KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

September 2020

After Genocide: How the Yazidi Perceive the Responsibility to Protect and the Actions of the International Community

Kerstin Tomiak, PhD

Centre for Peace and Human Security

The American University of Kurdistan

This research was made possible by the generous funding of the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation, Syria/Iraq Office. My thanks go to Regina Frieser and Lejla Djulancic for their support and interest in this project. I also wish to thank Gulistan, Runak, Linda, Viyan and Sarhan, my research assistants. They provided great insights into the Yazidi community; and they also conducted interviews and collected data in very trying and challenging circumstances.

September 2020

Table of Contents

Abstract 3

Introduction 3

Methodology 7

Genocide, R2P and transitional justice 9

Background to the study: the Yazidi in Sinjar 12

Before the attack 14

The flight 16

Leaving the mountain 18

After the attack 20

Discussion: finding a place in the world 22

Conclusion 24

References: 26

September 2020

Abstract

Six years after the Yazidi community in northern Iraq was targeted by the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and subjected to a genocidal campaign, the survivors of the genocide still cannot return to their ancient home of Sinjar but live mostly in the Dohuk-governorate in the Kurdish autonomous region of Iraq. This paper argues that under the Responsibility to Protect doctrine (R2P), which has the explicit aim to protect vulnerable groups from genocide and the worst forms of political violence, the international community, as well as the Iraqi and Kurdish governments, have the responsibility to rebuild Sinjar and help the Yazidi to restore their livelihoods. Based on qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 28 Yazidi women, the paper investigates the functions of R2P 'on the ground' and argues that post-genocide reconciliation might also be necessary with those who are perceived as bystanders and enablers of the violence.

Introduction

When asked about the events of August 2014, Yazidi women say that 'our inner peace was destroyed and we were ruined inside and out',[1] that ISIS, the *Islamic State of Iraq and Syria* 'destroyed our lives',[2] that 'I was escaping from a monster and (…) [it] was just running after me. My feelings were ruined',[3] and that 'we were so scared we couldn't see the light of [the] sun, because it was like sun covered by cloud and there was darkness everywhere'.[4] The Yazidi, a religious minority group that lived mostly in the disputed areas of northern Iraq, were targeted in 2014 by ISIS in the district of Sinjar in Nineveh Governorate. Before engaging in the murderous campaign against the Yazidi, who they called 'devil-worshippers' and 'satanists', ISIS had put the question of whether satanists can be enslaved to their religious scholars. The affirmative answer

meant that ISIS's genocidal campaign against the Yazidi not only included killings, but also meant capture and slavery for countless Yazidi women and girls. Numbers are unclear, but it is estimated that during the attacks in Sinjar between 2,100 and 4,000 Yazidi men were massacred, and between 4,200 and 10,800 Yazidi — mostly girls and women — were abducted (Cetorelli et al., 2017). When the attacks began at the start of August 2014, up to 50,000 Yazidi fled into the Sinjar mountains where they were trapped without food, water or shelter; in Iraq's blistering summer heat they were threatened with death or captivity from the jihadists should they leave the mountain, and faced dehydration and starvation should they stay.

Genocide, an attack against members of a group with the explicit aim to destroy that particular group, has been named 'the crime of crimes' (Parmentier, 2013) and is 'commonly regarded as the worst of all crimes' (Parmentier, 2013: 108). This is because the right to life is understood to be the 'most fundamental human right' (Thakur and Weiss, 2009: 22) and genocide is murder on an enormously large scale. Further, the aim of genocide is not to merely kill a large number of individuals, it aims to destroy a group; the destruction is aimed at a culture, a belief-system, and a way of life (Shaw, 2013).

There have been several attempts to prevent genocide, ranging from the United Nations' (UN) *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* in 1948 (UN General Assembly, 1948) to the *Responsibility to Protect* doctrine, or R2P in short, that was included in the *World Summit Outcome Document* of 2005 (A/RES/60/1). The formulation of R2P was a consequence of the Rwandan genocide and the atrocities committed during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, both in the 1990s.

The doctrine had, and has, the explicit aim to protect vulnerable groups from genocide by committing the international community to act even if action requires interfering in a sovereign state's internal affairs. R2P formulates the international community's obligation to safeguard vulnerable groups, and it offers a justification for intervention and a guideline on how to navigate the tension between the sovereignty principle, including the rule about non-intervention enshrined in Article 2 of the UN Charter (United Nations, 1945).

Despite the good intentions, the principle has been sharply critiqued. Introduced with the explicit aim to prevent mass atrocities as witnessed in Rwanda and Bosnia and to overcome the indifference of states towards such events, two decades later, R2P has a relatively poor track record. The doctrine, having been named 'the most dramatic normative development of our time' (Thakur and Weiss, 2009: 22), has not prevented human suffering in Syria, Libya or that of the Yazidi community in northern Iraq. And while there is engagement with questions of why, how, and when to evoke the principle (Stamnes, 2009), what is, with some exceptions (Matyas et al., 2020), mostly missing from the debate is an engagement with the question of how survivors of mass atrocities perceive the actions of the international community before, during, and in the aftermath of the genocide. In brief, the question of if and how R2P works in the eyes of a targeted group is unanswered. This paper aims to make a humble contribution to answering this question.

