A Fractured Kinship: Yazidis and Non-Yazidi Kurds Before 2013

I. Introduction: The Complex Tapestry of Yazidi-Kurdish Relations Pre-2013

The Yazidis, an ancient ethno-religious minority indigenous to Mesopotamia, have historically inhabited regions now part of Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and the Caucasus.[1] Primarily Kurmanji-speaking, their societal fabric and religious traditions are deeply interwoven with the landscapes they call home.[5] The Kurds, a numerically larger and predominantly Sunni Muslim ethnic group, share many of these territories, possessing their own intricate history and long-standing aspirations for self-determination.[1] The relationship between these two communities, particularly in the period preceding the tumultuous events of 2013 and especially before 2010, defies simplistic categorization. It cannot be reduced to a monolithic narrative of either perpetual victimhood for the Yazidis or unbroken kinship with their Kurdish neighbors. Instead, it is a complex mosaic, characterized by fluidity and a profound dependence on historical and geographical context.

The examination of the Yazidi-Kurdish relationship before the widely publicized crises of the 21st century, such as the 2014 genocide perpetrated by the Islamic State (ISIS), is not merely an academic exercise in historical record-keeping. This earlier period serves as a crucial baseline, offering a diagnostic lens through which to understand the vulnerabilities, political alignments, and the delicate balance of inter-communal trust—or its conspicuous absence—that existed prior to these cataclysmic events. Understanding this "normal," albeit often fraught, state of affairs is essential for analyzing the responses of various actors, including different Kurdish factions, during and after the 2014 crisis. For instance, the decision of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Peshmerga forces to withdraw from the Sinjar region in August 2014, leaving the Yazidi population exposed to ISIS attacks [7], can only be fully comprehended by examining the pre-existing political dynamics and the level of trust (or mistrust) that characterized the Yazidi-KRG relationship.[9]

Furthermore, the term "non-Yazidi Kurds" is itself a simplification that belies a more complex reality. It encompasses a diverse array of actors, including distinct political parties such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Iraq, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its affiliates, various tribal leaders, and the general Kurdish populace. The attitudes and actions of these different Kurdish entities towards Yazidis often varied significantly and were, at times, contradictory.[7] Ascribing uniform behavior or sentiment to "Kurds" in general would obscure the nuanced power dynamics and the specific political choices made by these distinct groups.

This report posits that the relationship between Yazidis and non-Yazidi Kurds prior to 2013 was a deeply intricate and often paradoxical tapestry. It was woven from threads of shared

linguistic and cultural heritage, yet simultaneously marked by profound religious divergence. This religious distinction frequently fueled persecution of Yazidis by segments of the Muslim Kurdish population. The relationship was further complicated by fluctuating political alliances and rivalries, a degree of economic interdependence, and a persistently contested Yazidi identity, particularly in the face of burgeoning Kurdish nationalist claims and the assimilationist pressures exerted by various states. These multifaceted dynamics varied considerably across different geographical regions—the Ottoman Empire, modern Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and the Caucasus—and evolved through distinct historical periods. Ultimately, this complex interplay created a legacy of mistrust and unresolved tensions that profoundly shaped the Yazidi experience on the eve of the 21st century's major crises.

II. The Enduring Question of Identity: Yazidis, Kurds, and "Kurdishness"

The question of Yazidi identity, particularly in relation to "Kurdishness," is a central and enduring theme in understanding their historical interactions with non-Yazidi Kurds. This complex issue is shaped by linguistic ties, religious distinctions, self-perceptions, external categorizations, and the political instrumentalization of identity by various actors.

A primary argument for the inclusion of Yazidis within a broader Kurdish ethnic umbrella is linguistic. The vast majority of Yazidis speak Kurmanji, a prominent northern dialect of the Kurdish language.[2] Significantly, Kurmanji is also the liturgical language for almost all of their orally transmitted religious traditions.[5] Beyond language, proponents of a shared Kurdish identity often point to common cultural practices. However, a careful delineation is necessary, as Yazidi culture also possesses highly distinct features, such as strict endogamy (marriage only within the community), a hereditary caste system (comprising Sheikhs, Pirs, and Murids), and specific food taboos, which serve to maintain communal boundaries and religious purity.[1]

The core differentiator, and the most significant factor in historical separation and persecution, is religion. Yazidism is a unique, syncretic, and monotheistic faith with ancient origins, believed to predate Islam and Christianity.[1] Its complex theology incorporates elements from pre-Zoroastrian Iranian beliefs, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Judaism, Nestorian Christianity, and Islamic Sufism.[1] This distinct religious identity has historically set Yazidis apart from their predominantly Muslim neighbors, including Muslim Kurds. A persistent and damaging mischaracterization of Yazidis as "devil-worshippers" by these surrounding communities, stemming from a misunderstanding of the Yazidi reverence for Tawûsî Melek (the Peacock Angel), has been a potent source of prejudice, discrimination, and extreme violence for centuries.[4]

The debate over whether Yazidis constitute a distinct ethno-religious group or a religious subgroup of the Kurds is not confined to academia; it resonates deeply within the Yazidi community itself and among Kurds.[5] Self-perception varies. Some Yazidis, particularly in Iraqi Kurdistan, identify as ethnically Kurdish.[12] This view has been historically supported by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which often refers to Yazidis as "original Kurds".[5] Vian Dakhil, a prominent Yazidi Member of the Iraqi Parliament, for example, publicly stated her

opposition to any political moves aimed at separating Yazidis from the Kurdish ethnic group.[5] Conversely, many other Yazidis, especially those in the Caucasus (such as Armenia) and in the global diaspora, vehemently assert a distinct Yazidi ethnicity and even nationality.[5] For these groups, Muslim Kurds are sometimes perceived as having "betrayed" an ancient, shared ancestral faith by converting to Islam, while Yazidis remained faithful.[5] Aziz Tamoyan, the late president of the Yezidi National Union ULE, was a vocal proponent of this view, asserting that "Yazidi" denotes a distinct nation with its own language, "Ezdiki," and religion, "Sharfadin".[5] This sense of separateness is sometimes buttressed by Yazidi mythology, which includes narratives of Yazidis having a unique genesis, being descended from Adam but not from Eve, and thus distinct from the rest of humankind.[1]

