# Refugees Once Again?
## Rethinking the History of Ezidi Forced Migration and Displacement

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Until Islamic State's latest genocidal attack in August 2014, Ezidis were one of the Middle Eastern communities least known to the rest of the world.[1] Indigenous Ezidi groups lived in the Ottoman and Persian Empires, yet exile and resettlement also took them to the Russian Empire during the nineteenth century. The emergence of nation states further dispersed and divided Ezidi communities across the borders of Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Georgia, and Armenia, with only the latter officially recognizing Ezidis as a distinct ethnic group and granting them citizenship rights. In Iraq, Syria, and Turkey – home to the majority of the Ezidis in the past – they have been doomed to *de jure* invisibility but also stigmatized both as *de facto* heretics and Kurds. Ironically, however, it was Islamic State's (hereafter IS) genocidal attack on the Shengal/Sinjar region of Ninewa (Nineveh) Governorate in northwestern Iraq in August 2014 that brought the community to the brink of annihilation but also abruptly ended the centuries-old obscurity, secrecy, and indifference that had kept the Ezidis veiled in invisibility.[2] The international community came to know them through dramatic images of their flight from the Shengal Mountains, with women and children desperately marching to survive, leaving the bodies of their loved ones behind, struggling with thirst, hunger, and extreme heat on the refugee route.

The experience of fleeing was devastating at the personal level, not sparing a single soul regardless of age, gender, or social status. The overall picture, however,

1 Although the community is known as Yazidis or Yezidis among outsiders, the term Ezidi is used here. The community itself favours this spelling. Further, the term Yazidi/Yezidi is often associated with Yazid ibn Muawiyah, the second caliph of the Umayyad dynasty. Increasingly, many community members thus refrain from this usage, which they deem misleading or even pejorative.

2 As in Ottoman times, the official name of the district under Iraqi administration is Sinjar, although it is more commonly referred to by the Kurdish toponym, Shengal, which is also the term that will be used here.

was even gloomier. According to the official propaganda magazine of IS militants, *Dabiq*, a group of Shari'ah students sent to study this community concluded that Ezidis were infidels (*mushrikun*) within the context of Islamic theology and law and that their very existence was something Muslims should question (*Dabiq*, 2014). IS took upon itself the task of totally eradicating Ezidis through mass killings, enslavement, rape, the sale of women and children, forced abortions, and forced Islamization. While they failed in their drive to fully exterminate Ezidis, the horrendous assault shattered the ethno-religious minority even in areas not within the immediate reach of the militants. This irreversibly altered life as they had known it until then.

There is little reliable data on the Ezidi population in the Shengal area prior to the assault: the last official census in Iraq dates from 1987 and the country has been a failed state since 2003, following the second invasion by the US-led 'Coalition of the Willing'. This is coupled with Ezidis' own desire to remain uncounted. Nevertheless, rough estimates range from 300,000 to 550,000.[3] Likewise unavailable are accurate data for the extent of the mass killings, the number who perished during the haphazard flight, and the number of abducted women and children still held by IS. It is estimated that during the course of a few months, there were as many as 7,000 casualties, with 5,000–6,000 captured, enslaved, or indoctrinated women and children (Omarkhali, 2016; Allison, 2016). But there are estimates that are even higher (PAX, 2016). Number crunching in and of itself is hardly consequential when it comes to crimes against humanity, but in this specific case, there is more or less a consensus within the international community that the damage exceeds the crime's statistical significance. An investigation conducted for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights released in 2016, 'They came to destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis', illustrates this point.[4] The investigators report that 'in [the occupation's] aftermath, no free Yazidis remained in the Sinjar region. The 400,000-strong community had all been displaced, captured, or killed' (OHCHR, 2016, p. 32). This concise observation rather strikingly captures the wholescale destruction and horror inflicted on the Ezidis in ways that absolute numbers cannot. This report constituted the foundations of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2379, adopted unanimously in September 2017, which recognized the

3 Citing the district mayor's office as its source, Iraq Food Security Cluster's 2017 report claims 93,000 households and 558,000 inhabitants in the Sinjar/Shengal district; the UN's Human Rights Council report mentions 400,000, whereas the UN's Inter-Agency Information and Analysis Unit [IAU] and Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [OCHA] estimates 237,073.

4 For details of UNSC Resolution 2379, see www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc12998.doc.htm. For the text of the Genocide Convention, see https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume %2078/volume-78-i-1021-english.pdf.

Ezidis' ordeal as a genocide and IS's accountability as its perpetrator. It also underscored the point that the genocide is not over and that it is an ongoing process.

