The displaced as guest: A case study of the Yezidis of Iraq and Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of hospitality

Zachary Jackman

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The Displaced as Guest: A Case Study of the Yezidis of Iraq and Jacques Derrida’s Deconstruction of Hospitality

A Thesis Submitted to

The Center for Forced Migration and Refugee Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Forced Migration and Refugee Studies

by Zachary Jackman

(under the supervision of Dr. Ian Morrison)

December 2017

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The American University in Cairo - School of Global Affairs and Public Policy (GAPP)

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Abstract

The Displaced as Guest: A Case Study of the Yezidis of Iraq and Jacques Derrida’s Deconstruction of Hospitality

Zachary Jackman
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Under the supervision of Dr. Ian Morrison

This thesis examines the Yezidi forced migration crisis by applying Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of the binary relationships of self and the other (ipseity) and host and guest (hospitality). This approach first uncovers how the application of these categories operates in the Yezidi dilemma. Further, deconstructing the classifications then creates a space for thinking of alternative means of considering identity, foreignness, the hospitality exchange, and competing discourses. With over half of the entire global Yezidi population still living as hosted, forcibly displaced guests after three years, these new windows may provide a better opportunity to critically engage with the emergency situation and its power relationships and give a superior platform for considering durable solutions for the group, such as the prospect of returning home.¹

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List of Abbreviations & Acronyms

IDP – Internally Displaced Person
KR–I – Kurdistan Region, Iraq
KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government
KRG-SF – Kurdistan Regional Government Security Forces (Peshmerga)
GoI – Government of Iraq
ISF – Government of Iraq Security Forces
CPA – Coalition Provisional Authority
MNF-I / CF – Multi-National Forces Iraq / Coalition Forces
IP – Iraqi Federal Police
Asayish - Asayîş – Kurdistan Regional Government State Intelligence and Security
ISIS – Islamic State in Iraq and Syria / Levant
PMF / PMU – Iraqi Popular / Peoples’ Mobilization Units / Forces / Front. Arabic: al-Ḥashd al-Sha’aby Militias
PDK / KDP - Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê – Kurdistan Democratic Party
PUK - Yekêtiy Nişîmanîy Kurdistan – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
PKK - Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê – Kurdistan Worker’s Party
PYD - Partiya Yekîtîya Demokrat – Kurdish Syrian Democratic Union Party
YPG - Yekîneyên Parastina Gel - People’s Protection Units – Armed forces of the Syrian
PYD
HPG - Hêzêν Parastina Gel – People’s Defense Forces – Armed forces of the PKK
YJA STAR - Yekîneyên Jînên Azad ên Star – Free Women’s Units – Women’s armed units of the PKK
YJE - Yekîneyên Jînên Èzîdîxan – Ezîdîkhan [Land of Yezidis] Women’s Units
YBS - Yekîneyên Berxwedana Şengalê – Sinjar Protection / Resistance Units. Formerly called “King Peacock”
BRHA – Duhok Governorate Board for Relief and Humanitarian Affairs
MODM – Iraqi Ministry of Displacement and Migration
UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNDP – United Nations Development Programme
NGO – Non-governmental Organization
BCF – Barzani Charity Foundation

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2 In several sources, also commonly interchanged with: ISIL, IS, and the Arabic acronym Daesh. With the changing definition and nature of the group’s position over time (for example from ISIS to just IS), the use of this term is complicated. For consistency, the “Islamic State” or the acronym ISIS will be used throughout unless included in a direct quote, in which case it will be reproduced as it appears in sources.
A Note on Transliteration

This thesis follows the Arabic Romanization and Transliteration system used by the AUC Library and the Library of Congress. Some clarifying notes on translation and transliteration (especially for Kurdish) also appear, such as in Êzîdîxanê [meaning “Yezidikhan,” or Land of Yezidis].

Disclosure

The author was employed with an international NGO in Northern Iraq from August 2015 until the filing of the present thesis in December 2017. While employed, the author worked daily with Yezidi IDPs in formal, KRG-run camps and places of return, including the disputed territories in Sinjar and Shaykhan, and in partnership with several of the agencies and NGOs named in this report. The views expressed in this thesis present only those of the author.
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Introduction

Yezidis\textsuperscript{3} form a closed ethnic and religious minority group predominantly found in Iraq. Their faith is heterodox to the majority and official state theology of Islam and is markedly different, even from other minority faiths like Christianity, in its origin and oral framework. Yezidis have ancient and traditional roots in the north of the country, particularly in the mountains near the borders with Turkey, Syria, and Iran. They are believed to be ethnically Kurdish yet majority power actors throughout their history have used their ethnic and religious origins to both differentiate and distance them, but also to co-opt them when it has been politically advantageous.

The fluctuations between Yezidis being distanced, named as foreign, and appropriated, also progressively gave rise to violent persecution. As a result, Yezidis have also attempted to physically and relationally separate and insulate themselves. Yezidis have developed a lasting pattern of seeking refuge in the peaks and valleys that demarcate the edge of the Nineveh Plains through the regimes of the Kurdish Tribal Emirs, the Ottomans, the British Mandate, the Kingdom of Iraq, Ba’athist Iraq and Şaddām Ḥusayn, the Coalition Provisional Authority, and the current government.

However, starting on the third of August 2014, with an unprecedented level of violence, the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) swept through the villages surrounding the lone and frontier mountain range of Sinjar, one of the two main historical areas of Yezidi concentration. Thousands from the community were trapped on the mountain itself that had been trusted for generations and hundreds of thousands fled to neighboring Syria and the Duhok Governorate in Kurdish Iraq. In the sudden assault over a quarter million Yezidis were forcibly displaced over a period of two weeks.

\textsuperscript{3} Also commonly spelled Yazidi, Ezidi, or in the more antiquated forms Yezidee or Yezeedi
With the global Yezidi population only around 500,000, more than half of the entire community has now remained as hosted displaced guests for over three years. Fifteen formal, majority Yezidi camps are run by the federated Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) housing approximately 160,000 and more than 90,000 live in informal settlements outside the camps.\(^4\) The KRG, in partnership with the United Nations and non-governmental organizations, provides services like camp maintenance, water access, healthcare, distribution of tents and non-food items, food, and cash assistance. In addition to internally displaced Yezidis, around 360,000 Christians, Sunni and Shi’a Muslim Turkomen, Sunni Arabs, and Sunni and Shi’a Muslim Kurds are also living displaced in the Duhok area, some of whom are refugees from Syria.\(^5\)

Operating in the capacity of a host and a master of the house, the KRG has received international praise for its open doors, rapid construction of camps, wide-scale response, and ongoing work with organizations like the UN. With Duhok Governorate alone hosting and giving refuge to more than 600,000 of Iraq’s 4.2 million total displaced, the response to the crisis has been, in many regards, an exemplary display of hospitality.\(^6\) However, in addition to the unprecedented ethnic targeting of the group, the 2014 crisis also resulted in majority power actors, like the KRG as host, exercising unprecedented degrees of full co-option. Historical trends of naming and reducing Yezidis into binary categories culminated in a peak of Kurdish inclusionism toward Yezidis and a referendum for Kurdish national independence.

The efforts resulted in the deployment and propagation of reductive understandings of the Yezidi situation and reflect that the corresponding power relationships that both created

\(^5\) \textit{Ibid}
and perpetuate them are imbalanced. The resulting skewed relationship of hospitality leans toward conditionality and, more importantly, contributes to protracting the crisis. Outside of a highly prescribed and narrowly fixed rhetorical narrative of nationalistic “Kurdification,” the quarter million displaced Yezidis who are still hosted in camps in the KRG after three years face limited prospects toward durable solutions like returning home or even integrating.7

Applying Derrida’s deconstruction of hospitality, foreignness, and identity first provides an opportunity to analyze the dichotomies and reductions within the crisis and hospitality relationship that have given rise to current narratives. Second, his deconstructive technique and theory of rather holding assumed binary oppositions (like host and guest, self and other) in tension and antinomy, what he terms aporia,8 creates a platform for considering alternative counter-discourses and beneficial ways of rethinking the dynamics of the hospitality exchange and identity formation within it.

Both Derrida and his deconstruction have prompted a large body of theoretical critiques and scholarly discussion (and their fair share of controversy), including in the field of migration and refugee studies. However, less material applies and tests his ideas and methods, particularly on hospitality, to specific migration crises, especially contemporary crises. This thesis summarizes some of Derrida’s core theories in hospitality (and some of the implications that other scholars have elaborated upon on a theoretical level) in order to apply them to a case-study of the Yezidi emergency. The objective is to test whether Derrida’s ideas provide a more helpful way of understanding the Yezidi crisis.

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8 Derrida, Jacques, and Anne Dufourmantelle. Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond. Translated by Rachel Bowlby. Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 65. Note: The text is formatted on corresponding pages where Dufourmantelle, on the left-hand, even-numbered pages provides a commentary (which she terms an “invitation”) to the recorded proceedings of Derrida’s two seminars which appear on the right-hand, odd-numbered pages. References to Dufourmantelle’s commentary, as opposed to Derrida, hereafter include the annotation Dufourmantelle - Invitation in the footnotes.
This thesis will incorporate the two-fold approach to analyzing rights disputes within Derrida’s framework and concept of justice proposed, in part, by Kelly. First, it is necessary to consider the “seriousness and weight” of the factors that lead to flight, particularly the imperative of fleeing genocide. Second, the “power differentials” between the parties disputing the rights need to be examined. However, Kelly cautions that it is also essential to see that these differentials may have been “contaminated by the legacy of historical power and wealth acquisitions resulting from colonialism, nationalism or imperialism” and that simply providing “balance” may be inadequate and may actually instead perpetuate skewed relationships of power.

Further, while there is a relative lack of material that does apply Derrida to contemporary migration issues, some examples do exist and form a backdrop for this present thesis. Stronks, for instance, applies Derrida to a recent example of a Somali asylum seeker named Abdirizak who arrives at the Dutch border. He traces Abdirizak’s journey from the first “violence” of having his interview being conducted in the Dutch language, which was foreign to him, and only being able to write his name in Somali, for example, through to tension between subjective and “objective” memory and testimony. Importantly for the topic here, however, he applies Derrida’s theories to a real and contemporary case of forced migration and hospitality and argues effectively that Derrida’s ideas provide significant explanatory power. For Stronks, the tension of the arrival at the border “is in fact paradigmatic for hospitality and […] for our migration practice.” This thesis takes a similar

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10 Ibid
11 Ibid
13 Ibid
approach to Stronks application, though it concentrates on analyzing history and rhetoric rather than law and the scale focuses on a larger crisis rather than an individual case.

As is true for the Yezidis, the overall number of forcibly displaced people in the world is at a record high and the assumed binaries, priorities, laws, and conditions within hospitality have become a daily reality in the lives of more people than ever before.\textsuperscript{14} Forced migrants, in particular, have also had hospitality imposed on them rather than entered into voluntarily. For Yezidis, it is the current state of affairs for over half of the community’s entire global population. Derrida equivocates hospitality to ethics, and building on language construction (and deconstruction), he questions conditional expectations like the ones embodied in Kurdification and the referendum, particularly in light of sharp increases in refugee crises around the world that seem to coincide with the dominance of nation-state frameworks, an anticipated end toward which the referendum explicitly aimed.\textsuperscript{15} Instead, Derrida’s discussions of new alternative future concepts like cosmopolitan \textit{cities of refuge} cast further light on the imbalance within the current hospitality crisis. Further, they allow a window for considering prospects for the Yezidi community’s future, the ability to integrate, and the possibility of one day returning home.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14} United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). \textit{Global Trends - Forced Displacement in 2016}. Report. 2017, p. 2. UNHCR reports that a record high 65.6 million people have been affected by forced displacement, with 4.2 million being in Iraq alone. The population of forcibly displaced persons, including Yezidis, in Iraq is the fourth highest in the world, preceded only by Syria, Colombia, and Afghanistan, in that order, pp. 5 & 9.


\textsuperscript{16} Derrida, Jacques. \textit{On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness}. Routledge, 2001, p. 4
Chapter 1 - Yezidis as Foreigners / History, Naming, Violence, and Displacement

In the Greco-Roman tradition,

“The stranger who appeared with no hostile object was regarded in the light of a supplicant and under the especial protection of Zeus Xenios. Hence he was kindly received, and on his departure broke a die […] with the host, each keeping a half for mutual recognition by themselves or by their descendants in future times. The ties of hospitality thus formed were hereditary in families. At Rome a stranger (hospes) was equally protected by custom and law, and the tessera hospitalis was equally a pledge and a symbol of this relation of host and guest. A formal hospitality when once declared could only be broken off in an equally formal way by a solemn renuntiatio.” 17

According to Derrida, the ancient concept of hospitality is fundamentally a paradox. 18 He shows this by exploring the relationships between binaries and seeming oppositions that make up its elements. He observes, for example, that in order to even have the ability to host, a master of a house must, in a most basic sense, have sovereignty and control over the distinct space in which they can welcome others and provide shelter and care. 19 To put it even more simply, a guest can only come from outside the home. They must be separate, come through a door, cross a threshold, a delineation, otherwise they would already be at home and it would not be hospitality at all. However, at the same time that a master, father, lord, homeowner, group, state, or so on establishes the limitations of their home, creating the possibility of hospitality, they also inevitably, by the same action, exclude. Drawing borders, in every possible sense of the concept, while creating a space for hospitality toward the foreigner, other, or stranger involves the same act of differentiation that creates the foreigner. Hospitality, which in its most abstract form is the total and unconditional welcome of the stranger, is steeped in the simultaneous antinomy of exclusion, differentiation, and expulsion.

18 Derrida, Of Hospitality, pp. 65; 75-79
19 Derrida, Of Hospitality, p. 55
For Derrida, the inherent paradoxes in hospitality are a particularly poignant and timeless manifestation of deeper linguistic patterns where seeming oppositions and binaries dominate. Throughout his career, he explored at length his theory that language and philosophy oversimplify and construct dichotomies like host and guest, self and other, family and foreigner. Derrida argues that the oppositions and inherent paradoxes within them go unacknowledged, are misunderstood, and set up undue privileges. In response, he developed his technique of deconstruction which aims to destabilize assumed privileges and instead hold oppositions and antinomies in constant tension, the end result of which is a potentially more helpful way of understanding the relationships between the elements.

In part because of Derrida’s background and upbringing, and in part because hospitality is ubiquitously cross-cultural and cross-temporal, it became a uniquely intriguing area of inquiry and possibility for critique. Derrida, who was born and grew up in French colonial Algeria, was also ethnically Jewish. Derrida and contemporaries like Hélène Cixous (who was also a Jewish, French Algerian) wrote with a context and background of having lived in between spaces of being guests, hosts, masters, subjects, foreign, and family, and were included and excluded at the same time by the varying sides and by equally varying means ranging from language, to naming, to schooling. Both had challenges with not only being named, but choosing their own names and classifications, with understanding their own identities and belonging, and further with wrestling with the complexities and paradoxes of binary reductions that did not fit the experiences of their own lives.

As one example, Judith Still describes how Derrida, despite being Jewish, did not know his “mother tongue” of Hebrew, nor did he know Arabic, but instead relied upon the

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heavily Christian-influenced French language.\textsuperscript{21} However, Caputo also observes that French 
was not totally Derrida’s either.\textsuperscript{22} Derrida himself asks the rhetorical question of how 
language, “the so-called mother tongue, the language you carry with you, the one that also carries us from birth to death” fits as “the home that never leaves us.”\textsuperscript{23} For him, it is a place 
to which one can “always come back” and that it is both a “mobile home” that one carries with them, but at the same time an “immobile home” as one never leaves it behind.\textsuperscript{24} And as 
Still continues, “language here [for Derrida] is understood not purely linguistically, but as 
ethos. It includes social class or background, and culture […]”\textsuperscript{25} Together, these reflect a 
problem of tension for Derrida between home, hospitality, and language that shapes much of 
his thinking. Derrida was in a position of a French colonialist hosted by the majority (and 
majority Muslim) Algerian population. Yet, at the same time, Derrida was Jewish, and was a 
minority guest of a larger French “home,” and would find himself at times excluded from 
Algerian culture and identity as an occupier, from French culture and identity as a minority 
Jew and colonialist pied noir, and from Jewish culture because he did not speak Hebrew.\textsuperscript{26} 

Yezidis, and especially displaced Yezidis from Sinjar, face a similar set of challenges 
and relationships. The crisis and Yezidi culture both intersect at crossroads between identity 
formation, language (both literal tongues and the wider ethos), nationalism, trauma, memory, 
displacement, and an overarching hospitality exchange. Displaced Yezidis from Sinjar have 
been named as foreigners, excluded, hosted, and co-opted. At the same time, elements that

154; See also: Caputo, John D. "A Community without Truth: Derrida and the Impossible 
\textsuperscript{22} Caputo, “A Community without Truth,” p. 32 
\textsuperscript{23} Derrida, \textit{Of Hospitality}, p. 89 
\textsuperscript{24} Derrida, \textit{Of Hospitality}, p. 89 
\textsuperscript{25} Still, \textit{Derrida and Hospitality}, pp. 29, 131 
\textsuperscript{26} Pied noir, lit. ‘Black foot,’ was a pejorative term used to refer to “In France: a person of 
European origin living in Algeria during the period of French rule, esp. a French person 
repatriated after Algeria was granted independence in 1962.” See entry for \textit{Pied noir} in 
contribute to forming identities, such as language and ideas of the home, leave them in spaces like Derrida where binary reductions do not account for the realities of daily life. Sinjari Yezidis, for example, who prefer Arabic, face challenges from their Kurdish hosts for the “mother tongue,” in which they find comfort and which in some senses is a home, because it represents another reductive binary opposition, that associated with Arabism and Iraq versus a Kurdish nation. At the same time, the reality shows that Yezidis too find the “home” of their own mother-tongue problematic, but privileging the opposite does not provide a pure alternative. Instead, language, like the wider ethos and rhetoric of the entire crisis, needs to be deconstructed and held in tension.

Both his upbringing and his philosophical explorations prompted Derrida to consider hospitality and its inherent power relationships. He levies fundamental structural questions that go to the heart of paradoxes between abstract, utopian, unconditional hospitality and practical, conditional hospitality: do we ask or not ask of the guest?27 If we do, in what language do we ask?28 And language is not strictly language in the literal sense, though that is invariably also included.29 Language, for Derrida, encompasses rhetoric, and in hospitality, how it manifests in the act of naming, or appellation, is critical.

Still quotes Derrida in Monolingualism of the Other, who says, “Mastery begins, as we know, through the power of naming, of imposing and legitimating appellations” and concludes that the act of naming “can be peculiarly acute in a situation of extreme inequality” and cites the example of colonialism as one such case where appellation has been significantly consequential.30 However, Still reserves that naming also opens up “the

27 Derrida, Of Hospitality, p. 29
28 Derrida, Of Hospitality, p. 131
29 Still, Derrida and Hospitality, p. 149
possibility of these ‘objects’ ['objects of knowledge; known subjects'] re-appropriating their names with pride and establishing counter-discourses.” Cixous warned to “never treat the power of the name the power of name-words lightly.” Like Derrida, she wrote in the context of French colonial Algeria in which, for example, neighborhoods with “99% Arab” populations were given French names like Clos-Salembier.

But, for Derrida, naming is the first and inevitable act of violence that recalls the wider aporias in hospitality. And naming in itself carries its own complexities and paradoxes, which can also include the lack of naming and depersonalizing. For example, Still discusses the use of the term ‘boy,’ which can be both pejorative and ‘infantilising,’ but also a term of personal endearment. Moreover, the paradox of “not naming,” such as Yezidis being implicitly excluded in special categories like being “People not of the Book,” or a faith that does not follow a majority canonical scripture system effectively categorizes them as heterodox and defined against a majority standard. They are named by not being named.

The foreigner, and Yezidis, represent, in physical form, a destabilizing enigma affront to the foundation of hospitality. The foreigner, with their foreign language, is the result of a history of naming and distancing and the foreigner embodies the question; The question of the foreigner as a concept and the questions both levied by the foreigner and to the foreigner. However, “the question de l’étranger (as objective genitive: ‘the question of the foreigner’) makes the foreigner sound like a problem that ‘we’ legitimate hosts should inquire into and debate, or seems to refer to the inhospitable interrogation of the stranger (for

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33 Ibid
34 Derrida, Of Hospitality, pp. 15, 55, 149
35 Still, Derrida and Hospitality, p. 146
36 The first Seminar in Of Hospitality is titled “The Foreigner Question: Coming from Abroad / from the Foreigner.”
example the asylum seeker), asking them for identity papers or at least a convincing narrative (of unspeakable suffering)."\textsuperscript{37}

In the Yezidi crisis, a historical background of being differentiated contributed over time to the onset of the present displacement. But the re-emergence of Yezidis at the threshold, the wounded and pursued guests seeking shelter at the door to the home, revived the fundamental questions of hospitality and the foreigner. And, the questions go back to how Yezidism first started.

**History, Narration, and Naming of Yezidis:**

The way the stranger is conceptualized, conceiving the other as the stranger to whom hospitality is due, already presumes some form of determination, introducing ‘circles of conditionality such as the family, the nation, the State, citizenship’\textsuperscript{38}

Over the last 800 years, Yezidis were progressively defined as foreign and their otherness was cemented. However, despite being consistently distanced, emerging and persisting patterns also show Yezidis being regularly co-opted, appropriated, and re-appropriated. Two major structural factors are both causal and contributive: Yezidis are simultaneously an orally based ethno-cultural-religious community \textit{and} have a history of occupying minority, marginal, fringe, and heterodox spaces theologically, physically, socially, relationally, and politically. Furthermore, Yezidis are a minority within a larger Kurdish minority and are often sidelined and absorbed into other, “larger” affairs and disciplines.

Yezidi oral mythic tradition syncretically traces the community’s origins back to literally primordial narratives from ancient Persian Zoroastrianism to Adam to the Great Flood, but several departures from both Biblical and Qur’anic orthodoxies are worth noting.

\textsuperscript{37} Still, \textit{Derrida and Hospitality}, p. 200

As Stoyanov shows in a historical traveler’s copy of one of the Yezidi holy texts, the *Meshef Resh*\(^{39}\) (‘Black Book’ or ‘Black Writing’),\(^{40}\) early cosmogony for the Yezidis has a creating god bringing forth both the angel Azrael and the primal waters of the pre-formed world out of a ‘White Pearl’ created from god’s own essence.\(^{41}\) Yezidis revere Azrael as *Melek Tawus*, the ‘Peacock Angel’ or ‘King Peacock,’ among seven angels,\(^{42}\) whom they believe is the primary of three manifestations of the single creator deity, Xwade.\(^{43}\) The triad, in a similar fashion to the Christian concept of the trinity, also includes two other persons, Sultan Yezid and Shaykh ‘Adi, with the latter being of particular historic and contemporary importance.\(^{44}\)

Many Yezidis believe that Yezidism is both the original Kurdish religion before Islam and that they are the original ethnic Kurds, arguing that they are set apart from other faiths and races. However, the syncretic story of Melek Tawus and his identification with Satan is even more consequential. For Yezidis, Xwade tested Melek Tawus by commanding him to

\(^{39}\) This work was traditionally passed down orally and it includes prohibitions on recording by non-believers, but some foreign travel accounts included early inscriptions and translations. See Appendix in: Parry, Oswald H. *Six Months in a Syrian Monastery, Being a Record of a Visit to the Head Quarters of the Syrian Church in Mesopotamia, with Some Account of the Yazidis, or Devil Worshippers of Mosul and El Jilwah, Their Sacred Book*. London: Horace Cox, 1895, pp. 374-80.


