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## Sentimentality Has its Place in Human Rights Activism: Nadia Murad Basee Taha's Testimony and The Yazidi Story

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Sentimentality Has its Place in Human Rights Activism:  
Nadia Murad Basee Taha's Testimony and The Yazidi Story

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Human Rights  
of Bard College

by  
Miranda Shulman

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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## **How I Came Across the Yazidis and Nadia Murad**

I first discovered the Yazidi minority when I was told that a young woman named Nadia Murad was coming to Bard College to give a lecture.

I prepared for her talk by watching a video of her speaking at the U.N. and various clips of her lawyer Amal Clooney speaking on her behalf, but nothing could have prepared me emotionally for the harrowing stories she recounted for us. She spoke about the Yazidi massacre which was inflicted by ISIS in 2014 and about her own experience as a Yazidi and as a young woman, watching her home destroyed and her loved ones killed in front of her.

She spoke with such courage. She was unafraid to cry and she gave herself space to pause and regain her composure whenever she needed to—those moments felt so full of strength. The experience of watching and listening to her changed my life—I became completely consumed by my desire to learn more about her and her faith.

Through her testimony, she gave me a role to play in her story, as well. As a college student I rarely feel empowered in a global context—the goal of students is for us to focus on ourselves so that later we can serve our community. We aren't really earning money yet, we aren't able to travel on our own accord, and the fact that our time is so consumed by school work often results in dedicated advocacy falling by the wayside.

However, Murad spoke to us *as* students and asked for our help specifically, pointing us to tools that we do have access to. She asked us to share her story and use



our voices on her behalf—a small request but she stressed its importance. She made me feel like I *could* actually help her, and that I could do it now with the resources I have at my disposal.

It was the first time I felt I was being spoken to directly and that I could be used for what I have to offer as a student and although this was only one aspect of why I left feeling so inspired, it was important and felt unique to her visit.

She spoke about what she had experienced and she welcomed personal questions from audience members about what had happened to her. But she was also completely honest with us, telling us when she found it difficult to respond.

One of the problems I encountered upon beginning to write this thesis was that I did not know what to call her visit—how to label it. It wasn't a talk or a lecture because she didn't speak to us as an expert in the classical sense, and because her performance was emotional. She confided in us about her life experience and it was poignant and painful and I realized that the only appropriate label for her visit was that she came to share her testimony. Her testimony helped me to formulate certain thoughts about the methods of advocacy in human rights because it was so effective.

As a result, the question I have chosen to focus on for my senior thesis considers the relationship between sentimentality and emotion in human rights advocacy—on behalf of the advocate and the audience.

Murad's testimony encouraged me to study the Yazidis in greater detail than I'd researched any topic prior. It inspired, within me, a new approach to human rights—one which revolves around story telling, the importance of first person accounts, and

the incredible value of the voices of the people who experience persecution. This feels like one of the most important discoveries I have made throughout my college career.

**Chapter One: The Yazidi faith, the Origins of Their Persecution,  
and The Recent Massacre**

**Yazidis in the News**

The Yazidi minority first entered the world's stage in 2006 when Dua Khalil Aswad, a young Yazidi woman, was stoned to death by members of the Yazidi community for having converted to Islam for a Sunni Muslim man she had fallen in love with. Dua ran away from her family's home, converted so that she could marry, and then moved to a Sunni cleric. The cleric is said to have received notes from her parents begging her to return home and promising her she would be safe but when eventually she did return, she was met with 2,000 people and was publicly lynched. There were law enforcement personnel present at the lynching but none of them intervened or tried to help the young woman. Videos of the event show her dressed in a red sweatshirt and black underwear with blood running down her face, screaming out for help while being repeatedly kicked and hit in the head with concrete.<sup>1</sup>

While this is an example of violence at the hands of the Yazidis against a member of their own, and thus quite different than the massacre Murad described, it's worth noting because it prompted a series of attacks which happened throughout the following year.

Two weeks after the lynching of Dua Khalil Aswad, the Yazidis were attacked by presumably Al Qaeda gunmen who killed 23 factory workers. Gunmen hijacked a

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Cockburn, "The Death Sentence that Drags Dua Back into a Bloody Feud," The Independent, last modified April 27, 2010, accessed April 26, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/the-death-sentence-that-drags-dua-back-into-a-bloody-feud-1956187.html>.

bus carrying people from the Mosul Textile Factory back to Bashika, a city in Northern Iraq which many Yazidis call home. They made sure only Yazidis were left on the bus before driving the 23 remaining Yazidis to eastern Mosul where they were killed. CBS News wrote at the time of the attack, “A police spokesman for Ninevah province, where Mosul is the provincial capital, said the executions were in response to the killing two weeks ago of a Yazidi woman who had recently converted to Islam.”<sup>2</sup>

Months later, Al Qaeda attacked the Yazidi minority—also ostensibly using the stoning of Dua Khalil Aswad as justification for their attack. A suicide bomber killed between 175 and 180 people according to the U.S. military calculations. Major Roger Lemons claimed that they would probably never know the exact number of casualties<sup>3</sup>. It is thought that the attack was committed by two garbage trucks filled with explosives. These two attacks mark the last time the Yazidis were a topic of conversation in the worldwide news prior to the 2014 massacre.<sup>4</sup>

In August of 2014, ISIS or Daesh as they are known in Muslim countries, invaded Sinjar, a mountainous region of Northern Iraq, one of the only places the Yazidi people can call home after a history of persecution at the hands of surrounding Muslim sects.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Alfonso Serrano, "Love and Hate in Iraq," CBS News, last modified April 22, 2007, accessed April 26, 2017, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/love-and-hate-in-iraq/>.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Graff, "Yazidis Fear Annihilation after Iraq Bombings," Reuters, last modified August 16, 2007, accessed April 26, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-idUSYAT71336220070816>.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Stephanie Nebehay, "Islamic State Committing Genocide Against Yazidis: U.N.," Reuters, last modified June 16, 2016, accessed May 1, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-yazidi-idUSKCN0Z20WR>.

Upon invasion, ISIS fighters separated Yazidi men from women and began to systematically slaughter the men while enslaving, raping, sterilizing, and mutilating the women they captured.<sup>6</sup>

ISIS fighters killed young children as an attempt to emotionally abuse their mothers who were then raped and beaten if they showed any emotion over the loss of their children. There were accounts found of very young children being sold as sex slaves to ISIS fighters and brutally beaten if they attempted escape. One New York Times article concludes with a quote from the U.N. panel as they discussed the mass killing: “No other religious group presented in ISIS-controlled areas of Syria and Iraq has been subjected to the destruction that the Yazidis have suffered[.]”<sup>7</sup>

### **A Theological Understanding of the Yazidi Faith**

The Yazidis have experienced religious based persecution from as far back as the Ottoman Empire. Only vague details can be found about the sort of persecution the Yazidis endured at the hands of their neighbors because the religion hinges on its strictly oral tradition—thus very little of their history has been recorded.<sup>8</sup>

The most self-evident reason for the persecution of the Yazidis, however, is believed to stem from their faith in Tawûsî Melek, the peacock god. Yazidi scholar,

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<sup>6</sup> Nick Cumming-Bruce, "ISIS Committed Genocide Against Yazidis in Syria and Iraq, U.N. Panel Says," New York Times, last modified June 16, 2016, accessed April 26, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/17/world/middleeast/isis-genocide-yazidi-un.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/17/world/middleeast/isis-genocide-yazidi-un.html?_r=0)

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Birgül Açıkyıldız, *The Yezidis: The History of a Community, Culture and Religion* (London, U.K.: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

Birgöl Açıkyıldız explains some of the intricacies of the Yazidi religion in detail. He writes that their “eternal” God, *Xwedê*, is:

not active and has delegated his power to the seven angels (the Heptad of seven holy beings), or seven mysterious *heft sir*, who assist him. He appointed the Peacock Angel, Tawûsî Melek, to take care of worldly affairs and human fortune; God is interested only in heavenly affairs. [...] In Yezidism<sup>9</sup>, *Xwedê* has a transcendental character, and he is perceived only through activities of the Holy Trinity, the divine and semi-divine creatures that are intermediaries between God and the Yezidi people. Thus it is believed that God manifests himself in three different forms: (1) a bird, Tawûsî Melek, the Peacock Angel who is the main representative of God; (2) a young man, Sultan Êzî; and (3) an old man, Sheikh ‘Adî, a historical personality and the reformer of the Yezidi religion.<sup>10</sup>

Tawûsî Melek serves as the intermediary between *Xwedê* and the Yazidis and thus is the most important and powerful figure in the religion.

Açıkyıldız characterizes him by saying, “[h]e is the enlightening of mankind,” and then includes the The Yazidi hymn to Tawûsî Melek which is translated as follows:

Oh my Lord, you are the angel who is the king of the world,  
 Oh my Lord, you are the angel who is a generous king,  
 You are the angel of the awesome Throne.  
 Oh my Lord, from pre-eternity you have always been the ancient one.

You are the taste, happiness and insight,  
 Oh my Lord, you are forever God,  
 You are forever aware,  
 And you are forever worthy of praise and homage.<sup>11</sup>

The Yazidis regard Tawûsî Melek as the embodiment of their ultimate creator *Xwedê*, thus, Tawûsî Melek is the figure they pray to and hold in the highest esteem.

