

The Yazidis

Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict



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MERI Policy Paper

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Photo obtained from (al-monitor.com) by Christophe Simon

1. Executive Summary

This report focuses on the Yazidi* community, one of the largest minority groups in Iraq, and their perceptions on conflicts and future reconciliation following the Islamic States (IS) invasion in 2014. The violence inflicted on this community by IS, combined with long-standing historical grievances, make their views on and attitudes toward the concept of reconciliation particularly relevant for the future stability of Iraq. By focusing on the question of what reconciliation means to the Yazidi community in Iraq, this study aims to map historic and more recent grievances, intra- and inter-community conflicts and tensions, and uncover community-held perspectives on conflict and reconciliation.

This report starts by placing emphasis on the need of avoiding imposing presumed definitions of reconciliation on the Yazidi context. Although the term itself has not yet been conclusively defined, peacebuilders and those engaged in reconciliation efforts after IS should be cautious about its usage and be clear as to what they mean by 'reconciliation' in their programmes. Failing to do this, significant efforts and financial resources may be wasted or yield little return. In addition to mentioning Yazidism, this report also examines pre-IS dynamics in order to understand the attitudes well. To this end, the researchers have highlighted two factors that have largely shaped the socio-economic status of Yazidis: (1) Their identity as an ethno-religious minority in Iraq's system of governance, and (2) The ongoing land disputes and competition over resources between Baghdad and Erbil.

The findings of this study reveal that the Yazidis suffer from internal and external conflicts. Externally, IS's violent attack and sexual enslavement of Yazidis have greatly damaged the Yazid-Sunni Arab relations. Further, the KRG and the Iraqi government do not seem to enjoy a favourable stance among the Yazidis; the KRG is seen to be largely focused on its own agendas while the Iraqi government is deemed to be neglectful of the Yazidis. Internally, a minority of Yazidis are beginning to consider themselves as a separate ethnic group rather than Kurds. This sentiment has grown among the people in Shingal since the KRG has not pursued a healthy policy in this area. There is also a gap between the community and political representatives. Many Yazidis do not feel represented as a result of the political affiliations of their leaders. In addition, the presence of a considerable number of armed groups in the Nineveh Plain that enjoy the support of the Yazidis may lead to worrying friction between part of the Yazidi community and the KRG.

The interviews for this report have been conducted in the summer of 2016 as part of a study funded by the United States Institute for Peace (USIP). The findings of this study have been reported to USIP at the time and now made accessible for a larger audience as a service to those seeking to assess the extent to which Yazidi grievances have been or are being addressed in the aftermath of IS' defeat in Nineveh. Although some views and opinions expressed by participants in this study may have been taken over by events, the findings of this study nevertheless constitute a form of documentation of the plight of the Yazidi community in Iraq.

*Yazidi (also known as Yezidi, Ezdi or Eyzidi)

2. "Reconciliation" after Genocide

The attacks perpetrated by the Islamic State (IS) on the various ethno-religious communities living in Nineveh Province since the summer of 2014 constitute genocide. Now, three years later, IS has been pushed out of its main stronghold in Mosul and is on the verge of losing its last urban centres. Hence, as the dust settles and the fog of war is slowly lifting, the question of how Iraq's society may seek to recover invariably arises. Exactly how previously hostile communities can come to terms with the past and reconcile their differences remains a complex process heavily subject to the local context and community views. The wide variety in reconciliation efforts adopted by governments around the globe in places like Europa, Africa and Latin America further underlines this and illustrates the opacity of the concept itself.

Academics and practitioners active in the field of peacebuilding widely recognise the need for increased clarity in research, programming and policy regarding what is meant by reconciliation. Without such clarity, some critics warn, we run the risk of 'expending millions of dollars and considerable effort on buzzwords that have no consistent definition or conceptual clarity and promoting mechanisms to achieve these obscure outcomes with little evidence that they will make a difference'.¹ The recognition that preconceived one-size-fits-all definitions of reconciliation cannot simply be imposed on target communities is widely shared among researchers and practitioners active in the field of conflict transformation.² Unfortunately, and much to the dismay of those who yearn for neat and concise definitions, the concept of reconciliation has proven notoriously difficult to define.

At its core, reconciliation can be considered a transformational, social process rather than an end-state or outcome.³ Transformational, as it seeks to move away from relationships mired with distrust and violence to one of mutual help and peaceful coexistence. Such an abstract concept however still allows for a wide variety of notions regarding what reconciliation actually means in more concrete terms. Some authors differentiate between minimal "thin" and maximal "thick" conceptualisations of reconciliation.⁴ The ability for two communities to share a public space without resorting to violence can thus be considered part of the minimal side of the reconciliation spectrum. Respect and social equality reflected in the rule of law takes the middle ground while elements such as reflection on, and acknowledgement of the past can help to further instil trust in inter-group relationships allowing atonement and forgiveness to eventually take place. These aspects can be understood as part of a thick, or maximalist definition of reconciliation. Megan Bradley points out there is not necessarily a linear progression from one end of the spectrum to another.⁵ In practice, sometimes thinner notions of reconciliation such as peaceful coexistence and mutual respect for human rights constitute significant achievements and is the most that can be asked for in societies recovering from severe conflict.

The following elements can all be considered integral to the process of reconciliation: non-violent coexistence, justice, acknowledgement, apology, forgiveness, equal rights, trust, establishing a shared truth about what happened in the past, and formulating a shared vision for the future. However, these elements do not exist in a vacuum separated from context and community views. Therefore, the exact configuration of elements

1 Weinstein, H. M. (2011: p. 3). Editorial Note: The Myth of Closure, the Illusion of Reconciliation: final thoughts on five years as co-editor-in-chief. *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 5(1), 1-10.

2 E.g. Bradley, M. (2012) Displacement, Transitional Justice and Reconciliation: Assumptions, Challenges and Lessons. See also, Zorbas, E. (2009). What does reconciliation after genocide mean? Public transcripts and hidden transcripts in post-genocide Rwanda. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 11(1), 127 – 147.

