WAR AND FAITH

– COPING STRATEGIES AMONG CHRISTIANS SURVIVING ISIS IN NORTHERN IRAQ

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ABSTRACT

During the last decades, the Christian population of Iraq is estimated to have decreased from about 1.5 million people to about 120,000. The historical examples of religious persecution are plenty, and in the last few years, the world again witnessed brutal violence against religious minorities, this time committed by the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). By examining the narrative of the survivors of the persecution and violence, insight can be gained into what becomes meaningful for a person in the darkest situation of violence and threats, and how the available resources can be useful to cope with the situation in a way that makes sense of evil.

Through an ethnographic approach, the inner lives of eight Christians from northern Iraq are explored in this thesis. Their personal stories demonstrate how a sense of coherence can be reached through being part of something greater than oneself; activism, nationalism, and most of all; religious faith, practice, and identity.

KEYWORDS

Strategies, survival, resilience, resistance, health, religion, faith, identity, peace, altruism, activism, Christianity, Assyrian, Chaldean, Syriac, sense of coherence, coping, northern Iraq, Mosul, Nineveh, Erbil, war, genocide, terrorism, ISIS, extremism, nationalism

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to all the people affected by ISIS and other actors in the war in Iraq. May the future from today and onwards be brighter.
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Beatrice Eriksson

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the personal experiences of extreme violence and persecution and to understand how victims of war confront, process, and make sense of the brutality that they have witnessed and endured. By positioning the narrative in the center of eight Christians from northern Iraq who have survived the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), I will address the following key questions: How can one manage extreme violence and comprehend horrific experiences? In what way do religious belonging and religious belief affect how to get through war? How does faith shape, change and affects one's life in a situation of despair? In this thesis I aim to understand how existential, ethical, and religious questions can be understood in relation to severe violence, in the context of Northern Iraq after the genocides conducted by the so-called Islamic State (the state formation and the groups behind it were previously under varying names, Daesh, ISIS, IS, ISIL, in this essay referred by the abbreviation ISIS).

Aim and research question

This thesis begins with an inquiry toward how individuals can endure extreme brutality, particularly through a religious perspective, looking into how a war situation can affect people's ways of relating to their personal religious faith and if it can be part of surviving and recovering. I expect that the war situation might affect one in a way that religion and faith become extra significant: a lifeline to hold on to, to make one keep struggling, to keep on trying to survive, that one's faith has increased, that one is feeling closer to God than before the crisis, and that the faith can help one handle the difficult situation and find meaning despite the violence.

It is just as possible that a result from being a victim of war, or of losing something due to war, can lead to faith being lost or pushed aside. Maybe one would think that if there is a God,
would Gods creations have to go through all this? And why would God not listen to the prayers about protection and peace?

There is also the possibility that the war situation doesn’t affect one’s faith or identification regarding religion, in either direction. For some people, that would mean that they still don’t identify themselves as religious and still don’t consider themselves to have faith, just as before the war. For others, it would mean that the faith is there, or that they still connect to their religious identity and group, just as usual.

For each of the interviewees, the dialogue explored their process of facing the harshness of the world, confronting horror, and finding security. While I hypothesize around the role of religion, the questions were open to the full range of what the interviewees may say, which can be different ways of handling the situation and finding distractions that can ease the pain. Most likely there are different aspects of life and different tools to be used that can contribute to managing a difficult situation, and that other factors rather than religious faith and religious belonging can be helpful to cope.

The ultimate goal of this writing is to capture a glimpse of insight into what becomes meaningful for a person in the darkest situation of violence and threats, and how resources available can be used to handle the situation in a way that makes sense of evil.

The main research question, therefore, is: **What strategies are being used to cope with extreme threats and violence?**

This writing revolves around a case study of Christians in Iraq, more particularly the Assyrian, Syriac, and Chaldean communities in northern Iraq. All interviewees lost something or someone in the war with ISIS or were affected by this war in some sense. Most of them used to live in the Nineveh / Mosul area, but because of threats and persecution, they had to flee and are now located in Erbil, Iraq. The findings are not intended to be representative of all survivors, rather it seeks to provide an intimate and detailed window into the experience a few individuals’ ways of thinking, making sense of their world, and acting in it.
BACKGROUND

In the Middle East today, many religious groups, including Christians, are exposed to discrimination, kidnapping, displacement, and even fatal violence, as well as the destruction of property, churches and Christian institutions. Social agitation creates separation between different ethnic and religious groups, where minorities often are the most vulnerable. There are no completely reliable statistics concerning how many Christians are still living in the Middle Eastern region, and the figures depend on how statistics are being used, in terms of how religious belonging and identity is perceived or officially registered. An article from Der Spiegel (2007) describes it as a Christian exodus from the Middle East, which has been extended over period of time, with an ever-growing number of Christians now living in diaspora in Western countries (El Ahl, et al, 2007). According to this article, the percentage of the Christian population in some of the Middle Eastern countries; Lebanon about 40 %, Egypt and Syria less than 10 %, and Jordan and Iraq around 2-4 % of the total population. Christians continue to emigrate from areas where they have been present for more than 2,000 years, recently due to the atrocities in Iraq and Syria after 2011.

In a critical opinion post in The Jordan Times (2016), James J. Zogby comments on the situation for Christians in the Levant and the grave challenges that they are facing. Zogby explains that the situation for Christians in Iraq and Syria have been affected by the interventions of the West, who in turn have either ignored or misunderstood the situation for the Christian group. Protecting the Christians, or even acknowledging their existence, has only been a concern of policymakers or advocacy groups when it fit their accepted narratives or political agendas for the region. “In the lead up to the US invasion of Iraq, no one in Washington even considered what the impact of the war might be on that country’s substantial though vulnerable Christian community” (ibid). Zogby claims that both political and religious leaders from for example the U.S. have neglected or ignored the situation for the Christians in Iraq, meanwhile the country is cracking down due to sectarian conflict. For example, The U.S. didn’t speak up while Christians were forced into exile, which led to the decline of Christians in Iraq. Zogby means that the Christians in Iraq are more than refugees or victims of religious extremism, that they are “communities of long-standing that have been an integral part of the development of the culture and social fabric of the Levant. Their survival is critical to that region” (ibid).
It is a dark picture that is being drawn to describe both the history and the current living situation for Christians in the Middle East, with oppression and threats for their existence coming from different directions. So how can this ethno-religious group survive and what is important for them to cope?
A HISTORICAL OUTLOOK

For many religious people, their faith in God has a higher value than their own safety and security. One example of this is the Syriac Orthodox Archbishop Nicodemus Daoud Sharaf, the last Christian leader to leave Mosul before it the ISIS occupation. In August 2017, he was interviewed in *The Huffington Post* where he was being described as a person who has “cried out his frustration in front of the world’s cameras while accusing the UN and the international community for being corrupt and completely powerless to act” (Kino, 2017). Archbishop Sharaf, who is originally from Mosul, was working in Australia when he was ordered back to serve in his native city. He describes the transition “like flying from serenity to hell”, referring to Mosul as a place of terrorism and persecution where several priests, monks, nuns, and bishops had been killed, where churches had been bombed and where he saw children using a human skull as a toy to play with. Archbishop Sharaf’s belief in divine calling had the upper hand over the decision and even though he did not have any plans of leaving his life in Australia, he says he “didn’t hesitate for a second. God wanted me there, so I went” (ibid). In this example faith, in terms of the perception of a calling from God, was for the Archbishop the most important guidance to turn to, to handle the extreme brutalities occurring in Iraq.

Another example of the importance of religious faith and identity, and how it has been used as a coping mechanism in the brutalities of ISIS is the Chaldean-Catholic Church that has been severely affected by ISIS’ terror in northern Iraq and eastern Syria. Church members have been kidnapped, raped, killed and homes have been plundered (Svenska Kyrkan, 2017). The church had one of its strongholds in Mosul, Iraq. After the US invasion of Iraq 2003 the terror towards the church and its members became brutal. St. Paul's Cathedral in Mosul was damaged in a bomb attack in 2004, the priest Ragheed Aziz Ganni, as well as several deacons, were murdered in 2007 after the mass in the Holy Spirit Church in Mosul and the archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho by Mosul was kidnapped in 2008 and after a few weeks his dead body was found outside the city (ibid). His successor, archbishop Emil Shimoun Nona, was forced to leave the area in 2014 when the Islamic State conquered Mosul. Archbishop Nona stated:

“For us the faith is everything. It is our life, our identity, our history and our way of life. We can’t separate ourselves from our faith in any way...Our faith, which has been in this land for more than 2,000 years, cannot come to an end so easily” (Ruiz, 2015). He speaks with the clarity that Christians will have to abandon Iraq for good in order to save their lives and escape persecution: “When something like this happens, we in the East thank God for
everything. Because we know well that man is the cause of this problem, not God. In this situation, the existence of God is more necessary than ever, the presence of God is more powerful...When there is such brutal violence on the part of man, the presence of God is even stronger because He is good. We believe even more because it is more necessary than ever to believe amidst a situation as extreme as this one. The question of where God is in this persecution is a question only you in the West pose. In the East, we never ask that question. For us, faith is enmeshed with our identity and the faith cannot be separated from our identity” (ibid).

