

Sinjar, Two Years after the Catastrophe

OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES TO THE RETURN OF THE YEZIDIS

Two years after the massacres committed by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) against the Yezidis, the situation in their home region of Sinjar has not improved significantly. However, the liberation of Sinjar in November 2015 and the recognition of ISIS crimes as an “on-going genocide”¹ by the UN have been important achievements. Despite this progress however, more than 300.000 Yezidis still live in refugee camps in the Kurdistan Region (KRI) of Northern Iraq. Their return to Sinjar is impeded by the lack of reconstruction in Sinjar, the Yezidis’ loss of trust in the Sunni Arabs and Kurds, their proximity to ISIS frontlines, as well as the uncertain political future of the region. Sinjar is an example of Iraq’s political problems: The weak central government in Baghdad faces a large number of conflicting actors, all of which try to promote their own interests in the region. This hampers the reconstruction and stabilisation of areas liberated from ISIS, which, in turn, increases the risk of an armed conflict along new fault lines and of a continued deterioration of state structures in Iraq. Reconstructing liberated areas and overcoming political conflicts in areas such as Sinjar should thus represent a continuous pri-

ority for German policies towards Iraq, particularly within the context of combating the causes of refugee movements.

On 3 August 2014, ISIS overran the city of Sinjar, located in the north-western Iraqi governorate of Nineveh. The Iraqi-Kurdish Peshmerga, previously stationed in the area to protect the Yezidis, withdrew from their posts prior to the attack.² More than 5.000 Yezidis were killed in the ensuing massacres in and around Sinjar, while over 7.000 women and girls were abducted and sold as sex slaves.³ Hundreds of thousands of Yezidis fled; many of those who did not make it to the KRI or other parts of Iraq were trapped on Mount Sinjar in October 2014. The images of the Yezidis, trapped and besieged on the mountain by ISIS, led to a world-wide media outcry, including in Germany, home to the biggest Yezidi diaspora community of over 120.000 people.⁴ Faced with the critical situation in the mountains of Sinjar, the US launched aerial attacks on ISIS, while Germany began delivering

² Cf. Masi, Alessandria 2014: Before Kurdish Peshmerga Freed Mount Sinjar, The Yazidis Were Left Alone To Face The Islamic State, IB Times, 20.12.2014, in: <http://www.ibtimes.com/kurdish-peshmerga-freed-mount-sinjar-yazidis-were-left-alone-face-islamic-state-1763666> [13.10.2016].

³ Cf. Beck, John 2016: Iraq's Yazidis living in fear on Mount Sinjar, Al Jazeera, 26.07.2016, in: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/07/iraq-yazidis-living-fear-mount-sinjar-160726063155982.html> [27.09.2016].

⁴ Cf. Rütten, Finn 2015: Jesidische Gemeinden in Deutschland, Das Erste, 23.01.2015, in: <http://daserste.ndr.de/beckmann/sendungen/Jesidische-Gemeinden-in-Deutschland,jesiden262.html> [06.10.2016].

¹ Human Rights Council 2016: “They came to destroy”: ISIS Crimes against the Yazidis, HRC, 15.06.2016, S.2 in: http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf [30.09.2016].

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weapons and equipment to the Peshmerga, which marked the the first time it actively supported a party directly involved in the conflict. Finally, in November 2014, Peshmerga forces and Syrian People's Protection Units (YPG), supported by US air strikes, managed to break through the ISIS siege on Mount Sinjar. One year later, in November 2015, Peshmerga forces, together with YPG and Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) units liberated Sinjar from ISIS.

ISIS sees the Yezidis as devil worshippers. In their view, Yezidis are not included in the minorities considered worthy of protection by Islam, such as Christians and Jews. In June 2016, the UN Human Rights Council condemned the crimes of ISIS as an "ongoing genocide".⁵ The council recognizes that ISIS purposely attempted to annihilate the minority group. The UN ruling is a first successful step in the area of international recognition and justice. However, for the large number of Yezidis still stuck in refugee camps, this has no practical implications. One year after the liberation of Sinjar, only a fraction of the refugees have returned home.