3 Lederach, J.P. (1997). *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. Washington DC, 4.

4 Crocker, D. A. (1999). Reckoning with past wrongs: A normative framework. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 13, 43-64.

5 Bradley, M. (2012). Displacement, Transitional Justice and Reconciliation: Assumptions, Challenges and Lessons. *Forced Migration Policy Briefing* 9.

in terms of their prioritisation and importance is subject to the views of the communities concerned. What reconciliation means, in other words, ‘depends on where you are looking at it from and who you are.’⁶ The premise of this study is that reconciliation can mean different things to different people. If reconciliation serves as a modern catch-all phrase – a vessel to be filled with localised dynamics and essences – then both researchers and practitioners should seek to identify and formulate those dynamics and meanings as a first step in the process of peacebuilding and reconciliation.

The report is structured as follows: chapter two presents a brief introduction on Yazidism and its community in Iraq. Chapter three presents the key findings and discusses Yazidi concerns for justice, security, representation and reparations. Chapter four offers concluding remarks.

⁶ Quinn, J. R. (2009). Reconciliation(s): transitional justice in post-conflict societies (Vol. 6: p. 298). McGill-Queen’s Press-MQUP.

3. Yazidism and its Community in Iraq

Yazidis are one of the oldest ethnic and religious communities indigenous to the Middle East. The majority of Yazidis live in the north-west of Iraq, in areas surrounding Shingal⁷ Mountain and Shekhan district. Additionally, there are some Yazidi villages and towns in Talkeef and Bashiqa District, and in Duhok Governorate in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Although there is a dearth of reliable statistics on demography, community estimates state there are about 550,000 – 600,000 Yazidis in Iraq.⁸ Yazidis are considered the second-largest religious minority in Iraq, after the Christians.

Figure 1: Map detailing Yazidi Areas (circled)



⁷ The area is referred to as either Sinjar (Arabic) or Shingal (Kurdish).

⁸ Domle, K. (2013) Yazidis: A Deep-Rooted Community in an Unstable Present. In Salloum, S. (2013) Minorities

The Yazidi community is structured according to social classes and ranks, similar to the Indian caste-system. At the top, there is the mir (Prince and secular leader) and the baba sheikh (the spiritual leader). Directly below them are forty sheikhs divided into three factions; Adani, Achammsana and Qatani. There are also forty pirs, who are tasked with regulating the religious affairs of the followers. The followers, or ordinary Yazidis, are called Mureed. The Mureed cannot get married to members of the Sheikh and Pir classes. Pirs and Sheikhs cannot intermarry either.⁹

Khider Domle, a Yazidi researcher who has written extensively on Yazidi culture and religion, considers Yazidism as ‘one of the oldest Kurdish religions in the East.’¹⁰ It is an ancient monotheistic religion. For centuries, Yazidism relied on conveying its beliefs through verbal heritage in the form of hymns, stories and poetry rather than scripture. Gradually however, holy books called Mushafs were written down, albeit with the explicit directive not to be circulated in public and viewed by members outside of the Yazidi community. The language of religious texts, books, songs and prayers is Kurmanji Kurdish. It is widely recognised that the original language of the Yazidi community is Kurdish, but many also speak Arabic as a result of their proximity to Arab neighbourhoods and Ba’athist Arabisation campaigns. Yazidis share a strong connection to their land and geographic location, especially their main temple in Lalesh, as it was built in the place where Yazidis believe creation began after the Great Flood.

A key aspect of Yazidism is its belief in one source of good and evil. Rather than believing in a source of good (God) and one of evil (Satan), Yazidis believe people’s choices, through the heart, spirit and mind, determine where good and evil exists on earth. The power of Choice is a central feature in Yazidism. The arch-angel of the Yazidis, Melek Taus, helps to guide humanity in its decisions between good and evil.

The story of Melek Taus – often depicted as a peacock and hence also referred to as the peacock angel – bears resemblance to the account of Shaytan (Satan) in Islam and has been the source of much discrimination against Yazidis in Iraq. Misinterpretation of their faith has led to the labelling of Yazidis as ‘devil-worshippers’ – an image that has proven hard to shake off for the community. Moreover, throughout history the story of Yazidis in Iraq is one of discrimination, neglect and violence on a massive scale.¹¹ The following section elaborates on this and presents the backdrop to which a process of reconciliation needs to take place.

3.1 Violence against the Yazidi Community

Understanding the attitudes of the Yazidi community towards reconciliation and coexistence requires an historic examination of their position in Iraq which goes beyond the most recent episode of violence at the hands of IS. Although it is not the aim of this report to present a detailed historical overview, this section briefly delineates the experience of the Yazidis in Iraq under Ba’athist rule and in the post-2003 era, before addressing the impact of the rise of IS on the community.

Two factors have largely shaped the socio-economic status of Iraq’s Yazidis: (1) Their identity as an ethno-religious minority in Iraq’s system of governance, and (2) The ongoing land disputes and competition over resources between Baghdad and Erbil.

For decades, Iraq’s curriculum in public schools did not recognise the history and culture of many minority

⁹ Idem.

¹⁰ Idem. (p. 68).

¹¹ Minority Rights Group Int. (2014: p. 16). From Crisis to Catastrophe – the situation of minorities in Iraq.

groups, including the Yazidis.¹² This marginalisation has led to widespread ignorance about their beliefs, culture and traditions. Iraq's majoritarian rule system appealed to Arab-nationalist and Islamic identities and deliberately denied equality and recognition for minority communities. Although this situation has somewhat improved since 2003, there is still much need for improvement when it comes to education on minorities and their representation in schools. In 2012, Yazidis, Christians, Sabean-Mandaeans and Shabaks managed for the first time to be more accurately represented in textbooks. Nevertheless, negative perceptions emanating from protracted marginalisation and discrimination in the past are not easily rectified, and both younger and older generations continue to inhibit negative stereotypes of religious minorities.¹³