Archbishop Nona’s analysis of understanding regarding the importance of religious faith can thus be interpreted through different perspectives depending on cultural and religious background. In this sense, it can be relevant to keep in mind that I as an author comes from a Western background, while the interviewees come from the East.

**Iraq and the decreasing numbers of Christians**

The city Mosul in northern Iraq by the river Tigris and beside the ancient remains of Nineveh in Mesopotamia may be an example of what has happened at the beginning of the 21st century in Iraq. Among the churches, there were the Assyrian Church of the East, the Chaldean-Catholic Church, and the Syrian Orthodox Church. In total, the Christian population of Mosul may have reached 60,000 people (Svenska Kyrkan, 2017). At the same time, Christians with financial opportunities started to leave Iraq due to Saddam Hussein's regime and the blockade established against Iraq, and urbanization began among Christians from rural areas that moved into the city (ibid).

With the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the safety of Christians decreased, as Christians were attacked in different ways including targeting by rebel groups. Christians were kidnapped in order for rebel groups to demand ransom to make a profit, and houses owned by Christians were taken by Islamic groups. After the U.S. invasion, it could be stated that Christians in Iraq were struck by mayhem and the increase of sectarian tensions and violence that followed has proven to be devastating for the Christian group in Iraq (America Magazine, 2011). Assyrians were the first group that was targeted, because of their religion. Since they are Christians, they were considered to be allied with the Americans and therefore considered as occupiers and infidels and had to be killed and pushed away. At the time when Saddam Hussein in 2003 was overthrown, 54 churches had been bombed, and that 905 Christians had been killed. A majority
of the Christians had left and less than 500,000 in Iraq (ibid). Christians all over Iraq were affected. In 2008, Islamic extreme violent groups exerted threats and committed murders of Christians in Mosul, hence 12,000 Christians left the city (Svenska Kyrkan, 2017). Since then, Mosul's Christian population has been gradually reduced to a few thousand in 2014, due to Christians leaving Mosul because of security reasons in relation to armed conflict and strife between different rebel groups and against government forces (ibid).

Mosul and Nineveh under the atrocities of the Islamic State

In the summer of 2014, ISIS started its conquest of the Nineveh province in Iraq. After three days Mosul was defeated, and an estimated 500,000 people fled. ISIS set an ultimatum to the Christians in Mosul. The options offered were to convert to Islam, enter into a dhimmi contract (which means that Christians in Muslim areas get rights and protection of Muslim supremacy including starting to pay special tax called jizya), or to be killed (Doyle, et al. 2018). For the Yazidi population, this was not an option since they were not "people of the book". Yazidi men were slaughtered, and Yazidi women were kidnapped and taken to be slaves that would be raped and tortured. Later these persecutions and killings of Christians, Yazidis, and other groups were recognized as genocide by the European Parliament, the U.S. Congress and the British Parliament (Official Journal of the European Union, 2016).

ISIS is a group that is known for ethnic cleansing and terrorism, denoted a militia, an unacknowledged state formation within Iraq and Syria, and an ideology that represents an extreme Salafi-Jihadist and ultra-conservative Wahhabism interpretation of Sunni Islam (al-Ibrahim, 2014). ISIS identifies adherents of other religions and other branches of Islam as infidels and justifies the use of violence against them, such as military attacks, persecutions, kidnappings, torture, and executions of civilians. In June 2014, the organization proclaimed the Islamic State as the new caliphate and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its caliph. ISIS then proclaimed a worldwide caliphate claiming religious and political power over all Muslims, which was rejected by Muslim political and religious leaders worldwide. In spring 2015, ISIS reached its military culmination. They then controlled a geographical area in Iraq and Syria, almost as large as the United Kingdom, with a population of about 8 million people (Expo, 2019).

To get a glimpse of insight of the extreme violence the ISIS terrorists pursued, the stories from “Jamila” can contribute with examples. In an interview with the Swedish journalist Niklas Orrenius (2019), this Yazidi woman who was kidnapped and tortured by ISIS testifies of the
severe atrocities performed in Mosul. She tells the reporter about repeatedly being sold, as if she was a trade object, and how she got raped by multiple men, physically and mentally abused, and deprived of any thinkable most basic need. Her family members were executed even though they converted to Islam, and the worst memory she has from her time in captivity is what happened to a woman that she shared cell with while being in kidnapped by ISIS in Mosul, here described in the article by Orrenius:

“The mother was locked up with Jamila. She had a baby that was nine months old. The IS terrorists barely gave the Yazidi women any food, except a little bread that was often moldy. “There was no milk for the mother to breastfeed her baby, and the child screamed and screamed. The mother knew Arabic and quarreled with the prison guards. She said her son was crying for hunger because they didn't give us food”. One day the ISIS men came and tore the baby away from her. They were gone for two hours, says Jamila. “Then they came with a big dish of meat and rice and said, "Here is your son. We have cooked him for you". They told her "you said you were hungry". So far in the story, Jamila yells of despair. “They had cut up her baby and ... I will never forget it. Who can accept such a thing? Who can endure such a thing?” ...The mother who was served her own child on a dish of rice became mad with grief, says Jamila. “She took the pieces of meat from the dish, lifted them in her arms and pressed them to her breast. She just screamed”. Was it really meat from her child, or was it just as the ISIS men said to torment the woman? “It was her child. The head lay on the dish, they had not done anything with it. They had cooked the other parts of the baby” (my translation).

Although I have been following the terrible developments in Iraq and Syria, I was shocked when I read "Jamila's" testimony. It is the most serious violence against an individual I have ever heard about. It's hard to even imagine such atrocities. Through "Jamila's" story, I wonder what it does to a human being's understanding of humanity and God by being the victim of such torture.

In the summer of 2014, ISIS took down the cross from St. Ephrem Cathedral and destroyed a statue of Holy Mary in Mosul. Several churches and monasteries were attacked and when the cross was removed from the church and replaced with the ISIS' flag, which among the remaining Christians was perceived as a clear signal for them to flee (Svenska Kyrkan, 2017). They tried to find refuge in cities and villages that still had a Christian population, as in Kurdish controlled areas like Hamdaniya and Erbil. Louis Sako, formerly a priest in Mosul, Archbishop in Kirkuk and patriarch of the Chaldean-Catholic Church based in Baghdad said: "For the first
time in Iraq's history is now Mosul emptied of Christians” (BBC News, 2014). An estimated number of 120,000 Christians became internally displaced in the north of Iraq and Kurdistan. Many Christian refugees left Iraq; others fled to Baghdad where most Christians today are displaced. Once in safe areas, the refugees seek to build up some form of new life, often with the help of the different churches.

The persecution of Christians and the Assyrian community

The persecution of Christians in the Middle East is not a new phenomenon. Already, in the New Testament, this is a recurring theme. A few examples from the Bible comes from; Luke 2:22: “Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man”, Acts 8:1: “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria”, and in the Book of Revelation 20:4-6: “I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.” (The Bible, New International Version).

These verses are usually interpreted to be a message to persecuted Christians to let them know that God is aware of their suffering, and an encouragement to endure since they have eternal life. These are a few of the many examples that describe the exposure of threats that followers of Jesus had to endure already in the earliest time of the Christian church. The example of Jesus himself, being crucified is one of the most significant acts of violence in the New Testament, an extremely painful and humiliating method that ISIS also used during the war.

The historical examples are many. Of course, Christians are not the only group facing persecution in Iraq. For example, the Yazidi population is one among other groups that have experienced brutal violations of their human rights and deserve attention and protection. In this thesis, I have chosen to focus on the abuses perpetrated against Christians. In a human rights
report from the Assyrian Confederation of Europe that was published in 2018, it is stated that “Assyrians are one of the most consistently persecuted communities in Iraq and the wider Middle East” (Doyle, et al. 2018, p 2). Assyrians have struggled for survival through repeated massacres for centuries, and have regularly been subjected to violence, cultural suppression and forced displacement. Sefo (or Seyfo) is the term used for the 1915 Ottoman genocide when, among other ethnic groups, an estimation of 750,000 Christian Assyrians living in their ancestral homelands, which today is covered by the nations of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, where killed (Assyrian Holocaust).