\(^{42}\) This is partially due to the only slight variance in Arabic between the word ‘Angel’ (mālak, with a medial ‘alif’ or ‘a’) and ‘King’ (malik, m-l-k).

\(^{43}\) X being similar to the Greek letter 'chi' and Arabic ‘kh,’ being pronounced ‘khwadê.’ One, among many Kurdish, Persian, and Arabic words used to refer to ‘God.’

\(^{44}\) Asatirian and Arakelova. "Malak-Tawûs," p. 4
bow and worship Adam, which Melek Tawus refused on the grounds that it was wrong to be subservient to any created being. The story is similar to the Qur’anic depiction of the angel Iblis (Satan), where the angel refuses God’s orders to bow to Adam and is punished for his disobedience as an unbeliever. The Qur’an refers to the fallen Iblis, for example, as a ‘disbeliever’\footnote{Qur’an, \textit{Surah al-Baqarah}, 2:34} and a ‘Jinn,’\footnote{Qur’an, \textit{Surah al-Kahf}, 18:50} or evil spirit, and the unresolved elements of the angel’s punishment in the Yezidi accounts show some crossover similarities. Biblical accounts of Satan being punished and cast out of heaven also reinforce this. Further, there is extensive serpent symbolism in the Yezidi community as well. Ussher’s \textit{A Journey from London to Persepolis} in 1865 includes a full-color lithograph plate of a drawing of the principle Yezidi temple in Lalish that shows a large black snake next to the main door to Shaykh ‘Adi’s tomb (See \textit{Photograph 5}) which is still visible when visiting the site today.\footnote{Ussher, John. \textit{A Journey from London to Persepolis}. Hurst and Blackett, 1865, insert between pp. 408 and 409} Other Yezidi shrines and temples include snakes and Yezidi religious leaders in the past were also known to perform rites while draping large, live black snakes over their shoulders. Another syncretic story that appears also includes that the black snake was involved in the Yezidi version of the Great Flood narrative, where the black snake saved Noah’s ark by plugging a leak with its body (See \textit{Photograph 6}).

Most importantly, the factors of syncretic stories employing the name Satan, strong crossover symbolic and color imagery, secretive and changing accounts, and even deception have together contributed to widespread beliefs and perceptions that, instead of being only slightly heterodox, Yezidis are extremely foreign ‘Devil-worshippers.’ This led to two major elements coinciding with naming in the early history of Yezidism; distancing and violence. The faith first started with orthodox Islam and then split, gradually absorbing elements of
other, older faiths as it became more and more fringe. At the same time, the group was increasingly persecuted and marginalized for its heterodox position and increasingly resistant to authority, such as spurning conscription efforts, which reinforced and exacerbated its difference.

However, at the same time that Yezidis co-opted personal figures, narrative, and physical spaces and became more distinct, the syncretic nature of their history also allowed a two-way bridge over which other power brokers have since been able to do the same with their own motives and agendas. As Yezidis became more foreign, both the communities and the original masters of the house from which they deviated, the original family (or families), simultaneously engaged in narrative construction and drawing borders from their own perspectives.

Many Yezidis believe the oral tradition that copies of the Meshef Resh document, that the venerated Shaykh ‘Adi was sent directly by god from the land of Syria to Lalish. For Yezidis, Shaykh ‘Adi, being one of the three members of the Yezidi trinity, is himself an image of the deity and, in accordance with mythic tradition, was responsible in part for creating the Yezidis as a distinct and separate race. However, a different narrative from several sources is widely accepted in scholarship and shows a heavily disputed and appropriated figure. ‘Adi ibn Musāfir was historically a mystic Sufi with a distinctly Islamic father and was born in Lebanon circa AD 1075. He was originally a strict follower of orthodox Islam and his Sufi traditions were all notably written in Arabic. Despite being influenced by trips to Baghdad in his youth, he retreated to the valley of Lalish, at the base of

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48 Parry, Oswald H. *Six Months in a Syrian Monastery*, p. 222.
49 Açikyildiz, *The Yezidis*, p. 2
51 Guest, *Survival Among the Kurds*, p. 17. Early manuscripts of the Meshef Resh and al-Jilwah, the two Yezidi holy texts, are also in Arabic, though they include Kurdish prayers.
the Hakkari mountains on the edge of the Nineveh plains, sometime around AD 1100 and lived there, apart from a trip to Mecca in 1116, for the rest of his life.\textsuperscript{52}

As he gained followers and became the leader of a burgeoning religious community in the secluded foothill sanctuary, he was bestowed with the title of “Shaykh” and his followers became known as “‘adawys.” Açikyildiz notes that, “On their arrival [to Lalish], the ‘adawis found a peasant community, whose beliefs may have been a mixture of ancient Iranian beliefs, such as Zoroastrianism, and veneration for Yazid ibn Mu‘awiya, and who were in need of a savior.”\textsuperscript{53} Yazid ibn Mu‘awiya was a caliph in the Arab Umayyad dynasty, his succession was particularly disputed by Muslims, and he became infamous for murdering Hussein ibn ‘Ali, the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson, and leader of Shi’a Islam. As veneration for him was absorbed, some argue that he became a patronym for the transition of the group from ‘Adawys to Yezidis, but the development is unclear. However, what is clear is that association with ibn Mu‘awiya became a major platform for both syncretism and co-option, leading at first to accusations against the Yezidis of Islamic roots and then later apostasy, but curiously, the same argument of Yezidi ties to the caliph would later be used for inclusion\textsuperscript{54} by Şeddâm Ḥusayn’s Ba’ath regime during its Arabization campaigns to claim

\textsuperscript{52} Açikyildiz, \textit{The Yezidis}, p. 39. Guest, \textit{Survival Among the Kurds}, p. 16

\textsuperscript{53} Joseph’s translation of the \textit{Meshef Resh} includes a story where Yazid is listed as the servant of Muhammad and has to shave the prophet’s head, but upon doing so cuts him and causes him to bleed. Instead of letting the blood drip to the ground, he licks it and is rebuked for sinning. Muhammad also prophesies that Yazid will lead a sect that will oppose Muslims which causes ibn Mu‘awiya to vow to never marry or have children. In his old age, he is afflicted, and on physician’s advice marries a woman who is beyond the age of childbearing. However, after their first night of marriage, they awake, the woman has miraculously become 25 years of age, and she conceives, giving birth to “our God Yezid.” Joseph, Isya. "Yezidi Texts (Continued)," pp. 225-226. See also: Açikyildiz, \textit{The Yezidis}, p. 39

\textsuperscript{54} Or, more accurately, the driving factor can be seen as exclusion from being Kurdish rather than inclusion as Arabs
and co-opt Yezidis as being of Arab roots. Meanwhile, Shi’a Muslims emphasized that ibn Mu’āwiya was the murderer of ibn ‘Ali and treat the Yezidis with contempt.

At the time, ‘Adi and his followers had not yet totally departed from Islam. Guest writes that, still “In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Islamic commentators mentioned Shaykh Adi’s teachings with approval. They were unaware of two other works, attributed to the shaykh […] that constitute the holiest book of the Yezidi religion and the principal psalm of its devotees.” Shaykh ‘Adi would later be retroactively distanced by Islamic leaders for his increasingly heterodox positions, especially when it was discovered that he authored severely heretical works effectively used as scriptures, but Yezidism would not become a clearly distinct religion until the 1400s.

In addition to theological change, other early transitions also altered the course of history for the community over the next millennia. At a point in history, Guest observes that Shaykh ‘Adi changed from being referred to as al-Shamy (the Syrian) to al-Hakkari (the man from Hakkari), of the Hakkari mountains that formed the Lalish valley near Duhok. This is an early hint of a later essential shift from being identified as a Lebanese or Syrian Arab to identification of both the person of Shaykh ‘Adi and Yezidis as a group as Kurdish. Combined with the Yezidi mythic tradition of ‘Adi’ and the community’s ethnic singularity and distinction, ‘Adi’s ethnicity still remains a significant polemical challenge as it has been contended and co-opted by Kurds, Yezidis, and Arabs alike.

After several early successors, the ‘Adawy order was mostly comprised of Kurds, but still notably Muslim. They became soldiers for another influential and regularly co-opted

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56 Guest, *Survival Among the Kurds*, p. 18
57 Açıkyıldız, *The Yezidis*, p. 39
58 Guest, *Survival Among the Kurds*, p. 16
59 Guest, *Survival Among the Kurds*, pp. 19-20
ethnically Kurdish Muslim, Şalâh al-Dîn, fighting in his armies in Egypt and Syria.⁶⁰ At one point, Şalâh al-Dîn tried to sack Mosul but could not. And, because of fears of growing Kurdish threat, Ba’dr al-Dîn Lu’lu’, who was first regent, then later the post-Zangid Nur al-Dîn’s replacement atabeg ruling Mosul and the Jazîrah,⁶¹ had Shaykh Hasan, an early Yezidi leader, “seized, imprisoned and strangled in the citadel of Mosul in 1246.”⁶²

Lu’lu’ continued his campaign of violence. Guest cites a contemporary historical source that: “after a bitter struggle, the Adawi Kurds were routed, some killed, others taken prisoner. Lu’lu’ crucified a hundred and executed a hundred more. He ordered their emir’s arms and legs to be chopped off and displayed above the gates of Mosul. He also sent men to dig up Sheikh Adi’s bones and burn them.”⁶³ Unsurprisingly, Fuccaro calculates that, “It is most likely that the first groups of Yazidi refugees left Shaykhan for Jabal Sinjar⁶⁴ in this period [...]”⁶⁵ The Mountain, which was in an even more fringe and autonomous position than the Lalish valley, first became known as a sanctuary and refuge, a namesake which over 750 years later it would both astoundingly fulfill and catastrophically betray.

Instead of political motivations, Yezidis became increasingly and even more violently targeted by Sunni Muslims and even governments specifically for their cemented religious heterodoxy and heresy. At the same time, the shift included reappearances of early accusations and identities, such as Yezidis worshipping the ruler Yazîd ibn Mu‘âwiya, to justify religious persecution.⁶⁶

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⁶⁰ Açikyildiz, The Yezidis, p. 41. Guest, Survival Among the Kurds, p. 20
⁶¹ The Jazîrah (Arabic for ‘Island’) is a regional area of land formed by the Shatt al-‘Arab, the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates joining near Basra in southern Iraq and southwestern Iran and emptying into the Persian Gulf, and the close sources of Tigris and Euphrates in eastern Turkey. Together the rivers nearly form an island. Includes Sinjar and Mosul.
⁶² Guest, Survival Among the Kurds, p. 21
⁶³ Guest, Survival Among the Kurds, p. 21
⁶⁴ Jabal is Arabic for “Mountain”
⁶⁶ Maisel, "Social Change Amidst Terror," p. 3
The Ottomans also heralded a key change in formalizing and legalizing the Yezidi marginal position. Their religious policies encouraged Muslim Kurds (Sunni and Shi’a) to persecute heterodox minorities like Yezidis. As Açikyildiz highlights, Yezidis, who were not from mainline faiths, were also undefinable and “placed on the lowest rung of Ottoman society.” For example, Yezidis were unable to avoid compulsory military service by paying a tax because the legal mechanism for exception was only available to “People of the Book.” Yezidi heterodoxy and fringe positioning was to such a degree that even mechanisms for exclusion did not exist.

Sunni Kurdish religious and political power also started to be used toward Kurdish nationalism. Key families, like the Barzans in northern Iraq (who were notably religious and political), started to gain power as their shaykhs notably sheltered and hosted persecuted members of other tribes. The Yezidis also sheltered refugees and as the Turks targeted minority faiths like Christians in the Jazīrah, leaders like the Yezidi Hamu Shiru welcomed them to Sinjar as asylum seekers. Shiru refused demands to turn over the refugees and, in response, the Ottomans sent what would be their last expedition against the Mountain in 1918.

Other key Ottoman changes paired with specific Yezidi practices further solidified Yezidi fringing. In 1858, the Ottoman Land Code that was introduced as a part of the Tanzimat reform period led to many Yezidis, who were traditionally farmers or shepherds, and who were already mistrusting of the government, having their land registered from under

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67 Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds*, p. 37; Layard, *Nineveh*, 1:275-276
68 Açikyildiz, *The Yezidis*, p. 52
69 Açikyildiz, *The Yezidis*, pp. 52-54
70 Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds*, p. 36
Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds*, p. 36
72 Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds*, p. 50; Açikyildiz, *The Yezidis*, p. 57; Guest, *Survival Among the Kurds*, p. 180
them to others, notably Arab Muslim and Christian trading classes from Mosul. The issuance of land deeds (Turkish: tapu, Arabic: tabu) started a systemic pattern of advantaging non-Yezidis, even from other minority religions, that would continue through Ṣaddām’s Arabization and have lasting effects. Yezidis were wary of land registration in part because of historical practices from within the community prohibiting literacy, but more importantly, because they saw it as the mechanism under which they would eventually be conscripted into the army. As a result, at the turn of the century, in Sinjar, Muslims dominated the ownership not only of businesses and public services, but houses as well.

Yezidi leaders, like Hamu Shiru, were more welcoming to the British than Sunni Kurds, who had been closer to the Ottomans, and in the beginning of the Mandate enjoyed special relationships. For example, in exchange for allegiance and order, Shiru was set up by the British as the chief of Sinjar and was given a “substantial monthly subsidy.” Combined with similar Ottoman patters, these early trends of external support and being placed on government payrolls, in a type of paternal dependence network, foreshadowed strategies that continued through Ṣaddām and the Kurds. However, Yezidi practices like prohibitions on literacy also continued to place barriers from within the group on its integration, and resulted in the British choosing Christians to fill administrative posts instead.

In the beginning of the 20th century, as the Kingdom of Iraq was formed, early Kurdish nationalism also did not appeal to Yezidis because Kurds were largely Muslim. Additionally, the key Yezidi strongholds of Shaykhan and Sinjar were originally left out of

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73 Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds*, pp. 38-39
74 Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds*, pp. 74-75
75 Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds*, p. 64; Açikyildiz, *The Yezidis*, p. 57.
76 Açikyildiz, *The Yezidis*, p. 57
77 Açikyildiz, *The Yezidis*, p. 58
nationalist dialogue. According to Açikyildiz, “It was only in the 1960s that Kurdish nationalists realised the importance of obtaining the support of the Yezidis.”

The turn of the century also saw Western European, mainly British, travelers and archaeologists undertaking far trekked desert journeys to see the ancient, mysterious, illusory, “primitive and superstitious” Yezidi “devil worshippers” in the frontier mountains of Sinjar and Shaykhan. They watched the “cult” perform religious rites and dances in the mystical Lalish valley temple and made drawings of their exotic experiences to be published once home in geographical journals and travel volumes. (See Photographs 1-5). Key figures like Gertrude Bell and Mark Sykes, who would influence the shaping of the borders, also visited the area, with Bell photographing Lalish in 1909.

Further, because of a lack of other written material, especially from within Yezidi culture and its immediate setting, travel accounts and their agendas formed a part of the early foundation of the written record about Yezidism. Moreover, they represented an encompassing external, even paternal colonial framework and narrative that persisted in not only drawing borders, but furthering the rhetoric and pattern of dependency and exclusion.

However, the historical patterns and the range of Yezidi heterodox practices that distance them from power actors around them have not stopped efforts to absorb the group when it has become politically expedient nor has it totally prevented the community from being more widely politically absorbed. This is especially so when the balance between political and religious power shifts toward the former. In periods when the Yezidis

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78 Açikyildiz, The Yezidis, p. 59
80 Layard, Austen Henry (A.H.). Nineveh and Its Remains
81 See, as one example among many: Newman, John P. The Thrones and Palaces of Babylon and Nineveh - From Sea to Sea - A Thousand Miles on Horseback. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1876.
represented a means to a political end, a pattern of downplaying or outright ignoring their relatively extreme theological positions in favor of, for example, their ethnic appropriability surfaces. This is, in part, due to their geospatial position in key disputed areas, and their mutually marginalized position in a no-man’s land between both Kurds and Arabs on other fronts not constrained to the physical. The nature of Yezidi power and leadership structures and the insular and endogamous group makeup has also largely resulted in a community that is, apart from language, in many other regards homogeneous and, therefore, easily able to be targeted and directed. Finally, while it is possible to overstate, the Yezidis, after hundreds of years of repeated persecution and marginalization, are simply extremely vulnerable to exploitation.

The Kurdish Autonomous Region formed in the 1970s was unstable. It included Arbîl, Duhok, and Sulaymâniyyah Governorates, but also disputed territories and set the groundwork for a bitter struggle between Baghdad and Arbîl that has never since stopped (See Appendix: Maps). Under the 1970 Autonomy Agreement, Kurdish became the language of instruction in schools in majority Kurdish areas. However, a large portion of Yezidis were not affected because they resided in territory dominated by the central Iraqi government and which had been the target of heavy Arabization. In Sinjar, teaching in Kurdish was prohibited. “The government also refused to register newborns with Kurdish or other non-Arabic ethnic names – claiming that “foreign names” are alien to the heritage of Iraqi society and Islamic culture.”

In the Şaddâm era, Yezidis faced different manifestations of largely the same historic phenomena. However, instead of being primarily religiously focused, as had happened with the Ottomans, the policies of the Ba’ath government were driven by power consolidation on a

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83 McDowall, A Modern History of the Kurds, pp. 327-328; 329-338
84 UN HABITAT. Emerging Land Tenure Issues Among Displaced Yazidis from Sinjar, Iraq. 2015, p. 11; McDowall, A Modern History of the Kurds, pp. 327-328
basis of rising ethno-nationalist platforms. Yezidis were included as the Ba’ath regime more widely targeted Kurds, which contributed to associating and reducing the sect to the binary of Kurdish versus Arab (and Iraqi) inclusion. One of the most consequential and lasting results of which was the Arabization and collectivization campaigns embarked by Şaddām’s regime in the mid 1960s, mid 1970s, and late 1980s.

The Algiers Accord in 1975, which ratified the disputed borders between Iran and Iraq, prompted the central Iraqi government to boost Arab populations among the Kurdish frontiers, especially with Iran, like the mountains that form the boundary between the two conflicting nations. The government relocated ethnic Arabs from southern Iraq to towns and villages with predominantly Kurdish and Yezidi communities in the north and gave them homes, land, and allowances. Additionally, they simply destroyed thousands of Kurdish villages, including 400 Yezidi villages, and their mausoleums. In Sinjar district alone, the government razed nearly 6,000 homes and displaced “hundreds of thousands” of Yezidis. It moved the forced migrants to newly constructed collective villages (Arabic: mujamma’at) with new Arabic names, and gave them a small allowance to rebuild, but like problems with Ottoman tapu distribution, the regime denied Yezidis the right to register the new properties in their names. Further, in censuses, Yezidis were forced to register as Arabs. It is also worth noting that a secondary consequence of the campaign was the use of low-grade construction materials for the new state-sponsored housing, which enabled ISIS in 2014 to easily knock down thousands of homes and entire towns and added to the level of destruction inflicted by airstrikes and mortars. The severity of the devastation still contributes to a lack of

86 Açıkyıldız, The Yezidis, p. 22
87 UN HABITAT. Emerging Land Tenure Issues, p. 1
88 UN HABITAT. Emerging Land Tenure Issues, p. 1
89 Açıkyıldız, The Yezidis, p. 60.
returns as many Yezidis, despite living in tents, would have to start with nothing if they chose to go back.

Among many significant changes, collectivization also reinforced earlier patterns of paternal dependence on the government for housing and daily subsistence, including food rations. The collective towns were also civilly engineered with wider streets and straighter, paved highways which enabled easier access for the central army, troop transports, and tanks, making it easier to police, control, and master the concentrated and hosted population. Yezidis, who were largely undereducated farmers and shepherds, now living in collective urban environments, were not able to adapt agricultural skills or their education to new work, which combined with majority orthodox attitudes toward their heterodoxy, even among other forcibly relocated Kurds, further relegated them to both consistent poverty and dependence. Collectivization and Arabization also de-cultured land relations that had long dominated Yezidi social and economic practices, undermining mythic and experiential history, memory, and ties to ancient concepts, like the mythical Mountain. Arabization and collectivization were not only attempts to redefine the geospatial threshold of homes, belonging, and mastery of the house, but also an effort to shift identity and dependence relationships to the paternal state and to reconstruct memory.

At the same time, the Ba’ath government also completed massive civil works projects like the Mosul dam which was constructed between 1980 and 1985 on the Tigris river, creating Lake Ṣaddām (which would later be renamed Lake Mosul). Yezidis who lived in

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92 Ellison, Amanda. "An Unprecedented Task." *International Water Power and Dam Construction Magazine*, November 3, 2011. See also: erran, Lee, and Mazin Faiq. "Mosul Dam: Why Control of a Terrifying Dam in Iraq Is Life or Death for Half Million People." *ABC News*, August 7, 2014. The dam was constructed against the advice of several engineering firms that the ground was unstable and unsuitably porous. Led to major concerns for its structural integrity in 2017 (especially as it was controlled briefly by ISIS) and prompted fears that it could either be deliberately destroyed or naturally fail, with the resulting flood potentially killing 500,000 people in the Tigris plain.
the villages along the river were pushed into the *mujamma’at*, like the Yezidi village of Khanke (now in the KR-I), as their original towns were flooded by the new reservoir (See *Photograph 32*).

As Yezidis were again reduced to some of the lowest rungs in society, Ṣaddām’s Ba’ath regime nevertheless did not miss the opportunity to co-opt and revived the association of Yezidis with the Caliph Yazīd ibn Mu‘āwiya, claiming that they were Arab descendants. ⁹³ Few Yezidis supported the assertion and instead insisted on Kurdishness, but that identification would also prove to be problematic. ⁹⁴ Despite crude attempts to co-opt Yezidis as Arab, between 1986 and 1989 some Yezidis were swept under the umbrella of Ṣaddām’s *Anfal* campaign which targeted Kurds. ⁹⁵ However, after the *Anfal* campaign and 1991 Persian Gulf War, a coalition established two no-fly zones in Iraq, with one north of the 36th parallel, which is 30km south of Sinjar Mountain. ⁹⁶ Further, in the aftermath of the war, Kurds seized the opportunity to gain defacto autonomy from Baghdad, but disputed areas like Sinjar remained outside that threshold. Only the religious Lalish valley and tomb of Shaykh ‘Adi, the town of Ba’adre, and collective towns in Khanke, Mam Shivan, and Shāria were in the Kurdistan Region. It is worth noting that all of these villages now host major Yezidi IDP camps. The Yezidi towns of Shaykhan (‘Ain Sīfny), Ba’āshīqah, and Sinjar were all outside, leaving a supermajority of Yezidis still under central Iraqi administration.

With Kurdish autonomy, Yezidis in the region found new opportunity for increased civic engagement, but from the start, clear agendas for “Kurdification” and early hints at Kurdish ethno-nationalism hemmed development. ⁹⁷ Both the majority and opposition

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⁹⁷ Barber, Matthew. “The KRG’s Relationship with the Yazidi Minority”
Kurdish parties, the KDP and the PUK, supported Yezidi inclusion in the new Kurdistan, but did so with specific interests, part of which involved promoting a narrative of Yezidis as the original Kurds and Yezidism being the original, pre-Islamic Kurdish religion. The willingness to absorb and appeal to Yezidism, despite its severe heterodoxy to Sunni Islam, reflected a Kurdish shift away from religious centrism toward ethnocentrism that generally paralleled the rise in political nationalism, which was fueled by and pitted against a growing conflation of Islam and Arabism. Šaddām’s Arabization and collectivization and the Anfal campaign had contributed to galvanizing Kurdish ethnic primacy.