This was not, however, the first time Ezidis suffered a massacre or were forced into exile. The communities claim to have survived 73 persecutions, which they call *ferman*, a noun derived from the Persian verb 'to order'. Historically, *ferman* became synonymous with decrees or edicts issued by the Ottoman sultan, the ultimate authority in the empire. In the late Ottoman and early Republican periods, however, the term came to be adopted by victim groups to differentiate state-sponsored extermination campaigns from other forms of persecution. It was therefore used to single out the culprits, as in the Armenian and Assyrian genocides of 1915 and the Dersim genocide of 1938.[5] Yet in the specific case of Ezidis, the term's use has not been limited to refer to persecution in the late imperial period or even to those attributable to the Ottomans: *ferman* denotes each pogrom endured by the community in the past, with the culprits ranging from early Islamic armies to Mongols. Indeed, many survivors' testimonies detailing IS crimes were filled with examples from and allusions to earlier accounts about the abduction of women, mass killing of men, desecration of holy sites, and experience of exile – memories orally transmitted from one generation to the next. Such evocation of trans-generational trauma may be taken as evidence of the Ezidis' long history of being persecuted. Yet the assault of 2014 has rendered the community more dispersed and distraught than ever, leaving many in uncertainty, struggling with how to find meaning and, more importantly, how to find a way out of their predicament. Photographs from the Shengal district – the religious, cultural, and demographic heartland of Ezidi life – substantiate this observation. The number of Ezidis who returned home did not exceed 90,000 for the entire Ezidi region. Even after the liberation of Shengal in November 2015, the number remained dramatically low – some 6,000 households. Around 300,000 Ezidis remained in IDP (internally displaced persons) camps, mostly within areas controlled by the Kurdish Regional Government (hereafter KRG), and another 90,000 people have crossed to Europe or gone to the US or Canada in search of new homes (Nadia's Initiative, 2018).[6] Displaced yet again, Ezidis are trying to re-establish their lives on the

5 Interestingly, Sunni Kurds also use the term *ferman* for the extermination of Armenians in 1915. On the memory of the Armenian genocide as a *ferman* among the Kurds of Diyarbakır, see the oral history project conducted by Adnan Çelik and Namık Kemal Dinç, Yüz Yıllık Ah!: Toplumsal Hafızanın Izinde 1915 Diyarbekir (İstanbul İsmail Beşikçi Vakfı, 2015). A song about the Dersim genocide, which illustrates the continued use of *ferman* in the Republican period, is available online (starting at 3:00): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kptsWZm3c_g.

6 On the return of the Ezidi refugees to their homes, see the report prepared by Nadia Mourad's initiative that provides detailed information. Another report prepared by REACH Initiative, a partner to the United Nations Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNOSAT),

refugee routes, soul-searching and redefining their religio-cultural traditions in unfamiliar destinies and destinations.

It is within this specific context that the essay seeks to historicize Ezidi experiences as refugees from the Ottoman era up until the 2014 genocidal attack. Rather than listing them chronologically and denoting each one a *ferman*, this essay takes a diachronic approach to the study of Ezidi exile and forced migration, arguing that these spatial dislocations shed light on each discrete pogrom, something that is crucial for giving voice to a community muted by oppression and other factors. Yet the approach also allows us to capture something about the nature of Ezidi subjecthood at pivotal moments in history and to trace how subjecthood was shaped and redefined again and again through these violent episodes and encounters with political authorities, fanatical intruders, and unaccepting neighbours.

While it is important to emphasize that the Ezidis, historically, have indeed been targeted and persecuted more often than their neighbours, this essay's focus lies elsewhere. Instead of merely reiterating narratives of victimhood, it reflects on manifestations of Ezidi agency and the various forms of resistance Ezidis employed, specifically to fend off attack and avert persecution. Through a study of Ezidi refugee experiences, the essay insists on an analytic separation between the migration movements planned and implemented by the community by way of survival strategy and the forced deportations inflicted upon them. These have not always been mutually exclusive patterns. The essay argues, however, that tracing refugee routes is vital when it comes to contextualizing emerging ideological constructions and their praxis. Included among these are, for example, an all-encompassing imperial/national citizenship and then-novel technologies such as census-taking, conscription, and taxation that regulated Ezidi bodies and encroached upon their everyday lives. It is the contention of this essay that the genealogy of Ezidi experiences on the refugee and migration routes reveals how these mechanisms – particularly the introduction of equal and universal citizenship – have failed to grant Ezidis equal or impartial universal treatment as promised and claimed by the reforming political centres over the past two centuries. To the contrary, diffusion of these supposedly equalizing mechanisms has gradually led to Ezidi disempowerment, depriving them of their 'traditional' survival strategies and means of resisting, ultimately rendering them more vulnerable to their persecutors and even defenceless against exterminationist assaults.

