# The Forced Displacement of Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Disputed Areas in Iraq
## A Case Study of the Post-2014 Yazidi Minority[1]

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**Abstract:** This study addresses the forced migration and internal displacement of ethnic and religious minorities in the so-called disputed areas of Iraq, with a focus on the Yazidi minority. Since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the populations of these areas, especially non-Muslim religious minorities, have been targeted by jihadi organisations and armed groups. This persecution reached its peak following the invasion of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in 2014 and the perpetration of genocide against the Yazidi minority, which fled or was forcibly displaced to Kurdish areas in the north and Arab areas in central and southern Iraq. The Yazidi minority was almost entirely uprooted and displaced to cities in the Kurdistan Region. This study covers contextual developments and gaps related to an Iraqi minority in the disputed areas, discussing the factors and obstacles preventing the return of displaced Yazidis to the Sinjar region.

Forced Displacement    Yazidi Minority    Iraq    ISIL

## Introduction

The third Gulf war and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 set in motion political developments that produced a new reality for all segments of Iraqi society. Violent religious, sectarian and nationalist conflicts erupted in various regions of Iraq, causing great suffering and destruction. These conflicts have displaced hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, sparking waves of internal migration and the mass emigration of religious and sectarian communities. As a consequence of these conflicts, Iraqi territory was effectively divvied up between the forces and parties representing the major parties to the conflict (Shiʿis, Sunnis and Kurds). The so-called disputed areas[3] between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi central government are the site of significant ethnic, religious and sectarian diversity and home to the majority of religious and ethnic minorities, in particular the Yazidi minority in Sinjar and Shekhan, located on the Nineveh Plain.

Communal and identity-based conflicts in Iraq fuelled increased sectarian and religious hatred and animosity and gave rise to armed resistance, Shi'i and Sunni extremist groups, and paramilitary organisations and militias. Social cleavages widened between communities in many areas, especially after many Muslim citizens, both Sunni and Shiʿi, joined armed organisations for various reasons. This led to armed violence and ultimately the displacement, internal

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**3**    The disputed areas constitute the dividing line between Arabs in the south and the Kurdish Region in the north. They include most of the governorate of Kirkuk, districts in the Nineveh governorate, and parts of the Diyala governorate. They are home to numerous minorities, including the Yazidis, whose historical region extends from the district of Sinjar to the district of Shekhan and includes numerous villages and towns, particularly on the Nineveh Plain. Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi constitution provides for a mechanism to resolve the dispute over these territories, but it has not been applied and thus far no resolution has been reached.

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migration, and emigration of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. Iraqi minorities, including the Yazidi minority — which is not considered among the "People of the Book" (*ahl al-kitab*) — fell victim to the fighting and massacres perpetrated by rival groups.

Genocidal massacres of the Yazidi minority in the disputed areas are only one result of sectarian and religious conflict in Iraq,[4] leading to their ongoing forced displacement to safer areas, especially to cities in the Kurdistan Region and from there to areas outside Iraq. Most traditional Yazidi areas in Sinjar are still uninhabited, destroyed and abandoned. According to the latest estimates, the majority of Yazidis today (250,000–300,000 people, according to the Relief and Humanitarian Affairs Department of the Duhok governorate in 2019)[5] live in camps in the Kurdistan Region. In the context of these events and their repercussions, two questions can be asked: how do we create a suitable platform for the sustainable return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the Kurdistan camps to their areas of origin? And what factors impede their return?[6]

This study aims to identify the factors hindering the return of IDPs and to discuss the developments, conflicts and divisions within minority communities, as factors that prevent their return and preclude reconciliation and social peace between the communities living in these areas.

The study takes a qualitative approach and is divided two main parts. The first is theoretical and historical, drawing on information from various sources to provide the foundation for the study. The broader literature, reports and previous studies on the subject are used to support research questions related to demographic change, displacement and return. The second part is based on a field study. Despite the difficulty of conducting fieldwork given ongoing conflict in Iraq, starting in early August 2019, I conducted a number of interviews with IDPs during visits to the camps, especially camps designated for the Yazidi community

in the cities and towns of the Duhok governorate in the Kurdistan Region. Due to the security difficulties involved in accessing the Arab and Sunni Muslim areas of Sinjar, I selected a sample of Yazidi IDPs and conducted semi-structured interviews with them for the purpose of consultation as a prelude to the research; the sample then became the main material for field research. Through the interviews, I sought to investigate the facts and solicit opinions in order to decide how best to address the issue.

According to the planned approach, I asked the interviewees fourteen questions. The first interviews were conducted randomly with five non-Yazidi minorities, most of them Shiʿis, in a camp near the city of Duhok, to understand the reasons for their migration. I then conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty-five members of the Yazidi minority in three camps located in towns in the Duhok governorate in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Each camp houses a diverse population from across the Sinjar region, and the ages of those I met ranged between 18 and 80 years old — that is, an appropriate age group from which to derive the necessary information. All the people I interviewed understood their situation; some had been affected by the ISIL invasion, and some had lost family members and seen their homes destroyed. To further enrich and support the study, I also conducted interviews by telephone and over social media; the names of all interviewees are withheld for reasons of security, privacy and professional ethics. In addition, I conducted interviews with some minority representatives who are officially working in the central and regional governments in order to gain a better understanding of barriers to the return of IDPs, the role of the security agencies, and the official positions of the central and regional governments and how serious they are in encouraging the return of IDPs to those areas that lie outside their conflict zones.