Yazidis are often wrongfully believed to worship the devil. This stems from a misinterpretation of their religion due to the resemblance the story of the Yazidi's arch-angel bears with the story of Satan in Islam. In Islam, the arch-angel refuses to bow down to Adam out of sinful pride and subsequently falls from the grace of God. After this, he continues to try and corrupt mankind through temptation and other means. In Yazidism however, the angel does refuse to bow down to Adam, is expelled from Heaven, but cries for 7,000 years until his tears of repentance quench the fires of Hell. In the Yazidi faith therefore, Melek Taus is redeemed in the eyes of God and continues to serve as a medium between mankind and God.¹⁴

This misapprehension is the source of much of the discrimination and socio-economic marginalisation of the Yazidi community. The tenacity of which is compounded by the community's reliance on oral traditions rather than scripture to convey their beliefs and practices. As Matthew Barber, an American scholar of Yazidi history currently working on Yazidi rights issues explains: "Islam's political framework includes provisions for the protection of some religious minorities, particularly those viewed as part of the monotheistic trajectory that preceded Islam, such as Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity—religions instituted by God, but later corrupted."¹⁵ The perception of Yazidis as worshipping the devil, and the community's inability to challenge those views through written sources, has historically led to Yazidis not being considered as 'People of the Book'. This situation was subsequently exploited by IS to instigate and justify its genocidal campaign aimed at eradicating the Yazidi community in Iraq.

The Yazidi community has been the victim of many violent attacks and prosecutions throughout history. Organised violence against the Yazidi community can be traced back as far as the Ottoman Empire, when Yazidis were targeted by campaigns of forced conversion and religious violence¹⁶. Yazidis often claim their community has gone through at least 72 attempts at annihilation – i.e. genocides. Whether this number is historically accurate is hard to determine. Nevertheless, being victims of prosecution and genocide is an important component of the shared Yazidi identity and community narrative.

Later on, as Kurdish speakers, Saddam's Arabisation campaign did not spare the Yazidis either. During the 1970's, it was Ba'athist policy to force Yazidis out of their villages and into newly constructed 'collective towns' such as Shingal, severely disrupting their traditionally pastoral way of life.

After the US-led coalition toppled Saddam in 2003 sectarian violence quickly escalated to involve fundamentalist attacks on all minority communities. Yazidi villages, shrines and holidays were all repeatedly targeted. One of the worst attacks occurred on August 14th 2007, when terrorists inflicted a devastating and

12 Salloum, S. (2013). *Minorities in Iraq: Memory, Identity and Challenges*. Masarat for Cultural and Media Development.

13 A case in point was made when a translator urged the author of this report not to accept Yazidi food offerings with the explanation that "Yazidis do not wash themselves because it is against their religion."

14 Asatrian, G. S., & Arakelova, V. (2014). *The Religion of the Peacock Angel: The Yazidis and Their Spirit World*. Routledge.

15 Hafiz, Y. (2014, Aug, 14th) *Yazidi Religious Beliefs: History, Facts, and Traditions of Iraq's Persecuted Minority*. The Huffington Post. Accessed on http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/13/yazidi-religious-beliefs_n_5671903.html on 08.06.2016

16 Hastings, J. (2003) *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* Part 18. Kessinger p. 769.

coordinated attack detonating four truck-bombs simultaneously in the villages of Kataniya and Jazira. It is estimated that over 500 people lost their lives in the attack, and another 1,500 were wounded.¹⁷ Although no perpetrators were arrested or indicted, it is presumed that Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQ-I) was behind the bombings.

Ervin Staub defines mass killings and genocide as ‘endpoints in an evolution of harm-doing’, a process of dehumanisation met with increasingly violent behaviour.¹⁸ This observation seems to hold true for the experience of Yazidis in modern-day Iraq. IS’ genocidal campaign against the Yazidis can be regarded as an endpoint of increasing dehumanisation coupled with ever-more violent attacks against the community. Thus, when IS captured the city of Mosul on June, 10th 2014, they gave other religious minorities - such as Christians - three options; (1) accept dhimmi status¹⁹ and pay the Jizyah (a special tax), (2) convert to Islam, or (3) face death. For Yazidis however, the ‘privilege’ of dhimmi status was denied leaving only the latter two options. IS murdered hundreds of Yazidi and Shia prisoners in Badush prison.²⁰ In the weeks following, IS advanced towards the area of Shingal and the Iraqi Army and the Peshmarga retreated from Shingal, costing thousands of lives and large-scale destruction.

When IS attacked, they attacked without mercy. Yazidis in Shingal area were subjected to mass killings, forced conversions, the abduction of young children and the sexual enslavement of thousands of women and girls. The UN estimates that no less than 5,000 men were executed,²¹ while another 7,000 women and girls were forced into sexual slavery.²² The staggering levels of violence prompted a massive wave of displacement into the Kurdistan Region in Iraq and Syria. This campaign of ethnic cleansing through mass killings has been widely recognised as an act of genocide.²³ It has shattered trust and relationships between communities. Between those who were formerly neighbours, friends and colleagues. Moreover, the controversial withdrawal of the Peshmarga preceding IS’ attack has seriously damaged the relationship between the Yazidi community and the KRG – in particular the image of the dominant political party in the region, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). This relationship has not yet been mended despite victories against IS by the Peshmarga.

17 Cave, D. & Glanze, J. (2007, August 22nd). Toll in Iraq Bombings is Raised to More Than 500. New York Times. Accessed at: http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/22/world/middleeast/22iraq-top.html?_r=2&hp&oref=login

18 Staub, E. (1989). *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence*. New York Cambridge University Press.

19 Meaning: One of Islam’s protected ‘People of the Book’, or recognised monotheist religions.

20 Human Rights Watch (2014). *ISIS Executes Hundreds of Prison Inmates*. Accessed: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/10/30/iraq-isis-executed-hundreds-prison-inmates>

21 For a detailed account of the mass killings perpetrated by ISIS and the location of kill sites and mass graves, see Yazda (2016). *Mass Graves of Yazidis Killed by the Islamic State Organization or Local Affiliates on or after August, 3rd, 2014*. Available at: <http://www.yazda.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Yazda-Report-on-Mass-Graves-Jan-28-2016.pdf>

22 UNAMI & Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2015). *Report on the Protection of Civilians in the Armed Conflict in Iraq: 1st May – 31st October, 2015*. United Nations.

