

I. Introduction

The Yazidi people are arguably one of the oldest and most misunderstood groups in the world. Originating from northern Mesopotamia, mainly in present-day Iraq, they have preserved a unique faith, culture, and identity for millennia. Despite their profound history, the Yazidis have endured persecution, displacement, and violence for thousands and thousands of years due to their beliefs, and their refusal to abandon their traditions and religion.

In August 2014, the Yazidi community gained international recognition when the militant group referred to as the Islamic State (ISIS) initiated a genocidal and violent campaign against them in Shingal, Iraq. Thousands of Yazidis lost their lives, women and girls were subjected to enslavement as well as sexual enslavement, and their sacred sites were destroyed. This horrific event has since been acknowledged by the United Nations and various governments, including Australia, as an act of genocide.

To date, Yazidi communities are still displaced, suffering from trauma, and scattered globally. Some are enduring harsh conditions in northern Iraq, while many have relocated to countries like Germany, Canada, and Australia, where they are reconstructing their lives and maintaining their cultural heritage; however, the impact is still ongoing.

This guide has been created to offer a straightforward and approachable introduction to the Yazidi ethnic group, containing their history, culture, and current circumstances. It serves as a valuable resource for educators, students, and community members eager to learn about the Yazidis and contemplate the wider human rights issues highlighted by their story and experiences.

Learning about the Yazidis highlights the crucial need to safeguard cultural diversity, combat persecution, and advocate for the rights of marginalised minority groups worldwide. Their strength amidst horrific violence serves not just as a story of survival but also as a powerful reminder for global unity and the importance of human rights education.

II. Who are the Yazidis?

The Yazidis are an Indigenous group from northern Mesopotamia (known as modern Iraq), known for their unique identity formed by their beliefs, culture, and a rich history of endurance. Despite their small population, they represent one of the oldest minority communities globally and have demonstrated remarkable strength in maintaining their traditions despite centuries of oppression.

Origins and homeland:

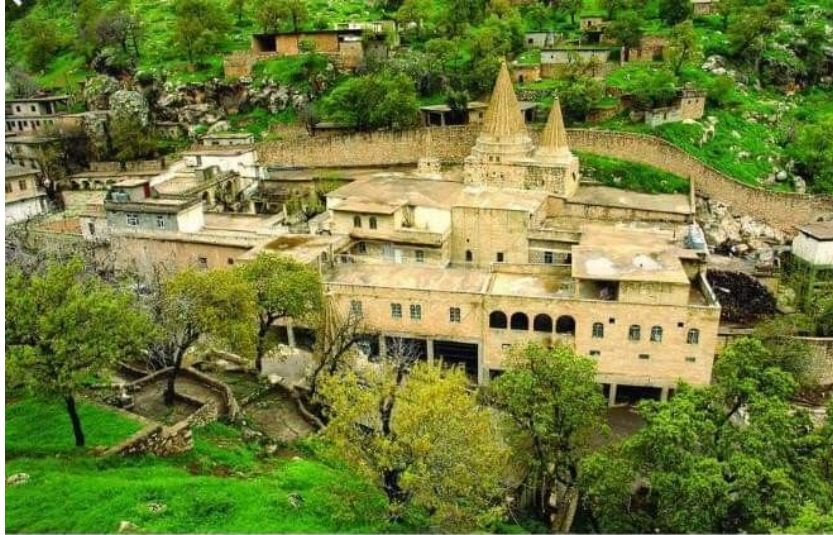
The Yazidis are mainly located in North East of Iraq, with their homeland primarily located around Sinjar and the Nineveh Plains. Throughout history, Yazidis have resided in various towns and villages within this area, engaging in agriculture, trade, and fostering tight-knit communities.



The Sinjar Mountains have consistently been of great significance. Although Yazidis resided in nearby towns and around, these mountains acted as a spiritual hub and a place of protection. In periods of persecution, families frequently sought refuge in the mountains, utilising their rough landscape as a natural stronghold. Additionally, the mountains house some of the community's most revered sites, such as shrines and temples, which represent the Yazidis' enduring spirit and profound spiritual bond with their homeland.