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<sup>9</sup> Another spelling of Yazidi

<sup>10</sup> Açıkyıldız, *The Yezidis*, 73.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

The story of the origin of Satan for the Yazidis is that he refused to bow to Adam because he vowed only to bow to the creator God. God then told Satan that he *must* bow before Adam so, to appease God, Satan agreed. Satan then spent seven-thousand years crying about his mistake at not initially bowing to Adam as God wished he had. He filled seven jars with his tears and used the tears he collected to put out the fires of Hell. In the Yazidi faith Tawûsî Melek, actually embodies this figure. Satan, then, is not a negative or frightening character at all but rather is regarded as a misguided, and then resurrected and changed angel which is the ultimate honor and regarded as worthy of deep respect. The utterance of the very name “Satan” is considered a sin in the Yazidi faith because of its close relationship to Tawûsî Melek. Rather Açıkyıldız writes, “[s]atan is not a fallen angel, but the most beautiful and powerful angel and the only representative of God on earth.”<sup>12</sup>

However this is not a popular belief among the neighboring Islamic faiths. Most other Islamic religious groups recognize Tawûsî Melek as a fallen angel who disobeyed God’s wishes and was thus banished from Paradise. Açıkyıldız writes of his relationship to neighboring religions, “[t]he ambiguous figure of Tawûsî Melek is largely regarded as an incarnation of evil and equivalent to Satan in the ancient Near Eastern cultures.”<sup>13</sup>

Other aspects of the Yazidi faith further complicate the relationship between Yazidi peoples and Tawûsî Melek. One such story is that when the prophet Muhammed joined a meeting between God, Tawûsî Melek and other angels. Tawûsî Melek ordered

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<sup>12</sup> Açıkyıldız, *The Yazidis*, 75.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

that he leave because he was a mere mortal. Muhammed refused and Tawûsî Melek threw him to Earth, out of heavens.

Another story about the Yazidi relationship to Tawûsî Melek is that he was a fallen angel who was found having descended from above and tended to by mortals. The Creator, the people's one true God, praised the caretakers of the fallen angel for the kindness they showed him. He commanded the people to follow Tawûsî Melek from that day on and "never to abandon the downcast and rejected Tawûsî Melek in distress or affliction. Those people were the Yezidis; until now they go after Tawûsî Melek, hated and cursed by the whole world..."<sup>14</sup>

Believers of Islam or other Muslim faiths do not share the Yazidi's esteem for Tawûsî Melek. Tawûsî Melek is considered the incarnation of Satan as the devil and because of this extreme and contentious difference, members of Yazidis are widely considered devil-worshippers and thus have been persecuted throughout their history.

There are many intricacies which are called into question by the representation of "satan" or Tawûsî Melek, as a Peacock. Muslim tradition dictates that a peacock was actually involved in coaxing Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. In this myth the peacock plays the role of sending Satan to the serpent who then convinces Adam and Eve to commit their crime. He does this in exchange for "eternal youth, prevention of illness and eternal access to Paradise"<sup>15</sup> (79). Ultimately Satan, the peacock, and the serpent are all banished from Paradise forever.

Another explanation for the relationship between the peacock and Satan is that Satan was likened to a peacock because of his breathtaking beauty. However "the poet

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<sup>14</sup> Açıkyıldız, *The Yezidis*, 78

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.



Nizāmī writes, ‘Do not judge a peacock by the colour of its feathers and the manner of its flight, for like the cat he too has an ugly cry.’<sup>16</sup> footnote in book 229.

Açıkyıldız writes:

Although Yezidis are not the only or the first to give a primordial place to Satan in their cult, with time, Tawûsî Melek became the most obvious and clear symbol of the dissociation of Yezidism from other religions. This symbol grew notably over time, and it was depicted on brass banners, called *sanjak*, when Yezidi heterodoxy became clearly defined in opposition to the Muslim establishment.<sup>17</sup>

Through this dissenting characterization of Tawûsî Melek, a deep prejudice has developed in most Muslim and Islamic faiths in surrounding areas regarding the Yazidis

### **Defining Genocide**

If we choose to believe that the ISIS attack on the Yazidi people was based strictly upon differing religious values, the acknowledgement of the Yazidis as devil worshipers by many of the other Muslim sects would serve as the motivation for ISIS’ attack on the Yazidi minority.

It is debatable that ISIS uses this as justification for the genocide they committed against the Yazidi people but this concept will be returned to at a later point in this essay.

An important aspect of the Yazidi faith is maintained by the absence of written texts. The oral tradition is exceptionally important to the Yazidi faith but that results in an unfortunate lack of written history and thus a lack of scholarly research about the

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<sup>16</sup> Açıkyıldız, *The Yezidis*, 79

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 79

traditions and very little recorded information about the persecution they have faced throughout their existence. At an event entitled, “Freeing Yazidi Women: Combating a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Slavery Revival Project,” Matthew Barber, a top scholar of the Yazidi people and advocate on their behalf explained that the oral tradition itself contributed to Yazidi persecution based on the other religion’s lack of knowledge about the intricacies of the faith.

Regardless, there have been many attacks against the Yazidis and attempts to wipe them out completely dating back to the Ottoman Empire and Ottoman’s attempt to convert all Yazidis to Islam and kill any who refused. Açıkyıldız addresses the Yazidi discord with the Ottomans, writing:

[T]heir relations with the Ottomans were tense from the beginning. They had suffered under the Ottoman military expeditions and were persecuted by the local Ottoman governors. The main pretext for the massacres was their alleged refusal to pay taxes or to be conscripted into Ottoman army, but the Ottomans also considered them former Muslims who had deviated from the right path by worshipping Satan. The Ottomans forced the Yezidis to convert to Islam, and from the eighteenth century, many *fetwas*<sup>18</sup> were declared against Yezidis for their infidelity.<sup>19</sup>

The Islamic Law could not protect the Yazidi peoples because they were not what Açıkyıldız calls, “people of the book” in the eyes of the Ottomans. They were thought of as members of the lowest ranking group.

As a result of the violent and constant persecution of the Yazidis throughout history, they have been pushed to isolated Mount Sinjar. Because of their long history

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<sup>18</sup> Official statement which sets precedent for action

<sup>19</sup> Açıkyıldız, *The Yezidis*, 199

of living in the region, many of their religious structures are located there making the environment itself a very sacred, special place to Yazidis.<sup>20</sup>

In 2014 The Islamic State invaded Sinjar and committed—what is considered genocide—against the Yazidi minority<sup>21</sup>.

According to Human Rights Watch, the assaults began in Sinjar on August 3<sup>rd</sup> when ISIS began killing hundreds of male Yazidis and kidnapping Yazidi women and girls<sup>22</sup>. After the initial attack, 5,000 women and girls were sold into slavery and an estimated 3,400 were still held captive in 2016<sup>23</sup>.

In the New York Times, Nick Cumming-Bruce wrote about documents which were found detailing the treatment of the Yazidis post 2014 attack:

In addition to the killings, Islamic State fighters systematically separated Yazidi men and women and carried out rape, sexual mutilation and sterilization to prevent the birth of Yazidi babies, and they transferred captured Yazidi children to the fighters' families and training camps, cutting them off from Yazidi beliefs and practices and 'erasing their identities as Yazidis.'<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Matthew Barber, "IS Routs Peshmerga, Takes Control of Sinjar Mountains, Jeopardizes Yazidi Homeland," Syria Comment, last modified August 3, 2014, accessed May 1, 2017, <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/routs-peshmerga-takes-control-sinjar-mountains-jeopardizes-yazidi-homeland/>.

<sup>21</sup> Nebehay, "Islamic State," Reuters.

<sup>22</sup> "Iraq: Forced Marriage, Conversion for Yezidis Victims, Witnesses Describe Islamic State's Brutality to Captives," Human Rights Watch, last modified October 11, 2014, accessed April 26, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/10/11/iraq-forced-marriage-conversion-yezidis>.

<sup>23</sup> Seth J. Frantzman, "PHOTOS: A modern genocide — Yazidi survivors in Shingal," +972, last modified January 1, 2016, accessed April 26, 2017, <https://972mag.com/photos-a-modern-genocide-yazidi-survivors-in-shingal/115479/>.

<sup>24</sup> Cumming-Bruce, "ISIS Committed," New York Times.

ISIS fighters killed young children as an attempt to emotionally abuse their mothers who were then raped and beaten if they showed any emotion over their loss. There are accounts of very young children who were sold as sex slaves to ISIS fighters and brutally beaten if they attempted escape. Cumming-Bruce's article concludes with a quote from the U.N. panel: "No other religious group presented in ISIS-controlled areas of Syria and Iraq has been subjected to the destruction that the Yazidis have suffered[.]"<sup>25</sup>

Kirk Semple of The New York Times recounts harrowing details of the experiences of five women and girls who managed to escape ISIS.<sup>26</sup> These women requested for their names not be included for fear of ISIS harming their families. One fifteen year old girl initially wanted her name to be included as revenge. She eventually settled on only her initials, D.A., being published.

The women describe something which can only be understood as slavery. D.A. describes her experience of being captured: her family was driving away from the scene of the massacre, fleeing Sinjar, when they were stopped by a group of ISIS fighters. The family was taken back to Sinjar where the fighters separated the men from the women and then the unmarried and older girls from the married and younger. D.A. recounts, "I was crying and grabbing my mother's hand, [...] One of the Islamic State

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<sup>25</sup> Cumming-Bruce, "ISIS Committed," New York Times.

