

# A People Outside of History: The Unique and Persecuted Legacy of the Yazidis

## Introduction: The Paradox of an Ancient Faith on the Brink of Extinction

The Yazidis present a profound and tragic paradox: they are a people whose unique ethno-religious identity is rooted in the ancient soil of Mesopotamia, with a history stretching back millennia, yet they have been violently thrust into the global consciousness only through the abject horror of modern genocide.<sup>1</sup> They are the custodians of a complex, syncretic faith that predates many of the world's major religions, a faith that has been the wellspring of their profound cultural identity and, simultaneously, the pretext for their relentless persecution.<sup>4</sup> The campaign of annihilation launched against them by the Islamic State (IS/ISIS) in August 2014, an event they solemnly refer to as their 74th

*ferman*, or genocidal decree, was not an aberration but the catastrophic culmination of a long and brutal history of massacres, forced conversions, and marginalization.<sup>6</sup>

At the heart of this history of persecution lies a foundational and catastrophic misconception. For centuries, the Yazidis have been branded by their neighbors as "devil-worshippers," a calumny that has served as the ideological justification for unimaginable violence.<sup>4</sup> This accusation stems from a fundamental, and often willful, misinterpretation of their reverence for Tawûsê Melek, the Peacock Angel, who is the central figure in their cosmology and the active agent of the divine will on Earth.<sup>10</sup> Outsiders have erroneously conflated this complex and venerated being with the figure of Satan in the Abrahamic traditions, a fatal misunderstanding that has painted the Yazidis as heretics worthy of extermination.<sup>9</sup> This report will demonstrate that this libel is not a simple theological error but a destructive narrative weaponized to legitimize dispossession and genocide.

The unique history of the Yazidis is, therefore, an unbroken narrative of resilience, a testament to a people's struggle to exist. This history has been profoundly shaped by the dynamic interplay between their esoteric and syncretic faith, a rigidly structured society designed for cohesion and survival, a history defined by cyclical persecution, and a contemporary battle for existence against the forces of political fragmentation, cultural erosion, and the deep, unhealed wounds of genocide. This report will trace this history from its ancient origins and theological foundations through the centuries of *fermans* to the precarious present. It will explore the intricate social and cultural fabric that has enabled their survival, analyze the devastating impact of the 2014 genocide, and examine the daunting challenges that now

confront the Yazidi people in their homeland and in the diaspora, as they fight to preserve their identity on the very brink of extinction.

## **Section I: Origins and Identity: The Êzidî Nation**

### **The Debate on Ethnogenesis: A Contested Identity**

The Yazidis are an endogamous, primarily Kurmanji Kurdish-speaking ethno-religious group indigenous to the region of Kurdistan, a geographic area that spans parts of modern-day Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran.<sup>1</sup> Their identity, however, is a subject of intense debate and political contestation, both among scholars and within the community itself. At the core of this debate is the question of whether the Yazidis constitute a religious subgroup of the broader Kurdish ethnicity or a distinct ethno-religious group in their own right.<sup>1</sup>

Genetic studies have provided some clarity, suggesting that Yazidis from northern Iraq may possess a stronger genetic continuity with the original peoples of Mesopotamia than other groups in the region, lending credence to their claim of ancient, distinct origins.<sup>16</sup>

Linguistically, while the majority speak Kurmanji, a northern dialect of Kurdish, some communities, particularly in the Bashiqa and Bahzani regions of Iraq, speak Arabic as their mother tongue, adding another layer of complexity to their identity.<sup>1</sup>

This question of identity is far from a mere academic exercise; it is a geopolitical battleground where the very survival of the Yazidi people is at stake. Throughout the 20th century, their identity was actively manipulated by regional powers for political gain. The Ba'athist regime in Iraq, for instance, pursued a deliberate policy of "Arabization," systematically attempting to sever the Yazidis' connection to the Kurdish nationalist movement. This was achieved by officially registering them as ethnic Arabs and promoting the false etymology that their name derived from the Umayyad Caliph Yazid I, thereby framing them as an Arab-descended group.<sup>15</sup> This policy was accompanied by forced displacement and the destruction of Yazidi villages, all aimed at consolidating central government control.<sup>19</sup>

Conversely, Kurdish nationalist movements have historically claimed the Yazidis as "original Kurds," whose faith represents an ancient form of Kurdish spirituality. This claim was used to bolster Kurdish territorial ambitions, particularly over the Yazidi heartland of Sinjar (Shingal).<sup>19</sup>

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) expanded its influence over Yazidi areas after 2003, but this protection proved illusory. The turning point came in August 2014, when KRG Peshmerga forces, tasked with defending Sinjar, abruptly withdrew in the face of the advancing ISIS forces, leaving the Yazidi population entirely defenseless against the ensuing genocide.<sup>6</sup>

This act of abandonment shattered the trust that many Yazidis had placed in Kurdish authorities and catalyzed a powerful movement of self-identification. In the aftermath of the

genocide, a growing number of Yazidis have asserted a distinct "Êzidî" identity, separate from both Arab and Kurd. This is not simply a cultural affirmation but a modern political strategy for survival. By defining themselves as a unique ethno-religious nation, they seek to reclaim their own agency, advocate for their own rights on the international stage, and escape the deadly tug-of-war for their land and loyalty between the governments of Baghdad and Erbil.<sup>19</sup>

## Linguistic and Geographic Roots

The primary language of the Yazidis is Kurmanji, the northern dialect of the Kurdish language, which is also the language of their sacred oral texts.<sup>1</sup> Their ancestral homelands are concentrated in northern Iraq, specifically within the Nineveh and Duhok governorates. The two main centers of the Yazidi population have historically been the Sheikhan region, a collection of towns and villages northeast of Mosul, and the mountainous Sinjar region to the northwest, near the Syrian border.<sup>1</sup> These areas, particularly the holy valley of Lalish in Sheikhan, are the spiritual and cultural heartland of the Yazidi people.<sup>13</sup> Historically, significant Yazidi communities also existed in southeastern Turkey, northern Syria, and Armenia.<sup>22</sup> However, centuries of persecution, culminating in the massacres of the 19th and 20th centuries and the recent genocide, have led to dramatic demographic shifts and mass emigration.<sup>21</sup> Today, the vast majority of Yazidis who remain in the Middle East reside in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> Global population estimates vary widely, ranging from 700,000 to over 1.6 million, a testament to the difficulty of conducting a census of a community so fragmented by displacement and violence.<sup>1</sup> Large and growing diaspora communities now exist in Germany, Sweden, Canada, Australia, Armenia, and Georgia.<sup>1</sup>