After sources and data were collected and the interviews conducted, the information was consolidated, processed and analysed to reach

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**4** U.S. Department of State, The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *International Religious Freedom Report 2008, Iraq*, 19/9/2008, accessed on 19/4/2021, at: https://bit.ly/3ntsbYE

**5** This number includes all the Yazidis of Sinjar and the Nineveh Plain. See: Duhok Governorate, Board of Relief and Humanitarian Affairs (BRHA), Executive Directorate, "IDPs and Refugees in Duhok Governorate: Profile and General Information", 2019.

**6** I asked these and other questions of IDPs in personal interviews about the subject of return, and drew on this information for this study. See the appendix to this paper for a list of all interview questions.

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clear conclusions. The questions asked during the interviews explored Yazidis' knowledge of and attitudes towards return, and their information and views on the subject were useful for assessing the general situation, the issue of displacement, and the causes and factors impeding return.

The study itself is divided into two main parts. The first deals with the historical background of internal developments in Iraq and the repercussions for the Yazidi minority from the inception of the Iraqi state until the ISIL invasion, looking at issues such as

Arabisation, the seizure of property and land, and demographic changes in Sinjar. The second part concerns the ISIL invasion and its implications, which is the heart of the study. It discusses the repercussions of the invasion, including forced displacement and the rising dominance of armed parties and factions, and then identifies the factors that impede the return of IDPs to Sinjar. The paper concludes with a brief summary of the research and its main findings, followed by proposals to address the issue of IDPs and the prospects of their return to their areas of origin in Sinjar.

## Internal Developments in Iraq and Implications for the Demographics of the Yazidi Minority Before and After 2003

Iraq is home to the largest Yazidi community in the world, numbering between 500,000 and 550,000 people, although the precise size of the community is impossible to gauge. Official data certified by the Iraqi Ministry of Planning relies on figures from 1997, which excluded Iraqi Yazidis who had resided in the Kurdistan Region since 1991, including those living in the Sharya and Khanki collective communities[7] and the town of Baadre. According to a statement from the Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation, "The Yazidi population in Iraq according to the 1997 general census, which did not include the governorates of the Kurdistan Region, but only fifteen governorates, is 205,379 people. When the population is calculated using the population growth rate in Iraq for 2010, estimated at 2.6 per cent, the Yazidi population numbers 273,319 people".[8] Based on the law granting recognized minorities one seat in the Iraqi Council of Representatives for every 100,000 people, one seat was given to the Yazidi community, but if the Ministry of Planning 2010

estimated figures are used, the Yazidis deserve at least two seats. There is no doubt that the Yazidi population of 2022 is larger: in the 2010 elections, the Yazidis won seven seats in the Council of Representatives with only the votes of Yazidis in the disputed areas. We can therefore estimate their numbers at about 500,000. This may make Yazidis the second largest religious group in Iraq, given that the Iraqi Christian community has declined due to emigration. Today less than 300,000 Christians likely remain in Iraq, based on emigration data after 2003.

The Yazidis faced significant persecution after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The car bomb attacks against the Yazidi collective communities in Kar Izir and Siba Sheikh Khidir in the Sinjar region in 2007, attributed to al-Qaeda, resulted in the death and injury of more than 500 people, making them among the deadliest suicide bombings in Iraq since 2003.[9] Assassinations of Yazidis in cities and areas near their villages and towns continued, eventually culminating

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**7**    "Collective communities" refers to the towns established by the Iraqi government following the forced resettlement of Yazidis and the destruction of their villages in Sinjar and Shekhan from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s. Residents of multiple villages were resettled into a single collective community to facilitate control of them. Some of these towns came to have more urban amenities than the villages thanks to the provision of water and electricity. The communities were given Arabic names of national or religious (Islamic) significance, such as the community of Abu Firas al-Hamdani (Sharya) and Beni Umayya (Khanki). When these towns were included in the Kurdistan Region in 1991, they were renamed by their inhabitants after the names of their original villages.

**8**    Iraqi Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation, "Bayān ʿAdad Nufūs al-Mukawwin al-Iyzīdī fī al-ʿIrāq", no. 3428/8/1/3/1, Central Organization of Statistics & Information Technology, 6/5/2010. The document was directed to the Supreme Federal Court, signed by Dr. Mahdi Muhsin al-Allaq, chair of the Central Organization of Statistics & Information Technology. This is an unpublished document in the author's possession.

**9**    Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2008* (Washington DC: 2008), p. 479.

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in a massive assault by ISIL in August 2014[10] on Sinjar and the Nineveh Plain that left thousands dead and wounded and saw the capture and enslavement of Yazidi women and children.

