18 Nested Vulnerabilities in the Context of Migration: The Yazidi Case

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Introduction

'Tu ji kuderê yî?' (Where are you from?), we asked. 'Kocho', Dilan replied. Her answer gave us chills. Kocho is a Yazidi village to the east of Mount Sinjar in Iraq. It was one of the first places where ISIS attacked Yazidis in 2014, many of whom fell victim to the ensuing genocide. In November 2018, a Yazidi family friend introduced us to a group of former ISIS abductees who were among the more than 1,000 Yazidi women who have relocated from refugee camps in Iraq to Germany since 2015. It was around lunchtime when we arrived at the residential accommodation where these women were living while being treated for their traumas. Dilan, a woman in her fifties, dressed in black, opened the door. The expression on her face and her welcoming voice conveyed calmness and filled the room with warmth. Some children and younger women entered the room and greeted us. Not long after this warm welcome, they served a rich traditional Yazidi lunch, including a tasty pomegranate salad, the seasonal fruit from back home. We felt very humbled, not expecting such hospitality.

Yazidis[1] are an indigenous ethno-religious minority group in the Middle East, spread across Iraq, northern Syria, western Iran, Turkey and Armenia. There is no reliable data available for the population statistics of Yazidis, but before the ISIS attack in 2014, community sources estimated that around 700,000 Yazidis were living in Northern Iraq (2012 Report on International Religious Freedom), predominantly around the Sinjar and Bashika districts in Nineveh and Sheikhan where their most sacred temple Lalish is based. The large majority of Yazidis speak the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish, among themselves also referred to as Yazidi. Having grown up multilingual, Kurmanji has been one of the languages that we learned in addition to our mother tongue, Surayt Aramaic. We were, therefore, lucky to be able to have a basic conversation with Dilan in Kurmanji. After lunch, Dilan shared her

[1] Also known as Êzidî or Yezidis.

eyewitness account with us. Her tone was consistently calm and factual, but nevertheless sombre:

> They gathered all of us in the village school. They brought a large bag and ordered the village leader to entreat everyone to place their money and gold inside. The women all dropped their valuables and mobile phones into the bag […]. Then they took the men by car to the village vicinity and shot them. They killed them! Then they took us, the women and children, to the Solagh Institute building. In the afternoon, they moved the women with babies to the second floor. [A]nd they put the girls and older women on the floor below us. We didn't know that they were separating all the girls into two rooms. We were women with babies on the second floor. In the evening, they took all the girls to Mosul. They put the older women, our mothers, in a separate room, and we were also in a separate room, but all of us were in the same yard. At night, they separated all the male children between seven and 12 years old from their mothers. They isolated them and took them too. Not one of them was left! We woke up the next day to find all the girls had been taken. Around noon, they came and took the older women, our mothers. […] They took them outside of the institute building and killed them all; there were 85 older women in total. (V_Y_30:5)

Almost seven years after this genocide, on 6 February 2021, the Iraqi government honoured 104 innocent Yazidi victims killed in Kocho by ISIS in a formal national burial ceremony (Puttick 2021). Yazda—a Yazidi NGO established by volunteers in the aftermath of the genocide—reports that on 3 August 2014 and in the days that followed, approximately 12,000 Yazidis were killed or abducted by ISIS. In the immediate aftermath of this genocide, several more reports documented the killings and the forced displacement of the entire population of Yazidis from the Sinjar region, including the kidnapping and sexual enslavement of Yazidi girls and women (OHCHR 2015, 2016; OHCHR and UNAMI 2016; Cetorelli et al. 2017).

As Dilan recounts, the perpetrators systematically divided Yazidis into different groups. Young women and girls were forcibly converted and transferred to numerous sites in Iraq and Syria to be forced into marrying ISIS fighters and used as *sabaya* (sex slaves) (Human Rights Watch 2015; Amnesty International 2014). At the same time, young boys were separated from their families and taken away to be brain-washed and trained as child soldiers for the ISIS cause (Qasim and Qirani 2014). Older boys and men who refused to convert to Islam—or in some cases even those who did so—as well as some of the older women, were executed using different killing methods. Iraqi and international investigators have so far discovered 17 mass graves in Sinjar, containing the bodies of some of the 3,000 Yazidis killed (Arraf 2020). Those who were forcibly converted were relocated to abandoned villages and exploited as forced labourers.