This study is firmly grounded in historical methodologies that allow for the capture of those moments when Ezidis set off on the refugee routes as they appear in the archives. Methodologically and conceptually, it combines an historiographic

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also confirms the dramatically low number of returns – 6,000 families to the Sinjar/Shengal region: 'Rapid Overview of Areas of Return (ROAR): Sinjar and Surrounding Areas', May 2018.

approach with an anthropological one. In addition to archival records of the previous *fermans*, survivors of the 2014 genocide left behind significant ethnographic accounts of their experiences, collected at the refugee camps right after the mass killings and their flight from the Shengal Mountains. Particularly detailed is the series of interviews carried out for over a year by a team of researchers at refugee camps at Diyarbakır, Siirt, and Batman, three predominantly Kurdish provinces.[7] Of the more than 100 interviews, twelve have been translated from Kurdish into Turkish and were published in 2017, while the rest have been made available to researchers by the Zan Institute in Diyarbakır (Dinç, 2017, p. 27). Other reports by NGOs, relief organizations, and individual researchers have also recorded the experiences of Ezidis. It should be noted that many Ezidis have shared intimate details about their identity, history, and the everyday life they left behind. They have described IS assaults and the trauma inflicted on them as a desperate cry for the international community's attention in the hope that this would save abducted children and women and provide a safer path than that of IDPs on a refugee route (OCHRC, 2016; Moradi and Anderson, 2016). There are ethical and technical complications involved in recording the stories of people who are suffering and at risk, yet such interviews provide valuable evidence of genocide as well as rich testimony to a haunting history filled with communal and personal loss. The documentation of the Shengal genocide is the first time in their entire history that Ezidis have allowed and received such public visibility. To contextualize the recent cataclysm, this essay draws on extensive archival research conducted in the Ottoman Archives in Istanbul as part of a larger research project covering three centuries of Ezidi life. Given the Ezidis' secrecy and the limits of the Ottoman state's capacity to monitor, register, and transform these communities prior to the nineteenth century, locating Ezidis in the official registers is no simple task. Gaps in the official record have thus been filled by referring to other sources ranging from orientalist novels and missionary reports to the travelogue of a seventeenth-century Ottoman explorer, Evliya Çelebi. While only some of these sources are cited here, collectively they are crucial for reconstructing the Ezidi lifeworld. This body of archival work has also informed the interpretive framework – what is referred to here as the three stages of Ezidi refugee routes. The historical and ethnographic approaches are thus put into dialogue in a sometimes anachronistic fashion that combines the often-hostile official record emanating from the political centres with the testimonies of the survivors, assembled through oral history and other ethnographic research.

7 In transition from the empire to republic, the province of Diyarbekir has experienced change both in its administrative borders and name. In 1937, during his visit to the city, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk renamed the city Diyarbakır, citing both the etymological obscurity of its previous name and rich copper resources. Throughout this text, Diyarbekir will be used for pre-1937 contexts and Diyarbakır will be reserved for the rest.

## Cyclical and to the Highlands

In 1640, the celebrated traveller Evliya Çelebi described a military siege against Ezidis – an episode also listed by the community among the *fermans*. The attack was carried out by the governor of Diyarbekir, Melek Ahmed Pasha, in the Shengal Mountains, also known as Saçlı Dağı (literally Hairy Mountain) in reference to the Ezidi practice of men wearing long braids. This operation brought the Pasha's army, including 40,000 cavalrymen, to the arduous landscape of Saçlı Dağı in order to address the complaints of the city dwellers about the Ezidis, who they claimed were 'raid[ing] and plunder[ing] the villages of Mardin, swooping down from the mountain on merchants, and travellers, and committing highway robbery'. According to Çelebi, within the space of a week the 'Pasha's armies took 9,000 heads (that is killed or decapitated), with another 13,600 captives, women, men, girls, boys, and more gold, silver vessels and earrings, and rings, and caps and goblets and dishes and other booty, more than tongue could say or pen could write' (Dankoff, 1991, p. 172). Çelebi justified the military action on the basis of his beliefs about their creed:

> These were brave and plucky infidels. They all worship black dogs. In their villages, you never find a mosque. They know nothing of fasting, and prayer, pilgrimage and alms, and witness formula. All of them are wine bibbers, since they raise juicy grapes in their vineyards. Forever since the event of Kerbela, these people have been rich, and no king had ever conquered them before. (Dankoff, 1991, p. 173)

Interestingly, the story of Melek Ahmed Pasha's campaign was embedded within another story that was told by Çelebi twenty years later to the new governor of Diyarbekir, Firari Mustafa Pasha. He begged Çelebi to share the secret of his predecessor's success, someone who had managed to suppress the Ezidi, albeit briefly: '[O]n that merciless mountain live […] Yezidis […] "dog worshippers", worse than infidels, a band of rebels and brigands, and perverts, resembling ghouls of the desert, hairy heretic Yezidi Kurds, people who felt not the slightest fear or awe toward the commander' (Dankoff, 1991, p. 167). According to Çelebi, the Ezidi community had recovered: they once again enjoyed power over the highlands, challenged the authority of local governors, and conducted the business of robbing and plundering as they saw fit.

