Where Are the Yazidis Almost a Decade After ISIS's Genocidal Campaign?*, FRONTLINE, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/yazidis-decade-after-isis-genocidal-campaign/> (last visited May 27, 2025).

²¹ Shashank Joshi, *IS Forced Me to Practise Beheadings on Dolls*, The Telegraph (Sept. 14, 2014),

Women: Misinterpretation has led to wars not only between families but also between religions. The ISIS misinterpreted the Quran in such a manner that legitimised their cruelty upon women, labelling them as “Spoils of War”, a property which they could treat the way they liked, not a person with human rights. The ISIS justified that, Sharia permitted the enslavement and exploitation of non-Muslims,²² thus, the only way to purify these ‘infidel’ women was to rape them. The women did not have the option to convert or die. They were forcefully abducted and were sold as animals to the highest bidders²³. They were not only separated from their families but were also a victim of sexual slavery and abuse. The ISIS titled them ‘Sabaya’ or sexual slaves and sold them among themselves²⁴. Girls as young as 9 were raped based on the ideology of purifying them. The older women who were considered ‘unfit’ to be sold as sex slaves were killed.

ISIS did not target the women of the community, they targeted the honour of the community²⁵. An ISIS soldier prayed before and after raping a 9 year old girl justifying it was permissible which Islam firmly denounces and considers it as a grave sin.

Men: The men were killed in bundles as sheep and dogs were slaughtered. ISIS provided them with two options: Convert or die. The ones who refused to convert were rounded up and killed²⁶. What contributed worse to it was their family members' emotional forbearance of witnessing their mass execution. Those who agreed to convert were sent to ISIS campaigns to be trained as future ISIS soldiers and had to pray in a Mosque and follow the customs of Islam²⁷. The men, boys, and women were separated. Boys as young as 12 and adults were coerced to join ISIS camp²⁸. Besides, men had to bear the burden of witnessing their beloved mothers, wives and daughters being raped and humiliated by ISIS monsters.

IV. GLOBAL RESPONSE, PERCEPTION AND THE REPERCUSSION OF THE GENOCIDE

ISIS committed numerous atrocities, but the global media was chiefly interested in the sexual

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11071276/Where-does-the-Islamic-States-fetish-with-beheading-people-come-from.html>.

²² Allen McDuffee, *ISIS Confirms and Justifies Enslaving Yazidis in New Magazine Article*, The Atlantic (Oct. 13, 2014), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/10/isis-confirms-and-justifies-enslaving-yazidis-in-new-magazine-article/381394/>.

²³ *Supra* note 15.

²⁴ “*Sabaya*” Movie Review: Documentary about the Rescue of Yazidi Women from ISIS Terrorists Is a Courageous Piece of Filmmaking - The Washington Post, https://www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/movies/sabaya-movie-review/2021/08/04/e2f28e3e-f093-11eb-a452-4da5fe48582d_story.html (last visited May 27, 2025).

²⁵ ‘*I Was Sold Seven Times*’: The Yazidi Women Welcomed Back into the Faith | Sexual Violence | The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jul/01/i-was-sold-seven-times-yazidi-women-welcomed-back-into-the-faith> (last visited May 27, 2025).

²⁶ *Supra* note 19.

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.*

violence perpetrated upon Yazidi women and girls; heavy media glare masked other horrific crimes, particularly those committed against men and boys²⁹. Women from the Global South got caught in these deliberations while a "Yazidi rape and enslavement" story controlled both international and domestic reporting of ISIS atrocities³⁰. However, this focus came with a price. Human rights workers questioned the ethicality of these journalistic practices. Many reports were criticised for sensationalism, for exposing the identities of victims, and for using unorthodox and, at times, unethical means to assemble testimonies

Journalistic practices were further scrutinized for including gratuitous details of rape and for publishing victims' names and images, thereby endangering both survivors and their relatives (Biggs, 2015; Callimachi, 2015, 2017). Human rights organizations reported that many journalists had violated international ethical standards for reporting sexual violence in conflict zones, including those established by the UN Global Protection Cluster and the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma³¹.

The international community has recognized the atrocities committed by ISIS as genocide. Despite this recognition, over 2,600 Yazidi women and children remain in captivity, with minimal efforts made to rescue them, even when their locations are known³². Thus, the genocide is ongoing; persecution and suffering persist. The International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI) has consistently raised concerns about the Yazidi crisis and called for comprehensive legal responses³³. In 2024, the IBAHRI published a mapping report highlighting existing legal responses, gaps, and recommendations³⁴. That same year, the IBAHRI also testified before the Joint Committee on Human Rights' Daesh Inquiry. By July 2024, the IBAHRI partnered with Yazidi-led organizations—the Free Yezidi Foundation, Yazda, the Sinjar Academy—and the Coalition for Genocide Response to submit recommendations to the UN Human Rights Council for Iraq's Universal Periodic Review (UPR)³⁵. These recommendations included: halting terror-related trials that lack due process;

²⁹ Johanna E. Foster & Sherizaan Minwalla, *Voices of Yazidi Women: Perceptions of Journalistic Practices in the Reporting on ISIS Sexual Violence*, 67 WOMEN'S STUDIES INTERNATIONAL FORUM 53 (2018).