<sup>26</sup> Kirk Semple, "Yazidi Girls Seized by ISIS Speak Out After Escape," New York Times, last modified November 14, 2014, accessed April 26, 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/15/world/middleeast/yazidi-girls-seized-by-isis-speak-out-after-escape.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/15/world/middleeast/yazidi-girls-seized-by-isis-speak-out-after-escape.html?_r=0).

members came and beat me and put a pistol to my head. My mother said I should go so I wouldn't be killed."<sup>27</sup>

She recounts that her and her sister were taken to a building and left for nine days with other women and girls where ISIS fighters could come and choose which woman (or women) they wanted. Once she was chosen, she was moved to an auction house where she and other Yazidi women—as young as eleven years old—were forced to undress and were again auctioned. She tried to escape at one point but was beaten severely. She and the other five interviewees said they had not been raped but that most of the other women they met while there had been, many times by multiple men at once. It is also possible that the women being interviewed wouldn't have admitted to their assault. A great deal of humiliation is associated with rape in the Yazidi culture and the fear of punishment keeps many women and girls from admitting to having been sexually assaulted.<sup>28</sup>

The Islamic State's online magazine, *Dabiq*, explained the purpose of marrying off Yazidi women and young girls to members of the Islamic State—referring to them as their “concubines” and clarifying that it would prevent these men from committing adultery.<sup>29</sup>

The responses to this event on a global scale have been surprisingly scarce. Very little has been done in the way of providing aid to the Yazidi women still in

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<sup>27</sup> Semple, "Yazidi Girls," *New York Times*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Sewell Chan and Somini Sengupta, "Nadia Murad, Yazidi Woman Who Survived ISIS Captivity, Wins Human Rights Prize," *New York Times*, last modified October 10, 2016, accessed April 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/11/world/middleeast/yazidis-isis-nadia-murad.html>.

slavery, and nothing concrete has been done to protect or prosecute the individuals who murdered so many Yazidi men and young boys. The chairman of the U.N.'s 40 page inquiry on the Yazidi genocide, Paulo Pinheiro, asserted in June of 2016, “[t]he finding of genocide must trigger much more assertive action at the political level, including at the (U.N.) Security Council [...] Almost two years since the attack on Mount Sinjar, nothing has been done to save those people.”<sup>30</sup>

Murad Ismael, a Yazidi American who advocates on behalf of the Yazidis, discussed specific actions which the global community could take to help the Yazidis while attending the, “Freeing Yazidi Women Combating 21<sup>st</sup> Century Slavery Revival Project”. His suggestions include providing artillery to the Yazidi civilians attempting to fight ISIS, increasing airstrikes near Sinjar, helping to evacuate Yazidis from the mountains around Sinjar, and assisting in freeing Yazidi women from sex slavery.<sup>31</sup>

In June, 2016 Skye Wheeler writes for Human Rights Watch:

Human Rights Watch has found that the abuses against Yezidi women and girls, including abducting them and forcibly converting them to Islam and/or forcibly marrying them to ISIS members, amount to war crimes, may be crimes against humanity and may be part of a genocide against Yezidis<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Nebehay, "Islamic State," Reuters.

<sup>31</sup> Emily Parker, "Freeing Yazidi Women: Combating a 21st Century Slavery Revival Project," Wilson Center, last modified October 31, 2014, accessed April 26, 2017, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/freeing-yazidi-women-combating-21st-century-slavery-revival-project>.

<sup>32</sup> Skye Wheeler, "UN Panel Reports on ISIS Crimes on Yezidis “Unimaginable Horrors”," Human Rights Watch, last modified June 21, 2016, accessed April 26, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/21/un-panel-reports-isis-crimes-yezidis>.

The United Nations investigators also finally officially recognized the Yazidi attack as what it is, genocide, in June of 2016 but still have not taken any of the steps to help outlined by Ismael above. Wheeler writes, “[t]here has been considerable attention to the plight of Yezidi women in the media, but little discussion on how to provide justice for these terrible crimes. [...] The ICC [the International Criminal Court] has a mandate over crimes of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.”<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, Iraq is not part of the ICC and Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi told Human Rights Watch in March that Iraq will not be joining the court, presumably because he wants to keep secret other military abuses the Iraqi military has committed—thus they do not want Iraq to be under any serious investigation.<sup>34</sup>

Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, who is the chairman of The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic said of labeling the Yazidi massacre a genocide:

‘Genocide has occurred and is ongoing [...] ISIS has subjected every Yazidi woman, child or man that it has captured to the most horrific atrocities,’ [...] ‘ISIS permanently sought to erase the Yazidis through killing, sexual slavery, enslavement, torture, inhuman and degrading treatment, and forcible transfer causing serious bodily and mental harm.’<sup>35</sup>

Then John Kerry proclaimed in March of 2016 that the United States officially labeled the ISIS invasion of the Yazidis as genocide as well.<sup>36</sup>

So far these labels are essentially all that’s been done to aid the Yazidis. The label of genocide alone doesn’t do very much for the cause itself. Article II of The

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<sup>33</sup> Wheeler, "UN Panel," Human Rights Watch.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Cumming-Bruce, "ISIS Committed," New York Times.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

Convention of the Prevention of Genocide established in 1948, essentially lays out what exactly the United Nations constitutes as genocide, and it is as follows:

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

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.<sup>37</sup>

The Yazidi genocide satisfies each of the points of the convention.

Reuters discusses the U.N. report of the event which consists of interviews with survivors, writing, “the Islamist militants had been systematically rounding up Yazidis in Iraq and Syria since August 2014, seeking to ‘erase their identity’ in a campaign that met the definition of the crime as defined under the 1948 Genocide Convention.”<sup>38</sup>

Article VI of The Convention details the punishments associated with committing the act of genocide:

Persons charged with genocide or any of the other acts enumerated in article III<sup>39</sup> shall be tried by a competent tribunal of the State in the territory of which the act was committed, or by such international penal tribunal as may have jurisdiction with respect to those Contracting Parties which shall have accepted its jurisdiction.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> United Nations, “The Convention on the Prevention of the Crime of Genocide,” 1948, 282, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%2078/volume-78-i-1021-english.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> Nebehay, "Islamic State," Reuters.

<sup>39</sup> Article III of The Convention of The Prevention of the Act of Genocide is as follows:  
The following acts shall be punishable:

- a) Genocide;
- b) Conspiracy to commit genocide;
- c) Direct and public incitement to commit genocide;
- d) Attempt to commit genocide;
- e) Complicity in genocide.



The result of the United Nations calling the attack genocide means that if the ISIS fighters are captured, they will be tried for genocide in court. While this is one aspect of the appropriate response, it is certainly not enough. Yazidis are still dying, the potential prosecution of the Islamic State seems like a far-fetched notion when the Yazidis are in need of aid now.

Murad spoke at the United Nations, begging them to offer more support to the Yazidis but they have not responded in a concrete way. The details of this testimony and the testimony she gave while at Bard will be discussed later in this essay but it is important to recognize the basis of what she asks for in both. She asks for acknowledgement of the bloodshed, she asks for sympathy and attention, and she asks for the eventual prosecution of the ISIS fighters responsible for inflicting such gruesome and heartless violence upon the people of her faith—thus the basis of her request to the U.N. does partially hinge on the perpetrators being charged with genocide. She said in address in Strasbourg, France, to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, “I will go back to my life when women in captivity go back to their lives, when my community has a place, when I see people accountable for their crimes.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> United Nations, “The Convention on the Prevention of the Crime of Genocide,” 1948, 282, <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%2078/volume-78-i-1021-english.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Chan and Sengupta, "Nadia Murad," New York Times.

## **Chapter Two: The Benefits of Using Sentimentality in Human Rights**

How *should* the world respond to a massive Human Rights violation like the one inflicted upon the Yazidis? Murad speaks of her desire for legal assistance in the creation of justice for her people. She requests trials for the perpetrators of the massacre against her people.

However, the law has a very impersonal, unsentimental aspect to it. It acts out of necessity and tradition rather than acting upon human needs. It studies events and considers what legal justice might look like oftentimes without taking into account the wishes of the specific people affected. It goes by protocols rather than bending itself to fit each situation that it addresses and often times legal action comes from a place of needing to uphold a standard for the way certain situations have been handled in the past. The law frequently acts on behalf of itself and rarely includes the input of people who are directly connected to and affected by the events. Much of the time the result of this impersonal, unsentimental aspect is that the people speaking on behalf of others do not understand the needs of those they represent and thus spend their time fighting for something that will not really benefit anyone.

Nadia Murad and people like her who use testimony to speak on behalf of their community, change the legal narrative and make the law into something far more personal and thus, more effective, than it usually is at dealing with human rights violations.

Scholars Lyn Hunt and Richard Rorty discuss the role that sentimentality and emotion play in Human Rights in great detail through very different lenses.

Hunt's lens is rather unique as she writes about the way that empathy functions in fictional writings. In her book, *Inventing Human Rights*, she analyzes the reason that novels have an effect on the reader, the way that effect is achieved, what exactly that effect is, and what a similar sort of embrace of empathy could mean for Human Rights work.

She discusses the invention of epistolary novels and the way that empathy operates in that scheme.

Epistolary novels are essentially a collection of fictional letters. Thus, it utilizes the medium, the book, itself—the fact that when one reads, one is touching and seeing paper and ink, the same thing one sees and feels when they read a letter they received from a loved one. Therefore in some ways this writing style offers even more of a personal connection and creates even more room for empathy and personal identification than the novel as a writing style because it doesn't deny what the experience of engaging with it is—that experience being reading. It embraces the action that we are taking in reading rather than pretending it isn't happening, as one must when reading a novel.

She writes about Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel, *Pamela*,<sup>42</sup> stating:

We read the letter along with the mother. No narrator, indeed no quotation marks, stand between us and Pamela herself. We cannot help but identify with Pamela and experience with her the potential erasure of social distance as well as the threat to her self-possession.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Samuel Richardson, *Pamela* (London, England: Messrs Rivington & Osborn, 1740).

<sup>43</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights* (New York, U.S.: Norton, 2007), 43.

In this epistolary novel *Pamela* recounts conversations she had with people, her feelings while conversing with those people, and also communicates the arc of the story, all at the same time. She places us in the front row—places the reader inside her own mind so simultaneously she becomes part of us while we simultaneously become the friend to whom she is writing. We, the readers, are part of her story ourselves.

Hunt writes:

By its very form, then, the epistolary novel was able to demonstrate that selfhood depended on qualities of ‘interiority’ (having an inner core), for the characters express their inner feelings in their letters. In addition, the epistolary novel showed that all selves had this interiority (many of the characters write), and consequently that all selves were in some sense equal because all were alike in their possession of interiority.<sup>44</sup>

The the structure of Richardson’s novel *Pamela* and the invention of this new writing style capitalizes on what Hunt refers to as the “interiority” of a person—or I refer to it as the personal. One does not necessarily expect their interiority to be accessed while reading a book about someone else, and might be set in a different time or place. Through our ability to access interiority we are able to become the person we read about in some capacity. We take on many aspects of Pamela, the readers feel her pain. We both take on the role of her friend and confidant through the action of reading her letters, while also becoming Pamela and this process is what creates such a strong sense of empathy. We see ourselves in so many aspects of the story.