Even if we take into account Çelebi's oft-remarked tendency to exaggerate, he offers a striking counter-narrative about the Ezidis.[8] Rather than presenting further testimony to the persecution of the meek and powerless, he portrays Ezidis as fearless, daunting, and invincible as well as 'heretical' residents of the 'merciless'

8 On Evliya Çelebi's writing style, see Dankoff's article (2010) 'An Odyssey of Oddities: The Eccentricities of Evliya Çelebi', *Eurasian Studies*, vol. 8, pp. 97-106.

mountains. Like Çelebi's description implied, Ezidis of the seventeenth century indeed had more options and possibilities than has been assumed retrospectively. As a religiously non-conforming community living in a Muslim empire, Ezidis preferred to live in seclusion, out of easy reach of the state, mostly in rugged landscapes and surrounded by belligerent neighbours. Violence was thus not unknown to them, mostly on the receiving end but sometimes also as dispensers thereof. Throughout history, Ezidis have survived numerous exterminatory attacks by governing bodies and other local communities. The worst of these, however, would come with the twentieth century. Prior to that, the scope of the state's military, administrative, and ideological capabilities remained limited in the highlands. Borrowing anthropologist James Scott's eloquent formulation, these communities had mastered 'the art of not being governed' and thus enjoyed relative autonomy, self-rule, and the leeway to be non-conforming in the geographically inaccessible highlands (Scott, 2009, p. 156). As Çelebi's valuable, if exaggerated, account suggests, Ezidis' superior knowledge of the landscape, and the ease and speed with which they traversed it, provided an advantage in their encounters with hostile groups and over the Ottoman armies in particular. Other archival sources support this reading and suggest, moreover, that Ezidis came to be armed and confrontational out of necessity in this harsh environment. Given that bearing arms was a privilege granted only to Muslim subjects of the empire and Ezidis were not considered Muslims, their bearing arms attests to the complexities of coexistence on the local level and to the limits of Ottoman control over the highlands.

Along the same lines, it can be argued that it was because of the particularities of the highlands that the Ezidis developed a conscious mechanism for securing their own survival. This was based on a simple but crucial migration strategy – a cyclical play with altitude that involved ascending the mountains and hiding in areas beyond the army's reach when hostile forces posed a threat, attacking when they could, and then descending to resume normal life when the army withdrew. This kind of tactical transhumance proved an effective survival strategy for centuries. It was in fact practised not only against centralized armies, but deployed on a daily basis in the mountainous areas they traditionally inhabited. Life in this harsh region was regulated and conditioned by sporadic violence, where tribal feuds, mutual attacks on property, livestock, and the harvest were frequent. The community's survival depended on its ability to defend its members, reciprocate in kind, and deter potential invaders. Various documents in the Ottoman archives indicate that the Ezidi tribes were not passive subjects of attack by their neighbours – whether Muslim or Christian, Arab, Kurdish, or Nestorian – and they did not hesitate to mobilize and repel attacks or, at times, initiate retaliatory attacks, as was the

case in their relationship with the Arab Shammar tribe.[9] Historian Yavuz Aykan's research in the Amid [Ottoman Diyarbekir] court records demonstrates that among Ezidis, the politics of the highlands sometimes also transcended religious distinctions, enabling Ezidis to join forces with Sunni Kurds against a common enemy (Aykan, 2016). Along the same lines, Ezidi tribal chiefs also followed the patterns adopted by notables in other communities, often trying to secure favours from the Ottoman centre by underscoring their own ability to control the community, acting as powerbrokers both locally in inter-tribal relations and among the Ottoman, Russian, and Persian Empires, when possible.[10] They were also politically astute, resisting state attempts to control matters relating to their identity, including socio-economic status, conscription, and taxation.[11] Moving between the highlands and lowlands did not always stave off persecution, nor was it always successful. But remaining in their historic homeland, enjoying close-knit social networks, and keeping to their sacred geography and close to places of worship were all factors that enabled them to recover and recuperate as a community, survive as a creed after each *ferman*, which the community registered in its collective memory through legends, stories, and songs (de la Bretéque, 2012; Gökçen, 2015).

## Unilinear and Lateral

This time-honoured strategy of seeking refuge in the highlands began to fail in the second half of the nineteenth century after the implementation of the Ottoman centre's modernizing efforts known as Tanzimat reforms, beginning with the imperial decree of 1839. Census-taking, conscription, and taxation were the three most intrusive tools of the new Ottoman statecraft. Thanks to military modernization and technological innovations, the Ottoman state was now more visible at the empire's periphery, including in the highlands. Census-taking and conscription came with the imposition of Muslim identity, which began to threaten Ezidis' non-conforming religious structure and communal identity. With the Tanzimat reforms, conscription was a duty imposed on every Ottoman male subject, who in

9 The Prime Ministry's Ottoman Archives [hereafter BOA], based in Istanbul, holds documents relating to the empire for the entire period and includes interesting details on such non-conforming communities. For a selection of documents on tribal feuds of the Ezidis, see BOA İE.DH 21/1941, 20/06/1118 [29/09/1706]; A.MKT.MHM281/54, 22/M/1283 [6 June 1863].

10 The patterns implied here are explored in Albert Hourani's seminal work on urban notables, particularly in the Ottoman Arab provinces: Hourani, A. (1993) 'Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables', in Hourani, A., Khoury, P. S. and Wilson, M. C. (eds) *The Modern Middle East*, Berkeley, University of California Press.

