

## Effectively Urbanized

Yezidis in the Collective Towns of Sheikhan and Sinjar

*Effectivement urbanisées. Les Yézidis des villes collectives de Sheikhan et Sinjar*

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- 1 THE YEZIDIS, like the Shabaks, the Mandeans and the Christians of various confessions, belong to the small religious minorities in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> They are concentrated in northern Iraq where, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, some 550,000 live – about two-thirds in the district of Sinjar<sup>2</sup> and most of the remaining third in the district of Sheikhan.<sup>3</sup> Both regions belong to the governorate of Nineveh and to the so-called disputed territories which are claimed by Arabs as well as by Kurds. Both try to co-opt the Yezidi community in order to gain power over the territories where this minority is settled and in pursuing this goal they do not always refrain from violence.
- 2 However, this is not the first time in the past decades that the Yezidi community in Sheikhan and Sinjar have faced severe challenges: from early 1975, under the regime of Saddam Hussein, both were confronted with village destruction, depopulation, and deportation. The indigenous Yezidis (as well as Muslim Kurds) were deported from their villages and resettled in so-called collective towns. At first, these were advertised officially as “modernization projects”, serving the population from disadvantaged villages by supplying them with electricity, water, and sanitation. However, it soon became obvious that the forced resettlement of the Yezidi population was not a development intervention, but a security project. The central government’s primary goal was to prevent Yezidis from supporting the Kurdish National Movement led by Mullah Mustafa Barzani until its collapse in March 1975.<sup>4</sup> The collective towns supported this goal since they greatly facilitated control of the population [Dulz 2001: 54-55].<sup>5</sup> In other words, forced displacement and forced urbanization went hand in hand.
- 3 Indeed, the Yezidis of Sheikhan and Sinjar – originally a rural population – have been effectively urbanized in the collective towns. Even though circumstances in Sinjar, in particular, are far from satisfactory in terms of security, employment opportunities and infrastructure, they did not, unlike many other Iraqi Kurds, migrate en masse to

the urban centres of the Kurdistan Region. At the same time, there has not been a significant return of expelled Yezidis or their children to the ancestral villages. It appears, rather, that a considerable number of young, predominantly male Yezidis have been seeking asylum in European countries.

- 4 After briefly describing the main features of Yezidism and the historical relationship between the Yezidi community and the Iraqi state, on the one hand, and Yezidis and Muslim Kurds, on the other, this paper concentrates on the current situation in the collective towns. What are the main reasons for the forced urbanization of the Yezidis? Are there differences between Sheikhan and Sinjar? And what exactly does urbanization mean? Is this term suitable in order to describe the situation of the Yezidis in the collectives?
- 5 Our paper attempts to give some preliminary answers to these questions – preliminary, as there are neither reliable statistics available on the Yezidi collective towns, nor is it currently possible, for security reasons, to conduct field research in Sinjar.<sup>6</sup>

## Religious Beliefs and Caste System

- 6 Even though the majority of Yezidis – not only in Iraq – define themselves as Kurdish, the relationship between Yezidis and Muslim Kurds is complicated.
- 7 The Peacock Angel, the highest of the seven angels ruling the world and a key figure of piety in Yezidi religion is, according to some outside interpretations, identified as personification of the evil [Kreyenbroek 1995: 97]. Many Muslims view the Yezidis as “devil-worshippers”. Moreover, and in comparison to Christianity and Islam, Yezidism is not considered a religion of a Holy Book: it is based mainly on oral tradition. Therefore, Yezidis do not conform to the Muslim concept of protection. Finally, some Muslims consider Yezidis not only as “Infidels”, but as apostates, Muslims who strayed from the right path of Islam. Indeed, in the scientific literature it is widely accepted that Sheikh Adi bin Musafir (born between 1073 and 1078 AD, died between 1160 and 1163 AD), the founder (respectively the reformer) of Yezidism, was an orthodox Sufi sheikh. It is only under the leadership of Sheikh Hasan ibn Adi, nearly a hundred years after Sheikh Adi bin Musafir’s death, that his followers increasingly began to turn away from Islamic norms and integrate elements of pre-Islamic religions into their beliefs [Kreyenbroek 1995: 97-98].<sup>7</sup>
- 8 Central for Yezidi society is a rigid caste system of religious character dividing Yezidis in murids (laymen), pirs and sheikhs. In exchange for the religious services pirs and sheikhs offer their followers, here and in the hereafter, they receive alms. Strict endogamy not only prohibits conversion or marriage to a member of another religious group but also marriage to a member of another caste [Guest 1987: 36; Yalkut-Breddermann 1991: 2.2.9].
- 9 Yezidism neither centres on individual prayer, nor does it know places analogous to mosques or churches. Communal religious life is usually restricted to religious holidays and the most important events in the human life cycle: birth, marriage and death. However, with the Valley of Lalesh, situated in Sheikhan, which hosts the shrine of Sheikh Adi bin Musafir, the Yezidi community has an important religious centre where yearly feasts and religious ceremonies are celebrated. Moreover, a great part of the informal spiritual life in the Yezidi villages of Sheikhan and Sinjar centres around local

shrines: small, whitewashed buildings with conical spires. They are dedicated to Yezidi holy beings – such as the seven great angels or their earthly manifestations – or to local Yezidi personalities. These shrines function mainly as “places of succour” for believers facing some kind of difficulty, be it physical, psychological, or spiritual [Spät 2005: 34].