## Historical Overview of Demographic Changes from the Inception of the Iraqi State to the US Occupation

From the establishment of the modern Iraqi state in 1921 until the US occupation in 2003,[11] the Yazidis were the targets of several Iraqi army campaigns undertaken for various reasons, most importantly for the settlement of Arab and Muslim tribes in their areas. This sparked several rebellions against successive Iraqi governments, especially in the Sinjar region, the most significant of which were the armed movements in of 1925–1935, led by well-known Yazidi leaders such as Daoud al-Daoud and Hemoye Shero, which demanded the return of Yazidi lands and the expulsion of the Arab tribes brought into the region.[12] The Yazidi rebellion of 1935 was ostensibly a response to the conscription law enacted that same year; the British documents indicate that it was related to the land dispute between Yazidis and the tribal settlement policies in Yazidi areas.[13] With the persistence of the problem, armed Yazidi movements and insurgencies were renewed in the 1960s, this time in the republican era and for the same reasons. The 1964 rebellion led by Sido Hemoye Shero prompted the Iraqi government to develop long-term plans and programmes to allow the full control of any future Yazidi insurgency or movement[14] and to ensure the continued settlement of tribes in Yazidi areas.

Among the government's plans for the Yazidi minority, Arabisation campaigns intensified under the Baath Party regime (1968–2003). Starting in the 1970s, the government dispossessed the Yazidis and forced them off their ancestral lands. To that end, the government demolished most Yazidi villages and concentrated Yazidis into collective residential communities given Arabic names. Table 1 lists some of these communities in Sinjar.

**Table 1**
**Names of Yazidi Communities in Sinjar**

| Name in the local language | Name in Arabic |
| --- | --- |
| Dohula | al-Qadisiyya |
| Kar Izir | al-Qahtaniyya |
| Siba Sheikh Khidir | al-Jazira |
| Zorava | al-Uruba |
| Gir Zerk | al-Adnaniyya |
| Tel Banat | al-Walid |
| Gohbal | al-Andalus |
| Khana Sor | al-Tamim |
| Dugure | Hittin |
| Borek | al-Yarmouk |

**Source:** Prepared by the author based on personal knowledge and interviews.

Subsequently, the government encouraged other citizens from Arab tribes, mostly Sunnis, to settle in

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**10**    After ISIL seized territory from 2014 to 2017, Iraq saw a massive wave of internal displacement, estimated at more than three million people by Minority Rights Group International. See: *Crossroads: The Future of Iraq's Minorities after ISIS* (Brussels: The Institute for International Law and Human Rights, Minority Rights Group International, 2017), accessed on 14/4/2021, at: https://bit.ly/3affPxF

**11**    In the wake of the First World War, Iraq became independent of the Ottoman state, and the majority of Yazidis became part of the nascent state, particularly after Mosul was annexed to Iraq in 1925. The Yazidi community was concentrated on the Nineveh Plain, in the area between Sinjar and Shekhan. This is the site of the Lalish Temple, the main temple for the world's Yazidis.

**12**    Majid Hassan Ali, "Religious Minorities in Early Republican Iraq (1958-1968): Between Granting Rights and Discrimination: A Socio-Political and Historical Study", PhD dissertation, University of Bamberg, Bamberg, 2017, pp. 98-102.

**13**    See the following documents: British Archive, Foreign Office (F. O.) 371/ 18949, Extract from R.A.F. Intelligence Summary, Iraq, November 1935, paras 595-605, (Internal security); British Archive, Foreign Office (F. O.) 325/22/42, British Embassy, Baghdad, 23 August, 1942; British Archive, Foreign Office (F.O.) 325/27/42, British Embassy Baghdad, 31st October 1942.

**14**    Ali, pp. 117-133, 220-270.

and around Yazidi villages.[15] The Sunni Arab tribes that moved from the Jazira desert in southwestern Mosul towards Yazidi areas include the al-Hadidi, al-Jahish, al-Shammar and al-Matyut. All of these tribes settled in Yazidi villages after the state initially leased out Yazidi lands to them;[16] as they acquired more land and property, the tribes permanently settled in the region, and so the problems persisted.

The Yazidi community nevertheless remained in Sinjar. There was no mass exodus to remote areas and there was similarly no wave of Yazidi emigration from Iraq in that period. On the whole, Yazidis settled into the new collective communities until the 1990s.

Following the Second Gulf War in 1991, the areas inhabited by Yazidis and other minorities were divided between the central government and the KRG by UN Security Council Resolution 688, and a no-fly zone over Kurdish areas was established at the 36th parallel north. Individuals began to migrate due to the war and its aftermath, the economic blockade of Iraq and the establishment of a safe zone in the Kurdistan Region. This was the situation until 2003, which gave rise to the so-called disputed areas and religious, sectarian, and ethnic conflicts throughout Iraq, which in turn led to mass displacement and emigration.

**Map 1**
**The Disputed Areas**



**Source:** International Crisis Group, *Iraq and the Kurds: Trouble Along the Trigger Line*, Middle East Report, no. 88 (8 July 2009), p. 30.