## The Meaning of "Êzidî": Tracing the Name

The Yazidis' own name for themselves is *Êzidî* or, in some tribal contexts, *Dasinî*.<sup>1</sup> The origin and meaning of this name are, like their ethnic identity, a source of contention and a reflection of their persecuted history. The most common theory among outside scholars in the past linked the name to the second Umayyad Caliph, Yazid ibn Muawiyah (r. 680–683 CE), who is reviled in Shia Islam for his role in the killing of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Hussein ibn 'Ali.<sup>1</sup> While some older Yazidi traditions did show a degree of reverence for the caliph, all modern Yazidis and most contemporary scholars vehemently reject any etymological link between their name and Yazid I.<sup>1</sup>

This rejection is a crucial modern defense mechanism against the very propaganda used to justify their persecution. By linking the Yazidis to a reviled figure in Islamic history, their enemies can frame them as a heretical and deviant offshoot of Islam, thereby legitimizing violence against them. Instead, the Yazidis themselves and many scholars favor etymologies that assert a pre-Islamic and independent origin. One prominent theory derives *Êzidî* from the

Old Iranian word *yazata*, meaning "divine being" or "one worthy of worship".<sup>1</sup> Another powerful etymology, popular within the community, traces the name to the Kurmanji phrase *Ez dā*, meaning "I was created," or *Xwedê ez dam*, "God created me".<sup>1</sup> In this interpretation, *Êzidî* means "the people of God" or "the servants of the creator," a name that firmly positions them as a people with a direct and unmediated relationship with the divine, existing entirely outside the framework of the Abrahamic faiths that have so often sought their destruction.<sup>1</sup>

## Section II: The Yazidi Faith: A Syncretic Cosmos

The Yazidi religion, or *Yazdanism*, is a highly syncretic and ancient faith that stands apart from the major monotheistic traditions of the Middle East. It is a complex tapestry woven from the threads of ancient Iranian religions, Sufi mysticism, and elements of Christianity and Judaism, all layered upon a unique mythological and cosmological foundation.<sup>1</sup> Its esoteric nature, combined with a history of persecution that necessitated secrecy, has led to it being profoundly misunderstood by outsiders.<sup>8</sup>

### Theology of a Remote God (*Xwedê*) and His Active Emanations

At its core, Yazidism is fundamentally monotheistic. Yazidis believe in one supreme, eternal, and transcendent God, to whom they refer by names such as *Xwedê* (the most common term), *Êzdan*, or *Pedsha* (King).<sup>4</sup> According to their sacred hymns, or *qewls*, this God has 1,001 or even 3,003 names.<sup>27</sup> In Yazidi theology, *Xwedê* is a primordial creator, a being of pure light who is considered remote and largely inactive in the day-to-day affairs of the world he created.<sup>12</sup>

The Yazidi creation myth begins with God existing alone in a spiritual void. From his own pure light, he created a single white pearl, the *dur*, and dwelt within it.<sup>27</sup> He then created the universe by shattering this cosmic egg.<sup>3</sup> Having brought the material world into being, God entrusted its governance and preservation to a heptad of seven holy beings, or angels, known as the

*Heft Sîrr* (the Seven Mysteries).<sup>10</sup> These angels are not independent deities but emanations of God himself, acting as his intermediaries and the active executors of his divine will.<sup>27</sup>

### The Divine Triad: The Manifestations of God

The divine is often understood and venerated through a primary triad of figures who represent different hypostases, or manifestations, of the one God.<sup>12</sup> This triad consists of:

1. **Tawûsê Melek (The Peacock Angel):** The first and preeminent emanation of God, the

chief of the seven angels, and the active ruler of the world.<sup>27</sup>

2. **Sheikh 'Adī ibn Musafir:** The 12th-century reformer saint who is venerated as a divine figure and an earthly incarnation of Tawûsê Melek.<sup>27</sup>
3. **Sultan Ezid:** Another divine figure, sometimes associated with the historical Umayyad caliph, who completes the triad.<sup>12</sup>

The identities of these three figures are often fluid and blurred within Yazidi tradition, with one being seen as a manifestation of another.<sup>12</sup> This concept of a divine triad, where different figures represent facets of a single, ultimate reality, allows for a complex theology that is at once monotheistic in its essence but polytheistic in its manifestations. The Yazidis proudly call themselves the

*Miletê Tawûsê Melek*—"the nation of the Peacock Angel".<sup>12</sup>

## **Tawûsê Melek: The Peacock Angel and the Crux of Misunderstanding**

No figure is more central to Yazidism, or more tragically misunderstood, than Tawûsê Melek. He is the leader of the seven angels and God's chosen deputy on Earth, responsible for all that happens, both good and bad.<sup>12</sup> The symbol of the peacock, with its thousand-eyed tail and vibrant colors, is believed to represent the diversity and beauty of the world that Tawûsê Melek governs.<sup>30</sup>

The catastrophic "devil-worshipper" libel originates from a willful misreading of the Yazidi story of Tawûsê Melek's refusal to bow to Adam. In the Yazidi narrative, after creating the first human, God commanded all seven angels to prostrate themselves before Adam. All obeyed except Tawûsê Melek.<sup>12</sup> His refusal was not an act of prideful rebellion against God, but an act of supreme monotheistic loyalty. He argued that as he was an emanation of God's own light, he could only bow to his creator, God, and not to a being made of dust.<sup>33</sup> This was a test of devotion, which Tawûsê Melek passed. For this act of unwavering faithfulness, God praised him and appointed him as the leader of the angels and ruler of the world.<sup>12</sup>

This narrative stands in stark contrast to the story of Iblis (Satan) in the Quran, who is cursed by God for his refusal to bow to Adam. Outsiders, particularly neighboring Muslim communities, have seized upon this superficial parallel to conflate the venerated Tawûsê Melek with their figure of pure evil, Shaytan.<sup>4</sup> This has led to centuries of persecution against the Yazidis, who find the accusation deeply offensive.<sup>11</sup> Yazidism lacks the concept of a purely evil, adversarial entity like the Abrahamic Satan. For them, good and evil are not external forces but potentials that reside within the human soul, and the choice between them is a matter of human free will.<sup>10</sup> Tawûsê Melek, as the ruler of this world, embodies this complex reality, responsible for allocating both blessings and misfortunes as he sees fit, acting as a bridge between humanity and the remote creator God.<sup>14</sup>

## **The Heptad: The Seven Mysteries (*Heft Sirr*)**

The seven angels who govern the world are known as the *Heft Sirr*, or the Seven Mysteries.<sup>12</sup> They were created from God's own divine light (*nûr*) and are considered to be emanations of his very essence (*sur* or *sirr*).<sup>12</sup> In addition to Tawûsê Melek, their names are sometimes given as Cibrayîl, Ezrayîl, Mikayîl, Şifqayîl, Derdayîl, Ezafîl, and Ezazîl, reflecting an influence from Abrahamic angelology, though their earthly incarnations are known by other names such as Fexreddin and Sheikh Shems.<sup>27</sup> These seven beings are also associated with the fundamental forces and elements of nature. Yazidis believe in *Xudans*, divine powers or spirits that preside over natural phenomena.<sup>27</sup> The four classical elements—fire, water, air, and earth—are considered sacred and must not be polluted in any way.<sup>27</sup> This belief fosters a deep reverence for the natural world, which has its roots in ancient nature worship.<sup>28</sup> The sun, in particular, holds a place of great importance. Yazidis pray facing the sun at dawn and dusk, not as an act of sun worship, but because they see it as the most powerful and visible manifestation of God's divine light and power on Earth.<sup>27</sup>