Before ISIS attacked, approximately 400,000 Yazidis were living in the area near Mount Sinjar in the Nineveh governorate in Iraq, which has historically

been home to most of the country's minority groups, including Yazidis, Assyrians, Mandaeans, Turkmen, Shabak, and Kaka'i. ISIS targeted these groups systematically in an ethnic and religious cleansing campaign (Amnesty International 2014, Kikoler 2015; UNITAD 2021). The Yazidis were singled out for the most extreme assault, being portrayed as 'devil worshippers'. As a result, an estimated 250,000 Yazidis fled up the mountain, where for days, they were hunted by ISIS in hot August temperatures. Hundreds of Yazidis died from starvation, dehydration, and other injuries during the ISIS siege before a coordinated rescue operation organized safe passage from Mount Sinjar into Syria. Some 250,000 Yazidis found temporary shelter in hundreds of informal settlements, including schools, community spaces and unfinished buildings in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) region of Iraq (BRHA 2015). Internally displaced Yazidis were gradually transferred to hastily built camps. About 15,000 Yazidis crossed into Syria (Sidky and Rummery 2014) and at least 30,000 into Turkey (Daloglu 2014). At the time of writing this chapter, seven years after this genocide and displacement, there are still more than 200,000 Yazidis living in camps in Syria and Turkey. Many of the Yazidis have left their historical homeland with no intention to return.

When the Yazidi case is discussed in the media and political circles, the concept of 'vulnerability' is frequently used as a descriptor. To give an example, after the controversial deal that the EU signed with Turkey, the European borders closed in March 2016, after which around 3,500 Yazidis found themselves stuck in Greece. A debate between the Greek and Portuguese authorities concerning the resettlement of these refugees ensued. Applying the 'vulnerability criteria', the Portuguese MEP Ana Gomes initiated a project to relocate hundreds of Yazidi refugees from Greece to Portugal. However, the Greek government refused this offer, arguing that this would discriminate against other refugees by privileging one particular group (i.e., the Yazidis) based on religion or ethnicity (Kantouris and Hatton 2017). Here, the Yazidis' specific circumstances as survivors of genocide at the hands of ISIS were overlooked. This debate shows how the vulnerability criteria are understood and implemented differently by the two EU member states (and in the EU more generally). More importantly, there was a clash between Yazidis' own perceptions and demands, on the one hand, and the authorities' handling of the group on the other hand. As a result of their dwindling population, Yazidis themselves thought relocation to Portugal (where there is no established Yazidi community) would lead to their further dispersion, which in turn could endanger their future existence (Carstensen 2016).

As a socio-legal construct, the status of 'vulnerability' has become an important aspect in the assessment of asylum claims (Papada 2020). Not only states but also refugees and the humanitarian sector have expressed claims within the framework of vulnerability. For example, responding to the debate between Greek and Portuguese politicians, Baroness Emma Nicholson,

the founder of the aid group AMAR, stated that the Yazidis deserved special recognition because they were the 'immigrants in greatest need … [having been] subjected to genocide' (cited in Ridgwell 2017). Yazidis, too, apply the 'vulnerability' label to their case and express the desire that their situation as survivors of genocide and as a persecuted group in the homeland be recognized and considered when applying for asylum.

As we conducted our fieldwork among the Yazidis, the need to understand their group-specific vulnerabilities and the way long-standing vulnerabilities had been intensified and transformed through the process of migration became central to our research. We conducted our ethnographic fieldwork among Yazidi refugees in Germany in November 2018, November and December 2019, and the UK between October 2018 and December 2019. All our interviewees had arrived in their respective host countries after the 2014 Yazidi genocide in Iraq.