Hunt writes about the public’s response to Rousseau’s epistolary novel, *Julie* as well. She writes:

Men and women alike identified with the female heroines of these novels. From letters to Rousseau, we know that men, even military officers, reacted intensely to Julie. One Louis François, a retired military officer,

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<sup>44</sup> Hunt, *Inventing Human*, 48.

wrote to Rousseau: ‘You have driven me crazy about her. Imagine then the tears that her death must have wrung from me. . . . Never have I wept such delicious tears. That reading created such a powerful effect on me that I believe I would have gladly died during that supreme moment.’<sup>45</sup>

Hunt shows us the result of the strange psychological effect that the epistolary novel has on its readers. The books make people who are in most ways different, feel deep love and empathy for the characters and recognize themselves in them, resulting in similar emotions and reactions to the story that the characters experience themselves—thus the books create a certain, incredibly powerful, unique sort of empathy.

The very nature of fictional literature does not lend itself to the creation of such a strong sense of empathy. The characters in novels are merely that: characters. The fictional aspect of epistolary novels, however, overlooked, however, because the sense of empathy created by the structure and writing is so strong. In order for us to care about the emotions in the story, we must also view the characters as full-fledged people and we do. Studying methods like these is extremely important to human rights advocacy because the ability to create empathy between people who have experienced none of the same things is the key to the effective use of sentimentality in human rights. They also mirror many of Murad’s testimonial tactics. She wants her listener to identify with her thus allowing them to feel empathy for her regarding experiences they will never and have never actually had.

Richard Rorty writes in great depth about the contemporary use of sentimentality in Human Rights. He also spends a great deal of time discussing the innermost thoughts of the bystanders of violence and the considerations of the inflictors. He writes about the inflictors of violence, in the case of Nadia Murad and the

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<sup>45</sup> Hunt, *Inventing Human*, 47-48.

Yazidis, the inflictors of violence being ISIS: “They are not being in-humane but rather are discriminating between true humans and pseudo-humans. They are making the same sort of distinction the Crusaders made between humans and infidel dogs, and Black Muslims make between humans and blue-eyed devils.”<sup>46</sup> While stating that “they are not being in-humane” seems to be an understatement when it comes to studying the psychological tendencies of people capable of committing such heinous acts like genocide, it also provides us with an important commentary on the way that sentimentality might operate on the opposite side.

Rorty goes on to state:

We here in the safe, rich democracies feel about Serbian torturers and rapists as they feel about their Muslim victims: they are more like animals than like us. [...] Here in the safe countries we find ourselves saying things like ‘That’s how things have always been in the Balkans,’ suggesting that, unlike us, those people are used to being raped and castrated.<sup>47</sup>

It is incredibly important to consider the way that sentimentality works against good as well or rather how sentimentality can be worked around by the foe of human rights.

Rorty points to the fact that people who commit large scale Human Rights violations must play a mental game with themselves wherein they must turn the people they persecute into something other than human so as to detach themselves from any feeling of sentimental connection.

People who live in far away, “safe” places as Rorty has dubbed them, also work to counter sentimental tendencies which would, if they were allowed to remain, move

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<sup>46</sup> Richard Rorty, *Human rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality* (New York, U.S.: Basic Books, 1993), 167.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 168

us to act on behalf of the people who live in less “safe” places. *This* we are able to accomplish with great ease because we are never forced to confront any of the far-away suffering. We are able to choose what news we see and which articles we read. When we *are* confronted by certain stories we are able, as Rorty explains, to separate ourselves from them by simply reminding ourselves that that’s what other people endure all the time—it becomes their natural state in our minds.

The deep rooted beliefs that the inflictors of violence must possess in order to allow them to torture, and the mental game that the bystanders must play: both are rooted in sentimentality, both attempt to and succeed at counteracting sentimental feelings. This is essentially the opposite of what Lyn Hunt talks about in terms of the importance of empathy in the context of epistolary novels. This serves as the counter process. The counter process, however, works as a direct result of the power of sentimentality and emotion in human nature.

The fact that these are aspects of ourselves which are innate and can also be utilized in order to motivate others to act in certain ways is potentially dangerous—as Rorty explains, but it can also be a source for good; positive manipulation. Rorty also uses the word “manipulation” when describing the potential relationship between sentimentality and Human Rights. He explains how emotion and sentiment can be used to create similarities between people who are very different.

He writes:

The best, and probably the only, argument for putting foundationalism behind us is the one I have already suggested: it would be more efficient to do so, because it would let us concentrate our energies on manipulating sentiments, on sentimental education. That sort of education gets people of different kinds sufficiently well acquainted with one another that they are less tempted to think of those different from themselves as

only quasi-human. The goal of this sort of manipulation of sentiment is to expand the reference of the terms ‘our kind of people’ and ‘people like us.’<sup>48</sup>

Testimonial speech helps to break down the “us vs. them” narrative making way for changes of heart from both sides which, Rorty explains, serves the destruction of the assailant/bystander narrative. The reality of putting a face to the pain and suffering is sometimes enough of a reminder of our similarities. People experience the brutality of war or discrimination or bombs should never have to feel accustomed to it. The cultivation of sentimentality versus actively countering it can do so much for human rights.

Rorty talks of sentimentality as a means for the creation of empathy, and thus, considers the importance of empathy in human rights in the same way that Lyn Hunt uses the success of epistolary novels as a commentary on the benefit of sentimentality in human rights.

While discussing the use of sentimentality in human rights, Rorty simultaneously points to the lack of effectiveness of rationality as a tool for Human Rights activism. He considers what the role of rationality actually is when it comes to teaching about Human Rights. He explains that people who utilize rationality do not then become the true “problem”—still the “problem” is the people who hate and persecute those who are different from them.

He writes:

Plato thought that the way to get people to be nicer to each other was to point out what they all had in common – rationality. But it does little good to point out, to the people I have just described, that many Muslims

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<sup>48</sup> Rorty, *Human rights*, 176.



and women are good at mathematics or engineering or jurisprudence. Resentful young Nazi toughs were quite aware that many Jews were clever and learned, but this only added to the pleasure they took in beating such Jews.<sup>49</sup>

Rationality does not make change, it does not make people feel any more akin to one another, and it does not counter anyone's preconceived notions about the differences between people. Appealing to one's emotions generates change because it allows people to access the part of themselves which can motivate them to act. Rorty explains that it is not effective for a person with no real stake or emotional connection to the cause to explain why the issue should be addressed. It takes more than an reasoning relying only on rationality and fact to eliminate deep-set prejudice.

Testimonial speaker's words come from a place of true feeling. The poignancy of this relates back to what we discuss earlier in this essay regarding the impersonal, unemotional side of the legal system. But a system that, nonetheless, acts in reaction to catastrophes experienced by human beings who typically have nothing to do with the legislation or legal proceedings.

Taking human emotion—specifically pain—and translating it into something else, essentially is the legal process. The pain is typically taken completely out of context and people who have absolutely no connection to it discuss how to appropriately address it. How can legal proceedings be made more accessible to the people who are in need of the resulting legislation—especially those who have been victim to crimes against humanity like the Yazidis?

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<sup>49</sup> Rorty, *Human rights*, 177.

Testimonial speech might be the best way to accomplish such an ambitious goal. Testimonial speech serves as a platform for the honest words of survivors of injustice—and for the use of sentimentality in human rights advocacy. Its use also ensures that lawmakers know exactly what is necessary in the creating genuinely beneficial policy; what changes must be made in order to make living conditions better for a community of which they are not part. Testimonial speech gives people a voice which they can use to ask for exactly what they need as a people whether new that's laws, prosecution of offenders of laws, or another layer of protection as Murad Ismael was able to do on behalf of his people and as Nadia Murad did when she asked for prosecution of the members of ISIS who destroyed her town and life and killed her family. The fact that these requests can be heard and then can be taken into consideration by lawyers and legislators or U.N. board members puts us on the pathway of making the law personal.

The downside to this approach to human rights advocacy is that there is still a very obvious division between the audience and the person giving the testimony. The use of sentimentality through the vehicle of testimony in human rights advocacy works to break down prejudices, and works to counteract people who justify being a bystander of violence, but it can also generate something else which does not necessarily bring people together. Testimony typically uses pity to create action. It is extremely important to weigh the pros and cons presented by this relationship.

We must consider the way that this relationship is cultivated by the nature of testimony itself. Testimony operates by the speaker both presenting their audience with

aspects of themselves that they can relate to but simultaneously reminding them of their differences.

This combination of both familiarity and difference works perfectly to create a desire within the audience to act on behalf of the face which reminds them of themselves, and they are moved to act from a place of pity which is driven by the experiences that person has had to endure which they will *never* have to endure.

Is it moral to use pity as such? The answer comes down to the level of urgency for concrete change. If testimony can give the speaker ownership over their own experiences, which allows them to ask for exactly what they need, and has the potential to end prejudice, potentially addressing the actual root of the problem, then maybe the fact that pity plays a role in the narrative of testimony is forgivable.

In his book, *Human Rights, Inc., The World Novel, Narrative Form and International Law*, Joseph Slaughter discusses the importance of the TRC—the National Truth and Reconciliation Commission—a group of people who assembled in post-apartheid South Africa to give a platform to the stories of individuals who underwent abuse under the apartheid rule. It gave an official, legal space for testimonial speech, exploring the relationship between the law and sentimentality which we also discuss above.