The discourse surrounding Yazidi identity has been significantly shaped and often manipulated by state policies and Kurdish nationalist movements. For nearly a century, some Kurdish intellectuals and nationalist movements have propagated the narrative of Yazidis as "Original Kurds" and Yazidism as the authentic pre-Islamic Kurdish religion.[9] This narrative served a strategic purpose: it helped to bolster Kurdish demographic claims to Yazidi-inhabited territories as integral parts of a future "Greater Kurdistan." In stark contrast, the Ba'athist regime in Iraq pursued systematic Arabization policies, compelling Yazidis to register as ethnic Arabs and actively suppressing Kurdish language and identity in Yazidi areas.[6] This policy, aimed at fragmenting potential Kurdish opposition and consolidating Arab dominance, sometimes had the paradoxical effect of strengthening Yazidi resolve to maintain their distinct identity and their Kurmanji language, even if their dialect incorporated Arabic words and they adopted some Arab customs.[24] Following the establishment of the KRG in northern Iraq, particularly after 2003, Yazidis residing in areas under KRG control or influence reported experiencing pressure to identify as Kurds. Human Rights Watch documented instances of intimidation by KRG authorities against Yazidis who did not identify as ethnic Kurds or who opposed KRG policies.[9] In some alleged cases, Yazidis were tortured and given an ultimatum: either accept that they were Kurds or confess to being "terrorists".[10]

These external pressures and historical experiences have profoundly influenced Yazidi perceptions of non-Yazidi Kurds. For a significant portion of Yazidis, especially in Iraq and in the diaspora, the term "Kurd" is inextricably linked with "Muslim".[18] This association is heavily freighted with historical trauma, stemming from centuries of persecution perpetrated by Muslim Kurdish tribes and leaders. The perception of (Muslim) Kurds as historical persecutors, often grouped with Muslim Arabs and Turks, has contributed to the (re)construction of Yazidi identity as that of a historically victimized and marginalized minority.[18] This perspective can differ markedly from how other regional minorities, such as Armenians, or Western observers have viewed Kurds. For instance, while some historical Armenian accounts might have depicted Kurds as "barbaric and uneducated," Yazidis, despite often sharing the same language and similar tribal systems with Kurds, and having higher illiteracy rates, might perceive Muslim Kurds primarily as "violent" due to direct experiences of persecution, but not necessarily as "backward" in the same vein.[18]

The fluidity and contested nature of Yazidi identity prior to 2010 reveal its status as a political

commodity. It was strategically employed by Kurdish nationalists to expand territorial claims and bolster demographic numbers. Conversely, Arab nationalist states like Ba'athist Iraq sought to impose an Arab identity on Yazidis to dilute Kurdish influence and assimilate a distinct minority. KRG authorities, in their nation-building efforts, also pressured Yazidis to conform to a Kurdish identity to consolidate control over disputed territories. Simultaneously, many Yazidis asserted a unique ethno-religious identity as a means of preserving their ancient traditions, demanding specific minority rights, and consciously distancing themselves from the "Muslim Kurd" identity, which, for them, was often synonymous with historical oppression. This dynamic illustrates that identity was not merely a cultural or personal attribute but a pivotal element in the complex political struggles for land, resources, autonomy, and survival. The common Yazidi association of "Kurd" with "Muslim" underscores a deep psychological and historical chasm. Despite the shared Kurmanji language, which forms a basis for ethnic affinity, the religious distinction often became the paramount factor in defining "us" versus "them" for many Yazidis. This was largely due to the long and brutal history of religiously motivated persecution by Muslim Kurds. This perceived dichotomy, rooted in centuries of trauma, inherently complicated any notion of a unified "Kurdish" identity that could seamlessly encompass Yazidis and rendered inter-group trust exceptionally fragile, a critical factor in the lead-up to the crises of the 2010s.

III. A History of Persecution: Violence Against Yazidis by Non-Yazidi Kurdish Actors (Pre-2010)

The history of Yazidi relations with non-Yazidi Kurds is tragically punctuated by numerous episodes of severe persecution, often perpetrated by Muslim Kurdish feudal lords, tribal chieftains, and irregular forces, particularly before the 20th century. These events, frequently referred to by Yazidis as "fermans" (decrees, implying officially sanctioned campaigns of extermination), have left an indelible mark on Yazidi collective memory and identity.[2]

Medieval and Early Ottoman Period:

The animosity and violence were not new phenomena in the centuries leading up to modern times. As early as the 10th century, following the Islamization of some Kurdish tribes, these groups reportedly joined in the persecution of Yazidis in the Hakkari mountains. Sources suggest these attacks were characterized by "particular brutality," with attempts made to forcibly convert Yazidis to Islam.10

A significant early attack occurred in 1254 when Badr al-Din Lu'Lu, described as a Kurd who had converted to Islam and was the Zangid governor of Mosul, executed Sheikh Adī's grand-nephew, al-Ḥasan b. ʿAdī, along with 200 of his followers. Subsequently, the sacred Yazidi shrine of Sheikh Adi at Lalish was desecrated.10

Later, in 1415, a Shāfiʿī theologian named ʿIzz al-Dīn al Hulwānī, with the military backing of Sunni Kurds from the Sindi tribe and the lord of Ḥiṣn Kayfā (Hasankeyf), attacked Lalish again, burning down the Yazidi temple.5 In 1585, Sunni Kurds from the Bohtan emirate are recorded as having attacked Yazidis in the Sinjar mountain region.10