We completed a total of 27 semi-structured in-depth interviews with male and female Yazidi refugees aged 18–60 and spent time with our respondents in their places of residence (refugee camps, emergency accommodation, or private dwellings) in order to learn more about their stories. The interviews usually took 2–3 hours. We recorded our respondents' life stories, focusing on their eyewitness accounts and asking them about their displacement experiences, including border-crossing, bureaucratic procedures, their everyday lives, struggles and their perspectives on the future.

In most cases where the individuals spoke no English, we used interpreters who translated from Kurmanji to English. Pseudonyms have been used in order to protect the respondents' identities. All interviews have been analysed inductively by making use of the Atlas.ti software. We have supplemented our primary data with extensive desk research, reviewing both journalist accounts of the salient events as well as relevant social media posts.

In 2018 and 2019, as we conducted our interviews with Yazidi survivors in Germany and the UK, ISIS was still active in Iraq, and there were still more than 3,000 Yazidi women and children in captivity. When we met these survivors, they were mourning their loved ones while expressing cautious optimism about their future in the new country. The uncertainty concerning killed or abducted family members and those who had to stay behind in refugee camps significantly increased the distress experienced by our interlocutors. When we asked these survivors about their losses, it was like touching an open wound; almost as if to contain their grief, they would carefully recite the names of those family members who had disappeared or been killed. In all conversations, our respondents were concerned about sending a message to 'the world'—an imagined international community—asking for help, as governments had made no serious effort to find and return their missing family members. Their eyewitness accounts helped us to better understand

how their sense of vulnerability was exacerbated through the genocide and subsequent forced displacement.

The remainder of the chapter proceeds as follows. The following section outlines the concept of 'vulnerability', focusing on its use in migration and asylum policies. After that, we delve into the established vulnerabilities of Yazidis in light of their historical positioning in the Middle East, their precarious lives in their homeland and more specifically in Iraq and discuss how these long-standing vulnerabilities are (re-)experienced in new ways through migration and settlement.

Nested and multilayered vulnerabilities

In recent years, the concept of vulnerability has gained much attention in academic circles and is generally used in policy discourses on asylum and migration. Both the New York Declaration (2016) and EU documents categorize many different groups in their 'vulnerable list' of peoples.[2] In its legal reasoning in the case of *M.S.S. v Belgium and Greece* (21 January 2011) concerning the transfer of an Afghan asylum seeker under the Dublin system, the European Court for Human Rights (ECtHR) defined 'asylum seekers' as an inherently vulnerable group, as members of 'a particularly underprivileged and vulnerable population group in need of special protection'. This aspect is seen as a benchmarking development in ECtHR case law (Peroni and Timer 2013; ECRE 2017). However, in other cases, the Court confirmed the particular vulnerability of specific categories of asylum seekers (for example, *ECtHR Tarakhel v Switzerland* or *ECtHR O.M. v Hungary*). In EU asylum law, specifically in the Asylum and Reception Directives, member states are legally required to make provisions for the identification and subsequent treatment of vulnerable asylum applicants whose vulnerabilities are framed in terms of 'special needs'. Despite its extensive use, the term lacks a standard definition or a common approach to its implementation.

This chapter uses the term 'vulnerability' in line with Judith Butler's conceptualization of precariousness and precarity. Our key aim is to explain the position of Yazidis in light of their forced displacement as survivors of genocide. Butler (2009: 25) understands precariousness and precarity as intersecting concepts. While precariousness is 'a feature of all life', precarity is a 'politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from fail-

[2] The list includes the following categories: women at risk, children (especially those who are unaccompanied or separated from their families), members of ethnic and religious minorities, victims of violence, older persons, persons with disabilities, persons who are discriminated against on any basis, indigenous peoples, victims of human trafficking, and victims of exploitation and abuse due to people smuggling.

ing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death' (ibid.). In line with the same logic of understanding, 'vulnerability' is *both shared and differentiated*.