## From Ottoman Times to the End of the Baath Regime

- 10 Historically, the Yezidi community has remained largely secluded, essentially for religious reasons. Stigmatized as devil worshippers, they faced waves of religious persecution since Ottoman times. Under the reign of Badr al-Din in the first half of the 13th century, the followers of Sheikh Adi were slaughtered, Adi’s tomb in the Valley of Lalesh desecrated and his bones burnt. Moreover, widespread anti-Yezidi military campaigns were carried out by Sunni Kurdish tribesmen in the same period. Towards the end of the 19th century, the religious policies of the Ottoman government resulted in large-scale persecution of the Yezidis. Many of them saw conversion to Christianity as an alternative to Islamisation and conscription. After the First World War, British mandatory rule, on the one hand, guaranteed some protection from persecution; yet, on the other hand, it contributed, as Nelida Fuccaro [1999] shows, to alienating the Iraqi Yezidis from the emerging “Kurdish nation”.
- 11 Iraqi independence did not mark the end of Yezidi persecution, rather the opposite. Under the Iraqi monarchy as well as the republican regime, Yezidis were discriminated against – the measures applied included the loss of land, military repression, and efforts to forcefully enlist them in the central state’s struggle against the Kurdish National Movement.<sup>8</sup>
- 12 The Baath party under Saddam Hussein took this policy even further: from the mid-1970s onwards, a process of forced displacement was initiated. In Sinjar, in late 1974, the former Committee for Northern Affairs ordered the confiscation of property, the destruction of the mostly Yezidi villages and the forcibly settlement of the population in 11 collective towns with Arab names. Most of the 137 villages destroyed were located in or close to Sinjar Mountain, which is the prominent feature of the district. The collective towns were constructed 30 to 40 kilometres north or south of this location. In 1976, the number of houses built in the 11 collectives of Sinjar Mountain amounted to 11,544, i.e., 1,120 in al-Yarmuk, 1,195 in al-Tamin, 510 in al-Uruba, 771 in al-Andalus, 1,531 in Huttin, 858 in al-Qadisyia, 907 in al-Walid, 1,300 in al-Bar, 838 in al-Adnaniya, 1,334 in al-Qahtaniya and 1,180 in al-Jazirah [Dulz 2001: 54-55]. Additionally, 5 neighbourhoods in Sinjar town – Bar Barozh, Saraeye, Kalhey, Burj, and Barshey – were arabized in 1975. The residents were displaced either to collective towns or other parts of Iraq. In the same year, 413 Muslim and Yezidi Kurdish farmers were dispossessed of their lands or had their agricultural contracts cancelled and were replaced by Arab settlers. In the censuses of 1977 and 1987, Yezidis were forced to register as Arabs and, since the mid-1970s, speaking Kurdish has been prohibited. Finally, in the 1990s, the distribution of land to Arab settlers was resumed, and continued until the fall of the Baath regime in 2003.<sup>9</sup>
- 13 In Sheikhan, a similar process took place: in 1975, 147 out of a total of 182 villages suffered forced displacement, while 64 villages were handed over to Arab settlers in the years following. The legal basis for these measures was the Revolutionary Command Council’s Decree (RCCD) No. 795 from 1975 and the RCCD No. 358 from 1978. The former

authorized the confiscation of movable and immovable property of members of the Kurdish National Movement; the latter allowed for the invalidation of property deeds belonging to displaced Muslim and Yezidi Kurds, the nationalization of their land under the control of the Ministry of Finance, and resettlement of the region by Arab families. In the 1977 census, Yezidis and a number of Muslim Kurds were forced to register as Arabs. Moreover, 7 collective towns were constructed in Sheikhan for the residents of arabized villages. Finally, in 1988, another 10 villages located in the Aqra sub-district of Atroush were destroyed.<sup>10</sup>

- 14 The beginning of the First Gulf War in January 1991 was followed by a Kurdish uprising in March, which was violently suppressed by the Iraqi regime. By the end of April, more than 1.5 million Kurds, among them many Yezidis, crossed the border and fled to Turkey and Iran to escape persecution. As a consequence, “Operation Provide Comfort”, carried out by the US and its allies, established a “save haven”, a security zone inside the Iraqi state, including Dohuk, Zakho, and Amadiya, to protect the civilian population. Moreover, on April 19th a no-fly zone was established north of the 36th parallel. Also in April, the Iraqi Kurdistan Front, grouping Kurdish opposition parties such as the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) and the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), and the Iraqi leadership started to negotiate about the territories to be included in an autonomous Kurdish region. The Kurdish side demanded the inclusion of Sheikhan as well as Sinjar; however, in the end, only the northern part of Sheikhan became part of the region governed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), while the southern part of Sheikhan as well as Sinjar remained under Iraqi control. Yezidi places of settlement were effectively cut into two, with the Valley of Lalesh being allotted to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.
- 15 The KDP and the PUK, the parties dominating the KRG, soon started to recognize the Iraqi Yezidis as a major political factor.<sup>11</sup> Since the mid-1990s, protagonists of the Kurdish National Movement acknowledged Yezidism as the original religion of the Kurds, thus creating the myth of a common pre-Islamic religion. This phenomenon had a unifying effect on the Kurds, distinguishing their religious origins from those of other nations in the Middle East and stressing the uniqueness of Kurdish (cultural) identity [Dulz 2001: 103-106].<sup>12</sup> Consequently, encouragement of the Yezidis by Kurdish political parties has strengthened the Kurdish identity of the Yezidis and their sympathy for Kurdish nationalism. This is particularly true as, since the fall of the Baath regime in 2003, the persecutions of Yezidis outside the Kurdistan Region ranged from murder, assassination attempts and violent attacks, to death threats and public intimidation campaigns.
- 16 However, the ethnic identity of the Yezidis in Iraq is more disputed than Kurdish parties tend to admit. Shifting identity concepts such as “I used to be an Arab, now it’s better to be a Kurd” and “I am half Kurdish, half Arab” are gaining prevalence.<sup>13</sup> According to Human Rights Watch (2009), Yezidis in the “disputed territories”<sup>14</sup> of Sheikhan and Sinjar who define themselves as Arabs or simply as Yezidis risk persecution by the KRG, as these ethnic definitions question “the right” of Kurdish parties to govern these disputed parts of Nineveh.
- 17 Even in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the relationship between Yezidi and Muslim Kurds is more complex than often described. The Yezidi perception is clouded by erstwhile persecutions carried out by the Muslim majority. Yezidis from Dohuk, for example, define themselves as Kurds. Should the above-mentioned persecution of the

