

Why the Yezidi genocide should be recognized internationally

RETHINKING **SECURITY** IN THE 2020s SERIES – COMMENTARY

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A proposal of resolution is pending in the Belgian Federal Parliament from Koen Metsu (N-VA) and Georges d'Allemagne (CdH). They are asking the Belgian government to recognize the systematic extermination of the Yezidis as genocide. In the following paragraphs, we will elaborate on the qualification 'genocide', the situation of the Yezidi during the genocide and after, and what kind of action should be taken to prevent these kinds of events in the future. We will also discuss why international recognition of the genocide against the Yezidi is indispensable.

We will dwell more specifically on the psychological aspects of such recognition and examine which psychosocial effects such a recognition can trigger in the various victims.

Who are the Yezidi?

As context is key in understanding almost every issue let us take a moment to examine who exactly are the Yezidi.

Yezidi are followers of a syncretic religion that includes Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Manichaeic, Mithraic and pagan elements.¹ They adopted their belief in reincarnation from Hinduism and their practices, such as baptism from the Christians. Their praying schedule is an example of the Islamic influence on their religion. Yezidi pray 5 times a day, just like Muslims.

The Yezidis believe in the god Jezdan, who - according to their religion – is the creator of the world. On the other hand, they also believe in the Angel Melek Taus, who is the chief of the seven archangels. They have two holy books, the Kitabe Cilve and the Meshef Resh. Both are written in Kurdish, as the Yezidic religion is part of the Kurdish folklore.

Yezidism is an endogamous religion. One cannot become a Yezidi but must be born as one. They do not identify as Muslims and are seen as anti-Islamic by some extremist groups.

The Yezidi have been the victims of blind hatred several times in the course of history. Persecution of Yezidi by hostile neighboring peoples or regimes was commonplace.

A timeline of the genocide

Events

During the civil war in Iraq and Syria, the Yezidi became the victims of various atrocities. Especially in 2014 and 2015, several Yezidi women, men and children were victims of murder, extortion, slave trade and sexual assault by fighters of the Islamic State.

The dramatic saga began when the Sinjar region of northwestern Iraq fell into the hands of ISIS extremists. There were many casualties during the capture of the area. The surviving civilians were faced with the choice of either converting and submitting to ISIS or being killed. The Yezidi were forced to abandon their identity and religion. They had to give up their individuality and adopt a new identity. An identity of radical Islam, averse to broad-mindedness and progressivism.

The Yezidi had anything but an easy life under IS rule. Murder, mass executions, sex slave trade and similar atrocities were commonplace.

A delegation of Yezidi survivors came to speak in the Belgian Parliament. One of them, an incredibly courageous woman, told how she had been raped by hundreds of men. Behind her mutilated face was a hidden trauma. A trauma that is incomprehensible. But also: a trauma that she shares with so many other Yezidi women.

Other survivors testified about the systematic torture, taunting and humiliation.

But let it be clear that these testimonies come from those who can still raise their voices. Many Yezidis were brutally murdered. Their deaths were often filmed and shown on social media.

Many Yezidis were also transferred to other areas controlled by IS, especially when IS lost control of the Sinjar region. These events can be placed on a par with mass deportation.

Some civilians managed to escape from ISIS. Some 200,000 people fled. Still some 49,000 Yezidi sought refuge in the Sinjar Mountains. They were trapped there without food or medicine.

Thanks to an airlift by the Americans, the British and the Iraqis, some Yezidi who were lucky enough to escape, managed to survive.

Aftermath

Together with those of many Yezidis, humanity was lost. In the wake of these atrocious acts by the Caliphate, many alarm bells went off internationally.

- In March 2014, the International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS) wrote that the crimes against humanity committed in the Syrian conflict “bordered on genocide”.
- On the 5th of September 2014, the human rights organisation Genocide Watch issued a 'genocide-emergency alert'.
- In 2015, in the Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the human rights situation in Iraq in the light of abuses committed by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and associated groups, the UN Human Rights Committee OHCHR reported that there was indeed a suspicion of genocide.
- In 2016, several non-governmental organisations and human rights activists including Amal Clooney went to the public with their intention to bring the genocide against the Yezidi to the International Criminal Court.
- 30th of August 2021, Amnesty International stated in a report that nearly 2,000 Yezidi children who returned to their families after being abducted by IS were in physical and mental pain. For the report, the human rights organisation spoke with survivors who were captured as children, their relatives, doctors, psychotherapists, and government officials.

- UNITAD's report stated that there was a "clear and convincing evidence" that the terror group IS was guilty of genocide against the Yezidi community. According to the investigation report, as far as crimes against the Yezidis were concerned, at least 1444 possible perpetrators have been identified, 469 of whom participated in the attack on Sinjar.
- Today, some 300,000 Yezidis now live in tent camps in northern Iraq. Another 100,000 have fled abroad.

Genocide

Genocide as a term was invented by Raphael Lemkin and is the combination of the Greek word '*genos*', which means 'race', and the Latin word '*cide*', which means 'to kill'. Due to the hard work of Lemkin the United Nations Genocide Convention was adopted in December 1948, just three years after the ending of World War II.