23 Labott, E. & Kopan, T. (2016, March 18th). John Kerry: ISIS Responsible for Genocide. Accessed at <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/03/17/politics/us-iraq-syria-genocide/>

3.2 The Impact of Arab-Kurd Division on the Yazidi Community

The Yazidi community is mainly concentrated in areas contested by Baghdad and Erbil. The administrative status of areas such as Shingal and Bashiqa has been the source of ongoing tensions between the Kurds and Arabs of Iraq. The failure to implement the only legal mechanism able to solve the issue – Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution²⁴ – has led to a problematic lack of ownership regarding Yazidi areas. As neither side can be confident they will hold on to these territories in the future, and the political representation of religious minorities in Iraq lacks the ability to successfully advocate for minority rights, the disputed territories suffer from underdevelopment and systemic negligence in public investment and service provision.²⁵ Consequently, Minority Rights Group International (MRGI) reports that districts in the Nineveh governorate lacked many essential services and suffered from a dearth of job opportunities even before the war against ISIL impacted the area.²⁶ Considering access to healthcare for example, one report states that Yazidis from Shingal had access to only one hospital with about 15 – 20 beds for a population of over 600,000.²⁷ Most Yazidi villagers had no direct access to maternal healthcare facilities and were forced to travel all the way to Duhok to give birth (a distance of approximately 167 km or 103 miles). Moreover, access to these facilities is reportedly conditioned on Yazidis' ethnic identification as Kurdish.²⁸

Similarly, access to higher education has been limited for the Yazidi community; there are no colleges or universities in the area surrounding Shingal. Yazidis wishing to obtain higher education degrees have had to travel to Mosul where they were frequently subjected to threats, intimidation and targeted violence. Even before IS officially took hold of the city, Yazidis would receive death threats prompting them to drop out of college and leave the city. It is estimated that around 1,300 Yazidis withdrew from their studies out of fear of attack in 2013 alone.²⁹ For non-Islamic minorities it was perceived as dangerous to send their children to university in Mosul, and many would advise their daughters to wear the Hijab and hide their religious identity for the sake of obtaining a college degree.^{30 31}

The ongoing Arab-Kurdish competition also impacts the political representation of minorities in the disputed territories. In their struggle for control over the areas, each party has an interest in binding the various minority communities, including Yazidis, to either side of the conflict. This has resulted in Yazidis being faced with intense pressure to identify as either Kurd or Arab, subverting their distinct religious identity. In the KRI, the number of reserved seats for non-Kurdish minority communities is 11 out of 111, reserved for Christians, Turkmen and Armenians. Yazidis however do not get any reserved seats. The only way for Yazidis to acquire some level of political representation is for its representatives to affiliate themselves with one of the major Kurdish political parties which have been more focused on Erbil-Baghdad rivalry than catering for the needs of the various ethnic and religious communities in Shingal and the rest of the disputed territories. This situation leads to problems with representation especially when the aspirations of the Yazidi community are not in line with Kurdish political party objectives. This often results in political

24 Article 140 stipulates the status of the disputed territories to be decided by the people through a referendum. The article also specifies however that, prior to the referendum, measures to reverse Saddam's Arabization process need to be taken, following which a census needs to be carried out to decide the eligible voters. To date, no referendum has been held in the disputed territories and the parties involved have strong disagreements over voter eligibility.

25 UNAMI (2007) Disputed Internal Boundaries part I. United Nations (unpublished)

26 Minority Rights Group Int. (2014: p. 16). From Crisis to Catastrophe – the situation of minorities in Iraq.

27 Salloum, S. (2013). Minorities in Iraq: Memory, Identity and Challenges.

28 Institute for International Law & Human Rights (2013: p. 152). Iraq's Minorities and Other Vulnerable Groups: Legal Framework, Documentation and Human Rights.

29 Minority Rights Group Int. (2014). From Crisis to Catastrophe

30 Institute for International Law & Human Rights (2013: p. 152). Iraq's Minorities and Other Vulnerable Groups: Legal Framework, Documentation and Human Rights.

leaders communicating and presenting their party's interest towards their community, rather than the other way around. Similarly, in Baghdad, Yazidis are only entitled to one seat in Parliament as they are considered part of the Kurdish entity rather than a distinct minority.

4. Findings

The findings of this study are based on a combination of 20 semi-structured, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Over the course of several weeks in the summer of 2016, MERI staff conducted interviews with spiritual and political leaders, activists and intellectuals from the Yazidi community. The formal interviews mainly took place in Erbil, Duhok, Sheekhan district and the Yazidi spiritual centre in Lalesh. Subjects were interviewed in places they felt most comfortable to talk such as their home, workplace, hotel room or restaurant garden. Interviewees were selected as to ensure the ultimate sample represents a cross-section of the Yazidi community. Hence, interviewees included men, women, displaced and non-displaced, youth and older generations. Two focus group discussions were organised in camps with displaced Yazidis from Shingal area in the Kurdistan Region. Participants were separated according to gender.

4.1 Conflict Mapping and Victim Groups

At the time of the interviews, many participants expressed a feeling of isolation. A feeling that not only was their community viciously attacked, it was also abandoned by the authorities whom they expected to uphold the rule of law. Hence, the events of the summer of 2014 did not only break down relationships with their Sunni Arab neighbours, but also negatively impacted the relationship between the Yazidis and the Central Government of Iraq (CGI) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Moreover, the violence inflicted on the Yazidis in Shingal has brought to the fore and intensified long-standing issues regarding their identity and political representation in the CGI and the KRG. IS' attack created a security vacuum which was filled by a variety of actors pursuing competing agendas, further dividing the Yazidi community by forcing them to support one group over the other.

Three conflicts between the Yazidi community and external actors can be discerned from the data. A separate set of issues is leading to tensions within the Yazidi community itself. Table 2 presents an overview of the main conflicts and tensions. Interviews and group discussions frequently touched upon more than one or all of the above conflicts.