Yezidis be the topic of conversation, however, “Kurd” becomes synonymous with “Muslim” [Spät 2005: 86].

## Material Aspects of Urbanization

### Geography and Statistics

- 18 The district of Sinjar and the district of Sheikhan are situated in the governorate of Nineveh. Sinjar lies between Tel Afar in the north-east, al-Baaj in the south-east, and the Syrian border in the west. Thus, Sinjar is a region cut off from Kurdish territories and surrounded by Sunni Arab settlements where the insurgency, i.e., radicals of Sunni Islamist and Baathist provenance, is highly influential.
- 19 The district of Sheikhan borders on the governorate of Dohuk in the north, the district of Tel Kaif in the west, the district of Aqra in the east and the sub-district of Bashiqa (Mosul district) in the south.
- 20 In 2008, the Nineveh Provincial Council estimated the population of Sinjar at 235,950 and the population of al-Qahtaniya at 72,307. An estimation of the number of Yezidis and others living in the collective towns is not available. However, the current population of the two collective towns in the sub-district of al-Qahtaniya – al-Qahtaniya and al-Jazirah – is estimated to be approximately 58,000.<sup>15</sup> This means that about 80% of the population of al-Qahtaniya live in collective towns.
- 21 Southern Sheikhan – the region officially governed by Nineveh – has, according to the Nineveh Provincial Council, a population of 64,208. The population of the northern, Kurdish-administered area of Sheikhan is estimated at 68,156 – a figure based on the food rations distributed. Hence, the total population of Sheikhan district stands at approximately 132,000.<sup>16</sup> Although no precise information is available on the number of people currently living in the collective towns of Sheikhan, numbers of voters registered for the Iraqi parliamentary elections in March 2010 have been obtained for some of the major Yezidi collective towns. In Mahat and the surrounding 6,887, in Beban 1,600, in Esyan 2,013, and in Nisiriya and surroundings 2,662 voters were eligible to vote. As children are not registered as voters, the total population of the collectives is much higher.

### Security

- 22 Nineveh is Iraq’s most dangerous governorate and in 2009 Mosul city was the most violent city of Iraq on a per-capita basis.<sup>17</sup> Violence and fighting take place on a daily basis. In 2007, extremists linked to the al-Qaida network began to retreat to northern Iraq, particularly to Nineveh,<sup>18</sup> where the environment remained favourable for several reasons. First of all, the American “surge” – a new strategy against al-Qaida that included the funding of Sunni tribal militias fighting al-Qaida – focused on the regions of Anbar and Baghdad rather than the North. Secondly, the KDP and the PUK, which control parts of Nineveh, opposed the emergence of Sunni militias, fearing they might ultimately become a more potent threat than the existing insurgency. Finally, ethnic tension and Arab resentment to what was perceived as a “Kurdish expansionist agenda” meant that al-Qaida retained its appeal for large segments of the population.<sup>19</sup>

- 23 The current conflict between the KRG and the Provincial Government of Nineveh centres on the above-defined disputed territories of the governorate. Since 2004 and particularly after the violent flare-up of sectarianism between Sunni and Shia Arabs in 2006, the Kurdish leadership has been quietly moving security forces further into Nineveh, over which it asserts claims, and has established political and administrative structures to maintain control. Sinjar and Sheikhan both belong to territories controlled by the KRG.
- 24 In Sinjar, the Iraqi Army 3rd Division, the Iraqi police and Kurdish Peshmerga forces<sup>20</sup> (the latter have been in the region since November 2004) are jointly responsible for security. The Peshmerga mostly provide static security for the collective towns,<sup>21</sup> whereas the Iraqi army is primarily in control of the checkpoints on the main roads.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, security in Sinjar has deteriorated markedly in recent years, a result of its geostrategic significance. Since the beginning of 2006 or 2007,<sup>23</sup> the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq – a network linked to al-Qaida – has imposed a siege on the delivery of food, fuel, and construction materials to Sinjar, because it regards Yezidis as “unbelievers”.<sup>24</sup> Service deliveries – food rations, fuel, and other supplies – are provided by Dohuk in agreement with the Nineveh Provincial Council. However, according to food distribution agents for the collective town of Tel Banat, almost no deliveries were made in 2007.<sup>25</sup>
- 25 The most devastating attack in post-Saddam Iraq against the Yezidi population, and against civilians as such, occurred on August 14th 2007 in al-Qahtaniya sub-district, on the border to Sinjar. Two Yezidi collective towns, al-Qahtaniya and al-Jazirah, were attacked by trucks loaded with dynamite, which subsequently detonated,<sup>26</sup> killing 326 Yezidis and injuring 530.<sup>27</sup> As a result, Peshmerga forces in Sinjar were increased. By surrounding the collective towns with earthen berms and setting up checkpoints, they created an effective barrier between Yezidi areas and the Arab settlements.<sup>28</sup> While historically the homogeneous structure of the villages in Sinjar, both in ethnic and religious terms, proved a form of protection, the purely Yezidi composition of the population in today’s large collective towns makes them an easy target.
- 26 The overall security situation in Sheikhan is quite different. It is much better than in other parts of Nineveh Province, with only a small number of security incidents reported in recent years. As of March 2010, Peshmerga forces are responsible for the security of the areas south and east of Baadhra, whereas the Iraqi army is present in the areas west of it. Local police are reported to come from Dohuk, not from Nineveh. In the past, the administrative staff of the provincial government in Nineveh was more than once prevented by pro-Kurdish security forces from entering the district.<sup>29</sup>