In the early 1990s, new Kurdish television and satellite channels (closely tied to the ruling parties) appeared alongside coalescing nationalism and helped to solidify a narrative of Kurdishness. They built a rhetoric of Kurdish memory and nostalgia for the mountains and the lost village life and broadcast traditional oral poems, dances, dress, and showed cultural programs. Allison observes that urban Kurds who were interviewed “recalled their youth in villages with fondness; this was not mere nostalgia, forgetting the harshness of the conditions of rural life, but rather the result of a feeling, expressed by Kurds of all classes in Iraqi Kurdistan, that the authentic Kurdish life was village life, and that the villages were the repository of Kurdish culture.” The destruction of villages under Šaddām’s collectivization and Arabization also created a blank canvas for reconstructing memory and the early Kurdish movements co-opted it quickly, attempting to appeal to a universal and united Kurdish experience, which by this time notably included Yezidis. The birth of Kurdish media alongside culminating nationalism and heavy ties of government dependence also set up a reaffirming relationship between the media, the government, and the Kurdish cause.

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99 Allison, The Yezidi Oral Tradition, p. 18
However, myths of Kurdish unity were spurious at best and redactive, especially in the Kurdish media. In 1994 civil war erupted between the two major Kurdish political parties, the PDK, headed by Masoud Barzani (of the Barzani family of Shaykhs who had gained support sheltering and hosting persecuted Kurds in the 1800s and 1900s), and the PUK, led by Jalal Talabani. In 1996 the parties disputed over taxing illegal oil exports that the central Iraqi regime had been allowed to funnel through Kurdish territory. The PDK, which controlled borders to Turkey, was able to impose “tariffs” on oil exported to the country, although it did so in the face of specific sanctions against Iraq. The PUK-dominated territory near Sulaymāniyyah did not have the same opportunity because it simply only borders Iran. The money, which an article cites at about half a million US Dollars a day at the time, went in to PDK coffers. The government then used the funds to build infrastructure, but also to create a heavy dependence and hospitality network with high rates of state payroll (on the reciprocal condition of party loyalty).

Despite rhetoric of a united Kurdish brotherhood, key power actors were not averse to bridging ethnic divides when it worked in their favor. In 1996, Barzani directly requested the assistance of Ṣaddām Ḥusayn who then sent heavy armor and tens of thousands of Iraqi troops to the PUK-controlled city of Arbīl to fight the Kurds that rivaled Barzani. After the PUK was driven out, the PDK gained control and Ṣaddām’s forces withdrew back to Iraqi territory. As Kurds battled Kurds, even with the help of Arab armies, Chapman contributes that the war came to be called the “Shari bra Kuzhi, the “fight of brother killing” or as more

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100 Zaman, "Kurds Consolidate Power in North Iraq."
101 Zaman, "Kurds Consolidate Power in North Iraq."
102 McDowall, A Modern History of the Kurds, pp. 387-391. See also: Zaman, "Kurds Consolidate Power in North Iraq."
commonly translated, “the brotherhood fight,” but it did not hinder efforts toward familial inclusion of Yezidis, where it was expedient.

Meanwhile, as the PDK solidified its own base, it also continued efforts to bring Yezidis under its particular Kurdish umbrella. In Duhok City in 1993, heavy party support enabled the creation of the first Lalish Cultural Center. The centers are physical facilities constructed in areas with concentrated Yezidi populations and are used for meetings, funerals, and other public events. But the centers are not simply efforts from within the Yezidi community to promote cultural or religious heritage, as their name may seem to imply. Instead, they are created and funded with PDK financial backing and serve as a platform for physical presence and hosting and they produce publications. The workers and even Yezidi religious men involved in running the centers are on the PDK payroll and many are party members (Much like Hamu Shiru was with the British in Sinjar at the turn of the century and Yezidi forced converts were in Shaykhan in the 1890s when they were made Ottoman Pashas). In the mid 2000s, new branches opened even in disputed areas like Sinjar City, Snuny, Ba’ashīqah, and Shaykhan, Kurdish-controlled villages in Khanke, Shāria, and Ba’adre, and more were planned. Moreover, the last four towns are now locations of major IDP camps from the 2014 crisis and the centers in them are often used as distribution locations by the government, charities, and NGOs for food and non-food items for Yezidi IDPs. The government uses the centers, among other means, to create a visible and associative pattern of hosting and providing for Yezidi citizens and Yezidi IDPs in disputed

areas, camps, and PDK-controlled territory, but it is party-driven and the hospitality comes with implicit conditional expectations.

While Kurds were also well familiar with persecution, the plight of being refugees, and with being subjects of co-opting relationships of hospitality driven by Ṣaddām’s Iraqi government, a new class of rulers and political elites emerged in tandem with increasing control and ethno-nationalism. They had access to oil revenue and started to use it to build a foundation toward changing the thresholds of the as yet delineated ‘Kurdistan.’ They started to redefine the narrative of defending and promoting the new geopolitical homeland. In 1998, the PDK opened a new military training facility in the city of Zakho. One of the cadets told a *Washington Post* reporter, "I have joined to serve my country, to defend Kurdistan," but the commander of the base, from Duhok, in a comically diplomatic attempt to salvage the statement, interjected that, "Kurdistan is a part of Iraq, and our activities here have nothing to do with seeking independence. Look: We are wearing Iraqi uniforms,” pointing to the Iraqi crest with the eagle of Ṣālāḥ al-Dīn emblazoned on his belt buckle.107

The rhetorical strategy also ironically started to involve similar elements that previous majority actors, like the Ba’aths, had used, and even included hints of strategies that crossed over with colonialism. With a wider view toward language, Still offers, for example, that “In the colonial situation, the ‘first trick’ is that of the colonizer who imposes a language as ‘his own’ – which of course it is not, but: ‘that is his belief; he wishes to make others share it through the use of force or cunning; he wants to make others believe it, as they do a miracle, through rhetoric, the school, or the army.’”108 As has already been discussed, Derrida’s idea of language encompasses *ethos* and extends well beyond a literal tongue.109

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107 Zaman, "Kurds Consolidate Power in North Iraq."
In September 1998, the Washington Agreement was brokered between rival PDK and PUK factions, in part over oil-revenue disputes, but it was tense. McDowall concludes that it was only the “imminence of a US invasion” which pushed the two parties to work together toward a unified Kurdish cause.\textsuperscript{110} Despite emergent rhetoric toward a united and stable ‘Kurdistan’ under one roof, many Kurds were still divided, but the collective suffering and targeting that they had endured would enable anti-Iraqi and other binary sentiments to gain strong footholds, even if those promoting them had become distant to the daily reality of poverty and persecution.

The ruling Kurds used Yezidi disenchantment with the central Iraqi government and its policies to push the group toward greater Kurdish inclusion, but at the same time was also not above employing similar methodology to that which had been used to co-opt and control them before. The Kurdish region provided, generally, a more welcoming environment, both ethnically and religiously, than the Yezidis had previously enjoyed. Maisel observes, for example, that “until 1991, the Iraqi government outlawed Yezidi schools but, short of Kurdish allies, relented after the Gulf War,” but continues that still in 1997 “two Yezidi teachers from al-Qush were arrested by Ṣaddām’s intelligence services and tortured until they agreed to stop teaching the Yezidi religion.”\textsuperscript{111} On the other hand, according to Dulz, in the KRG system, if a class enrolls at least 20 Yezidi children, then Yezidi religious education is taught as a subject twice a week.\textsuperscript{112}

However, despite the spearhead of ethno-nationalism providing a greater window for Yezidi religious inclusion in the face of heterodoxy, other aspects have remained more contentious and resist appropriation. Moreover, the way the KRG handles them discloses that

\textsuperscript{110} McDowall, \textit{A Modern History of the Kurds}, p. 462; Zaman, Amberin. "Kurds Consolidate Power in North Iraq."
\textsuperscript{112} Dulz, et al. “Persecuted and Co-opted,” p. 39
the underlying agenda is not primarily pro-Yezidi, but rather that Yezidis are a means to another end; namely a wider Kurdish nationalism. Language, in particular, is a crux.

Controlling language (and the teaching and dissemination of that language) enables the ability to control naming, narration, myth-making, and is in itself a move of power over a personal and communal place of comfort, the ‘home’ of the mother-tongue, as Derrida says, and each of these historical realities contributed to Yezidis developing a largely oral culture.\textsuperscript{113} Allison observes that, “in the authoritarian states in the Near and Middle East, where written material is rigorously censored, points of view which contradict the government are usually by necessity expressed orally” and further that “Oral communication is often the vehicle of minority discourses, of tendencies deemed to be subversive; oral tradition, with its hallowed accounts of the people’s past, provides a whole fund of folkloric examples which can be used to justify political courses of action, to rouse a rabble, or to fuel a revolution.”\textsuperscript{114}

From early history, Yezidis embraced strategies that counteracted patterns of co-option and made attempts to dissuade persecution, but the group nevertheless remained vulnerable. Rich with maternal and home imagery, Derrida’s questions of language are significant for forcibly displaced Yezidis, but only because of roots that took hold long before the 2014 crisis. Early divisions between the two Yezidi spheres of influence in Sinjar and Shaykhan dating back to the Kurdish tribal emirates created a pattern of Yezidis living in disputed territories that not only included geophysical borders, but linguistic frontiers as well. Generally, Sinjar, which came to be governed by Arabs in Baghdad and Mosul, and which is legally in the Nineveh Governorate, (See \textit{Appendix: Maps}) fell under heavy Arabic influence, while Shaykhan, also technically in Nineveh, but because of its proximity to Duhok and other

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[114]{Allison, \textit{The Yezidi Oral Tradition}, pp. 5-6}
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Kurdish cities, solidified Kurmanji and Sorani Kurdish. Moreover, the two language families are not on equal footing.

While most Yezidis in both major regions speak Kurmanji Kurdish as a mother-tongue, Kurmanji has several structural challenges that contribute to wider divisions and setbacks among Yezidis, particularly those forcibly displaced from the Sinjar area. First, Kurmanji is a significantly underdeveloped language that lags behind Sorani and even more so, Arabic. Sorani became enshrined as the language of government in Kurdish Iraq when the League of Nations delegated the Mosul vilayet. Kurmanji, on the other hand, never received such a blessing. In neighboring Turkey (where Kurmanji is more regionally common), the language was even illegal for official purposes between 1924 and 1991 and since 1924 still remains prohibited for use in education, as it also came to be in Arab Iraq. Moreover, publication in Turkey in Kurmanji was almost nonexistent which created a major dearth in literary material, and thus linguistic development, the consequences of which both compounded over time and spilled over the border. Together, the development of the language suffered and it became relegated to “a household language only,” while Sorani enjoyed at least some development in government, administration, and publishing in the Iraqi KRG.

This was further exacerbated by the fact that in Iraq and Iran slightly altered Arabic-based scripts are used for reading and writing Kurdish, while Kurmanji in Turkey has adopted a similar Latin-based alphabet to modern Turkish. Material that has more recently begun to be published in Kurmanji in Turkey is largely illegible to Iraqi Yezidis. Again because of cultural restrictions, few Yezidis in the past learned how to read or write and even

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116 Açikyildiz, *The Yezidis*, p. 59
117 Allison, *The Yezidi Oral Tradition*, p. 6
118 Allison, *The Yezidi Oral Tradition*, pp. 6-7
fewer are literate in Kurmanji (and very little material is available anyway). Instead, Yezidis in Shaykhan and other areas increasingly dominated by Kurds opted to learn Sorani while Yezidis in Sinjar and even Ba’ashīqah, which is much closer to Mosul, learned Arabic.

For Sinjari Yezidis, now forcibly displaced in a Kurdish context, the lack of linguistic Kurdish development severely handicaps their potential for integration and assimilation. Moreover, their familiarity and comfort with Arabic is a point of contention and active suppression among nationalist Kurds as it, especially since the 2014 crisis, has become increasingly taboo and associated with Arabism, Islamism, and Iraq.

Further, recently (from as late as the 1950s) literacy is changing the reconstruction of mythmaking and memory among Yezidis, who were historically oral. However, for Sinjaris, that literacy is in the form of Arabic and Kurdish resistance to the language also constitutes resistance to Yezidi abilities to construct collective memory since the 2014 crisis. This is potentially dangerous as nationalism, narrative, ethnicity, and the textual galvanization of traditionally oral myth and memory are all crossing at the same temporal juncture as forced migration, war, and Kurdish, Iraqi, and Islamic nationalism. While it would come to a head in the 2014 crisis and the Kurdish independence referendum, contention over language in disputed territories nevertheless gained roots along with Kurdish ethno-nationalism decades before. Further, the pattern of how it has been handled is a good litmus test and baseline for the intentions and conditionality of hospitality that existed previous to the current displacement.

Arabic was the official language of education in Sinjar as it fell in Nineveh. However, after the 1991 Gulf War and even more so after the 2003 Iraq War and the ouster of Şaddām Ḥusayn, KRG influence and projection grew in the area, but influence over language notably

spearheaded the efforts. In 2008, Dulz observed that the Directorate of Education in Duhok Governorate had pushed Kurdish, not Arabic, language training for school teachers in disputed Sinjar and regularly paid their salaries.\textsuperscript{120} She commented that it was “remarkable” because the central Iraqi government at the same time continued to pay for and administer other essential services in Sinjar, like water and sanitation, and Ministry of Interior functions (like the Iraqi Federal Police, IP), a pattern which repeated itself after 2014 (See Photograph 17).\textsuperscript{121}

Upon closer inspection, the seeming dichotomy between Arbīl and Baghdad was not so clearly opposed and binary. Language, in particular, was an essential platform for extending thresholds of a Kurdish ‘homeland,’ but it was also subtle and strategic. The KRG could influence the language spoken in the home, but did not have to take on all the responsibilities that would come with being master of the house, like paying for essential services.

The crossover of linguistic and ethnic identity also complicated the issue further. In Ba’ashīqah, where some Yezidis speak Arabic, some go even further and consider themselves ethnically Arab, in part claiming to be from Shaykh ‘Adi’s Arab lineage.\textsuperscript{122} The safety of Kurdish influence did enable Yezidis in the town to set up their own religious schools in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and they notably included instruction for both boys and girls.\textsuperscript{123} However, though Yezidi prayers retained and were recited in Kurdish, Arabic became the main language in which classes were taught.\textsuperscript{124}

Yezidis in Sinjar and Ba’ashīqah had grown up speaking Arabic, Arabic was taught in schools, and Kurdish efforts to promote the Kurdish language did not go unnoticed. A study

\textsuperscript{120} Dulz, et al. “Persecuted and Co-opted,” pp. 41-42
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid
\textsuperscript{122} Açikyildiz, The Yezidis, p. 24
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid
on Kurdish schooling concluded that some in minority communities like the Yezidis also see the KRG’s education program as ‘sinister,’ ‘predatory,’ driven by nationalism, and that it “strives to ‘eliminate other cultures and languages’ in order to achieve the illusion of ethnic dominance on the ground.” The same report cites that in 2013 (before the crisis) the KRG announced plans to open 14 new schools (teaching the Kurdish language) in the Sinjar area, despite protests from many that they spoke Arabic at home and that the penalty for parental resistance to the efforts could include coercion and being imprisoned. (See Photograph 41 of a school that was constructed after the displacement during KRG control of the Sinjar area).

Alongside language training, the PDK also set up political party offices in Sinjar and Shaykhan. Further, even before the displacement, battle, and recapture of Sinjar, Dulz observed that the PDK and PUK party offices in Sinjar City resembled fortified military outposts rather than civilian structures. After the bombardment and liberation, this was even more the case, with concrete blast walls, armed guards, and flags regularly adorning offices.

Even ten years ago, Dulz concluded that the ruling PDK employed a two-fold approach to Yezidis that first involved using party-tied media to promote the narrative that Yezidis were ethnic Kurds and “brothers.” Second, building on that foundation, Kurds co-opted Yezidis into larger agendas. One of the challenges was that the GoI had so poorly provided for the Yezidis, particularly in frontier Sinjar, that KRG efforts did result in desperately needed increases in access to services like schooling, literacy, political

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126 Ibid
128 Ibid, p. 34
129 Ibid, p. 39
participation, religious freedom, resources, income, jobs, and so forth. Maisel cites, for example, that in the Jazīrah, “with a population of 25,000, there were only two elementary schools in which six teachers took care of 1,000 students. There was no secondary school.”

A UN HABITAT report remarks that, despite the offset provided by the urban capital of Mosul, “Ninewa [Nineveh] ranks among some of the poorest governorates in Iraq [and] food insecurity grew significantly in the last decade due to prolonged drought. In 2011, 26% of the population lived below the poverty line of US$2.5 per day, more than double the national level (11.5%). The literacy rate of 75.5% is lower than the national average. Rural intermediate school enrolment rates are among the worst in Iraq.”

Ruling Kurds also did not have a difficult time providing a seemingly safer and more free home to Yezidis. In 2004, because of increasing Arab Muslim attacks, the Yezidi Emir Tahsin Beg had to announce a temporary suspension of Yezidi religious pilgrimages and feasts in Lalish. Also in the mid-2000s, several assassination attempts were made against Yezidi leaders, including the Emir, a civil minister, and the mayor of Sinjar. Particularly during the 2003 Iraq War, Arab nationalists also targeted Yezidis who identified themselves or who were identified by others as Kurds because they generally perceived them to be sympathetic with Americans. By 2007, no Yezidis would travel to places like Tal ‘Afar and Mosul.

But, Kurdish hospitality came with a reciprocal conditionality. Yezidis experienced interference during elections in 2005, prompting Maisel to observe that, “it becomes obvious that support from the Kurdish parties is not granted wholeheartedly and on the basis of

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131 UN HABITAT. Emerging Land Tenure Issues, p. 3
133 Açikyildiz. The Yezidis, p. 61
common Kurdishness, but for political benefits.” Minorities other than the Yezidis also faced similar problems. The International Crisis Group reported that Hunein Qaddu, the leader of a Shabak political party, when commenting on the 2005 elections, accused KRG President Barzani and the Kurds as setting themselves up as the minority group’s “only possible protector.” In a *Washington Post* article in 2005, a Yezidi woman in Sinjar is quoted, “We do have freedom, but the invasion of the Kurds and all their peshmerga and money from the north are overwhelming us.” The woman said she wanted her children to learn Arabic, but was not able because only Kurdish was being taught in the newly re-opened schools. The community accused Yezidi election officials of being "bought" by the PDK and PUK and in the 2005 elections, 80,000 votes were cast for KDP in Sinjar area, while only 11,000 were cast for the Yezidi party. “Desperate for help, the village [of Karsy, on Sinjar Mountain, See *Appendix: Maps*. See also, for example, *Photograph 41*] welcomed Kurdish funds for refurbishing its school. In return, the whole village voted for the KDP in the Dec. 15 election.” The PDK provided monthly stipends to Sinjar residents stuck in poverty, employed 1,200 teachers, and paid for school facilities in the area.

Notwithstanding, Baghdad also continued efforts. After the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), the Constitution of Iraq was formed in 2005, and Section 1 (Fundamental Principles), Article 2, Subsection 2 explicitly lists Yezidi protection: “This Constitution guarantees the Islamic identity of the majority of the Iraqi people and guarantees the full religious rights to freedom of religious belief and practice of all individuals such as

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138 *Ibid*  
139 *Ibid*  
140 *Ibid*  
141 *Ibid*
Christians, Yazidis, and Mandeans Sabeans.”  

However, a less clearly written section of the document, Article 140, created a platform for further tensions between Arbīl and Baghdad and also affected Yezidis significantly. Article 140 called for the full implementation of Article 58 of the previous Transitional Administrative Law (TAL), which notably included mechanisms for reversing and providing justice for people affected by Ṣaddām’s Arabization, collectivization, and anfal campaigns. Article 58 of the TAL required homes and properties to be restored or compensation to be provided where restoration was not feasible. TAL Article 58, § 4 also acknowledged the problem and stipulated the right for co-opted people to “[…] determine their own national identity and ethnic affiliation free from coercion and duress.”

In addition, Article 140 of the Constitution also required disputed territories to be normalized by referendum by the sunset date of 31 December 2007. It explicitly lists the disputed area of Kirkuk, but does not specifically list any others, including Sinjar. Nor did it define, provide a mechanism for, or even outline what a referendum process would look like, who would vote in it, or who would control and conduct it. The government made several attempts to schedule referendums, but they were regularly postponed. Meanwhile, rising ethnic and theological tensions amid the war, like peak violence in 2006, made Kurdish inclusion much more appealing, giving a more solid platform for Kurdish appropriation efforts, despite their overt conditionality.

On 7 April 2007, a group of Yezidi men beat, stoned, and killed a 17-year-old Yezidi girl from the community named Dua Khalīl Aswād because she had been perceived as engaging in a romantic relationship with a Sunni Muslim man and some attackers, perhaps

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142 Iraqi Constitution, 2005, Section 1, Article 2, § 2
falsely, believed she had also converted to Islam. The particularly shocking “honor killing” in the Yezidi stronghold of Ba’ashīqah was recorded on a cellphone video and sparked outrage as it was distributed on the internet. It shows attackers dragging her in a headlock, throwing a cement block at her head, and government police standing and watching as the event unfolds. Two people from Dua’s family were arrested in connection with the killing. According to the same report in the *LA Times*, earlier in February that year a Sunni Muslim woman was killed by her family for engaging in a similar relationship with a male Yezidi.

Arabs also warned Yezidis to leave Mosul, but clear Yezidi exclusion from Islam and Arab-dominated areas in Iraq did not necessarily translate into automatic Kurdish inclusion or support from the Kurdish public, despite deliberate media efforts to bolster Kurdishness. Unprecedented threats even started coming from Kurdish cities like Duhok, Sulaymāniyyah, and Arbīl. Dulz notes that in several incidents, even within the relatively safer Kurdish region, Yezidis were beaten, evicted from student housing, and fired from jobs. Despite PDK efforts to create a narrative that included Yezidis, many Kurdish Muslims still perceived the group as unclean and heretical and integration remains a challenge.

Meanwhile, Arab Muslim and Yezidi relations continued to deteriorate. In a reprisal attack against the stoning of Dua, on 23 April, armed Sunni Muslim attackers halted a bus full of laborers traveling to the village of Ba’ashīqah, the same village where Dua was from,

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147 Tawfeeq and Todd, "Four Arrested in Iraq 'honor Killing'."
148 Susman, "Fallout from Stoning Embodies Iraq's Discord."
149 Ibid
150 Dulz, et al. “Persecuted and Co-opted”
selected only the Yezidi men out of the passengers of different faiths, lined 23 of them against a wall, and shot them.\textsuperscript{151}

Further, because of the upcoming referendum sunset date for the disputed Sinjar area, on 14 August 2007, in the villages of Qahtaniyya\textsuperscript{152} and Jazīrah\textsuperscript{153} in the Tel ‘Afar and Ba’aj areas south of Sinjar, Al-Qaeda in Iraq coordinated an attack specifically targeting Yezidis in an aim to dissuade votes for Kurdish inclusion.\textsuperscript{154} They detonated a series of truck bombs, killed between 500 and 1,000, and destroyed over 1,000 homes.\textsuperscript{155} At the time, it was the worst terrorist attack in Iraq since Saddām Ḥusayn was ousted and the second deadliest attack in history, preceded only by the events of September 11\textsuperscript{th}.\textsuperscript{156} However, like the relatively unknown Yezidis it targeted, it did not receive widespread press coverage and was overshadowed and contextually absorbed by the ongoing war and widespread violence. The article also cites that substandard architecture in the area, predominately mud and simple stone buildings, holdovers from collectivization, contributed to the high death toll as they collapsed.\textsuperscript{157}

In 2008, Dulz wrote that PDK officials were among the first visitors to the site after the attack and notes that Kurdistan TV, the KDP-run satellite channel, broadcast interviews with men in Sinjar who were thankful for the party’s response.\textsuperscript{158} The narrative in the disputed territory juxtaposed Kurds, embodied in the ruling PDK, extending their mantle and

\textsuperscript{152} Different reports list 23 or 24 Yezidis killed.
\textsuperscript{153} The Kurdish name for the village is \textit{Gir Azair}
\textsuperscript{154} The Kurdish name for the village is \textit{Siba Shaykh Khidir}
\textsuperscript{157} Butcher, "Iraq Bombs: 250 Die in Worst Terror Attack."
\textsuperscript{158} Cave and Glanz. "Toll in Iraq Bombings Is Raised to More Than 500."
\textsuperscript{158} Dulz, et al. “Persecuted and Co-opted,” p. 39
Kurdish ‘home,’ and caring for their Yezidi ‘brothers’ in the face of extreme Islamic (and ethnically Arab) violence.