In general, investigating the perspective of genocide survivors is still relatively rare when it comes to the examination of global norms, although in the literature and practice of peacebuilding the inclusion of local voices is increasingly considered and

sought for. For studies that rely on or investigate local voices, sometimes the denomination 'voices from below' is used (Matyas et al., 2020; Pouligny, 2006), a rather unlucky choice of words as it seemingly indicates a value judgement: if someone is below, someone else is above. For this paper, instead, the perspective of 'voices from within' is evoked, as the experiences and thoughts of people from within the targeted community are investigated. This perspective is important. R2P explicitly names it a state's responsibility to protect its population and obliges the international community to act if the state in question is not able or willing to fulfil this duty. But as genocide is about destroying a group and its way of life, and as R2P is about preventing such crimes, it follows that the actions of a state and of the international community cannot end with the prevention of mass murder, but need to go on to restore and rebuild the targeted group's livelihood. Here R2P also connects to notions of transitional justice, which is about the targeted group (re)finding its place in the world. With this, it is important to gain an understanding of how targeted groups see the actions of those who should protect them. The paper proceeds with introducing the methodology. Following this, the concepts of genocide and R2P, including the notion of transitional justice, are unpacked in a little more detail. Some background on the Yazidi and the genocide committed against them is provided and the insights from the interviews are then presented. Finally, in the conclusion, some policy recommendations are made. In particular, the paper argues for the need for a stronger emphasis on rebuilding Sinjar to make a return of the Yazidi community possible. To achieve this, a more coordinated engagement of the international community is asked for.

Methodology

Qualitative, in-depth interviews were conducted with 28 Yazidi women to gain insights into how survivors of a genocidal attack perceive the actions of those who are tasked to protect them. In the case of the Yazidi, targeted by ISIS, these were, on the one hand, the Iraqi state and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), on the other hand the international community of states. The focus in this paper is on women, as they were not only threatened with death but potentially with slavery; an ongoing threat to their life that might have resulted in a more urgent wish for protection. Interview participants were asked about their life circumstances prior to the events of 2014 and after ISIS's attacks; they were further asked about their flight to and the situation on Mount Sinjar, and about the help they received during and after the attacks. Thus, the interviews investigated both the military help that aimed to vanquish ISIS and protect the Yazidi from the murderous campaign and the humanitarian help after ISIS's defeat. As has been said, and will be elaborated on in more detail below, R2P is not solely about defending a group from an actual attack but as much about helping them to survive the aftermath of a genocide as a group – to withstand the social destruction a genocide aims to achieve. With this in mind, and to investigate the survivors' thoughts regarding their survival after genocide, participants were asked about their hopes and wishes for their personal futures and the future of the community. The interviews were organised, conducted, and transcribed by five research assistants, students at the American University of Kurdistan and themselves members of the Yazidi community. They were introduced to the research aims and research design and trained in qualitative interviewing in a day-long workshop. The interviews were analysed in searching for

emerging and re-occurring themes and topics. Informed consent was asked for and granted, and interview participants were fully briefed and debriefed.

With the aim to examine the functioning of R2P on the ground and of how survivors of genocide and recipients of international aid perceive the help given by the international community, the research faced a methodological dilemma. Coming from a social constructivist perspective, interviews are understood as a social situation where knowledge is created in the interaction between interviewer and interviewee (Kvale, 2005; 2007). Here, this meant that to avoid bias or receiving answers that are more polite than truthful, the interviewer should not be an international expat. If one who clearly belongs to the international community asks about how recipients perceive help from the international community, bias is inevitable. Thus, interviewing was done 'by proxy' (Cammett, 2013), and undergraduate Yazidi students were employed as research assistants and interviewers. This decision came with several advantages. Most importantly, it helped to avoid an interview situation where interviewees felt a need to be overly positive and created instead a situation where respondents talked to one of their own, a community member that shared, to an extent, the experiences the interviewees were talking about. It also had the advantage of avoiding the need for translation while interviewing. Interviewers and interviewees could talk naturally with each other, using their native, mutual language. It was not the speech that was translated, but the later produced transcripts. This allowed the research assistants to concentrate on interviewing and to reflect on what was said later, while transcribing and translating. On the other hand, there were also disadvantages. For one, the sample of women participants is a convenience sample. Interviewers were given certain guidelines

on which participants to choose but, within this framework, recruitment was left to them, and they mostly recruited within their circle of relatives, friends and acquaintances. Second, despite training, it shall not be forgotten that the research assistants were undergraduate students who were novices at research and even more so at qualitative interviewing. Where a seasoned researcher would have used given answers to explore topics further — a strength of the semi-structured interview — there was a tendency among the research assistants to play it safe and stick to the given questions. Despite all this, the benefits of the approach were seen as clearly outweighing the disadvantages.

The interviews for this study were conducted in March 2020, very shortly before the Coronavirus crisis fully broke and the KRG imposed a strict lockdown on all movements. The research assistants were briefed to avoid crowded areas and places and to keep a safe distance when conducting their interviews. Some of the final interviews were, for precautionary measures, conducted over the phone instead of face to face.