Other examples of religious persecution of Assyrians are the horrific Similie Massacre that took place in 1933, the aftermath of the U.S. invasion in 2003 that once again made Assyrians a target for extreme violence, and with ISIS progression in 2014 extreme brutalities have been perpetrated against the Assyrian community in Iraq. ISIS did not only torture and kill human beings, but also attempted to demolish the cultural and historical heritage from the Assyrian community, for example destroying Assyrian artifacts and bulldozing the ancient city Nimrud (Doyle, et al. 2018). The majority of the Assyrian community that is still remaining in the Middle East can be found in Iraq. Depending on the church denomination belonging, some ethnic Assyrians identify themselves as Syriacs or Chaldeans. However, some Syriacs or Chaldeans would not identify themselves as Assyrian. In this thesis when I use the term Christian, I include people from different denominations including Assyrians, Syriacs and Chaldeans, which can belong to the five different Eastern churches; the Ancient Church of the East, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, and the Syriac Orthodox Church. Most of the Assyrians that currently remain in Iraq below to the Chaldean and Syriac churches (ibid). The Nineveh Plain, located in between the Kurdish region of Iraq and the Mosul area, is considered to be the original Assyrian homeland. This is also the area where most Assyrians in Iraq are located. There are different figures regarding how many Christians that was living in Iraq before 2003 compared to now, but out of an estimated 1.5 million Christians that was living in Iraq in 2003, only 120,000 are currently remaining in Iraq, which is a decline of more than 90% within one generation (Aid to the church in need, 2019). According to the Assyrian Confederation of Europe, Assyrian communities are being marginalized and disenfranchised at an increasing rate; “this is remarkably tragic in Iraq, where Christianity has long been a vital aspect of Iraqi culture and history and has been practiced by Assyrians for millennia. If Assyrians are to be wiped out in Iraq, it will mean the end of this ancient and venerated practice in the country.” (Doyle, et al. 2018, p 10).
METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to White (2002), both qualitative and quantitative methods have their place in social analysis and there is no reason to value which one of the methods that are better than the other. For a researcher, the qualitative approach is preferred if one “seeks to understand the informant from his or her personal perspective and frame of reference and seek to acquire as complete a picture as possible of the situation of the informant” (Olsson, 2007, p.64, my translation). To come close to stories of resistance towards violence, I chose a qualitative approach that has the main focus on semi-structured interviews with a few interviewees to get detailed information about their experiences, strategies, and feelings, and combined it with observations on the field.

Alvesson & Sköldberg note: “Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible...Qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p 8-9).

Interviewing survivors of a genocide gave me an intimate perspective on how they have made sense of their experiences. Even if I had prepared key questions that I wanted to hear answered, I chose to carry out semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and room for unexpected follow-up questions. With this method, the data collection for the thesis became flexible in the sense that each interview had a starting point, but also an openness to see where the data collection would go letting the interviewees guide me into the next question.

The ethnographic method of result and analysis chapter is inspired by Kirin Narayan who encourages the writer to create something bigger than just written words; “Writing offers the chance to cultivate an attentiveness to life itself, and to enhance perceptions with the precision of words.” (2012, p xi). Narayan means that a text becomes more interesting when it is divided into different sections; “Writers of creative nonfiction distinguish between vivid, sensual scenes, complete with details, description, and dialogue, and summaries that afford more general overviews.” and when quotes are being used; “Locate a quote from another person on the issue you’re writing about and experiment with working just a line or two into an introduction.” (2012, p 9, 73). This research included eight in-depth interviews, six of which required the assistance of an interpreter. Long quotes from the interviewees are being used to
portrait the essence of their stories. All interviews were recorded in order to ensure accurate transcription.

The role of the researcher

A methodical issue that Narayan highlights is the importance of deciding why you want to write and the aim of telling a specific story. “All stories are told for some purpose. What is your purpose in choosing a particular story?” (2012, p 15). I am from Malmö, a city in Sweden with a multicultural and diverse population, with 186 different nationalities represented in a total population of 339 000 people (Malmö Stad, 2019). Around one third of the population of Malmö are born in another country, and including people with parents born in another country, that makes almost half of the population of Malmö (ibid). A majority of the people in Malmö that have their background in another country comes from the Middle Eastern region, and Iraqis are one of the biggest immigrant groups in Sweden.

When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, I was 16 years old. I remember staying up all night crying that day in March when President Bush declared that the U.S. was going to invade Iraq if Iraq didn’t acknowledge they had weapons of mass destruction. It was so obvious that this intervention would be harmful to so many people. Somehow, this was my first adult political awakening that put deep traces in me, motivating me to try to understand geopolitics in a better way. After that, Iraq as a country has captured my interest. During the same period of time, I made a new friend who had grown up in Iraq but moved to Sweden, which also got me interested in the living conditions for the inhabitants of Iraq.

When I, in 2014, watched the video recording of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declaring the caliphate of the Islamic State in al-Nuri mosque in Mosul, I remember chills went down my spine realizing this situation is terribly serious and offensive. The ISIS leader using God’s name in this context, which somehow also reminded me of how the U.S. President Bush started a war in God's name when invading in Iraq 2003. Already by that time I perceived it distasteful to politicize religion and use religious rhetoric as if that would legitimate violent actions with horrible consequences for a massive number of people during a long period of time.

Growing up partly in a religious environment, I have always had a personal interest in religion and faith, especially how it can be used to understand human behavior and how human behavior can be affected by their religious identity, belonging or faith. When ISIS used religion
as a tool for warfare, it made me interested to see if religion can be applied in terms of resistance towards evil in a war situation.

**Limitations**

A limitation of using qualitative research could be that the population to study will have to be rather small. This means that it would be difficult to get a wide view of the situation, and it wouldn’t be possible to generalize. Another disadvantage with choosing a qualitative approach could be that the research will not present hard data that can be structured in a way that quantitative research could have been. This research will not say anything about the Christian population surviving ISIS as such but can give an insight into the experiences of a few people identifying themselves as Christians who have survived ISIS. This thesis will be limited to only the few people I will interview and will not be representative of a larger population. It would later be interesting to do a larger and wider study that includes both quantitative and qualitative research on the same topic, to get a better view of the situation.

**Selection**

Through the Church of Sweden's connections to the ACT Alliance in Iraq, and through the Assyrian Federation of Sweden, I was connected to several persons in Erbil, who in turn connected me to others, of which I was able to meet eight interviewees for formal interviews. I also had informal conversations with church leaders, NGO staff, and people that I met during my stay in Erbil. The people I met came from different congregations, and groups within the Iraqi Christian community; from Orthodox or Catholic backgrounds, from backgrounds with self-identification to be both Assyrian, Syriacs and Chaldeans, from different socio-economic backgrounds, and from different generations. Most of them have their geographic background in the Nineveh / Mosul area, some of them had moved to Erbil before 2014, and some of them became displaced after the ISIS occupation. I didn’t specifically ask for interviewees that are active in church or has religious faith. I asked to be connected to people from the ethno-religious Christian community in Iraq, but as one of the interviewees said, “probably around 95 % of all Assyrians in Iraq have faith and/or are active in the church.”
Research ethics

The importance of making ethical considerations while making research cannot be emphasized enough. According to ALLEA European code of research ethics “Research is the quest for knowledge obtained through systematic study and thinking, observation and experimentation” (2017, p 3) and reliability, honesty, respect, and accountability are the principles of research integrity that good research practices are based on. There are four research-ethical principles within research pertaining to social science, formed by the Swedish Research Council: the demand for information, the demand for agreement, the demand for confidentiality and the demand for utilization. According to these principles, the researcher is to inform the people affected by the research of the aim of it (Vetenskapsrådet). With this in mind, I understood I had to be very considerate about how I approach the interviewees so that they will feel comfortable to say yes or no to be part of my study. As a researcher it is important to acknowledge sensitive aspects. The questions I was interested in asking could be perceived as intimate or private, so ethically the researcher should always let the interviewee know that he or she is the one to decide which questions to answer or not. Also, the interviewee should be informed about the option to cancel the interview at any time.

Another important ethical consideration is the anonymity of the interviewee. In my thesis, I will keep all interviewees anonymous and I have given them other names.