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Ten Years of Darkness – The Yazidi Genocide and the Need for Comprehensive Responses*, <https://www.ibanet.org/Ten-Years-of-Darkness-The-Yazidi-Genocide-and-the-Need-for-Comprehensive-Responses> (last visited May 27, 2025).

³³ *Ten Years of the Yazidi Genocide – IBAHRI Raises Concerns around International Abandonment* | International Bar Association, <https://www.ibanet.org/Ten-years-of-the-Yazidi-genocide-IBAHRI-raises-concerns-around-international-abandonment> (last visited May 27, 2025).

³⁴ *The IBA report on the social and economic impact of the legal profession*, <https://www.ibanet.org/document?id=IBA-report-on-the-social-and-economic-impact-of-the-legal-profession-2024-Executive-Summary> (last visited May 27, 2025).

³⁵ *Supra* note 20.

amending Iraqi criminal law to define and criminalize genocide in consultation with survivors, civil society, and legal experts; investigating and prosecuting ISIS crimes as genocide and other international crimes; ensuring protections for victims, survivors, and witnesses; and working with international actors to establish a specialized tribunal to try Daesh crimes. In response to requests from the Yazidi community, Nadia's Initiative (NI) launched a project in 2021 to construct a cemetery and memorial in Sinjar, designed in collaboration with community members and a Yazidi architect³⁶. Construction is now underway with support from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Iraq and USAID. Nadia Murad, NI's founder and president, emphasized that "grief is part of the healing process," and that memorials help both in mourning and educating future generations. IOM Iraq's Chief of Mission, Giorgi Gigauri, echoed that memorialization is essential for supporting displaced survivors returning home.

Given the transnational nature of the Yazidi genocide, it is critical to consider the present insecurities faced by the Yazidi diaspora in Europe. Since 2014, the Yazidi population in Europe has grown significantly, making it vital for governments, policymakers, academics, and civil society to understand how the diaspora perceives security and justice.

The Yazidis in Europe speak of an everyday kind of insecurity that extends beyond simple physical violence. Their identity is often hidden from the outer world due to the prevalent racism and discrimination³⁷, much like their experience of marginalization back in Iraq. Arriving in Europe, the returning ISIS fighters—which off and on have escaped prosecution or have been given very lenient sentences—further worsen their sense of insecurity, along with online threats from ISIS sympathizers whenever Yazidis speak out about issues of current relevance, such as women still in captivity³⁸. Their experiences cause Yazidis to worry about their displaced families back in Iraq, which adds significantly to their ongoing insecure feeling.

This sustained insecurity issues a challenge to the dominant storyline that justice efforts have been sufficient in addressing the genocide. Yazidis do not see 2014 as a closed chapter; rather, they experience the impact of the genocide daily. There is a disconnect between governments' stated commitments to justice and the Yazidis' lived reality³⁹. Traditional operating models are

³⁶ *Nadia's Initiative and IOM Iraq Break Ground on Cemetery and Memorial for Yazidi Genocide Victims*, INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION, <https://www.iom.int/news/nadias-initiative-and-iom-iraq-break-ground-cemetery-and-memorial-yazidi-genocide-victims> (last visited May 27, 2025).

³⁷ *Supra* note 24.

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Towards a More Meaningful Transitional Justice Approach for the Yazidi Diaspora in Europe*, INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR COUNTER-TERRORISM - ICCT, <https://icct.nl/publication/towards-more-meaningful-transitional-justice-approach-yazidi-diaspora-europe> (last visited May 27, 2025).

premised on a post-conflict environment, overlooking ongoing discrimination and insecurity. Even more importantly, in only focusing on acts committed in 2014, they have overlooked the existing threats as well as the continued discrimination against the Yazidi community.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The genocide of the Yazidis by ISIS is a profound reminder of how hate, when left unchecked, can wipe out entire communities. Hence, a much more thorough, victim-centered approach is required. An avenue worth considering can be that of transitional justice, whose four pillars are criminal prosecution, truth-seeking, reparations, and institutional reform⁴⁰. It is not enough to label these crimes as genocide; global action must follow to ensure justice, accountability, and the restoration of dignity to the survivors.

Based on this analysis, Immediate and coordinated international efforts are needed to locate and rescue the remaining Yazidi women and children still in ISIS captivity. Rehabilitation programs must address both physical and psychological trauma, with a special focus on trauma-informed care for survivors of sexual violence. National and international legal mechanisms, including the International Criminal Court (ICC), should prosecute ISIS members responsible for genocide and war crimes. Iraq and Syria must ensure that all trials adhere to due process and victim-centered justice. The Sinjar region, devastated by ISIS, needs rebuilding of infrastructure including homes, schools, and hospitals. Yazidis must be allowed to return voluntarily and safely to their ancestral lands, with guarantees of security, political representation, and autonomy.

In conclusion, the silence and delayed response of the world allowed the occurrence of this genocide. A just global order cannot tolerate impunity. Only by fully acknowledging the whole tragedy of the Yazidis and committing to continued action for healing and justice will the brighter face of the world will emerge. The international community must ensure that "never again" should not just be words but a promise kept and reflected in action.

⁴⁰ *Id.*