Genocide, R2P and transitional justice

The Responsibility to Protect doctrine, R2P, was endorsed at the UN's 2005 World Summit by all UN member states. It 'embodies a political commitment to end the worst forms of violence and persecution. It seeks to narrow the gap between member states' pre-existing obligations under international humanitarian law and human rights law and the reality faced by populations at risk of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity' (United Nations, n.d.). Born out of the 'never again' aspiration repeatedly stated after mass atrocities, the R2P doctrine deliberately and

firmly annuls the doctrine of state sovereignty when and if a state is not protecting its population or groups of its population, be it that the state in question is not willing or not able to fulfil its duty towards a targeted group. The United Nations in 1948 defined genocide as ‘any of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, including: (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; and (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group’ (UN General Assembly, 1948). All these acts would be punishable in court. The onus of the genocide convention is on group membership; what sets the crime of genocide apart is that it is committed against a group and with the explicit aim to destroy this group.

When thinking about genocide, the debate normally ranges from prevention to coping, or from risk to resilience (Ingelaere et al., 2013). It can be argued that this mirrors the R2P doctrine itself, which, in its earliest formulation introduced by the *International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty* (ICISS), rests on three pillars, namely prevention, reaction and rebuilding (ICISS, 2001), even if the last pillar, the responsibility to rebuild, has received less attention in the literature (Keranen, 2016). R2P did not make genocide punishable, far from it. What it did was explicitly oblige states to prevent and react to genocide committed in another state; thus, under the conditions of genocide it annuls state sovereignty. With R2P resting on three pillars – prevention, reaction and rebuilding – states are also responsible for rebuilding a targeted

group's livelihood after genocide. R2P does not only seek to prevent and protect potential victims from being killed or otherwise harmed; instead, it aims to protect the group and its way of life from annihilation. The international community is thus also tasked with (re)creating a group's livelihood. This is where the notion of transitional justice connects to R2P and becomes important: in understanding transitional justice as an attempt at reconciliation and specifically referring back to the third pillar of R2P, rebuilding, it can be argued that the international community has a duty to help a targeted group find its place in the world again after genocide, in a spiritual as well as a physical sense. This is also a key concern of transitional justice, applying what has been called the TARR model: 'to search the truth (T) about the past; to ensure accountability (A) for the acts committed; to provide reparation (R) to victims; and to promote reconciliation (R) in society.' (Parmentier, 2013: 113). As a genocide's aim is the social destruction of a targeted group, the international community's duty must be to protect not only the individual but the group's way of life; at the same time, the group, whose basic sense of trust has almost certainly been shattered, needs to find a way to restore this trust and to return into the community of states.

The development of international human rights norms and of global norms, such as R2P, has been named 'one of the great success stories of the UN' (Limon, 2014). More critical literature, however, points to a growing tendency for states and the international community to promote global norms in the easiest and most low-cost way. An example is 'great powers [that] have begun to promoting institutions of transitional justice, especially foreign and domestic war crime tribunals, as a way to signal concern for human rights while at the same time avoiding costly

humanitarian interventions' (Subotic, 2014: 128). This raises the question of whether the international community is not only an enabler and supporter of international norms but – and in particular is so perceived by targeted groups — might also be a bystander of committed atrocities. The lack of action in 1994 during the Rwandan genocide and in 1995 during the massacre in Srebrenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina, are two prominent examples. Critical literature on transitional justice claims that projects for reconciliation after mass atrocities are financed and conducted as a replacement for a rather lacklustre will to intervene to prevent or stop genocides. Is the international community and their attempts at transitional justice and reconciliation perceived in this light by genocide survivors? It is this question this paper is concerned with. The consequence of such a perception would be that reconciliation is also necessary with those who did neither prevent the atrocities nor engage fully in rebuilding.

I now provide some background on the events of 2014; following this, I turn to the Yazidi's perception of these events and the help offered.

Background to the study: the Yazidi in Sinjar

The district of Sinjar, with the city and a mountain range of the same name, is located in northern Iraq, roughly 50 kilometres from the Syrian border, in the governorate of Nineveh, close to Dohuk Governorate. The area is 'both a geographical crossroads and a political fault line' (ICG, 2018:1). It is a contested area, with claims made by the Government of the Kurdish autonomous region in Erbil and also the Iraqi government in Bagdad. Sinjar is also the ancient homeland of the Yazidi community, a religious

minority group, indigenous to Iraq and Syria. Most of the Yazidi people today live in the Kurdish autonomous region of Iraq, only some in Syria, and many also in diasporas outside the Middle East. In the Yazidi faith, place is important and connected to the practice of the religion; with this it is also crucial to the creation and sustainment of identity. Sacred sites are 'a space for the construction of community cohesion, particularly on visits during holy days and festivals, but also critical to preserving the unique identity of the Yazidis' (Rashid et al., 2019: 30). Sinjar is such a space, with Mount Sinjar being a holy and sacred place. In August 2014, it became a death trap.

ISIS attacked the Yazidi in Sinjar, targeting the villages from different sides. The Peshmerga forces of the Kurdish autonomous region fled prior to the attacks, leaving the Yazidi to care for themselves. During the Sinjar massacre, up to 5,000 Yazidi men were slaughtered. Other sources name between 2,100 and 4,000 deaths and between 4,200 and 10,800 abductions (Cetorelli et al., 2017). Adolescent boys were brainwashed, indoctrinated and made to fight for their capturers. Women and young girls were raped, beaten, registered and sold into sexual slavery. The United Nations Mission in Iraq and the Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights confirm the events, having been called and asked for help by the Yazidi at the time (UNAMI/OHCHR, 2014). Roughly 50,000 Yazidi were able to escape the massacre by fleeing to the Sinjar mountains, where they were trapped without food, water or shelter, facing starvation and dehydration in the blistering heat with temperatures between 40 and 50 degree Celsius.