Even though there is a difference between working as a counselor and making interviews for a master thesis, I hope that my experiences from working eight years with psychosocial support and counseling (including support to victims of crimes and other kinds of social and existential problems, as well as meeting beneficiaries escaping from war and armed conflict), can be helpful in this context. Counseling can help people to change into active survivors rather than passive victims and can contribute to healing psychological wounds and rebuild social structures after an emergency or critical event (Unicef). This is the approach I wanted to have also during the interviews for conducting the data to this thesis, not with the aim of being a social worker or therapist but because this is the kind of question I am interested in hearing the answers to in relation to my research question.

I made sure that the interviewees were informed that I am a student from Sweden, coming to Erbil to write my thesis for the programme “Religion in Peace and Conflict”. In line with Narayan’s advice on being aware of the risk of offending or harming people you are writing about, as she writes: “Describing other people is a big challenge, whatever the form
you choose", I told them about the aim of my thesis. I carefully pointed out that I wasn't there to dig into dark experiences they wouldn't want to talk about, but that I was rather interested in learning more about, and trying to understand how they are coping with an extreme situation, and what strategies have been useful for them during and after the war (2012, p 46).

There are many questions related to religion and faith that I was curious to find out more about. At the same time, I knew I must be open to finding that religious belonging and faith might not have been an aspect that has been relevant to the interviewees at all. Maybe playing video games have been a way of processing the evil events, for example. Meeting the interviewees, I knew I had to be considerate not to assume anything, but to be open and listen to each unique person. I was sure I didn't want anyone to relive the trauma they have been through, so I wouldn't push for answers, but rather ask open questions and see where the answers would take the interview.
THEORY

Coping

People’s abilities to cope with trauma and stress are correlated to which resources are available for the individual and what could limit the use of these resources in different situations (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Resources could be anything that could be helpful to solve a problem or deal with a situation. Lazarus and Folkman are describing categories of resources, such as health and energy, positive belief, problem-solving skills, social ability, social support, and material resources.

Health and energy are being described as one of the most pervasive resources as it is the foundation to manage stressful situations. With poor health and low energy, it is obviously more difficult to manage traumatic experiences. Having a positive belief or a positive approach is closely linked to feeling hope, which arises when one is convinced that a positive result is available to achieve. Problem-solving skills refer to the ability to find information and analyze situations in order to identify a problem and to choose an appropriate action plan to act upon. Social ability is an important coping resource because of its function in communicating with people in a way that is socially appropriate, and to adapt to others. With good social support, we begin to sympathize with our situation and can seek advice about how we should act which can also contribute to affect one's health in a positive way. With material resources, one’s vulnerability is reduced which can make it easier to manage stress (ibid).

Lazarus and Folkman explain that coping involves “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of a person” (p 141, 1984). In this perspective, coping is dynamic and process oriented “and involves conscious, purposeful actions employed when an individual appraises a situation as stressful” (Cooper and Quick, p 353, 2017). Within this theory, coping has two overarching divisions; problem-focused coping, which refers to identifying the problem and actively trying to change the situation, and emotion-focused coping, which is about reducing emotional stress through the ability to distance oneself from the stress and finding acceptance to handle the situation that is ongoing. This can bring hope and optimism, while the stress is being given less space in one's life. The problem-focused coping aim, therefore, to directly manage the source of the problem, while the emotion-focused coping regulates the feelings that comes because of the problem (ibid).
Sense of Coherence

The salutogenic theory of Sense of Coherence (SOC) was developed by the sociologist Aaron Antonovsky after World War 2. Antonovsky, who lived in Israel for the latter part of his life, was interested in looking into the life situation of Jewish people that survived the Holocaust. For some Jews, the darkness and pain overwhelmed them and even though they physically survived a genocide, it was impossible to move forward and keep living. Antonovsky was interested in the surviving part of the population who had been able to remain well in spite of the extreme violence and brutalities they had undergone during the Holocaust, and who managed to cope with their experiences from war and persecution. According to Antonovsky’s research, an important factor that protects against traumatic experiences is what he would label as a “sense of coherence” (Antonovsky, 2005). The part of the population in the research that was without a sense of coherence had couldn’t find strategies to cope with the trauma, and their continued lives were characterized by helplessness and powerlessness (Tamm, 2002). In contrast to that, Antonovsky could show that the part of the researched population that had a sense of coherence, also were able to move on and according to themselves, live a good life despite the terrible experiences.

According to Antonovsky, a holistic view of the human being is necessary. With a system-theoretical starting point, he views an individual in the context of their entire life. SOC is a solution-focused theory that emphasizes agency, possibilities, and resources (Tamm, 2002). The origin of health and how people can remain at good health, or find a way back to good health after a trauma, is central in this theory where a main conclusion is that a person can create order through making her or his reality coherent (Antonovsky, 2005).

There are three cooperating components incorporated in the theory of SOC: comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness (ibid). In his book from 2005, Antonovsky describes his view: “The sense of coherence is a global perspective which expresses to what extent one has a penetrating but dynamic sense of trust that (1) the stimuli that originate inside and outside oneself during the course of life are structured, predictable and comprehensible, (2) the resources necessary for facing the demands that these stimuli put on you are accessible, and (3) the demands are challenges, worthy of investment and involvement” (p 46, my translation).
With examples, the three components can be described as follows: Comprehensibility is the extent to which events are being perceived as intelligible, in order, explainable and predictable. Antonovsky describes a person with a high sense of comprehensibility as someone with a strong idea of the world that has clarity as well as a high level of understanding of different events. (ibid). Manageability refers to the perception of what resources that could be accessible to cope with challenging situations. Through these resources, the person has an understanding of which useful tools (within themselves or found in others) she or she can use when facing problems. A person with a high level of manageability can undergo stress without suffering long term life harm, and they wouldn’t perceive themselves as victims under circumstances. This does not mean that they wouldn’t experience the effect of violence, for example, but rather that they find ways to solve or accept challenging situations (ibid). Meaningfulness is the component that regards how a person perceives the importance of something and can see the value of being part of whatever situation, relation or event that is significant to them (ibid). Having a high sense of meaningfulness can also be expressed by accepting challenges as a part of life and try to see what good that can evolve through the difficulties that can give some kind of meaning.

A high sense of coherence is conceived in a person when she or he has a high sense of the three components, which are “indissolubly intertwined” with each other, even though he ranks meaningfulness as the component with the most central significance (ibid, p 48, my translation). The reason for that is how important meaningfulness appears to be to a person in terms of finding hope to adapt to whatever she or he is going through. Without meaningfulness as a component to cope with trauma, the level of comprehensibility and manageability is of less significance. However, a high level of meaningfulness will not, as the only component, create a successful salutogenic way of living but needs to be combined with comprehensibility and manageability (Antonovsky, 2005).
RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

In the following eight stories from interviewees, I identify three main, recurrent themes that are relating to what strategies that are used to cope with extreme threats and violence:

1. Altruism, activism, and the will to take part in making change and providing support for others in need.
2. Nationalism and the importance of the survival of the ethno-religious group.

Religious faith, practice, and identity

“I chose to bring the Bible with me because it was the only weapon for me to protect myself,” Lina answered when I asked her about the dire night of the 6th of August 2014. Lina had just told me about her reactions and actions when she realized ISIS had reached her hometown, Hamdanya (also called Baghdeda or Qaraqosh), a town close to Mosul in Nineveh governorate. I met Lina at a camp for internally displaced people (IDPs) in central Erbil. The camp is located in an old part of a shopping mall. Long white corridors, with small rundown rooms that look like they haven’t been used in a long time (Or maybe it's just the result of lack of maintenance during the four plus years they have been used for hosting people that had to flee their homes). Outside of Lina’s family's room, there is a group of children that share a small bike, riding back and forth in the long corridor. The vibrant atmosphere at the old bazaar outside of the windows of the building doesn’t reach far enough to enter this very calm and quiet camp.

When I asked Lina about her selection of items that she brought from the house in this stressful situation, she told me that, of course, there were many important things in her house that she should have wanted to take with her, not least photo albums and other things of affection, but she knew she couldn’t bring much, so she chose her Bible and her book of prayers. “If I am not protected by the words of God, I cannot protect myself. During this night, we were praying to God and we knew that the words from the Bible made us stronger”. Lina tells me that her husband is a soldier, so that during the night of her escape from ISIS she was alone. “But when I brought the Bible with me, I no longer felt alone”, she says. “I was feeling that my relationship with God was protecting my family. Before, I was a good believer, but when ISIS came, my faith grew stronger”, Lina adds. She told me that after the night-long terrifying journey from Hamdaniya to Erbil, she went straight to a church because she knew that would
be the right place for her to get help. “We arrived at 7 am and they said: “you must be so hungry” and asked us if we wanted something to eat. We responded that we only wanted to read the Bible at that moment, that is our food, and we were praying with a high voice.” I asked Lina if she remembered if there was any specific verse from the Bible that helped her during this morning, and she responded by citing Psalm 23 from the old testament:

“The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” (The Bible, New International Version).