Lalish, located at the northeast of Mosul, is regarded as the most sacred site in the Yazidi faith. Every year, Yazidis who can do so embark on a mission to Lalish to engage in ceremonies that reinforce their identity, history, and collective beliefs. Lalish stands as the most sacred site of the Yazidi faith and serves as the final resting place of Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, a venerated reformer and saint from the 12th century. Each year, during the Festival of Assembly (Cejna Cemaia) in early October (6th-12th), Yazidis from Iraq and across the globe come together in Lalish to engage in prayers, ceremonies, circle dances and rituals

that honour renewal, forgiveness, and unity. For Yazidis residing in diaspora, Lalish continues to serve as a significant symbol of home and continuity.



In addition to Iraq, Yazidis have created new sacred sites in the diaspora. The most notable is the Qele Mira Temple located in Aknalich, Armenia, which was completed in 2019. Rising to nearly 25 meters in height, it ranks among the largest Yazidi temples globally and acts as a religious and cultural hub for the Yazidi community in the Caucasus. Further, various smaller shrines and gathering places have been set up or are soon to take place in Germany and Georgia, showcasing the Yazidi people's unwavering dedication to preserving their faith and cultural identity no matter where they reside.

Population and relocation:

Prior to 2014, it was estimated, although not statistically proven, that there were between 700,000 and 1,000,000 Yazidis globally, predominantly located in Iraq. In the present day, due to displacement and migration, Yazidi populations have scattered around the world. The largest concentration of Yazidis is now in Germany, where over 100,000 individuals reside. Notable communities are also established in Canada, the United States, Sweden, and Australia.

In Australia, Yazidi families started to arrive following the genocide in 2014, establishing communities primarily in Wagga Wagga, Toowoomba, Sydney, Armidale, and Coffs Harbour. Despite their small population, Yazidis in Australia are working to rebuild their lives while maintaining their cultural traditions for future generations.



Faith and Identity:

Yazidism is a monotheistic religion that focuses on the belief in one God and honours Tawûsê Melek, known as the Peacock Angel. This figure symbolises forgiveness, renewal, and the responsibility of humanity to nurture creation. Unfortunately, this belief has often been misinterpreted, leading outsiders to mistakenly label Yazidis as "devil worshippers", a damaging myth that has contributed to centuries of persecution.

Being Yazidi requires not merely a religious affiliation but also an identification with a unique ethnic and cultural community. Historically, Yazidism does not permit conversion; one's identity is passed down through birth and family. This practice has contributed to the preservation of Yazidi customs, yet it has simultaneously rendered the community particularly susceptible during periods of conflict, when their very existence is threatened.

Culture & Community:

The Yazidi culture is profoundly rich, grounded in oral traditions, music, poetry, and the art of storytelling. Festivals and rituals, particularly those celebrated at Lalish, signify the passage of life and the changing seasons. Kinship and community are fundamental values, with families and castes holding a significant position in the structure of social organisation.

Even when living in diaspora, Yazidis uphold their traditions by participating in community events, wearing traditional attire, and observing religious rituals. This cultural tenacity serves as a source of pride and strength, especially for the younger generation of Yazidis who are raised far from their ancestral homeland.

Why learning about the Yazidis matter?

The narrative of the Yazidis goes beyond an ancient culture, but also underlines the importance of protecting the minority rights in the contemporary world. Their survival highlights:

- The need to fight against intolerance and misinformation,

- The significance of preserving cultural heritage, and
- The strength of communities when confronted with oppression.

Why are the Yazidis distinct?

The Yazidi identity is unique as it encompasses religious, cultural, and ethnic dimensions. In contrast to other groups that may convert or assimilate more readily, Yazidism traditionally does not welcome converts; it is inherited through birth. This has resulted in both resilience and fragility. On one side, it has enabled the Yazidis to preserve their traditions for centuries, even in the face of ongoing persecution. On the other hand, it has rendered them a common target for outsiders who have either misunderstood or misrepresented their beliefs.

For instance, Yazidis hold Tawûsê Melek, the Peacock Angel, in high regard as a symbol of light and divine beauty. This reverence has led outsiders to mistakenly label them as “devil-worshippers”, a damaging myth that has sparked numerous waves of persecution throughout history. However, for Yazidis, Tawûsê Melek represents forgiveness, redemption, and the duty of humanity to protect the earth.