However, with overt appropriation efforts from both alternative hospitality providers common, middle positions also started to emerge among Yezidi discourses that rejected the binary between Arbīl and Baghdad, between Kurdish and Arab (and Iraq). Also in 2007, citing evil and aggression toward Yezidis in Shaykhan, the destruction of religious buildings, and disowning those who were silent and had “sold their religion to the masters of material and power,” a group of Yezidis formed a militia called the Melek al-Tawus (King Peacock) Troop. In the statement that the group published, they made a point to emphasize that they were "completely independent" from political party affiliation.\footnote{Ridolfo, Kathleen. "Iraq: Christian Population Dwindling Due To Threats, Attacks." \textit{Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty}, May 31, 2007.}

Other evidence undermined the genuineness of the inclusionism expressed toward Yezidis. While Kurdish nationalism’s primary focus on ethno-centrism gave it an ability to overlook religious difference, tensions still permeated. Dulz notes the easily observable reality that there are a significant number of migrant workers from other majority Muslim nations, like Bangladesh, or other nations with majority populations that are Christian or ‘People of the Book’ employed in the KRG which do not face the same religious discrimination as domestic Yezidis.\footnote{Dulz, et al. "Persecuted and Co-opted," p. 37} Despite overt efforts to include Yezidis as ‘brothers,’ the community still faces high unemployment rates and is actively discriminated against for its heterodoxy. Kurdish hospitality even before the 2014 forced migration crisis was conditional and Yezidis were neither simply “guests” or equal Kurdish “brothers.” A decade ago, Dulz noted that there was still widespread unemployment in the \textit{mujamma’at} and that the ruling Kurdish PDK party, remained, in many cases, the dominant employer, reinforcing
its dependency networks.\textsuperscript{161} In Sinjar, “for countless impoverished families in the region, Kurdish patronage is the only available source of income.”\textsuperscript{162}

In many cases, control of the relationship of hospitality included quite literal symbols and themes of a classic familial home, and policies targeted basic home needs like providing food, shelter, and a place to settle. The KRG, for example, prevented Yezidis from Sinjar, Shaykhan, and Ba’ashīqah “from registering with the PDS (Public Distribution System), since they are not allowed to transfer their ration cards from their place of origin.”\textsuperscript{163} The Public Distribution System (PDS) is a rations scheme that was implemented in the early 1990s as a part the UN Oil-for-Food programme and was a response to embargoes and sanctions against Iraq. The ration system resulted in nearly all Iraqi families being issued PDS identification cards which have become widely used as a standard form of ID and official document used when interacting with the government, even as ID for voting in elections.\textsuperscript{164}

The use of specifically food ration cards as the simultaneous means of proving name and identification, the means of accessing sustenance in the form of food, and access to political participation and voting was symptomatic of a wider power dynamic that is common in Iraq that conflated the state as the master of the house, the one who names, and the paternal breadwinner. One of the consequences of such an arrangement, though, is that the master can then use the access to food (and its distribution) and political participation to exercise control and set expectations of conditional loyalty. Dulz cites the Kurdish example where IDPs to

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\textsuperscript{163} Dulz, et al. “Persecuted and Co-opted,” p. 35
\textsuperscript{164} Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. Iraq: Residence Card and Public Distribution System (PDS) Ration Card, including Purpose and Validity; Requirements and Procedures for the Issuance, Renewal and Replacement of the Cards; Frequency of Fraudulent Cards; Whether a Person Can Live in the Country without These Cards. Report. 2013.
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Kurdistan from Duhok were pushed to return back to Kirkuk by the PDK and PUK when the parties distributed their food rations there and not in locations of displacement.\textsuperscript{165}

Assimilation (and hospitality, hosting) was not preferred especially because Kurdish presence in Kirkuk was needed for territorial claims of legitimation and control of its vast oil reserves. Dulz concludes that Yezidis had been “deliberately forced to stay outside the secure Kurdish administered region to uphold the nationalist claims of the Kurdish parties on a ‘Greater Kurdistan.’”\textsuperscript{166}

Blatantly conditional and loaded hospitality did cause Yezidis to explore avenues for pushing back and they are not relegated to the state of absolute non-participation simply because of their vulnerability to co-option. For example, in the past, Yezidi leaders have threatened Kurdish leaders that they would identify themselves as Arab.\textsuperscript{167} However, this option, and others, are becoming increasingly unrealistic and rare for the Yezidi community as Yezidis and Arabs have suffered a catastrophic harm to their relations in the form of ISIS. At the same time that Kurdification is becoming progressively the only viable choice, reduction into that binary extreme also spells even greater conditional compromise.

However, as Derrida shows, binary reductionism also betrays its own structural flaws in that, as well as being and avenue for external co-option, identity formation has realistically become a choice among Yezidis. Dulz cites Spät’s travels to the region in 2005 and a curious interaction she had with a taxi driver from Ba’ashāqah. When questioned about the Kurdish ethnic roots of Yezidism, “firstly, he explained that he was not a Kurd. He later added to the question if all Yezidi were not Kurds: “Oh yes, now we are Kurds. […] Before it was not good to be a Kurd; now it is better to be one.”\textsuperscript{168}

\textsuperscript{165} Dulz, et al. "Persecuted and Co-opted,” p. 36, Footnote 37
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid, p. 36
\textsuperscript{167} Dulz, et al. “Persecuted and Co-opted,” p. 41
By 2014, before the crisis, Barir observed that a “new Yezidi discourse” had emerged with a set intention to “consolidate an alternative collective identity for a community all too familiar with oppression and disappointment, and to root it in the collective trauma of past persecutions.” The ‘new narrative’ was a pushback against external efforts to absorb Yezidis, insisted that Yezidis were utterly unique, and ignored or downplayed cultural ties like ethnic lineage and language, instead opting toward a central foundation of shared trauma and persecution. While it set up spurious binaries of its own, like the community facing a uniquely high severity of trauma versus others who purportedly suffered less, the Yezidi discourse nevertheless gained traction. However, it was as much a reactionary statement against appropriation as it was a positive shift toward new structure of memory. Moreover, it did not address any of the systemic problems inherent to linguistic reductions and co-options, but rather tried to reverse the binary to where the privileged power was in the hand of the community rather than the actors around them.

Instead, the spurious foundations of the new memory left the Yezidis as vulnerable to appropriation as they had ever been and the community was about to face an unprecedented trauma, persecution, and uncertain future.

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Chapter 2 - Yezidis as Guests / Hospitality, Crisis, and Co-option in the Present

The idea behind deconstruction is to deconstruct the workings of strong nation states with rigorous immigration policies, to deconstruct the rhetoric, the politics, and the metaphysics of native land and native tongue, the politics of sites, of *propria* and my-ownness, to remain as vigilant as possible about the community of fusion. The idea is to disarm the bomb of identity that nation-states build to defend themselves against the stranger, against [...] immigrants, [...] against all the Others, all the other Others, all of whom according to an impossible formula, a formula of the impossible, are wholly other.  

Older historical trends of Yezidis being named as heterodox, distanced as foreigners, and persecuted for their difference started to change with the advent of Kurdish ethno-nationalism. Particularly after the 1991 Persian Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq War, the ruling Kurdish PDK progressively gained more influence and increasingly employed inclusive, even familial, rhetoric that sought to include Yezidis under a nascent and formative umbrella of ‘Kurdishness.’ However, the 2014 Yezidi crisis that gave rise to the current hospitality relationship was an unprecedented catalyst and window of opportunity that caused those narratives to expand into full co-option, culminating in the September 2017 independence referendum and its related politics, which was the likeliest bid for autonomy that the region had experienced in close to a century.

In the three years between the mass displacement and the referendum in which Yezidis have been ‘hosted’ in the Kurdistan Region (and in disputed areas outside of it), the Kurdish government, contradicting longstanding trends of establishing Yezidis as foreign, instead deliberately politicized and appropriated Yezidi cultural memories, trauma, ethnic identity, and physical territory and downplayed their differentiation.

Bowlby articulates in the prefaced translator’s note to Derrida’s *Of Hospitality* that both the French word *étranger* and the Greek word *xenos* (from which a far more common term in migration studies, *xenophobia*, derives) both capture the equivalent terms ‘foreigner’

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\[170\] Caputo, “A Community without Truth,” p. 29
and ‘stranger’ in English. Moreover, Dufourmantelle further notes the pivotal antinomy contained within the Latin word *hostis* which “means guest but also enemy.” It is the same root from which words like hospitality, host, hotel, hostel, hospital, and hospice eventually derive. Each seemingly communicates welcome, comfort, healing, refuge, and care. On the other hand, *hostis* is simultaneously the source of words like hostile and hostage, and conveys, for instance, *power*, as in the English Biblical translation ‘Lord of hosts,’ describing the omnipotent and omniscient Lord God of earthly armies and the angel armies of Heaven. The curious wordplay hints at an inherent linguistic instability that reflects a deeper, underlying instability in the binary of host and guest.

As Dufourmantelle comments, Derrida’s textual deconstruction is an “obsession” in which there is a relentless pursuit of revealing and maintaining *aporias*, or inevitable tensions. In one look at a written text, in the *Apology of Socrates*, the titular character claims to be a foreigner to the rhetorical language of the courts in which he is on trial for his life and asks for the hospitality of being afforded his plain speak. He is not unlike the modern refugee or displaced person, like a Yezidi, who, finding themselves as a guest in complicated, legal frameworks and rhetorical narratives to which they are also a foreign, faces conditionality from the outset. And, one might immediately ask, as is commonly stated, “but, is this really unreasonable? How could hospitality be exercised without at least a basic framework, the courts, a regime, or an arrangement of expectations?” But Derrida prompts, “That is where the question of hospitality begins: must we ask the foreigner to understand us, to speak our language, in all the senses of this term, in all its

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174 Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, Dufourmantelle – Invitation, p. 6
175 Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, pp. 15-33
possible extensions, before being able and so as to be able to welcome him into our
country? At the precise moment of the question, the ideal of hyperbolic hospitality would
clearly answer in the negative. The guest should be welcomed without condition, without
even asking for a name by which to call the new arrival at the border, without what Derrida
calls the first and inevitable violence of practical, conditional hospitality. The refugee
should not have to defend their cause, ask for protection in their flight, in a language, a
rhetoric, legal or otherwise, that is not their own. The ideal would demand that not even a
name be asked for or handed down. Still proposes that it would be better to ask the subject,
‘what is your name?’, but both she and Derrida see that in pure hospitality, even the question
ought not to be asked. However, Derrida does not leave the question there. He also does
not then simply reverse the binary and privilege the opposite. Rather, through more textual
deconstruction, without leaving the same moment of the question, he shows that, on the other
hand, considering The law of unconditional hospitality as ultimate shows problematic
instability as well. Deconstruction deliberately exposes enough discomfort to keep questions
“testify[ing] without end in our memory.”

The second of the two lectures in Of Hospitality ends with epigraphs to two
distressing chapters in the Hebrew Bible that consider the limits of unconditional hospitality;
Genesis 19 and Judges 19. In the former, two angels are sent to the city of Sodom to destroy
it because of the wickedness of the people in it and save Lot and his family. After Lot insists
that the angels stay as guests in his home, local men from the city demand that Lot hand over
the new arrivals so that they can rape them. Lot, rather than violate an unconditional
hospitality that he had elevated close to ultimate, instead offers to give his two daughters to

176 Derrida, Of Hospitality, p. 15
177 Derrida, Of Hospitality, p. 15
178 Derrida, Of Hospitality, p. 27-29
179 Still, Derrida and Hospitality, p. 146
180 Derrida, Of Hospitality, p. 155
the crowd, a heinous act avoided only by the angels intervening. In the latter, a similar account where the men of Gibeah demand a host to give his traveler guest to them. The host instead offers to release his daughter and the traveler’s concubine. The concubine is taken for the night, raped, and is found unresponsive at the threshold of the host’s door in the morning. The concubine’s “master,” the traveling guest at the home, then takes her back to his own home, cuts her body into twelve pieces, and distributes the limbs across Israel as a testimony to the atrocity. Derrida ends by asking, “are we the heirs to this tradition of hospitality?”

Can untethered, unconditional hospitality ever be placed as ultimate or above ethics? In the same way that the answer to the questions of laying down conditions is ideally, ‘no,’ at the same time, the answer to total unconditionality is also clearly, ‘no.’

Forced displacement crises like the current Yezidi emergency sit exactly in this aporia, the disjunction of the two extremes between binaries like linguistic reductions between foreigner and family and seeming oppositions like the abstract Law of hospitality and the inevitable conditions and decisions that must guide it if it is ever to be possible and effective. Deconstruction insists on a constant, inescapable, irreducible tension that must always be maintained between the conditional and the hyperbolic. For Yezidis, the question is whether the tension between practical conditions and the spirit of abstract, theoretical hospitality is held in well-judged balance or if one of the elements is overly skewed, and it corresponds to the tension or privileging that occurs in defining the group as foreign or family.

ISIS controlled the city of Sinjar and the areas surrounding the mountain range from its initial assault in August 2014 to the winter of 2015 and in the course of the year executed mass numbers of Yezidis, bought and sold Yezidis into sexual slavery, and deliberately destroyed religious sites. Additionally, ISIS fighters entrenched themselves into the urban

181 Derrida, Of Hospitality, p. 155
environment, dug tunnels, converted civilian buildings into fortifications, and stole or appropriated infrastructure for larger combat ends. Repeated coalition airstrikes targeted the zealous fighters, resulting in large craters and entire sections of the city being destroyed. The combined fighting and demolition brought to rubble or partially damaged over 2,300 homes, business, and other structures.\textsuperscript{182} ISIS desecration of the Yezidi homeland and religious sites, continual fighting and airstrikes, and the armed operation that eventually recaptured the city together enshrined a visceral and shocking environment dotted with mass graves, riddled with bullet holes, and rigged with improvised explosive devices set to trigger if any Yezidis did venture to return home. Sinjar city was left as a visibly scarred and jarring expression of the same level of treatment that Yezidi people faced (See Appendix: Photographs).

As Barir notes, for a period immediately after the Yezidi genocide in August 2014, Yezidi leaders affiliated with the ruling Kurdish PDK quieted their rhetoric.\textsuperscript{183} He goes further to observe that, “while Yezidis blame IS for the atrocities perpetrated against them, they assign equal if not greater blame to the Iraqi Kurdistan leadership for abandoning them,” despite the KRG’s consistent claim that Yezidis are Kurdish “flesh and blood.”\textsuperscript{184} The unprecedented attack on Sinjar and its particularly heinous violence pushed Yezidis back toward the binary of being foreign, persecuted, and marginalized, and revitalized mythic and historical sentiments among Yezidis that harkened back to the wider, ironically Kurdish axiom of having ‘no friends but the mountains.’ A Reuters report quoted a Sinjari Yezidi man who had fought ISIS and fled to the Mountain during the August 2014 attack. In December of the same year, he cites that 1,700 Yezidi families\textsuperscript{185} were still sheltering on Sinjar, and

\begin{flushright}
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\textsuperscript{183} Barir, "The Yezidis: Traumatic Memory and Betrayal," pp. 3-4.
\textsuperscript{184} \textit{Ibid}
\textsuperscript{185} Using a standard average family household size of six, which is normal for the area, this represents approximately 10,200 individuals. Since the crisis, the population of displaced and re-displaced Yezidis on the mountain increased as the mountain continued to be seen as a
\end{footnotesize}
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notably reinforced Yezidi oral theological heritage and the mythological identification with the Mountain: "Our faith in God and this mountain was strong. […] Our fathers and grandfathers used to talk about past genocides and we didn't really believe them, but it happened again." Once the corridor to the Syrian border had been opened by the PKK, YPG, and affiliate groups allowing for escape, despite being surrounded by ISIS, many Yezidis instead elected to stay, and when prompted for the reason why, the same man instead of trusting government or other forces said, “this mountain is the safest and best place.”

Despite the KRG’s efforts during the previous decades to set themselves up as ‘brothers’ and protectors of Yezidis, specifically Sinjaris started to question the genuineness and extent of those claims. A news article cites another interview with BAS News in which Qassem Shesho, a Yezidi hero figure trusted among the community, described that Kurdish Peshmerga retreated even before fighting began. Amidst the chaos, allegations emerged in Yezidi and Kurdish media sources that officials had deliberately ordered the retreat, but the accusations were denied. Some circulated Yezidi narratives even included allegations that the KRG had withdrawn some 10,000 troops as ISIS advanced or that KRG-SF commanders had even colluded with ISIS and exchanged Yezidis for safe retreat passage.

While reports, timelines, and exact figures varied, and articles from specific media sources, like explicitly Yezidi online newspapers, are potentially highly biased in their place of safety. The PKK and YPG also established regular positions on the mountain, though they were targeted by Turkish airstrikes.

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187 Ibid
188 "Massoud Barzani to Investigate Peshmerga Military Commanders over Failure to Protect Kurdistan." Ekurd Daily, August 6, 2014.
190 "Situation in Sinjar Heats Up: Ezidis Make Serious Allegations Against KDP." Êzîdî Press, October 13, 2014. Êzîdî [Yezidi] Press is a small, online and explicitly Yezidi news presence run in the German diaspora; Barir, "The Yezidis: Traumatic Memory and Betrayal," p. 4
presentation of the narrative, other reports and accounts corroborate that KRG-SF undisputedly retreated back toward the Tigris frontier and the Duhok Governorate in the Kurdistan Region. The move triggered widespread feelings among Yezidis that the KRG had abandoned them and were, to some degree, complicit in the subsequent atrocities. This was exacerbated after the retreat when, during the first few weeks crisis, up to 130,000\textsuperscript{191} Yezidis were trapped on Sinjar Mountain itself, and it was separatist Kurdish and Yezidi militias (like the PKK, YPG, and YBS), largely from Syria, not Duhok or Arbîl, who broke a corridor through the ISIS lines and enabled safe passage off the mountain. Yezidi accounts of having to walk tens of kilometers to the safety of the Syrian border, where they became 	extit{prima facie}\textsuperscript{192} refugees, are common, with some reporting that family members died either on the Mountain or in the flight on foot.\textsuperscript{193}

The crisis also exposed the problematic that the underlying motivation and limitation of commitment on the part of the KRG was its primary focus on Kurdish expansionism, including projecting and reinforcing Kurdish identity and territorial control in the area. The KRG, who had built party loyalty, allegiance, and projection capacity by hiring Kurdish language teachers, paying ‘salaries’ to poor Yezidis, constructing cultural centers, and bringing key leaders on to the party payroll, reinforced Yezidi dependence on its paternal role in Sinjar. Moreover, the efforts kept Yezidis, as loyal Kurds, territorially present, thus justifying ongoing KRG presence. However, in the 2014 retreat of KRG forces and political

\textsuperscript{191} REACH, IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED, and UNOSAT. \textit{Iraq - Sinjar IDP Crisis (3rd - 14th August): Successive Phases of Crisis and Displacement Trends}. Report. August 18, 2014. Precise information on these figures is lacking and varies widely depending on the section of the Mountain and specific days considered.


officials, the re-emergence of those policies became scandalous. Another article (not in Kurdish media) summarizes that a PDK official (on protection of anonymity) said, “that higher-ups in the party told representatives to keep people calm, and that if people [constituents] in their areas of coverage left their salaries would be cut.”194 The article further observed that another KDP official in charge of a party office in Sinjar was on political and social media “posing with various weapons and claiming that “until the last drop of blood we will defend Sinjar,”” but concludes that he, along with others, were among the first to leave as ISIS advanced from the Arab-dominated south.195 Only afterwards, in the very early morning on 3 August, did local Yezidis take up arms against ISIS, and attempted to protect the thousands that by then were running to the mountain for refuge. People in the towns north of Sinjar Mountain, like Khanasour, Snuny, Karsy, and Borek only started to flee in the late morning on 3 August. The YPG, which is a notably mixed-gender Syrian Kurdish force affiliated with the PKK did fight, but KRG Peshmerga reportedly fled to Duhok and abandoned successive checkpoints as waves of IDPs passed through.196

But within days, the KRG and the wider Kurdish media reinvigorated a narrative that started with ostensibly holding people accountable and would eventually come to be a launching pad for even more inclusive co-opting, including shared experience language, like “us” and “our,” tied to Kurdish nationalism. President Barzani announced that his government would investigate and punish officers in the armed forces who had retreated.197 A week later, the overall commander of Kurdish Peshmerga forces published a letter in a Kurdish daily newspaper, vaguely and blanketly saying, “After the catastrophe visited upon

195 Ibid
196 Van Den Toorn, “How the U.S.-favored Kurds Abandoned the Yazidis”
197 “Massoud Barzani to Investigate Peshmerga Military Commanders over Failure to Protect Kurdistan.” Ekurd Daily, August 6, 2014.
the Yazidis, all the political, security and military officials responsible have been relieved of their positions” and appropriated the conflict as a Kurdish conflict: “What happened in Sinjar did not happen to the Yazidis alone; it is an injury that has hurt us all.”

The assault and early Yezidi feelings against the KRG of abandonment and betrayal did provide a small window and platform for the rise of Yezidi hero figures and alternative spaces for Yezidi discourses outside of the binary between Arbîl and Baghdad. However, the KRG, following patterns it had developed in previous decades, did not leave the opportunity open for long and quickly exerted its influence among even Yezidi leaders and co-opted the community’s veneration and support of them into support for the larger Kurdish cause. The KRG employed similar methodology with hero figures (and thus their followers) that it had before, reinforcing and consolidating Yezidi dependence on it as ‘master of the house,’ protector, and provider.

In autumn 2014, as ISIS surrounded Sinjar Mountain and captured several large Yezidi villages (particularly north of the Mountain), two members of the Yezidi diaspora from Germany, Qassem Shesho and his nephew Haider Shesho, traveled back to Sinjar, took up arms, and started militias. Qassem Shesho, a Yezidi whose village had been destroyed by Ṣaddām Ḥusayn in the 1980s, had started as a mountain rebel fighting against the Ba’aths. In 1989, he, along with his family, emigrated to Germany and became a part of the Yezidi diaspora. After returning, Qassem and Haider reportedly defended the sacred Yezidi mountainside village (and Yezidi holy temple) of Sharf al-Dīn (See Photograph 40) against ISIS and, in an interview, he said when the militia had captured four ISIS members,

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198 “Kurdistan's Barzani Slams Peshmerga Leaders,” Ekurd Daily
199 Several articles cite that Haider Shesho is Qassem Shesho’s nephew. One article lists that they are cousins. See: "Yezidi Commander Resigns from PUK, Founds New Party." Rûdaw, April 18, 2017.
200 Mercier, Celia. "'The Old Tiger of Mount Sinjar': Meet Qasim Shesho, the Yazidi Commander Battling the Islamic State." Vice News, February 12, 2015.
We executed them in the name of our people." ISIS never captured Sharf al-Dīn and legends of the defense of the village spread widely in the Yezidi community, developing an almost mythic aura. Haider became a popular Yezidi name for newborns. The leader’s status garnered support and, at the time, the Shesho’s militia was cited at a strength of about 2,000 fighters from the Sinjar area, many of whom were Yezidis disenchanted with both the KRG and central Iraqi government.