What Lina described could be connected to Lazarus and Folkmans theories about coping (1984). The way her religious faith is became useful for her in this very threatening situation, gave her a positive belief and a positive approach. Even the fundamental basic needs such as food or sleep had a lesser value than her relationship with God in this moment of despair, as her faith gave her hope.

“We hadn't planned to leave our town, but on the 6th of August 2014 the Kurds and ISIS started bombarding each other and they were using a really heavy weapons. There was a rocket that landed in a house close to ours that killed a young girl and my husband told me that “we have to leave right now, ISIS is attacking us,” Maryam told me. Just like Lina, she is displaced in the camp in Erbil, since 2014, but comes from Hamdaniya, which she tells me used to be the biggest city for Christians in the whole country before ISIS. She is sat on the sofa beside me, embracing her little daughter sitting in her lap while telling me how she, that night, had to protect her from bullets. Maryam used her phone to show me a video that was shot after her home city was liberated. The film shows what used to be her house which is now totally burned such that there is nothing much left. She told me that ISIS used her son’s clothes to set their house on fire.

Maryam served me a big plate of Arabic pastry with the best Arabic coffee with cardamom that I have tasted. Telling me her story, three other women sat in the room, listening to her experiences. The other women are also IDP’s that have become close friends with each other
in the camp. “We were really scared because ISIS was very close. My husband said we had to leave immediately, but I took my picture of Virgin Mary in my hands and stopped to pray for a second before leaving. I said goodbye to our house, to our streets, to everything I could see, and I prayed while saying goodbye to everything. I looked at every room in the house in a way knowing that I will never come back here again.” I asked Maryam why it was important for her to do this in this urgent and stressful moment. She tells me that she has always been a faithful person, a believer, and always have had faith in Virgin Mary. “She has been making a lot of miracles with me. At the weakest points in my life, I have been asking her for help and she has been there for me. So I took the picture of her outside and I was asking God to protect the area. My faith was so big in this moment,” Maryam replied. I asked her if her religious faith changed somehow due to this experience. “When we arrived in Erbil, I was telling people that this is Jesus’ cross. We have to carry it and we have to follow him. To be honest, my faith has just grown stronger after all this.”

Also for Maryam, her religious faith is in focus as she leans on her trust in the Virgin Mary and Jesus coming to her rescue. The ability to relate her situation to the history of other Christians and what is written, putting herself in a historical context, could be defined as creating meaningfulness, which is the most important component of reaching a high level of sense of coherence (Antonovsky, 2005).

The hope bringing and creating meaningfulness approach can also be found in Ninos´ narrative. I´m met him at a café in the Christian suburb of Erbil, called Ankawa. He wore the clothes of a typical businessman, ordered an Arabic coffee, and leaned toward me saying: “You can ask me anything!” While telling me his experiences during the dreadful night of the 6th of August, he showed with his whole body how he gets chills re-experiencing what happened.

“My faith helped me through this war,” Ninos says, and continues: “our religion is based on love and peace. Love each other the way that you love yourself - this is the main message of the gospels”. Ninos is from the area around Mosul and fled for his life when ISIS occupied the area. He now works as a human rights activist, doing all he can to help people in need. “I believe in the power of the religion and how it can change people”, he says and tells me that his faith has changed during the war. “I started talking to Jesus; I didn’t to do that before. My faith grew stronger,” Ninos tells me. As Ninos tells me about his heartbreaking experiences from the 6th of August 2014 and onwards, and what he lost in the war, we enter a discussion.
regarding one of the main dogmas in Christianity – forgiveness. I can't help but wonder if Ninos could ever forgive ISIS members for what they did. “I forgave them from the first day,” Ninos says while breaking into tears. “Jesus has said “God forgive them because they don't know what they are doing” and this is something that was coming to mind during that night I escaped.

Lina also addresses this topic: “I already forgave them,” she said, and described how this is a healing process for herself: “If I wouldn't have forgiven them in my mind, I would be so sad because they burnt my house. It was a very new house; we had lived there for four months only. Forgiving them changes something inside of me, it brings me peace. The most important thing [to be able to move on] is to stop thinking about what they did because they did so many bad things, and just forgive them. If I wouldn't forgive ISIS, I would only keep thinking about them.” Lina explained how the practice of forgiveness is related to her religious faith: “if I wouldn't have had faith in Jesus I would never have forgiven them.”

Turning to forgiveness, one of the most significant practices within Christianity (that of course can be found in other faith based or non-faith based systems and ideologies as well) seems to be a strategy that comes with the effect of distancing oneself from the problem. When Lina forgives the perpetrators, she makes her own situation more comprehensible (Antonovsky, 2005) Practicing forgiveness can also be viewed as what Lazarus and Folkman would describe as emotion-focused coping. In this sense, finding acceptance to handle the trauma through forgiveness, while the negative feelings towards the perpetrators are being given less space becomes a strategy to cope (1984).

Lina, Maryam, and Ninos described how their religious faith makes inner and outer stimuli comprehensible, which is the first step to reach a sense of coherence (Antonovsky, 2005). Lina says she hasn't only forgiven ISIS, but that she is also praying for them to change as Jesus told us to love our enemies and to bless our haters. “I prayed for them already when they first arrived to Hamdaniya. I prayed that God would open their eyes and make them see the truth,” she says. Another verse from the Bible that Lina tells me that she has returned to many times during the war is Psalm 27:
“The Lord is my light and my salvation - whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life - of whom shall I be afraid?” (The Bible, New International Version).

Two of the interviewees are not from the Mosul / Nineveh area, and did not have to flee and be displaced, but have seen the effects from the war from a close distance. My first plan was to only interview people who have fled from ISIS, but when I got to Iraq I realized that you don't have to leave your home to have lost something in this war. The atrocities this country has undergone since 2014 seems to have affected everyone, in one way or another.

Violetta, a young fixer for journalists from Erbil governorate, went to the frontlines of battles in Mosul and Hamdaniya with journalists and have met hundreds of victims of the war. Esho, a young activist and student from Dohuk governorate, has been working hard to support people in need.

Esho is the only one of the eight interviewees who says his belief and religious faith were challenged by the war. “When ISIS came I wondered: where is God? Where is God when 7000 Yazidis are being kidnapped and killed? I wondered how could this happen in 2014. Where was the international community? We were being killed and we had to leave our homes. In Western countries people treat their pets better. In that time I wished that we were animals in America and not humans in Iraq.” Esho told me that during a period of time during the war he stopped believing in God and became an atheist. In a community one's religious faith is an important part of one's identity, Esho defused the fact that the war made him leave his faith: “being an atheist is the first step to being a believer, and coming closer to God. If you try to be an atheist that means you are trying to think.” After a few years, Esho went back to the Bible. He says: “the Bible shows that this is the life, this is the world, you are going to see many bad days. But if you trust in Jesus you will be fine. Because in Christianity this life on Earth is not our place, it is just temporary.” Esho described taking a break from religion actually increased his belief in God and given him new perspectives on the scriptures. “My faith is now 100% stronger. Even if it is the same verses in the Bible that I read, I understand them differently after the war,” he says. Esho also says he changed as a person during the war, understanding that education is one of the most useful strategies to prevent violence and mitigate its effects. “I didn't think like this before ISIS. I was Christian before but now I am Christian in a different way. I can see the world differently now and studying has helped me
in this”. According to Antonovsky, individuals with a high sense of coherence see information as a resource of resistance and will use that to reach comprehensibility (2005).