11 On the Ezidi notables, see BOA A.MKT 212/42, 17-08-1265 [08/07/1849]; HAT 376/20475, 29-12-1251 [16/04/1836]; İ.DH 760/61962, 25/11/1294 [01/12/1877].

return would be a citizen endowed with the rights and subject to the duties of the new era. Shortly after the proclamation of these reforms, however, an exemption was granted to members of non-Muslim communities, who were expected to pay a fee in lieu of service. While favoured by many, this new rule meant that Muslim and non-Muslim communities would continue to be differentiated from each other in terms of their rights and duties regarding census participation, conscription, and taxation. The model did not leave any room in the identity matrix of the polyglot, multi-ethnic, multi-religious empire for grey zones that would accommodate Ezidis and other non-conforming communities. The new census officials wanted not only to register as many people as possible, but also to assign them to the categories available on the forms. Theoretically, Ezidis could only be a derivation of Christians, Jews, or Muslims, yet given the realities of nineteenth-century imperial rivalry and the continued adherence of the Ottoman centre to Shari'ah law, the only option available to Ezidis and other non-conforming communities was to declare themselves Muslim, an option which was taken by some, but vehemently opposed by many.

Increased state capacity also meant greater mobility, longer expeditions, and a better equipped army, and consequently the highland altitude no longer offered the protection it once had. Relocating to higher ground began to fail the Ezidis as a tactic, making the outcome of military confrontations uncertain. Ottoman military encroachments were unbearable, as was harassment by officials, who attempted to conscript or Islamize Ezidis, which was connected with their seeking either favours from the centre or unaffordable bribes from the community.[12] As a result, Ezidis inhabiting areas close to the Ottoman-Russian borderlands opted to cross into the Russian Empire. Clearly demarcated borders were still a novelty, making borders porous for those with local knowledge of the mountain passes. Furthermore, tense Ottoman-Russian relations made it impossible for soldiers to chase the fugitives once they had crossed into the neighbouring state. Under these conditions, the new migration strategy had to be a lateral one: it was intended to be a cyclical and temporary strategy of relocating to avoid the conscription season. Members of the community would sometimes return after striking a deal with Ottoman officials for a reduced fee in exchange for exemption from service or because they were in possession of Russian citizenship, which allowed them to avoid conscription completely.[13] As the Ottoman administration enhanced its strategies for controlling the borders and population, particularly those groups marked as unruly and heretical, the cycles of lateral migration became ever longer, eventually becoming

12 For an example of bribery, see BOA A.MKT.UM 368/1, 27.S. 1276.

13 For a selection of documents on the initial cyclical nature of Ezidi escape to Russia, see BOA A.MKT.MHM 354/37, 07.Z.1282; A.MKT.MHM 359/15, 14.S. 1283; A.MKT.MHM 351/6, 27.L.1282; A.MKT.MHM 353/66, 28.Za.1282.

permanent. For the first time, this led to the extension of Ezidi settlements outside of their historic homeland. As a result, a significant Ezidi settlement emerged in Armenia which developed distinct ritual and identity markers that have, over time, come to distinguish this group from other Ezidi communities in the region (Açıkyıldız, 2014; Gökçen 2014). While saving some individuals from conscription and the pressure of converting to Islam, lateral migration across borders has gradually weakened the remaining Ezidi communities militarily and socially, possibly also creating frictions and widening divisions within the community. It has also rendered them suspect to the successor states of the empire, which see them as fickle for changing sides and forging alliances with the enemies of the Ottomans.

Lateral migration had already signalled to the Ezidis that the life they once knew was becoming less viable. The worst, however, was yet to come. The 1877-78 Russo–Turkish War resulted in an embarrassing defeat for the Ottoman Empire and significant losses on its eastern front and in the Balkans. Around the same time, the Armenian question emerged in the midst of the Ottoman struggle to secure control over its territory and subjects, reaffirming the European perception of the Ottomans as the 'sick man of Europe'. These factors increased pressure on the Ottoman centre, which resorted to a dual strategy. First, it was deemed necessary to enhance the empire's military competitiveness to serve as a deterrent and maintain the realm. Second, Ottoman leaders were convinced they needed to redesign ethno-religious coexistence in the empire. Paradoxically, they promised universal citizenship to restore order, while seeking to preserve Muslim superiority at all cost. In this context, two factors rendered the Ezidis, more than any other non-conforming community, the target of both local officials and policymakers in the imperial centre. First was the Ezidis' insistence on full citizenship with recognition as a distinct ethno-religious community, that is, independent of the recognized confessional categories of *millet*: the Greek Orthodox, Armenian, Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, and Jewish communities. Second was the unfortunate reality that they had been weakened by demographic losses resulting from the waves of migration to Russian Armenia. They were further weakened by changing power dynamics vis-à-vis neighbouring Muslim Sunni tribes and the Ottoman troops, which meant a loss of weapons and other means of fighting. Prior to the 1890s, Ezidis had to deal with violence that was punitive, short-term, or cyclical in nature, which caused suffering but ultimately allowed them to heal and regenerate as a community. After the 1890s, however, they were subject to new forms of violence that not only aimed to punish the community but also transform their creed, to resolve what officials termed the Ezidi question. Regardless of how small the community was, reforming Ottoman officials could not bring themselves to ignore the ills of ignorance, heresy, disobedience, and treachery, characteristics they believed were detrimental to the well-being of the empire and Islam. Thus, from this point on, all military interventions unleashed forms of violence that, even while killing people, sought to convert

Ezidis and quash Ezidism as an identity and creed.[14] In response, between 1890 and 1915, Ezidis fled from Mardin, Midyat, Viranşehir, and Batman in the north southwards to Shengal, in modern-day Iraq, and Afrin and the Kurdish Mountains in Syria to escape Ottoman exterminationist policies (Guest, 1993).