Table 2: Main conflicts and tensions

External Conflicts		
Conflict 1:	Yazidi – Sunni Arab	Campaign of violence and sexual slavery perpetrated by IS and supported by local Sunni Arab tribes.
Conflict 2:	Yazidi – KRG	Many Yazidis feel the KRG is merely pursuing its own interest in the area, as distinct from the needs of the Yazidi community. They see the lack of rebuilding efforts in liberated areas and the withdrawal of Peshmerga prior to August 3rd as examples of this.
Conflict 3:	Yazidi – CGI	Community feels abandoned and ignored by the central government of Iraq. The absence of formal recognition of the genocide reinforces this sentiment.
Intra-community divisions		
Conflict 4:	Ethnic identity	A minority of Yazidis consider themselves a separate ethnic group rather than Kurds. This sentiment has grown stronger especially in parts of Shingal after relations with the KRG soured since 2014.
Conflict 5:	Political Representation	There is a gap between the community and political representatives. Many Yazidis do not feel represented as a result of the political affiliations of their leaders.
Conflict 6:	Armed actors support	A large number of armed groups is now active in Nineveh. Yazidi support for groups such as the PKK-linked YBS and Iranian-backed PMFs lead to worrying friction between part of the Yazidi community and the KRG.

Due to the social proximity of victims and perpetrators, reconciliation after genocide during civil war can be particularly challenging.³² Victims often feel betrayed, abandoned by authorities and the international community, and blind-sighted by the sudden outbreak of extreme violence. Often, the perpetrators are not aggressors from some foreign country, but the neighbours, schoolteachers, doctors and gardeners with whom the victims have long shared a community and public space. Grievances therefore run especially deep and are hard to overcome. This is certainly the case for Yazidis. As one interviewee explained:

There was a high school teacher. When IS came, he wrote down the name of one of his students and took her as a sex slave... Although we had good relations with them [Sunni Arabs] before, we simply cannot live with them any longer.

▮ **Young female activist**

It is important to recognise that as long as IS has not been decisively defeated, and hostilities remain ongoing, the very thought of reconciliation with Sunni Arabs is seen as premature – if not plainly undesirable – in the eyes of many Yazidis. Furthermore, attitudes towards reconciliation are partly determined by individual experiences. Therefore, rather than observing the Yazidis as a homogeneous group of victims of genocide,

32 Staub, E. (2006). Reconciliation after genocide, Mass Killing, or Intractable Conflict: Understanding the Roots of Violence, Psychological Recovery, and Steps toward a General Theory. *Political Psychology*, vol. 27, No. 6

a number of relevant distinctions can be made in order to identify different groups with specific needs regarding psychological recovery. Men and women, displaced and non-displaced, are perhaps the most obvious. Another relevant distinction can be made between Yazidis from areas south of Mount Shingal and those from towns and villages in the North. As one camp manager explained:

Those people south of the mountain were completely surprised by the ISIS attack. They had no time to try and defend themselves or bring people to safety. The people in the north had more time. Because of this some could get away.

▮ **Camp manager**

Another important group is those who were first-hand witnesses to, or survivor of, the mass killings and abductions (often of their own family members) and those who were more fortunate. Among the participants, those who witnessed the brutality inflicted against their community and family members first hand were notably more opposed to the idea of reconciliation. To them, the concept of reconciliation was often connected to forgiveness, which implied impunity, and an endpoint few participants understandably were able to consider. Forgiveness is an ultimate outcome however, and the process of reconciliation can be advanced in many other meaningful ways. If forgiveness feels like impunity to victims, then disconnecting this concept from the process of reconciliation is important to ensure traction among local communities and stakeholders.

Similarly, men and women have suffered differently at the hands of IS. Although families and the wider community share pain, there are also important differences in the traumas inflicted on men and women by IS. This causes men and women to inhibit different psychological barriers related to honour, anger or grief. Women who lost their husbands and survived sexual slavery struggle to overcome distinct grievances and obstacles towards reconciliation as do men who survived the mass killings in their village only to realise their wife or daughters ended up in the hands of IS.

Ultimately, processes of reconciliation and conflict resolution will have a better chance of taking hold when peacebuilders take into consideration these differences by using a targeted approach and diversify their programming to fit the needs of different groups within the Yazidi community.

4.2 Main Needs: Justice, Security, and Reparations

At the time of this study in the summer of 2016, participants were uniform and consistent in expressing immediate needs and first steps towards reconciliation. Both key informants and participants in focus groups stressed the first priorities for initiating a process of reconciliation are Justice, security, and reparations. The fact that both key informants and ordinary community members participating in FGDs mention justice, security and reparations as important first steps indicates an important level of harmony in the views of the community and its leadership.

The following sections delineate the conceptualisation of justice, security and reparations as perceived by the Yazidi community. Each discusses the what, who and how per element of reconciliation. In other words, what needs to be done in the eyes of the Yazidi community? Who needs to be involved? And how will it advance the process of reconciliation between the Yazidis and Sunni Arabs, or improve the relationship between the Yazidis and local authorities.

4.2.1 Justice

All participants engaged over the course of this study expressed a strong desire for justice. However, justice can be a broad concept laden with different symbolic, economic, social, legal and psychological meanings.³³ Lederach stresses the importance of including ‘restorative justice’ as an element of reconciliation.³⁴ Similarly, Mani distinguishes between three categories of justice important for peacebuilding and reconciliation: legal justice, rectifying justice, and social justice.³⁵ Interviewees were therefore asked to further define what justice means to them. In most cases, interviewees explained they primarily referred to legal – or retributive – justice. In other words, ensuring perpetrators of war crimes were brought to court, receive fair trials and appropriate sentences. In addition, other issues falling under the umbrella of social justice were also frequently mentioned. The social, economic and cultural rights of minorities in Iraq have been under pressure both before and after the 2003 watershed. Political representation of minorities in both the Iraqi Council of Representatives and the KRG parliament has been lacking – despite proposals to improve the situation.³⁶ A number of participants pressed on the need to revise the education system and in particular the way in which religion is taught in schools. Religious class should focus less on Islamic teachings and more on respect for all religions. Ultimately, many participants blamed the lack of social justice on the role religion has taken in Iraqi politics, especially since 2003. Separating religion from politics is, in their eyes, the only effective way to ensure equality for all Iraqi citizens.