## Core Beliefs: Reincarnation, Purity, and Orality

Several core tenets define the practice and worldview of Yazidism. One of the most significant is the belief in reincarnation, or the transmigration of souls (*metempsychosis*).<sup>10</sup> Yazidis believe that souls undergo a cycle of rebirth, allowing for progressive purification. This belief also extends to the divine, as the great saints and even the angels are believed to reincarnate in human form at critical moments in history.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of purity is central to Yazidi life and is maintained through a strict social and religious code. This includes a rigid caste system, an absolute prohibition on marrying outside the faith (endogamy), and a series of taboos.<sup>5</sup> These taboos can govern food (avoiding pork and, famously, lettuce), dress, and personal habits (such as a prohibition on spitting on the sacred elements of earth, water, or fire).<sup>25</sup> While some of these rules may seem arcane, they function as powerful mechanisms for maintaining group identity and cohesion in the face of constant external pressure to assimilate or convert.

A defining characteristic of the Yazidi faith is its reliance on oral tradition. This has created a symbiotic relationship between their method of cultural preservation and the history of persecution they have endured. Historical sources and Yazidi tradition recount that their sacred books, such as the *Mishefa Reş* (Black Book) and the *Kitêba Cilwe* (Book of Revelation), were systematically destroyed or lost during centuries of violent persecution, particularly during the Ottoman era.<sup>11</sup> This relentless suppression of their written scripture forced the community to develop a highly sophisticated and resilient system of oral transmission. Specialized religious figures, known as *Qewwals*, were tasked with the sacred duty of memorizing and reciting the vast corpus of hymns (*qewls*), prayers, and narrative stories (*çiroks*) that contain the entirety of Yazidi

theology, mythology, and history.<sup>1</sup> This reliance on orality, born of necessity, combined with the need for secrecy to survive, made the religion appear "mysterious" and dangerously esoteric to outsiders.<sup>8</sup> This perceived secrecy, in a tragic feedback loop, fueled suspicion and reinforced the very "devil-worshipper" narrative that had led to the destruction of their texts in the first place. Thus, the primary means of their cultural survival—orality—inadvertently contributed to the pretext for their continued persecution.

## **Syncretic Influences: A Tapestry of Faiths**

Yazidism is a masterful example of religious syncretism, blending a diverse array of influences into a unique and coherent whole. Its deepest roots lie in ancient, pre-Zoroastrian Iranian faiths.<sup>1</sup> It shares with Zoroastrianism a profound reverence for the sun and fire as manifestations of the divine, a belief in seven holy beings (akin to the Zoroastrian Amesha Spentas), and a dualistic worldview, though Yazidism's conception of good and evil is internalized within the human soul rather than externalized as warring cosmic forces.<sup>13</sup> The influence of Islamic mysticism, or Sufism, is also profound and unmistakable, particularly in the faith's esoteric vocabulary, its veneration of saints, and its mystical traditions.<sup>1</sup> The figure of Sheikh 'Adī himself, a Sufi master, was the primary conduit for this influence. Additionally, Yazidism has absorbed elements from its other neighbors over the millennia. The rite of baptism is reminiscent of Christianity, and Jesus is revered as a holy figure.<sup>17</sup> Elements of Judaism are also present in their mythology and traditions.<sup>27</sup> This ability to absorb and reinterpret external influences, while preserving a core of ancient, non-Islamic mythology, is a testament to the religion's dynamic and resilient nature.

## **Section III: Pillars of the Faith: Sheikh 'Adī and the Holy Land of Lالش**

While the origins of Yazidism are ancient, the faith as it is practiced today was profoundly shaped by two central pillars that emerged in the 12th century: the person of Sheikh 'Adī ibn Musafir and the sacred space of Lالش. Together, they provided the nascent Yazidi community with a focal point for their beliefs, a center for their religious life, and a formal structure that would allow them to endure the centuries of persecution to come.

### **Sheikh 'Adī ibn Musafir: The Reformer Saint**

Sheikh 'Adī ibn Musafir (c. 1075–1162 CE) is the most important saint in Yazidism, venerated as a divine being and considered an earthly incarnation of Tawûsê Melek.<sup>27</sup> However, the historical Sheikh 'Adī was not the "founder" of a new religion in the conventional sense. He

was a Sufi sheikh of Umayyad Arab descent, born near Baalbek in modern-day Lebanon, who studied orthodox Sunni Islam and Sufism in Baghdad under renowned masters like Ahmad al-Ghazali and Abdul Qadir Gilani.<sup>13</sup> His own surviving writings are in line with mainstream Islamic teachings and show him to be a pious Muslim mystic.<sup>31</sup>

Seeking a life of asceticism and seclusion, Sheikh 'Adī left the political and doctrinal rigidity of Baghdad in the early 12th century and settled in the remote, mountainous valley of Lalish, northeast of Mosul.<sup>13</sup> This area was already inhabited by local Kurdish tribes who adhered to a variety of ancient, pre-Islamic beliefs with some syncretic elements.<sup>26</sup> Impressed by his piety, asceticism, and reported miracles, these local peoples were drawn to him, and he established a Sufi order known as the 'Adawiyya.<sup>31</sup>

The crucial transformation occurred after Sheikh 'Adī's death. His followers, particularly the local Kurdish tribes, began to venerate him to an extreme degree, a practice noted with alarm by early historians who observed his grand-nephew, al-Hasan b. 'Adī, struggling to control his fanatical supporters.<sup>41</sup> Over time, the orthodox Sufi teachings of Sheikh 'Adī and his order began to merge with the pre-existing local traditions and mythologies of his followers.<sup>15</sup> This process of syncretism, which unfolded over several centuries, gradually formalized the Yazidi faith as it is known today, with its unique blend of Sufi terminology, pre-Islamic mythology, and a deified Sheikh 'Adī at its center. He was posthumously incorporated into the divine triad as the second hypostasis of God, a perfect fusion of a historical Sufi saint and an ancient belief system.<sup>26</sup>

## Lalish: The Heart of the Yazidi World

The valley where Sheikh 'Adī chose to live and was ultimately buried became the undisputed center of the Yazidi religion. The tomb of Sheikh 'Adī in Lalish is the holiest site in Yazidism, a spiritual focal point that unites the global Yazidi community.<sup>4</sup> For Yazidis, Lalish is more than just a shrine; it is their

*qibla*, the direction they face during certain prayers, and a place of immense spiritual power.<sup>3</sup> According to their mythology, Lalish was created first in heaven and then descended to Earth, making it a terrestrial paradise and the most sacred ground in existence.<sup>42</sup>