19th Century: A Period of Intensified Massacres and Forced Conversions:

The 19th century stands out as a particularly devastating period for the Yazidis. Multiple

accounts state that the Yazidi population was nearly decimated by a series of massacres carried out by Muslim Kurds and Ottoman forces.10

Muhammad Pasha of Rawanduz, also known as Mîrê Kor (the Blind Prince), was a prominent perpetrator. Between 1831 and 1833, he launched several brutal campaigns. In 1831, he is reported to have massacred the inhabitants of Kellek village and attacked Yazidi-populated areas east of Mosul.[10] In 1832, his forces committed a massacre against Yazidis in Khatarah, followed by an assault on the Shekhan region. During this campaign, over 300 Yazidi villages were reportedly occupied, and more than 10,000 Yazidis were kidnapped and taken to Rawanduz, where they were given an ultimatum: convert to Islam or be killed. Most were forcibly converted, while those who refused were executed.[10] The massacre of the Yazidi Prince Ali Beg and his followers by Muhammad Pasha in 1832 is remembered as an event that left a "deep scar" on the Yazidis of Sheikhan.[4] In 1833, Muhammad Pasha's forces continued their attacks, targeting Yazidis in the Aqrah region, where 500 were killed in the Greater Zab, and also in Sinjar.[10]

Bedir Khan Beg, the Kurdish emir of Botan, was another major figure in the 19th-century persecutions. He is implicated, along with Muhammad Pasha of Rawanduz, in the killing of an estimated 70,000 Yazidis around 1832.10 In that same year, Bedir Khan Beg's troops carried out a horrific massacre in Shekhan, nearly annihilating the Yazidi population there. Many Yazidis attempting to flee towards Sinjar drowned in the Tigris River, and approximately 12,000 were killed by his men on the river's banks; Yazidi women and children were also kidnapped.10 In 1844, Bedir Khan Beg led another campaign of violence against Yazidis in the Tur Abdin region. His forces captured many Yazidis, subjected them to forced conversions to Islam, and the inhabitants of seven entire Yazidi villages were compelled to convert.10 Some historical reports classify the Bedir Khan massacres as genocidal in nature.10

Faced with such existential threats, Yazidis did offer resistance. The Yazidi leader Ali Beg, for example, mobilized forces against Muhammad Pasha. However, his troops were outnumbered, and he was eventually captured and killed by the Rawanduz emir.10

Late 19th Century Ottoman Campaigns with Kurdish Participation:

Even after the Ottoman authorities granted Yazidis a degree of legal status in 1849, following interventions by European diplomats 10, persecution continued. In 1890 or 1892, the Ottoman general Omar Wahbi Pasha (remembered by Yazidis as Ferîq Pasha) was dispatched from Mosul to Shaikhan and Sinjar. After Yazidis refused an ultimatum to convert to Islam, these areas were occupied, and another massacre was committed among the residents.4

The Ottoman rulers also mobilized the Hamidiye cavalry, irregular regiments often composed of Kurdish tribesmen, to act against the Yazidis. Numerous Yazidi villages were attacked by the Hamidiye, their residents killed, and temples destroyed, including in Bashiqa and Bahzani. The Yazidi Mir (Prince) Ali Beg was captured and exiled. The central Yazidi shrine of Lalish was seized and converted into a Quranic school for a period of twelve years until Yazidis managed to recapture it.4

Early 20th Century:

The pattern of violence involving Kurdish actors extended into the early 20th century. During the Armenian Genocide (1915-1916), many Yazidis were also targeted and killed by the

Hamidiye cavalry and other Kurdish groups who participated in the atrocities against Christian minorities.10 Chillingly, slogans such as "Those who kill 7 Armenians will go to Heaven" reportedly had a parallel version: "Those who kill 7 Yazidis will go to Heaven".29 Some estimates suggest that as many as 300,000 Yazidis may have been killed during this period, while others fled to Transcaucasia.10

The following table summarizes key documented instances of persecution:

Table 1: Documented Instances of Persecution of Yazidis by Non-Yazidi Kurdish Actors (Pre-2010)

Approximate Date/Period	Key Event/Nature of Persecution	Location(s)	Primary Kurdish Actors Involved (if specified)	Consequence for Yazidis	Key Source Snippets
10th Century	Islamized Kurdish tribes persecute Yazidis, attempt forced conversions	Hakkari mountains	Islamized Kurdish tribes	Attacks, persecution, attempted forced conversions	[10]
1254	Execution of Sheikh Adī's grand-nephew al-Ḥasan b. ʿAdī and 200 supporters; desecration of Lalish shrine	Mosul, Lalish	Badr al-Din Lu'Lu (Kurd convert to Islam, Zangid governor of Mosul)	Executions, desecration of holy site	[10]
1415	Attack on Lalish, burning of the temple	Lalish	Sunni Kurds of the Sindi tribe, lord of Ḥiṣn Kayfā (supporting theologian)	Destruction of main temple	[10]
1585	Attack on Yazidis	Sinjar mountain	Sunni Kurds from Bohtan	Unspecified attacks	[10]
1831-1833	Massacres, occupation of villages, forced conversions, kidnapping	Kellek, Shekhan, Khatarah, Aqrah region, Sinjar	Muhammad Pasha of Rawanduz and his troops	Mass killings (e.g., 500 in Greater Zab), occupation of ~300 villages, ~10,000	[4]