A reporter remarked that when Haider visited a Yezidi IDP camp, “A Yazidi flag was draped over his shoulders like a cloak, and, indeed, he is a kind of caped super-hero for Sinjar, one who swooped in from Germany when the regular police and military couldn’t rid the city of monsters and criminals.” According to the article, as he greeted the crowd, he was treated like a “relative” and “family” and the people called out “All Yazidis are Haydar Shesho.” Haider used the opportunity to state that, “We fight only for Yazidis, not for any party,” and further that, “Only Yazidis can rule Yazidis now.” Another article quotes a Yezidi militia spokesperson stating the obvious of Shesho, “He’s a very important symbol for the Yazidis.”

Because KRG Peshmerga had withdrawn, and Yezidis became trapped or captured, and because of hero figures like the Sheshos and efforts of Yezidi militias, narratives emerged among Yezidis and Yezidi media of wanting to found their own homeland in Sinjar.

201 Ibid
202 Ibid
203 Van Den Toorn, Christine. "The Hero Yazidis Hope Will Save Them." The Daily Beast, May 10, 2015. The Yezidi flag is white, with a large red strip running horizontally in the middle, and (similar to the KRG flag) a 24-pointed sun against the red backdrop.
204 Ibid
205 Ibid
and defend it independently of political party allegiance. The traces of some of these early narratives are still visible in common Yezidi petitions to have an international protection force control Sinjar rather than the disputing governments. The media and Yezidi militia forces accused the closely-party-tied Peshmerga of disarming Yezidi militias prior to the ISIS assault and that, because Yezidi militia commanders did not want to become PDK party members, they were not given support and protection.

Haider’s militia, started under the name Sinjar Protection Force (HPŞ), expanded to approximately 3,000 fighters. In a further and deliberate statement against the PDK, Haider argued that Yezidis were not supported by the Kurds in their efforts and incorporated his militia under the al-Hashd al-Sha’aby Popular/People’s Mobilization Force/Units (PMF/PMU) militia scheme in Baghdad and received arms, finances, and equipment from the central Ministry of Interior. This was the same arrangement that was used to allow Iranian Shi’a Muslim militias to fight in Iraq. Further, in November 2015, the name of the militia changed from Sinjar Protection Force (HPŞ) to Ezidikhan (land of Yezidis) Protection Force (HPÊ).

However, Haider was reportedly “arrested” by the KRG in April 2015 (before Sinjar was recaptured from ISIS) for “creating an illegitimate militia.” By 2017, Haider, who was originally affiliated with the rival Kurdish Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) Party based in Sulaymāniyyah, announced the founding of his own “Yezidi Democratic Party” in the

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207 “Situation in Sinjar Heats Up: Ezidis Make Serious Allegations Against KDP.” Êzîdî Press, October 13, 2014. Êzîdî [Yezidi] Press is a small, online and explicitly Yezidi news presence run in the German diaspora

208 Ibid


Kurdistan Region. However, at the same time, despite insisting on neutrality and a lack of political allegiance to any party, Shesho announced that his militia, under its changed name Ezidikhan Protection Force (HPÊ), had “been fully incorporated into the Kurdistan Region’s Peshmerga Ministry and that they depend on the Kurdistan ministry for their salaries and arms.” According to the report, Shesho’s arrest by the KRG two years previous was “resolved” after he agreed to place the armed force under the government’s command.

Haider’s uncle, Qassem Shesho’s forces similarly shifted to be under the control of the KRG Peshmerga and Qassem is a member of the PDK. By 2017, Qassem commanded 8,500 KRG-SF Peshmerga troops in Sinjar.

ISIS held Sinjar City for over a year, and in the interim power vacuum where neither the central Iraqi government or the KRG fully projected their influence as they had before, the frontier physical and border region allowed for fringe separatist groups to gain footholds. The PKK (Kurdistan Worker’s Party), a socialist Kurdish nationalist and separatist group that had taken up arms against the Turkish Government since the 1980s actively fought ISIS and expanded its territorial influence around the Sinjar area, gaining fighters and supporters among the Yezidis (See Appendix: Photographs). Affiliate groups and other militias in the area, like the Shesho’s, galvanized anti-ISIS and pro-Yezidi attitudes into other initiatives. Yezidis in Sinjar formed and joined units like the all-Yezidi YBS (Sinjar Protection Units. Formerly called “King Peacock”), the YJA STAR (armed “Free Women’s Units” of the PKK), and the YJE (Ezidikhan [land of Yezidis] Women’s Units). Moreover, alongside the larger Syrian-Kurdish YPG (People’s Protection Units), which also gained a presence in the officially Iraqi territory, it was the loose coalitions who had created a corridor for Yezidis to

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213 Ibid
214 Ibid
escape off of Sinjar Mountain from 4-13 August (See Appendix: Maps). Therefore, subsequently, the groups enjoyed popular support among Yezidis as heroes who stayed and rescued while others abandoned, but both their presence and the narratives that they represented would quickly be challenged by the KRG.

The Washington Agreement in September 1998 that softened the hostilities and brokered deals on oil revenue disputes between the PDK and PUK in the Kurdish Civil War had stipulations to not tolerate the PKK (who had fought on the side of the PUK) in Iraqi territory. Since then, the PDK also sought to gain legitimacy especially vis-à-vis its economic powerhouse neighbor Turkey (on whom it depends heavily for both food imports and oil exports) and allowed Turkey to regularly target the PKK with airstrikes in the northern mountains in Duhok that still regularly continue. While the PKK was pro-Kurdish nationalism, it was a different nationalism (and came with a different politics) than that supported by the KRG, despite the KRG’s inclusive language of “Kurdishness.” It is worth noting that Turkey, the EU, and the United States classify the PKK as a terrorist organization.

Nevertheless, because of the strength and entrenchment of ISIS in Sinjar and widespread and grassroots support among local Yezidis for the PKK and all-Yezidi militias who had stayed and fought, the KRG-SF had no choice but to rely on and work within the environment of the loose coalitions as it recaptured the city and region. However, this nevertheless did not prevent the KRG from adopting a rhetoric and strategy where they increasingly claimed sole legitimacy and mastery of the house in the disputed area from the outset. Furthermore, the KRG simultaneously and increasingly started to employ its particular level of influence over the Yezidi populations (and particularly the Yezidi leadership) that was based in the other Yezidi stronghold of Shaykhan (and the sanctuary and temple in Lalish), the seat of the Yezidi Emir and religious paramounts. Shaykhan is in much closer physical proximity to Kurdish cities like Duhok and the Yezidi leadership there had
historically enjoyed closer ties to the KRG via being in defacto Kurdish territory (though Shaykhan, like Sinjar, is technically disputed). As Kurdish nationalism and the push for the referendum would move forward, the KRG would openly and explicitly display and appeal to the alignment of Yezidi leadership in Shaykhan with the cause, especially in its territorial and political expansions in Sinjar. This was exacerbated by the fact that a majority of Sinjari Yezidis, because of the forced displacement and resulting hospitality relationship in camps in the KR-I, now lived under the effective sphere of influence in Shaykhan. Both Yezidi leadership and the KRG would align to be in favor of the particular Kurdish nationalism embodied in the referendum lobbied by the ruling PDK and the KRG. However, the power move hinted toward a deeper reality that, despite being an endogamous and closed minority group, Yezidis were nevertheless not completely united even among themselves. Particularly those in Sinjar who had not fled to the KRG, but instead to the Mountain, or those who had returned, started to mistrust even Yezidi leadership as it was co-opted into Kurdish nationalism and as it seemingly downplayed or ignored some of the serious sentiments of abandonment and traumatic memory that Sinjari Yezidis had felt.

On the day Sinjar was liberated, the KRG made a clear and visible statement of another agenda, at the order of Kurdish President Masoud Barzani, by hanging a 50-meter-long KRG, and notably not Iraqi, flag on the central grain elevator, the tallest building in the town. Barzani, in a press conference atop Sinjar Mountain, with the heavily damaged Sinjar City as a backdrop, (See Photograph 14) notably stated, “Sinjar is liberated by the

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216 See, for example: Rudaw English. "#Kurdistan Flag Raised on #Sinjar's Silo by President @masoud_barzani's Order. #FreeSinjar Https://t.co/JJLoJWldu." Twitter. November 13, 2015. https://twitter.com/RudawEnglish/status/665119369488388096/photo/1.
217 Mezzofiore, Gianluca. "Operation Free Sinjar: Peshmerga Raise Giant Kurdistan Flag in Liberated City after Crushing Isis." International Business Times, November 13, 2015. Cited measurements in the news for the length of the flag ranged from 50 to 150 meters. Irrespective, it was highly visible, even from a distance, and covered several silos, representing a very deliberate statement
Peshmerga [using the name for KRG armed forces],” in a specific response to a question of the role other militias played. He further stated that, “I congratulate the people of Kurdistan, especially the Yezidis,” explicitly including Yezidis not simply in the Kurdish umbrella, but more specifically as the ‘people of Kurdistan,’ the as yet evolving geopolitical space. Though the referendum would not be officially announced until many months later, he continued to co-opt trauma and memory for nationalism, stating, “Sinjar is very important because it has become a symbol of the injustice against the people of Kurdistan,” appropriating the injustice against the Yezidis as an affront to Kurdistan. Further, speaking in a clear tone ostensibly representing a united interest and seemingly agreed solution said, “Aside from the Kurdistan flag, we do not accept any other flag rising over Sinjar.” A Reuters article also quoted Barzani adopting a familial and protective narrative, saying, “We promised and we keep our promise: we proved to our Yazidi brothers and sisters that all Kurdistan is behind them. Today we took revenge for every Yazidi.”

But, for many Yezidis, the narrative had revised and brushed aside a serious consideration of the traumatic events in 2014, particularly when KRG-SF and ISF had withdrawn and ISIS started its genocide. Within two months of the area being retaken, 35 suspected Yezidi mass grave sites were discovered and documented around Sinjar (See Photograph 12). The discoveries were part of the reason for the revival of the earlier opted narrative among the Yezidi community to remember the past persecutions, and after the 2014

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218 “President Barzani: Only Kurdish Flag Will Fly over Shingal; Thanks US.” Rûdaw, November 13, 2015.
219 “President Barzani: Only Kurdish Flag Will Fly over Shingal; Thanks US.” Rûdaw
220 Ibid
221 Ibid
crisis, the cry numbered “74 genocides.” However, themes of memory and trauma, while raw and sensitive, particularly among the historically targeted community, continued to be politicized and ethno-nationalistic inclusionism and “Kurdification” overshadowed.

In 2016, the KRG formed specific military units with Yezidis and 127 Yezidi women volunteered to join a new force in the Zerevani Peshmerga (a government-supported paramilitary group) because of the IS attack on Sinjar. At the graduation ceremony, the brigade commander at the Tiger Base training facility in the border city of Feshkhabour specifically stated in an interview with the Kurdistan 24 satellite channel that the girls’ motivation for volunteering as Peshmerga was to, “defend the soil of Kurdistan” (emphasis added). One of the volunteers, a woman named Aliya from Sinjar, was also interviewed and used familial rhetoric: “Our Ezidi [Yezidi] sisters were oppressed by IS extremists, and we will not allow that to happen again... we will defend ourselves alongside our Peshmerga brothers in the frontlines.” President Barzani, attending their graduation, employed similar language, saying, “I am very hopeful that you will […] achieve significant victories hand in hand with your brothers.”

Additionally, even though the KRG utilized the same strategies as other militias, forming ethnically based armed brigades, it downplayed any competing narrative claims that

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224 The exact number that people use varies, depending on the historical narrative, but generally represents a feeling among Yezidis of a significant and distinctly large number of genocides and targeted persecutions that the community has faced. While highlighting a patterned reality which does have historical backing dating back to the Kurdish emirates, it has also become a defining source of identity formation and even self-victimization with the community expressing a collective, and sometimes crippling, suffering and mourning that permeates in everything from prohibitions on dancing and singing at weddings and community feasts, for example, to unending states of mourning for the Yezidis who are still in captivity or missing. See also: Barir, "The Yezidis: Traumatic Memory and Betrayal." 225 Goran, Baxtiyar, and Ismat Marounsi. "Ezidi Women Voluntarily Join Peshmerga, Establish Roj Force." Kurdistan 24, June 4, 2016.
226 Ibid
227 Ibid
228 Ibid
the factions operating in Sinjar put forward that represented alternative Yezidi sentiments, interests, and discourses, especially those that included feelings of mistrust toward the KRG and its Kurdish nationalism. It dismissed groups like the Turkish-originated PKK as ‘illegitimate’ and simply equivocated affiliate Yezidi forces like the YBS with the PKK, dismissing them, and notably the narratives they represented, as well.\footnote{Barber, "The KRG’s Relationship with the Yazidi Minority." \textit{NRT}} The tensions escalated and even resulted in troop deployments and eventually physical clashes.

In 2017, stresses ratcheted in the Yezidi dominated towns of Khanasour and Snuny (both north of the Mountain). Khanasour, which is physically closer to the Syrian border (and further from the KR-I) had by that point come to be heavily PKK-influenced (as well as influenced by affiliate groups like the all-Yezidi YBS, the YPG, and YJA STAR) as had the corresponding western half of Sinjar Mountain. Moreover, the PKK had a dominant presence in several key Yezidi areas. This first included the entrance to the only road leading up to the top of the Mountain near the village of Karsy. Second, the PKK dominated the informal IDP settlement of Sardashde on the top of the Mountain that had burgeoned since the 2014 crisis and notably included many Yezidi IDPs who never fled to the KRG. Finally, the PKK and its affiliates also controlled several fortifications on the very top of the Mountain. The KRG’s presence was relegated to only a few areas of projection and a war of branding marking different allegiances and narratives started to pepper the entire disputed Sinjar area. One exception for the KRG on the top of the Mountain, was in the form of the aptly named Barzani Charity Foundation (BCF), which recalled similar patterns of projecting dependence and influence that the KRG had employed in the previous decades around Sinjar.

BCF represented humanitarian responses that were closely tied to government efforts. The charity is a Kurdish NGO whose primary outreaches include food and non-food item (NFI) distributions to displaced persons inside and outside of the KRG. It is named after the
legendary Kurdish hero figure Mustafa Barzani, who is often depicted as a mountain and resistance Kurdish Peshmerga fighter against oppressive regimes and a leader for Kurdish nationalism. He led the still ruling PDK from 1946 to his death in 1979, and, Masoud Barzani, his son, took over party leadership and was the President of the KRG until November 2017. The charity has been accused of being politicized and tied too closely to the ruling Barzani family, whose religious Shaykhs had galvanized tribal leadership into early Kurdish nationalism at the turn of the 20th century. BCF opened a large office and distribution site on top of Sinjar Mountain next to Yezidi IDP settlements (notably flying a prominent KRG flag, see Photograph 18), and was responsible for delivering food aid and support items to local dependents. Before tensions between Baghdad and the KRG erupted over the referendum, and despite being in the disputed Sinjar territory in Nineveh Governorate, BCF had worked on behalf of the Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displacement in Baghdad to distribute food rations to thousands of IDP families.230

The KRG had a much more dominant presence in strategic towns like Snuny (directly east of Khanasour) and Sinjar City itself, and PDK and Asayish (State Security) offices operated regularly. However, while Sinjar City was KRG controlled, it also included the tense coexistence of other militias that had helped liberate it and all of the competing sides, including the KRG, jockeyed among the ghostly empty streets of the town to mark territory, spray graffiti, and raise flags (See Appendix: Photographs). Furthermore, the KRG controlled the access points and thresholds to cities like Rabi’a on the Syrian Border as well as to markets like the KR-I and the Turkish border while the roads to Raqqah, Mosul and Tal ‘Afar were effectively useless because of the presence of ISIS in each of the cities. Duhok represented one of the only viable markets for agriculture and livestock that Yezidis

230 “Food Aid Delivered to 6000 Families near Shingal." Barzani Charity Foundation (BCF), March 10, 2017.
produced, but for Yezidis who supported the PKK and affiliate factions, traveling through KRG dominated areas and thresholds became problematic, exacerbating the pressure and correlation of allegiance, dependence, and even sustenance. Unless people had ties to the ruling party, the transport of goods and livestock to and from markets (even including transporting home goods for returns) were regularly prevented between the KR-I and the disputed Sinjar area.231

On the other hand, while groups like the PKK, YBS, and YPG were perceived by Yezidis as “rescuers” and heroes, this nevertheless did not prevent them from also co-opting Yezidis into their larger, pre-existing political agendas and using the crisis to their advantage. The PKK, with its longstanding conflict against the Turkish government, used the same physical features of the Mountain as a remote, frontier, and secluded place to carve a niche of territorial control and resistance to both the Turks and the KRG. Further, on the platform of having rescued many in the community off of the Mountain, the PKK and YPG recruited Yezidi followers and fighters, setting itself up as a protector and provider.

However, by March of 2017, as drumbeats towards the referendum intensified, the pressures of ethno-nationalist politicization, specific factionalized agendas, troop deployments, dependencies, and economic isolation spilled over into violence. Seven fighters from the all-female YJA STAR and Yezidis from the YBS were killed when they clashed with KRG-sponsored, Syrian-originated Rojava Peshmerga that had been deployed by the KRG near the town of Khanasour.232 Within weeks, protestors affiliated with the PKK in the town of Khanasour again demonstrated against the KRG and Peshmerga with violent clashes resulting in reported fatalities and blame being thrown from all sides. By then, some Yezidis

who had previously supported the PKK and affiliate groups started to distance themselves as they saw Yezidis becoming co-opted into a the larger, and pre-existing, PKK conflict. This was reflected as the town of Khanasour had been largely vacant and the KRG accused the PKK of busing Yezidis in from across the border in Kurdish Syria to show artificial support numbers and stage a riot.

But the KRG’s rhetoric went even further. The KRG Ministry of Interior issued a statement accusing the PKK of constantly inciting clashes, and also did not miss an opportunity to deliberately co-opt Yezidis as family protectees at the same time: “Only the PKK is responsible as it intentionally wants to use some Yezidi brothers [emphasis added] as a device for a disgusting plot.”233 In a deliberate affront to the all-Yezidi YBS, the KRG Presidency’s spokesperson was quoted as saying: “It is impossible to allow any party to freely challenge the political will of the Kurdistan Region.”234 Despite a number of Yezidis vocalizing that the YBS fought for their interests, the KRG’s narrative continually downplayed their legitimacy vis-à-vis that of the government. The spokesperson continued that, “just because they have a few people from Shingal in their ranks” did not mean that the force had any representative authority.235

In an interview with the Kurdish satellite channel Rûdaw, when asked about the presence of the PKK and YBS in Sinjar, the spokesperson for President Barzani simply equivocated the YBS with the PKK and argued that they shared the same ideology.236 When lobbed uncharacteristically pressing follow-ups by the Kurdish media interviewer about the legitimacy of the YBS and how Yezidis largely supported them as rescuers, the Spokesperson

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234 “Kurdish Presidency Says Rojava Peshmerga More Legitimate than YBS.” Rûdaw
235 Ibid
still argued that the only legitimate forces are those who worked within the “framework of [the] Kurdistan Regions armed forces.”\footnote{Ibid} Further, he appealed to a meeting that had occurred close to the time between Yezidi leaders and Prime Minister Nechervan Barzani, and argued that their views represented all Yezidis. He asked, “Did you see all these statements that \textit{all the people from Shingal} [emphasis added] are saying that this force should leave the area? The Yezidi Mir, Yezidi Spiritual Council, Shingal’s mayoral council, and the Nineveh provincial council.”\footnote{Ibid} However, notably, the Yezidi Mir (Emir) is based in Shaykhan and even largely in the diaspora in Germany. Moreover, groups like the Nineveh provincial council and Shingal’s mayoral council had developed close PDK ties over the previous three decades of the government’s deliberate effort to build dependence.\footnote{Barber, "The KRG’s Relationship with the Yazidi Minority" \textit{NRT}. To quote Barber: “Shingal’s “mayors” (qaymaqam), including the current one, are never elected by the local people, but are appointed by the party and are, of course, always party loyalists. Despite the fact that the KDP completely dominated Shingal, it remained one of Iraq’s least developed and most marginalized districts.”}

In March, Prime Minister Barzani, in an effort to gain support against the PKK and galvanize Kurdish unity, met with the Yezidi leaders, including Prince Tahseen Beg, in Duhok.\footnote{Dolamari, Mewan. "PM Barzani: PKK Should Leave Shingal like Peshmerga Left Kobani." \textit{Kurdistan 24}, March 14, 2017.} On behalf of the government, he made three key promises, including working harder to rescue remaining Yezidi captives of IS, to seek to have international actors officially recognize the Yezidi crisis as a genocide, and to start rebuilding the devastated Sinjar City, but cited the presence of the PKK as a hindrance.\footnote{Ibid} He employed familial rhetoric and drew an allusion to KRG intervention in the besieged Syrian Kurdish city of Kobani, saying, “when our brothers in Syria needed our help, we sent Peshmerga forces to help free Kobani [from IS].”\footnote{Ibid} He continued by appealing to how, when asked, the
Peshmerga left “without imposing ourselves,” and called on the PKK to follow the same pattern in the Sinjar area. The Yezidi Emir Tahseen Beg is cited as praising the KRG.243 The article finally cites that Prime Minister Barzani appealed to Yezidis to stay in Kurdistan, saying that they could be protected there.244

But, along with even Kurdish media questioning the claims of the KRG, some competing and even unexpected narratives also continued to find purchase, including other attempts to co-opt, and displayed that Yezidis did not universally adopt pro-Kurdish inclusionism. An article quotes an interview with one of the “senior leaders” in the all-Yezidi YBS militia in which he said that Yezidis did “not accept a merger with the Kurdistan Region and their fight is to preserve their Iraqi identity [emphasis added].”245 Like Haider Shesho’s Yezidi militia, the YBS was also funded for some time under the al-Ḥashd al-Sha’aby PMF/PMU militia scheme run from Baghdad. The YBS leader went further and accused the KRG-run Roj Peshmerga Force of Syrian Kurds stationed in Snuny of targeting Yezidis instead of the PKK.246 Moreover, he accused the Peshmerga as intending to “merge the Shingal [Sinjar] region into the Kurdistan Region,” and followed with a call for the “Iraqi government and Iraqi people to stand by the Iraqi Yezidis in Shingal.”247

A month later, in April 2017, the Turkish Air Force conducted coordinated air strikes against the PKK and affiliate YPG and YBS forces on and around Sinjar Mountain and in the Kurdish Rojava region in Syria (See Photographs 27 & 28). During the attacks, five KRG Peshmerga were inadvertently killed and nine wounded, but the narrative from Arbīl, instead

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244 Dolamari, Mewan. "PM Barzani: PKK Should Leave Shingal like Peshmerga Left Kobani." Kurdistan 24
245 "Yezidi Commander: PKK Trained Us to Protect Our Iraqi Identity." Rûdaw, March 6, 2017.
246 Ibid
247 "Yezidi Commander: PKK Trained Us to Protect Our Iraqi Identity." Rûdaw
of being directed at Turkey, turned sharply to the PKK, the YPG, and even the all-Yezidi YBS, ironically again invoking an unjustifiably “imposed presence.” Despite Turkey overtly violating the same threshold of international sovereignty and killing KRG troops, the PDK issued a statement: “Once again, we remind our people and all the other parties of the fact that this incident or any of such kind is due to the inappropriate imposed presence [emphasis added] of the PKK in the Kurdistan Region, which has not brought any benefits, only chaos.”