## Economy and Infrastructure

- 27 Security is not the only urgent problem in Sinjar. The district suffers from a lack of employment opportunities, a low educational level and persistent poverty. According to a UNDP study conducted in 2006, overall deprivation in Sinjar is “extreme”, placing it among the least developed districts in Iraq. The major weaknesses observed are the lack of education, basic infrastructure and housing, and crowded family circumstances. Concerning basic infrastructure and housing, Sinjar ranks among the five most deprived districts in the whole of Iraq.<sup>30</sup> The 2008 CFSVA (Comprehensive Food Security

and Vulnerability Analysis) draws similar conclusions and rates Sinjar as “extremely vulnerable”.<sup>31</sup>

- 28 The infrastructure of the Yezidi collective towns is inadequate and, at best, still weak. The streets of the collective towns and their feeder roads are not tarred. Most collective towns are without proper sewage. The greatest drawback is the lack of adequate supplies of potable water, which has to be delivered by truck. Recent years have seen no improvement in the infrastructure or health care of the collective towns. United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) describes service delivery to Sinjar and al-Qahtaniya’s 11 collective towns as “grossly inadequate”, which is ironic considering that the improvement in service delivery was the postulated rationale for displacement in the 1970s.
- 29 According to UNAMI, the primary economic activities in Sinjar are subsistence agriculture and livestock herding, although agricultural land is not serviced by irrigation.<sup>32</sup> However, the dry climate, a number of years of drought, water shortages, and poor soil make it impossible for the traditionally large Yezidi families to survive on agriculture. An additional problem for those families living in the collectives is that their estates are frequently located at some distance from the collective, close to their ancestral villages; there, access is limited for security reasons. As a consequence, people in the collective towns have to access other sources of income to address their economic needs.
- 30 Sinjari men traditionally leave their home to work as “labour migrants” in the large urban centres. Up until mid-2004, young Yezidi men from the collective towns migrated to Baghdad or Mosul in search of work, while their families continued to live in the collective towns.<sup>33</sup> However, very few Yezidis now live, for example, in Baghdad.<sup>34</sup> Lack of security has forced most of them out of the capital. Moreover, the precarious security situation also obliged the last of the Yezidi families living in Mosul to seek refuge in nearby Bashiqa in June 2007.<sup>35</sup> Mosul has become a no-go area for Yezidis. As a result, labourers are now confined to seeking jobs in Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaimaniya, as well as in other cities in the safe, legally KRG-administered region. Male breadwinners stay away from home for weeks or months on end, since frequent journeys from Sinjar to the Kurdish North are unaffordable and dangerous.
- 31 Furthermore, in Sinjar itself, the KRG has developed into a potential economic factor: jobs in local administration, posts as party officials, and the newly established Yezidi community centres are highly welcomed by most of the inhabitants. For countless impoverished families in the region, Kurdish patronage is the only available source of income.
- 32 In Sheikhan, the overall economic situation is rated above average in the ranking of 94 districts by the UNDP 2007 Basic Needs Assessment, while overall deprivation is judged as moderate.<sup>36</sup> Agriculture is the source of most jobs in the district, benefiting not only from regular rainfall, but also from established systems of irrigation.<sup>37</sup> However, at least in the collective towns, the population depends on jobs offered by the KRG. Due to the comparatively safe security situation, the KRG is in a position to introduce several measures to improve the infrastructure. It is investing large sums in road construction and water projects, with a particular focus on the collective towns. Currently, almost every large collective in Sheikhan has its own auditorium and its own Yezidi cultural centre. The shrine close to the cemetery in the collective town of Beristek has also been renovated. Infrastructural projects stretch as far south as the Makhlub Mountain at the



district border of Tel Kaif. This is a new development, since, prior to 2009, the KRG was not as prominent as it is today in the region. Several small factories have been established along the road to Ain Sifni. As in Sinjar, the KRG has become an attractive employer in Sheikhan, providing jobs in the local administration, in the party apparatus, as a Peshmerga and with the Yezidi community centres. Moreover, as it has become extremely dangerous to travel to Mosul for work, external labour markets are mostly limited to Ain Sifni, Dohuk, Sulaimaniya and Erbil.

- 33 So far it has been shown that the collectives of Sheikhan and Sinjar constitute an urban environment with regard to population density, primary types of economic activity, and, in Sheikhan more than in Sinjar, settlement categories such as electricity, water supply, etc. Even those aspects of life in the collectives which seem to be “rural” at first sight do not prove to be so on further consideration. If having some sheep is already “rural”, is it still rural if these sheep live between plastic garbage rather than the open countryside? Breeding bees might be categorized as “rural”, but what if these bees are fed with industrial food from the local market? These examples clearly show that the rural/urban dichotomy is highly artificial. Therefore, in the next section, we will examine to what extent urbanization goes beyond such material aspects. What Lewis Holloway and Moya Kneafsey state about the rural context is valid for the urban context as well. It cannot be understood as a clearly identifiable space, or as a verifiable of social or economic characteristics, but as a meaningful concept, “discursively constructed, understood and related to in different ways by diverse social groups” [2004: 2].