Seeking to explain different types of vulnerability, Rogers, Mackenzie and Dodds (2012: 24–26) developed a taxonomy based on three different sources—namely, *inherent*, *situational*, and *pathogenic vulnerability*. Inherent vulnerability is an ontological condition of human life arising from our corporeality, our dependence on others, and nature. The *situational* aspect explains the contextual and temporal dimensions of vulnerability. For example, migration is a source of situational vulnerability. This may be short-term, intermittent, or enduring depending on the length of the migration journey. The authors link inherent and situational vulnerabilities with the extent to which they are latent or manifest: both kinds of vulnerability can thus be either *dispositional* (potential) or *occurrent* (actual). For instance, women, children or migrants with disabilities are dispositionally vulnerable to exploitation. But whether or not these groups of migrants are actually vulnerable to exploitation will depend on a range of factors, such as their socio-economic status or geographical location.

Finally, the authors use a specific category, *pathogenic vulnerability,* to explain how some responses may paradoxically exacerbate existing vulnerabilities or create new vulnerabilities. According to the authors, a key feature of this type of vulnerability is that it creates a sense of powerlessness, loss of agency which paves way to the production of new and troubling dependencies. This can be in the form of morally dysfunctional interpersonal and social relationships (for example, abuse) or by socio-political situations characterized by oppression, subjugation, persecution, or political violence.

Referring back to the ECtHR's judgement about the qualification of asylum seekers as inherently vulnerable by definition, all asylum seekers live in a precarious zone as their right to remain and settle in the territory of a country is not formally established (ECRE 2017). This legal reasoning based on the precariousness of 'asylum seekers' (their vulnerability vis-à-vis the state) intersects with the micro experiences of different groups and individuals. To give an example, the experiences of Afghan refugees are not the same as those of Syrian refugees. Both groups are inherently vulnerable because of their legal status. However, they do not experience migration (crossing borders, life in transit countries and settlement in destination countries) in the same way. The power structures, norms, social and political organizations that have developed historically 'maximize precariousness for some and minimize precariousness for others' (Butler 2009: 2). Labelling everyone as equally vulnerable undermines the meaning of the term and its use in scientific research and practice. As scholars have argued, this 'universalist' understanding of the concept muddles the identification of context-specific

vulnerabilities and the distinct needs of particular groups and individuals (Levine et al. 2004; Luna 2009).

Some scholars have cautioned about dangers attendant upon labelling particular subgroups or populations as 'vulnerable', arguing that this can lead to discrimination, stereotyping, victimhood, dependency, unwarranted and unjust paternalistic responses, and categories such as 'acceptable' (vulnerable) and 'unacceptable' (non-vulnerable) refugees (Atak et al. 2018; Fineman 2018: 8; Hruschka and Leboeuf 2019; Rogers et al. 2013;). We agree that the notion of vulnerability has become the 'new' governance tool for migration regimes to regulate (that is, restrict) entry and border procedures. It has become more evident in the so-called 'hotspot approach', where the admissibility of asylum claims is procedurally determined on the grounds of vulnerability. This shift in legal and political discourses of migration not only paves the way to further compartmentalization of asylum seekers but also disregards refugee rights enshrined in international law to a procedural assessment on the ground.

In our understanding, any inquiry into vulnerability should look into produced vulnerabilities in a given context and explain them in relational and temporal terms. This gives the concept a more dynamic and flexible orientation and shifts the focus to power relations in which vulnerabilities are produced and to mechanisms 'which frame and re-frame corporality, adversity, agency, capability and entitlement' (Brown et al. 2017). Instead of seeing vulnerability as a label attached to specific subpopulations, Florencia Luna (2009) suggests a dynamic theory based on the idea of 'layers of vulnerability'.

This approach is highly salient for migration, which is a process that not only generates new 'migratory vulnerabilities' (Baumgärtel 2020) but also transforms the way historical vulnerabilities are experienced. Thus, it results in a set of vulnerabilities that build on and interact with one another in complex ways. Against this backdrop, we employ the terms 'nested' and 'multilayered' to make sense of the Yazidis' current experiences of vulnerability. The former points to the historical formation and sedimentation of particular vulnerabilities and traumas transmitted over generations that impact the present. The latter is adopted to explain the relationship between vulnerabilities produced and reproduced in different time zones and contexts, distancing us from the binary of vulnerable/not-vulnerable, which dominates present migration politics.