Violetta describes her experiences of the war: “When ISIS happened in 2014, I was a student at university. I saw what happened from a close distance, as a lot of people were displaced to my hometown. Many of them slept in the church next to my house. They didn't have anywhere to go, and they had to leave everything. Mostly they came from Nineveh plains, and the towns around Mosul, like Hamdaniya and Bartella.” She told me how traumatizing it was for her to see this happening as she knows it has happened many times before with her people in history. “We have gone through genocide before, but we didn’t expect it to see it in the 21st century. I was very afraid at the beginning. My sister and I had nightmares about ISIS. We were thinking about them and we were hearing stories about them; it was very traumatizing for us. We saw how the displaced families lost their dignity.” In the midst of the war, Violetta finished her education and started to work, but the job she started with was not what she had studied to become. “In 2016, I started to work as a fixer for journalists, so I was at the front lines of the war. My first time in the Mosul area was in Hamdaniya.” Violetta tells me she just wanted to see what had happened to the biggest Christian town in Iraq. “The first time I was there was when it was just liberated. The whole town was burnt, it was all black. The first thing I saw was the ashes and the destroyed churches. I saw one church that had been turned into a shooting range, one that had become a factory for bombs, and another church had been used for hanging people.” Violetta tells me how shocked she was when she got to Mosul the first time since it didn't look as she had seen it in media: “It was way different; media hadn't shown how big it was. It was like ghost cities. Imagine walking around in a town where everything is burnt, and everything is broken. You can never imagine what people went through, it's crazy. Visiting Hamdaniya, I felt there is no hope, they will never be able to live here again they will never be able to rebuild this city. Every single thing is burnt.” Just as most of the other interviewees, Violetta tells me that her faith kept her strong during the war. “My faith helped me to believe that I can go through it, I can be strong. I have been through many hard things; I've been threatened to death, I've heard thousands of terrible stories I have met with the most miserable people of Iraq. After everything I have been through, if I wouldn't have had my faith I would have been crazy by now, I would have lost my mind.” She also mentions a function of belonging to Christianity further than finding comfort and power in faith: “For me, being a Christian is enough to be thankful. Being a Christian also gives me a lot of freedom compared
to my Muslim friends. As a Christian I can work late in the night and I can go to Mosul to work by the front lines. I have a lot of freedom and I appreciate it.”

Daniel is a young person born in Baghdad, but whose family fled when he was a little child because of threats. By 2014, he was living with his parents and siblings in Hamdaniya. “The biggest threat in the war was ISIS. We didn't know who else was involved, we could only assume. We lost all of our memories in this war. Thank God, no one in my family got kidnapped or killed, but because of the war, my family is now spread out. I feel as if I lost my brother in the war because he couldn't stay here and left for Europe to be safe. He is my oldest brother, so I see him as my father”. Daniel told me that three of his siblings left Iraq to search for security elsewhere: one brother went to Germany, another to Jordan, and his sister to Turkey. “We lost our family gatherings; we lost the things to use to do together.” Daniel tells me that he went back to see Hamdaniya after the town was liberated: “Everything was burned and looted, there were just destruction. everything was destroyed, he says and continues: “next to our house, the priest had his house. ISIS took the priests’ house and made it a base for them. They had used our house as a prison.” When I ask Daniel what has been helpful for him in this difficult time, he replied: “My faith in God has helped me through everything. These experiences of war have made me stronger and my faith has grown stronger. I feel I was lucky because I got help to flee from Nineveh to Erbil. This increased my faith.” Despite all the darkness that Daniel described, he said: “nothing is impossible with God; he has never disappointed me.”

Through the trauma they have experienced, Violetta and Daniel agree that their religious faith is what mainly has helped them to cope with the situation. Knowing that they can turn to God for relief, their situation seems to become more manageable. Violetta connected her faith and her health, saying her faith in God has kept her sane. Having their religious faith, increasing their manageability is part of gaining a sense of coherence and continuation toward a desirable direction in the continuum of health (Antonovsky, 2005).

On my way back to the IDP camp for my last two interviews, I happened to run into a man that turned out to be the famous musician and human rights activist Karim Wasfi. He went to Mosul to play the cello in front of the war-torn buildings and wanted people to hear the beauty in the midst of all the death and destruction and the recorded videos from these concerts have been
globally spread and have shown to be of huge appreciation. He told me that during the war he was devastated from everything that happened and he realized he needed to do something to help victims of war, as well as contribute to preventative work, for people not to get radicalized and join violent extremist groups. Therefore, he started to work with victims of the war to give them a sense of coherence by teaching them how to play instruments and putting together orchestras. He named his organization “Peace Through Arts”.

Karim Wasfi was visiting the IDP camp to meet with participants from his music class. He introduced me to a few of them and they told me stories of what difference being part of this project has made to them. One woman told me that this music project has helped her to be strong and to want to continue to strive despite all challenges after the war.

The hope that the participants reported having gained through the Peace Through Arts course can analyze as that they are experiencing resources in other people of which they made them better prepared to meet the challenges they had been overwhelmed by and analyzed as creating meaningfulness in a difficult situation (Antonovsky, 2005).

Back in the living area of the camp, Anita served me coffee with cardamom and pieces of typical Arabic pastry as Giwargis asked me: “Is it fair, what they did to us? We can't believe that this could happen in 2014. This is something that could have happened 1000 years ago, but in a modern time like this, how can this kind of cruelty still happen? Is it really fair?” he repeated in a way I perceived as rhetorical. “We are so tired of life, so we don't care much about anything anymore.” Anita described the night of the 6th of August 2014: “So that night I heard my son scream from our garden, and we went out to hear sounds of bombings between ISIS and Peshmerga. They came closer and closer and our fear increased.” Anita saw three well-known relatives in their nearby area killed: two children and one woman. They were caught in between the fighting armed groups and heard the fights as they drove away with their car. After describing their story of escape, Anita told me: “I had a market of clothes and makeup. They burnt it and they destroyed our home. It was completely destroyed.” Giwargis brings out photocopies of pictures of what used to be their home, showing nothing much left to be called a home. Still, Giwargis said “thank God” while showing me these photos. I asked him about that, and he responded: “We say thank you God because nothing happened to our family members. Many houses were burnt down and our house was bombed. But losing your house is nothing”. Anita filled in, describing how their religious faith helped them to survive:
“God knows what is happening, so we trust him. We pray and go to church. We pray at all times, to Jesus and Mary. We pray when we walk, pray when we talk, whenever we have a problem, we pray.” Giwargis continued: “the big thing that God did for us was to protect us from ISIS.”

The lack of understanding for the situation but believing that God is aware of what is going on, still seems to bring Anita comprehensibility, which is one of the three components in the theory of Sense of Coherence (Antonovsky, 2005). Using prayer (another of the most significant Christian practises) continuously could be analysed as what Lazarus and Folkman would describe as emotion-focused coping. Through prayer, it sounds as emotional stress is being reduced and shows the ability to distance oneself from the problem (1984). Re-definition of what is meaningful in life is one way of reaching a higher sense of coherence. What once used to be of meaning, but no longer is there, can be re-defined as less meaningful, if something else in life can come across as more important (Antonovsky, 2005). In Anita and Giwargis’ case, they redefined the value of the material resources they used to have, such that when it was destroyed they valued their losses less and found greater meaning elsewhere.

Nationalism and the importance of the survival of the ethno-religious group

“I could never forgive anyone who has hurt my country. I'm not even sure I can forgive the Assyrians that left during the war, because if they wouldn't have left, we would have been a stronger people. There are more Assyrians in Chicago or in Sweden now than here. If all Assyrians that has ever left this place will come back, we could grow a stronger community than the Arabs”. Violetta tells me how every Assyrian family is split over the seven continents of the world and that it's impossible to find one Assyrian who does not have a sister or brother or cousin abroad. “This is really bad. If it was up to me, I would never accept that anyone could leave”, Violetta says and continues: “in the war, we lost our heritage, we lost a lot of [historical] prints. Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian empire, every single square in this area has an Assyrian heritage, but ISIS ruined all that. They ruined churches, structures everything that has anything to do with our people. They tried to erase our people and they erased everything they could see with their eyes that belongs to our people. They didn't kill a lot of us, but all the Christians from every city in Iraq were threatened. They forced us to leave, and they succeeded”, Violetta says.
Esho’s position resembles Violetta’s: “I have never thought anytime about leaving my country. I do respect everyone who did leave, even though I don’t agree with it. If someone leaves, he has his own reasons why he left, but for me no I’m going to stay here.” Why? I ask him. “It is so simple”, Esho responds. “I don’t want to sound like a patriot or like a Superman but this is really simple: if my mother is sick, I will not leave her alone. Even under the atrocities of ISIS, I didn’t consider leaving my country”. Esho told me that he, coming from an area where ISIS and the war didn’t reach, personally didn’t lose anything in the war, but says that “life doesn't go like that”. He explained: “We believe that we are a nation if our community is losing something that means I am too. I didn’t lose anything in Duhok, but I lost a lot in Nineveh plains”.

The importance of their group belonging for Violetta and Esho can not be emphasized enough. To see their own part, and to contribute to keeping the Assyrian people existing in the midst of a genocide proves Antonovsky’s theory that a person can cope with almost anything, as long as they can find meaningfulness (2005).