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**15**     Some 100,000 Yazidi citizens were forced out of villages in Sinjar and resettled in towns built by the central Iraqi government starting in the 1970s; the old villages were razed. For more details, see: UN-Habitat: For A Better Urban Future, Emerging Land Tenure Issues Among Displaced Yazidis from Sinjar, Iraq: How Chances of Return May be Further Undermined by a Discrimination Policy Dating Back 40 Years (November 2015), pp. 6-16, accessed on 15/4/2021, at: https://bit.ly/3skk15v

**16**     "Claims in Conflict: Reversing Ethnic Cleansing in Northern Iraq", Human Rights Watch, 2/8/2004, accessed on 15/4/2021, at: https://bit.ly/3v0ETAJ

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## Developments After 2003 and Implications for the Yazidi Minority

The third Gulf War (the 2003 invasion of Iraq) fuelled sectarianism among the various Iraqi communal groups (Shiʿis, Sunnis, Arabs, and Kurds). Intra-community divisions based on religious doctrine also emerged, and this had a direct impact on non-Muslim religious minorities as well. These sectarian prejudices ultimately constituted an unprecedented existential threat to religious minorities, especially the Yazidi minority, which, not being considered People of the Book, were seen as infidels and devil worshippers. Yazidis were therefore often targeted more than other minorities in the disputed areas. They were more vulnerable to targeted violence in the Nineveh Plain and Mosul, and then in Baghdad, and less so in villages and towns with a greater concentration of Yazidis, where more demographic homogeneity offered some protection against incursions. Yazidis were assassinated and their temples and religious shrines were targeted,[17] which contributed to internal disintegration within Yazidi communities. In addition, Yazidi areas experienced and continue to experience demographic changes — what we might call "demographic Islamisation".[18] Transcending both Arabisation and Kurdification, this process resulted in the Islamisation of the regions inhabited by Yazidis and other non-Muslim minorities throughout Iraq[19] and entailed the continued violation of the rights of non-Muslim minorities with respect to population, land and property in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.

Political developments since 2003, in particular the ongoing conflict between the central government and the KRG, have been coupled with quasi-systematic demographic changes in minority and indigenous areas. As far as the disputed areas are concerned, although Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi constitution provides for the normalisation of these areas, whereby the central government and the KRG are obliged to return land and property to the original owners who were displaced or deported in previous eras, the Yazidis have not been able to recover their land and property. Moreover, as a result of the conflicts between political parties for control of these areas and the lack of security and stability, discriminatory practices by factions in control have persisted, spurring additional waves of displacement.

In addition to the conflict between the central government and the KRG over the future status of the disputed areas,[20] and due to the fallout of the post-ISIL period, minorities in these regions have formed militias and paramilitary forces loyal to each of the two governments. Minority communites are thus internally divided, which poses a fundamental obstacle to the return of the majority of displaced minorities. In the long term, this may mean that few serious attempts are made to restore social peace to the region and encourage the return of displaced people.

## The ISIL Attack on Sinjar: Forced Displacement and Factors Preventing Return

The nature of the conflict in Iraq has imposed itself on the political landscape; non-Muslim religious minorities have become victims of the ongoing conflict due to increased religious and sectarian militancy.[21] As a non-Muslim religious minority, the Yazidis are seen as infidels by extremists, and

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**17**    For example, see: Majed Eshoo, "The Fate of Assyrian Villages Annexed to Today's Dohuk Governorate in Iraq and the Conditions in these Villages Following the Establishment of The Iraqi State in 1921," *Assyrian International News Agency*, accessed on 15/4/2021, at: https://bit.ly/3mP4w4z

**18**    By demographic Islamisation, I mean the process whereby Muslims seize and settle the lands, property, and towns of non-Muslim religious minorities in Iraq, whether legally or illegally. Iraqi governments were directly and indirectly involved in violating Yazidi property and land rights and offering assistance to Muslim tribes and citizens in seizing them. As a result, the historical demography these areas shifted and they were Islamized.

**19**    Christian representatives have made repeated demands to stop the demographic changes underway in their areas on the Nineveh Plain and in the Kurdistan Region.

**20**    For more on the nature of the violence and conflict in the disputed areas, see: Dlovan Brwari & Ernesto Londoño, "Blasts Kill at Least 53 in Iraq," *The Washington Post*, 11/8/2009, accessed on 15/4/2021, at: https://wapo.st/339npGd

**21**    Corey Flintoff, "Some Displaced Iraqi Christians Ponder Kurds' Role," *NPR*, 28/10/2008, accessed on 15/4/2021, at: https://n.pr/3suhYvD

historically social and media discourse has portrayed them as devil worshippers. For al-Qaida, and later ISIL, this justified targeting Yazidis and forcing them to either convert to Islam or kill them, without giving them the opportunity to pay the minority tax (*al-jizya*) or flee. In contrast, in the city of Mosul, ISIL gave Christians — as People of the Book — a chance to pay the *jizya* or leave the city.

After ISIL seized broad swathes of Sunni areas in northern Iraq and launched the large-scale assault on Sinjar and the Nineveh Plain, ISIL attacked Yazidi areas on 2 August 2014. Kurdish security having hastily retreated, ISIL met with little resistance. Hundreds of thousands of Yazidis living in villages and towns in Sinjar fled for the fortified area of Mount Sinjar; those who were unable to save themselves were captured by ISIL fighters. Men and elderly people who refused to convert to Islam were killed, and more than 6,000 women and children were taken captive and forced into sexual slavery; the fate of more than 3,000 women and children remains unknown.