One last point to stress here is the salience of *political subjectivity*. Opposing the binary understanding of vulnerability and agency, Butler approaches vulnerability as 'an incipient and enduring moment of resistance' (2016: 24–25). In her work, the relational aspect of vulnerability creates what she defines as an 'ambiguous region' between 'receptivity' and 'responsiveness'—we are all receptive to vulnerabilities, but we are also responding to and re-

sisting what is acted upon us (ibid.: 25). This brings us to the concept of political subjectivity. Approaching 'vulnerability' as a productive concept, Hirsch suggests we should think of it 'as a radical openness' toward change and new possibilities and 'as a space to work from as opposed to something only to be overcome' (2016: 81). As we argue in the following sections, this 'productive space' has been constructed through the act of migration in which Yazidis' political subjectivities have become more apparent in their discursive articulations and practices.

We will first provide a brief account of the Yazidis' historical experience to contextualize their present-day vulnerabilities and then discuss how these established vulnerabilities have been transformed through migration and settlement in host countries.

The precarious lives of Yazidis in the Middle East

Yazidis are indigenous to the Middle East. They have lived for centuries in a subordinated position at the periphery of regional power centres. Historically, the vulnerability of Yazidis has been deeply rooted in their relations with the states and societies of the region, which have developed outside formal institutional frameworks (Fuccaro 1999: 3). Different from other non-Muslim groups (namely, Christians and Jews) during the Ottoman period, Yazidis were not recognized as a distinct *millet* (religious community) and were targeted by both Ottoman and local Kurdish leaders through campaigns of forced conversion and religious violence. In public discourses, they were stigmatized as *kuffar* (infidels) and always mistrusted. This historical narrative was rehearsed with tragic consequences by ISIS during their genocidal campaign in 2014.

The emergence of 'modern' nation-states in the region after decolonization brought little change in the treatment of Yazidis. During its Arabization campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s, the Ba'ath regime in Iraq systematically targeted Yazidis and other minorities. They were forcibly displaced; their properties were confiscated, and their villages and pastoral life were destroyed. During the construction of the Mosul Dam (formerly known as Saddam Dam) on the Tigris in 1985, Yazidis were once more displaced from their homes when they were forcibly resettled to other areas (Human Rights Watch 1993). In addition, they were systematically targeted during the Anfal campaign of genocide (1986–1989). Alongside Iraq's other minorities, Yazidis fled to Turkey and Iran to escape persecution by Saddam Hussein during the first Gulf War in 1991. Since the end of the Ba'ath regime in 2003, like other ethno-religious minorities, Yazidis have been systematically targeted by Islamic extremist groups. In 2007, Al-Qaida's Iraqi branch attacked the Yazidi towns of Til Ezer (al-Qahtaniyah) and Siba Sheikh Khidir (al-Jazirah) with suicide bomb attacks, killing 796 Yazidis (Yazda 2019).

Over the next decade, the number of Yazidis and the country's other indigenous minorities diminished drastically. To understand the scope of their forced displacement, it is important to emphasize that after the 2014 genocide, almost the entire Yazidi population in the Sinjar district was displaced (UNHCR 2019).

Dispossession has historical roots in the modern Middle East. It is interwoven with state formation practices. Studying waves of forced migration in the Middle East, Dawn Chatty (2010: 41) concludes that understanding dispossessions and forced displacement is vital for finding solutions to the protracted humanitarian crises that have become a defining feature of the region. The internal displacement and forced migration of the Yazidis is one such crisis. Indeed, the Yazidis' modern history can be summarized as one of continuous displacement and dispossession. According to Arendt, dispossession renders human subjects into 'superfluous' objects. Moreover, as she writes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973: 295–296): 'The calamity of the rightless is not that they are deprived of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, or equality before the law and freedom of opinion […] but that they no longer belong to any community whatsoever'. To this point, historical subordination, persecution and forced displacement have uprooted the Yazidis from their historical homeland.