Ninos is just as convinced as Violetta and Esho: “I mentally and emotionally belong to this country; I am 100 % connected to this country”. He described several opportunities to leave, including an airplane that was waiting for him and his family, but they refused. “Because of my love for the heritage and history that we have here. We are not people who came to this country, we are this country. We are one of the first civilizations in this world. We feel our dignity here more than in any other place. This is why I could never leave,” Ninos said. “The country lost its heritage and its original people in this war. I will not feel this kind of belonging to any other place” he said, breaking into tears and apologizing for being so moved by talking about the persecution of Christians, telling me this is such a heartbreaking topic for him. He described how he sees the Assyrian nation as strong and powerful, even with all of their losses. “We are highly integrated with our religion and our land. We are developed, we are educated and we have a lot of abilities and we will fight for it”, he concludes.

Violetta, Esho and Ninos view their struggle in relation to their future. Not only their personal future, but what they consider to be their people's future. People with a sense of coherence consider themselves to have agency and be able to act and make an impact. This corresponds to the concept of coping, which describes a human being’s ability to manage stressful and emotionally demanding situations (Cooper and Quick, 2017). Violetta, Esho and
Ninos all made a decision not to leave. To stay is to fight for the existence of their people. They have a clear cause, and they are willing to take risks for it.

Talking to Anita and Giwargis about the same topic, they said that even though they would want to stay to keep their group and nation together, they cannot see a future here. We start talking about coexistence and social cohesion and they both break out in laughter when I ask them if this is something they can believe in as if it was not at all in reach: “Well, we believe but for sure there is no co-existence here. You must live here to understand. ISIS or other groups can come and kill us at any time.” They said they will never feel safe here and that this lack has cost the family everything: “we have been living in a camp for four years and the situation is not getting better here. Our daughter had to get married at 16 years old. If our situation would have been better, we wouldn't have allowed this.”

Using Lazarus and Folkmans theory of coping and the categories of resources, the sub-category of material resources can play a role in the difference between the way Violetta, Esho and Ninos in one hand handle the situation, compared to how Anita and Giwargis cope. A similarity among all is the value in maintaining the existence of Christians in Iraq, but what differs is their socio-economic status. While Anita and Giwargis are unemployed, living in a camp, and struggling to support themselves; Violetta, Esho, and Ninos, have incomes that enable them a decent living situation when it comes to material standards. As Lazarus and Folkman argue, having material resources accessible, one’s vulnerability is reduced and vice versa: with a lack of material resources, it is more difficult to manage stress (1984).

Daniel also painted a dark view of the future and describes a scenario he wouldn’t have to want to choose, but said he sees no other option: “ISIS will always be a threat to us. We will never feel safe here. When I think about the future, I realize I need to leave this country. I could go to any country where I would feel safe, any country that could provide security for us because we deserve it.”

Daniel’s way of relating to his situation can be analyzed as problem-focused coping, which aim to directly manage the source of the problem; he perceives that he is not and he will never
be safe in Iraq, therefore he doesn't see other alternatives than searching for security and stability elsewhere (Cooper and Quick, 2017).

The importance of the survival of the ethno-religious group is not only an issue in relation to ISIS, but also other armed groups, political groups, and interests. All the interviewees stated that ISIS was the biggest threat for them during the war (and still), but most also said ISIS is just one of many groups that are endangering the survival of the Assyrians, the Christians, in Iraq.

I asked Esho if he would say that he lives in Kurdistan. “No!” he stated in an almost over-exaggerated way. “I live in northern Iraq; I don't belong to Kurdistan. We are discriminated by the Kurdish government. They are trying to erase our heritage and history and making our history belong to them. They are not acknowledging us and our history, but we are the original people of this land. We have many historical places in northern Iraq, but they paint Kurdish flags on heritage places that goes back to 6000 years.” To prove his point, Esho later brought me to the old citadel in the center of Erbil. As we walk around in the beautiful surroundings that breathe so much history, he makes sure to show me the signs and descriptions of the citadel, saying that it is a Kurdish monument. “Do you see what they are doing here? They are claiming it as theirs.”

I asked Violetta the same question, to which she responded: “I would never say that I live in Kurdistan. I have never said it, and I will never say it. Kurdistan doesn't mean anything to me.” She told me it is not easy at all to live around people who are “completely different from yourself”. She said that despite all threats, or maybe because of them, Assyrians as a people will keep struggling and that they feel connected to each other. “For example, if I would get into a taxi and I see that a taxi driver has a cross in his car then I will be sure that I'm safe and nothing would happen to me,” Violetta said. She told me how worried she about the future of Christians in Iraq: “The threats are not over for us as Assyrians. In the war, the army and the forces were not any better. After the liberation, whatever was left, they looted it. Whatever was not looted by ISIS was looted by the army. The threats came from both Kurdish and Iraqi side. They don't care about us we are just a minority for them, we are just Christian infidels for them. I've been threatened to death by Muslims just because I’m a Christian.”
Altruism, activism and the will to being part of making change

When Maryam was displaced to the camp in Erbil, she opened a kindergarten to start activating and stimulate the children and now manages a preschool for eighteen children. When I asked her why she did this, she told me she decided not to let the children in the camp become a lost generation. In the story of her escape from ISIS when they came to Hamdaniya, she shared her incredible act of altruism, putting her own life at risk for helping someone else. A young woman related to Maryam was due to give birth. Maryam explains the situation as is very difficult, as doctors and nurses left the hospital during this day the more they found out about the arrival of ISIS. Only the manager of the emergency units stayed, but there was no one to help this woman to give birth. The manager told the woman that she would need an operation but that there was no doctor to do the operation. “I was very thankful I was so strong at this moment because there was no one else there for her. She was just crying, and she couldn't do anything. We felt the bombings coming closer and closer, we didn't have time we felt we were fighting against time.” Before they fled the city, a few doctors and nurses came back to pick up their last salaries. Maryam tells me how she begged the doctors and nurses to stay and to help, and she managed to convince someone to help with the surgery of the pregnant woman so she could deliver her child. “I called the father of the woman and asked him to go to her house and bring her documents so they could leave for Erbil. Her father was very scared to go home because of the bombings close to his house, but I motivated him to go quickly and then they came and picked the woman and her newborn to bring them to safety. So, after making sure that the woman was safe, I went back to my home where my husband had waited for me, and we left immediately. The baby boy that was delivered that night was saved and is now living in Canada”. I asked Maryam how she risked herself not getting away, to help the pregnant woman. “With the big threats towards us, it was never an option for me to stop trying. When I got to Erbil I also started to work with other victims of ISIS, working with psycho-social support to Yazidi survivors. When I heard their stories, I realized we didn't lose anything compared to what they lost, they lost everything. We lost materialistic stuff, and this doesn't mean anything to me, it can be replaced. But if you lose a soul, that cannot be replaced”. Maryam told me that working with these women and supporting them became a way for her to make resistance towards ISIS. Maryam relates her act to her religious faith: “Every single day God and Jesus have been helping me to continue to help others,” she said.
Working as a fixer is not an easy or safe job. In her car, Violetta always has her bulletproof vest, as she goes on missions with journalists reporting from her country. When I asked Violetta about her motives for doing this, she told me that this is not even her real job. She works full time for an NGO for a reasonable salary with her fixer work on the side. “To be honest, I don't even need the money from fixing. But for people who are here to help, I would do anything,” she said, adding that her religious belief also has a part in it. Since the war started, she says she has grown stronger and she established more relationships and contacts. “I can use these contacts in a positive way, and I try to help people as much as possible. Trying to make good is my way of handling all the violence. I help other people to stay strong, to not need anyone else. Especially I help women. I talk to them and I show them ways to cope with everything. This brings me happiness as I can help others, when I change something about someone’s life that really makes me happy”.

Talking with Esho about what usually is helpful for him in difficult situations he immediately started telling me about how he takes action and does whatever he can to impact the situation: “Trying to be helpful and trying to do things for others is part of our faith, it is a part of our obligations. We are here in this war to help each other. If I don't carry a responsibility than who would carry it?” Among other things, he has been part of fundraising money for victims of the war and have been producing videos to raise awareness of the situation for Christians in Iraq during ISIS.