In this situation, Iraqi helicopters, as well as the US, UK and Australian air forces, began to drop food and water for the Yazidi population besieged on the

mountain. On 7 August 2014, the then US President, Barack Obama, ordered targeted airstrikes on ISIS militants. Kurdish fighters from the mostly Turkish Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the mainly Syrian People's Protection Units (YPG) established a safe corridor from Mount Sinjar and enabled roughly 35,000 of the 50,000 trapped Yazidi to flee the mountain and escape the siege to Syria. This mission, however, resulted in the re-evaluation of the situation on Mount Sinjar by western militaries and the eventual cancellation of a planned US rescue mission, while between 5,000 and 10,000 Yazidi remained trapped on Mount Sinjar. ISIS was finally largely defeated in 2017 by Kurdish and Peshmerga-forces. An unknown number of Yazidi are still not accounted for and probably remain in captivity. The Yazidi population live mostly as internally displaced people (IDP) in the Dohuk and Nineveh Governorates of Iraqi-Kurdistan, some in refugee camps, others with relatives. A return to their former homeland is impossible for many as Sinjar is mostly destroyed and not fit for human inhabitation. Furthermore, its status is still unclear as Iraq and the KRG both claim the area.

Before the attack

When investigating the Yazidi community's feeling towards those that should have protected them from ISIS and the genocide, a distinction is made between the Iraqi state and the international community, as it is home states that bear the primary responsibility of protecting their populations. With Sinjar being a disputed area, this would be the governments in Bagdad and Erbil. While many areas in Iraq are poor and governmental services are in short supply, the disputed status of Sinjar probably meant that neither of these governments felt a particular responsibility towards Sinjar and the Yazidi

community that lived there. In the eyes of the interviewed women, this is apparent in the lack of governmental services. The women interviewed describe their life prior to 2014 as hard but good; hard because 'we were depending on ourselves and work and I can say Sinjar was ignored because the government service was poor like electricity and clean water',[5] 'we did not have electricity and clean water in our village'[6] and 'in our village there was no permanent electricity and water was either salty or bitter. This is why we had to buy clean water.'[7] The lack of economic and educational opportunities, in particular higher education, are also mentioned. Despite these hardships, life is also described as good, and the interviewed women emphasise the importance of living with families and in the community. 'People in my village used to live together as [if] they were one family. We built a beautiful house, and we lived in it for a short time until 2014. My other son and his children and wife were living in another house near to my home in [the] same village'[8] and 'the thing that we were happy with was all of our relatives were happy together. We were participating in each other's sad and happy moments; with all the difficulties we had a more relaxed mind than today.'[9] The happiness and hopes for a good life in the future are domestic, although participants also describe wishes to go to university, graduate, and serve the community as teachers or doctors. The community, however, and the importance of the community, are mentioned repeatedly. It provides a reference point in and for everyday life, whereas not much is expected from the Kurdish or Iraqi government.

In the first half of 2014, ISIS had gained ground in Iraq, and the Yazidi community was fearful; a sense of foreboding is described by many of the interviewees, with participants saying that, 'we already were all worr[ied] because we know that ISIS

has attacked some places and they might come to our town, we were always worrying and watching the news [for] updating',[10] and that 'before ISIS attacked Sinjar, they had attacked Mosul and Tal Afar, we were so scared because our village was on the border of Sinjar. So, we knew that if they attacked Sinjar, we would be captured easily.'[11] Some participants show a reliance on the security forces being present in Sinjar: 'We saw on TV that ISIS occupied Mosul, but the Peshmerga were in Sinjar so we were relaxed and never thought that ISIS would be able to come to our region.'[12] The fear among the Yazidi, however, grew when the Kurdish Peshmerga forces left Sinjar, leaving the Yazidi community vulnerable. 'I was at home; my kids were playing in the garden. I went to [the] street to see what is going on. Then I saw some Peshmerga cars were leaving the village. I got so scared because I knew [that] after that ISIS will attack us, we didn't have any weapons to fight ISIS and defend ourselves.'[13] Another woman said that 'ISIS attacked places around us. My brother-in-law came from Sinjar city, and he said that Peshmerga and other soldiers left Sinjar, also ISIS is coming toward us. He said we should leave [the] village, if not we are going to be killed.'[14] Seeing the Peshmerga forces leave created a feeling of being abandoned; it was also the moment when many Yazidi decided to flee from their homes and villages and try to escape to the mountains.