The KRG Ministry of Peshmerga fell in step and also used similar language: “We also announce that all the trouble is due to the PKK’s presence in the area and their presence has brought headache and trouble to the region’s people and the Kurdistan Region.”

The leader of the ruling Syrian Kurdish party PYD also made a claim toward a competing Kurdish nationalism, denouncing the airstrikes and lobbing that, “this attack does not scare the Kurdistan nation.”

The KRG developed a pattern of deflecting Kurdish blame and culpability and repeatedly employing other reductive pro-Kurdish binaries like anti-Arabism and anti-Iraqism as alternative narratives, even through Yezidis closely tied to the party. But Still notes that, “the generous and expansive state, that wishes to extend universal rights not dependent on birthplace, becomes the nation state that defines itself against others.”

Barir quotes Vian Dakhil, the female, Yezidi Member of the Iraqi Parliament “expand[ing] the scope of the Yezidi narrative of betrayal and abandonment to include the Arab neighbors of Sinjar” in a Turkish newspaper interview. Without addressing the roles Kurdish armed forces and their retreat played, she said of stealing property, killing Yezidis, and kidnapping girls,

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249 Ibid
250 Ibid
251 Still, Derrida and Hospitality, p. 30, Chapter Note 43, p. 48
that, “All these are enormous tragedies, but ISIS is not our only problem – our Arab neighbors betrayed us severely.” Vian is a member of the PDK.

Despite quieting rhetoric in the immediate aftermath of the 2014 tragedy, by the time of the referendum in late 2017, the KRG had also quickly re-engaged earlier patterns of appropriating narrative, trauma, and memory. At a commemorative event for the third anniversary of ISIS’ assault on Sinjar (a major event in the Yezidi community that fell about two months before the vote), KRG Prime Minister Necherivan Barzani (who is also the nephew of former KRG President Masoud Barzani and grandson of the Kurdish nationalist hero Mustafa Barzani) co-opted the catastrophe not only as a Kurdish, and not just Yezidi, issue, but as an issue for Kurdish nationalism and as a campaign platform for the referendum. “I say this, unfortunately, that we [the Kurds] have no hope that Iraq could get better.” He continued, with inclusive “our” language, that “Our past experience with Iraq has led us to this conclusion that there is no way we could defend ourselves and our rights in Iraq.”

“Therefore, in order to maintain and protect our peace and coexistence we will have to show our ambitions to the whole world in a referendum.” Barzani said that the Yezidi massacre that the event was remembering was undeniably a genocide, but went even further to appropriate both the suffering and the ethnic targeting of Ṣaddām’s Anfal campaign, which was aimed at Kurds more broadly, and co-opted the Yezidi voice: “The voice of Shingal in this referendum is very important because it is the voice of the Anfal genocide and the voice of the pains of our people,” said Barzani, and, like a paternal caretaker, continued, “The KRG still feels the pain of what happened three years ago.” “The KRG will do its best to reduce the pain of what happened to our beloved Yezidis.”

253 “PM Barzani: Kurds Lost All Hope with Baghdad, Must Protect Themselves as a State.” Rudaw, August 3, 2017.
254 Ibid
255 Ibid
However, also on the third anniversary of the Sinjar massacre, a Yezidi man told a non-Kurdish media source, Reuters, that “The Kurds and the Iraqi Government are fighting for Sinjar and we are paying the price.” Yet, the same report quotes another Yezidi, but notably a politician in Sinjar, the Mayor, as again deflecting to an anti-Iraqi binary, blaming the former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki on the grounds that al-Maliki was in power at the time ISIS attacked.\(^{256}\)

At the same time as it resumed narratives of co-option and appropriation, the KRG also breathed new fire into development rhetoric in a similar pattern to how it announced its plans for educational expansion in Sinjar in elections prior to the crisis. In an interview with a Turkish news outlet, the KRG’s Minister of Housing and Reconstruction announced (two months before the referendum) that the KRG, in partnership with the Iraqi government, was going to reconstruct 2,000 destroyed homes in the Sinjar area in 2018.\(^{257}\) He cited the economic crisis as the reason that the KRG had not previously had the budget to help develop the “Kurdistani areas” outside the region, like Sinjar.

But Yezidi resistance to the narrative of familial and Kurdish inclusion and the overt co-opting and politicization of events like the genocide memorial date sparked backlash. Some Yezidis targeted the mountaintop offices of the Barzani Charity Foundation, which had been accused of giving food and support on a partial basis and was perceived by some Yezidis as being another political means of extending PDK influence and dependence (such as providing food and salaries) among an already vulnerable and exploited population. At the same time that the KRG Prime Minister Nechervan Barzani (the grandson of the Barzani after whom the charity is named) was campaigning for the referendum on the third anniversary of the ISIS attack, with tensions and politicization high in the run up, young people affiliated

\(^{257}\) KRG to Build Thousands of Homes in Shingal next Year.” Rûdaw, August 6, 2017.
with the PKK, who were likely Yezidis, attempted to tear down the KRG flag at the charity’s distribution facility on Sinjar Mountain, prompting a clash with KRG-SF.258

In late 2016, the BBC had interviewed a Yezidi teacher who said, “There is no future for the Yazidis in Kurdistan,” a sentiment that strongly contradicted the prevailing discourse that the KRG presented in the period between the 2014 crisis and which culminated in the 2017 referendum.259 Other minorities, including Christian groups and al-Ḥashd al-Sha’aby militias in the Nineveh plains also decried inclusion under the Kurdish umbrella.260 Nevertheless, the KRG pressed forward, seizing the politically expedient moment to conduct a vote even in disputed territories that it had only come to control after ISIS weakened the GoI’s capacity to project influence.

The Kurdistan Independent and High Referendum and Electoral Commission (IHREC) that was set up to run the vote was also chaired by President Barzani whose term had expired in 2015, but remained in power.261 The official question and methodology of vote was also telling. “Do you want the Kurdistan Region and the Kurdistani areas outside the Region to become an independent state?” read the official ballot in Kurdish, Arabic, Assyrian, and Turkmen, and presented a binary ‘yes’ or ‘no’ choice.262 The referendum was scheduled to be held in areas outside of the administrative region, only if local authorities “requested” it. However, the deliberate effort of the PDK to build political foundations in

258 “PKK-Affiliated Forces Attack Humanitarian Organisation BCF." BAS News English, August 3, 2017. BAS News is an explicitly Kurdish online-only news outlet. The article cited that “A group of PKK-affiliated armed forces attacked…,” while other informal reports indicated that the people involved were a small group of disgruntled and disenfranchised Yezidis, possibly youth. Irrespective, the Yezidi sentiment of mistrust toward an overt Kurdish presence was a driving factor.
locations had developed over years in disputed territories like Sinjar led to many “requests.” In early September, the election commission announced that it would conduct voting in Sinjar and oil-rich Kirkuk.

In addition to extending the mantle of the conceptualization of the Kurdish home to disputed physical voting locations, the commission also created a website through which members of the Kurdish diaspora were eligible to vote electronically in absentia. The system was only open to citizens of the KR-I or “Kurdistani territories that are not organized under KRI” who lived abroad (it could not be accessed from within the region), and required proof of citizenship, like notably a Food Ration (PDS) card or an Iraqi Passport and asked the same binary ‘yes’ or ‘no’ question.263

Derrida, speaking in the 1990s, discussed the rapidly expanding ability of telephone systems and the internet (and everything they represent) in changing the face of public and private communication and the borders of the home, the ability to host, and importantly, the question of the State’s role in policing and controlling the then uncharted domain of hospitality and the inviolable home.264 In the Kurdish referendum, the Election Commission’s setup of an internet-based registration and voting system that could only be accessed from outside the Kurdistan Region was a significant step in projecting the same threshold of hospitality that it had physically to Yezidi IDPs, in this case to a diaspora. More importantly, it was a deeper reflection of the deliberate effort that the government was making in the referendum to redefine both the space of hosting and its inextricable link to also defining who was foreign and who was family. A total of 5.34 million people were eligible to vote in areas in which the referendum would be held, including the formal KR-I (Duhok, Arbîl, Sulaymāniyyah, and Halabja Governorates), ‘Kurdistani areas outside the KR-I,’ and the

263 “Referendum eVote Registration Begins for Diaspora.” Rûdaw, September 1, 2017.
264 Derrida, Of Hospitality, pp. 45-73
diaspora. Over 1.9 million people were eligible to vote in the disputed “Kurdistani” areas outside of the KR-I, including 890,000 in Kirkuk and 218,000 in Nineveh, which included Sinjar.\textsuperscript{265} 150,000 were expected to vote in the diaspora.\textsuperscript{266}

The election commission centered its referendum operations in Nineveh in the Yezidi town of Shaykhan, and the commission “hired” 1,400 people to work on the day of the vote.\textsuperscript{267} The head of the election office in Shaykhan said people could vote using identity or food ration (PDS) cards.\textsuperscript{268} The office leader also confirmed that IDPs being hosted in camps, including the quarter million hosted Yezidis in camps, were eligible to vote, an operation overseen by the Duhok Office.\textsuperscript{269} At the time of the referendum, the area just south of Sinjar Mountain was controlled by al-Ḥashd al-Sha’aby militias, the northeast of the mountain was controlled by the KRG, and the western side of the mountain and northwestern areas around the town of Khanasour were still dominated by the PKK and its affiliate groups. The Mayor of Sinjar City, in the same report, told \textit{Rûdaw} that the government would not open polling areas in PKK controlled territory, but had plans to transport people from areas dominated by other actors to KRG areas, like Snuny and Sinjar City, in order to allow participation.\textsuperscript{270}

However, other factors undermined and weakened the implied claims that the referendum was genuinely and primarily an ethno-nationalist venture founded on unadulterated self-determination. Before the vote and before central Iraqi forces retook control of Kirkuk in October after the referendum, an article in \textit{Forbes} cited that the KRG had control of a fifth of all Iraqi oil. It went further to conclude, at the time, “If the Kurds do

\textsuperscript{266} \textit{Ibid}
\textsuperscript{267} "Referendum Officials to Open 140 Voting Stations in Nineveh, Shingal." \textit{Rûdaw}, September 22, 2017.
\textsuperscript{268} \textit{Ibid}
\textsuperscript{269} \textit{Ibid}
\textsuperscript{270} \textit{Ibid}
declare and maintain independence within the borders that the KRG currently controls, Kurdistan’s oil industry would be among the top 10 largest in OPEC.”

Yezidi leadership, on the other hand, including leaders in power centers like Shaykhan, instead opted to support the wave toward Kurdish nationalism. The Yezidi-dominated village of Ba’ashīqah, source of the venerated religious Qawwals, was one of the areas that “requested” to take part in Kurdish referendum. One of the town council members, interviewed by Kurdish media while wearing a traditional Kurdish Cili Kûrdî outfit, said that all of the 47 villages in the area, which notably included Arab villages, “requested” that the council vote to take part in the referendum. He cited that “Bashiqa is known for its brotherhood and coexistence.” The article also interviewed the female Yezidi Member of the Iraqi Parliament, Vian Dakhil. She predicted that most Yezidis would vote to be a part of Kurdistan, but invoked a rhetoric of covering and safety which she notably extended to disputed Sinjar, saying, “Here at least, the stability, safety, prosperity, and development that exists here [Kurdistan] can also be expanded to Shingal.” As noted before, in addition to being an MP, Dakhil is also a member of the ruling Kurdish PDK.

But, in the face of continued language of stability and safety, actors around the KRG instead condemned the referendum’s timing and purported impartiality. The UN Security Council issued a statement expressing “concern” for the “potentially destabilizing impact” of the referendum and cited the ongoing war against ISIS and the continued needs of Iraq’s three million refugees and IDPs, like the hosted Yezidis. In the face of the referendum’s clear attempt at redefining the locations of thresholds and the Kurdish home, the statement went

273 Ibid
further to emphasize the Security Council’s “continuing respect for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and unity of Iraq.”

A month before the vote, the Resident UN Humanitarian Coordinator had said that the UN would support Kurdistan because of their “exemplary” and internationally noticed hospitality, and had specifically cited the joint need for reconstruction to begin in Sinjar. However, as the referendum drew closer it became clear that dissenting voices, like those of a number of Yezidis, and even the hospitality arrangement were being ignored and co-opted as platforms for the nationalist cause, specifically outside actors started to distance themselves or come out against the plebiscite.

Furthermore, tensions heightened rapidly between Baghdad and Arbīl and started moves that would come to change territorial control from the KRG to ISF in all of the disputed areas by the end of the year (See Appendix: Maps). The GoI cited the 2005 Iraqi Constitution as grounds for the illegality of the vote, but the KRG fired back that Baghdad had failed to enforce substantial parts of it, specifically the requirement in Article 140 to hold referendums in disputed areas like Sinjar and Kirkuk by the end of 2007. Moreover, Arbīl continued to appeal to longstanding patterns in Iraq of building central dependence that recalled the policies the Ba’ath had used to set themselves up as breadwinners and providers (a tactic that the KRG had also simultaneously used to its advantage for years with Sinjari Yezidis). Speaking on disputes over salaries and oil revenue percentages, KRG President Barzani asked of Baghdad, “What constitutional article gave you the right to cut the bread of Kurdistan?”

276 "UNDP in Iraq: We’ve Promised the Kurdish Government They Can Count on Us." Rūdaw, August 15, 2017.
277 "Iraqi Supreme Court Rules to Suspend Kurdish Referendum until Final Ruling." Rūdaw, September 18, 2017.
Hospitality towards IDPs and refugees and the referendum’s goal of redefining thresholds of control and hosting also closely coincided with themes of the home and the family that have pervaded Kurdish politics for decades. In some cases, the ties are literal. Mustafa Barzani, the widely revered Kurdish nationalist hero who is often depicted as a mountain resistance soldier and dressed in Kurdish garb, was descended from the Barzan tribe, whose religious Shaykh’s had first hosted refugees and fragmented tribes in the early 1900s. His son, Masoud Barzani, was the President of the KRG until November 2017, and galvanized his party, the PDK, into the ruling embodiment of Kurdishness over his tenure. Several of Masoud’s close family members also hold key government positions, a reality that receives regular criticism. His son, Masrour Barzani, is the head of Kurdish security services and, as previously noted, his nephew, Nechervan Barzani, is the KRG’s Prime Minister.

President Barzani also set himself up to be a paternal protector and even used language that evoked images of a savior. In a Rûdaw article quoting a Saudi news channel’s interview with Barzani, he said that his “duties will finish after independence is achieved” and, in a messianic appeal, that he “was born for the independence of Kurdistan.”278 However, he also took the opportunity to say that he would not allow anyone in his family to run for President.279

The lead up to the referendum reflected the wider tension inherent in the Yezidi hospitality arrangement in that the space in which they were hosted, despite its conditionality, heavy co-option, and excessive discourse, was superior than any other available choice. This reality was part of the reason why co-option developed so blatantly and was transactional and expectant to such a high degree. Yezidis, like other Kurds, had to navigate between a clearly superior living arrangement of genuinely better safety, inclusion, and acceptance in the

279 Ibid
Kurdistan Region, but a constant awareness of the reality that being hosted in that particular home came with its own expected acceptance of a specific and guiding narrative. The narrative also required the cost that memory of particularly traumatic events and their histories needed to submit to a parent framework and if they did not fit, the details and emphasis of the memories needed to change, not the scheme.

While Yezidis represented the largest bloc of subjects that the pattern affected, other minority discourses also faced the same challenges. A Rûdaw article highlighted a group of Kurdish women’s’ activists who notably issued a statement in support of the referendum. They recognized inclusive changes, like how women had become fighters in the Peshmerga, battled ISIS, had formed all-female brigades, and had become political leaders and journalists, but reserved that “the government, the system, and the culture is patriarchal.”

However, despite cautioning against nationalism and other limiting factors overshadowing gender equality, the group positively looked toward the potential Kurdish state also as an opportunity to fight some inherent power structures, like a “legacy of colonialism.”

The new Kurdish nationalism also represented one of the best opportunities in recent decades for Yezidis to find an inclusive place in a newly defined ‘home.’ However, the masters of the house had contributed to Yezidis being in a dependent relationship of power and the same crisis that resulted in the hospitality exchange became a platform redefining the thresholds and borders at the same moment that the guest crossed them. Crisis and conditionality have worked in tandem to keep Yezidis as hosted guests.

Three days before the referendum, at a rally for the ‘yes’ vote, KRG President Masoud Barzani addressed a reported crowd of 40,000 waving KRG flags. He downplayed accusations that the KRI was dangerous to its neighbors, and the news listed him as directing

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281 Ibid
“the Peshmerga to be prepared to “pay whatever cost” necessary to protect Kurdistan.” He was quoted using rhetoric against Turkey and Iran, saying, “You have punished us for 100 years. Are you not tired yet?” and again invoked a self-sacrificing, savior-laden, messianic appeal: “If you want to go back to punishment, come punish me, and leave the people of Kurdistan.” In the same speech in which he said, “Either we live a life of subordination, or a free life,” Barzani also highlighted the hospitality of the KRG, saying, “displaced Iraqis are “our guests,” and “their problems are in Fallujah and Baghdad” where the Iraqi government does not want to receive them or has problems letting them go home. Further, while thanking the international coalition against ISIS, he instead praised the Peshmerga, “but it was us who shed blood.”

At a press conference the day before the referendum, Barzani was reported discussing genocides that Iraq had inflicted on the Kurds and said, “only independence can prevent past tragedies from happening again.” He also continued, “We are neighbours with Iraq from this moment on.”

For many Sinjari Yezidis, for many who had been trapped, or had family members killed or captured, or who felt abandoned, or fled, these statements were tough to hear. Furthermore, for the quarter million Yezidis, particularly Sinjaris, who had now been displaced for three years, the prospects of leaving the ‘guest’ dependency relationship remained as slim as ever, despite such ostensibly laced language of ‘inclusion.’ Disputes over controlling and dominating Sinjar meant that even staying in tents remained a superior option than facing still-shattered infrastructure, factional territoriality, and the prospected fears of a repeated genocide.

A 63-year-old Iranian Kurd who had been fighting “on the mountains for 43 years” showing solidarity with Kurdish referendum said, deliberately in Kurdish, “the struggle of our fathers is about to bear fruit.” But, for Yezidis, the pains of the community against a backdrop of 74 genocides and repeated historical marginalization still foreshadowed a long road ahead of being dependent guests of majority power holders as they redefined the borders of their home and the conditions of their hospitality.

Chapter 3 - Yezidis and Home / Power and the Future

On 25 September 2017, representing a 72 percent turnout, 3.09 million people, including the diaspora, voted in the referendum, with 93 percent in favor of leaving Iraq and forming an independent Kurdistan. The vote occurred largely without violence or clashes. However, the attempt made by the Kurds to move toward redefining the borders, thresholds, and family and provider inclusiveness of a new ‘Kurdistan’ home prompted forceful responses and tensions over the definition of the place of thresholds and hospitality. The day after, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi demanded that the KRG hand over control of its airports to the central Iraqi authorities and Turkish President Erdogan threatened a trade blockade, which would notably cut off a large portion of the Kurdish food supply and oil revenues, affecting the KRG’s historical ability to project itself as a provider and host. However, the KRG refused. Four days after the referendum, in a move to reassert its mastery and control the doors in the form of borders, the GoI ordered the stopping of all international flights to and from the KR-I airports in Arbil and Sulaymāniyyah.

Protesting the move as “collective punishment,” KRG Prime Minister Nechervan Barzani notably appealed to the hospitality of the Kurdish region as opposed to the inadequate master of the house in Baghdad. He “added that the Kurdish airports are used to host the 1.8 million displaced Iraqis who were not allowed to visit Baghdad when they fled their homes caused by the war against ISIS.” Rhetoric and themes of hospitality, family, and the home continued to dominate the binary discourse that evolved in the weeks after the

referendum. The central government continued to assert its influence over the boundaries of the home and officially requested Iran and Turkey to only deal with Baghdad in matters relating to borders, imports and exports, and business. According to the Huffington Post, in 2012 the economy of Turkish exports alone to the Iraqi Kurdish region totaled USD$13 billion and construction firms had over USD$30 billion in contracts, representing major sectors of the small economy. If followed through, shutting the borders down would catastrophically undercut the KRG’s ability to exercise hosting and paternal power in dependent networks.

Additionally, by early October the GoI, Iran, and Turkey all threatened to take coordinated action in stopping Kurdish petroleum and gas exports if the referendum results were not canceled. Turkey, Iran, and Iraq (along with Syria) all share the common perceived threat of having significant Kurdish minority populations and face the political potential that if the Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum was successful it could prompt a domino effect towards Kurdish separatism in each of the countries. Moreover, the oil export revenues that the KRG had relied upon since the PDK consolidated dominance in the 1990s were the tap through which the party had built its dependence and allegiance networks, including among Yezidis.

Kurdish media had presented an angry Turkish President Erdogan threatening to “close” the “valve” of major oil exports from the KR-I to Turkey, threatening to shut down the border crossing, and AFP citing Erdogan calling the referendum “illegitimate.” However, it also juxtaposed the rhetoric with KRG President Barzani speaking for Kurdistan,

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290 “Iraq Officially Demands Turkey, Iran Deal Exclusively with Baghdad on Oil, Borders.” Rûdaw, October 7, 2017.
292 “Kurdistan Erdogan: Iraq, Iran, Turkey to Decide Together on Shutting down Kurdistan’s Oil.” Rûdaw, October 5, 2017.
293 “Turkey’s Erdogan Threatens to Shut off Oil Pipeline, to Close Border.” Rûdaw, September 25, 2017.
saying, “We want to be a good neighbor.”

But, both the Kurdish media and KRG officials were also accused of vilifying Baghdad and its efforts to reinforce its sovereignty and mastery over the federated region. A GoI statement within days of the referendum said, “The central government assuming control of land and air borders in the Kurdistan Region is not to starve, prevent funds, or impose a blockade as claimed by some officials of the Kurdistan Region,” and continued rather that the goal was to exercise “control” of the movements of economic goods and populations across borders.

However, the KRG also added fuel to the fire of the tensions between Baghdad. Further displays of hospitality reflected competing claims for control, the power to define, and the power to name. Less than two weeks after the referendum, and a week after the airports were shut down by Baghdad, the Kurdish leader, former President of Iraq, and leader of the rival Kurdish minority political party PUK, Jalal Talabani, died in the diaspora in Germany. Kurds affectionately refer to him as mam Jalal, meaning “uncle Jalal,” and his power-sharing presidency and diplomatic skills in central Iraq gave platform to the Kurds. However, in an ironic ceremony and hospitality exchange at a disputed threshold, Talabani’s funeral occurred on the tarmac of the same international airport in his Kurdish home city of Sulaymāniyyah that had just been closed by the central Iraqi government. Talabani’s coffin, with a full KRG Peshmerga parade and gun salute, sat in front of an Iraqi Airways plane, the only commercial ones allowed to fly, and was draped in a highly visible KRG, not Iraqi, flag. The Kurdish news report presented a specific narrative when it interviewed a Kurdish Iranian man who was quoted saying that it felt to him like, “I lost my parents again,” and KRG President Barzani, attending the funeral, said, “My dear brother President Mam Jalal, I will never forget your brotherhood.”