The TRC represents a successful merging of the two in a legal setting. Slaughter writes about the success and merit of the TRC assembly also citing the official TRC report itself, which states:

‘Often the basic facts about what happened are already known,’ notes the TRC report; ‘what is critical is that these facts be fully and publicly acknowledged’—placed ‘on public, national record.’ In other words, part of the work of truth commissions is to provide a space for the

official acknowledgement of the untold suffering that everyone presumably already knows and thereby also to (re)activate, as a second (civic) nature, the dialogical processes and discursive practices of an emergent modern democratic state's anticipated 'more visible and more valuable citizens'<sup>50</sup>

Thus, the public nature of testimonial speeches and the creation of forums dedicated to making sure they are given a platform and consequently taken into account, creates another benefit for the speaker. Slaughter discusses this aspect of testimonial speech in another article, writing, “[w]hile postmodern theory posits the unknowability of the self, because subjectivity is a nexus of complex relationships, the testimony offered by victims of human rights abuses tends to suggest that, even if the subject is ultimately unknowable, the individual, through self-narration, experiences herself as a distinct spatio-historical being.”<sup>51</sup> The importance of testimonial speech also lies in its ability to make the speaker feel valuable—which they are—and unique in the experiences they recount and in their experiences as an individual—thus giving their life meaning in the face of the greatest adversity.

The innate purity in the presentation of the testimonial speech itself is the epitome of what makes it so special. This seems like an important step in the use of testimony as a vehicle for the heightened use of sentimentality in human rights advocacy in the context of a legal forum based on the benefits it offers for victims

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<sup>50</sup> Joseph Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc., The World Novel, Narrative Form and International Law* (New York, U.S.: Fordham University Press, 2007), 145.

<sup>51</sup> *A Question of Narration: The Voice in International Human Rights Law* (n.p.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 429,

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/15ba6136cdfd59eb?projector=1>.

violence or misfortune and the benefits in terms it's ability to create action and garner attention

### Chapter Three: The Role of Testimony in Human Rights

#### The Art of Testimony

The way that testimonial speech operates is an important skill to understand when promoting its use in human rights advocacy. There are right ways of doing it—ways that are productive—but producing change takes certain skill sets and calculations when it comes to the testimony.

The specific techniques that a person uses to tell a story can function in very deliberate ways when they are geared toward advocacy. The language one uses holds power over the way a situation is perceived, and deliberate language is also far more motivational than facts—or what Rorty might call rationality<sup>52</sup>.

The language used in descriptions of events or in the recounting of events experienced by others are often times edited to appeal to a specific demographic or audience. Kimberly A. Nance discusses this concept in her piece, “Can Literature Promote Justice?: Trauma Narrative and Social Action in Latin American *Testimonio*.” She writes, “Rhetorical analysis of *testimonio* demands close attention to the speaker’s goal with reference to a particular audience, as well as identification of specific strategies.”<sup>53</sup> She lays out the relationship between the language one uses and their audience in the context of *testimonio* or testimony.

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<sup>52</sup> Rorty, *Human rights*

<sup>53</sup> Kimberly A. Nance, *Can Literature Promote Justice?: Trauma Narrative and Social Action in Latin American Testimonio* (n.p.: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006), 19.

She goes on to further address this aspect of testimony later in her paper when she quotes Salvadorian activist Maria Teresa Tula who wrote about her own experience of it in her own book<sup>54</sup>. Tula writes:

Talking to different groups of people is a lot of work. If you speak to a religious group then you have to talk about religion and relate what you say to parts of the Bible. If you are talking to a group of workers, you have to talk about exploitation and the living conditions in El Salvador. If you address a group of students then you have to talk about students. Peasants, housewives, feminists—they are all different.<sup>55</sup>

This speaks to the importance of the deliberate creation of the relationship between the speaker and her audience; the significance of the speaker creating a persona that her audience sees themselves in as well. How, then, does this relationship work on a larger scale like in a testimony or interview for a news paper where the audience is *all* people? The challenge presented by such a large audience is one potential explanation for Murad's choice to visit to Bard College. Her testimony was most of the student attendees' first introduction to the Yazidi genocide. However it has also been suggested that the lack of extensive coverage might be due to the Iraqi government's fear of drawing too much attention to its military or governmental activity so as to protect from the disapproval of the United Nations<sup>56</sup>.

The relationship described by Nance is exactly what Murad attempts to cultivate when she is delivering her testimonies. She tailors her speeches to her audiences. She wants her story to surpass just that and affect her audience as it has affected her. The

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<sup>54</sup> Maria Teresa Tula, *Este es Mi Testimonio, María Teresa Tula: Luchadora Pro-derechos Humanos de el Salvador* (n.p.: Editorial Sombrero Azul, 1951).

<sup>55</sup> Nance, *Can Literature*, 22.

<sup>56</sup> Chan and Sengupta, "Nadia Murad," *New York Times*.

fact that this is possible through her mannerisms and the specific anecdotes she chooses to share to specific audiences, I argue, is what Murad capitalizes on in the way that she talks about herself, allows herself to emote during her lectures, and uses herself as the subject of her speeches and her own story as the reason why people should care, offer support, and spread the word.

This is a technique which, as she explained herself, is extremely painful for her and yet one which also gives her audiences access to the personal. We access our own interiors through interacting with her interior and memories. Through her emotion and honesty, we ourselves feel emotion and thus access an honest place within ourselves. In many respects I argue her testimonies mimic the structure of the epistolary novel especially because Murad speaks about her life as herself and allowing us into her interior as a means for accessing our own. There is no narrator here either; only the subject of the story. It is as though she is letting us read her diary, she lets us see how each anecdote affects her on an emotional level through the performance of her testimony.

Another layer of this technique, however, is that she switches her performance based on whom she is attempting to appeal to. Her audience and her goal—which differs based on the context of her lecture—dictates the way she delivers her story. However, there is always an epistolary quality to her speech. Her words always come from a very personal, interior place—whether she directs them at a room full of dignitaries or Bard College students. Her mannerisms—the amount of emotion she allows herself to exhibit changes but the personal aspect—the fact that her audience is allowed a glimpse into her interior does not change.



### Nadia Murad's Bard College Testimony

Regardless, Nadia Murad Basee Taha—known now as “Goodwill Ambassador for the Dignity of Survivors of Human Trafficking,” appointed by the United Nations and also a Nobel Peace Prize nominee, came to speak at Bard College on September 23, <sup>rd</sup> 2016. She spoke to us about the lack of knowledge about the Yazidi religion across the globe and the effect of the lack of attention that has been paid to the Yazidis in the wake of the 2014 genocide. She spoke with feeling and strength it resonated with us—at 23 we saw ourselves in her, she addressed us directly, and she also made us want to help her through her honesty and emotion. Her moving testimony inspired the whole of my senior project.

Her audience members were prohibited from bringing backpacks or liquids into the lecture hall as Nadia has been the recipient of death-threats from ISIS for her public work with the United Nations and for her escape. She is extremely small in stature, soft spoken, and stoic—she expressed during her testimony that she is actually quite shy and that public speaking is extremely difficult for her.

She sat at a little black table surrounded by faculty and students all silently listening to her story. She spoke in Arabic and used a translator (all of the included quotations are actually his words). At various times throughout her lecture she broke down in tears.

She introduced herself and her religion by saying, “My name is Nadia Murad I am from the Yazidi minority. It is a small minority of about a half million people mainly in Iraq. I was raised in a small village called Codjo.”

“I came here because there is a big cause that I want to speak about. I do not come here for example for asking to study here.” This works on two separate planes—first she reminds us that really the only thing that makes her different from us is what she has access to but she also reminds us that because she doesn’t have access to such things, our lives are nothing alike. Throughout her testimony, however, we were constantly aware of the fact that, had she been born in America or another place with less turmoil, she would be our peer.

Her physical appearance, the fact that before us sat a 23-year-old young woman just like many of us, aided her performance as well. The fact that her physical appearance operates on such a nuanced and successful level with people in her own age group might be the reason she presents her testimony at college campuses. She knows her audience and she knows how to make them care about her cause.

She continued to deepen the distinction between the two planes by saying that Sinjar does not have schools like Bard or Universities dedicated to learning—a point which again, serves the purpose of both drawing a connection between us and creating a distinction between the nature of our lives and hers. This also brings an epistolary quality to her testimony. We are invited inside her world, we acknowledge and feel connected through our similarities but we also are reminded that we come from vastly different places and experiences. Thus she creates a deep empathy in the same way that epistolary novelists are able to—through drawing the reader or listener’s attention to what makes them similar to the subject while also reminding them of the aspects of their respective lives which are nothing alike.

She said, “it is basically a place that has nothing. But,” she said, “Daesh or ISIS came because they saw us as infidels they did not come because of the resources of the area. They came because even that place which had nothing they thought that we didn’t deserve to have that place—to live on that land.” This is an especially important moment in her testimony which will be returned to when I discuss the totalitarian nature of ISIS.

Murad then went on to describe the details of the genocide: “more than 5,000 people were killed. Their bodies were laying on the ground. They were not even buried. ISIS didn’t even bury them. They let the animals like dogs to eat up their flesh.” She presented us with facts and numbers but at the same time, she gave us a mental image of what the experience was actually like for her, reminding us what she has lived through, reminding us that even though we are close in age to her we are not the same.

She continued discussing the casualties of the event and her own experience as a member of the community, saying, “More than 6,500 women, girls and children were taken to be slaves and I was one of them. [...] We wished we were killed like others.” She said, “for two years more than forty mass graves have been found and in these mass graves are our brothers, our mothers, our family members.” Again she presents us with facts and simultaneously with the reality of what those facts actually mean for her and the Yazidis. She essentially operates as a newspaper article in one aspect but then goes far beyond what any reporter could convey.

She went on, beginning to talk about the future of the Yazidi people: “as Yazidis [...] our future is unknown. We still have three-thousand-four-hundred women, girls, and children [...still] in captivity.”

