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The ways of coping with post-war trauma of Yezidi refugee women in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This study shows the strategies for coping with the post-war trauma of Yezidi refugee women who escaped from the Sinjar genocide by ISIS in August 2014. The interviews that became the basis of this research were done only for the psychological support of the women staying at the Diyarbakir Refugee Camp in Turkey between January and March 2015. This research was shaped with aim of understanding the women, sharing their experiences, and being these women's voices, therefore the interviews given by Yezidi women were evaluated with grounded theory methodology. Coping strategies included gratitude for surviving, finding meaning for massacres, politization, being self-enclosed, mourning rituals and worship, strengthening women's solidarity, and showing solidarity with sexually attacked women through silence. War trauma reactions included mental unpreparedness, the sense of being betrayed, verbalization about the genocide (but not the sexual attacks), re-experiencing the trauma and mood changes.

Coping with post-war trauma of Yazidi refugee women in Turkey

Natural disasters, and other events that result in unexpected violence to the body's integrity and threats to life, to oneself or to close relatives, lead to psychological trauma due to the creation of helplessness and intense fear (APA, 2015). War is a man-made disaster which results in people being uprooted, or even exiled. In addition to these things, it affects survivors more severely than natural disasters (Pedersen, 2002; Tol et al., 2010). Humanity witnessed another brutal man-made disaster in August of 2014 in Iraq, targeting the ethnic and religious Yazidis. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is a terrorist organization that attacked Sinjar, where over 200,000 Yazidis were located in Iraqi Kurdistan. After the 'be Muslim or die' declaration of ISIS, the Yazidis had to abandon their residential districts within 2 h, leaving all of their possessions in the homes (Escaped, 2016). The military forces dependence on the Barzani¹ government had retreated from their positions in Sinjar with the purpose of defending themselves, so Yazidis were abandoned to their own fate. While the people with cars were able to escape to the Dahok region of Iraq, the ones without any vehicles had to go to Sinjar Mountain on foot, facing starvation and dehydration, to seek refuge in Dahok (Barber, 2014), or in Turkey (Bassano, 2016). Meanwhile, hundreds of People's Defense Units (YPG)² came to Sinjar in order to help the Yazidis, even though they were too

late to prevent the massacre. Almost 5000 Yazidis who could not escape from Sinjar were killed in only 5 days, between August 3rd and 8th of 2014, and approximately 5000–7000 Yazidi women were taken into slavery by ISIS (Escaped, 2016). YPG attempted to save the remaining Yazidis who got lost on the Sinjar Mountains and helped them cross the border into Turkey by means of opening a corridor through the mountains toward Rojava in northern Syria (Bassano, 2016). Then, refugee camps in Turkey were built quickly by Kurdish Municipalities of People's Democratic Party (HDP)³ by their own efforts, one of them located in Mardin and the other was in Diyarbakir. Like the researcher of this article, a lot of volunteer activists worked at refugee camps to support the refugees. It is a well-known fact that people who are forced to leave their homeland suffer from severe traumatic experiences due not only to war, but also from re-traumatization caused by poor living conditions after war in the country where they find refuge (Brune et al., 2002). Because these camps were built by the efforts of only municipalities without being subsidized by the government, their opportunities were highly limited. In order to supply minimum living standards, such as shelter, food, clothing, and primary medical care, local people shared their own food, local markets contributed food, feminine, and baby care products, local pharmacies supplied medicine, and private hospitals supplied health care. As well, a small amount of money was transferred from the salaries of all employees who voluntarily

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¹ Masoud Barzani (16 August 1946) is an Iraqi Kurdish politician who has been President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region since 2005. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masoud_Barzani.

² People's Defense Units of free Rojava region of Syria. <http://ypgrojava.com/en/>.

³ Kurdish party at Turkish parliament. <http://www.hdp.org.tr/en>.

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extended their work hours for the camp's needs. Therefore, Yazidis had to endure the limitations of their living conditions in the refugee camps in addition to the war trauma. Unfortunately, these Yazidi camps were closed in January 2017 by the Turkish government, under the state of emergency after the failed coup attempt, and Yazidis were forced to uproot again (Al-Monitor, 2017). This was not the first time they had been uprooted in their history (Suvvari, 2004). To understand why Yazidis have been targeted over hundreds of years by other ethnic and religious communities is crucial to comprehend their current situation from a historical and ethnographical perspective.

Being a Yazidi in history

Yazidis are a Kurdish ethnic group living in Northern Iraq, Armenia, Syria, Southeastern Turkey, Azerbaijan (Suvvari, 2003), the Caucasus (Izady, 2015), and since the 1990s, in Germany as a result of migration (Nicolaus, 2014). Although it is impossible to give a clear number because of their dispersed settlement, the Yazidi population is roughly estimated to be about between 500,000 (Bassano, 2016), and 650,000 (Acikyildiz, 2010). Currently, they constitute less than 5% of the Kurdish population (Izady, 2015, p.153). Their language is Kurdish and their religion is Yazidism—their name comes from 'Yazdan', meaning pure, merciful, and generous God, and 'izid' means angel. Yazidis believe in a god; they are monotheistic, and have been influenced by Islamic Sufism due to the land they have historically settled in. However, their belief system is very complicated and shows influence from many sources including ancient Zoroastrianism (Nicolaus, 2014; Suvvari, 2009). Endogamy (marriage within the community) is highly protected in their communities and exogamy is punished as anathema because they consider themselves as a chosen people (Suvvari, 2005). Also, they have a strict caste system composed of secular individuals, clergy, and executive classes; exogamy is allowed neither among other ethnic groups without Yazidi origin, nor between their own castes (Suvvari, 2005). So, it can be said that Yazidism is not only a belief system among the community, but is also identity forming because of its ethno-religious character; this belief does not permit religious conversion to join them; one must be born into the Yazidi community (Suvvari, 2003).