In 1915 in particular, Ezidis were subject to genocide together with Armenians and Assyrians, though their ordeal is hardly remembered outside of the community, which registered it as yet another *ferman*. In order to escape further slaughter and forced conversion, they trekked these arduous routes in despair, moving away from their homelands but to areas closer to the traditional Ezidi regions, again in the highlands. It is unclear whether they anticipated a return, but in the end, return was not possible. This refugee route remained unidirectional for at least a century, particularly after the creation of borders that divided the Ezidis among four nation-states, separating them firmly from each other. With the exception of Soviet Armenia, none of these nation-states granted them full citizenship rights, because they were deemed either Kurds or religious heretics or even both. According to researcher and journalist Eva Savelsberg, pressure continued to be exerted on Ezidis under the Iraqi monarchy. This took the form of land grabs, military repression, and enlisting them against Kurdish nationalist groups (Savelsberg et al., 2010). After the collapse of colonial monarchies, state structures were taken over by populist authoritarian regimes that supported their legitimacy through nationalist rhetoric. Equating de-colonization with Arabization, the new political elite treated non-Arab identities with suspicion and subjected them to assimilationist schemes. Ezidis were categorized this time as Kurds and included in these programmes. In Iraq we find further evidence of governmental anxiety about the highlanders. Saddam Hussein ordered the destruction of Ezidi villages in the highlands of Shengal and Sheikhan starting as early as the mid-1970s, forcing them to resettle at a lower altitude in newly created collective towns known as *mujama'at*. Saddam's methods and the consequences of his policies were little different from the late Ottoman ones. Village eradication and deportation resulted in radical depopulation. As a result of their enforced displacement, Ezidis became an urban population for the first time in their history, initially in these new settlements, but many of them also ended up in Europe. A reminder of having been deprived of their time-honoured survival strategies and proof of their history of disempowerment, these collective towns in the lowlands were what rendered them easier prey for IS some forty years later.

As the uneasy heir of its imperial past, Turkey continued to treat the remaining Ezidi population with suspicion. Up until 1980, there was still a significant number

14 Two massacres, one in 1892 and the other in 1909, were accompanied by forced conversions and abductions. These were particularly devastating for the Ezidi communities and produced sizeable populations of refugees and new Muslims.

of Ezidis, almost 80,000, living mostly in rural areas close to their places of origin. However, within a matter of only four decades, their numbers have been reduced to a mere 500 due to the dual pressures they have had to face. One of the policies that has been criticized by Ezidis is the lack of religious categorization on their identity card in the form of the dedicated box being either left empty or marked with an X, rendering them dangerously illegible (Yalkut, 2014, p. 28). While it is not possible to establish with certainty when and how this policy was devised, the X on their ID cards haunted Ezidis whenever they had to interact with any state office, from schools and healthcare providers to compulsory military service and birth registrations. Furthermore, their Sunni Kurdish neighbours, who harassed and abused them physically and psychologically while benefitting materially from their vulnerability, made life unbearably hard for the remaining members of the community (Yağız, 2014). The 1980 coup vowed to resolve the Kurdish question and suppress political demands. According to the generals, the Kurdish question was a foreign intrigue unfolding with the help of non-Muslim liaisons inside the country. Once again pointing a finger at the Ezidis, the coup intensified pressure on them and resulted in their mass migration.[15] Unlike the Kurdish or Alevi migration patterns, Ezidis consciously skipped the urban centres of Turkey, where they believed they would experience even more pressure to assimilate than in their hometowns. The most recent refugee route has thus led to Europe, particularly Germany and Sweden, both of which have been destinations for Ezidi migrants since the 1960s. While migration to Europe allowed Ezidis to enjoy greater safety, the communities are exposed to other pressures of assimilation. As put rather dramatically by one Ezidi migrant in Germany, who chose to be referred to as Hasan and who considered these waves of migration to be forced: '[F]orced migrations are [the] worst of all the suffering we have endured. For good or bad, they always come with assimilation. One day, they will say, once upon a time, there were a people called Ezidis' (Yağız, 2014, p. 118).