Lalish is the destination for the most important Yazidi pilgrimage, the *Cejna Cemayî* (Feast of the Assembly), a seven-day festival in October that every Yazidi is expected to attend at least once in their lifetime if able.<sup>4</sup> The valley is filled with sacred sites, conical spires marking the tombs of saints, and the holy White Spring (

*Kania Spi*), whose water is used for baptismal rites for children and sacred objects.<sup>8</sup> The entire valley is considered so sacred that visitors must remove their shoes upon entering.<sup>42</sup>

The centrality of Lalish has also made it a primary target during persecutions. Throughout history, the shrine has been attacked, desecrated, and its treasures looted by hostile forces.<sup>1</sup> During the brutal Ottoman campaign of 1892, the temple was seized and converted into a Quranic school for twelve years before the Yazidis were able to reclaim it.<sup>7</sup> This history of



destruction and reclamation has only deepened the sanctity of Lalish in the Yazidi consciousness, making it a powerful symbol of their persecution, resilience, and eternal connection to their faith and homeland.

## **Section IV: A History of Persecution: The 74 *Fermans***

The history of the Yazidi people is inextricably linked to a narrative of profound and relentless suffering. This history is not remembered as a simple chronological sequence of events but is structured through a unique and tragic worldview: the concept of the 74 *fermans*.

### **The *Ferman* as a Worldview**

In the Yazidi collective memory, their history is a chronicle of 74 separate genocidal campaigns waged against them.<sup>6</sup> They refer to each of these events as a *ferman*, a term borrowed from Persian and Ottoman Turkish that originally meant "decree" or "order".<sup>7</sup> The word took on the meaning of "genocide" for the Yazidis because the official decrees issued by Ottoman sultans or local rulers frequently served as the legal and religious justification for launching massacres against them.<sup>7</sup> The 2014 campaign of extermination by ISIS is thus understood not as an isolated tragedy but as the 74th chapter in this long and brutal saga.<sup>6</sup>

This framework of the 74 *fermans* is more than just a historical accounting; it is the fundamental organizing principle of Yazidi identity and collective consciousness. It transforms history from a linear progression into a cyclical pattern of existential threat, catastrophe, survival, and renewal.<sup>45</sup> This worldview has fostered a deep-seated, historically justified, and entirely rational mistrust of outside powers and neighboring communities, who have repeatedly been the perpetrators of these genocidal campaigns.<sup>7</sup> It is this historical trauma that explains the community's intense focus on social cohesion, strict endogamy, and a degree of religious secrecy, as these have been the essential survival mechanisms developed over centuries of persecution.<sup>5</sup> For any external actor, be it a government or a non-governmental organization, to engage effectively with the Yazidi community, it is imperative to understand this framework. Interventions that ignore this history of cyclical betrayal and trauma, such as the top-down 2020 Sinjar Agreement, are destined to fail because they do not address the core issue of existential security from the Yazidi perspective.<sup>19</sup>

### **Early Conflicts and the Ottoman Era**

While conflict with neighboring groups existed earlier, the persecution of the Yazidis

intensified dramatically with the rise of powerful Islamic states. As early as 1254, the Zangid governor of Mosul, Badr al-Din Lu'lu', executed Sheikh 'Adī's grand-nephew, Sheikh Hasan, along with 200 of his followers, and desecrated the tomb at Lalish.<sup>1</sup> In 1415, Sunni Kurdish forces attacked Lalish again, burning the temple and exhuming and burning the bones of Sheikh 'Adī.<sup>1</sup>

The Ottoman period, from the 16th to the early 20th century, was particularly brutal. Under Islamic law as interpreted by the Ottomans, the Yazidis were not granted the status of *ahl al-kitab* ("People of the Book"), a protected class that included Christians and Jews. Lacking this status, they were deemed apostates (*kafir*) or heretics, leaving them vulnerable to the most extreme forms of persecution.<sup>41</sup> Local Muslim clerics and muftis frequently issued *fatwas* (religious rulings) that provided theological justification for these state-sanctioned campaigns of forced conversion, enslavement, and massacre.<sup>46</sup> Ottoman policies shifted over time, from initial tolerance to aggressive campaigns of Islamization and conscription, especially from the mid-16th century onward.<sup>46</sup>

## The 19th Century Massacres

The 19th century witnessed a series of devastating *fermans* that brought the Yazidi community to the brink of annihilation. This period of intense violence was largely driven by the ambitions of local Kurdish emirs seeking to expand their power and by the centralizing reforms of the Ottoman state.

Between 1832 and 1834, the Kurdish emir of Soran, Muhammad Pasha of Rawanduz (known as Mîrê Kor, or the "Blind Prince"), unleashed a genocidal campaign across the Yazidi heartlands. His forces massacred the Yazidis of Sheikhan, slaughtering thousands who had sought refuge on the ancient mound of Nineveh.<sup>7</sup> In one infamous episode, his troops cornered fleeing Yazidis on the banks of the Tigris River; those who could not swim were cut down, and an estimated 12,000 perished.<sup>7</sup> Shortly after, the Kurdish emir of Bohtan, Bedir Khan Beg, launched his own series of massacres, attacking Yazidis in Sheikhan and the Tur Abdin region, forcing entire villages to convert to Islam at swordpoint.<sup>7</sup> Together, the campaigns of these two emirs are estimated to have killed tens of thousands of Yazidis and are remembered as some of the most horrific *fermans* in their history.<sup>2</sup>

Later in the century, the Ottoman state itself became the primary persecutor. In 1892, as part of Sultan Abdul Hamid II's pan-Islamist policies, the Ottoman general Omar Wahbi Pasha led a major military campaign into Sheikhan and Sinjar with the explicit goals of forcibly conscripting Yazidis into the Ottoman army and converting them to Sunni Islam.<sup>7</sup> When the Yazidis refused, his forces launched a brutal assault, killing thousands, destroying temples, and, in a profound act of sacrilege, seizing the holy shrine of Lalish and converting it into a madrasa (an Islamic school).<sup>7</sup>

# The 20th Century: From Ottoman Genocide to Ba'athist Oppression

The 20th century brought no respite. During the Armenian Genocide (1915–1918), the Yazidis were also targeted for extermination by Ottoman forces and their allied Kurdish Hamidiye cavalry.<sup>23</sup> As a non-Muslim, non-Turkish group, they were seen as an undesirable element in the new Turkish state envisioned by the Committee of Union and Progress. Estimates of the number of Yazidis massacred during this period range from 300,000 to as high as 500,000.<sup>48</sup> Despite facing their own genocide, the Yazidi community of Sinjar famously provided sanctuary to tens of thousands of fleeing Armenian and Assyrian Christians, a remarkable act of solidarity in the midst of shared suffering.<sup>7</sup>

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of modern Iraq, the Yazidis continued to face persecution. Under the Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein, they were subjected to systematic "Arabization" campaigns. These policies aimed to erase their distinct identity and sever their cultural ties to the Kurds by forcibly registering them as Arabs, destroying hundreds of their villages, and resettling them in collective towns where they could be more easily controlled.<sup>15</sup>

The following table provides an abridged chronology of these persecutions, illustrating the cyclical and relentless nature of the violence that has defined Yazidi history.