				kidnapped/forcibly converted, killing of Yazidi Prince Ali Beg	
1832	Massacres, forced conversions, drowning of refugees	Shekhan, Tigris River	Bedir Khan Beg of Botan and his troops (sometimes with Muhammad Pasha)	~70,000 Yazidis killed (jointly); near annihilation of Shekhan Yazidis, ~12,000 killed on Tigris banks, women/children kidnapped	[10]
1844	Massacre, forced conversions	Tur Abdin region	Bedir Khan Beg of Botan and his men	Mass killings, forced conversion of inhabitants of seven villages	[10]
1890 or 1892	Military campaign after refusal to convert, massacres, destruction of temples, conversion of Lalish to Quran school	Shaikhan, Sinjar, Bashiqa, Bahzani, Lalish	Ottoman General Omar Wahbi Pasha, Hamidiye cavalry (often Kurdish tribesmen)	Mass killings, destruction of property and temples, capture of Mir Ali Beg, temporary loss of Lalish	[10]
1915-1916	Massacres during Armenian Genocide	Ottoman Empire (various Yazidi areas)	Hamidiye cavalry, other Kurdish groups	Mass killings (estimates up to 300,000 Yazidis), displacement, fleeing to Transcaucasia	[10]

This long and brutal history of "fermans" and religiously motivated violence, often perpetrated by neighboring Muslim Kurdish feudal lords and tribes, created a profound and enduring collective trauma within the Yazidi community. The memory of these extermination campaigns became a core component of Yazidi identity and oral tradition [18], shaping their perception of "Kurds" (often equated with "Muslim Kurds") as historical persecutors. This deeply ingrained

historical memory would inevitably cast a long shadow over all subsequent interactions, political calculations, and the fragile prospects for trust and cooperation.
The religious classification of Yazidis as "heretics," "apostates," or "devil-worshippers" by Muslim clerics and leaders provided a potent ideological justification for this persecution.[6] This framing effectively delegitimized Yazidis and could morally sanction violence against them in the eyes of the perpetrators. Such religiously rationalized violence was often intertwined with tangible political and economic motives, such as the desire to seize Yazidi lands, as evidenced by the occupation of hundreds of Yazidi villages [10], or to consolidate local power. The persecution was thus rarely purely religious in its impulse but rather a complex interplay of religious ideology serving as a mobilizing and justifying force for socio-political and economic domination.

IV. Political Landscapes and Power Dynamics (Pre-2010)

The political experiences of Yazidis prior to 2010 were markedly diverse, shaped by the overarching policies of the states in which they resided (Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and the Soviet Union/post-Soviet Caucasus) and by their interactions with various Kurdish political actors and nationalist movements. These dynamics profoundly influenced Yazidi identity, security, and inter-communal relations.

A. Iraq: Contested Spaces and Kurdish Influence

In Iraq, the Yazidi community found itself navigating a complex political terrain, particularly in the period following the 2003 US-led invasion. Their ancestral lands, primarily in the Ninawa Governorate, including the Sinjar (Shingal) mountains and areas around Shekhan, became focal points of contention.

- Yazidis in "Disputed Territories":
  A significant portion of Yazidi-inhabited areas, including Sinjar, were designated as "disputed territories" after 2003, contested between the Iraqi central government in Baghdad and the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).7 This ambiguous status created a persistent power vacuum and administrative instability, often leaving minority communities like the Yazidis vulnerable and caught in the political crossfire.24 Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi constitution was intended to provide a mechanism for resolving the final status of these territories through a census and referendum. However, for areas like Sinjar, it was never fully implemented, while the KRG progressively expanded its de facto control and influence in these regions.9 The unresolved status of these territories became a microcosm of the broader Yazidi predicament: being caught between larger political forces, each prioritizing its own strategic interests. This liminality hindered socio-economic development, undermined consistent security provision, and complicated the assertion of specific Yazidi rights, thereby creating a state of persistent vulnerability.
- KRG Policies and Yazidi Responses (Post-2003, Pre-2010):
  As the KRG consolidated its authority, it extended its administrative reach and

patronage system into Sinjar and other Yazidi areas.9 This involved various tactics, including funding pro-KRG Yazidi organizations, co-opting local Yazidi leaders into KRG structures, and nominating pro-KRG candidates in local elections.9

However, this expansion of influence was not without friction. Reports emerged, notably a 2009 Human Rights Watch investigation, documenting instances of intimidation, arbitrary arrests, and pressure by KRG authorities on Yazidis who did not identify as Kurds or who voiced opposition to KRG policies.9 There were allegations of Yazidis being tortured and coerced into declaring themselves ethnically Kurdish, or risk being labeled as "terrorists".10 The hereditary Yazidi spiritual leader, Prince Tahsin Saeed Ali, reportedly warned US officials in a meeting (details of which were later made public by Wikileaks) that the intense pressure from Kurdish officials could lead to the Yazidi community disappearing “like snow in the sunshine”.9

Despite these significant pressures and underlying tensions, the presence of KRG Peshmerga forces in Yazidi areas was, for some Yazidis, a source of reassurance regarding their physical security.7 This belief, however, would be tragically shattered by the events of August 2014 when Peshmerga forces withdrew from Sinjar in the face of the ISIS onslaught.7

Furthermore, Yazidi activists raised serious concerns about the abduction and forced marriage of Yazidi women to members of Kurdish security forces (Asayish) in the post-2003 period. Families were allegedly threatened with reprisals if women and girls refused these marriages.6 Given the strict Yazidi religious prohibition against marrying outside the faith, such forced marriages often meant that the Yazidi women involved were compelled to renounce their religion and identify as Kurdish, representing a direct assault on Yazidi identity and communal integrity.6 This situation exemplified the paradox of Kurdish nationalism for Yazidis: while it could offer a potential umbrella for shared linguistic rights and resistance against hostile state policies (like Arabization), it also posed a tangible threat of assimilation and the erasure of distinct Yazidi religious and ethno-religious identity. The KRG's actions, in particular, demonstrated this tension, promoting the Kurmanji language on one hand, but also pressuring Yazidis to identify as Kurds and suppressing dissenting voices on the other.