She told us, “as a person I’ve lost a lot. I’ve lost my mother, I’ve lost my brothers, as a girl I’ve lost my life. I’ve lost many people close to me but the question is I still do not know who I am going to lose.” She mentions this as evidence of the lack of help the Yazidis have received from other nations and governments. She goes on to explain what it is like to live with this reality, saying, “I think for two months now I have been in many places. I’ve spoken to many leaders and presidents of countries and told them about this. But nothing has happened not even a child has been freed since I spoke. People still live in the refugee camps with no future, no food, no life or dignity.” There’s also something interesting about the way she organizes her testimony. She first talks about what she has lost, her loved ones, and her fear of the future—reminding us of all she has endured—then talking about the lack of aid her cause has received. She tells us about how horrible her situation is, and then, directly afterward, talks about how little help the Yazidis have received in response, so our next natural question is about how we can help?

She then lets us ponder this question for a little while saying, “[...] when you help someone you don’t need to be a President, you don’t need to be a head of a state, or a head of army. Once there is collective willingness for something then you can do it.” She makes us feel important as what we are. She tailors her testimony to her audience perfectly. We still are left wondering what we can actually do to help.

She addresses the need for a political movement by utilizing her ability to move us on an emotional level. She seems to return to the comparison between us and her which she drew at the beginning of her testimony when created the perfect tension between our similarities and differences. She does this here by pointing to another

similarity—the form of activism she is looking for from us is much like the form of activism she is engaging in on behalf of the Yazidis. It differs in that our activism would not include our own testimonies, but it's similar in that we would rely on speech and the recounting of her story. She discussed the power of our voices in aiding her cause. Her testimony is an example of what she wants from us.

She talks about her mother and her brothers and her dreams all of which are now gone. It was as though we were looking through her eyes at our own lives as we listened to her—what it might be like to have our own siblings and mothers taken from us, and our dreams destroyed before we even really knew what they were. She does this so as to continue to flesh out this narrative focusing on specific differences between our lives and the lives of the young people who have been affected by the genocide living in Sinjar and the area surrounding Sinjar. We experienced this again when she said, later in her talk, “I think there are thousands of girls younger than you, of children younger than you, for two years they have not had a cell phone, they haven't had education, they haven't had access to the basic human rights. Things that we all should have access to.”

Finally she discusses in a very abstract, yet honest and emotional way, how we might be able to provide aid to Yazidis. She says, “Plenty of girls like myself are at the refugee camps maybe just for you to go and sit with them, look them in the eye, maybe that's good enough support for them. It will be very important for them to be sitting with you and to tell you what has happened to them. We are waiting for normal people like you to do something and to help us.” She speaks of the beneficial effects of sympathy here again too. This display of care—not even the creation of tangible

change—is what she’s looking for. The feeling that a visit from us might give to a Yazidi girl is enough of a service. This request is seemingly the ultimate argument for sentimentality and emotion in human rights advocacy and action. Not only does she use sentiment and emotion to convince us to visit the young Yazidi girls, but she also says that a display of our emotion and sentiment and comradeship provides enough of a change and is human rights activism in itself.

She ended her powerful testimony by saying, “I will be very happy if you stand with me, I will be very happy if we can bring back the rights of these women and these children. To bring back these rights to these people in the conflict areas and all over. I will be very happy if together we can take on this mission.” Roger Berkowitz closed her short lecture by saying “Sometimes just telling a story changes the world and can make a difference and I do hope this is one of those times.” Thus, Berkowitz gives Murad’s approach to human rights and the goal of testimony in human rights activism, a concise thesis.

No matter the amount of calculated plans she made for her testimony or the number of times she has delivered it to other fortunate students, through her candor and strength Murad displayed true conviction, love, loyalty, and perseverance in the context of an event which is the opposite of all of the above. We were collectively in awe of her resilience, her determination to fight through her own pain and ultimately—we hope—create change for the Yazidis by sharing her story with honesty and feeling.

Murad then responded to some of our questions. She told us about watching her mother and six brothers be killed by ISIS. She told us that upon her arrival at the ISIS camp she had been gang-raped and of the countless other sexual assaults she

experienced while she was captive. She did not speak to us of the intricacies of her escape from slavery, though she openly answered any and all questions she was asked about her experience including questions regarding birth control and other equally personal and specific topics regarding her experience—she has spoken in more detail of her escape in other lectures and interviews. It seems that part of her theory about testimony is that nothing should remain off limits to the audience. The speaker must be ready to complete the image of the tragedy which they are attempting to plant in the minds eye of their listeners.

She also discussed her feelings toward ISIS in response to someone asking her whether she believed the members of ISIS could ever be rehabilitated thus changing the way they treat others—a question which might be difficult to answer for a person who has endured such torture at their hands. None-the-less she did not shy away from complete honesty through her fluctuating emotions and her detailed recounting.

She told us that her new appointment as Goodwill Ambassador for the Dignity of Survivors of Human Trafficking—which has catapulted her to some version of fame—is her worst nightmare to put it mildly. She spoke of the pain she feels whenever she must relive these horrible memories. This seems to be another angle of the downside of testimony which I've already discussed. The fact that pity is simply a part of this method of activism also lends itself to the odd, often times painful experiences of people who are presenting the testimonies. The fact that they are being used as propaganda to some extent whether or not they choose to be and the result can be difficult on both a tangible level—the level that Murad talked about in terms of her having to repeatedly recount the details of her assault and the death of her family—but

also in that the person is turned into their story. That their existence is becomes entirely wrapped up in their experience and they are potentially subject to exploitation by the news media—which also happens to serve their cause. It’s a confusing relationship and the positives and negatives must be weighed but in the end the speakers take ownership over their story and their cause and that must be better than someone speaking on their behalf.

Of course, this is the Nadia Murad testimony I had the most personal experience with and thus the one which had the greatest effect on me—whether that is because I was a member of the specific intended audience that she crafted the testimony around or because I was actually in the room. She has given many others for different audiences, some of which it is necessary to look at to provide us with some perspective about the way that she tailors her testimonies to her audiences.

### **Nadia Murad’s U.N. Testimony**

She is quoted in an article in the New York Times<sup>57</sup>, from an address she made in Strasbourg, France, to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. The Times writes, “Ms. Murad said she was exhausted by having to repeatedly speak out about what she has survived. But she also said she knew that other Yazidi women were being raped back home even as she spoke: ‘I will go back to my life when women in captivity go back to their lives, when my community has a place, when I see people accountable for their crimes.’” A slightly different sentiment than she had expressed with the Bard student body to whom she talked about how painful it is for her to share

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<sup>57</sup> Chan and Sengupta, "Nadia Murad," New York Times.



her story. Here she speaks with strength rather than vulnerability which is evidence of her catering her testimony to the specific audience that is the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Her speech to the UN is entirely different in tone. It is far less personal—less testimonial as it were. She seems to try to appeal less to the emotions of the members of the UN and instead she presents herself in a far more tempered, not so emotional way.

Instead of allowing herself to emote freely, she opts for a sort of numbness. This testimony also comes from a place of strength in terms of her performance.

She begins by saying:

It is with great sadness and recognition and hope that I am sitting here before you. On behalf of the Yazidis I am a descendent of one of the oldest religions that is threatened with extinction today. Today I am here to talk to you about the practices of what we call the Islamic State against us. Trafficking in persons, women in slavery, children in war, and the genocide of our society. [...]

In her Bard College testimony, Murad began first by acknowledging our commonalities while simultaneously pointing out our deep and profound differences. In her U.N. testimony there is no personal acknowledgement of the people she speaks to. This is an interesting choice and one which seems very deliberate. It also speaks to the notion discussed earlier in this essay of there being very little feeling or sentimentality in the legal world—even as she shares her testimony, which certainly pushes the limits of what is the norm in the way of self expression in law, she keeps her tone level and does not speak directly to her audience in an attempt to make a personal connection with them in the way she did with the Bard students.

The whole testimony has a vastly different energy to it, it is not emotional, rather she is calm and matter-of-fact. She maintains her composure throughout. She seems far more disassociated from the words she chooses and the stories she shares. She doesn't shy away from including personal, deeply painful details but she does not fixate on them in the same way she did when in front of the Bard community. She has accounted for the formality of her audience and the importance and power of the platform from which she is speaking. She doesn't look to make eye contact with her listeners. Instead, she reads from a paper looking up only periodically. In this context, it seems, she believes that what matters are her words and not the personal connection with her audience or even evidence of her own humanity. She goes on:

Before the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August 2014 I was living with my family in Cojo village with my mother, my brothers and sisters in our pretty little quiet village but then the Islamic state attacked our religion. We found ourselves faced with a true genocide. Their goal was to eliminate all Yazidis under the pretext that we were infidels. The Islamic State did not just come to kill our women and girls but they took us as war booty as merchandise to be exchanged. These crimes were not committed in an arbitrary fashion it was an organized planned policy. The Islamic State came with one soul aim: to destroy the Yazidi identity through force, rape the recruitment of children and destruction of all of our temples. All of this can only be interpreted as an act of collected genocide against our identity in particular against Yazidi families.

Here she makes her specific goal very apparent from the beginning of her testimony. She wants the U.N. to recognize what ISIS has done as genocide. She lays bare the facts of what happened in 2014 for the members of the U.N. and pointedly includes the word genocide, making her agenda transparent. The existence of a set and specific agenda, which is necessary in this context, seems to change the entire energy of

the testimony as well. Her Bard College testimony begins with her building a relationship whereas her U.N. address begins with her presenting her agenda.

She then delves into her own personal pain and experience while continuing to maintain complete composure. While the beginnings of each testimony differ drastically, the true difference between the two had much more to do with her performance and delivery. She included similar content in both testimonies and yet the experience of listening to her feels entirely opposite. In her U.N. address she recounts the same graphic, heartbreaking details about her experience that she shared with us when she visited Bard.

She says:

Rape was used to destroy women and girls and to guarantee that these women could never lead a normal life again. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of August people from the Islamic State invited us to go to the school of the village. They separated women, men and children. I saw them from the second floor of the school. They took the men and they killed them. Six of my brothers were killed, three survived this collective bloodshed. We the women and children were taken by bus to another region. Along the way they humiliated us. They touched us and that violated ourselves.