**Table 1: Abridged Chronology of Major Persecutions (*Fermans*)**

Date/Period	Event/Ferman	Perpetrators	Key Details/Regions
1254 CE	Execution of Sheikh Hasan	Badr al-Din Lu'lu (Zangid Governor of Mosul)	Execution of Yazidi leader and 200 followers; desecration of Sheikh 'Adī's tomb in Lalish. <sup>1</sup>
1415 CE	Attack on Lalish	Sunni Kurdish tribes under 'Izz al-Dīn al-Hulwānī	The temple at Lalish was burned; the bones of Sheikh 'Adī were exhumed and burned. <sup>1</sup>
1832–1834 CE	Massacres of Mîrê Kor	Muhammad Pasha of Rawanduz (Kurdish Emir of Soran)	Genocidal campaign across Sheikhan and Sinjar; estimated 70,000 killed; thousands enslaved. <sup>7</sup>
1844 CE	Massacres of Bedir Khan Beg	Bedir Khan Beg (Kurdish Emir of Bohtan)	Attacks on Yazidis in Tur Abdin region; destruction of villages; forced conversions of entire communities. <sup>7</sup>

1892 CE	Campaign of Omar Wahbi Pasha	Ottoman Empire (General Omar Wahbi Pasha)	Campaign of forced conscription and conversion in Sheikhan and Sinjar; Lalish seized and converted into a madrasa. <sup>7</sup>
1915–1918 CE	Yazidi Genocide	Ottoman Empire & Kurdish Hamidiye Cavalry	Systematic massacres alongside Armenians and Assyrians; estimates of 300,000–500,000 Yazidis killed. <sup>23</sup>
1970s–1980s CE	Arabization Campaigns	Iraqi Ba'athist Regime	Forced displacement, destruction of over 200 villages, and forced registration of Yazidis as Arabs. <sup>18</sup>
2014–2017 CE	The 74th <i>Ferman</i> (ISIS Genocide)	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)	Systematic massacres, mass graves, enslavement of over 6,800 women and children, forced conversion, destruction of cultural heritage. <sup>6</sup>

## Section V: The Social and Cultural Fabric

The remarkable survival of the Yazidi people through centuries of persecution cannot be understood without examining the unique social and cultural structures that have provided them with cohesion, resilience, and a powerful sense of collective identity. These structures, centered on a divinely ordained caste system and a vibrant oral tradition, have served as a fortress against the constant external pressures of assimilation and annihilation.

### The Caste System: A Divinely Ordained Hierarchy

Yazidi society is organized into a strict, hereditary, and endogamous caste system that governs all religious and social relationships.<sup>8</sup> This structure is not seen as a social construct but as a sacred order established by God. At the broadest level, the community is divided into

three main castes:

1. **The Sheikhs:** The highest clerical caste, serving as the primary spiritual guides for the community. The Sheikhs are themselves divided into three distinct and endogamous lineages: the **Şemsanî**, the **Adanî**, and the **Qatanî**. Each Yazidi must have a Sheikh from one of these lineages to serve as their spiritual mentor.<sup>8</sup>
2. **The Pirs:** A second clerical caste of priests who hold a rank below the Sheikhs. They preside over many important religious rituals, such as weddings, funerals, and festivals, and also serve as spiritual advisors.<sup>8</sup>
3. **The Murids:** The laity, who constitute the vast majority of the Yazidi population. Every Murid is a disciple of a specific Sheikh family and a specific Pir family, a relationship that is passed down through generations.<sup>34</sup>

At the apex of this entire hierarchical structure are two principal leaders:

- **The Mîr (Prince):** The hereditary secular and political leader of the entire Yazidi community worldwide. The Mîr, who must come from the Qatanî lineage of Sheikhs, represents the Yazidis to the outside world and serves as the final arbiter of internal disputes.<sup>52</sup>
- **The Baba Sheikh (Father Sheikh):** The supreme spiritual leader of the Yazidis. He is responsible for safeguarding the faith's doctrines and traditions and presides over the most important religious ceremonies at Lalish. While the position is hereditary within a specific family, the Mîr formally appoints him, symbolizing the unity of secular and spiritual authority.<sup>52</sup>

This caste system is rigidly maintained by a strict rule of endogamy: marriage between members of different castes is forbidden.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, marriage outside the Yazidi faith is considered the gravest sin, an act that results in excommunication and, in some traditional contexts, has been punished by honor killing.<sup>4</sup> While this system may appear archaic and exclusionary to modern sensibilities, it has been a profoundly effective tool for preserving the purity of the faith and ensuring social cohesion in the face of existential threats. It guarantees that religious authority and knowledge are maintained within specific, dedicated lineages, thereby reinforcing group identity and creating a powerful bulwark against forced conversion and assimilation.

**Table 2: The Yazidi Social Hierarchy**

Level	Position/Caste	Key Roles and Responsibilities	Rules of Interaction
Supreme Leadership	Mîr (Prince)	Hereditary secular and political head of the global Yazidi community. Represents Yazidis externally; settles major disputes. <sup>52</sup>	From the Qatanî Sheikh lineage. Appoints the Baba Sheikh.
	Baba Sheikh	Supreme spiritual	Hereditary within one

		leader. Guardian of the faith and Lalish. Leads major rituals. Lives an ascetic life. <sup>52</sup>	family; must be formally appointed by the Mîr.
	<b>Pesh Imam</b>	Presides over marriage ceremonies; sets bride price. Accompanies the Baba Sheikh. <sup>53</sup>	Appointed by the Mîr; not hereditary. Traditionally the most literate class.
<b>Clerical Castes</b>	<b>Sheikhs</b>	Primary spiritual guides. Divided into three endogamous lineages (Şemsanî, Adanî, Qatanî). Every Yazidi has a hereditary Sheikh. <sup>8</sup>	Strictly endogamous. Cannot marry Pirs or Murids.
	<b>Pirs</b>	Priests of a lesser rank. Preside over festivals, weddings, funerals. Maintain shrines. Often seen as mystics. <sup>8</sup>	Strictly endogamous. Cannot marry Sheikhs or Murids.
<b>Laity</b>	<b>Murids</b>	The common people, comprising the majority of the population. <sup>34</sup>	Must have a hereditary Sheikh and Pir. Must also have a "Brother/Sister of the Hereafter" from a clerical caste. <sup>52</sup>
<b>Specialized Roles</b>	<b>Qewwals</b>	Singers of sacred hymns. Travel between communities to transmit oral traditions. Come from specific Pir lineages. <sup>1</sup>	A chosen role, not inherited. Trained from youth.
	<b>Faqirs</b>	Ascetics who dedicate their lives to religious service, often at Lalish. Set an example of holiness. <sup>34</sup>	A chosen role, open to all castes but dominated by specific tribes.
	<b>Kocheks</b>	Seers and mystics known for prophecy, dream interpretation, and healing. Can come	A role based on spiritual gifts, not heredity.