Unfortunately, after the fall of the regime in 2003, the model of governance was dominated by figures that wear turbans and promoted religion and political Islam. These people did not have a national model to offer, their model was sectarian. We believe that secularism is the solution for the governance system because it protects minorities and provides guarantees and assurances for them.

▸ Local representative

Addressing the socio-economic problems perceived to be root-causes of the current situation was generally seen as a more long-term objective however. In the current context therefore, ending impunity by imposing accountability on perpetrators of war crimes through criminal trials was clearly prioritised.

When asked about legal justice, participants stressed the importance of ensuring independent and unbiased courts. Some argued that only an international court could ensure a fair trial. Others believed the KRG is capable of punishing the guilty appropriately. The central government in Baghdad felt far away for many Yazidis and they expressed concerns about Baghdad’s willingness and ability to punish perpetrators in the future. Multiple key informants raised serious concerns about the nature of Iraq’s justice system and its ability to administer justice to the satisfaction of the Yazidi community. One of the main problems mentioned by several interviewees was the perceived bias of Iraq’s legal system towards Muslims embedded in Sharia Law.

The Iraqi Court has always had a problem where judges who studied Sharia favour Muslims over Yazidis or Christians. They always decide in favour of their religious brothers against us ‘infidels’.

▸ Academic, male

Another person pointed out the common use of *wasta*, a political connection, in the Iraqi justice system as an obstacle to justice. Without some level of involvement from an international entity, either in the form of

33 For a discussion on ‘Justice’ see Lambourne, W. (2004). *Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: Meeting Human Needs for Justice and Reconciliation*. Peace, Conflict and Development. Issue 4.

34 Lederach, J.P. (1999). *The Challenge of the 21st Century: Just Peace*. In *People Building Peace: 35 Inspiring Stories from Around the World*. Utrecht: European Centre for Conflict Prevention.

35 Mani, R. (1998). *Conflict Resolution, Justice and the Law: Rebuilding the Rule of Law in the Aftermath of Complex Political Emergencies*. International Peacekeepers.

36 Middle East Research Institute (2015) *Protecting Minorities’ Rights in the Kurdistan Region*. MERI. Available at: <http://www.meri-k.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/English-Minorities-Report.pdf>

oversight or a more active role, Yazidis fear many perpetrators of crimes will not receive punishment, in turn obstructing reconciliation by leaving many victims dissatisfied. This could lead to new cycles of violence by fuelling desires for revenge-acts outside the legal system.

There is no real justice in Iraq. There is always wasta. There is always the influence of the tribes and political parties. We would welcome the participation of any international entity in this process, as this would signal guarantee and insurance to us.

▮ **political representative**

The poor track-record of both the KRG and the CGI in convicting terrorists for attacks in the past, aroused clear scepticism among many of the participants. Even before IS, terrorist attacks against Yazidis were rarely investigated with prosecutions being rarer still. Moreover, participants argued that if the KRG and CGI were serious about ensuring justice after the genocide they could have taken important steps already. They complained about the lack of effort by Baghdad to get recognition of the genocide in the international arena.³⁷ The KRG on the other hand was criticised for their inaction in dealing with the issue of mass graves in areas liberated from IS.³⁸

Regarding who should be involved in administrating justice, subjects explained they saw an important role for the Sunni Arab tribes and the international community. While international involvement was perceived to be necessary to ensure fair trials and appropriate sentences, participants explained the cooperation with Arab tribal leaders would help combat the idea among Yazidis that all Sunni Arabs are IS sympathisers. Combating perceptions of collective guilt is critical for advancing reconciliation. One effective way of doing this is by drawing attention to the victimhood of the Sunni Arab community itself. Many Arabs were themselves displaced by IS. Those who did not swear allegiance to the group were frequently targeted in attacks even prior to ISIL's take-over of Mosul. Moreover, it should be emphasised that passivity on the part of bystanders does not equate to complicity. Studies have shown that although some people do endanger themselves to save innocent lives during genocide, passivity by witnesses is the norm.³⁹ Another way is to highlight and emphasise acts of resistance by the Sunni Arab community. For example, the actions of Al-Shammar tribe and its dismissal of IS extremist ideology has not gone unnoticed by the Yazidi community and was repeatedly mentioned as a positive sign for future reconciliation. Local authorities and the media can play an important role in correcting the negative image of Sunni Arabs in the eyes of the Yazidi community.

The Al-Shammar tribe is good and we do not have any problems with them, but other tribes should identify and disown IS members from their midst.

▮ **FGD participant**

The KRG is trying to help the Yazidi community to understand that it is not all of the Sunni Tribes that helped bring about DAESH. There were also some tribes and members of tribes that helped Yazidis to liberate their family members.

▮ **Political representative**

37 It serves to note here that since the time of these interviews in the summer of 2016, the central government has undertaken steps, in close conjunction with the United Kingdom, to gain international support for the process of transitional justice.

38 Yazda (2014). Mass Graves of Yazidis Killed by the Islamic State Organization or Local Affiliates On or After August 3rd, 2014. Available at: <http://www.yazda.org/yazda-issues-public-report-on-yazidi-mass-graves-in-sinjar-shingal/>

39 Staub, E. (1989) *The Roots of Evil: The origins of genocide and other group violence*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

4.2.2 Security and Concerns about the Future of Shingal

As a primary security concern, many participants discussed the importance of bringing back all the captives currently held by IS. However, interviews and focus group discussions showed that the return of Yazidi women and girls from captivity can give rise to new tensions within the community. In the Yazidi culture, intercourse with members outside of the community – whether consensual or not – is a great taboo. Despite a decree issued by the religious leadership stating women should be welcomed back into the community with open arms, some Yazidis still have reservations. An apparent minority of Yazidi men views the women taken by IS as violated and impure, impossible to marry with. FGDs showed this could lead to tensions, particularly with family members of the victims. However, it should be stressed such views are held by a minority and not shared by the wider Yazidi community. The majority of Yazidis appears to be supportive of the religious decree encouraging the acceptance of the women back into the community.