## Beyond Material Aspects of Urbanization

- 34 According to the Nineveh Office of the Article 140 Committee, approximately 16,000 compensation claims were filed by both Yezidi and Muslim Kurds seeking to return to their original villages in Sinjar. About 1,500 of these claims are said to refer to families displaced from the Nineveh governorate, whereas the majority emanated from families forcibly relocated to collective towns in Sinjar and al-Qahtaniya. Given a total household size of 5.5 in Sinjar,<sup>38</sup> it can be estimated that approximately 80,000 people currently living in collectives would like to return to their villages.<sup>39</sup> However, there is no large-scale village reconstruction programme in Sinjar although such has been called for by the Yezidi Movement. This is primarily due to a lack of security. A second reason could be Nineveh’s hitherto poor performance in terms of executing its provincial investment budget: as of November 2008, it had contracted no more than 12% of its 2008 budget allocations and disbursed a mere 1% of its overall budget to contractors. Financing a large-scale village reconstruction programme with funds from Dohuk, by contrast, would probably have been criticized by Mosul and Baghdad as the pursuit of a “Kurdish expansionist agenda”. Last but not least, the fact that the majority of Arab settlers brought in by the Baath regime from the mid-1970s onwards, have, unlike in Sheikhan, remained in the region<sup>40</sup>, and possibly in villages claimed by displaced Yezidis, could prove problematic.
- 35 In Sheikhan, the situation is different. Several villages destroyed by the Iraqi military in the northern and southern areas of Sheikhan have been reconstructed or are in the process of being reconstructed by the KRG since 1991 and 2003, respectively.<sup>41</sup> Prior to the 2003 invasion, a number of Arab settlers fled the area; the villages of those who

subsequently attempted to return, but were prevented from doing so, were taken over by Kurds.<sup>42</sup> Former Arab residents of Sheikhan claim that up to 11,000 people were displaced at that time. The process described was based on the shift in the balance of power in northern Iraq, not on the implementation of legal reforms: Kurdish returnees had not re-established their land rights, since the corresponding legislation was not in place to allow for such redress.<sup>43</sup>

- 36 However, who exactly returned to the villages remains unclear. Are they former residents and their offspring who had originally fled to other parts of Iraq or were deported to collective towns, or are they people who had never lived in the region, but now benefited from the new power balance between the Kurds and the Arabs? Moreover, it seems that many Kurds returning only did so temporarily. Indeed, a vast and permanent movement back to the Yezidi ancestral villages has not occurred, nor is it expected. Our research in the collectives of Sheikhan shows that the members of the Yezidi community have opted to improve their living conditions in the collective towns and establish themselves there permanently. Those who return for economic or security reasons to the reconstructed villages are extremely poor. At the same time, the number of compensation claims from Yezidi and Muslim Kurds living in the collective towns of Sheikhan received by the Nineveh Office of the Article 140 Committee is comparably small: approximately 6,000 to 7,000. About 3,000 to 4,000 claims are said to have come from families displaced from Nineveh governorate, while the remainder relates to families forcibly relocated to collectives in Sheikhan.<sup>44</sup> Given a total household size of 7.3 in Sheikhan,<sup>45</sup> it can be estimated that approximately 25,000 people currently living in the collectives are contemplating a return to their original villages. This figure is much smaller than in the case of Sinjar (80,000), not only in absolute numbers, but also in relation to the overall population of the two districts.
- 37 Displacement and village destruction may have affected fewer people in Sheikhan than in Sinjar. However, another factor seems more important: since the security situation in Sheikhan is far more stable than in Sinjar, and the KRG has invested heavily in the infrastructure of the collectives, staying there has become more attractive for Yezidis than returning to village life; this is particularly for women, as the aforementioned infrastructure significantly facilitates their lives. In other words, the Yezidi population of Sheikhan might still present itself as an originally rural population dreaming of return. However, when people are free to decide if they want to return to the village or not, they mostly chose to stay in the collective towns. This is very likely to happen in Sinjar, once infrastructure and security in the collective towns improve. Thus, at least the majority of the Yezidis in Sheikhan does not only live in an urban environment but also prefers this life to that in the village. They have been “mentally urbanized”.
- 38 However, in this regard, the Yezidis of the collectives of Sheikhan and Sinjar are not so different from many other Kurds: Yezidi collectives are not the only ones to have become permanent. What, then, makes the Yezidi case different from others?

## Against the Urban Centres of the Kurdistan Region

- 39 Up to now, and not only under Saddam Hussein, migration has been limited for the most part to the phenomenon of commuting. No mass migration by Yezidis to the urban centres of the legally Kurdish-administered region has occurred so far. Since the

1970s, the number of Yezidi families in Erbil, for example, is estimated to be no more than 10.<sup>46</sup> Why?