ISIS systematically attacked women, kidnapped and forced thousands of Yazid girls and women into sex slavery. Some of them were sold tens of times, dispossessed from their own bodies. We interviewed four women of different ages who were kidnapped by ISIS. Because of the trauma that they underwent, only two of them felt comfortable telling us their stories. One of them was Saba, a mother of two young children. The youngest one had been born only a couple of weeks before ISIS attacked them in Sinjar. She was courageous in recounting the details about her abduction. Giving a clear voice to the cruelty inflicted has been a profound act of political subjectivity exercised by many Yazidi women after this genocide. Like many of our interviewees, the Nobel Prize laureate Nadia Mourad was also kidnapped from the village of Kocho. She managed to escape and tell her story despite the weight of tradition, which often circumvents women's voices. This new women-centred activism signals an emerging political subjectivity among Yazidi women that has also made the Yazidis' suffering visible to the international community. Saba gave us some details about how they were sold in human markets.

> Every night between 10 pm and midnight, or even sometimes as late as 3 am, they would come and wake us up to take pictures of us. They would show these pictures to whoever wanted to pick us [to buy as a slave]. One night they came and took my brother's wife; they claimed that she was being sent

> to be the servant of the two wives of someone called Abu Yousif Al-Baghdadi from Raqqa.[3] […] Then, they took another woman to Al-Tabaqa in Raqqa. They gave her to another man alongside another woman from my village. (V_Y_31:4)

> We entered Syria, and we were brought to a place where a Sheikh came and had a look at us. He was disgusted and said, 'I don't want them; they are old!' (V_Y_31:2)

Our respondents shared with us the discrimination that they had faced as Yazidis in daily life in Iraq. Shabo tells us about an example with a taxi driver in Ainkawa, Erbil: 'When I went to pay [the driver], he requested that I not place the cash directly in his hand. He said I was 'najjis', meaning 'very dirty' [ritually unclean]' (V_A_27:8). Our other respondents have also confirmed these everyday discrimination practices. Yekdar told us how Yazidis are systematically discriminated against and left with few choices to make a living:

> You can't open a restaurant because they won't eat food you have prepared. They don't allow you to open any kind of large-scale business either. You have only one choice, which is to sell alcoholic beverages. But they don't really accept that either, meaning you have to work as a tradesman or day labourer. You are not even allowed to sell bread. (V_Y_16:2)

The construction of Yazidis as 'unclean'—an undesirable population—is a particularly familiar discourse observable in the sociology of racism.[4] Being clean or unclean is also a category produced by a religious discourse, where all non-Muslims are seen as 'unclean' (without ritual ablutions). Three of our respondents run liqueur shops in Iraq, one of which extremists bombed, while the other two received death threats.

The concept of precarity also explains the insecure life of minorities in the Middle East. In particular, it captures how they have been excluded from livelihoods, threatened continuously with unstable circumstances and made to suffer disproportionately from societal turmoil. The genocidal campaign of ISIS has uprooted the Yazidis from their homes and paved the way for their *mass exodus* from Iraq. Even though ISIS has been defeated, Yazidis in Iraq still do not feel safe.

As all of our respondents ventured repeatedly, the vast majority of the Yazidis have settled on migration to Western countries as the only solution

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[3] We have deliberately chosen not to anonymize the names of the perpetrators.

[4] See, for example, Gregory B. Lee's (2017) study on nineteenth-century British and American imaginaries in which both the Irish and the Chinese were framed as unclean, sick, contagious, and mentally unsound.

to their existential problems. Our respondent, Zerdesht, a middle-aged woman who escaped ISIS by climbing up Mount Sinjar, recounted the resilience of her young children during the sea journey from Turkey to Greece and how they lived this dangerous experience as a turning point symbolizing the end of their earlier life in fear and limbo:

> The waves were very strong; a big wave hit our boat, and the engine cut out […]. I really felt we would not make it […], but my children were happy to be on that boat. They just wanted to be out of there [Iraq] because I had kept telling them, 'when we are out of here, you will have much joy, and you will be able to forget all about here'. In Iraq, they were afraid; sometimes, they would wake up in the middle of the night. […] In the boat, I was terrified, but they were laughing. (V_Y_40:14)

Our respondents did not see their act of migration as a negative experience but rather as a survival response that would end their precarity in their homeland and bring them a safe future. In the following section, we discuss how earlier vulnerabilities change in the context of migration and settlement.