She read this from the sheet of paper, sometimes stuttering a bit but she seemed not to allow herself to fully conceptualize of the anecdotes she was sharing—instead she spoke quickly, and said them as blatantly as she could without much pause. She gave herself no time to reflect.

Her U.N. testimony presented all the same facts but through a very different lens. In this context she wanted to be seen less as a victim and more as a warrior for her cause. Both are extremely effective testimonies and both were perfectly calculated to fit their audience.

### Nadia Murad's BBC Interview

Murad also appeared on BBC's HARDtalk with correspondent Sarah Montague. It was structured as an interview and in that way is very different than both her Bard College and U.N. testimonies. The interview context is fascinating because it leaves less room for Murad's own planning when it comes to presenting her testimony—in this context she simply responds to questions about topics decided upon by someone else with a different, or less specific agenda.

This is the only testimony of the three in which Nadia goes into any sort of detail about her experience escaping, saying:

I thought to myself I must run away although I didn't believe I would succeed. Daaesh militants were everywhere in Mosul. I tried to escape through a window but I was immediately caught by one of the guards who put me in a room. Under their rules a captured woman becomes a spoil of war if she is caught trying to escape. She is put in a cell and raped by all the men in that compound. I was gang raped, they call this practice sexual Jihad. Afterwards I couldn't even think of trying to escape again.

This testimony delves into the drama of the situation in a way that neither of the others do. It seems to be tailored to fit the context of television; she details her dramatic escape at HARDtalk, but chose not to include any details about this part of the story in at the U.N. or Bard. She plays up the drama for her television audience which might be the best way to appeal to a larger, unspecific audience. Television and the media, make it difficult to tailor a testimony because the audience is everyone. Drama makes people pay attention and care and that was what she utilized at HARDtalk.

However, while she embraces the drama of her story she doesn't allow pain to show at all. There an interesting dichotomy between the sadness of her story and the

lack of visible emotion which makes the experience of watching her feel even more dramatic—as though she is somehow numb to the horrors she speaks about making them feel even more harrowing but simultaneously making her seem fearless and strong.

She continued explaining some of the intricacies of her escape:

I asked them for help. I said to them that my brother would give them whatever they wanted in return. The family told me that they did not support Daesh and had no connection with them. They gave me all the help they could. They gave me a black adaya<sup>58</sup> and an Islamic ID and then they took me to the border.

She was able to escape Iraq and now lives in Germany.

In answering the question posed by Montague: “There are many women who’ve been held who killed themselves out of desperation. Was it something that at the time you thought...” Nadia said:

Being in the hands of Daesh we felt as if we had already died. Most people die once in their lifetime but we were dying every hour. Our hearts were constantly full of fear as we had no idea when they would come for us. I have never thought of killing myself, either before or after I was captured by Daesh, it has never occurred to me. I believe that everyone should accept what God has given them regardless of whether they are poor or have suffered injustice, we all must endure it. We should be confident with what God has given us. But still many girls committed suicide, one of them was from my village.

This extremely personal question gave Murad pause. She took some deep breaths as she spoke but this is just evidence of the problem that the interview structure poses for testimony. She can’t work off her own plan because she doesn’t know exactly what’s going to be asked—thus she cannot completely prepare herself emotionally ahead of time. Regardless her answer was poignant and showed her strength. It also

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<sup>58</sup> A traditional robe or cloak worn by women in certain places in the Muslim world.

served her goal of dramatizing her story because she spoke about it from a slightly emotional standpoint which gives a whole separate layer to her struggle.

This is also the most public of the three testimonies as it was intended for television and to be watched by the masses—Murad spoke about her disgust for being in the public eye during her testimony to the Bard community, thus indicating that this might be the most difficult of all three testimonies for her to perform.

### **Nadia Murad as U.N. Ambassador**

In September of 2016, Nadia Murad was appointed Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations, her official title being Ambassador for the Dignity of Survivors of Human Trafficking. This is the first time that a survivor of human trafficking has become the Goodwill Ambassador for the cause<sup>59</sup>.

Testimony generates fame in a way that cannot be denied—and certainly fame serves the overarching goal of testimony. It is human nature to tend toward stories which make us feel something, hence most of what becomes viral on the internet. It is important to also consider the way that fame serves human rights advocacy and vice versa and the specific way that Nadia Murad utilizes the platform.

In the New York Times article, previously quoted from, entitled, “Nadia Murad, Yazidi Woman Who Survived ISIS Captivity, Wins Human Rights Prize,” they quote Murad:

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<sup>59</sup> Suyin Haynes, "Nadia Murad, Survivor of ISIS Atrocities, Named U.N. Goodwill Ambassador," Time, last modified September 16, 2016, accessed April 30, 2017, <http://time.com/4496933/nadia-murad-united-nations-goodwill-ambassador/>.

‘We cannot have terrorist groups, barbarians, massacring whole peoples, destroying civilizations and cultures, because all people must be able to determine their own lives and nobody should seek to impose their ideas on anyone else,’ she told lawmakers. ‘We need to have religious freedom, we must accept difference wherever it arises and we must make sure that all parliaments are aware of what happened to us.’<sup>60</sup>

Nadia’s appointment as U.N. Goodwill Ambassador prompted many more articles to be written about her and gave her many other opportunities to share her testimony. Fame serves as a device—it gives her more of an audience—and a very different audience, which is what Murad was asking us to help her generate during her visit to Bard College when she asked us to talk about her story.

Another way she seems to embrace fame in aiding her cause is through her choice of lawyer: Amal Clooney—an extremely experienced, successful lawyer but also a high profile public figure. Clooney advocating on her behalf means that her story will reach more people.

In a statement to the United Nations Secretary General, Amal Clooney said, “make no mistake what Nadia has told us about is genocide. And genocide doesn’t happen by accident, you have to plan it.” When Clooney speaks on behalf of a cause, more people hear about and care about it than might typically pay attention to what happens at U.N. assembly meetings—thus potentially pushing the U.N. to act in ways and at speeds that they might not were they under less of a spotlight. This is especially true in the context of Clooney unequivocally labeling the Yazidi massacre, genocide.

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<sup>60</sup> Chan and Sengupta, "Nadia Murad," New York Times.

Thus, Murad uses her strengths as a testimonial speaker and the nuance that the art requires in her public persona as well. She crafts herself and her team in the same way she crafts her testimony, prioritizing appealing to her audience over everything, understanding that more attention is better than less. Then by reminding her audience of her pain at having to recount her story and thereby reminding us of the fact that her own self-sacrificial fame causes her pain, we feel sympathy and consequently, she utilizes sentimentality in her advocacy through yet another avenue.

Even if Murad's testimony differs slightly based on her audience, it is heartfelt and poignant no matter who she delivers it to, therefore there's also an important and effective dichotomy between the rather visceral experience of her words and Clooney's cut-through approach in such close proximity to each other. Murad represents the story and the feeling, and Clooney represents the urgency with which this cause must be taken seriously. Their relationship is very calculated and really grounded in understanding the way that sentimentality operates in their listeners and also as an aid to their cause and human rights work in general.

In her statement to the United Nations Secretary General, Clooney read a list of commonly asked questions from a pamphlet created by ISIS laying out acceptable practice when dealing with female Yazidi sex slaves. She says:

ISIS even released a pamphlet entitled, 'Questions and Answers on taking captives and slaves,' to provide more guidelines. 'Question 19: is it permissible to beat a female slave? Answer: it is permissible to beat the female slave as a form of discipline. Question 13: is it permissible to have intercourse with a female slave who has not reached puberty? Answer: yes however if she's not fit for intercourse then it is enough to enjoy her without that. Question 6: is it permissible to sell a female captive? Answer: it is permissible to buy, sell, or gift female captives and slaves for they are merely property.



She shows ISIS' malice in regards to the experiences Murad herself has endured, from an outsider's standpoint.

She then goes on to voice concerns regarding the way the case has been handled by the U.N., directly to the members of the U.N. in a unique appeal to motivate them to act. Presumably from a place of knowing that her assessment of the situation is especially meaningful because of her high profile platform.

She engages in testimony from a place of safety. It seems that her role is essentially as the voice of Murad's audience and as such, she offers the audience yet another important and beneficial perspective—a potential response to Murad's testimony which we too can engage in. Clooney says:

This is the first time I have spoken in this chamber and the first time I've had a chance to address a crowd in front of the U.N. secretary-general. I wish I could say that I was proud to be here but I'm not. I am ashamed as a supporter of the United Nations that states are failing to prevent or even punish genocide because they find that their own interests get in the way. I am ashamed as a lawyer that there is no justice being done and barely a complaint being made about it. I'm ashamed as a woman that girls like Nadia can have their bodies sold and used as battlefields.

She continues:

I am ashamed as a human being that we ignore their cries for help. We know that what we have before us is genocide and we know that it's still ongoing. We know exactly who the perpetrators are they brag—ISIS brags about its crimes online. We know that these perpetrators have no political support from any of the powerful states and there is no one more blameless than a young Yazidi girl who has lost everything and who today comes before you and asks for help. Yet today, two years on, two years after the genocide began, three-thousand, two-hundred Yazidi women and children are still held captive by ISIS and not a single member of ISIS has been prosecuted in a court anywhere in the world for crimes committed against the Yazidis. Evidence is being lost and destroyed, mass graves lay unexhumed and unprotected, witnesses are dispersed or disappeared.

She publicly, and to the faces of the very people she criticizes, details their failures. Her speech has definite similarities to the testimonies Murad herself shares. She creates an image and she clearly aims to generate an emotional response from the U.N. assembly and but simultaneously from anyone who listens to it—this response will be different because Clooney’s speech is a critique directed at the U.N. assembly. She also specifies the desired actions that she and Murad believe should be taken in countering ISIS’ cruelty—they want to prosecute them in a court of law which the U.N. has a legal responsibility to do in response to genocide.