The flight

ISIS forces together with their local supporters attacked Sinjar province from 3 August, 2014 and onwards. Waiting, sometimes in vain, to meet family members to flee together and helping others in the community, the Yazidi fled en masse to the mountains, trying to escape the imminent threat. 'We tried to escape from the village (…) and we rode in

our car and [we] were going to the mountain. But, when we saw old people on our way, we took them to our car until there was little space left. When we were going to the mountain, we did not know when ISIS will capture us, and we were so scared'.[15] The mass flight blocked the streets and made it increasingly difficult for the Yazidi to flee. 'Then we saw all the cars were stopped and there was a big crowd of cars and cars were not moving. My dad asked all the women, my uncles and brothers to walk to the mountain. Because if we waited until the crowed of cars is finished, ISIS would come and kidnap us.'[16] The ordeal of the flight and of seeing others that could not escape or be helped is unsurprisingly salient in the interviews: 'when ISIS saw us fleeing, they got angry [and they were shooting at us]. (…) While we were fleeing, I saw helpless old people and that was one of the most painful moments when they were sick or could not walk.'[17] Many of the interviewed also describe encounters with ISIS fighters and their Arab supporters while fleeing. One of the women describes this: 'ISIS came and found us. At that time, I was wearing white clothes. ISIS looked at me and said your clothes are [a] symbol of surrender, so that means you want peace (…) instead of fight and for that we will let you go back to your village. I told them okay, we will return. I knew if we return to [the] village, they will kill our men and kidnap girls and kids, so after [they] went, [we] immediately rode in our car and directly went to the mountain.'[18] Another interviewee said that 'ISIS followed us and stopped us. They told us that they don't have any problem and they will not kill us if we return to our village, but we knew they [were] lying. After ISIS left us, we went to the mountain.'[19] In addition to the encounters with ISIS forces who tried to talk the fleeing people into going back to their villages, where death and captivity awaited them, it was encounters with ISIS's local

supporters that left the Yazidi feeling betrayed. One woman said that 'there was an Arab guy [who] asked some of my relatives not to leave and [said that] he would rescue all of them. But they did not know that the Arab guy (…) [was] deceiving them. So, when the Arab guy was sure that the people had already believed in him (…) [he] called ISIS to come and capture all of them.'[20] This betrayal generated additional fear among the Yazidi community. 'Some of us, in past they used to live near to people who betrayed them and helped ISIS to attack them. So, when we return to home, again we have to live near to those people and that will bring risk to our life',[21] said one woman. Another said that 'right now, my village is surrounded by people who betrayed us when ISIS attacked us, so if we return to village our life will be in danger.'[22] These descriptions of the attack and flight demonstrate feelings of being abandoned by the Peshmerga and betrayed by their neighbours. Before the attacks, the community was described as close and relying on each other, mostly left to care for themselves by the governments in Erbil and Bagdad. When the attacks happened, however, and the Peshmerga forces left the Yazidi to their fate, there is a sense of a further loss of trust in local forces' duty to safeguard and protect them.

Leaving the mountain

The mountain was hardly a safe haven for the Yazidi community. At best, it offered a temporary refuge from ISIS. People faced starvation, dehydration and the blistering heat of Iraq; furthermore, there was the ordeal of watching people die, of experiencing hopelessness, fear, and uncertainty. Asked about the experience on the mountain, interviewees said that 'there were not any obstacles or difficulties left that we did not face on the mountain. Children were very scared and crying for water and food. Old

people were dying in front of us and we could not do anything for them. What hurts my heart was when I saw women were trying to commit suicide because they were helpless or because they were the only members [that] survived from their families.'[23] Another interviewee described the situation as 'similar to hell' and said that 'every night I was crying because I was scared of ISIS. During the day we heard (…) [shooting], and we didn't know in which moment we are going to be killed by their shooting. I was praying to God to help us to survive from that situation.'[24] Another one described the choice between facing death by ISIS or death by dehydration, saying that 'some men went down to get some food and water but whenever they went, they didn't come back because ISIS killed them. I was praying to God to help us to survive those dark days.'[25]

In this situation, it is probably unsurprising that when help came the interviewed women were not paying much attention to who provided it. With regards to the military intervention that finally made it possible to leave the mountain, the interviewed women say that they don't know who helped them escape from the mountain in August 2014, and also that 'I don't know if the foreign countries reacted with airstrikes. What I know [is that] several months after 3 August the Peshmerga occupied Sinjar, maybe at that time [the] United States helped them to fight ISIS.'[26] Participants express gratefulness about the help they received and being able to leave the mountains. They also describe help received in Syria and later when they travelled back to Iraqi-Kurdistan, where they received humanitarian help in the camps and from neighbours and relatives. With regards to the humanitarian help on the mountain – the food and water dropped there – interviewees said it was not enough and too late: 'When we were on the mountain, the United States and the international community did not react at the right time. Because it

was the third day till they sent aid. The aid was not enough, because there were thousands of people on the mountain, and when one side of the mountain could get the help, the other would not.'[27] Another woman said that 'I cannot say that there was help, because hundreds of people died on the mountain and were buried without shrouds due to having no help. (…) There are still many people who died on the mountain, and no one knows who is from which family.'[28] The interviewed women express gratitude and appreciation, both for the military help that ultimately defeated ISIS and liberated Sinjar and for the humanitarian help received on the mountain. They express gratitude in the strongest terms with regards to the help they received when they had left the mountains and reached first Syria and then the Kurdish region of Iraq. This is described as more personal, almost neighbourly help, whereas the airstrikes and dropping of food and water on the mountain is described in more unpersonal terms. This distinction is also apparent in the descriptions of life after the attack.