The Humanitarian Situation: No Reconstruction, no Reconciliation

Before 2014, Iraq hosted the largest Yezidi minority community in the Middle East, whose size was estimated at around 700.000 to 800.000 people.⁶ As a result of the ISIS advances, more than half of the Yezidis left the region; between 50.000 and 120.000 have made the journey to Europe so far. Between 300.000 and 450.000 Yezidis live in refugee camps in the KRI, especially in the areas surrounding Erbil, Dohuk and Zakho.⁷ The humanitarian situation in

these camps remains destitute, as necessary basic medical services are often lacking. The situation is aggravated by the psychological stress on the refugees. Women in particular suffer from the consequences of slavery and abuse. Urgently needed psychological treatment can hardly be provided in Kurdish refugee camps, as there are only around 20 to 25 psychologists in northern Iraq.⁸ The refugees' vulnerable situation is exacerbated by the continuous economic difficulties faced by the KRI. Since 2013, economic development in the region has stagnated due to falling oil prices and conflicts over transfer payments with the central government in Baghdad. As a consequence, the area-wide provision of public services is no longer guaranteed and wages in the dominant public sector are not paid regularly. The Kurdish Regional Government is therefore unable to bear the economic burden of both the Iraqi internally displaced persons and the Syrian refugees, who now constitute around 30 percent of Iraqi Kurdistan's population.⁹

A central problem impeding the return of the Yezidis is the lack of infrastructure in Sinjar itself. So far, there have been no reconstruction efforts in liberated cities and villages in the Sinjar area. Public services such as water and electricity are unavailable, while roughly between 60 and 80 percent of the buildings are uninhabitable.¹⁰

2016: Over 3,000 Ezidis remain in the hands of IS, Kurdistan24, 03.08.2016, in: <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/55d105cf-f28a-48a6-ad5a-85a5d694929a/Over-3-000-Ezidis-remain-in-the-hands-of-IS> [07.10.2016].

⁸ Cf. Van der Zee, Renate 2016: The German village helping Yazidi women raped by ISIL, Al Jazeera, 23.06.2016, in: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/06/german-village-helping-yazidi-women-raped-isil-160621083203597.html> [27.09.2016].

⁹ Cf. Rudaw 2016: Official: IDPs make up 35 percent of Kurdistan region population, Rudaw, 20.10.2015, in: <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/201020153> [12.10.2016].

¹⁰ Cf. Beck, Fn. 2; Rudaw 2016: Yezidis still appealing for international help two years on, Rudaw, 03.08.2016, in: <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/030820163> [27.09.2016].

⁵ Human Rights Council, Fn. 1, S. 2.

⁶ Cf. Tolan, Telim 2016: Die jesidische Religionsgemeinschaft, Yeziden.de, 17.09.2016, in: <http://www.yeziden.de/blog/2016/09/17/die-jesidische-religionsgemeinschaft/> [27.09.2016].

⁷ Cf. Smith, Taylor 2016: 'In five years there won't be any Yazidis left here', Al Jazeera, 20.02.2016, in: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/02/years-won-yazidis-left-160215061037283.html> [07.10.2016]; Dolamari, Mewan

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Furthermore, ISIS left behind an unknown number of *Improvised Explosive Devices* (IEDs) which have not yet been defused. Due to the proximity to the frontlines, only a few aid organisations are present in Sinjar. The Yezidi NGO *Yazda* estimates that up to two thirds of the Yezidi population will not return to their areas of origin without a comprehensive reconstruction program.¹¹ According to a UN report, less than half of all interviewed Yezidis are currently considering to return.¹² The government of Nineveh Province recently promised one billion Iraqi Dinars (around \$850.000) for the survivors of ISIS attacks, while the Kurdish government is trying to raise \$10 million for the reconstruction of Sinjar from the international community.¹³ Recently, Kurdish president Masoud Barzani spoke about building a new city in Sinjar and leaving the old city in ruins as a symbol.

A further obstacle is the Yezidis' loss of trust in Sunni Arabs that live in and around Sinjar. According to witnesses, local Sunni Arab fighters who had only recently joined ISIS constituted a large proportion of the attackers in August 2014.¹⁴ Witnesses further report that local Arabs collaborated with ISIS and helped to identify Yezidi families and unmarried Yezidi women. The Yezidis accuse the Arabs from Sinjar and especially specific tribes of cooperating with ISIS during the massacres. Although the massacre of Yezidis committed by ISIS and the Sunni Arabs "is deeply embedded in the collective

memory of the population",¹⁵ no reconciliation has been promoted between the two population groups. Further, the retreat of around 10.000 Peshmerga troops during the ISIS attack in 2014 has left a lasting impression on the Yezidis.¹⁶ Many Yezidis felt abandoned by the Peshmerga, which permanently damaged the relations with their Kurdish neighbours.