- 40 A first possible explanation is quite simple: if the collectives have to be defined – in a material sense – as desirable urban environment, why then move to the urban centres of Erbil or Dohuk? Which advantages would be linked to such a change of location? Indeed, it seems that the disadvantages predominate.
- 41 Firstly, the large Yezidi families cannot cover the high cost of living in the Kurdish-administered North. Housing rents have soared there since the US-led invasion. In addition, Yezidis from Sinjar and the centrally governed regions of Sheikhan are prevented by the KRG administration from registering with the PDS (Public Distribution System). They are not permitted to transfer their food ration cards from their place of origin to the legally Kurdish-administered region. Many Yezidi families depend on PDS food rations and they are unable to move to the Kurdistan Region without.<sup>47</sup> This is because the food ration lists are used to produce the voter lists, and people are only entitled to vote wherever they are registered with their food agent. The KRG has an interest in seeing as many Kurds – in this case the Yezidis – as possible stay in disputed territories such as Sinjar in order to vote, at the time of the referendum,<sup>48</sup> in favour of Sinjar and other disputed territories being attached to the KRG region. Consequently, by hindering them to transfer their ration cards from their place of origin, the Yezidis are forced to stay outside the security of the Kurdish-administered region and to uphold the nationalist claims of Kurdish parties seeking to establish a “Greater Kurdistan”.<sup>49</sup>
- 42 Secondly, in confidential conversations, Yezidis complain of discrimination by Muslim Kurds in the Kurdish-administered region. Residents of the collective town of Mahat stated that Muslim Kurds treated them as second-class citizens. Indeed, many Yezidis in the Kurdish-administered region fill jobs that Muslim Kurds refuse to do because of their low social prestige, e.g. housekeepers, waiters or cleaners in hotels, restaurants, and homes. Our observations confirm that workers in the service sector are treated with disrespect by their superiors. Moreover, Yezidi workers in the construction sector, for example, are paid less than their Muslim colleagues.<sup>50</sup>
- 43 Thirdly, at least in the case of Sinjar, language and cultural differences might be reasons not to move to the Kurdish North. The fact that Sinjar is surrounded by Arab settlements contributed to the success of Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi Baath regime’s policy of arabization. The majority of Yezidis in Sinjar speak Arabic today, with Kurdish more or less relegated to the status of a domestic language. Numerous Arabic words are used in place of Kurdish terms; as a written language, Arabic takes preference over Kurdish.<sup>51</sup> The private as well as the official language in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, in contrast, is Kurdish, making it difficult for Yezidis from Sinjar to establish themselves there. At the same time, migration to Arab cities is difficult due to security considerations.
- 44 Fourthly, the religious homogeneity of the collective towns is an important aspect facilitating the enforcement – at least some aspects – of endogamy. Events such as those of 2007 in Bashiqa, after a young Yezidi woman fell in love with an Arab neighbour, converted to Islam, and was subsequently stoned by an angry Yezidi crowd, are most unlikely to happen in a collective such as Sinjar. In cities like Erbil, the “risk” to enter into close contact with members of other religious groups is significantly higher.<sup>52</sup>

- 45 Last but not least, living in the collective towns means living in the vicinity of the numerous Yezidi shrines and the Valley of Lalesh, places of high significance for the day-to-day practice of Yezidism. Only the presence of a large Yezidi community in the region can assure the future existence of this “holy landscape”.

## Effectively Urbanized in the Periphery of the Collectives

- 46 Under Saddam Hussein, the Yezidi rural population of Sinjar and Sheikhan was effectively urbanized in the collective towns. This process has neither been revoked after 1991, nor after 2003. Migration to the urban centres of the Kurdish Region was out of reach for Yezidis living in both districts, above all for economic reasons. At the same time, Yezidi and Muslim Kurds in Sheikhan mostly decided against returning to the villages when they had the option. They prefer work as public servants to earning a living as small peasants or shepherds. Indeed, with the PDS still in place and large amounts of fruits and vegetables being imported from Iran and Turkey, it is difficult to find a market for agricultural goods. In Sinjar, however, people were not given the option of returning to their original villages. Until 2003, the district was ruled by the Baath regime; afterwards, the security situation did not allow a broad resettlement. It seems that many Yezidis still nourish the dream of return. Yet, this dream is most likely to vanish and give place to a similar process as that which occurred in Sheikhan once the security situation and the infrastructure in the collective towns will have improved.
- 47 Economic and political dependency on Dohuk or Erbil, respectively, is one of the most characteristic features of the collectives. It has been shown, for example, that job opportunities are created and allocated above all by the KRG. The collectives may therefore be well characterized by the term “peripheral area”, defined as a region significantly characterized by unequal power relations to a centre [Beetz 2008]. Still, in this regard, life in the collectives does not differ much from that in many parts of the Kurdistan Region. At the same time, at least the collectives in Sheikhan some combine positive aspects of “urban” life (electricity, water, sewage) with the advantages of the former Yezidi villages (ethnic and religious homogeneity, location in the “holy landscape”). Therefore, urbanization in the collectives has not only been as effective as it was because of the use of force and a lack of other alternatives, but also because it offers – and did offer – very specific advantages for the deported Yezidi population.

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## NOTES

1. Irene Dulz conducted research on the Yezidis in Iraq from August 2004 to December 2005, in May and June 2006, and from December 2009 to January 2010. Eva Savelsberg and Siamend Hajo carried out research on Iraqi Yezidis in August 2002, September 2006 and October-November 2007.

2. “Sinjar” is the official Arab expression. The Kurdish term “Shingal” is more familiar to Yezidis.

3. Strictly speaking, Sheikhan consists of two districts: Sheikhan and al-Sheikhan. See ICG (International Crisis Group), “Iraq’s New Battlefield: The Struggle over Ninewa”. Middle East Report No. 90, 28 September 2009, p. 30.

4. However, there was no specific objective to target the Yezidis, but they were swept up in the anti-Kurdish campaign.

5. See also UNAMI (United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq), “Disputed Internal Boundaries: Sinjar district”, Volume 1, 2009, p. 2, and UNAMI, “Disputed Internal Boundaries: Sheikhan district”, Volume 1, 2009, p. 2.