In the aftermath of the ISIL invasion and its attendant atrocities, new militias emerged that took control of large parts of the disputed areas, especially in Sinjar and the Nineveh Plain. This complicated the security landscape and resulted in armed conflicts that led to further displacement, additional violations, and more dispossession.

The main factions and militias that dominate Sinjar are:

- The Protection Force of Êzîdxan (HPE), a Yazidi militia led by Haydar Shesho.
- The Yazidi Peshmerga, led by Qassem Shesho and affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK).
- The Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS). Made up of Yazidis from Sinjar, it adopts the thought of the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as its organisational ideology; it is concentrated in the town of Khana Sor near the Syrian border.
- The Lalish Units, subordinate to the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF).
- Units within the Iraqi army.

Given geostrategic considerations in the region, the struggle for control of Sinjar continues, hindering the return of 250,000–300,000 Yazidi IDPs from camps in the Kurdistan Region. Based on my observations, the authorities in the Kurdistan Region also may be loathe or allow the return of IDPs for fear that they will join rival forces with a strong presence on the ground, like the YBS and the PMF, which could undermine the influence of other parties in the Kurdistan Region, especially the PDK, and thwart its hope of controlling Sinjar in the future, particularly in the case of a referendum on the fate of the disputed areas. Besides Kirkuk, Sinjar is the main centre of gravity in the Kurdistan Region, and Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution calls for a referendum in these areas to determine whether they will join the central government or become part of the Kurdistan Region.

It is worth mentioning that all aforementioned militias and parties advocate for the defence of Yazidis in Iraq; they were formed specifically to defend and protect the Yazidi presence in their historical areas. But the presence of militias and paramilitaries in Yazidi areas does not bode well, and in fact poses additional risks to Yazidis. As is known, there are profound differences between some PMF factions and the Kurdish Peshmerga. The fact that there are Yazidi units operating under both umbrellas does not bring protection or stability to the region since the central government and the KRG could at any moment find themselves facing off in armed confrontations due to intense competition over the disputed areas. Some Yazidi units may therefore be exploited to advance these larger agendas. Sectarian, nationalist, and religious factors have had a hand in precluding the return of Yazidi IDPs to their areas, in particular the conflict between the nationalist KRG and Baghdad, as well as sectarian conflicts between Shiʿis and Sunnis. In addition, the Turkmen community in Tal Afar is divided between Shiʿis and Sunnis; the majority of the latter joined ISIL and were accused of carrying out massacres against Shi'i and Yazidi Turkmen.

## The Forced Displacement and Mass Exodus of Yazidis

Available statistics indicate that 350,000-400,000 Yazidis have been displaced from the regions of Sinjar

and the Nineveh Plain since the ISIL invasion,[22] while some 100,000 Yazidis have emigrated from Iraq.[23] In the first days of the attack, 1,293 people were killed; 2,745 children were left orphaned by the invasion, and 6,417 people were abducted (3,548 girls and 2,869 boys). According to the latest statistics of the Office for the Rescue of Abductees,[24] the 3,509 survivors include 1,192 women, 337 men, 1,033 girls and 947 boys, while 2,908 (1,323 girls and 1,585 boys) are still held.[25] To date, 80 mass graves have been discovered in Sinjar, in addition to dozens of individual grave sites, and 68 Yazidi religious shrines were razed by ISIL.[26]

**Map 2**
**Displaced Yazidis**



**Source:** Map adapted by the author from: "Gulal–Iraq Capital City Map, Png Download," *PngJoy*, accessed on 25/5/2021, at: https://bit.ly/3hXkj0R

## Factors Preventing the Return of IDPs, Particularly Yazidi IDPs to Sinjar

Several factors impede the return of IDPs, particularly Yazidis, to the Sinjar region. These include conflicts between the political forces and militias; the

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22    This number includes all the Yazidis of Sinjar and the Nineveh Plain. See: "IDPs and Refugees in Duhok Governorate: Profile and General Information;" Emre Basci, "Yazidis: A Community Scattered in between Geographies and its Current Immigration Experience," *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2 (July/September 2016), p. 342.

23    This is an estimate from the Central Yazidi Council in Germany (ZÊD), an official institution. The council announced that as of 2019, there were 230,000 Yazidis in Germany, according to the German authorities.

24    This office was established in Duhok by decree and with the support of the prime minister of the KRG, Nechirvan Barzani; it is dedicated to the purchase of Yazidi slaves from captivity.

25    These figures represent all Yazidi victims of ISIL since 3/8/2014. The figures are maintained by the Office for the Rescue of Abductees in Duhok; Hussein Kero Ibrahim, interview, Duhok, 12/8/2019.

26    On the destroyed shrines, see: *Destroying the Soul of the Yazidis: Cultural Heritage Destruction During the Islamic State's Genocide Against the Yazidis* (Munich: Rashid International; Lincoln, NE: Yazda; Oxford, UK: Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa, 2019), accessed on 16/4/2021, at: https://bit.ly/3tqErv4

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increasingly heated conflict between the KRG and the central government for control of the region; the security vacuum; the lack of adequate protection and growing tensions and threats to social peace between Yazidis and Arab and Muslim tribes; the near total destruction of homes; the collapse of the sewage system and the lack of attempts to re-establish necessary services like electricity and water; and widespread minefields and explosives planted by ISIL throughout the area. I discuss these issues in the context of the field study.