III. The history of Yazidis:

Early Origins:

The Yazidis are native to the Mesopotamian area, with origins that go back thousands of years. Their cultural and religious practices show influences from ancient Mesopotamian beliefs, however, Yazidism has evolved into a unique faith of its own.

For centuries, Yazidis have been primarily located in the mountain areas of northern Iraq, especially in Sinjar and the Nineveh Plains. These locations offered not just physical safety but also represented a spiritual place. The mountains served as a safe refuge during periods of oppression and have become a homeland to which Yazidis feel a deep connection.

Prosecution through centuries:

Unfortunately, a significant portion of Yazidi history is characterized by repeated instances of persecution. Due to a lack of understanding of their beliefs, Yazidis frequently became targets of surrounding authorities. During the Ottoman Empire, efforts were made to compel them to convert to Islam. According to Yazidi oral tradition, they have endured "74 genocides" throughout history, with each event inflicting lasting wounds and scars on the community.

In spite of this, the Yazidis managed to rebuild following every prosecution. Their ability to survive was frequently attributed to their geographical escapes, their strong family and community ties, and their determination to maintain and observe their identity.

20th Century – New challenges:

In modern times, the Yazidis have continued to encounter threats. During Saddam Hussein's rule in Iraq (1979–2003), the government implemented "Arabisation" policies that forced Yazidis out of their villages and sought to integrate them into the dominant culture. Numerous Yazidi lands were seized, and families were forced to relocate to collective towns, which disrupted their traditional lifestyles. Simultaneously, Yazidis frequently found themselves excluded from political and economic prospects, resulting in the community being marginalised within Iraq. This history of discrimination rendered them vulnerable when the nation became unstable after 2003.

The path to 2014:

Following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, sectarian violence escalated, putting minorities like the Yazidis in greater danger. Numerous assaults were directed at Yazidi civilians, highlighted by a horrific wave of bombings in 2007 that resulted in the deaths of hundreds. These events were a hint to the tragic occurrences of 2014, when ISIS entered Sinjar and committed mass atrocities against the Yazidi community.

IV. The 2014 Genocide & Onwards:

In August 2014, the Yazidi community faced one of the most dreadful and brutal atrocities of the 21st century. The self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) initiated a coordinated assault on the Sinjar area of northern Iraq, the core of the Yazidi population. Whole villages were overrun within days. Men and elderly women were killed, young boys were taken to training camps, indoctrinated, and brainwashed; and thousands of women and girls were kidnapped, enslaved, and trafficked in markets throughout Iraq and Syria.

As stated by the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria (2016), ISIS aimed to eradicate the Yazidis through various heinous acts including murder, sexual slavery, forced conversions, and the kidnapping of children, actions that unequivocally align with the definition of genocide as per international law. The Commission determined that ISIS had "sought to eliminate the Yazidis through killing, sexual slavery, enslavement, torture, and inhumane and degrading treatment."

Scale of atrocity:

The scale of the genocide was quite catastrophic:

- Approximately 5,000 Yazidis lost their lives in the weeks following the attack.
- It is estimated that 6,000 women and children were abducted, with many remain missing to this day.
- More than 400,000 Yazidis fled their homes, seeking safety on Mount Sinjar, where tens of thousands found themselves stranded without food, water, or shelter in the sweltering summer heat.

- Hundreds died from dehydration and exposure prior to the establishment of humanitarian corridors by Kurdish and international forces.

The Sinjar Mountains, historically seen as a place of refuge, have once more become a symbol of both anguish and resilience. The world watched as the Yazidi families fought for their existence on the mountains, a haunting reminder of their ongoing persecution throughout history. For many Yazidis, the year 2014 was not a single catastrophic occurrence but rather the 74th genocide in a protracted series of existential threats faced by their people.

Women, girls, and the use of sexual violence:

ISIS exploited sexual violence as a calculated tool of genocide. Yazidi women and girls, some as young as nine, were systematically isolated, sold, and subjected to abuse. Survivors have shared experiences of being coerced into conversion, tortured, and traded repeatedly among different fighters. Through this brutality, ISIS aimed to destroy not just individuals but also the social structure of Yazidi existence; specifically targeting women, who play vital roles in preserving cultural continuity, family, and community identity.