In light of this fact, the Yezidis have increasingly turned away from their neighbours and pivoted towards the international community. For example, members of the Yezidi community are demanding that the international community manage funds allocated for the reconstruction of Sinjar, instead of the Iraqi central government.¹⁷ In the aftermath of the massacres, several Yezidi NGOs were formed, which now work towards bringing the massacres of Yezidis before the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague.¹⁸ So far, however, the central government in Baghdad has refused to consider joining the ICC.¹⁹ Various Yezidis have become internationally known activists after the massacres; Nadia Murad, who was held captive by ISIS for three months, was recently named the UN *Goodwill Ambassador* and received the European Václav Havel Human Rights Prize. She demands the establishment of a special court for the

¹¹ Cf. Brown, Jonathan 2016: Yazidis leave Europe and return to warring Iraq, Al Jazeera, 09.05.2016, in: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/04/yazidis-leave-europe-return-warring-iraq-160404074817769.html> [27.09.2016].

¹² Cf. Rudaw 2016: Iraq's minorities on 'verge of disappearance', Rudaw, 07.07.2016, in: <http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/07072016?keyword=yezidi> [27.09.2016].

¹³ Cf. Beck 2016, Fn. 2; Rudaw, Fn. 8.

¹⁴ Cf. Bennett, Dalton 2014: Grisly finds in Iraqi village wrested from militants, Newsobserver, 24.12.2014, in: <http://www.newsobserver.com/news/nation-world/world/article10202666.html> [27.09.2016].

¹⁵ Interview with Bashar Kiki, Head of the Nineveh Provincial Council, in August 2016.

¹⁶ Cf. Salih, Mohammed A. 2015: With the Islamic State gone from Sinjar, Kurdish groups battle for control, al-Monitor, 10.12.2015, in: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/iraq-kurdistan-sinjar-liberated-isis-hegemony.html> [27.09.2016].

¹⁷ Cf. Rudaw, Fn. 10.

¹⁸ Cf. Stoter, Brenda 2016: How this young Yazidi is bringing hope to IS victims, Al-Monitor, 06.07.2016, in: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/07/yazidi-foundation-iraq-europe-justice-isis-victims.html> [13.10.2016].

¹⁹ Cf. Field, Glenn 2016: Baghdad complicates Erbil's pursuit of justice for Yezidi victims of ISIS, Rudaw, 22.09.2016, in: <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/22092016?keyword=yezidi> [13.10.2016].

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Yezidis in order to try ISIS perpetrators and collaborators.²⁰

The Military Situation: Armed Militias Hamper State Control

Most of the Sinjar region has been liberated from ISIS. However, the current frontline is only around five kilometres south of Sinjar city, and therefore the city is located within gun range of ISIS fighters.²¹ Apart from this proximity, the presence of a variety of different armed militias hampers the return of the Yezidis. Since its liberation from ISIS, Sinjar has developed into a battlefield of the inter-Kurdish struggle for power: Iraqi-Kurdish Peshmerga units of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)²² are competing for influence with troops of the Turkish-Kurdish PKK as well as the Syrian-Kurdish YPG, who are considered as the PKK's offspring in Syria and who gained control over large parts of the north-eastern region of Syria.²³ In light of the good relations between the governing KDP and the political leadership in Ankara, the KDP objects to the presence of PKK and YPG forces in Sinjar. The strength of the PKK in the area is currently estimated at 2.000 to 5.000 troops.²⁴ De-

spite various demands by local authorities and President Barzani, the PKK refuses to withdraw their forces from Sinjar and thereby hampers the governance and control of Sinjar by the Iraqi state and its security forces.

The Yezidis, too, have split along Kurdish conflict lines. Apart from the 13 Yezidi military units of around 400 to 450 soldiers each under Yezidi command within the KDP Peshmerga, two Yezidi militias were formed in 2014 to face the ISIS threat: the HPE (*Ezidhkan Protection Forces*) and the YBS (*Sinjar Resistance Units*). The HPE is comprised of around 2.000 to 5.000 forces. The YBS was trained by the PKK and the YPG and includes over 1.000 armed troops.²⁵ This could potentially lead to conflict: Yezidi Peshmerga announced that they would fight the PKK and YBS if they did not withdraw, while the YBS issued similar threats against the KDP Peshmerga. Furthermore, both the HPE and the YBS refuse to hand over control of their areas to the regular Iraqi security forces. The resulting lack of security and stability discourages many Yezidis from returning to Sinjar.