6. None of the authors have been able to visit Sinjar since 2005.

7. Whereas a number of Yezidis are of the opinion that Sheikh Adi started integrating Islamic elements into “pure” Yezidism [Spät 2005: 39-40].

8. See ICG, "Iraq's New Battlefield: The Struggle over Ninewa". Middle East Report No. 90, 28 September 2009, p. 31.
9. UNAMI, "Disputed Internal Boundaries: Sinjar district", Volume 1, 2009, pp. 1-3.
10. See UNAMI, "Disputed Internal Boundaries: Sheikhan district", Volume 1, 2009, pp. 2-3. The scale of Kurdish displacement in the North during the mid-1970s was not confined to the Sheikhan and Sinjar regions, but covered an area stretching from Khanaqin town close to the Iranian border to the Syrian and Turkish border regions around Sinjar. Moreover, it was followed by the *Anfal* campaign of 1988, during which the Iraqi government destroyed between 3,000 and 4,000 Kurdish villages and towns, displacing hundreds of thousands of Kurds. Some of them were settled in collective towns, others deported to Southern Iraq. Many fled abroad, above all to Iran. About 100,000 people "disappeared". The genocidal character of the *Anfal* campaign made it radically different to earlier and later arabization campaigns.
11. For more on KRG policies towards Yezidis, see I. Dulz, S. Hajo and E. Savelsberg [2004-2005: 102-107; 2009: 43-52].
12. Compare J. Tejel Gorgas [2004-2005] on early attempts, especially of the Bedir Khan brothers, to co-opt the Yezidis into the "Kurdish National Project" or to describe Zoroastrianism as the predecessor of Yezidism and the original religion of all Kurds.
13. The discussion on the ethnic affiliation of the Yezidis is not new. Sheikh Adi, originally from the Bekaa Plateau in Lebanon, was an Arab and has been declared as such by the Yezidis. Arab ethnicity applies to members of the Yezidi sheikh class because they derive from the lineage of Sheikh Adi.
14. Disputed territories are those territories claimed by the KRG, but not covered by Article 53 of the Transitional Administrative Law, later incorporated into the Constitution by Article 140. This article stipulates that the KRG is legally responsible for governing the territories controlled by KDP and PUK on March 19, 2003, when US-led troops invaded Iraq. These territories are comprised of parts of the governorates of Dohuk, Erbil, Sulaimaniya, Kirkuk, Diyala and Nineveh. However, in the case of Nineveh – and not only here – the KRG asserts its right to regions that extend way beyond this line. In the west of the governorate it claims Zummar, a sub-district of Tel Afar, as well as the whole of Sinjar (to which it wants to attach the sub-district of al-Qahtaniya, which has belonged to the neighbouring al-Baaj district since 1977). In the North, the KRG seeks control of the districts of Tel Kaif and Aqra; only the latter is covered by Article 53. In the east of Nineveh governorate, it demands the incorporation of Sheikhan and al-Hamdaniya districts; again, only some areas of these districts (the sub-districts of Baadhra, Atroush, Qasrouq and Eski Kalak) are covered by Article 53. Finally, Bashiqa, a sub-district of Mosul, is to be incorporated into the KRG region. See ICG, "Iraq's New Battlefield: The Struggle over Ninewa". Middle East Report No. 90, 28 September 2009, p. 17. The KRG justifies its claim to these regions by arguing that, prior to arabization, they were entirely or predominantly Kurdish.
15. UNAMI, "Disputed Internal Boundaries: Sinjar district", Volume 1, 2009, pp. 1-2.
16. UNAMI, "Disputed Internal Boundaries: Sheikhan district", Volume 1, 2009, p. 1.
17. See <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/numbers/2009/>
18. The other northern governorate to be affected by this insurgent retreat was Kirkuk.
19. ICG, "Iraq after the Surge". Volume 1: "The New Sunni Landscape". Middle East Report No. 74, 30 April 2008, p. 8.

20. The “Peshmerga” literally means “those who face death”.
21. The Arab residents of Sinjar claim that the Peshmerga prevent them from entering the collective towns and consequently deny them access to schools, health clinics and other governmental services located in the collectives.
22. UNAMI, “Disputed Internal Boundaries: Sinjar district”, Volume 1, 2009, pp. 17-18.
23. The source quoted here, the UNAMI report, gives inconsistent information on the date.
24. UNAMI, “Disputed Internal Boundaries: Sinjar district”, Volume 1, 2009, pp. 3 and 17.
25. UNAMI, “Disputed Internal Boundaries: Sinjar district”, Volume 1, 2009, p. 7.
29. See HRW, “On Vulnerable Ground. Violence against Minority Communities in Nineveh Province’s Disputed Territories”. November 2009, p. 19. See also ICG, “Iraq’s New Battlefield: The Struggle over Ninewa”. Middle East Report No. 90, 28 September 2009, p. 19.
30. UNAMI, “Disputed Internal Boundaries: Sinjar district”, Volume 1, 2009, pp. 14-15.
31. As the study is conducted at district level, no figures are available for the al-Baaj sub-district al-Qahtaniya. See UNWFP (United Nations World Food Programme), “Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis in Iraq”, 2008, p. 187.
32. UNAMI, “Disputed Internal Boundaries: Sinjar district”, Volume 1, 2009, pp. 14 and 21.
33. Interview with Mamou Othman, Director General, Presidential Diwan of Kurdistan Region, Hamburg, Germany, 13 August 2007. Interview with Khidir Domle, journalist, Dohuk, Iraq, October 2004.
34. Interview with Said Silo, President of the Lalesh Cultural Centre, Dohuk, Iraq, November 2007.
35. Interview with Lazgin al-Barany, a Yezidi from Mosul, Damascus, Syria, June 2007.
36. See UNAMI, “Disputed Internal Boundaries: Sheikhan district”, Volume 1, 2009, p. 10. See also UNWFP, “Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis in Iraq”, 2008, pp. 128 and 187.
37. UNAMI, “Disputed Internal Boundaries: Sheikhan district”, Volume 1, 2009, p. 9.
38. UNWFP, “Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis in Iraq”, 2008, p. 182.
39. According to the PUK, families from 11 villages have already left the collective town of al-Qahtaniya and returned to their ancestral homes. See UNAMI, “Disputed Internal Boundaries: Sinjar district”, Volume 1, 2009, p. 16.
40. UNAMI, “Disputed Internal Boundaries: Sinjar district”, Volume 1, 2009, pp. 9, 14 and 16.
41. A number of Yezidis and Christians privately claim that the construction of Yezidi and Christian villages destroyed during the arabization campaign proceeded much more slowly than the rebuilding of Muslim Kurdish villages. See UNAMI, “Disputed Internal Boundaries: Sheikhan district”, Volume 1, 2009, pp. 12-13.
42. HRW, “Claims in Conflict. Reversing Ethnic Cleansing in northern Iraq”, August 2004, Volume 16, No. 4, pp. 27-29.