Nevertheless, Yazidi women have also come out to represent a remarkable symbol of resilience. Survivors such as Nadia Murad, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018, have become worldwide advocates for justice, truth, and acknowledgment; with a self-made initiative that aims to rebuild communities and support sexual violence victims and survivors. These women's accounts have played a crucial role in revealing sexual violence as a tool of warfare and have attracted global focus on the necessity for accountability.

Displacement and camp life:

Following the liberation of Sinjar in 2015, a significant number of Yazidis, totalling tens of thousands, continued to be displaced. Many individuals were unable to return to their homes due to the destruction of villages, the presence of landmines, or ongoing insecurity. Recent reports indicate that over 150,000 Yazidis are still residing in displacement camps within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, frequently enduring difficult conditions and facing limited opportunities for education, healthcare, and employment as well as discrimination.

Although some Yazidis have managed to return to Sinjar, the process of reconstruction has been painfully slow, hindered by political conflicts involving the Iraqi central government, the Kurdish Regional Government, and various militias. For many Yazidis, Sinjar continues to symbolise a place of sorrow, loss, and an uncertain path to recovery.

International recognition & justice attempts:

The 2014 Yazidi genocide has received a wide recognition from international organisations.

- The United Nations, the European Parliament, the US Congress, and various national governments, including Australia, have all recognised the actions of ISIS as genocide.

- The UNITAD (UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL) has been actively investigating and gathering evidence to support future legal proceedings.
- In a significant case in Germany in 2021, an ISIS fighter was found guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity, marking one of the first judgments of this nature globally.

Despite these efforts, many Yazidis still perceive a sense of abandonment by the global community. Justice progresses at a sluggish pace, reparations are limited, and countless survivors are still hoping for the return of their missing relatives, despite the over decade gap. The genocide has inflicted enduring trauma that continues to influence Yazidi identity and advocacy in the present day.

Cultural & spiritual survivor:

In the face of devastation and grief, the Yazidi community has shown remarkable strength. Their cultural and religious leaders have dedicated themselves to safeguarding traditions, restoring temples, and reviving ceremonies. The Yazidi faith, which has often been misinterpreted and misrepresented, is now receiving worldwide acknowledgment as a profound, peaceful, and ancient religion grounded in harmony, tolerance, and respect for nature.

The genocide of 2014, though devastating and catastrophic, also sparked a deep sense of solidarity and unity among Yazidis across the world. From Iraq to Armenia, Germany, and further beyond, communities have come together to focus on remembrance, justice, and education, ensuring that their long suffering is neither overlooked or repeated.

I. The Yazidis abroad and international context:

The Yazidi community, which was predominantly located in northern Iraq, has increasingly become global over the past decade. The genocide in 2014 spread tens of thousands of Yazidis worldwide, leading to the establishment of new diaspora communities in Europe, North America, and Australia. These communities have emerged as essential centres for cultural preservation, advocacy, and remembrance, ensuring that the Yazidi voice continues to resonate even far from their home land.

Resettlement post 2014:

Following the attack by ISIS on Sinjar, numerous Yazidis sought safety through humanitarian evacuation programs.

- Germany initiated one of the most notable resettlement efforts, providing asylum to more than 1,000 Yazidi women and children survivors via a special program in Baden-Württemberg.

- Canada, Australia, France, and the United States have also welcomed Yazidi refugees through various humanitarian and sponsorship initiatives, frequently supported by NGOs and international partnerships.

Although resettlement has provided safety and opportunities for rebuilding lives, it has also introduced challenges. Many Yazidis encounter language barriers, trauma, and the difficulty of maintaining their cultural identity in new societies. Community organisations and diaspora leaders have dedicated themselves to aiding mental health recovery, preserving religious traditions, and enhancing intergenerational ties.

Communities around the world:

Currently, there is an establishment of Yazidi communities in:

- Germany (with an estimated population of over 150,000 Yazidis, mainly located in Lower Saxony and North Rhine-Westphalia)
- Armenia (which hosts one of the largest Yazidi populations outside of Iraq, complete with their own schools, temples, and cultural media)
- Georgia and the Caucasus region (where a longstanding Yazidi presence has existed since before 2014)
- The United States and Canada (notably in states like Nebraska, Tennessee, and the province of Ontario)
- Australia, where small yet growing Yazidi communities have emerged, particularly in Toowoomba (Queensland), Wagga Wagga, Coffs Harbour, and Armidale (New South Wales), aided by resettlement initiatives.