294 Ibid
296 “Kurdistan Bids Farewell to Great Uncle Jalal Talabani.” Rûdaw, October 6, 2017.
Husayn’s army to help him oust Talabani’s PUK from Arbil and cement PDK paternal dominance. The orchestration and the hosting of the event sparked outrage, with several Iraqi television channels halting coverage once they had realized the coffin had been covered in the KRG flag. A member of the Iraqi parliament sharply criticized President Barzani, saying that he “was very precise in his insult.”

Yet, despite KRG sentiments that Baghdad was unjustly projecting influence and control and actions like the funeral that protested it, at the same time the KRG had occupied and set itself up as master in disputed territories like Sinjar and oil-rich Kirkuk. KRG-SF had dominated the heavily disputed area of Kirkuk since the ISIS advance of 2014, and prompted by the referendum, within five days the Iraqi Parliament requested that central armed forces be directed to the city to reclaim it (and its oil fields) from Kurdish control. Indeed, in the face of protesting Iraqi imposition of power, Kurdish forces had actually expanded their territory by a peak estimate of 40% during the 2014 ISIS offensive, including to Yezidi-dominated areas like Sinjar and Ba’ashiqah (See Appendix: Maps). With the central Iraqi government focused on actively fighting a protracted war with ISIS, the KRG had set itself up as a liberator, host, and provider. However, while the referendum was the culmination of that window of opportunity, its timing also coincided with a drawdown of the war and the central government and its troops were able to redirect their attention to reclaiming the disputed areas.

On 17 October, central Iraqi armed forces took control of Kirkuk, many of its oilfields, including its two largest, and tore down the KRG flag at the Mayor’s office, which prompted the PUK and PDK to lob accusations against each other of “betrayal.”

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298 Ibid.
same day, central Iraqi forces also retook the Yezidi cities of Sinjar, Ba’ashīqah, and the cities of Makhmour and Rabi’a from the KRG (See Appendix: Maps). However, a local Yezidi armed militia which was registered as a part of the PMF / PMU was notably included in the coalition that went to Sinjar. The Washington Post report cites local residents saying that for the first time in 15 years, the Iraqi flag flew over Sinjar, but the statement is misleading. Sinjar, which is legally in the Nineveh Governorate, has long had the presence of central Iraqi civil services, government offices, and hospitals, and, moreover, Yezidis and other residents not only work as Iraqi police officers, wearing Iraqi uniforms, but also regularly fly the Iraqi flag, despite the fluctuating presence in the past of the KRG (See Photograph 17). Despite the KRG paying political salaries and having security presence, Baghdad (and Mosul, the Nineveh Governorate’s provincial capital) still funded hospitals, agriculture, water and electricity, and police. Schools only became a point of contention in the dispute as they represented the ability to control language, and along with language, the ability to teach certain curriculum and narrative, but when it came to paying for other essential services, the bill was left with Baghdad.

The strange relationship of strategically picking and choosing essential services based on their potential to support Kurdish nationalism (like schools) and ignoring other less strategic services (like infrastructure repair) translated into mixed and uneasy loyalties in the Sinjari Yezidi community towards the KRG, especially in the aftermath of recapturing Sinjar, when little of the city was repaired and few people were allowed to return. Many Yezidis, despite being ethnically Kurdish, and in part because of continued historical prominence of the Arabic language and geophysical proximity to Arab-dominated metropolitan centers like Mosul, had stronger loyalties toward Baghdad and Iraq than the KRG. The Kurdish

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nationalist agenda actively downplayed these sentiments and promoted and equivocated Kurdishness with independent statehood, but continued signs throughout the displacement crisis and the different manifestations of hospitality showed both resistance and outright contradiction to it. Some Yezidis on Sinjar, for example, regularly flew Iraqi flags and claimed Iraqi identity in the face of overt Kurdish attempts to dissuade it both before and after the 2014 ISIS attacks (See Photograph 31).

However, loyalties did not automatically translate toward a wholehearted support of alternative Iraqi-centered identification as central forces re-took control. Historical associations between the Iraqi State, ethnic Arabism, and Sunni Islamification were exacerbated by the 2014 ISIS assault and traumatic memory to such a degree that Yezidi discourses started to look outside the framework of the Kurdish-Iraqi duality. Additionally, while Baghdad had continued to be a civil presence in Sinjar and had funded infrastructure, Nineveh still lagged behind other governorates in funding and state support was less than exemplary. Further, in contrast to the Sunni-dominated Ba’ath era, the Shi’a dominated GoI’s al-Ḥashd al-Sha’aby militia scheme had allowed for an influx of predominantly Iranian Shi’a militias to operate in Iraq and revived earlier historical tensions between Yezidis and Shi’a Muslims as well. Yezidis had throughout history, including up through the Šaddām Ḥusayn era, been associated with the Umayyad Caliph Yazīd ibn Mu’āwiya who is widely perceived by Shi’a Muslims as the murderer of the venerated Shi’a Imam, Hussein ibn ‘Ali. Ibn ‘Ali’s tomb is also in Karbala in southern Iraq, and is a major annual pilgrimage site for Shi’as, who treat the Yezidis with contempt. The al-Ḥashd al-Sha’aby militia scheme provided an additional 60,000 desperately needed troops to drive out ISIS as it declared a caliphate in Iraq. 301 However, by the drawdown of the war, the Shi’a militias were used to clear ISIS

remnants in Nineveh and were eventually a part of the Iraqi forces that retook control of Sinjar in October 2017.

Instead, as mastery of Sinjar changed for the fourth time in three years, alternative narratives re-emerged that opposed the reduction to the oversimplified binary of being either Iraqi or Kurdish. A Yezidi man from Sinjar named Elias gave a telling interview. In a *Washington Post* article, he expresses caution even toward armed Yezidi groups, saying, “I don’t care who holds our city, whether it’s Peshmerga or Iraqis. What we care about is living in peace and to be protected,” and elaborates that, “Everybody claims they care about Sinjar when, in fact, no one did anything for Sinjar. We are just a card they use when they need and then can throw away.”

The article also quotes the Yezidi hero figure and militia commander Haider Shesho, who said, “Unfortunately, again, the forces that were expected to protect the Yazidis left the Yazidis alone without firing a single bullet.”

Despite still being on KRG payroll, Haider Shesho and his forces remained in Sinjar City after the withdrawal of KRG Peshmerga in the morning of 17 October. When the Shi’ā al-Ḥashd al-Sha’āby militias entered Sinjar, apparently in contradiction to an agreement they had previously made, they started to loot Yezidi homes. Foreshadowing some of the major problems that Baghdad’s control of Sinjar will come to pose for Yezidi’s who remained, have returned, or will return, when Shesho reportedly raised the issue of the Shi’a militias looting Yezidi homes with the Iraqi military, commanders cited that they had no authority to stop them.

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302 Morris, et al. "Iraqi Forces Move Deeper into Kurdish-held Areas."
303 Ibid
305 Ibid
306 Ibid
Irrespective of which master of the house controls the Sinjar area, Yezidi interests continue to be relegated within larger agendas. In On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness, Derrida posits that “ethics is […] thoroughly coextensive with the experience of hospitality,” and equivocates the discussion of morality with the treatment of the other that arrives at the border. He takes up the question of the global refugee crisis, the systemic reasons why it has continued to degenerate, and why it is so problematic. In an ambitious move, he argues that the nation-state system is structurally flawed and calls to create entirely new legal and juridico-political spaces in the form of new alternatively cosmopolitan cities of refuge. His proposal is not simply to create new spaces within the existing global political framework, but rather, he says, “we are dreaming of another concept, of another set of rights for the city, of another politics of the city.” Further, “we would ask these new cities of refuge to reorient the politics of the state,” even taking on the bastions of the seemingly inviolable rule of national sovereignty.

In the Yezidi context, ethics takes the form of hospitality in the midst of a burgeoning nationalist movement, a unique example of the same nation-state system Derrida is insistent on destabilizing as inadequate. Derrida says, “I also imagine the experience of cities of refuge as giving rise to a place (lieu) for reflection – for reflection on the questions of asylum and hospitality – and for a new order of law and a democracy to come to be put to the test (expérimentation).” While the cities that Derrida theorizes do not yet exist, the spirit of his call for reflection does. In the Yezidi hospitality exchange, the policies and practices of co-option used by the different nation-states that fluctuated and served as the hosts for Yezidi IDPs show imbalances between conditionality and the ideal. State interests, including

308 Derrida, On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness, p. 8
309 Derrida, On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness, p. 4
310 Derrida, On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness, p. 23
nationalistic, ethno-centric, and territorial expansionism displayed clear patterns of usurping Yezidi interests into wider, reductive understandings that unethically ignored and, worse, co-opted Yezidi trauma, memories, and future durable solutions.

In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida posits that,

“Displaced persons,” exiles, those who are deported, expelled, rootless, nomads, all share two sources of sighs, two nostalgias: their dead ones and their language. *On the one hand*, they would like to return, at least on a pilgrimage, to the places where their buried dead have their last resting place (the last resting place of family here situates the *ethos*, the key habitation for defining home, the city or country where relatives, father, mother, grandparents are at rest in a rest that is the place of immobility from which to measure all the journeys and all the distancings). *On the other hand*, exiles, the deported, the expelled, the rootless, the stateless, lawless nomads, absolute foreigners, often continue to recognize the language, what is called the mother tongue, as their ultimate homeland, and even their last resting place. This was Hannah Arendt’s response on one occasion: she no longer felt German except in language, as though the language were a *remains* of belonging […].

Derrida considers Oedipus (in *Oedipus at Colonus*), who murdered his father and married his mother, as he decides to show hospitality to his daughter/sister Antigone’s happiness and peace by keeping the location of his final burial a secret. He seeks to protect her by cutting off the possibility of spatial grieving, mourning, and memory of the shame of the family’s strange situation. However, Derrida shows that in the same precise moment, Oedipus also inhospitably creates a perpetual, impossible mourning. Without a grave, there is no place for closure, no knowledge of a final resting place and no opportunity for grief. In the same moment, there is both a presence and complete lack of hospitality. Hospitality in general follows that pattern, being both a paradoxical welcome and differentiation. A home that at the same time that it is created, also creates a threshold, a border, and a line that can only be crossed on condition.

The discovery of mass graves and execution sites after the liberation of Sinjar prompted the start of constructing memory, loss, and closure for the Yezidi community, but

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311 Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, pp. 87-89
each was regularly co-opted or, in the very least, effectively prevented either by active narratives or physical and security barriers to return. Yezidis had to construct memory and process grief as guests in a place where the recollection of that memory posed a threat to the hospitality they were being shown.

The different hosting governments and their interests have created a paradox of mourning, the impossibility of mourning, as Derrida describes through Oedipus. The masters of the house, the government and actors who held the keys to the city up until the referendum, who were at the same time the masters of the house for Yezidis in camps across Duhok, had co-opted the moment into Kurdish nationalism. Political infighting between Yezidi and Kurdish militias, who are hailed as heroes, and the KRG authorities, and eventually Iraqi forces and al-Ḥashd al-Sha’aby militias, kept Sinjar City unstable and practically inaccessible for returnees. By the middle of 2017, less than a thousand families had returned to the city itself and little redevelopment had occurred. The result is that Yezidis who wish to mourn have a seemingly permanent preserved and visible memorial of destruction in the form of the uninhabited city with its guardian hosts and their ulterior motives, but at the same time, it is almost entirely inaccessible because of the actions of the same hosts who dispute it. Like Oedipus in his placeless burial, the city haunts as a reminder of failed and co-opted hospitality. To KRG, it is a revenant, living (and ghostly dead) legacy of a withdrawal, re-appropriation, and now failed bid toward nationalistic inclusion. To Yezidis, it is a co-opted memorial to the unnamed and unidentified missing, the kidnapped, the killed, shattered lives, and a perpetual reminder of the conditional rules of hospitality that take the form of flags over the both the home city and the camps. It is a ghost of a home that constantly testifies to the inability to return home, to both physical buildings now destroyed, but also to the closure of grief and memory.
At the same time, Yezidis who are unable to openly process the memory of the 2014 crisis for fear and risk of coming against their host’s sensitive narrative, the place of language as a ‘home,’ as Derrida describes, also remains a linked challenge. In the same pattern that Yezidi ethnic experiences were glossed over and co-opted into the greater Kurdish cause, language in both its literal and thematic senses was also appropriated. In the broader sense, language is inextricably linked to rhetoric and the community’s descriptive ability to articulate its own cultural narrative, which could occur and has occurred also in Kurdish. On the other hand, in the narrow, literal sense, the dominance of the Arabic language in Sinjar was a more direct point of confrontation, as it also represented, via reductive understanding, the persistence of a narrative of Arabism, Islamism, and pro-Iraq sentiments.

In both cases, the KRG dominated the formation of accounts in Kurdish but also made deliberate efforts to literally promote the Kurdish language in general over Arabic and to even suppress the latter, despite protests among Yezidis that it was what they knew and grew up with. In both cases, the efforts were affronts to trusted places of ‘home,’ showing that not only did the hospitality relationship in this case define the borders and thresholds of the home in which Yezidis were hosted, but that it went further to also project and redefine the home from which they fled and to which they cannot realistically return in the near future. Furthermore, any prospect of return has now been complicated by the fact that the home from which Yezidis fled is inevitably shaped and defined differently.

Dikeç observes that “the notion of hospitality, simply because it is almost always taken for granted as implying a desirable quality, invites critical reflection. It is, perhaps, not always liberating and emancipatory, but, on the contrary, may conceal an oppressive aspect beneath its welcoming surface.”

Hospitality, like any other relationship of power, can be abused. But, there is a particularly dangerous aspect and one-sidedness to the ancient

312 Dikeç, “Pera Peras Poros,” pp. 228
relationship, especially in the context of the vulnerabilities and dependencies of guests, and even more so in the form of forced migrants. Derrida’s (and not his alone) cautions are toward a nation-state system that is responsible for hospitality toward the displaced, most often enshrined through legal regimes, but one that is also simultaneously often a contributor to the very factors that give rise to crises. The inherent paradoxes of hospitality, which first defines, names, and differentiates the other, and later sets down conditions for re-acceptance and welcome, reflect systemic challenges in a world where nations do the same to foreigners, refugees, and the displaced.

Derrida also asks of a new concept of hospitality, “How might it be adapted to the pressing urgencies which summon and overwhelm us? How might it respond to unprecedented tragedies and injunctions which serve to constrain and hinder it?” As an example of an unprecedented tragedy, the Yezidi forced migration raises difficult questions at the extreme limits of hospitality. It prompts a discussion of the place of decision making within stress and pressure, not simply between competing ideas, but also the tension of time and historical events. What do ethics and hospitality look like for guests as a nation is legitimately born, as the thresholds and borders of the home are being redefined as the guest crosses them? If the inherent weaknesses in the nation-state system prompted the creation of the crisis, how can the same system be the solution? But, even here, with deconstruction often misunderstood as only allowing total undecidability, Derrida argues that it is in fact the opposite:

“Far from opposing undecidability to decision, I would argue that there would be no decision, in the strong sense of the word, in ethics, in politics, no decision, and thus no responsibility, without the experience of some undecidability. If you don’t experience some undecidability, then the decision would simply be the application of a programme, the consequence of a premiss or of a matrix. So

313 Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, p. 5
a decision has to go through some impossibility in order for it to be a decision.”

For Derrida, the places of *aporia* make decision possible. The Yezidi dilemma is certainly such a place. Competing narratives and contemporary clashes between incipient nationalism and rising global refugee numbers are the apex of tension. Deconstruction helps to understand it better. For Derrida, ultimately:

“It is a question of knowing how to transform and improve the law, and of knowing if this improvement is possible within an historical space which takes place *between* the Law of an unconditional hospitality, offered *a priori* to every other, to all newcomers, *whoever they may be*, and the conditional laws of a right to hospitality, without which *The* unconditional Law of hospitality would be in danger of remaining a pious and irresponsible desire, without form and without potency, and of even being perverted at any moment.”

At the conditional end of the binary in hospitality, reasonable expectations are placed on guests that include agreements, for example, to not violate the laws of the host or country, to not try to harm or destabilize the home, and so forth. However, the holder of power, most clearly, but not exclusively the host, has the ability to define what constitutes instability or harm and it is related to how the same power holder also defines the thresholds of what is foreign, strange, or even enemy. In the case of the KRG relationship with the Yezidis, the state hosts have clearly defined the threshold of hospitality to center around support for a particular narrative of inclusive, big-tent Kurdish ethno-nationalism. If at any point this threshold is crossed, even by simply recalling objectively true memories or carrying the competing ‘home’ of a different language, for example, the guest, the Yezidi, is no longer welcome in the hosted home and transcends that linguistic paradox of the Latin word *hostis*, which means ‘guest’ but also ‘enemy.’

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315 Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, pp. 22-23
On the other hand, toward the extreme of unconditionality, the ancient theory and ideal of hospitality constantly prompts and inspires acceptance of the guest as-is, without so much as committing any violence, without even asking for a name by which to call them or differentiate them. In the Yezidi exchange, host policies drifted toward the binary extreme of conditionality and upset the balance of tension. But, as the imbalance was an artificial appropriation and shift toward expectations and unequal reciprocity, the spirit of unconditionality constantly testified against it, and it could not sustainably last.

Baghdad continued to mount pressure against the KRG and caused the attempt at marrying severely conditional hospitality toward Yezidis with Kurdish ethno-nationalism to break down, and by 1 November KRG President Barzani resigned, deflating the hopes of many Kurds as to the outcome of the referendum and nationhood. The KRG now finds itself in the position of a guest. It remains in heated dispute with Baghdad and violent clashes between Peshmerga on one side and ISF and the PMF/PMU on the other, particularly in disputed areas, remain common. Challenges over appellation also continue, but in this case from the master of the Iraqi house showing conditional hospitality to the Kurds. In the 2018 budget proposal, Baghdad names “the provinces of the [sic] Kurdistan” instead of the officially federated “Kurdistan Region,” embracing a rhetoric of undermining legitimacy and even punishment for the Kurdish guests who disobeyed the rules of being hosted. Moreover, the dependency network that the Kurds had used for decades to promote allegiance to it as master in hospitality relationships also caught up with the time and Baghdad had to reconcile its financial obligation as it planned for the coming year. The network was unsustainable and, as it was largely undergirded by petroleum export revenue, the government in Arbîl had built up a legacy of a massive USD$772 million obligation for

316 “KRG Welcomes Abadi’s Offer to Pay Kurdish Salaries, Costs Baghdad $772m.” Rûdaw, November 1, 2017.
salaries. Arbîl listed 1.25 million people on salary, and of that total, 455,000 were police and
civil servants and a quarter million were KRG Peshmerga and state security (Asayish),
leaving about 525,000 on the list as undisclosed. With a 2017 estimated Kurdish
population at around 6.65 million, even the published number represented, by the time of the
referendum, that close to a fifth of all Kurds were on some level of permanent government
payroll. In negotiations with the troubled KRG, Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi offered for
Baghdad to shoulder and appropriate the responsibility.

The pattern of paternal dependence and reciprocal allegiance had traces as far back as
the Kurdish tribal emirates, to the dismay of Kurds was reinforced particularly through
Ṣaddām’s Ba’ath era, but then became a tool for the KRG itself used to project influence,
particularly in disputed areas. However, out of the collapse of the longstanding protective
narrative of Kurdish hosting emerged the of imagery of abandonment for all Kurds, a feeling
that Yezidis have well known. Kurds and Yezidis alike are now together facing the
restructuring of borders and ideas of the home around them.

However, divisions still exist in the Yezidi community toward future prospects and
ideas of home, especially between the opinions of Yezidis in KRG-dominated areas and
Sinjaris. Before the referendum, an International Organization for Migration (IOM) study
interviewed both IDPs from and people who had already returned to (returnees) Sinjar
City. Unsurprisingly, insecurity was cited as the primary reason among IDPs originally
from Sinjar for not returning to the area and about half said that the area in which they are

317 Ibid
318 United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). World Factbook - Iraq. Report. 2017. Population estimate for all of Iraq, including the KRI, as of July 2017 was 39,192,111. Kurdish population calculated at 17% of total Iraqi population.
319 "KRG Welcomes Abadi’s Offer to Pay Kurdish Salaries, Costs Baghdad $772m." Rûdaw
321 Sometimes referred to in Arabic as Markaz Sinjar
currently displaced and hosted is safer. However, more importantly, the report remarked that “There is no consensus among interviewed IDPs and returnees about which actor is the most appropriate to foster cohesion in Markaz Sinjar.”

Half of IDPs listed the KRG as the “preferred actor” with tribal leaders (39%) and religious leaders (30%) scoring second and third, respectively and the GoI scored second to last among IDPs, with only 21%.

However, among returnees surveyed, like Yezidis actually living in Sinjar, the KRG scored only 26% and, while still outpacing the GoI at 12%, 61% of people surveyed nevertheless preferred an international actor. IDPs, like Yezidis hosted in camps, largely reported broad support, either somewhat or very satisfied with the KRG, Peshmerga, and Asayish (KRG state security), with over 90% in each category. However, over half of returnees were either neutral or unsupportive of the same three. A majority of IDPs were unsatisfied with militias, while an overwhelming majority of returnees were either neutral or actually supportive of them.

Despite the same host in both cases, the respective experiences of Yezidi IDPs shown hospitality by the KRG in camps mostly in the Duhok area differed significantly to the experiences of Yezidi returnees in Sinjar. IDPs, who were also from Sinjar and experienced the same atrocities, generally looked more favorably on their Kurdish hosts, testifying to the relative effectiveness of the KRG co-opting and appropriating inclusive rhetoric and policies. Meanwhile, Yezidis in Sinjar were more skeptical of the KRG’s narrative and rhetoric, and over the three years between the ISIS assault and the central Iraqi re-takeover of Sinjar, had

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322 International Organization for Migration (IOM). "Obstacles to Return in Retaken Areas of Iraq." March 2017, p. 48
323 Ibid, p. 49
324 Ibid, p. 49
325 Ibid, p. 49
326 Ibid, p. 49
327 Ibid, p. 49
328 Ibid, p. 49
more direct experience of how the same nationalist focus actually manifested in a disputed area.

Yezidi returnees in Sinjar tended to look much more favorably, or at least did not have the same negative perceptions, toward militias like the PKK and all-Yezidi YBS. The repeated efforts of the KRG and the Kurdish media to present the PKK and its affiliate militias as the source of instability and a lack of returns for hosted Yezidi IDPs in camps appears to have had a collective effect on galvanizing support for the KRG among Yezidi IDPs in camps as legitimate. At the same time, the same rhetoric seemed to spawn an alternative Yezidi narrative in Sinjar and pushed the rhetoric outside of the binaries. Yezidi returnees embraced a now popular sentiment of preferring to trust an international actor.

Furthermore, even since 2003, issues like land tenure challenges that found their roots in Ba’athist Arabization, collectivization, and control policies still continue to haunt Yezidis. In Sinjar, the lack of access to titles and deeds still remains a prohibitive barrier for returns. Ongoing territorial disputes, like those outlined in Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution have not only not been effectively resolved, but rather made worse by the different governments and actors repeatedly co-opting the Yezidi area into larger nationalistic disputes, effectively tabling smaller issues like land re-acquisition and compensation schemes. Yezidi returns to Sinjar also remain affected by an unprecedented schism that developed between ethnic Arabs and the minority community. As early as 2015, not long after mass grave sites had been discovered, returning Yezidis were accused of taking revenge and killing 21 people from Arab tribes in the village of Sibaya near Sinjar.