The Arabs, our neighbours, they helped IS in taking our girls because they knew already that our girls are our honour. So when IS came they told them to take our girls and women because they knew that is how they could harm us most.

▮ **Female activist**

A second theme that developed surrounding the issue of security was the ability of the Yazidi community to carry arms and defend itself from attack. Participants argued that unless their community feels protected and secure, a process of reconciliation cannot realistically take hold. For many Yazidis, the Peshmerga and Iraqi army withdrawal in the summer of 2014 demonstrates that the only way for the community to feel safe is for Yazidis to be able to protect themselves or enjoy international protection. In absence of the latter, many Yazidis expressed strong support for armed Yazidi groups such as the PKK-affiliated and supported Shingal Resistance Units (YBS), and the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD) military wing Peoples' Protection Units (YPG). Although support for these groups has been waning in conjunction with a decrease of the IS threat, they still occupy an important position in the landscape of Shingal security actors.⁴⁰ The continuing desire for autonomy in their own security arrangements is what drove many Yazidis to leave the YBS and Peshmerga ranks to join the PMF when it was liberating areas south of Shingal. Armed groups who are willing to give Yazidis increased autonomy in the way they go about protecting their areas continue to garner significant popular support. However, key informants who occupy a political position often affiliated with the Kurdish KDP maintain that the KRG and the Peshmerga are more than capable and willing to protect the Yazidi community in Shingal. They see other forces such as the YBS and other PMF outfits as destabilising actors. This reveals an important chasm between the Yazidi political leadership and the community. While all men and women participating in FGDs called for the need of international protection, and the need for Yazidis to protect themselves, their political leaders express diametrically opposing views.

The fact that many Yazidis feel KRG and Yazidi interests are not in line leads to problems with political representation. The only way for Yazidis to ascend to political positions is through the structure of one of the major Kurdish political parties. Some Yazidis believe that by becoming part of the Kurdish political apparatus, their political representatives lose the ability to freely advocate for and represent the community's interests. Conflict between the community and their political representatives arise when Yazidi wishes do not fit in the wider Kurdish agenda, in particular that of the KDP. Political representation was regarded by multiple interviewees as "a major issue". Yazidi groups who do not see their interests represented in the political arena can be tempted to form or join new armed groups such as the PMF in an increasingly desperate bid to pursue their objectives. This dynamic threatens to deepen divisions within the community.

40 Barber, M. (2017). The end of the PKK in Sinjar? How the Hashd al-Sha'bi can help resolve the Yazidi Genocide. NRTTV. <http://www.nrttv.com/en/birura-details.aspx?jimore=6196>

Interviewees also expressed their concerns that the presence of multiple armed groups could lead to clashes in the future. The PKK and its affiliated groups, as well as the PMF, both have agendas that run counter to that of the KRG in the area. For this reason, many Yazidis fear it is the future rather than the past that poses the real threat to stability.

For the KRG, if you affiliate with any other group you can be arrested. But this is the will of the people. The government needs to respect those people because they only try to defend their area. Both governments needs to respect minority groups.

▮ **Local activist, Duhok**

The Yazidis are themselves divided into groups. They are divided according to the Iraqi and Kurdish parties and don't have any idea about the Yazidi nation.

▮ **Journalist, Shingal**

4.2.3 Reparations

Alongside security and justice, Yazidis also stressed the need to urgently restore and rehabilitate places of origin. The community has been largely displaced since the summer of 2014 and the seasons in the camps are rough. Freezing temperatures during winter are met with sweltering summers where temperatures soar to well over 45 °C. They want to return to their areas of origin. However, participants lamented that although areas north of Mount Shingal have been liberated since December 2014, no consolidated efforts have been made to rebuild the area and resume public services such as healthcare, education, water and electricity. Fast forward one year since the interviews and not much has changed. It is nonetheless a crucial step in allowing them to return and enable a process of reconciliation with other communities. It would also serve to mend the relationship between the Yazidi community and the KRG by demonstrating that the Kurdish authorities currently administrating the area genuinely care for the well-being of the Yazidi community living there. As one interviewee explained:

The trust between the people in Shingal and the KRG has been broken. If they want to fix that problem, they need to take positive steps towards the community; trying to support them with basic services, rebuilding infrastructure, schools, health-centres... They have to say: We care about the Yazidi community.

▮ **Aid worker, Erbil**

We cannot go back because there is nothing there [area North of Shingal Mountain]. If the people could go back possibly then reconciliation can begin

▮ **Participant in focus group discussion, Khanke camp**

Besides restoring the provision of public services, some interviewees underlined the importance of jobs and economic opportunities for the process of reconciliation. Employment and development, they argued, would foster psychological recovery by alleviating stress and frustration among Yazidis and Arabs currently living under difficult circumstances. It would also serve to combat radicalisation among the youth of both communities.

Compensation from the government, either work or financial, is going to reduce stress. Of course, financial compensation should be given to all Iraqis, not just Yazidis. It's going to let people work, and build. Provide working opportunities to help young people, the jobless people and those who don't go to school... then there will not be any more terrorists.

▮ **Local politician, Erbil**

Since the 1970's, there has been zero economic support. No development, and no rehabilitation. We are fed up!

▮ **Displaced participant focus group, Khanke Camp.**

Financial compensation and job opportunities can also help to advance reconciliation by increasing inter-group contact. As members of both communities start working together again, cooperating in small businesses, the number of inter-community business transactions will grow, nurturing a sense of cooperation and inter-connectedness. Some participants in the male focus group even went so far as to say that, in their eyes, this might be the only way to secure lasting reconciliation in the long-term.