Vulnerabilities in the settlement process

We conducted our fieldwork in Germany and the UK, where the legal and political contexts differ, resulting in different experiences for Yazidis. In the aftermath of the 2014 genocide, Germany has been the most welcoming country for Yazidis.[5] It is estimated that since 2014, more than 80,000 (around 20 per cent of the Sinjar Yazidis) have settled mainly in three German states – Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia and Berlin (Tagay and Ortaç 2016). According to a report submitted by Germany's Left party to the Federal Foreign Ministry in 2015, the protection rate for Yazidis was close to 100 per cent (97.4 per cent). This rate fell to 83 per cent in 2017 because more Yazidis arrived in Germany from so-called safe countries of origin, such as Russia, Georgia, or Turkey. Around 23,056 Yazidis were granted protection status in Germany in 2017 (InfoMigrants 2018). However, the protection rate declined to 60 per cent in 2018 (DW 2019/02/11) as the German government stopped considering Yazidis from the KRG region as a persecuted group, which also indicated a policy change focusing on the return of internally displaced people (IDPs) to Iraq and their resettlement there. In the wake of the 2014 genocide, German states developed several reception initiatives explicitly addressing the trauma of Yazidi survivors. The first such initiative was in 2015 when the state of Baden-Württemberg brought over more than 1,000 Yazidi women from refugee camps in Iraq. Another

[5] Germany has also been home to the largest Yazidi diaspora community, which was established in the 1980s when many Yazidis from Turkey found refuge abroad.

reception program developed by the eastern German state of Brandenburg aimed to provide shelter to Yazidis who had been the victim of ISIS attacks and suffered traumatic experiences (Bathke 2019; Gellersen et al. 2021).

Positivity towards the host country

Dilan, a genocide survivor who arrived in Germany to be treated for her traumatic experiences, expressed her gratitude about Germany to us: 'Germany has become our mother and father. We are so grateful to them [Germans]'. (V_Y_30:12) She expresses her gratitude for Germany's hospitality and for creating the conditions to make her feel safe. In our conversations with her and in the accounts of other respondents, we observed a high level of positivity towards both state and society in the host country. In their positive discourses, they articulate an abstract idea about the 'German system and way of life', regarding both the authorities and the host society at large. In these ideational constructions, they develop, the boundaries between state and society are blurred. To express this, they use conditional sentences, such as 'if you work hard, they will like you, and you will succeed in society'.

In our conversations, the Yazidis we spoke to repeatedly ventured their gratitude for having been welcomed in Germany. However, they did not frame their presence and being protected in Germany in terms of 'rights' enshrined in international refugee law. We interpret their gratitude as part of a continuum in their ontological insecurity—that is, the fear of being excluded, but also an emotional connection towards the countries that have provided shelter or a place that feels like home where they can dream and think about a safe future for the generations to come.

Their positivity also stems from their precarious position in their historical homeland of the Middle East, which is marked by a continuum of massacres, forced displacement and dispossession. The same narrative also resonates with their perception of migration as a survival strategy. In the long term, this positivity may function as a hindering discourse for their 'equal' participation in society and a source for developing new dependencies. Over the long term, excessive gratitude and positivity might hinder the Yazidis' participation in their new societies on full and equal terms by reinforcing a discourse that they are somehow 'indebted' to the host country for having 'rescued' them.

One of the other themes commonly expressed by our respondents is the safety aspect. While Yazidis referred to their insecure, unsafe, and unknown future in Iraq, in their new host societies in Europe, they recognize how safe they feel and its importance for their lives today and their future. Bahoz, a middle-aged Yazidi from Sinjar, says:

> After Saddam Hussein's regime fell, I myself didn't spend a single night without thinking about our safety. But since we arrived here [in Germany], we have slept soundly without worrying about anything. Life was difficult there. […] Life was so difficult, and we were surrounded by enemies. (V_Y_23:18)