The Sample Data and the Perspective of the Displaced

In this part of the paper, I discuss what displaced people themselves see as obstacles to their return to their areas of origin, based on information obtained from interviews and personal observation. As shown here, there are some optimists who believe that Yazidis should remain in Iraq, including some intellectuals and members of political parties. They believe that the survival of Yazidis depends on certain necessary changes to political and legal systems in Iraq in particular, and other Arab and Islamic countries more broadly. In this context, a displaced person from Khana Sor said, "Our survival in Iraq is contingent on radical changes and the transformation of governments in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region into civil, democratic systems that guarantee the rights of all citizens regardless of their religious affiliation and [recognize] the need to separate religion and state".[27]

Some Yazidi elites who hold official positions and jobs and are aligned with the policies of the dominant parties take a different perspective based on personal and factional interest.[28] They believe Yazidis should stay and demand a return to the status quo prior to 2014. In contrast, others hold no hope of Yazidis remaining in Iraq given the lack of any real foundations or guarantees for their protection.

The study found that many Yazidis are worried about the present and the future if they stay in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region due to the fragile, tattered social fabric and increasing religious extremism.

I observed a keen desire among young Yazidis, in both the disputed areas and the Kurdistan Region, to leave the country for the West. Several young men ages 20–40 who I contacted and interviewed — the majority of them IDPs living in the camps, though some were IDPs residing in Kurdish cities in the Kurdistan Region — told me that they all wanted to emigrate. They cited the ongoing targeting, growing religious extremism and terrorism, and the lack of any prospects for a better future where they currently live, and in Iraq in general.[29]

The majority of Yazidis believe that most of the Arab tribesmen and Sunni Turkmen who remained in the region and did not flee after the ISIL invasion joined ISIL and were involved in killing and enslaving Yazidis. This reinforces hatred, which may have a long-term impact on the future of the region, as reprisals are expected to continue. Law-enforcement in the region is difficult given the weakness of the state apparatus, ongoing sectarian conflicts, and most Sunni Arabs' rejection of the practices of the central government, installed by the US invasion and given over largely to Shi'i religious forces and parties. In this context, one of the Yazidis I met said: "Most of our neighbours from the tribes of al-Matyut, al-Khatuniyya, al-Jahish, and the Sunni Turkmen from Tal Afar joined ISIL. They took our sons and daughters captive and they killed the men, and we know them well. Now they live in Sinjar, and those who fled will also return, so how can we live together again after what happened?"[30]

The tribes that joined ISIL are the same ones that had previously settled on Yazidi lands and seized their property. In this context, the basis for Yazidis' fear of their Muslim tribal neighbours who joined ISIL remains salient; despite the liberation of their areas, the Yazidis are still reluctant to return in fear of these people, who they believe could be ISIL sleeper

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**27**    Interview with a Yazidi intellectual in Khana Sor, Sharya camp, 3/8/2019.

**28**    This is based on interviews with several IDPs in camps across the Duhok governorate in the Kurdistan Region, conducted in August 2019; some were members of influential political parties.

**29**    Interviews and communications with 21 Yazidi young men and women in IDP camps in the Duhok governorate, as well as some residents of Sharya and Khanki, 5-17/8/2019.

**30**    Interview with an IDP, Khanki camp, 12/8/2018.

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cells. One displaced Yazidi woman from Sinjar said, "We're afraid of everyone and all our neighbours who supported ISIL. They've been brainwashed by extremist religious ideas — even children were trained to kill — and there is no justice or law to protect us".[31]

The issue, relatively speaking, is the fear that no security or law exists to guarantee their protection. That is, Yazidis have lost trust in the security services and neighbouring Muslim communities, which means that the conferences and statements of political parties and Yazidi officials in political parties about emigration do not necessarily reflect the aspirations of the Yazidi street. The majority of Yazidis, whether residing in IDP camps in the Kurdistan Region or camps in Turkey, Greece and other countries, aspire to emigrate. Indeed, dozens of individuals and families in the camps leave the country every day.

In this regard, a Yazidi tribal leader displaced from Sinjar expressed his fears and distrust: "Although the military operations against ISIL have ended, this does not mean that we're ready to return regardless of the situation and conditions. I long to return to my hometown in Sinjar, but strong emotions aren't enough motivation to return. I'm still afraid of ISIL and the extremist forces that might seek revenge". He added, "The most important thing that the Yazidis lost in their forced migration is not property and land, but trust in the sons and daughters of the neighbouring Sunni Arab and Turkmen regions and villages who joined ISIL".[32]

In face-to-face meetings and through available means of communication, I asked seven young Yazidi men and five young Yazidi women in the camps of Duhok governorate (Bajid-Kandala 1, Sharya and Khanki),[33] six of them from the Sinjar district seat and six from neighbouring villages and towns, if they would return to Sinjar if various conditions

improved. Their responses were almost identical: four of them said yes, but only if safety and security conditions were met. The rest had lost all hope of returning and are trying to leave Iraq in any way possible. Despite the difficulties in the camps, their responses demonstrated that they prefer to stay and cope with the difficult life in the camps as long as there is no security in Sinjar; at least there, they are far removed from anxiety and terrorism due to religious difference and intolerance. They said that they had lost confidence in their religious and political leadership, and also emphasized that they are divided and scattered among various political factions and parties, which makes them feel that they have no real authority to protect them.[34] Interestingly, some nationalist Yazidis asserted that they would return to Sinjar if an administratively autonomous region were formed,[35] while non-nationalist Yazidis believe that there is nothing worth returning to or for.