We need ideas for projects within the community, such as small NGOs doing simple projects. You can build firms and companies together, so people can profit from the procedure too, combining co-existence and economic projects. But you need funds to be able to work on the ground.

▸ **Academic, Erbil**

We need economic transactions and contact to improve our relationship with them [Sunni Arabs], but it will be difficult nonetheless.

▸ **Participant focus group, Khanke camp.**

In summary, the return of displaced Yazidis and the necessary provision of public services in the areas of return are seen as crucial steps in the process of reconciliation. Perhaps understandably so, participants in focus groups seemed somewhat indifferent as to who should take responsibility for providing those services, as long as the area was restored and people could return as quickly as possible. Financial compensation and work programmes, whether organised by the government or humanitarian organisations, would help alleviate psychological stress, decrease radicalisation and enhance prospects for reconciliation by increasing inter-group contact.

5. Conclusion

Despite its ubiquity in rhetoric concerning post-conflict stabilisation efforts, the meaning of a pivotal concept like “reconciliation” often remains unclear.⁴¹ There is a general consensus among scholars and experts that conceptual clarity regarding reconciliation can only be attained through analysing the context in which it is to take place, and by understanding the views of the communities which ultimately attribute meaning to the term. In the absence of a conclusive definition, international peacebuilders and local authorities aiming to improve inter-community relationships run the risk of imposing preconceived notions of reconciliation, ill-fitting the local context, destining their efforts to fail from the outset. By interviewing twenty community leaders from a variety of backgrounds and complementing this sample with two focus groups, this study contributes to enhancing knowledge on local perceptions on reconciliation.

The results of this study corroborate some of the findings presented in reports produced by other international human rights organisations. Interviewees expressed needs and concerns similar to those outlined in reports published by Minority Rights Group and others.⁴² Most importantly, IS’ attack did not only damage the relationship between the Yazidi and Sunni Arab community, it also strained the relationship between the Yazidis and governmental authorities. Hence, Yazidis need to be reconciled with three parties: the central government of Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Sunni Arab community. Despite obvious differences between them, one issue spans across all three cases: the relationship is marked by a severe lack of trust. Many Yazidis do not trust the KRG or the GoI to protect them or care about their well-being in general, and many do not trust Sunni Arabs after some of their former neighbours turned against them and participated in the genocide.

Another potential obstacle for reconciliation is the lack of strong community leaders commanding significant legitimacy among ordinary Yazidis. Embracing a process of reconciliation takes courage as it forces a community to adopt a more vulnerable attitude. It leads the community into uncertain territory. A strong, unified leadership able to inspire its constituents is an important element in this process. Unfortunately, however, many Yazidis regard their religious leadership as timid in the wake of the crisis, and view their political representatives with suspicion. Religious and political leaders therefore, need to come together in order to develop and advocate for a unified vision of coexistence in the future.

It is further important to recognise how the recent violence has occurred. Reconciliation is a long-term process that takes years, if not decades, to yield meaningful results. Perhaps not surprisingly then, Yazidis tend to adhere to, and be more accepting of, a minimalist (thin) conceptualisation of reconciliation. Initiatives for reconciliation focusing on minimalist elements such as coexistence and an end to violence are more likely to be positively received by the Yazidi community than those linked to more maximalist elements such as forgiveness. When reconciliation is linked to forgiveness, many Yazidis still reserve the right not to be reconciled.

This appears to hold especially true for particular groups of victims within the Yazidi community. As attitudes towards reconciliation are partly shaped by individual experiences, Yazidis should not be regarded as a homogeneous group of genocide victims. Rather, there are a number of relevant distinctions which can be made, based on specific grievances, to identify important sub-groups who may require a targeted approach aimed at psychological recovery. Such groups are the displaced and non-displaced, men and

41 Zorbas, E. (2009) What Does Reconciliation After Genocide Mean? Public Transcripts and hidden transcripts in post-genocide Rwanda. *Journal of Genocide Research*. Vol. 11 (1), 127 – 147.

42 See for example: Higel, L. (2016). *Iraq’s Displacement Crisis*. Minority Rights Group. IHLR et al. (2015) *Between the Millstones: The State of Iraq’s Minorities Since the Fall of Mosul*. Brussels.

women, first-hand witnesses, and among the displaced: those who lived north of Mount Shingal and those who are from the south. Particular grievances are likely to translate into a more rejectionist attitude towards maximalist elements of reconciliation such as forgiveness. During the women's focus group for example, the staggering levels of gender-based violence perpetrated by ISIL proved to be the main reason for participants to unanimously select 'forgiveness' as the least important element for reconciliation. Especially when engaging with groups of particular suffering, peacebuilders are likely to achieve more by limiting the scope of reconciliation to peaceful coexistence and reducing desires for revenge.

Within this realm of minimalistic reconciliation, Yazidis do appear unified and consistent in their views regarding main priorities and first steps. Reconciliation, in their eyes, means first and foremost an end to the violence and the impunity with which it is committed. It also means being able to return to their homes and villages. As long as basic human needs such as a sense of security and justice are not met, it is unlikely for any process of reconciliation to realistically take hold. It is possible that the fulfilment of these elements of 'thin' reconciliation can, given time, open up avenues to wider, more maximalist, aspects of reconciliation such as socio-economic equality and mutual respect.

Justice, as perceived by the Yazidi community, means perpetrators of war crimes against the Yazidis get taken to the courts. Ideally, they would like to see the KRG and the GoI make a consolidated effort to refer their case to the ICC as they expect this would lead to international protection and ensure unbiased trials. A recent move by Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi and his foreign minister Abraham al-Jaafari to solicit assistance from the UN in dealing with the challenges of investigating and prosecuting IS crimes is an important step in the right direction.⁴³ Similarly, the positive role played by some Arab tribes in fighting IS have not gone unnoticed by the Yazidi community and appears to carry great weight in terms of offering hope for future reconciliation between the two communities.

43 Yazda (2017). Iraq Requests UN's Assistance to Bring ISIS to Justice. Accessed via: <https://www.yazda.org/?p=8686>

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