## Cross-Continental and Diasporic

Under assault by Islamic State and betrayed by their Muslim neighbours and the armed forces of the Kurdish Regional Government, Ezidis have had no other option but to resort to their time-honoured survival strategies. First was a retreat into the mountains, where they passed the line beyond which IS forces would not be able to pursue them, saving many lives. The heat experienced during summer 2014 and the limited water resources meant this was a critical but only temporary

15 The same policy was applied to other groups that were, or at least were considered to be, Armenian converts who continued to live in the area.

solution. The second approach was to determine the best survival route to pursue. Some chose to descend to areas controlled by the KRG, areas still safe from IS; others decided to reverse the journey of their ancestors a century earlier, crossing the border into Turkey. Ezidis' testimonies after their arrival in Viranşehir, Midyat, Batman, and Diyarbakır make frequent reference to earlier flight. Ironically, some of these refugees were settled in the very villages inhabited by Ezidis before forced Islamization and flight from the 1915 genocide. Transcultural psychologist Jan Ilhan Kizilhan, who has been working among Ezidi women captured by IS, argues in an interview that 'apart from the current traumatization, the genocide by ISIS reactivated the Ezidi communal memory of earlier genocides and massacres. They experience a double or multiple traumatization, resulting in the conclusion that they are unable to defend themselves, and are bound to become victims of Islamic terror over and again' (Omarkhali, 2016, p. 153). Indeed, the interviews reveal that memories of earlier persecution have caused more despair than hope for the normalization of life in the near future, thus complicating the refugee experience even further. In a diary she kept during the exodus, 19-year-old Asya shared an inner conversation on belonging, homeland, and exile:

> Ezidis had lands, we were on these beautiful lands. Weren't these lands ours? We did not know that these lands were not ours. We never thought we would have to flee one day. In the old days, here in Diyarbekir, we had had lands, and we had to flee due to persecution. Here we are again, yet as refugees on the very lands that were owned by Ezidis once upon a time. We are always refugees, in Turkish as well as in other foreign cities. (Dinç, 2017, p. 353)

Some were reunited with relatives among the fewer than 500 Ezidis remaining in Turkey, only to witness the conditions to which Turkish Ezidis have long been subject and from which their ancestors had escaped. Naif, a 35-year-old Ezidi returnee, explained that his ancestors left Viranşehir for Shengal 85 years ago and that his uncles still had land with titles registered in their names. Muslim neighbours had appropriated the land, but despite repeated appeals, officials did not help them. Naif exclaimed:

> [I]f only we could take those lands back, we would stay here and not go to Germany. We had gone to Iraq, and we are back here again. We have no money and no language, [possibly meaning Turkish here] to fight, but they threaten to kill us. This time, we will leave the land of Arabs [possibly meaning Muslims] for good. (Dinç, 2017, pp. 194-95)

Another survivor, 33-year-old Neam, also referred to her ancestors' flight and stated plainly, 'It is rather futile to return to a place, if that place is hostile to you. My parents were from here, and they have escaped persecution. What is the use?' It remains to be seen whether in the long run these refugee routes will prove cyclical

or unidirectional. In the interviews, however, many refugees express their unwillingness to return to their sacred and ancient homelands, where they no longer feel safe living with their Muslims neighbours:

> I will be honest with you. We do not believe that we can live in peace in any area ruled by Muslims for long. We would return to Shengal only and only if we are granted full autonomy and everything in Shengal is regulated and ruled by Ezidis. (Dinç, 2017, p. 200)

Most interviewees stressed that extending their migration route, this time to Germany and Sweden, was the most viable response to the fear of further persecution. A 41-year-old female interviewee who asked to remain anonymous said the following:

> We were in Turkey, they persecuted us, [a] surviving few went to Shengal, and multiplied there, and you see what happened to us now. This is why we are now on the route to Germany. We know that is not our homeland or patria, but we want to escape these infidels, we say, maybe there, we can end the fermans inflicted on us. (Dinç, 2017, p. 327)

Since 2014, 81,000 Ezidis have sought asylum in Germany, swelling their population in that country to more than 200,000, making it currently home to the second largest concentration of Ezidis after the KRG (ÊzîdîPress, 2018).

## Conclusion

In 1908, right after the constitutional revolution in the Ottoman Empire, Ezidis suffered yet another pogrom that was initiated this time by prominent members of the local branch of the Committee of Union and Progress. While their first target was the ancien régime, epitomized in the figure of Ibrahim Pasha, chief of the Milli tribe and a symbol of the Tribal Troops that had been established under the Hamidian regime, soon enough Ezidis too became their victims. For the reformist elite, Tribal Troops in general, and Ibrahim Pasha in particular, embodied all of the evils of Abdulhamid II's despotic rule. Hüseyin Kanco, his aide, who converted from Ezidism to Islam in order to be eligible to serve in these sectarian troops, became the target of local volunteers and the army, who jointly plundered and burned down over fifty Ezidi villages and killed around 700 people, which provoked the first mass exodus of Ezidis in the early twentieth century (Kaiser, 2014). According to historian Hilmar Kaiser, it was the constitutional regime's first genocide. Documents also show that 150 women were abducted. Historians know the names of three of them because one of the girls was 12-year-old Zine, a cousin of Hüseyin