She goes on to acknowledge the true strength and bravery of Murad and other survivors like her. She paints Murad as a warrior for the Yazidis and declares that she will not stop fighting. Her words are emotional and full of feeling—they are a battle cry for herself and for Murad and thus exude feeling and emotion in her listeners. She makes it into a fight that we want to join.

She says:

That’s why I’m in New York this week to meet with the Iraqi government, with UN representatives, with members of the UN Security Council; all those who have power to do something about this. Nadia, and others like her, are not seeking revenge—they are seeking justice. The opportunity to face their abusers in an international court in The Hague. The Iraqi government, for its part, called on the Security Council months ago to set up a specific international legal mechanism for investigating and bringing to justice the criminals of ISIS. [...] and to those who thought that by their acts they could destroy you, let them know this. Nadia Murad’s spirit is not broken and her voice will not be silenced because as of today Nadia is the United Nations ambassador who will speak for survivors all over the world.

The inclusion of Clooney’s response to Murad’s story also operates on a testimonial level. Her speech serves as her testimony in that she describes her response to Murad’s story and her support of the Yazidis.

In some ways this essay, like Clooney's speech to the U.N., serves as my own testimony detailing the experience I had while listening to Murad speak and my resulting interest in the Yazidis and the functionality of sentimentality in human rights.

#### **Chapter Four: The Totalitarian Agenda and Its Implications**

What she visited Bard College, Nadia Murad had said, “they didn’t want our land, they wanted to kill us because we are infidels.” In fact, I argue, ISIS’ motivations in attacking the Yazidis were far more complex than just the fact that they are infidels.

First, I argue that ISIS is a totalitarian regime, dedicated to broadening the belief in it’s understanding of the Islamic Doctrine at all costs. Then I argue that the motivations behind attacks by totalitarian regimes are extremely complex and have very little to do with actual, specific characteristics of the groups they target.

In the first chapter of this paper I discussed the theology of the Yazidis and how that has contributed to their persecution. While I do believe that they may have initially become targets based on their belief in Tawûsî Melek, The Peacock God, I do not think that is why they have been mercilessly persecuted throughout all of their existence. Rather, I think that the reason for totalitarianism and conquest comes from a desire for success, and not a desire to eliminate a certain set of beliefs. Thus I argue that ISIS targeted the Yazidis because they knew they would be successful in their attack and appear powerful—which is the true fulfillment of the totalitarian dream; the appearance of power.

In considering totalitarianism and—the genocides which frequently result, it’s important to study the motivations behind the actions of modern totalitarian rulers and groups such as ISIS.

Fawaz A. Gerges writes for the Foreign Policy Journal<sup>61</sup>:

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<sup>61</sup> Fawaz A. Gerges, "The World According to ISIS," *Foreign Policy Journal*, last modified March 18, 2016, accessed April 30, 2017, <https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2016/03/18/the-world-according-to-isis/>.

[u]nder ISIS, there is no breathing space for social mobilization and political organization, including by like-minded Salafi-jihadist activism. ISIS possesses a totalitarian, millenarian worldview that eschews political pluralism, competition, and diversity of thought.

ISIS's mindset is that any group with differing views is criminal—the intricacies of those beliefs are unimportant. They believe that people who do not recognize ISIS's reading of the Islamic doctrine are apostates and are worthy of death. They target people merely on the basis of them not being part of ISIS, they do not target people based on the specifics of their differences.

Theodore Adorno writes at length about the id, ego and superego of a totalitarian or authoritarian dictator, id being the fulfillment of one's impulse desires, ego being the interaction between the outside world and one's id impulses and the search for personal pleasure and fulfillment, and superego being the modifier of both of them which works to create and fulfill moral desires<sup>62</sup>. As an example of this study, he writes about the authoritarian personality:

The mechanism of projection was mentioned in connection with authoritarian aggression: the suppressed impulses of the authoritarian character tend to be projected onto other people who are then blamed out of hand. Projection is thus a device for keeping id drives ego-alien, and it may be taken as a sign of the ego's inadequacy in carrying out its function.<sup>63</sup>

This is a very specific way of characterizing one's actions. The fact that Adorno believes that one can look within to find the cause of hatred for another group means that in his understanding, the desire to eliminate a group really has nothing to do with the practices of the targeted group. He believes there are innate qualities which result in

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<sup>62</sup> Theodore Adorno, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York, US: Harper, 1950)

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 240

a person being authoritarian or fascist or possessing totalitarian tendencies. Adorno even created a scale to test for these innate qualities.

This suggests that the targets of such inclinations are not actually hated for any of their specific traits at all but rather are targeted because they ensure a certain fulfillment of innate desire. Frequently the targets of totalitarian regimes are people who are easily beaten and thus, in Adorno's terms, successfully satisfy these distinctive traits within the attackers.

The fact that these behaviors might be studied in this way—that id, ego, and superego can be used to explain mass violence, authoritarianism, totalitarianism or fascism, as the case may be, provides us with enough reason to believe that totalitarian conquests are not based upon any specifics of the persecuted peoples at all. Rather, tests like these suggest, through their existence, that attacks have more to do with the potential success of totalitarian or authoritarian regimes.

Separately from his discussion of id, ego, and superego, Adorno considered the motivations behind the Holocaust and expressed his belief that the anti-Semitism exhibited during the genocide had nothing to do with an actual hatred of the Jews. He states, “[t]his sort of activity depends too much upon the assumption that anti-Semitism essentially has something to do with the Jews and therefore could be combatted through an actual knowledge of Jews.<sup>64</sup>”

Adorno seems to have coopted Hannah Arendt's notion of anti-Semitism being an ideology rather than an actual hatred of the Jewish people and faith. She too believed

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<sup>64</sup> Theodor Adorno, "What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?" in Bitburg in Moral and Political Perspective, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 127-28

in the many different motivations of totalitarian regimes and their supporters. She discussed the fact that the masses are easily coerced into supporting totalitarian regimes because it gives them something to do with their lives—it gives them meaning and something to dedicate themselves to.

She writes to this point, “[w]ar had experienced as that ‘mightiest of all mass actions’ which obliterated individual differences so that even suffering, which traditionally had marked off individuals through unique unexchangeable destinies, could now be interpreted as ‘an instrument of historical progress.’”<sup>65</sup> Thus she comments on human psychology as a way of understanding the mass movement against the Jews in the holocaust, again returning to the notion that the motivation for taking action against the Jews at that time was about fulfilling an innate human desire within the individuals that made up the masses.

The existence of tests such as Adorno’s, the belief in the inherent psychological component of totalitarianism, and Arendt’s belief in the mental process of the masses, have nothing to do with the targets of the regimes. This suggests that there are complex thought processes which go into choosing which groups to target and when to act, because attacks don’t actually have to do with the targeted group—rather they have to do with the group’s potential for success and the totalitarian desire to appear unstoppable.

Thus, we must believe that Murad was not completely correct in her assertion that ISIS attacked the Yazidis because they are infidels. This simplifies the agenda.

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<sup>65</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, US: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1966), 329.

This may be partially true. The Yazidi people have certainly faced persecution for a very long time and at the hands of many different Muslim and Islamic sects presumably initially based upon the differences in their beliefs. However, the fact of their persecution throughout so much of history *itself* might serve as the reason for ISIS' attack. I posit that as the Yazidis were ostracized more and more throughout history, they have become increasingly easy targets. Thus, they may have initially been persecuted because of the difference in their beliefs but they continue to be persecuted because they present no threat and are easily defeated.

Because the Yazidi people have been recipients of relentless persecution they were an easy target for totalitarian ISIS fighters in 2014 and because they still have not received international aid, they continue to be easy targets to this day. This had nothing to do with the intricacies of their faith, or even the differences between their faith and ISIS's reading of the Islamic doctrine.

According to Hannah Arendt and Theodor Adorno, the Yazidi genocide was a result of the totalitarian mindset and did not concern the specifics of Yazidi beliefs at all. The genocide was committed in the name of the totalitarian dream and this presents a complex study in human nature. Thus, these texts and this thought process is inherently connected to sentimentality and human thought. In this case they consider sentimentality as it pertains to the importance of understanding the human mind and what drives us to act the way we do. They reflect upon and study in depth the fact that some people are able to act with complete disregard for any sentimental connection to another.



It also makes taking action in support of the Yazidis all the more important in order to ensure that they are no longer targets.

### **Conclusion: On Sentimentality in Human Rights**

There is a place in Human Rights law for emotion and sentimentality.

Human rights attempts to eliminate suffering, yet typically addresses it from an outsider's perspective. Sentimentality, often through testimony, creates less of an outsider, versus experiencer narrative when it comes to human rights advocates versus victims.

Sentimentality through the vehicle of testimony presents an anthropological lens to tragedy. It grants the person capable of providing aid, with a far more intimate understanding of the event. It motivates those who can make laws and, thus, respond to crises to do so quickly, and communicates what sort of aid the people affected by the event actually need. It also generates a response from the public at large and a desire to help—it makes human rights, laws, and politics far more accessible because people actually care about them and make an attempt to understand them.

Regarding the relevance of sentimentality and the human mind when it comes to human rights and the conceptualizing of tragic events allows us to analyze the perpetrators, and the events themselves, in the way that Arendt and Adorno do. I argue that considering sentimentality, emotion, and thinking about human tendencies—and the human part of human rights—is what allowed for Arendt and Adorno to write the monumental texts they produced.

The use and embrace of sentimentality in human rights gives voice to the victim. It gives them ownership over their experiences. It gives them a purpose after their life has been taken away. It gives them a means of serving their community.

Emotion and sentiment in human rights advocacy are tools and should be used and regarded as such. Nadia Murad wields these tool with brilliance, accuracy, and honesty—and testimony is one of the most effective ways that an activist can access each of these traits. It has been a privilege to study her and the Yazidis.

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