		from any caste. <sup>34</sup>	
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The Oral Tradition: A Living Library

As a culture whose sacred texts were largely destroyed, the Yazidis have cultivated one of the world's most vibrant and vital oral traditions.<sup>4</sup> Their faith, history, mythology, and laws are not primarily contained in books but are preserved in the collective memory of the community and transmitted through performance. This living library consists of a vast corpus of sacred texts, composed in Kurmanji, which are recited from memory. The two most important genres are:

- **Qewls:** Sacred hymns, often of divine origin, that contain the core theological and cosmological beliefs of the faith.<sup>36</sup>
- **Çiroks:** Narrative stories, folktales, and historical accounts that teach moral values and recount the history of the community, including the sagas of their saints and the tragedies of their *fermans*.<sup>36</sup>

The preservation and transmission of this oral tradition is the sacred duty of specialized religious figures, most notably the **Qewwals**.<sup>1</sup> These men, who come from specific lineages of the Pir caste, are trained from a young age to memorize and recite thousands of lines of sacred text.<sup>53</sup> Historically, they would travel from the spiritual center of Lalish to distant Yazidi communities in a biannual procession known as the *Gara Tawuse* (Tour of the Peacock).<sup>36</sup> They would carry with them a *sancaq*, a sacred bronze effigy of a peacock, symbolizing the authority of Lalish and the presence of Tawûsê Melek. During these tours, the Qewwals would recite hymns, provide religious guidance, settle disputes, and collect alms, thereby reinforcing the spiritual, social, and political bonds that connect all Yazidis to their holy center.<sup>1</sup>

Rituals and Festivals: Marking a Sacred Calendar

The Yazidi religious calendar is punctuated by a series of vibrant festivals and solemn rituals that serve as crucial moments of community reaffirmation and cultural transmission. These events reinforce social bonds, pass down religious knowledge, and connect the global diaspora to their spiritual homeland of Lalish.

Table 3: Major Yazidi Festivals and Rituals

Festival Name	Timing	Significance	Key Rituals
Çarşema Sor (Red Wednesday)	The first Wednesday of April (Nîsan). <sup>35</sup>	The Yazidi New Year (Ser Sal). Commemorates God's creation of the world and the descent of	Coloring hard-boiled eggs to symbolize the colors of the rainbow and the renewal of life. Hanging red flowers

		Tawûsê Melek to Earth, bringing it life and color. <sup>44</sup>	and colored eggshells on doorways. Visiting cemeteries to leave offerings for the dead. Lighting bonfires at Lalish. Marriage is forbidden in April. <sup>44</sup>
<b>Cejna Cemayî (Feast of the Assembly)</b>	October 6th–13th. <sup>35</sup>	The great seven-day pilgrimage to Lalish. A time for Yazidis from around the world to gather at their holiest site to reaffirm their faith and unity. <sup>44</sup>	Daily rituals at Lalish, including baptisms in the White Spring ( <i>Kania Spî</i> ), evening dances by religious dignitaries, and the ceremonial sacrifice of a bull on the fifth day to pray for rain and a bountiful harvest. <sup>35</sup>
<b>Cejna Êzî (Feast of God)</b>	The third Friday in December. <sup>35</sup>	The most important feast of the year, held in honor of God (Êzî). It follows three separate weeks of fasting dedicated to the sun, the ancestors, and God. <sup>35</sup>	A three-day fast from Tuesday to Thursday immediately preceding the feast. The fast is broken at sunset each day, and the feast day itself is a time of celebration, feasting, and visiting family. <sup>35</sup>
<b>Batzmi</b>	A seven-day holiday at the end of December. <sup>44</sup>	A festival primarily observed by the <i>Chelkiy</i> Yazidis, it celebrates their special relationship with Tawûsê Melek, who is said to have appeared to them as the saint Piralli. <sup>44</sup>	A complex series of rituals including fasting, the sacrifice of a sheep, the lighting of seven wicks ( <i>chera</i> ), and the all-night vigil of <i>Shav Baratk</i> , filled with music, storytelling, and feasting. The sacred red-and-white <i>Basmbar</i> thread is made and distributed during this festival. <sup>36</sup>



## Cultural Expressions: Music, Dance, and Symbolism

Yazidi culture is rich with expressive arts that are deeply interwoven with their religious and social life. Music is paramount, serving as the vehicle for the oral tradition. The recitation of *qewls* is a highly developed musical form, performed with a free, non-isochronic rhythm and complex melodies (*kubrî*) that enhance the sacredness and emotional impact of the texts.<sup>37</sup> The performance is traditionally accompanied by two sacred instruments: the **def** (a large frame drum or tambourine) and the **shibab** (a type of end-blown flute). In Yazidi cosmology, these instruments are themselves allegories for celestial bodies, connecting their music to the very creation of the universe.<sup>42</sup> Dance is an integral part of social and religious gatherings, particularly at festivals and weddings. Communal line dances, such as the *Dilana Shingali* (Sinjari Dance) or *govend*, are performed by men and women together, reinforcing community bonds and cultural identity.<sup>36</sup> The ability to perform these traditional dances well is a highly valued social skill.<sup>54</sup> Yazidi culture is also rich in symbolism. The **peacock** is the most sacred symbol, representing Tawûsê Melek and the beauty of the world.<sup>30</sup> The **sun** is a powerful symbol of God's light and is the focus of daily prayer.<sup>27</sup> The **Basmbar**, a sacred string made of intertwined red and white wool, is worn on the wrist or neck for blessing and protection, symbolizing love and peace.<sup>36</sup> These symbols, along with their unique rituals and social structures, create a distinct and resilient cultural identity that has sustained the Yazidi people through millennia of adversity.