The Political Situation: Unclear Status, Uncertain Future

The political future of Sinjar also remains uncertain. Officially, Sinjar is under the control of the central government in Baghdad; however, it is one of the *disputed territories*²⁶ where an indefinitely postponed referendum is supposed to occur. Like in other areas with a similar status, the conflict between the Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil and the Iraqi central government in

²⁰ Cf. Focus: Ex-ISIS-Gefangene bekommt europäischen Menschenrechtspreis, Focus Online, 10.10.2016, in: http://www.focus.de/politik/ausland/nadia-murad-ex-isis-gefangene-bekommt-europaeischen-menschenrechtspreis_id_6051280.html [13.10.2016].

²¹ Cf. Beck, Fn. 2; Schmidinger, Thomas 2016: Die Vergessenen von Sindschar, Die Zeit, 13.06.2016, in: <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2016-06/jesiden-nordirak-islamischer-staat> [01.10.2016].

²² Officially, all 150.000 Peshmerga of the KRI are under the command of Kurdish President Barzani and the Ministry of Peshmerga. However, the Peshmerga are divided into three factions. One third follows the direct orders of the Ministry. The KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), affiliated with Iran, each control around 50.000 Peshmerga troops.

²³ Cf. Ezidi Press 2015: IS-Terror in Shingal: Wer kämpft gegen wen? Ein Überblick, Ezidi Press, 12.10.2015, in: <http://ezidipress.com/blog/is-terror-in-shingal-wer-kaempft-gegen-wen-ein-ueberblick/> [27.09.2016].

²⁴ Cf. Rudaw 2016: PKK staying in Shingal but ready to talk with KDP, Rudaw, 05.08.2016, in: <http://rudaw.net/english/ku>

rudaw.net/english/ku rdistan/05082016?keyword=yezidi [27.09.2016].

²⁵ Cf. Salih, Fn. 13; Ezidi Press, Fn. 16.

²⁶ The *disputed territories* in Northern Iraq are located in the governorates of Nineveh, Kirkuk, Salah ad-Din and Diyala and were 'arabised' during Saddam Hussein's regime. While previously inhabited mainly by non-Arabs, especially Kurds, Arabs were then relocated to these areas and the original population was expelled. Today, parts of the disputed territories are controlled by the Kurdish regional government, others by the Iraqi central government.

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Baghdad is evident in Sinjar. Due to the presence of Peshmerga troops, the Kurdish Regional Government has notably expanded its influence in Sinjar. Erbil already views Sinjar as part of Kurdistan: President Barzani recently spoke of *“our people”*²⁷ in reference to the Yezidis despite the fact that many Yezidis do not see themselves as Kurdish.²⁸ Meanwhile, the government in Baghdad has also attempted to reinforce its influence by financially supporting the HPE and the YBS.

The Yezidis themselves are divided when it comes to their political future. Many support the central government, which is partly reinforced by their lack of trust in the Peshmerga, as well as the Kurds' reluctance to share political power with the Yezidis and grant them increased political representation. Incorporation into the Kurdish region would not automatically increase Yezidi participation in political decision-making: Because the Kurdish Regional Government regards the Yezidis as Kurds, there is no special minority quota for them in the regional Kurdish parliament.²⁹ Likewise, the civil and spiritual leader of the Yezidis, Mir Tahsin Beg, demands the incorporation of Sinjar into the KRI, but only under the condition that the Yezidis would maintain some autonomous rights.³⁰ In September 2016, the Sinjar Mayor Council's demand for such rights was rejected by the governorate of Nineveh.³¹ The only Yezidi member of the

Iraqi Parliament, Vian Dakheel, demands the establishment of an independent Sinjar governorate within the federal Iraqi state.³² Despite the efforts of Yezidi actors, it is currently not the Yezidis themselves who will determine the political future of Sinjar, but the many competing political and military actors. The only thing they all have in common is that they are unwilling to grant greater influence to the Yezidis.

Germany's Involvement

Germany has supported Iraq financially by providing it with a total of around €1 billion in aid, €500 million of which is a grant, and the other €500 million in loans. Germany is further involved in the international coalition against ISIS and is the co-chair of the Stability Working Group. At a donor conference in Washington, D.C. in July 2016, Germany contributed €160 million specifically for humanitarian aid, reconstruction of buildings, the provision of electricity and water, demining and the creation of a functioning police force for 2017. In addition, representatives of Germany, such as Joachim Rucker, the Special Representative for the Stabilisation Partnership in the Middle East, have repeatedly stressed the necessity of *“emotional reconstruction”*,³³ i.e., reconciliation and trust building between the different groups in Iraq. In an initiative by the state of Baden-Württemberg, around 1.100 Yezidi women and girls were brought to special therapy centres in Germany in early 2016, where they can receive treatment for up to two years. So far, Germany remains the

²⁷ Goran, Baxtiyar 2016: President Barzani: 'Build new Shingal beside old city', Kurdistan24, 03.08.2016, in: <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/aadb61c1-b45c-4433-a917-f083bbf6e87a/President-Barzani--'Build-new-Shingal-beside-old-city> [12.10.2016].