All of these restrictions and self-enclosing constructions mentioned above may have contributed to other societies perceiving Yazidis as an aberrant secret sect (Nicolaus, 2012). Thus, a lot of myths have snowballed, feeding hate and discrimination by labeling them as 'heretics'; the stories which deliberately distorted their culture were largely inaccurate and fictitious, such as those mentioned by renowned Turkish traveler of the seventeenth century, Awlia Chalabi, "*Their women give birth after full year of gestation...and their sons are beardless to age ten and on reaching this age he looks as though he is twenty years old,*" or as stated by Crowfoot, a 20th century anthropologist, "*Yazidis eat white rats and cook food with the blood of sacrificed animals*" (Ahmed, 1973: p.37). Hate speech due to the fabrications against Yazidis even today continues among other groups. In the broad fieldwork which was conducted with Yazidis in southeastern Turkey, Suvvari (2004) states that he was warned by Muslim peasants not to go to the Yazidi villages because of the probability of being slaughtered. This is reflected in an old idiom: "*Eat your dinner in a Yazidi house because they are cooking well and clean, but sleep in a Christian house because we do not know what Yazidis do when you are sleeping*" (p.362). All these descriptions and the countless others not mentioned here serve to dehumanize the ethnic group. Dehumanization can be counted as the worst form of hate because it allows others to torture or massacre to a targeted group without a sense of guilt by the offenders. If they are not human, torturing, slaughtering, or raping them is not contrary to universal moral values. Similarly, in the pages of ISIS, written in English, captured Yazidi women are talked about as "*devil worshippers...weak-minded and weak-hearted*" (Melchior, 2014).

Unfortunately, because of incessant misinterpretation, Yazidis have been called 'Satan worshippers' and 'heretics' throughout their history

and targeted for countless genocides by communities with Arabic, Mongol, Turkish, even Kurdish ethnicities, with Muslim and Christian beliefs (Nicolaus, 2012; Suvvari, 2003). About 73 massacres have been initiated for religious and partly political reasons; the first recorded massacre took place in 1254. The bloodiest massacre, in the Ottoman Empire, took place in 1832 led by Bedir Khan, the Muslim Kurdish prince of Bothan, who attempted compulsory conversion to Islam and seized power over the Kurdish provinces (Suvvari, 2008). This could be the reason why they do not define themselves as Kurdish, but they view themselves as an independent ethnic group apart from the Kurds, even though they have the same ethnic and geographical roots (Izady, 2015, p.157).

However, in 1991, the Kurdish Regional Government was established in Northern Iraq and as depicted in detail by Acikyildiz (2010), Yazidis attained a relatively peaceful life for the first time in their history by integrating into Kurdish society and supporting Kurdish parties. Their cultural activities were subsidized by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the first official cultural center for Yazidis was established in 1993 in Dohuk. After overturning the regime of Saddam Hussein, like other Kurds of Iraq, Yazidis gave a boost to the coalition forces against him, but they did not benefit from equal rights as much as Muslims of the region did. This is because their region (Sinjar) was left outside of the Kurdish Autonomous Region (KAR), since 2004, they have faced a lot of attacks, including discrimination, killings, and kidnappings from fanatical Muslims, including Al-Qaeda, in their unprotected region (there was no military support because they were not included in the KAR). The attack of ISIS in 2014 was the ugliest part of this hatred and they had to once again uproot themselves from their homelands. So, it might be said that the reasons behind the Yazidi massacres were not only religious but also political and economic. Whenever Yazidis became a force politically in their region by owning property, collaborating with the other forces, or refusing to be part of the army of their territory, massacres followed their resistance.

As mentioned by Izady (2015, p.157), by the 13th and 14th centuries, Yazidis had expanded their domain by converting many Muslims and Christians to their faith and had also acquired a good deal of political and military power. In this period, the emirs of the Jazira region were Yazidis, one of the Yazidi emirs was even in charge of Damascus. By 1596, seven of the 30 major tribal confederacies were fully Yazidi. During the last days of the Ottoman Empire, authorities failed to recruit Yazidis into the Ottoman army. Consequently, in 1872, the two sides (Yazidis and the Ottoman Empire) signed an agreement to exempt the Yazidis from military service. Unfortunately, this eventually led the authorities to carry out massacres on the Yazidi people. These massacres resulted in the migration of Ottoman Yazidis into the Russian territories in Caucasus. In 1859, the Ottoman Land Registration Law stated that Yazidi sheiks, who were the primary property owners, could maintain their land only by conversion to Islam—another mark against Yazidis. In the end, twenty major massacres were executed against Yazidis between 1640 and 1910, so that their number decreased from 200,000 to 60,000 between 1858 and 1938. A similar thing happened prior to the last Yazidi massacre following the 1991 Gulf War with the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government, and the Arab Spring. These two events made Kurds a significant force in the Middle East, and the regional countries could no longer ignore the power of Kurdish population, these events forced the major foreign powers to reconsider their policies (Danilovich, 2017, p.27). Acikyildiz (2010) mentioned that during these developments, Yazidis chose to cooperate with other Kurdish entities and become a political subject in the region again. Besides the political aspects of the massacres, the motivations of hegemony also have economic reasons. For instance, ISIS gives non-Muslims three options: conversion to Islam, payment of the *jizya* (tax), or death (Alexander & Alexander, 2015, p.54). The war is a financial source for the fighters of ISIS, who generally come from Tunisia and earn \$1500 dollars a month as mercenaries (Danilovich, 2017, p.114). Other financial sources for fighters include the sex slave markets, and

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