## Section VI: The 74th *Ferman*: The ISIS Genocide and Its Aftermath

On August 3, 2014, the long and tragic history of Yazidi persecution entered its most horrific chapter. The assault on the Sinjar region by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was not merely another massacre; it was a meticulously planned and systematically executed genocide, the 74th *ferman*, aimed at the complete eradication of the Yazidi people from their ancestral homeland.<sup>6</sup>

### The Attack on Sinjar (August 2014)

The genocide began with a profound act of betrayal. As ISIS forces advanced on the Sinjar region, the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, who had assumed responsibility for the area's security, abruptly withdrew without warning, leaving the entire Yazidi population defenseless.<sup>6</sup> The ensuing panic triggered a mass exodus. Nearly 200,000 Yazidis fled in terror towards the

barren heights of Mount Sinjar, the only defensible terrain available.<sup>6</sup> There, they became besieged by ISIS fighters who surrounded the mountain, cutting off all escape routes and access to food and water.<sup>6</sup> In the searing August heat, a humanitarian catastrophe unfolded. Hundreds of the most vulnerable—the elderly, the infirm, and young children—perished from dehydration, starvation, and exposure.<sup>6</sup> A desperate rescue operation, led primarily by fighters from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and their Syrian affiliates, the People's Protection Units (YPG), with air support from a U.S.-led coalition, eventually managed to open a humanitarian corridor, allowing tens of thousands to escape into Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>13</sup>

## A Systematic Campaign of Annihilation

For those who could not escape, ISIS unleashed a campaign of annihilation that was chilling in its ideological clarity and bureaucratic efficiency. The United Nations would later conclude that ISIS's actions constituted genocide, meeting all the criteria under international law: killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm, deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about physical destruction, and imposing measures to prevent births.<sup>58</sup>

The campaign was executed with brutal precision:

- **Mass Executions:** Men and boys over the age of 12 were systematically separated from their families. Those who refused to convert to Islam were summarily executed by shooting or beheading and dumped into mass graves.<sup>20</sup> In the village of Kocho alone, up to 400 men were executed on August 15, 2014.<sup>55</sup> To date, dozens of mass graves have been discovered across the Sinjar region.<sup>6</sup>
- **Sexual Enslavement:** Over 6,800 women and children were abducted.<sup>50</sup> Women and girls, some as young as nine, were declared *sabaya* (spoils of war or sex slaves) and subjected to a highly organized and officially sanctioned system of institutionalized rape and sexual slavery.<sup>20</sup> They were trafficked, sold in slave markets, "gifted" to fighters, and repeatedly subjected to horrific sexual and physical violence.<sup>58</sup> ISIS leadership regulated this practice, even opening a specific route between Iraq and Syria to facilitate the trade of Yazidi girls, hoping their presence would attract more foreign fighters.<sup>62</sup>
- **Forced Indoctrination of Children:** Young Yazidi boys were torn from their mothers, forcibly converted to ISIS's extremist ideology, and taken to training camps where they were brainwashed, radicalized, and trained to become child soldiers, known as the "Cubs of the Caliphate".<sup>20</sup> They were forced to fight and kill, sometimes against their own people, in a cruel attempt to destroy the next generation of Yazidis by turning them into their own executioners.
- **Cultural and Religious Destruction:** ISIS engaged in systematic "culturicide," deliberately destroying Yazidi religious and cultural heritage. Shrines, temples, and tombs across Sinjar, Bashiqa, and Bahzani were dynamited and bulldozed, an attempt to

erase the physical presence of the Yazidi faith from the landscape.<sup>6</sup>

## Voices of Survivors: Testimonies of Trauma and Resilience

The scale of the genocide is best understood through the harrowing testimonies of those who endured it. Their stories reveal the depths of the trauma inflicted upon the community, but also its incredible spirit of resilience.

**Nadia Murad**, a survivor from Kocho who would later win the Nobel Peace Prize for her activism, described the calculated nature of the violence: "When the terrorists entered my village of Kocho, men and women were immediately treated differently. The men were murdered... Women and children were captured, forcibly converted, subjected to domestic servitude and many were forced to marry fighters. Through this institutionalised sexual violence — and the indoctrination of our children — they sought to destroy our community first through our bodies, and then in our minds".<sup>62</sup>

**Dima Amin**, another survivor from Kocho who was held captive for nearly a decade, recounted the unending torment: "Honestly, I lived through hell—it was unbearable. I was sexually assaulted... An ISIS member took me by force to Syria and kept me in his house. He and others abused me—physically, emotionally, and sexually. They beat and insulted me constantly. I even thought about ending my life many times".<sup>64</sup>

**Pakiza Milham Ali** was forced to watch ISIS murder her husband before she was taken into captivity. After escaping, she returned to a devastated Sinjar and, living in a tent, began knitting wool to provide for her nine children, ensuring they could return to school to honor a promise made to her late husband. Her story is one of "deep wound and intense sorrow—then, remarkable resilience".<sup>65</sup>

These stories, and thousands like them, are a testament to the profound and lasting impact of the genocide. Survivors like **Siham** speak of their "rebirth after finally being freed," while others like **Basima** have dedicated themselves to helping other Yazidis heal, restoring a spirit that "may have bent, but never broke".<sup>66</sup> The trauma is immense, but the will to survive, to remember, and to seek justice is a powerful, unifying force within the community.<sup>43</sup>

## The Ongoing Humanitarian Crisis

A decade after the genocide began, the *ferman* continues in the form of a protracted humanitarian crisis. The promise of "never again" has rung hollow for the Yazidi people. Hundreds of thousands remain internally displaced, with an estimated 200,000 still living in squalid, overcrowded IDP camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.<sup>18</sup> Conditions in these camps are dire, with inadequate access to water, sanitation, healthcare, and education, leading to worsening poverty and rising rates of suicide and domestic violence.<sup>61</sup>

Their ancestral homeland of Sinjar remains largely in ruins. A lack of security, the destruction of infrastructure, and the presence of numerous competing armed factions have prevented

the safe and dignified return of the majority of its population.<sup>9</sup> Those who have returned face immense challenges, including a lack of basic services, limited livelihood opportunities, and the constant psychological burden of living amidst mass graves and the ruins of their former lives.<sup>70</sup>

The mental health consequences of the genocide are staggering and intergenerational. Survivors, particularly the women and girls who endured sexual slavery, suffer from exceptionally high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety.<sup>5</sup> The trauma is compounded by the ongoing uncertainty over the fate of the nearly 2,800 women and children who remain missing, presumed to be in ISIS captivity or dead.<sup>20</sup> For the Yazidi people, the genocide is not a historical event; it is a lived, daily reality of loss, displacement, and waiting.

## **Section VII: The Precarious Present and Future**

Ten years after the 74th *ferman*, the Yazidi people find themselves at a critical juncture, their future more uncertain than ever. Their survival is threatened not by a single genocidal entity like ISIS, but by a complex web of geopolitical conflict, political neglect, stalled justice, and the existential challenges of cultural preservation in the diaspora. They have moved from being a forgotten people to being a symbol of international failure, trapped between rhetorical solidarity and the harsh realities of state interests and inaction.

### **The Geopolitical Quagmire of Sinjar**

The primary obstacle to the recovery of the Yazidi community is the intractable political and military conflict over their homeland. Sinjar is officially designated as a "disputed territory" under the Iraqi constitution, caught in a decades-long struggle for control between the federal government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil.<sup>18</sup> The power vacuum created by the 2014 genocide and the subsequent defeat of ISIS has transformed the region into a proxy battleground for regional powers.