In all these locations, Yazidis have adapted while maintaining a strong sense of collective identity. Many have established cultural associations, constructed new temples, and engaged in national multicultural events, contributing to and embracing the societies that welcomed them.

Advocacy and global recognition:

The Yazidi diaspora has emerged as a significant voice for international human rights. Survivors and community leaders have successfully drawn global attention to the genocide, demanding justice, accountability, and acknowledgment of the ongoing suffering. Nadia Murad, a survivor and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, has become a prominent symbol of Yazidi resilience. As mentioned, she co-founded Nadia's Initiative, which aims to rebuild Sinjar and provide support to survivors of sexual violence.

Yazidi organisations throughout Europe and North America actively campaign for justice mechanisms, reparations, and education on genocide prevention, thereby influencing international policy discussions regarding gender, conflict, and minority rights. Additionally, diaspora networks have played a crucial role in documenting survivor

testimonies, aiding legal cases, and fostering cultural preservation through various forms of art, film, and education.

Preserving culture abroad:

For numerous Yazidis living abroad, the preservation of their culture represents both an individual and a community mission. Community centres, youth organisations, and cultural festivals honour Yazidi music, the Ezidiki language, and their faith traditions, ensuring these elements are transmitted to younger generations born in abroad. Places of worship like the Qele Mira Temple in Armenia, along with newly established shrines in other recent countries, act as spiritual foundations.

Meanwhile, community initiatives aim to educate about Yazidi history in educational institutions and public venues. These efforts are not merely expressions of cultural continuity; they also embody resilience and pride.

Challenges and future outlook:

Despite these efforts, numerous challenges remain.

- Thousands of Yazidis continue to be displaced in Iraq, still lacking homes and justice.
- Survivors face ongoing struggles with unresolved trauma and uncertainty regarding missing family members.
- In diaspora, the process of cultural adaptation can sometimes evoke fears of assimilation or the loss of traditional practices.

Nevertheless, the Yazidi community consistently showcases remarkable resilience. The younger generation, especially women, are stepping up as leaders, educators, and advocates, merging tradition with contemporary human rights activism. Their voices, grounded in survival and dignity, serve as a reminder to the world that the Yazidi narrative encompasses not only tragedy but also hope, renewal, and an unwavering pursuit for justice.

II. The International Context – post 2014:

The genocide of 2014 brought the Yazidi community to the forefront of global human rights issues. However, despite widespread condemnation of ISIS's actions, the international response has been inconsistent, slow, and remains incomplete in many areas.

International recognition of Genocide:

An increasing number of governments and institutions have formally recognised that ISIS perpetrated genocide against the Yazidis, including:

- The United Nations (Independent International Commission of Inquiry, 2016)

- The European Parliament, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and others.

This acknowledgment is significant, both legally and symbolically, as genocide invokes state responsibilities under international law to prevent, punish, and offer reparations. However, mere recognition has not guaranteed justice.

Justice & accountability efforts:

Despite the international recognition of the genocide, the pursuit of justice for Yazidi survivors has been slow. Most ISIS members accountable for the genocide are only charged with terrorism offenses in Iraq, as the Iraqi domestic legal system currently does not include crimes such as genocide or crimes against humanity. Consequently, the specific inhumane acts of violence directed at Yazidis, particularly sexual slavery, are frequently overlooked or ignored in legal proceedings. Some advancements have been made abroad, especially in Germany, where courts have applied universal jurisdiction to convict ISIS members for genocide against Yazidis. The United Nations investigative team (UNITAD) is actively collecting crucial evidence from mass graves and survivor testimonies to aid in future prosecutions and trials. Nevertheless, many perpetrators remain unpunished, and countless Yazidi families continue to await truth, accountability, and justice.

III. Human Rights themes and lessons:

This particular section highlights the essential human rights themes derived from the Yazidi experience, making it relevant for educators, policy organisations, and future advocacy.

→ Genocide prevention is an ongoing responsibility

The Yazidi people has suffered 74 genocides throughout their history, indicating that early warning signs have been repeatedly ignored. It is imperative for the world to move from reaction to protection, ensuring that the minorities are defended long before any potential violence.