After the attack

Six years after the attacks, a sense of normality has not returned to the Yazidi population. The majority are living as IDPs in Dohuk Governorate in the Kurdish autonomous region. Sinjar province is largely destroyed and uninhabitable. UN agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are working to help the Yazidi community, and their help is appreciated by the Yazidi: 'They provided us food and stuff; as well they built camps for us. Also, they gave us money to buy stuff that we needed. In camps they built schools and hospitals. (…) The projects that foreigners did for us helped us so much and we appreciate whatever they do. Yazidi people need help so whatever we receive we appreciate it.'[29] Another interviewee said that, 'we left our

home and lost our stuff. We need help so whatever they provide, we appreciate it. Organisations built schools for our kids. If they didn't help us, I wouldn't be able to send my kids to school. (…) The help we receive from foreigners is fair enough, but whatever we receive won't make us happy as much as providing security and safe life.'[30] The help from NGOs and foreign organisations is much appreciated, but it is also mentioned that projects are just 'short term',[31] and that foreigners' help is 'not permanent'.[32] This insight lets some participants ask and argue for help from and the involvement of the government – although it is unclear if the Iraqi government or the KRG is meant. The support offered by the international community today is seen as focusing on everyday needs, and the interviewed women mention a lack of support that would allow them to feel safe. They ask foremost for the reconstruction of Sinjar, so that they can return, and for the provision of security. There is a wish for stability: 'What I want from other countries is helping Yazidi people in returning to their home. Nowadays people got too tired from living in camps and other places around; they want to return to their place and house.'[33] 'We want to return to our home. So (…) we need [the] support of [the] international community. They should help us to rebuild life in Sinjar again. ISIS destroyed and damaged many buildings in Sinjar, many people lost their houses. We need money to be able build our home again.'[34] The wish to return is connected to the survival of the Yazidi as a community, and the international community is asked to provide a safe zone and guaranteed security: 'Another important thing is how will [we] be sure that the future of Yazidi is safe? How will [we] be sure that there will not be annihilation against Yazidi again? How will [we] be sure that we will not be ignored again by government? Yes, before 2014 we were happier and more

satisfied, but the government's service did not have a big difference [to today].'[35]

Discussion: Finding a place in the world

The interviews with Yazidi women show foremost (1) feelings of betrayal towards the local supporters of ISIS – their neighbours, (2) feelings of detachment towards the local state institutions, (3) a perceived difference between the help from the international community – military or humanitarian – and more neighbourly support, and (4) the need and wish for stability and help that goes beyond everyday needs. There is a lack of knowledge about who provided help in the mountains and the camps. With regard to this a more general gratitude is expressed, evident in comments saying that one is grateful for whatever is provided. The help received from neighbours and relatives in Syria and Kurdistan is described in more personal terms. This might be seen as a hint that everyday help belongs in local hands, while the international community's focus should be on providing a political settlement for the contested area of Sinjar, on rebuilding the area and on the provision of security.

The R2P doctrine, although described as an important step towards the development of global norms, has been massively criticised as a rather toothless tiger. Syria and Libya are two examples of the international community's failure to protect vulnerable groups who are subjected to violent attacks and atrocities. Investigating the genocide of ISIS against the Yazidi puts an additional problem with R2P on the agenda: its lack of a more long-term strategy. When thinking about R2P, the onus is mainly on preventing genocide, either (and in the best-case scenario) before a genocidal campaign can start or stopping it as soon as possible after it has begun. But the doctrine comes with another obligation: to rebuild. The need for this, on a theoretical level, is connected

to the aim of genocide. It is not only the killing of individuals, but it is an attempt to destroy a group, a way of life and a belief system. Individuals are targeted because of their group membership; genocidaires aim to achieve the destruction of a social identity and a way of life. Consequently, if genocide is to be prevented and the targeted group protected, this must mean helping to rebuild and thus preserve their way of life. This duty to rebuild can also be seen as connected to attempts at reconciliation, which aims to reintegrate a targeted group back into society. However, reconciliation and transitional justice have also been criticised as relatively cheap attempts by the international community to show adherence to global norms while avoiding the costs of full-blown interventions and rebuilding campaigns.

With regards to the case of the Yazidi, six years after the attacks and the siege on Mount Sinjar, the area is still contested between Bagdad and Erbil and remains uninhabitable, and many Yazidi are still in captivity, while others live in a kind of limbo, moving between accommodation in the refugee camps and staying with relatives. Stability and normality are more or less absent from their lives. In this way, and despite attempts by the international community, namely a diverse range of UN agencies and NGOs, rebuilding, the third pillar of the responsibility to protect, and the reintegration of the Yazidi back into society have thus far not been achieved.

The Yazidi women interviewed for this study perceived the military reaction of the international community following the ISIS attack as rather belated and insufficient. They also phrased the feeling of betrayal, directed against the Iraqi-Kurdish Peshmerga who were tasked with protecting them but who left them when the attacks started, and their Arab neighbours who betrayed them to the ISIS forces. Finally, there is a feeling

of abandonment which is directed at the Iraqi state and/or the international community. While the interviewed women are grateful towards the individual Kurds and the forces that helped them when they fled from Mount Sinjar into Syria and from there to the Kurdish autonomous region of Iraq, they feel that more should be done by the governments of Iraq and the autonomous region and/or by the international community, in particular the rebuilding of Sinjar, allowing for their return, and establishing security guarantees. In the case of the Yazidi, considering the idea that reconciliation is also about helping the targeted community re-find its place in the world and rebuilding their shattered trust, the need to reconcile with the groups that left them and/or did not help them seems important. These groups are the KRG and the international community, and any reconciliation attempts would need to include them.

