

Content warning: this document contains mention of sexual assault as a weapon of genocide.

Yazidi and Yazidism Background Information

The Yazidi (yuh-ZEE-dee) people, who follow an ancient belief in one God, have a rich history and special religious practices. The term "Yazidi" (which can also be spelled "Yezidi," "Izîdî," "Ezdayi," or "Êzîdî") comes from the Kurmanji language and means, "the one who created me." This name reflects Yazidis' belief in a single Creator and God.⁶ Even though there are various spellings, "Yazidi" has been commonly used and is recognized by many people.⁶

Yazidism is mostly centered on the belief in one supreme being known as "Xweda" (or Khuda) (hoh-dAY), which means, "the one who created himself."⁴ The religion has strong ties to ancient Mesopotamian beliefs, including worship and rituals that have lasted for centuries.⁶ The hierarchical structure of Yazidism includes seven archangels, with Tawûsê Melek (Tuh-WOO-see Mah-LEHK), known as the Peacock Angel, being the most significant figure. Tawûsê Melek is believed to be entrusted by God with taking care of the world and the protecting the Yazidi people.¹

Historically, Yazidis have mostly lived in northern Iraq, particularly the Sinjar region. They also have communities in the Shekhan area, the Nineveh Plains, and other parts of Iraqi Kurdistan.² Yazidi communities are also found in Syria, Turkey, Armenia, and Georgia. Throughout their history, they have faced many instances of persecution and misunderstanding, primarily because of their unique religious practices and beliefs. Over time, Yazidis have lost much of their indigenous lands to Islamized groups, which has led to them being surrounded in the Nineveh Plain. This region of the world is an unstable and disputed, with ongoing tensions

between the Iraqi Central Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government, making it harder for the Yazidis to remain secure and make their own governing decisions.²

The 2014 Genocide

In August 2014, the Yazidi community experienced a brutal genocide at the hands of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This genocide aimed to destroy Yazidis and rid them from their ancestral lands in Sinjar. On August 3, 2014, ISIS militants attacked Sinjar, leading to mass killings, abductions, and slavery.³

ISIS militants systematically separated men from women and children. Men and older boys were often killed immediately, while women and girls were abducted. These women and girls were subjected to sexual slavery, forced conversions to Islam, and other cruel treatment. It is estimated that over 5,000 Yazidis were killed, and around 7,000 women and girls were captured and sold into slavery.⁵

The genocide forced over 200,000 Yazidis to flee their homes. Many sought refuge in the Sinjar Mountains, where they faced severe shortages of food, water, and medical supplies. The international community responded with humanitarian aid and a coalition of forces and international airstrikes that eventually broke the siege of Mount Sinjar in mid-August 2014.

The United Nations and other human rights organizations have called these acts genocide. They recognize that the violence was deliberate and meant to destroy the Yazidi community. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic concluded that ISIS's actions against Yazidis constituted genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.⁷

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