- Ba'athist Era Policies (1968-2003):

  Prior to 2003, under Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime, Yazidis endured systematic policies of Arabization. These policies aimed to forcibly alter the demographic makeup of northern Iraq, strengthen Baghdad's central control, and suppress the burgeoning Kurdish nationalist movement.9 Hundreds of Yazidi villages, particularly in the Sinjar region, were destroyed. Yazidis were forcibly displaced from their ancestral lands, their property confiscated, and many were resettled in newly built collective towns known as Mujamma'at, often located far from their agricultural fields and traditional communities.7 As part of this assimilationist drive, Yazidis were pressured to register as ethnic Arabs in official censuses.6

  Despite these oppressive measures, some Yazidis actively supported the Kurdish national movement during this era.6 It is also noteworthy that the Yazidi community as a whole was largely spared from the direct genocidal violence of the Anfal campaign,

which the Ba'athist regime waged against the Kurdish population in 1987-1988.6 This differential treatment, while sparing them from Anfal's horrors, further complicated their position within the broader Iraqi ethnic and political landscape.

- Yazidi Political Representation:
  Historically, Yazidi leaders often articulated a profound sense of injustice regarding their lack of adequate legal rights and meaningful political representation within Iraqi state institutions.13 Even after the regime change in 2003, direct Yazidi political representation remained limited. In the KRG's political structures, Yazidis often had to affiliate with one of the major Kurdish political parties to gain a voice. In the Iraqi national parliament, they were typically granted only a single seat, often viewed as part of a broader "Kurdish entity" rather than as a distinct minority with unique concerns and rights.21 The constitutional provision for resolving the status of disputed territories (Article 140) was itself perceived by some as effectively erasing the distinct rights and collective voice of indigenous non-Arab and non-Kurdish groups like the Yazidis, by framing the dispute primarily as one between Baghdad and Erbil.9

B. Turkey: Navigating State and Kurdish Nationalism

In Turkey, the Yazidi experience was shaped by the legacy of the Ottoman Empire and the policies of the modern Turkish Republic, which often involved navigating complex relationships with both the state and the broader Kurdish population.

- Ottoman Period and Early Republic:
  During the Ottoman era, Yazidis were often an integral part of Kurdish tribal structures and interactions.3 However, this did not preclude periods of intense persecution. As detailed earlier, Yazidis faced violence and forced conversion attempts at the hands of both Ottoman authorities and some Muslim Kurdish groups.29 The 1844 massacres in Tur Abdin, led by the Kurdish emir Bedir Khan Beg, are a stark example.10 During the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1916, Yazidis were also targeted and massacred alongside Armenians and other Christian minorities, with some Kurdish tribes participating in these atrocities.10
- Modern Turkish Republic (Pre-2010):
  Throughout much of the 20th century, Yazidis in Turkey faced significant political, religious, and economic hardships. These pressures, coupled with ongoing discrimination, led to large-scale emigration, primarily to European countries like Germany. This exodus began in the 1960s as part of labor migration schemes but intensified significantly after the 1980 military coup, which ushered in a period of heightened repression for many minorities, including Kurds and Yazidis.1 By the 1980s, the Yazidi population in Turkey, once estimated at around 60,000, had dwindled considerably.29

  The Turkish state's long-standing policies of suppressing Kurdish identity—which included officially denying the existence of Kurds by categorizing them as "Mountain Turks" and banning the Kurdish language in public and private life 31—would have undoubtedly impacted the Kurmanji-speaking Yazidi community. However, specific details regarding direct Yazidi-Kurdish political interactions within this highly repressive state context are less prominent in the available information for the pre-2010 period. In

the diaspora, particularly in Germany, tensions emerged within the Yazidi community itself. Some Yazidis sought to assert a distinct ethno-religious identity, while others aligned with Kurdish nationalist organizations, including those linked to the PKK, such as the Föderation der Ezidischen Vereine in Deutschland (FKÊ).24 This reflected the ongoing debate about Yazidi identity and its relationship to broader Kurdish political aspirations.

C. Syria: Between State Repression and Kurdish Aspirations

Syrian Yazidis, historically concentrated in regions such as Kurd Dagh (Kurd Mountain, in the Afrin area), the Jazira (Al-Hasakah Governorate), and around Aleppo [1], also faced a challenging political environment shaped by the policies of the Syrian Ba'athist state.

- Syrian State Policies (Pre-2011 Uprising):
  The Syrian government under the Ba'ath party, which came to power in the 1960s, systematically discriminated against its Kurdish population, including Yazidis. Kurds were denied basic cultural and linguistic rights, and their political activities were suppressed.1 A pivotal event was the extraordinary census conducted in Al-Hasakah Governorate in 1962. This census arbitrarily stripped tens of thousands of Syrian Kurds of their citizenship, rendering them stateless (ajanib, or foreigners) or unrecorded (maktoumeen).33 This had devastating consequences, affecting their rights to property ownership, employment, education, healthcare, and freedom of movement.
  While this persecution affected all Kurds in Syria, there is evidence suggesting that Yazidis faced an additional layer of religious discrimination. Beyond the ethnic and linguistic repression common to all Kurds, Yazidis in Syria were reportedly historically denied the ability to freely perform their religious rituals, build or renovate their places of worship. Critically, thousands of Yazidis were officially registered as Muslims by the state. This meant they were forced to attend Islamic education classes in schools and were subjected to Syria's Sharia-based personal status laws, effectively leading to coercive religious assimilation.35 This dual burden of ethnic and religious persecution uniquely shaped the Yazidi experience in Syria.
- Interactions with Syrian Kurdish Political Movements:
  Detailed information on direct political interactions between Syrian Yazidis and Syrian Kurdish political movements specifically before 2010 is relatively scarce in the provided materials. The significant rise to prominence of Syrian Kurdish political and military actors, such as the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), and the subsequent establishment of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, largely occurred in the context of the Syrian Civil War, from 2011-2012 onwards.36
  It can be inferred that the general oppression of all Kurds by the Syrian state likely fostered a shared sense of grievance. However, the distinct religious identity of Yazidis, coupled with their historical experiences of persecution by some Muslim Kurdish groups in other regions, may have influenced the nature and extent of their engagement with Syrian Kurdish nationalist movements.