While the KRG’s conditional hospitality clearly proved to be problematic to the Yezidi community, the future prospect of the same methodology in the hands of the central

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329 UN HABITAT. *Emerging Land Tenure Issues.*
Iraqi government does not provide superior prospects. Tendencies and mechanisms toward co-option are still in place and Yezidis remain as a hosted minority group that is often absorbed into larger affairs. Still concludes that considering the philosophical idea of hospitality can, instead of giving place to rest, “interrupt what might otherwise petrify into fixed political (op)positions.”

The paradoxes and tension inherent in hospitality prompt decision precisely because they do not allow rest in oversimplified binaries.

Conclusion

[…] for deconstruction is a relentless, if sometimes indirect, discourse on democracy, on a democracy to come. Derrida’s democracy is a radically pluralistic polity that resists the terror of an organic, ethnic, spiritual, communitarian unity, of the natural, native bonds of the nation- (natus, natio) state, which grind to dust everything that is not kin of the ruling kind and genus (Geschlecht). He dreams of a nation without nationalistic or nativist closure, of a community without identity. His is a nonidentical community that cannot say “I” or “we,” a “we” that is not constituted by its fortification against, but by its invention of, the other.

Yezidis were first named as foreigners and others as far back as the 1100s and, over time, the group’s distancing progressively established them as subjects of disproportionate relationships of power. Those relationships led to persecutions and also provided opportunities for majority actors to co-opt Yezidis into larger interests, further harming the community’s self-determination. The 2014 ISIS attack on the community pushed the historical patterns to a breaking point, culminating in the largest physical population shift that Yezidis have ever faced and an equally unprecedented relationship of hospitality that created a platform for wholesale appropriation into Kurdish ethno-nationalism and territorial expansion.

For a majority of the community, and for a majority of displaced Yezidis, continued presence in the Kurdistan Region is still the likeliest prospect for a durable solution. For

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331 Still, *Derrida and Hospitality*, p. 188
many Yezidis, it has been home for some time, but for nearly a quarter million, tents have become the new norm. However, the momentum toward Kurdish nationalism has waned and the future of the agenda into which Yezidis have been co-opted is uncertain. Even if displaced Yezidis are given the opportunity to return home, they continue to face barriers as central Iraqi forces now control Sinjar.

Oversimplified binaries like host and guest, Iraqi and Kurd, foreign and family, and home and away, are blurred and do not adequately capture the challenges that Yezidis face in this unprecedented forced displacement. For many, in the tension between the dialectics, other emerging options are promoted, like the creation of a Yezidi homeland, or a shift toward international protection. However, like Derrida’s concepts of cosmopolitan cities of refuge, the prospects for these alternatives seems to remain slim. Instead Yezidi forced migrants continue to face other actors and interests who drift toward a tendency to reduce and co-opt their situation.

Engaging Derrida’s deconstruction of hospitality and foreignness combats that tendency. It shows that the Yezidi situation cannot be understood through oversimplified dichotomies and that doing so is harmful to the community, especially in light of trauma, memory, future threats of co-option, and the prospects for one day returning home. As Kurdish nationalism shifts, a new threshold for hospitality will eventually emerge, and the form it will take is as yet unknown. However, clear patterns have shown that it will invariably involve reductions and appropriation. Instead, there remains a need to critically engage the future Yezidi situation from a deconstructive standpoint of holding them as guests in tension.


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UN HABITAT. Emerging Land Tenure Issues Among Displaced Yazidis from Sinjar, Iraq. 2015.


Photograph 1: A sketch of the Lalish Valley and tomb of Shaykh ‘Adi. Yezidis consider the temple complex their holiest site and have attempted seek refuge in the secluded foothills for hundreds of years, though it has been repeatedly sacked and desecrated. From: Newman, John P. The Thrones and Palaces of Babylon and Nineveh - From Sea to Sea - A Thousand Miles on Horseback. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1876, p. 398.

Photograph 4: A sketch of one of the Sanjak. The Sanjak are brass standards that Yezidis regard as representative of their deity, Melek Tawus, the Peacock Angel. They are rarely, if ever, seen by outsiders, but used by Yezidi religious Qawwals as they travel around to collect alms. From: Badger, George Percy, (Reverend). *The Nestorians and Their Rituals: With the Narrative of a Mission to Mesopotamia and Coordistan in 1842-1844, and of a Late Visit to Those Countries in 1850; Also, Researches into the Present Condition of the Syrian Jacobites, Papal Syrians, and Chaldeans, and an Inquiry into the Religious Tenets of the Yezeedees*. Vol. 1. London: Joseph Masters, 1852, p. 124.
Photograph 5: A lithograph plate depicting the main door to the Yezidi temple and place of pilgrimage in Lalish which is also the tomb of the venerated Shaykh ‘Adi. Note the prominent black snake to the right of the door among several other symbols. The colors around the door have since faded and eroded, but the black snake is still visible when visiting the shrine today.

A mural painted in 2016 in the Lalish Temple Complex near Shaykh ‘Adi’s tomb depicting the syncretic Yezidi tradition of Noah’s ark in the flood. The Yezidi version of the story includes that a hole was punctured in the ark by the tallest peak of Mount Sinjar, but it was saved when the revered black snake used its body to plug the leak. Yezidis also believe that the ark was built (or at one point stopped) in the village of ‘Ain Sifni (Shaykh an), which is about 10 km south of Lalish and came to rest on Mount Judie, the location of which is disputed. Note also the two distinctly conical Yezidi temples on a mountain (dry land) in the background and the dove carrying the sign of land and safety in its claws. Photograph: Author. cf. Nicolaus, Peter. "The Serpent Symbolism in the Yezidi Religious Tradition and the Snake in Yerevan." *Iran & the Caucasus* 15, no. 1/2 (2011): 49-72, pp. 52 & 54; Parry, Oswald H. *Six Months in a Syrian Monastery. Being a Record of a Visit to the Head Quarters of the Syrian Church in Mesopotamia, with Some Account of the Yazidis, or Devil Worshippers of Mosul and El Jilwah, Their Sacred Book.* London: Horace Cox, 1895, p. 381; and Guest, John S. *Survival among the Kurds: a History of the Yezidis.* Kegan Paul International, 1993, p. 31
Photograph 7: Destroyed buildings and infrastructure line the streets of a commercial district in Sinjar City, Nineveh, Iraq. It was Captured by ISIS in August 2014 and held until November 2015 when it was retaken by an alliance of KRG Peshmerga, PKK, YPG, and YBS forces, with support from coalition airstrikes. Over the course of more than a year of occupation, ISIS forces constructed a network of tunnels that were used to avoid repeated airstrikes. However, much of the city now lies in ruin. Estimates for the number of families that have returned post-liberation range from 500-1000 (approx. 4,500 individuals), but the city is mostly unoccupied other than by armed militias, security forces, and political actors. As recently as April 2017, the city was still within 5 km of the ISIS front lines before the territory was recaptured by al-Ḥashd al-Shaʿʿāby militias. In October 2017, ISF regained control of the entire Sinjar area from the KRG.
Photograph 8: An ISIS flag is painted over the window of a house in the town of Snuny, north of Sinjar Mountain. The house was reportedly the ISIS headquarters in Snuny during its occupation. Photograph: Author.

Photograph 9: An ISIS flag and graffiti are painted on the side of a house in the town of Snuny. Photograph: Author.

Photograph 10: Graffiti marked by ISIS on a home in the town of Snuny. (It is the Islamic *Takbir*, saying, in Arabic, *Allahu akbar* (الله أكَبَرَ), or “God is [the] greatest.”) Photograph: Author.

Photograph 11: Part of a tunnel network dug by ISIS to avoid airstrikes leads under a house in Sinjar City. Photograph: Author.
Photograph 12: A human jaw bone, teeth, and other remains sit above a reported mass grave found in Sinjar City next to the road that leads up Sinjar Mountain. Within two months of the liberation of Sinjar, 35 mass grave sites, including the one photographed, were discovered in and around towns and villages that were recaptured. Some of the remains have only become visible as rain and weather have eroded the shallow level of soil that was hastily used to cover the sites after executions. Photograph: Author. See: Yazda. “Suspected Mass Grave Sites of Yazidis in the Sinjar Area.” Yazda Documentation Project, 28 Jan. 2016.
Photograph 13: A billboard in Snuny town shows Abdullah Öcalan, a Kurdish nationalist figurehead and one of the founders of the PKK, in front of the group’s flag, and overshadows another billboard depicting Yezidis practicing a religious rite at Yezidi temples. Öcalan is now serving a life sentence in prison in Turkey for treason (commuted from a death-sentence as a part of Turkey’s bid to join the EU). Photograph: Author

Photograph 14: A permanent monument on top of Mount Sinjar shows a photo of Masoud Barzani, the President of the Iraqi KRG and leader of the PDK/KDP, giving a press conference in the same location where he announced the recapturing of Sinjar by KRG Peshmerga forces. The monument is enshrined by KRG and PDK flags. Sinjar City is visible at the base of the mountain. Photograph: Author

Photograph 15: The flags of the HPG and YJA STAR fly to the left and right, respectively, of a flag depicting the PKK and Kurdish nationalist leader Abdullah Öcalan on a building or converted house in the Sinjar City area. Photograph: Author

Photograph 16: A makeshift, but unoccupied HPG / YBS checkpoint is set up in an equally empty Sinjar City. The new checkpoint owners have painted over its old ISIS flag and have added YBS graffiti tags on buildings in the background. Photograph: Author
Photograph 17: Checkpoint personnel in the Sinjar area wear Iraqi Federal Police uniforms under the authority of the Ministry of Interior in Baghdad (note the Iraqi, not KRG, flags on the uniforms) but guard a checkpoint that flies a Kurdish flag. Sinjar is in the Nineveh Governorate with its provincial capital in Mosul and has been controlled by the KRG, ISIS, and is now back under central Iraqi administration. These officers are Kurdish or Yezidi locals, not Arabs, but still receive salaries from Baghdad despite at the time being in defacto Kurdish-controlled territory and themselves being ethnic Kurds. Photograph: Author
Photograph 18: A large, prominent KRG flag flies over the offices of the Barzani Charity Foundation providing food and non-food items (NFI) to displaced Yezidis on top of Sinjar Mountain. Smaller Iraqi and Yezidi flags fly next to the road. Photograph: Author

Photograph 19: KRG and PDK/KDP flags fly over displacement shelters, tents, and security and telecoms infrastructure on top of Sinjar Mountain. Photograph: Author

Photograph 20: A faded, sun-bleached picture of PKK and Kurdish nationalist hero Abdullah Öcalan sits near a group of displaced persons’ tents on top of Sinjar Mountain. It is covered with graffiti tags that say PKK and “Apo,” a Kurdish term of endearment for Öcalan, shorthand for Abdullah or meaning uncle. Photograph: Author

Photograph 21: From left to right, YPG, PKK, and YJA STAR flags fly over a fort and radio tower installation atop Sinjar Mountain. This facility was hit by a Turkish airstrike in the early hours of 25 April 2017 as part of a renewed effort from Ankara against the PKK. Photograph: Author
Photograph 22: The winding road that leads up Sinjar Mountain from Sinjar City is lined with rusting, abandoned cars like these that were left during the flight from ISIS to the safety of the mountain. Photograph: Author

Photograph 24: Large, prominent flags for the Ezidikhan (land of the Yezidis) Joint Command for Liberating Sinjar (also known as the Sinjar Alliance) over a damaged, abandoned commercial space in Sinjar City. Photograph: Author

Photograph 23: HPG, YBS, PKK, YJA STAR, and other graffiti tags line a wall in Sinjar City. APO is Kurdish shorthand for Abdullah or uncle and is a reference to the Kurdish nationalist leader and founder of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan. Photograph: Author

Photograph 25: Forces associated with a Yezidi militia commander next to their technical on top of Sinjar Mountain. Photograph: Author
Photograph 26: The Sinjar Mountain range viewed from the north, near the town of Snuny. Photograph: Author
Photograph 27: PKK affiliate flags, including those of the Yezidi groups YBS and YJE (an all-female Yezidi unit) fly over a makeshift headquarters. This building was destroyed by a Turkish airstrike in the early hours of 25 April 2017 (see Photograph 28, right) Photograph: Author

Photograph 28: The rubble of the PKK, YBS, and YJE makeshift headquarters (see Photograph 27, left) (viewed from the NW) after being hit by a Turkish airstrike in the early hours of 25 April 2017. The Sinjar Mountains are visible in the background. Photograph: Author

Photograph 29: The view from within the Sinjar Mountains looking northwest toward the mountain-pass village of Karsy, which serves as a gateway to the only road. The valley is lined by terraced farms, some growing tobacco, and now houses several hundred displaced persons’ tents for families that have returned to the area. Photograph: Author

Photograph 30: A re-opened store in the town of Snuny now named after Nadia Murad (pictured on the store sign), a Yezidi girl who was kidnapped by ISIS and who gained an international platform speaking about her ordeal. Nadia is a hero to many in the Yezidi community and was made a UN Goodwill Ambassador by the Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 2016. Photograph: Author
Photograph 31: A Kurdish (KRG / KR-I) and a PDK / KDP political flag fly over a gathering place in an internally displaced persons (IDP) settlement on top of Sinjar Mountain, near the village of Sardashe in February 2017. The gathering place also shows pictures of KRG President Masoud Barzani, one of which is with his father, the Kurdish nationalist leader Mustafa Barzani. On the hill in the distance, a water tank is painted with the Iraqi flag and another Iraqi flag flies over a building painted with the Yezidi sun flag. The yellow taxi with the red license plate, meaning it is from Mosul, is also of note. It and its driver are likely also displaced by the ISIS occupation of the city. Many of the Yezidis who have found shelter in IDP settlements like the one pictured are also returnees or have been re-displaced from other areas around Sinjar where they had previously attempted to return. Renewed fighting and clashes between the PKK and the KRG, the PKK and Turkey, and the KRG and central Iraqi Security Forces have re-displaced hundreds of families, some of whom have continued to see the mythical and literal Mountain as a place of refuge. On 25 April 2017, Turkey conducted airstrikes against the PKK and its affiliates on top of Sinjar Mountain itself (See Photographs 27 & 28). Photograph: Author
Photograph 32: Yezidi children play at their family’s tent in the Khanke Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Camp in Duhok Governorate, Kurdistan Region, Iraq. The official Khanke camp houses approximately 16,500 individual Yezidi IDPs, most of whom are from Sinjar. An additional 20,000 Yezidi IDPs live in informal settlements and tents outside the camp (Population statistics: Duhok Board for Relief and Humanitarian Affairs, BRHA). The camp is located next to Khanke village, which was a Yezidi village before the 2014 displacement and before the construction of the camp. Temperatures range from below 0°C in the winter to above 50°C in the summer. Lake Mosul (formed from the Mosul Dam blocking the Tigris river) is visible in the background.

Khanke village is one of many artificial mujamma‘at created during Ṣaddām Ḥusayn’s Ba‘ath Party’s Arabization and collectivization policies. Many of the Yezidi families who live in the collective town used to live in villages along the Tigris river before the creation of the dam between 1980 and 1985. When the dam was constructed (and named the Ṣaddām Dam), it created Lake Ṣaddām and effectively forcibly displaced the populations in the riverbank villages. The Mosul Dam, and Lake Mosul, as they are now respectively called, were a major point of concern during the 2014 ISIS offensive with fears of the dam’s inadequate engineering and construction leading some to speculate that it could collapse and flood the Mosul plain, threatening the lives of more than half a million people. Photograph: Author
Photograph 33: Tents line the street of Kabarto 1 Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Camp in Duhok Governorate, Kurdistan Region, Iraq. Kabarto 1 and its sister camp, Kabarto 2 (visible in the background), together house 21,700 individual Yezidi IDPs (Population statistics: Duhok Board for Relief and Humanitarian Affairs, BRHA). Photograph: Author
Photograph 34: Essian Yezidi Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Camp, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq. Essian is home to 14,700 individual Yezidi IDPs and is situated close to Shaykhan and the Lalish Temple Complex (Population statistics: Duhok Board for Relief and Humanitarian Affairs, BRHA). Yezidis consider Lalish their holiest place and it sees hundreds of thousands of Yezidi pilgrims every year. Essian, like some other Yezidi IDP camps, is located legally in Nineveh Governorate, the capital of which is Mosul. However, it is a part of an area of disputed territories and is defacto controlled by the KRG. Photograph: Author
Photograph 35: A very large, prominent KRG flag flies at the entrance of the only road leading to Khanke village. The flag, a new addition after the construction of Khanke Camp, flies over and in front of informal IDP settlements in the village. Photograph: Author.

Photograph 36: Pro-KRG independence referendum campaign posters from private companies and universities displayed on public works in Duhok City. Photograph: Author.

Photograph 37: Pro-KRG independence referendum campaign poster from a private company displayed on public works in Duhok City. Photograph: Author.

Photograph 38: Pro-KRG independence referendum campaign poster from a private company displayed at a major mall in Duhok City. Photograph: Author.
Photograph 39: An ISIS flag painted on a wall in the town of Snuny accompanied by ISIS graffiti in Arabic. Photograph: Author.
Photograph 40: A camp for Yezidi IDPs in Sharf al-Din, on the northeast slopes of the Sinjar Mountains. This village was never captured by ISIS, but was instead defended by the local militia leaders (and local folk heroes) Qassem Shesho and his nephew Haider Shesho. Both are notably members of the Yezidi diaspora, living regularly in Germany, and upon hearing of the ISIS attack in Sinjar, traveled back to take up arms. After defending the area, the two gained loyal followings of Yezidi fighters and civilians alike (Haider has become a popular name) and hosted displaced Yezidis in a new camp they founded in the village they control. The village of Sharf al-Din is also named after a similar Yezidi hero figure from the 1200s who was credited with bringing Yezidism to the Mountain. The camp is home to IDPs as well as re-displaced people from PKK/KRG conflict, those that found their homes destroyed, and those who lost property ownership rights. For a brief time in the Spring, Sinjar and most of Kurdistan become lusciously green, crops grow quickly, and shepherds have an abundance of food for their flocks. Photograph: Author.
Photograph 41: A new school set up by the Kurdish Government (with a prominent KRG flag flying) in Nineveh Governorate. The Sinjar Mountains are visible in the background to the south. This is a very rural village with most families being farmers, agriculturalists, and shepherds. Not many people have returned and the school, while new, was not in use at the time of the photo. In disputed territories like the Sinjar area, the issue of education, and particularly the language in which education is given (either Arabic or Kurdish), is a hot point of contention over power projection, control, and thresholds. Photograph: Author.
Photograph 42: PUK flags and graffiti mark an abandoned bunker unit amid the rubble of Sinjar City. The PUK is the second major political party in the KR-I, though a minority, and is mostly active in the areas around Sulaymāniyyah. Photograph: Author.

Photograph 43: YBS graffiti is painted over PKK graffiti which is sprayed over ISIS graffiti on a damaged building in Sinjar City. Photograph: Author.

Photograph 44: A spray-painted ISIS flag, which includes the Islamic Shahādah, or “testimony” that is a confession of faith, marks the roof of a Yezidi house in Snuny town. Photograph: Author.

Photograph 45: Basic attempts paint over an ISIS graffiti flag on a house in Snuny town. Photograph: Author.
Photograph 46: Hundreds of bullet holes riddle burned and ransacked shops in a commercial district in Sinjar City. Photograph: Author
Photograph 47: PKK and YPG affiliate flags fly at an outdoor football stadium near Sinjar City at the base of the Sinjar Mountains. Testimonies and local reports indicated that this was the site of mass executions during the ISIS occupation of the city. Bullet holes are visible on the inside of the far wall. Photograph: Author
Yezidi Internally Displaced Person (IDP) and Refugee Camp Locations (2017)
Including Displacement Stages & Paths from Sinjar from 3-14 August 2014
Duhok and Nineveh Governorates, Iraq
Al-Hasakah Governorate, Syria

Map Sources: UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), UNOSAT
UNOSAT Live Map, Complex Emergency, Iraq (CE20140613IRQ), Accessed 25 April 2017
Displacement figures, some path information, and some phase dates:
REACH, IMPACT Initiative, ACTED, UNOSAT, Sinjar IDP Crisis (3rd-14th August), 18 August 2014
Satellite Imagery: Earthstar Geographics, Esri, HERE, Garmin

Stage 1 (3 August 2014) Max. 70,000 IDPs flee directly to Duhok Gov., Kurdistan Region, Iraq
Stage 1 (3 August 2014) Max. 130,000 IDPs flee to Sinjar Mountains from Sinjar City and other villages
Stage 2 (4-13 August 2014) Safe corridor via Syria. Max. 125,000 flee as refugees, then some re-enter Iraq
Nevrroz Refugee Camp, Syria
Major IDP Camp Locations, 2017 (majority Yezidi pop.) Some icons represent multiple camps
Lalish Temple Complex and Shrine / Tomb of Sheikh ‘Adi
Sinjar Mountains, Nineveh Governorate, Iraq

Map Sources: UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), UNOSAT, UNOSAT Live Map, Complex Emergency, Iraq (CE20140613IRQ), Accessed 25 April 2017
Satellite Imagery: Esri, HERE, Garmin, Earthstar Geographics, CNES/Airbus DS
ISIS Front Lines information: Live Universal Awareness Map (LiveuaMap)

Locations of concentrated populations of displaced persons, some of whom are returnees

Approx. line of influence between KRG (East) and PKK (West)

Approx. front line between ISIS (South) and KRG forces (North) on 1 Dec. 2016. Lines mostly stagnant since Sinjar retaken by KRG in Dec. 2015. In May & June 2017, ISIS territory retaken by PMF/PMU militias and in October 2017 all of Sinjar area retaken by ISF
Peak Territory Controlled by the Islamic State (2014-2015) and Kurdish-controlled Territory
Duhok, Erbil, Sulaymaniyyah, Kirkuk, Salah ad-Din, and Nineveh Governorates, Iraq

Map Sources: UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), UNOSAT
UNOSAT Live Map, Complex Emergency, Iraq (CE20140613IRQ)
Territory control:
Live Universal Awareness Map (Liveuamap), ISIS Emergency
Map imagery: Esri, GEBCO, DeLorme, NaturalVue

Approximate territory controlled by Kurdish forces
Approximate territory controlled by the Islamic State
Formal border of Duhok, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyyah Governorates
Lalish Temple Complex and Shrine / Tomb of Sheikh ‘Adi
Peak Territory Controlled by Kurdish Government Forces (December 2015) and Territory Controlled by the Islamic State
Duhok, Erbil, Sulaymaniyyah, Kirkuk, Salah ad-Din, and Nineveh Governorates, Iraq

Map Sources: UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), UNOSAT UNOSAT Live Map, Complex Emergency, Iraq (CE20140613IRQ)
Territory control: Live Universal Awareness Map (Liveuamap), ISIS Emergency
Map imagery: Esri, GEBCO, DeLorme, NaturalVue
Territory Re-taken from Kurdish Security Forces by Iraqi Security Forces (Including al-Hashd al-Shaabi PMF/PMU Militias) - October 2017
Duhok, Erbil, Sulaymaniyyah, Kirkuk, Salah ad-Din, and Nineveh Governorates, Iraq

Map Sources: UN Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), UNOSAT
UNOSAT Live Map, Complex Emergency, Iraq (CE20140613IRQ)
Territory control:
Live Universal Awareness Map (LiveuaMap), ISIS Emergency
Map imagery: Esri, GEBCO, DeLorme, NaturalVue

- Approximate remaining territory controlled by Kurdish forces after withdrawal
- Approximate territory retaken from Kurds by Iraqi Security Forces, incldg. al-Hashd al-Sha'abi Militias
- Approximate territory already previously controlled by Iraqi Security Forces, including militias
- Formal border of Duhok, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyyah Governorates
- Lalish Temple Complex and Shrine / Tomb of Sheikh 'Adi