43. The difficulties associated with RCCD No. 358 of 1978, which refers to the nationalization of Kurdish land, are ongoing: while the KRG was able to cancel the effects of this decree for the sub-districts of Atroush, Qasrouq and Baadhra, it has no legal jurisdiction over the southern sub-districts. Land in this region is still owned by the state. Hence, the original owners who returned to their estates are not legally entitled to them. See UNAMI, “Disputed Internal Boundaries: Sheikhan district”, Volume 1, 2009, p. 12. See also HRW, “Claims in Conflict. Reversing Ethnic Cleansing in northern Iraq”, August 2004, Volume 16, No. 4, p. 34.

44. See UNAMI, “Disputed Internal Boundaries: Sheikhan district”, Volume 1, 2009, p. 13.

45. UNWFP, “Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis in Iraq”, 2008, pp. 119 and 182.

46. Interview with Yezidi residents in Erbil, Iraq, December 2009.

47. Interview with Said Silo, President of the Lalesh Cultural Centre, Dohuk, Iraq, November 2007.

48. The referendum on the future of the “disputed territories” scheduled for 2005 has been postponed several times. It is still not clear whether, and if so when, the referendum is to be carried out. In April 2009, UNAMI presented a detailed study of the disputed territories to Iraqi stakeholders. However, the proposals were officially rejected on both sides and not used for further discussions of the opponents. See ICG, “Iraq’s New Battlefield: The Struggle over Ninewa”. Middle East Report No. 90, 28 September 2009, p. 19.

49. The described procedure is similar to how the KDP and the PUK dealt with internally displaced persons from Kirkuk. In the wake of their displacement they lived in camps in the Kurdish-administered North under miserable conditions, as their integration was not planned [Hajo and Savelsberg 2002]. Following the regime change in 2003, some were subsequently “motivated” by food ration distribution to move to Kirkuk and functioned as demographic support for the Kurdish claim to the city. For other strategies to persuade people to move to Kirkuk, see ICG, “Iraq and the Kurds: Resolving the Kirkuk Crisis”. Middle East Report No. 64, 19 April 2007, p. 4.

50. See [http://www.avestakurd.net/news\\_detail.php?id=8291](http://www.avestakurd.net/news_detail.php?id=8291)

52. Of course the “risk” that members of different casts fall in love with each other can not be banned by staying in the collectives.

## RÉSUMÉS

### Résumé :

Cet article présente les principales caractéristiques du yézidisme ainsi que les relations historiques entre, d’une part, la communauté yézidie et l’État irakien et, d’autre part, les Yézidis et les Kurdes musulmans. Ces relations sont marquées par des persécutions, des déplacements de populations rurales et des destructions de villages. Qu’en est-il des villes de Sheikhan et Sinjar ?



On a ici affaire à un environnement urbain pour ce qui est de la densité de la population, des activités économiques et, à Sheikhan plus qu'à Sinjar, de la fourniture d'électricité et d'eau. De surcroît, dans ces villes, la population a été « mentalement urbanisée ». La majorité des Yézidis de Sheikhan préfèrent la vie urbaine à la vie villageoise. Les communautés yézidies ne sont pas les seules en Irak à s'être implantées de façon définitive. On expliquera en quoi leur cas diffère de celui d'autres communautés.

The main features of Yezidism are described as well as the historical relations between, on the one hand, the Yezidi community and the Iraqi state, and, on the other hand, Yezidi and Muslim Kurds. Persecution, the displacement of rural populations and the destruction of villages has characterized these relations. What is the current situation in the towns of Sheikhan and Sinjar? This is an urban environment as regards population density, economic activities and, in Sheikhan more than in Sinjar, settlement facilities such as electricity or the water supply. Furthermore, the population in these towns has also been "mentally urbanized". The majority of the Yezidis in Sheikhan not only live in an urban environment but prefer this to village life. The Yezidi communities are not the only ones in Iraq that have become permanent. This article seeks to explain how this case differs from the others.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés** : Nord de l'Irak, déplacements de populations rurales, destructions de villages, urbanisation, communauté yézidie, Sheikhan, Sinjar

**Keywords** : destruction of villages, Northern Iraq, displacement of rural population, Sheikhan, urbanisation, Yezidis, Sinjar