The establishment of a safe and administratively independent region may be a solution to return, one linked to the agendas of the political party to which the aforementioned leader belongs, because if proposal is taken up, his party will have a role and position on the issue. But it is also the demand of many Yazidi groups and elites, and this points to a loss of trust in the governments and forces that controlled and managed Sinjar's affairs, both its security and politics, from 2003 until the ISIL invasion in 2014. On the other hand, many Yazidis believe that the issue of return is tied to the agendas of the political parties in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. One Yazidi said, "The factors fuelling the conflict in Sinjar and preventing the return of displaced people still exist. The Kurdish parties in the Kurdistan Region have their own agendas in Sinjar, as do the ruling parties in the central government, and most of them may be tied to the agendas of countries in the region that want

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**31**   Interview with an IDP, Sharya camp, 6/8/2019.

**32**   Interview with a prominent Yazidi tribal chief, Khanki camp, 12/8/2021.

**33**   Most of the people I interviewed asked that their name be withheld.

**34**   I concluded based on statements about the lack of an authority to protect them that after the death of Tahsin Said Beg, the leader of the Yazidis in Iraq and worldwide, a new leader was appointed under certain political pressures, which undermined the trust of Yazidis, including IDPs, in the authority of the new leader, since the legitimacy of his appointment was questionable.

**35**   Social media communication with a leader of the Yazidi Movement for Reform and Progress, 26/8/2019.

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to gain a foothold in Sinjar for geostrategic reasons and ambitions".[36]

As explained above, several militias and factions are active in Sinjar, each with its own internal and external agendas, and this is hindering efforts to encourage the return of IDPs. The PDK publicly accuses the PKK of controlling Sinjar and obstructing the return of IDPs. In this regard, one displaced person said, "The mutual accusations between the Kurdish parties are just partisan conflicts over interests and influence. The faction accused of being a branch of the PKK in Sinjar is just a party composed of Yazidis in Sinjar. Although they adopt the ideology and thought of the PKK, they are not a wing or arm of that party".[37]

On the general level, this study found that despite the major efforts by some members of Yazidi and Kurdish political parties to encourage Yazidis to stay in Iraq and not emigrate, there is no common, unified discourse on the return of Yazidi IDPs, especially to Sinjar. There is also no coordination with the Yazidi armed factions deployed in Sinjar, either because the majority of them are arrayed behind the policies of the influential parties and major powers in the central government and the KRG or because of the lack of a clear vision about the administrative future of the region and whether it will be subordinate to the central government or the KRG. As a result, their efforts are split and they are divided; meanwhile, conditions for Yazidis are worsening by the day and their numbers are steadily declining.

In addition to the aforementioned factors, most of Sinjar City, other Yazidi villages and towns, and Yazidi homes are almost completely destroyed; roads are similarly destroyed, and electricity and water services are not available. The reconstruction of Sinjar City and neighbouring Yazidi villages and towns would therefore ensure the return of some Yazidi IDPs. Even now, despite being liberated from ISIS in 2016, these areas still lack the most basic services, livelihoods and job prospects, and development projects, and there are no clear plans to restore infrastructure to these areas and take actual steps that could encourage

many Yazidis to consider returning. Nevertheless, some residents do want to return to escape their plight in the camps. When I visited the camps in August, about thirty Yazidi families voluntarily returned to their areas in Sinjar absent any action by the central government in Baghdad or the KRG. But there is a more important role for international organisations and civil society that encourage these attempts and try to provide some necessary services to the returnees.

Nevertheless, stability in the region remains crucial for the return of IDPs. Although more than six years have passed since the ISIL offensive, the security situation remains volatile, and the conflict between different forces, parties, and militias continues. In this regard, the special representative of the UN secretary-general for Iraq, Jeanine Hennes-Plasschaert, lamented the current failure to stabilize Yazidi areas. In a report, UN Assistance Mission for Iraq stressed that "stability is crucial for the stricken community to return home and rebuild its life", calling on Baghdad and Erbil to find urgent solutions that put the needs of the people first. Hennes-Plasschaert noted that the road to lasting peace, development and prosperity is long and complex, stressing that stable governance and security structures represent a crucial first step that is still lacking even years after the liberation of Sinjar.[38]

In addition to aforementioned factors hindering return, the psychological factor plays a major role, as the lack of trust has stripped many people of their desire to return. Psychological and social trauma continue to affect the victims' families, especially those who were subjected to the worst kind of physical and psychological violence, murder, massacres, displacement and enslavement. Many villages are the site of visible mass graves that have not yet been touched. In this context, a Yazidi tribal leader said, "How can we speak of encouraging people to return? Or how can we persuade our children to return at the present time — even though we know that return is crucial and necessary to preserve the land of our ancestors, and that our historical land cannot be

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36    Interview with a displaced university graduate, Bajid-Kandala 1 camp, 15/8/2019.