D. The Caucasus: Identity and Rights in Armenia and Georgia

Yazidi communities in the Caucasus (primarily Armenia and Georgia) developed a distinct

trajectory, largely due to their migration history and the specific policies of the Russian Empire and subsequently the Soviet Union.

- Migration and Settlement:
  The majority of Yazidis in the Caucasus are descendants of those who migrated from the Ottoman Empire, particularly from eastern Anatolia, during the 19th and early 20th centuries.1 These migrations were primarily driven by a desire to escape persecution at the hands of Ottoman authorities and some Muslim Kurdish groups, especially during periods of intense violence such as the Russo-Ottoman wars and the Armenian Genocide.3
- Soviet-Era Policies:
  The Soviet period brought both opportunities and challenges for Yazidis in Armenia and Georgia. Initially, in line with the policy of korenizatsiya (indigenization), the Soviet government provided support for the cultural development of minorities, including Kurds (a category that often officially encompassed Yazidis). This included the establishment of schools teaching in Kurmanji, Kurdish-language radio broadcasts, and newspapers like "Riya Teze" (The New Path) in Armenia.24 Efforts were made to create standardized alphabets for Kurmanji, initially using Armenian letters (1922), then a Latin-based script (1927/1929), and later Cyrillic (1945).41
  However, Soviet census policies regarding Yazidis were inconsistent. The 1926 All-Union Census registered Yazidis and Kurds as two distinct ethnic groups. But in subsequent censuses, from 1931 until the final Soviet census in 1989, Yazidis were often grouped together with Muslim Kurds under the single ethnic category of "Kurd".3 This official subsuming of Yazidi identity, coupled with the Soviet state's general policy of atheism which disregarded religious distinctions, contributed to an erosion of Yazidi religious practice and distinct cultural identity in places like Armenia.44
  Interestingly, Soviet Armenia itself played a role in fostering a sense of separate Kurdish-Yezidi identity within Transcaucasia. This sometimes ran counter to the policies of central Soviet authorities in Moscow, who tended to view Yazidis simply as a religious subgroup of the Kurdish people.43 The Armenian Soviet leadership's focus on Yazidis was partly influenced by the Bolshevik ideology of supporting marginalized groups and also continued a late 19th-century Armenian nationalist tradition that viewed Yazidis as distinct from, and potentially allied against, Muslim Kurds who had been loyal to the Ottoman authorities.43
- Post-Soviet Identity Politics (Pre-2010):
  With the weakening and eventual collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a significant movement emerged among Yazidis in Armenia to assert a distinct Yazidi ethnic identity, separate from that of Kurds.5 For many Armenian Yazidis, the term "Kurd" had become almost exclusively associated with Muslim Kurds, whom they did not see as sharing their core identity.41 This movement gained traction, and the Armenian government eventually recognized 'Yezidi' and 'Kurdish' as separate languages under the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages.44
  In Georgia, the government generally continued to classify Yazidis as part of the broader Kurdish ethnicity.40 The Yazidi population in Georgia saw a steady decline

throughout the post-Soviet period due to emigration, driven by economic hardship and a sense of marginalization.40

Across both post-Soviet Armenia and Georgia, Yazidi communities faced numerous challenges in the pre-2010 period. These included a lack of adequate state support for the preservation and development of their unique culture and religious traditions, insufficient resources for education in their native language (whether termed Kurmanji or Ezdiki), economic deprivation, experiences of veiled discrimination in accessing services and employment, and limited effective political participation.44 For example, a report concerning Georgia noted that the system of education in the native Yazidi language had been gradually deteriorating over the 30 years leading up to 2020, indicating significant problems well within the pre-2010 timeframe.45

The policies of central states—be it the Ottoman Empire, Ba'athist Iraq, the Turkish Republic, Ba'athist Syria, or the Soviet Union—were not merely a passive backdrop to Yazidi-Kurdish relations. These state actions actively shaped the status of both communities and the very nature of their interactions. Repressive policies, such as Arabization in Iraq or the denial of Kurdish identity in Turkey, could inadvertently create shared grievances between Yazidis and Kurds. However, state policies could also exacerbate tensions, as seen with the Ottoman use of Kurdish Hamidiye cavalry against Yazidis, or create unique developmental paths for Yazidi identity, as demonstrated by Soviet-era policies in the Caucasus which, paradoxically, both suppressed and, at times, enabled the assertion of a distinct Yazidi identity separate from their Middle Eastern counterparts.

The following table aims to synthesize the varied policy approaches towards Yazidis across different regions and authorities:

Table 2: State and Kurdish Authority Policies Towards Yazidis and Yazidi Identity (Pre-2010)