In this regard, it is also striking that the majority of the interviewed women are not aware of the projects that are financed and executed by international donors and international NGOs on Mount Sinjar. Most of them said that while they had heard of such projects, they had no specific knowledge of the attempts of the international community to help. This might point to a communication and outreach problem of the participating international organisations and NGOs. The sample interviewed here is small, and generalisations to the whole community are therefore impossible. Nevertheless, the tendency of NGOs to question the participants of their projects for monitoring and evaluation attempts is well known, and this might hide a situation where not enough is made known about available help to the general population.

Conclusion

The question this study set out to answer was how do targeted groups perceive the

actions of the international community with regards to the R2P doctrine; in particular, I was interested in the question of whether the international community is seen as a bystander and hence an enabler of genocide. For the interviewed Yazidi women, however this question was of only secondary importance; their feelings are more directed towards their neighbours and the state forces that should have protected them. There is a sense of detachment with regards to the international community, both the military intervention that enabled the Yazidi to leave Mount Sinjar and the organisations working to provide humanitarian help. While the interviewees expressed gratitude for this help, there was also a lack of knowledge about it and a wish for the international community to focus more on a political solution and on the rebuilding of Sinjar.

The invention of global norms including the *Responsibility to Protect* doctrine has been named one of the greatest successes of the UN (Limon, 2014), but its implementation and functions are still problematic. R2P, born of the will to prevent genocides by overcoming states' lacklustre reaction to it, justified by state sovereignty, rests on the three pillars of prevention, reaction and rebuilding. Not much is known, however, of how the doctrine is perceived on the ground. Interviews with 28 Yazidi women in the autonomous Kurdish region of Iraq showed that more needs to be done to reintegrate targeted groups into the international community of states and rebuild their basic trust in their state as well as in the international community of states. With regards to reconciliation, there is the important question of with whom the targeted community needs to reconcile; as the Yazidi were left by the Kurdish Peshmerga forces and betrayed to ISIS by their local neighbours, both groups would need to be included in

reconciliation attempts. The importance of this is made clear by the Yazidi women asking for international protection and safeguarding, instead of relying on local help. Clearly, and unsurprisingly, trust has been shattered; it is this trust that needs to be rebuilt.

There is no doubt that the military action in 2014 was necessary as well as successful; furthermore, it is doubtless that the humanitarian help given by UN agencies and NGOs in the aftermath of the genocide is essential. But as important as these were and are, conclusions about a successful operation within the R2P doctrine are still premature; questions about R2P remain. Even today, life has not returned to some kind of normalcy for the Yazidi community. As this paper argues, R2P is not only about receiving help in immediate danger and protection from annihilation; the doctrine is about protecting a way of life and hence about rebuilding. In the case of the Yazidi, this would mean the reconstruction of the group's ancient homeland of Sinjar and a reconciliation with their local neighbours and the Kurdish state forces.

(word count: 7231)

References:

Cammett, M. (2013) 'Using Proxy Interview to Address Sensitive Topics', in Mosley, L. (ed), *Interview Research in Political Science*. London, UK: Cornell University Press, 125-142.

Cetorelli, V., Sasson, I., Shabila, N. & Burnham, G. (2017) Mortality and Kidnapping Estimates for the Yazidi Population in the Area of Mount Sinjar, Iraq, in August 2014: A Retrospective Household Survey. *PLOS Medicine*, 14(5).

ICG (2018) *Winning The Post-ISIS Battle For Iraq In Sinjar*.Brussels, Belgium: International Crisis Group. [Online]. Available at: https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/183-winning-post-isis-battle-iraq-sinjar

ICISS (2001) *The Responsibility to Protect*. Ottawa, CA: International Development Research Centre. [Online] Available at: http://responsibilitytoprotect.org/ICISS%20Report.pdf.

Ingelaere, B., Parmentier, S., Haers SJ, J. & Segaert, B. (2013) 'Between Risk and Resilience - A Interdisciplinary Dialogue on Genocide', in Ingelaere, B., Parmentier, S., Haers SJ, J. & Segaert, B. (eds), *Genocide, Risk and Resilience. An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Rethinking Political Violence Series. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 1-20.

Keranen, O. (2016) 'What Happened to the Responsibility to Rebuild?' *Global Governance*, 22(3), 331-348.

Kvale, S. (2005) 'The Dominance of Dialogical Interview Research. A Critical View.' *Barn*, 3, 89-105.

Kvale, S. (2007) *Doing Interviews*. London: Sage.

Limon, M. (2014) *Human Rights Norms: It's the Implementation, Stupid*. Univ ersial Rights Group. Geneva: Switzerland. [Online] Available at: https://www.universal-rights.org/blog/human-rights-norms-it-s-the-implementation-stupid/

Matyas, D., Akhavan, P., Ashraph, S. & Barzani, B. (2020) 'What Justice for the Yazidi Genocide?: Voices from Below'. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 42, 1-47.