Kanco, who appealed on her behalf for mercy and for their return.[16] An official investigation began in due course. Two of the local abductors were volunteers from the Kurdish tribes who claimed that they had 'met' the women during the military operation. In their testimony, the women had apparently expressed their desire to be blessed with the glory of Islam, after which they 'voluntarily' married their abductors. In the investigation's report, it becomes clear that one of the women had already been married and that her husband survived the massacres; the other girl's father was killed in front of her. When the interrogator asked the women in the presence of two witnesses – the same individuals who had converted and married them – whether they had indeed come voluntarily, both said yes. Yet one of the women, in a heartbreakingly honest and straightforward fashion, said, 'I was taken captive, I was forlorn (sahipsiz). Even though he did not coerce me, I came by way of captivity and despair.'[17] For Ezidi women, being forlorn and captive more often than not also meant being Islamized and submitting to one's fate and accepting the rapist who may also have been the murderer of one's relatives. Once they had been Islamized, ethno-religious hierarchies of the empire, as well as local power dynamics, made the rescue of these women very unlikely. But even if rescued, their creed's very strict purity laws, which punish any form of sexual contact, rape or not, with excommunication, and the community's unwillingness to bend these rules often resulted in the community's refusal to receive 'fallen' women back into the religion.

This last refugee route, with all of its horrific scenes and appalling stories of abduction, rape, and enslavement, broke the silence over the double tragedy of women. Baba Sheikh, the spiritual leader of Ezidis in the Kurdistan Region, made an unprecedented move by declaring that Ezidi women who had been abducted and enslaved by IS were not to be excommunicated. To the contrary, he re-baptized and personally blessed them at Lalish – the most sacred site in the Ezidi tradition (George, 2015). This was intended to symbolize the fundamental transformation of the community after the latest genocidal attack – a way of coping with trauma and finding a way to recuperate. The international outcry has certainly been important in influencing this decision to bend and yield. Yet more decisive was the resilience of the survivor women who dared after the 2014 genocide to share their experiences of being kept captive, raped, tortured, enslaved, and sold. Being on the verge of extinction once again paradoxically loosened, if not totally broke, the community's control over the roles and acts deemed appropriate for Ezidi women, who empowered themselves against all odds and appeared as armed fighters, community builders, social workers, and representatives of the community in unprecedented

16 See BOA DH.MKT 2843/39, 25. Ca.1327 [14 June 1909] for Kanco's petition and the interrogation records for the two abducted women, their abductors, and witnesses.

17 See the minutes of the interrogation in BOA DH.MKT 2843/39, 25. Ca.1327 [14 June 1909].

numbers and ways. Figures like Nobel laureate Nadia Murad became the face of Ezidis not only as a community of survivors but also as a secretive group breaking their silence and revealing themselves to such an extent for the first time in their history. To reiterate, these testimonies not only aimed to help to rescue other Ezidis who are still held by IS, or who have been sold as slaves to others, but also to bring the culprits to justice and end the sexual violence that has been inflicted on Ezidi and other women in war situations. While Baba Sheikh's declaration and gesture at Lalish has been most welcome, and cherished as an example of spiritual generosity and compassion, it is important to note the Ezidi women's agency in bringing about this seemingly hopeful and encouraging development in the face of such evil and on the refugee routes. This essay might well have ended here had not events interrupted the editing process on 24 April 2019. On that day the Ezidi Spiritual Council issued a confusing decree that at first sounded like an extension of amnesty and blessing to the children born to Ezidi mothers as a result of rape, yet a few days later, a second announcement was made denying acceptance of these children as Ezidis after much uproar within the community (Otten, 2019). A news report that appeared on National Public Radio [NPR] revealed that the number of children born to fathers from IS has been estimated to be over one thousand, and some of the children have already ended up at orphanages (Araf, 2019). According to this report, some women volunteered to send their children to the orphanages, while others either do not know their children are now in orphanages or had their children brought to orphanages by someone else, being unable emotionally to do it themselves. This decision revealed the widening chasm among Ezidis on how to cope with such trauma, regenerate as a community, and revive Ezidi traditions for the first time since the 2014 genocide. It has the potential to promote further dialogue as well as divergence and fragmentation in the long run. Moral stigma attached to these children once again curbed the possibilities of hard-earned self-empowerment and deprived these traumatized Ezidi women of agency to decide for themselves and their children, by and large excluding women from this conversation for the time being.

These controversial decrees and the low rates of return to historical Ezidi homelands and sacred sites once again reminds us of the bigger picture. How will this broken community deal with the blow of the genocide, particularly considering the slow and inadequate response of local authorities and the international community? How will Ezidi women continue their lives after having been forced on refugee routes and left practically unaided to struggle for themselves and their community? What does it take to create a new normalcy after genocide at the personal, communal, and international levels? What do the transformations endured on the refugee routes and embraced by victims and communities entail for the future? While such despair confirms the desperate picture of massacres, destruction, and human suffering in the region, it also leaves us with broader questions about the possibility

of rescuing what remains of ethno-religious, linguistic, and political plurality and co-existence in the Middle East without falling into the trap of essentializing these identities, sacrificing human rights for communal ones, and creating more victims, particularly on the basis of gender and class. We are prompted to ask whether peaceful coexistence has ever been and will ever be an option. For many Ezidis, still on the refugee routes, this is an irrelevant question – at least for now.

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