Ninos told me how the war made him take his life in a completely new direction: “Before the 6th of August 2014, I worked with tourism, management, and hotels. I was successful and made quite some money.” The entry of ISIS in his hometown changed everything for Ninos. “The night we were displaced, I used my contacts to gather people to help out in the chaos”. Ninos told me that the first thing they did was to find places for displaced families to sleep. At this time Ninos didn’t know much about activism, minorities, or international relations. He decided to learn everything that he needed, and now he is a fulltime human rights activist. “My whole life changed in these 5 years. I left everything that had to do with tourism. I loved that profession, but I had to contribute to my country. Due to dirty political plots against us as minorities, in our own country, what they did to the Yazidis and what they did to us, it was obvious that they wanted to get rid of us. That was very traumatizing for me and it's pushed me
to start this”. Ninos registered an NGO that now have 32 volunteers in the staff, working with psychosocial support, social cohesion, capacity development in different cities in Iraq.

Their ways of mobilizing human resources to act for people in need can be analyzed as they are experiencing resources in people around them who were in similar situations as they were, desperate to do something to help. Even as they described it as difficult, with social support, they made the challenges they have in front of them manageable (Lazarus and Fokman, 1984 & Antonovsky, 2005).

According to Antonovsky, it is significant for people with a high sense of coherence to have faith in change and to be able to see his or her own part in contributing to the change. This is where the three components of comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness meet (2005). Maryam, Violetta, Esho, and Ninos, all use the resources they find accessible: health and energy, positive belief, problem-solving skills, social ability, social support, material resources. and use these resources to improve someone else’s living situation, which in turn brings themselves meaning and can move them forward in the desired direction of the continuum of health (ibid, and Lazarus and Fokman, 1984). Their proven altruism, activism and being part of making change are obvious problem-focused coping strategies: as they are identifying the problem and actively are trying to change the situation (ibid).

There are connections from this third theme in the result and analysis section to the first two sections: Maryam, Violetta, and Esho, relates their acts to their religious faith, Ninos's motives can be derived from the previous section regarding nationalism: “I do this because of my love for the nation, my love to the history and heritage. Because we are the original people of this country.”
DISCUSSION

For several years, millions of people have been directly affected by ISIS’ brutal deeds. The atrocities have dominated the news reporting globally. The outside world has been horrified and shocked by the stories and testimonies from the so-called Islamic State, which for most people is so brutal that nothing can be compared. One could claim that ISIS chose an efficient strategy to recruit fighters and supporters through politicizing and manipulating religion, using it as a tool for mobilization. Many young people were enticed by ISIS religiously coded war and were radicalized to participate in the battles and settle in the ISIS-controlled area. A minority of people in the world would argue that ISIS has been fighting in the name of God in a just manner, according to the scripture of the Quran. Most others, including the vast majority of Muslims, would say that the acts of ISIS have nothing to do with Islam at all. With a terrorist group adopting a religious rhetoric and arguing in the name of God, the religiously coded part of the war has become one-dimensionally angled. Therefore, it is interesting to see the results of this thesis, that religion can be used in other ways in a war situation. That religion, through identification, affiliation or personal faith, can be a part of helping vulnerable people deal with and understand their situation.

Making sense of evil is a classic religious question. In this writing, eight people were given the space to share their experiences of surviving the genocide by ISIS. According to Antonovsky, a specific strategy or a typical personality that always successfully can cope with trauma and stress does not exist (2005). This case study provides examples of people seeking ways to handle the trauma, which initially implies clarifying the kind and dimension of the problem and the reality that surrounds it, and furthermore to manage it through choosing the resources that best helps tackle the problem (ibid). It was not obvious that comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness, would be found in the narratives of the interviewees, but the findings of this writing demonstrate how a sense of coherence can be reached through being part of something greater than oneself. May it be through religion, through nationalism, or through activism. It also shows that these can be strategies for a person to process and make sense of traumatic experiences and cope with imminent threats.
With a religiously coded warfare, the stories from the interviewees give an insight of how religion also can be used for peace and hope. What is even more interesting is that the interviewees’ religious beliefs and their ethno-religious identity have not only been useful for them to cope, but also seems to have increased because of the immediate threats they faced. For several of the interviewees, the resistance towards the violence by engaging for others in need of support can also be derived back to their religious faith and identity. An example of resistance and dignity that Violetta told me about is that the very first thing that was done when Hamdaniya was liberated, before doing anything else, was to put up a big cross by the entrance of the city so that everyone would see that the city is now again Christian.

Almost every conversation I had regarding the experiences of the interviewees from coping with the genocide by ISIS, referred to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Most of the stories linked to ISIS are linked to 2003. Several of the interviewees meant that ISIS wouldn’t have happened if it wouldn’t have been for the U.S. invasion. Violetta talked about how she, as a seven-year-old, experienced that day in March when the USA had promised to intervene. The family put out all the lights in the house, her mother tried to get Violetta and her sister to bed, as they didn't want her to see what was happening. Violetta told me how they couldn't sleep waiting for the promised war to start. A moment later, Violetta heard that her mother was screaming and she understood then that the war had begun. Violetta says that: “At that time Iraq had a dictator, Saddam, but now we have a thousand Saddams. It was bad in Iraq in many ways before 2003, but so much better than it is now”

Through a Western perspective, many people simplify the situation and assume that threats to the Christian existence in Iraq are over with the defeat of ISIS. However, through the perspectives of the interviewees, ISIS was (and still is) a massive threat against them, but one of many.
CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have explored how one can manage persecution and comprehend horrific experiences. Through the personal stories from eight Christians in northern Iraq, who all lost something or someone in the genocide conducted by ISIS, I have found that religious faith has been of importance for their survival. Also their religious identity and connection to their ethno-religious group have shown to play a fundamental role in making sense of their situation and in strengthening their agency in their resistance towards evil. The strong connection to their lands, and their tradition of religious practice have been part of motivating several of the interviewees to mobilize support and contribute to helping others in need. In the darkest situation of violence and threats, the religious faith has grown stronger and their religious practice, such as prayer and forgiveness, has become of greater importance than before. It has become clear that the interviewees' abilities to cope with trauma and stress have been correlated to the resources that have been available for them; such as health and energy, positive belief, problem-solving skills, social ability, social support, and material resources, similar to how Lazarus and Folkman, (1984) suggest survival strategies are formed. Through analyzing the stories by the three components; comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness, I have been able to show that the interviewees have found strategies to cope with extreme threats and violence by reaching a certain level of what Antonovsky (2005) refers to as sense of coherence. Religious identity and faith have been integral to this sense of coherence and shows how important religion can be to individual coping mechanisms when subjected to conflict and violence.

In the future, it would be important to look more into the topic of war and faith in order to gain a better understanding of the importance of faith in people's lives, especially for people who have had to undergo major life changes and sacrifice or lose something because of armed conflict or even genocide. In this way, we can also gain a better insight into whether religion can be used not only to start or maintain conflicts but also for how religion can be used to get through and process war and conflict and keep one’s health. Maybe this knowledge could be useful not only for a broader understanding of victims of war but also for other situations related to crisis, violence and social changes.
EPILOGUE

Traveling to Iraq and Erbil, made me curious to also go visit Archbishop Nicodemus Daoud Sharaf and his church. On the way there, roadblocks had been put up because of security reasons. It was the Orthodox Easter, and just one week before, during the Protestant and Catholic Easter, ISIS carried out another horrendous fatal attack towards churches celebrating Easter in Sri Lanka. Because of the security roadblocks, the taxi driver has to drop me around 100 meters from the church. As I walked the last part to reach, I got an alert from the European Union warning for the increased risk for ISIS terrorist attacks during the upcoming few days for Christians celebrating Orthodox Easter in Iraq and other places. Security staff surrounded the church to protect it from any threats and to enable the church members to gather. Despite the general threats, the church was full of people joining the service.

Celebrating mass together with all these people that fled ISIS in the Mosul / Nineveh area was powerful, especially since it was Easter Thursday and the washing of the feet ceremony, a practice Jesus did with the apostles on this day 2000 years ago, after the last supper. This practice can be interpreted as a symbol for erasing the class society and everything that is hindering people to be equal and united, serving each other. Sitting there, in the Syriac-Orthodox church in Erbil, I couldn’t help but keep Archbishop Nicodemus words in mind, reflecting on and describing those days in early August 2014 that he will never forget: “I am a shepherd. It says in the Bible that I cannot leave my flock. I and the others in the Cathedral started making phone calls. We were going to leave when the others were safe. We had to flee, in a rush, with just the clothes we had on. Everyone was stopped at checkpoints, everything of value was stolen, even shoes and coats in some cases. Earrings were torn out of women’s ears so that they bled” (Kino, 2017). No one knows exactly how many people fled during those days, but most seem to agree that it was hundreds of thousands of people that arrived in the Kurdistan Region with cuts on their feet, with family and friends left behind (ibid). With this in mind, seeing the people still gather in the church gave me a strong impression of resistance and resilience.
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