The security landscape is dangerously fragmented. A multitude of armed groups operate in Sinjar, including the Iraqi army, KRG Peshmerga, Iran-backed Shia militias known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), and local Yazidi militias like the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ), which are affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).<sup>18</sup> This complex web of alliances is further complicated by Turkey, which views the PKK presence in Sinjar as a direct national security threat and regularly conducts airstrikes against alleged PKK targets, which often kill or endanger Yazidi civilians and destroy critical infrastructure.<sup>19</sup>

In an attempt to resolve this, the UN-brokered Sinjar Agreement was signed in October 2020 between Baghdad and the KRG. The agreement called for the withdrawal of all non-state armed groups and the establishment of a new, joint security force and local administration.<sup>19</sup>

However, the agreement has been a resounding failure. It was negotiated without any meaningful participation from the Yazidi community itself, treating them as passive subjects rather than agents in their own future.<sup>19</sup> It failed to address the root causes of Yazidi insecurity, including their profound mistrust of the KRG and Baghdad forces who had previously abandoned or oppressed them. As a result, the agreement has not been implemented, and attempts to enforce it have led to further violence and displacement, leaving Sinjar militarized, unstable, and unsafe for return.<sup>19</sup>

## **The Struggle for Justice and Accountability**

In the wake of the genocide, there has been significant international recognition of the crimes committed by ISIS. The United Nations, the European Union, and numerous national parliaments—including those of the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, France, and Germany—have formally recognized the atrocities as genocide.<sup>20</sup> The UN's investigative team, UNITAD, worked for years to collect evidence, exhume mass graves, and identify perpetrators, building criminal case files against thousands of ISIS members.<sup>58</sup>

Despite this progress in recognition, meaningful justice and accountability remain tragically elusive. The Iraqi legal system lacks the domestic legislation necessary to prosecute the crime of genocide, forcing authorities to rely on inadequate anti-terrorism laws that fail to capture the specific intent and nature of the atrocities committed against the Yazidis.<sup>56</sup> To date, neither the Iraqi courts nor the International Criminal Court have convened formal trials to hold ISIS members accountable for genocide.<sup>62</sup> While a handful of landmark cases have been successfully prosecuted in European courts under the principle of universal jurisdiction—most notably in Germany, where ISIS members have been convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity—these represent only a tiny fraction of the perpetrators.<sup>56</sup>

Yazidi-led civil society organizations, such as Nadia's Initiative and Yazda, are at the forefront of the global advocacy campaign for justice.<sup>73</sup> They tirelessly lobby governments, push for international tribunals, and work to ensure that any recovery process is survivor-centric, including provisions for reparations and long-term support.<sup>60</sup> However, with UNITAD's mandate having ended, there is a grave risk that the momentum for accountability will dissipate, leaving the vast majority of survivors without any semblance of justice.<sup>56</sup>

## **The Diaspora's Dilemma: Safety vs. Cultural Erosion**

The 2014 genocide triggered a new wave of mass emigration, leading to the growth of significant Yazidi diaspora communities in Europe (particularly Germany), North America, and Australia.<sup>1</sup> While these countries offer physical safety from the immediate threats in Iraq, life in the diaspora presents a new set of insidious, long-term existential challenges to the preservation of Yazidi identity.

The very structures that have preserved Yazidi culture for millennia are threatened by the realities of life in Western societies. The Kurmanji language, the vessel of their sacred oral tradition, is at risk of being lost among younger generations who are educated in other languages.<sup>77</sup> The strict caste system and the absolute prohibition on intermarriage, which have been the bedrock of their social cohesion, are increasingly difficult to maintain, leading to internal tensions between elders seeking to preserve tradition and youth adapting to new cultural norms.<sup>25</sup> Transmitting a complex, unwritten oral religion to children who have never seen Lalish and have no living memory of their homeland is a monumental challenge.<sup>54</sup> This has created a cruel paradox in the aftermath of the genocide. The international recognition of their suffering created a legitimate expectation of robust protection and support. Yet, this has not materialized in a meaningful way on the ground in Iraq. Worse still, the very countries that have offered refuge are now implementing policies that compound Yazidi trauma. Germany, which has been a leader in prosecuting ISIS for genocide, is simultaneously pursuing deportation policies that threaten to send Yazidi asylum seekers back to the insecure and unstable environment they fled.<sup>56</sup> This profound disconnect between the moral act of recognizing genocide and the political will to provide lasting, sustainable solutions leaves the Yazidi people in a state of perpetual limbo. They have moved from being ignored by the world to being a symbol of its collective failure, caught between empty promises of solidarity and the harsh realities of geopolitics and restrictive immigration policies.

## **Conclusion: Resilience, Remembrance, and the Fight for Survival**

The unique history of the Yazidi people is a profound testament to the endurance of the human spirit in the face of unimaginable adversity. Their identity is forged from an ancient, syncretic faith—a rich tapestry of pre-Zoroastrian, Sufi, and other regional beliefs that has been catastrophically misinterpreted as "devil-worship," providing the ideological fuel for centuries of violence. This history is not a linear narrative but a cyclical one, defined by the collective memory of 74 *fermans*, or genocidal decrees, that have repeatedly sought to annihilate them. This framework of cyclical persecution has shaped a deeply resilient culture, one that relies on a rigid social hierarchy, a vibrant oral tradition, and an unbreakable bond to its sacred homeland of Lalish to preserve its existence.

The 74th *ferman*, perpetrated by ISIS in 2014, was a crime of unprecedented scale and brutality, a systematic attempt to destroy the Yazidis through mass murder, sexual enslavement, and the indoctrination of their children. Yet, even from the depths of this horror, the community's spirit of resilience has shone through. It is visible in the courage of survivors like Nadia Murad, who have transformed their personal trauma into a global call for justice. It is evident in the painstaking efforts to preserve their oral traditions and cultural heritage, and in the quiet determination of families to rebuild their lives amidst the ruins of Sinjar. It is

remembered in their remarkable act of solidarity during the Armenian Genocide, when they, while being persecuted themselves, sheltered those fleeing a shared enemy. Despite this extraordinary resilience, the Yazidi people stand at a precipice. A decade after the world vowed "never again," they remain caught in a geopolitical storm, their homeland a battleground for regional powers. Justice for the genocide remains largely unfulfilled, and hundreds of thousands of their people languish in displacement camps, unable to return home. In the diaspora, the safety they have found comes at the cost of potential cultural erosion, threatening the very traditions they have fought for millennia to protect. The 74th *ferman* is not over. It continues today in the form of political neglect, forced displacement, the denial of justice, and the slow, grinding erosion of a unique and irreplaceable culture. Without a concerted and sustained international commitment to ensuring their security, facilitating their right to a safe and dignified life in their homeland, and holding the perpetrators of genocide accountable, one of the world's most ancient and persecuted communities faces the real and imminent possibility of extinction. Their fight for survival is a test of the world's conscience, and it is a test that, at present, is being profoundly failed.

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