²⁸ In contrast to the Kurds, many Yezidis identify primarily with their religion instead of their ethnicity.

²⁹ Cf. Van Den Toorn, Christine 2016: High Noon in Iraq's Wild West, Foreign Policy, 02.02.2016, in: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/22/high-noon-in-iraqs-wild-west/-to-disputed-territory> [12.10.2016].

³⁰ Cf. Rudaw 2016: Yezidi leader calls for Shingal integration with Kurdistan Region, Rudaw, 04.08.2016, in: <http://rudaw.net/english/world/04082016?keyword=yezidi> [07.10.2016].

³¹ Cf. Goran, Baxtiyar 2016: Iraqi parliament stands against new provinces for Ezidis and Christians, Kurdistan24, 26.09.2016,

in: <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/5496bb9a-227e-4672-887c-958eba5f56f2/Iraqi-parliament-stands-against-new-provinces-for-Ezidis-and-Christians> [07.10.2016]; Iraqi News 2016: Demands to make Sinjar a province gains momentum, Iraqi News, 19.09.2016, in: <http://www.iraqinews.com/baghdad-politics/demands-to-make-sinjar-province-gains-momentum/> [07.10.2016].

³² Interview with Vian Dakheel in Erbil in August 2016.

³³ Cf. Tietgen, Madita 2016: Irak-Geberkonferenz. Zwei Milliarden Dollar für den Irak, Heute.de, 21.07.2016, in: <http://www.heute.de/irak-geberkonferenz-zwei-milliarden-dollar-fuer-den-irak-44478520.html> [27.09.2016].

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only country to have initiated such a program.³⁴

Conclusion

Two years after the ISIS massacres in Sinjar, the situation in the region is far from stable. Despite the international attention on the atrocities committed against the Yezidis, the situation on the ground has not seen any improvements. There is no reconstruction plan; instead, various armed militias are competing for control in the area, while the political future of Sinjar remains uncertain. The Yezidi refugees are the ones who suffer from this situation: Since their expulsion from Sinjar, most of them have been living under hazardous conditions in camps in the Kurdish region. The more unlikely their return to Sinjar seems, the likelihood of more Yezidis risking the dangerous journey to Europe increases.

In the light of this, the German government should continue and also extend its involvement in Sinjar and other areas liberated from ISIS rule. Not only do sufficient financial means have to be provided in order to facilitate the reconstruction of these areas, but the German government should also become involved in promoting a settlement between Erbil and Baghdad within the framework of the international coalition. Likewise, the international community should assume a mediating role in local conflicts such as in Sinjar.

With the imminent start of the Mosul offensive, the situation in northern Iraq could change drastically. Germany has already provided €10 million in preparation for the humanitarian consequences of the offensive.³⁵ According to UN estimates, over one

million new refugees could move north from Mosul during the course of and in the aftermath of the offensive.³⁶ This could lead to a new refugee movement towards Europe, especially if the pace of reconstruction in liberated areas remains slow and the conflicts within Iraq between the Kurds, the Iraqi central government, the Shia militias and the Sunni Arabs increase further.

³⁴ Cf. Rising, David 2016: Raped and tortured by IS, Yazidi women recover in Germany, The Big Story, 24.08.2016, in: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/67825903ae5e419a9a263e1885b8a0a5/raped-and-tortured-yazidi-women-recover-germany> [27.09.2016]; Van der Zee, Fn. 8.

³⁵ Cf. Steinmeier, Frank-Walter 2016: There is no absolute security, Auswärtiges Amt, 19.07.2016, in: http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/nn_728986/sid_748AC00107070CF843D687B6E01B4E6E/EN/Infoservice/Press

[e/Interview/2016/160720_BM_Reuters.html?nnm=729012](http://www.kas.de/Interview/2016/160720_BM_Reuters.html?nnm=729012) [12.10.2016].

³⁶ Cf. Gladstone, Rick 2016: 1.2 Million Iraqis Could Be Uprooted in Mosul Battle, U.N. Says, New York Times, 23.08.2016, in: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/24/world/middleeast/isis-mosul-iraq.html?_r=0 [12.10.2016].