Article II of the Convention includes a definition of genocideⁱⁱ. The article states:

"In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

(a) Killing members of the group;

(b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;

(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;

(d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;

(e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."

Let us briefly consider this definition. After all, we can distil it from the criteria against which we can assess the situation of the Yezidi. In this way, we can check whether the situation meets the convention's definition of genocide.

First, the Yezidi are an ethnical group of people who can be individualized. That criterium is covered. It becomes more difficult when we must prove intent. Yet it

should be noted that in the case of IS, this is not a major hurdle. After all, IS makes no secret of its desire to evolve into an extremist Islamic state. IS aims to exterminate all those who do not share its complex of values and standards.

Article II also gives some examples of genocidal acts. All these examples - except perhaps (d) - apply to the situation of the Yezidi. It is safe to say IS' fighters did indeed commit genocide on the Yezidi.

The NGO Genocide Watchⁱⁱⁱ lists on their website ten stages of genocide, which are. This classification is accepted by a large proportion of experts.

These stages include:

1. Classification

- a. At first the genocide actor tries to distinguish the targeted people or community from them. Extremist groups do this all the time. Specifically applied to IS, we see that from its early years the organization divided the people based on religion. Beliefs other than Islam are inferior, as is, for example, the Shiite streak of Islam itself.

2. Symbolization

- a. This step builds on the previous one. Once a classification has been established, the genocidal actors assign certain symbols to the affected people. A striking example of this is the yellow Star of David that Jews had to wear during the Second World War.

3. Discrimination

- a. The targeted people are discriminated against.

4. Dehumanization

- a. In its ideology, IS invariably makes a distinction between the infidels and the believers. In their rhetoric, actions and propaganda, their opponents are invariably dehumanized. Just think of the masses of people who are buried alive, the inhuman beheadings and so on.

5. Organization

- a. Organisation is inherent in genocide. As genocide is the organised extermination of a people. This organisation can be formal or

informal. Applied to IS, we can indeed conclude that there is an organisation. When IS took cities and areas, citizens were systematically forced to convert to radical Islam? If they refused, they were killed. Moreover, a certain degree of organisation can also be found in IS's extensive bureaucracy.

6. Polarization

- a. The distinction between 'us' and 'them' is reenforced in every single step of the process.

7. Preparation

- a. In this step, the leader of the genocidal actor calls for a major ethnic cleansing. Applied to IS, we see that this genocidal actor already complies with this step. After all, Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi made it noticeably clear that he wanted to end his project with a world caliphate, without infidels.

8. Persecution

- a. Different victims are identified and separated because of their ethnicity, religious or racial identity. The most basic human rights of the victims are violated. Extrajudicial killings, torture and forced displacement happen frequently and without cause.

9. Extermination

- a. We can now speak of mass-killings, as happened with the Yezidi. Also, in the more modern genocides, mass rape of women is used frequently to genetically alter and destroy the victim group. This is also true with IS. Thousands of Yezidi women, and even children, were raped on a regular basis.

10. Denial

- a. The genocidal actor denies the genocide.

Bearing this in mind, there can be no doubt that this is indeed a case of genocide. All the criteria of international law, as well as those of authoritative third parties, are met.

Why the recognition is important

If the hearings in the Belgian Parliament have made one thing clear, it is that the Yazidi today are fighting for one thing. They are striving for recognition of the genocide. A Yazidi present at the hearings put it as follows: "We need this recognition to get our dignity back".

There is so much that has been taken from them. So many things we cannot give back to them. We cannot give back to widows their murdered husbands. We cannot give them back their bombed-out homes.

We cannot guarantee 7-year-old Yazidi sex slaves a normal sexual experience.

These people are devastated. They are destroyed to the bone. Averse to emotional experience, they must now get on with their lives. If recognition of this genocide, recognition of this disaster, can help them, then it is our moral duty to give them just that.

Besides the moral, human aspect of such recognition, it also seems to contribute to the healing process of the victims' traumas.

When people go through traumatic experiences, they are faced with the phenomenon of post-traumatic stress: PTSD. Acknowledging the genocide would have a positive effect specifically on treating PTSD.

Psychiatrists agree that bottling up and keeping silent about traumatic experiences can be very harmful to their treatment. When victims cannot accept their suffering themselves, it can help if others do so for them. One way of doing this is through recognition.

As mentioned, many Yazidi women as well as young Yazidi girls were victims of brutal (gang) rapes. For them, recognition is indispensable, as several studies show. For many victims, recognition opens the process of coping.

We must also consider the group aspect of a potential recognition of the genocide against the Yazidi by the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

A common criticism in clinical psychology is that too little attention is paid to the whole group in the treatment and diagnosis of traumas. After all, trauma processes are initiated on a very individual basis.^{iv} In mass traumas in which an entire population are victims, as in a genocide, it is important that the affected community heals together. The community must start a collective process of coping with this trauma. To achieve this, recognition is the first important step.

Conclusion

It is clear from this detailed account that the recognition of the genocide against the Yezidi by the international community is indispensable for the healing of the social fabric of their community as well as the individual healing processes of the victims.

I call on the international community and especially the European Member States to recognize the genocide against the Yezidi as genocide.

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

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