→ Gender-based violence must be recognised as a weapon of genocide

ISIS targeted Yazidi women and girls with:

- Sexual slavery
- Forced conversion
- Forced reproduction
- Trafficking

This was not incidental damage, but a calculated effort to dismantle the community's social fabric and structure. Global reactions to genocide must take into account the gender-specific aspects of these atrocities.

→ **Indigenous and minority rights need stronger domestic & international protection**

Yazidis are the Indigenous people of the Mesopotamian region, but they have historically faced political marginalisation. Their case illustrates how exclusion, discrimination, and misrepresentation of their faith can increase the risk of mass atrocities.

→ **Refugee rights and safe resettlement are human rights essentials**

For many Yazidis, their displacement continues to be uncertain. Their circumstances highlight the necessity for reliable resettlement options, availability of education and healthcare, and culturally appropriate integration assistance. Every displaced individual who deserves the right to dignity and a future.

→ **Justice must include truth, memory and healing**

Justice is more than just about courts or judicial systems, it involves truth-telling, return of missing individuals, reparations, memorialisation, and opportunities to restore cultural life. Upholding these rights is key for genocide recovery.

Why this matters for Human Rights Education?

The Yazidi cause teaches powerful lessons:

- Genocide is preventable
- Discrimination has the potential to escalate into mass violence.
- It is important to place survivors at the forefront of advocacy.
- International law is only as strong as the action that follows.

For students and human rights advocates, the experience of the Yazidis serves as a powerful reminder that silence and inaction enable atrocities; whereas awareness, acknowledgment, and solidarity can protect lives and cultural heritage.

IV. Conclusion:

The Yazidi people are one of the world's oldest and most durable Indigenous religious communities, their identity having survived centuries of collective trauma and regeneration. The 2014 genocide by ISIS, which is recognised as the 74th genocide against the Yazidi people, revealed the extraordinary vulnerability of a minority targeted purely for its faith. Despite exile, displacement, and attempts to wipe out their existence, Yazidis continue to

demonstrate incredible strength by conserving their traditions, protecting their sacred sites, and nurturing the Ezidiki language.

While the international community has begun to acknowledge the horrors done, awareness alone cannot repair lives. Thousands remain missing, survivors continue to suffer severe psychological, social, and economic consequences, and Sinjar's future remains uncertain. Justice, responsibility, and the safe return of Yazidi homelands are more than just legal requirements; they are ethical obligations.

To ensure an improved tomorrow for the Yazidi people, global solidarity, survivor-centered support, and investment in Yazidi-led recovery and cultural revitalisation are required. The Yazidi story must not be remembered solely for its genocide, but also for their acts of bravery, spiritual endurance, and an unwavering desire for dignity and self-determination. Their future must be protected, not as a form of charity, but as an essential commitment to human rights and humanity itself.

Glossary of key terms:

Diaspora - A population that has been forced to leave or scatter from its native country while maintaining cultural and community connections.

Ezidiki – The Yazidi language that recently has been formally recognised and acknowledged by many Yazidis as the distinct language, historically considered to be a variant of Kurdish.

Genocide – Defined under international law as any acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, as outlined in the 1948 Genocide Convention.

ISIS/ISIL/Da'esh – a violent extremist group that first appeared in Syria and Iraq and is well-known for its attempts to impose strict theocratic authority, mass crimes, and terror campaigns. The name "Da'esh" is commonly used in the region because it undermines the group's legitimacy and is disliked by its members.

Lalish – The most sacred place for the Yazidis, situated in northern Iraq, and it is visited each year for significant religious ceremonies.

Melek Taus – The "Peacock Angel" is the primary divine entity in Yazidi faith, symbolising mercy, light, and spiritual leadership.

Minority Rights – Legal protections established to protect the identity, culture, language, and religion of minority and ethnic groups.

Persecution – Systematic abuse and discrimination against individuals or groups due to their identity, beliefs, culture, or ethnicity.

Shingal (Sinjar) – A northern Iraqi region regarded as the historical homeland of the Yazidis; it was the location of the genocide and displacement that occurred in 2014.

UN Genocide Convention (1948) – The international treaty that legally defines genocide and obligates states to prevent and punish it.