Region/Country	Period	Governing Authority/Kurdish Faction	Key Policy/Stance Towards Yazidis/Yazidi Identity	Documented Impact on Yazidi Community/Identity	Key Source Snippets
Ottoman Empire	Late 19th/Early 20th C.	Ottoman State	Intermittent persecution, attempts at forced conversion, conscription; use of Hamidiye (often Kurdish) against Yazidis. Legal status granted 1849	Massacres, displacement, forced conversions, destruction of religious sites. Emigration.	[4]

			but often not enforced.		
Iraq (Ba'athist)	1968–2003	Ba'ath Party (Saddam Hussein)	Arabization: forced displacement, destruction of villages, resettlement in collective towns, registration as Arabs, suppression of Kurdish language/identity for Yazidis.	Loss of ancestral lands, cultural disruption, economic hardship, pressure to abandon Yazidi/Kurdish identity. Some Yazidis supported Kurdish resistance.	[6]
Iraq (Post-2003 KRG-influenced areas)	2003–2010	Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)	Promotion of Yazidis as "Original Kurds," extension of patronage, but also intimidation/pressure to identify as Kurd, suppression of dissenting Yazidi voices. Control over disputed territories.	Some Yazidis embraced Kurdish identity; others felt coerced. Limited independent Yazidi political representation. Abductions/forced marriages reported.	[6]
Turkey (Republic)	Mid-20th C. – 2010	Turkish State	General suppression of Kurdish identity and language (which affected Kurmanji-speaking Yazidis).	Mass emigration due to political/religious/economic hardship. Erosion of Yazidi presence in	[13]

			No specific state recognition of Yazidis as a distinct group.	Turkey.	
Syria (Ba'athist)	1962–2010	Ba'ath Party	Denial of citizenship to many Kurds (including Yazidis) via 1962 census. Suppression of Kurdish language/culture. Specific religious discrimination against Yazidis: registration as Muslims, forced Islamic education, denial of religious rights.	Statelessness, economic/social marginalization, cultural assimilation, coercive religious conversion for Yazidis.	[1]
Armenia (Soviet)	~1920s–1980s	Soviet Armenian authorities / Central Soviet State	Initial support for Kurmanji language/culture (often including Yazidis). Later census policies often merged Yazidis with Kurds. Soviet Armenia sometimes promoted separate Yezidi-Kurdish identity. Atheist state policy disregarded religious	Development of Kurmanji literacy. Fluctuating official recognition of Yazidi distinctiveness. Erosion of religious practice.	[5]

			identity.		
Armenia (Post-Soviet)	1991–2010	Armenian State	Growing movement for distinct Yazidi ethnic identity. Eventual state recognition of 'Yezidi' as a separate language alongside 'Kurdish'.	Assertion of separate Yazidi identity. Challenges in cultural preservation, education, economic hardship, discrimination.	[5]
Georgia (Soviet/Post-Soviet)	~1920s–2010	Soviet Georgian / Georgian State	Yazidis generally considered part of Kurdish ethnicity by the state. Post-Soviet era saw declining population due to emigration.	Limited specific state support for Yazidi culture/language. Reports of gradual destruction of native language education system.	[40]

V. Coexistence, Cooperation, and Economic Interdependence (Pre-2010)

Despite the pervasive history of persecution and the complexities of identity politics, the relationship between Yazidis and non-Yazidi Kurds before 2010 was not solely defined by conflict. Periods of peaceful coexistence, pragmatic alliances, and shared economic life also form part of their intertwined history, though these aspects are often overshadowed by the more traumatic narratives.

Patterns of Peaceful Co-habitation and Inter-tribal Relations:

Historical accounts indicate that, notwithstanding the ever-present threat of persecution, Yazidis often lived in geographical proximity to their Sunni Muslim neighbors, including Kurds, and periods of peaceful coexistence were not unknown.5 In the formative centuries of Yazidism (roughly 12th to 14th centuries), the faith was embraced by numerous Kurdish tribes and even became the official religion of several Kurdish emirates and principalities, such as Bohtan, Mahmudi, Donboli, and Kilis.4 The renowned Kurdish historian Sherefkhan Bidlisi, in his 16th-century work, the Şerefname, explicitly identified seven of the most prominent Kurdish tribes of his time as being Yezidi, at least in part.4 This historical integration suggests

periods where Yazidi influence was significant within the broader Kurdish tribal and political landscape.

The traditional Kurdish societal structure, typically organized around tribes led by sheikhs or aghas, was a common framework for both Yazidis and non-Yazidi Kurds.1 This shared social organization implies common customs related to tribal governance, dispute resolution, and social interaction, even if religious beliefs and practices remained distinct and often a source of friction.

Shared Economic Spheres:

The traditional livelihoods of Yazidis were predominantly centered on agriculture (as cultivators) and pastoralism (as herdsmen).1 These economic activities were characteristic of the rural, often mountainous, regions inhabited by both Yazidi and non-Yazidi Kurdish communities, naturally leading to a degree of economic interaction and interdependence, whether through trade of agricultural products, access to grazing lands, or local markets. During the Ottoman period, Yazidis were documented as participants in regional commerce and river transportation within their territories.5 This engagement in trade inherently involved contact and economic exchange with other ethnic and religious groups in the area, including their Kurdish neighbors. However, state-sponsored policies of forced displacement, such as the Arabization campaigns under the Ba'athist regime in Iraq, significantly disrupted these traditional economic patterns. Yazidis were uprooted from their rural agricultural bases and pushed into collective towns or urban areas, often facing high rates of unemployment and poverty, or compelled to migrate seasonally for labor.24 This socio-economic transformation would have inevitably altered the nature and extent of their traditional economic interactions with surrounding Kurdish communities.

Instances of Alliance and Mutual Support:

History also records instances where Yazidis and certain non-Yazidi Kurdish groups, or other regional actors, formed alliances, often driven by shared interests or common threats. During the zenith of the Ayyubid dynasty—a dynasty of Kurdish origin founded by Saladin—Yazidis reportedly served as troops and ambassadors, and were even granted lands to govern.5 This indicates a period of high-level cooperation and Yazidi integration into a Kurdish-led political structure.