37    Social media communication with a member of the YBS, Sinjar, 22/8/2019.

38    Osama Mahdi, "Ṭālabat bi-l-Isrāʿ fī Taḥqīq al-Istiqrār li-Sinjar wa-Iʿādat Muwāṭinīhā: al-Umam al-Muttaḥida Ghāḍiba li-Istimrār Ẓurūf al-Iyzīdiyīn 'al-Murawwiʿa'," *Elaph*, 1/8/2019, accessed on 16/4/2021, at: https://bit.ly/3ajNTc3

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abandoned — despite the horrors that have befallen us?"[39]

History holds many examples similar to the migration and displacement of Yazidis. The migration of religious minorities in the late Ottoman period comes to mind, when tens of thousands of Christians moved from the Hakkari region in present day south-eastern Turkey to Iraq, Syria, and other countries.[40] But migration is different in the modern era; today it flows from the countries of the East to the countries of the West. Yazidis leaving their homeland today means the loss of their ancestral lands, especially since property appropriation and the systematic practice of demographic Islamisation occurs in tandem with displacement and migration, whether legal or illegal.

## Conclusion

This paper discussed the actions of extremist religious groups that emerged in Iraq after the third Gulf War (2003) and the consequences and implications of their rise and growing influence. It showed that historical factors, religious and sectarian conflicts, and the failure of political parties to ensure the rights of citizens, especially after the US invasion, contributed significantly to the internal displacement and emigration of religious minorities, which were continuously targeted due the rise of religious extremism. This persecution peaked in 2014 when ISIL seized large parts of northern Iraq, including Sinjar, the Nineveh Plain, and the rest of the disputed areas. Although Sinjar and the rest of Iraq have been liberated from ISIL, conditions conducive to stability and a return to normal life are still lacking due to political considerations, the lack of security, the destruction of most homes and roads, and the lack of water and electricity services. Most importantly, social tensions and hostility persist between Muslim tribes that joined ISIL and the Yazidis. Moreover, the control of militias and paramilitaries over Sinjar has fuelled political competition and conflict due to the various competing political agendas of each armed faction.

Based on interviews, fieldwork and a review of the literature, I argue that there are no programmes or durable solutions for the sustainable return of Yazidi IDPs residing in camps and cities in the Kurdistan Region to their areas of origin. Most IDPs prefer to leave Iraq because of the political instability and their lack of faith in neighbouring communities, as well as their sense of political marginalisation, the absence of equitable representation in state institutions and social justice, and the enduring trauma arising from ISIL's crimes against them.

## Appendix: Questionnaire Used for Personal Interviews

During interviews, I presented a brief summary of the subject of my study, titled "The Forced Displacement of Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Disputed Areas in Iraq: A Case Study of the Yazidi Minority after 2014". I then asked for the interviewees' cooperation in responding to a set of precise, objective questions in order to obtain credible results to serve the academic research. I emphasized that these questions were designed solely for the purpose of the research and that all names would be withheld. The language used during the interviews was Sinjari Kurmanji.

- Gender: Male ___; Female ___; Decline to answer ___.

- Age: ___.

- Education: Primary ___; Preparatory ___; University ___.

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**39**   Interview with a displaced Yazidi tribal leader from Sinjar, residing in a rental home in Sharya, 9/8/2019; his name and his tribe's name have been withheld.

**40**   Majid Hassan Ali, "Inḥiṣār al-Wujūd wa-Fuqdān al-Huwiyya: Hijrat Masīḥiyyī al-ʿIrāq wa-Sūriyyā bayn Mawāqif al-Tashjīʿ wa-l-Rafḍ," *Mominoun Without Borders*, 2/4/2019, accessed on 16/4/2021, at: https://bit.ly/3uX0XMt

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- Social status: Unmarried ___; Married ___; Widowed ___; Divorced ___.
- Job status: Employed ___; Unemployed ___.
- I am involved in a political party: Yes ___; No ___.

## Questions

1. Do you expect to return to Sinjar in the near future? When? How? What factors are impeding your return?

2. Was your home destroyed after the ISIL invasion? Was it your private property and officially registered as such?

3. Are there indications that your living situation would improve if you returned to Sinjar?

4. If you returned to Sinjar, would you have a job or work that could provide an income for you and your family in the midst of the ongoing deterioration of security and political conflicts in Sinjar?

5. Are you afraid of your Muslim neighbours from the Arab tribes?

6. Are you afraid of the resurgence of ISIL?

7. Did the ISIL attack impact social relations between you and your neighbours belonging to other religious minorities and sects?

8. Is there hope or a possibility of building social peace and restoring peaceful coexistence? Or are you afraid to living peacefully with other religious and sectarian communities in Sinjar?

9. Do you trust the Iraqi state, the central government, or the Kurdistan Regional Government to protect you if you return?

10. Do you wish to belong to any political party or armed faction?

11. Do you feel that Iraqi and Kurdish political parties are exploiting the Yazidi issue in Sinjar?

12. Are you afraid of an armed conflict between political parties there?

13. Do you feel that staying in the camps is preferable to returning to Sinjar?

14. If you return to Sinjar, do you feel you will be protected from the dominant political party in your area?

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