Parmentier, S. (2013) Confronting the 'Crime of Crimes'. Key Issues of Transitional Justice after Genocide, in Ingelaere, B., Parmentier, S., Haers, J. & Segaert, B. (eds), *Genocide, Risk and Resilience: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 108-126.

Pouligny, B. (2006) *Peace Operations Seen From Below. UN Operations and Local People*. London, UK: C. Hurst & Company.

Rashid, Eamena & Yazda (2019) *Destroying The Soul Of The Yazidi. Cultural Heritage Destruction During The Islamic State's Genocide Against The Yazidi*. Munich,

Germany: Rashid, E., Yazda.[Online]. Avaiable at: https://rashid-international.org/publications/report-destroying-the-soul-of-the-yazidis/

Shaw, M. (2013) 'The Concept of Genocide: What Are We Preventing?', in Ingelaere, B., Parmentier, S., Haers, J. & Segaert, B. (eds), *Genocide, Risk and Resilience. An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 23-35.

Stamnes, E. (2009) '"Speaking R2P" and the Prevention of Mass Atrocities'. *Global Responsibility to Protect*, 1, 70-89.

Subotic, J. (2014) 'Bargaining Justice. A Theory of Transitional Justice Compliance', in Buckley-Zistel, S. B., Teresa Koloma, Braun, C. & Mieth, F. (eds), *Transitional Justice Theories*. Oxon: Routledge, 127-141.

Thakur, R. & Weiss, T. (2009) 'R2P: From Idea to Norm—and Action?' *Global Responsibility to Protect*, 1(1), 22.

UN General Assembly (1948) *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* United Nations. [Online]

UNAMI/OHCHR (2014) *Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict in Iraq: 06 July - 10 September 2014*.Bagdhad, Iraq: Rights, O. o. t. H. C. f. H.

United Nations (1945) *UN-Charter.* United Nations. [Online] Available at: https://www.un.org/en/charter-united-nations/

United Nations (n.d.). *Responsibility to Protect*. United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect [Online]. Available at: https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/about-responsibility-to-protect.shtml.

Notes:

[1] Woman, 27 years old, interviewed in Qazer Ezidin on 05 March 2020.
[2] Woman, 32 years old. Interviewed in Khanik on 02 March 2020.
[3] Woman, 32 years old. Interviewed in Qazer Ezidin on 05 March 2020.
[4] Woman, 27 years old. Interviewed in Khanik on 07 March 2020.
[5] Woman, 46 years old. Interview conducted in Khanik, 07 March 2020.
[6] Woman, 44 years old. Interview conducted in Qaser Ezidin/Duhok on 05 March 2020.
[7] Woman, 45 years old. Interview conducted in Khanik on 06 March 2020.

[8] Woman, 45 years old, Interview conducted in Khanik on 10 March 2020.
[9] Woman, 32 years old, Interview conducted in Khanik on 02 March 2020.
[10] Woman, 19 years old, Interview conducted in Esayan on 17 March 2020.
[11] Woman, 28 years old, Interview conducted in Old Kabarto/Duhok on 11 March 2020.
[12] Woman, 26 years old. Interview conducted in Khanik on 05 March 2020.
[13] Woman, 38 years old, Interview conducted in Qaser Ezidin on 03 March 2020.
[14] Women, 40 years old. Interview conducted in Khanik on 07 March 2020.
[15] Woman, 46 years old. Interview conducted in Kabarto, on 02 March 2020.
[16] Woman, 32 years old. Interview conducted in Khanik on 02 March 2020.
[17] Woman, 44 years old. Interview conducted in Qazer Ezidin on 05 March 2020.
[18] Woman, 44 years old, interview conducted in Qaser Ezidin, on 02 March 2020.
[19] Woman, 38 years old. Interview conducted in Qaser Ezidin, on 03 March 2020.
[20] Woman, 31 years old. Interview conducted in Kabarto on 11 March 2020.
[21] Woman, 35 years old, interviewed in Khanik, 02 March 2020.
[22] Woman, 36 years old, interviewed in Khanik on 05 March 2020.
[23] Woman, 46 years old. Interview conducted in Kabarto on 02 March 2020.
[24] Woman, 45 years old. Interview conducted in Khanik on 10 March 2020.
[25] Woman, 26 years old. Interview conducted in Khanik on 05 March 2020.
[26] Woman, 38 years old. Interview conducted in Qaseryazdeen on 03 March 2020.
[27] Woman, 28 years old. Interview conducted in Khanik on 07 March 2020.
[28] Woman, 46 years old. Interview conducted in Kabarto on 02 March 2020.
[29] Woman, 40 years old. Interview conducted in Khanik on 07 March 2020.
[30] Woman, 36 years old, interviewed in Khanik on 05 March 2020.
[31] Women, 43 years old, interviewed in Khanik on 10 March 2020.
[32] Woman, 31 years old. Interview conducted in Kabarto, 11 March 2020.
[33] Woman, 35 years old, interviewed in Khanik on 02 March 2020,
[34] Woman, 43 years old, interviewed in Khanik on the 10 March 2020.
[35] Woman, 46 years old, interviewed in Khanik on 07 March 2020.