At various times, some Yazidi tribes also formed alliances with larger regional powers, such as the Qara Qoyunlu or Aq Qoyunlu Turcoman confederations, which would have necessitated navigating complex inter-group political dynamics in the region.5

In more modern times, acts of mutual support against common adversaries are noted. For example, the Yazidis of Mount Sinjar are recorded as having sheltered Armenians during the massacres of 1915-1916.4 Similarly, in Transcaucasia, Yazidis fought alongside Armenian forces against the advancing Turkish army in the pivotal Battle of Sardarapat in May 1918, an event that is still commemorated by Armenians and signifies a crucial alliance based on shared existential threats.4 Yazidis in the Tur Abdin region and Sinjar also reportedly made common cause with local Christian communities in defensive campaigns against shared enemies.4

The periods of peaceful coexistence and strategic alliance between Yazidis and some non-Yazidi Kurdish factions or other groups appear to have been largely driven by pragmatic

considerations. Shared economic necessities in overlapping territories, the emergence of common, more powerful enemies (such as aggressive Ottoman state policies or external invaders), or the specific power dynamics within local emirates could foster temporary cooperation. However, these instances of amity, while significant, seem more sporadic or localized in the historical record when compared to the pervasive and deeply ingrained narrative of persecution. It is unlikely that these episodes of cooperation fundamentally altered the underlying mistrust felt by many Yazidis, a mistrust born from centuries of religiously motivated violence. The memory of the "fermans" and the existential threat posed by some Muslim Kurdish neighbors likely overshadowed periods of peace or alliance for a significant portion of the Yazidi community.

Furthermore, the gradual processes of "detribalization" and modernization, particularly in the 20th century, would have inevitably transformed the nature of traditional Yazidi-Kurdish interactions. As tribal structures weakened and rural economies shifted with forced sedentarization, urbanization, and assimilation attempts by modern nation-states, old patterns of inter-tribal alliance or enmity likely receded. They were increasingly replaced by new political dynamics centered on the politics of nation-states, the rise of modern Kurdish nationalism, and, in Iraq, the growing influence of entities like the KRG. While Yazidis became "relative newcomers to urban life" and often faced socio-economic disadvantages in these new contexts [4], these shifts also changed the primary locus of interaction. Relations moved from being predominantly inter-tribal and local to being mediated by state institutions, emerging political parties (such as the KDP and PUK in Iraqi Kurdistan), and overarching nationalist ideologies. This transformation could create new, albeit complex, avenues for cooperation but also introduced new forms of pressure, co-optation, and potential conflict.

VI. Conclusion: Legacy of a Fractured Relationship on the Eve of Renewed Crisis

The relationship between Yazidis and non-Yazidi Kurds in the period leading up to 2013, and particularly before 2010, was a profoundly complex and often contradictory phenomenon. It was characterized by the duality of a shared Kurmanji linguistic heritage and certain cultural affinities existing in tension with deep-seated religious cleavages. This religious distinctiveness, often misunderstood and maligned, served as a frequent pretext for brutal persecution of Yazidis by some Muslim Kurdish actors, casting a long and dark shadow over any periods of peaceful coexistence or pragmatic alliance. The very identity of the Yazidis became a contested field, subject to the pressures of assimilationist state policies and the encompassing, sometimes coercive, claims of Kurdish nationalism.

The centuries of "fermans"—campaigns of massacre and forced conversion—had instilled a deep-seated collective trauma and a potent victim narrative within Yazidi historical consciousness. This legacy of violence, particularly at the hands of individuals and groups identified as Muslim Kurds, fostered a pervasive mistrust that was a critical vulnerability for the Yazidi community. While there were instances of Yazidi integration into Kurdish tribal structures and even leadership roles in early Kurdish emirates, and alliances forged against common enemies, these were often overshadowed by the more dominant historical

experience of persecution.
The political landscape for Yazidis varied significantly across the regions they inhabited. In Iraq, particularly after 2003, Yazidis in their ancestral Sinjar and Sheikhan homelands found themselves in "disputed territories," caught between the ambitions of the central Iraqi government and the expanding influence of the Kurdistan Regional Government. While the KRG offered a degree of security and cultural space for Kurmanji speakers, this often came with pressure to identify as Kurds and align with KRG political agendas, sometimes through intimidation. In Turkey, a history of state suppression of Kurdish identity impacted Kurmanji-speaking Yazidis, contributing to their mass emigration. Syrian Yazidis faced similar state-led discrimination against Kurds, compounded by specific religious persecution that aimed to erase their Yazidi faith. In the Caucasus, Soviet policies led to a unique trajectory where Yazidis, particularly in Armenia, increasingly asserted an ethnic identity distinct from Muslim Kurds, a trend that continued post-Soviet independence amidst ongoing socio-economic and cultural challenges.
This divergence of experiences across different nation-states and political contexts likely contributed to a degree of fragmentation in Yazidi political thought and leadership globally. Such fragmentation, while a natural outcome of varied historical paths, could hinder the formation of a unified Yazidi political strategy or voice, especially when confronted with widespread crises.
A persistent "security dilemma" characterized the Yazidi experience. Seeking protection from dominant Kurdish groups, such as the KRG in post-2003 Iraq, often came with the implicit or explicit demand of political allegiance and the risk of cultural or identity assimilation. Asserting a distinct Yazidi identity, conversely, could lead to isolation, marginalization, or even pressure from those same potential protectors. This lack of an unconditional security guarantee from a consistently trusted entity remained a chronic condition for this vulnerable minority.
Ultimately, the intricate and often fraught historical legacy—marked by profound vulnerability, a contested and politicized identity, deep layers of mistrust interwoven with threads of shared heritage, and the recurring experience of being caught between larger, more powerful political forces—formed the critical and precarious backdrop against which the catastrophic events of 2014 and their aftermath would unfold. The relationship between Yazidis and non-Yazidi Kurds before 2010, with all its complexities and unresolved tensions, provides essential context for understanding Yazidi expectations, their responses to the genocidal onslaught by ISIS, and their subsequent interactions with various Kurdish, Iraqi, and international actors in the pursuit of survival, justice, and self-determination.

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