Prevalent in all our respondents' accounts are contrasting images of the historical home from the past and the new home in the host countries. Housing is thus an essential element for understanding the existential sense of safety. For example, two of our respondents were forced to live in mud houses after being forcibly dislocated from their original homes by Saddam Hussein's government during the Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988). However, even after the fall of the Ba'ath regime, their title to these mud houses was denied. Nor could they return to their original homes. As we visited them at home in the rural villages in Germany where they have settled, it was clear how extremely proud they are and how grateful they are to the German authorities for helping them find safe and stable accommodation. Even though they currently rent their homes in Germany, they are official tenants with legal documentation that states so unequivocally. What to some observers might seem elementary nevertheless has a *profound symbolic meaning* for the Yazidis' existence, since it marks their legal rights vis-à-vis the dwellings they occupy, signifies an official end to their situation of 'homelessness' and provides them with the safety and freedom they were long denied in Iraq.

Another vital point that resonates with this narrative is the Yazidis' affinity for the Western lifestyle, which has been imagined in contradistinction to the lifestyle and rules imposed on them in the Middle East. In this regard, religious differences play a vital boundary maker role. In Iraq, the education of Yazidi girls in high schools was a significant issue. All our respondents stressed the fear they experienced when going or sending their daughters to school. Shervin recounts that when the school was not in their village, they were forced to wear a hijab and hide their religion in public spaces (V_Y_24:20). Even before the 2014 genocide, Yazidi students were frequently targeted, received death threats forcing many of them to stop their university studies (about 1,300 only in 2013), and many were forced to wear a hijab in order to attend university to obtain a degree (Puttick 2014). Shervin, a university student when she lived in Iraq, compared her life there to the UK and told us that Iraq had felt like a prison (V_Y_24: 20).

Another theme in the narratives of our respondents is the notion of equality or no longer being treated as a second-class citizen. Shengal, a middle-aged Yazidi from Iraq, explained to us how the new country is making him feel 'strong':

> [P]eople here do not hate me because of my religion or because I'm Yazidi… Here I'm strong. Here in Germany, I feel equal to other people, but in Iraq, it was different. I felt weak. They were not accepting me as they do here. Some

> people really believe that Yazidis have tails, just like animals. It was terrible. (V_Y_19:12)

The expressed positive-ness is both subjective and contextual. Yazidi experiences in the UK are in many aspects different from the German context. Yazidis in the UK have experienced many hardships and have lived with existential fears during their asylum process. The few Yazidis who managed to enter the UK received several rejections for their asylum applications, were threatened with deportation and lived in limbo in the UK until their asylum applications were accepted. All Yazidis we interviewed in the UK found themselves in a precarious situation because their asylum applications were rejected. In Shervin's account about the UK, isolation and insecurity about her asylum application are mentioned as disturbing:

> I did not know anything about England […]. I thought if there is a strong government, no racist government, I can live as I want to live and not worry [...]. For two years, I lived without work, only as a volunteer for two NGOs. Every week we get 35 pounds. I can't go out. And I am always alone. No family, no one […]. Sometimes I am awake until 2 or 3 am. (V_Y_24:13)

Shervin has volunteered with some NGOs in order to turn her waiting time into something meaningful. She received several rejections for her asylum application. The UK Home Office rejected her asylum application arguing that Iraq is safe for Yazidis to return to. When we met her, she was very depressed because of the uncertainty regarding her future:

> The people in the UK are the nicest people ever; everywhere, in college, in the church, on the street, in the buses, everywhere. Even the police were nice, but the Home Office makes you feel unsafe and fights you psychologically. We don't need anyone to make us suffer psychologically. We already suffered. (V_Y_26:8)

Even though the UK parliament recognized the violence of ISIS against the Yazidis as genocide in 2016, the UK government does not welcome Yazidis into the country. Concerns have been raised in the media that Yazidi asylum claims in the UK are often denied and that the UK asylum process does not recognize Yazidis as a particularly vulnerable group despite their targeted persecution (Fallon 2018). The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office summarized the UK's main policy in a statement 'to prioritise supporting Yazidis who remain in the Middle East', claiming that 'for every one person that we are able to support in the UK [financially], we can support more than 20 people in location' (Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office 2016).

The UK's economy-driven and pragmatic approach typifies the main essence of the current asylum and migration policies of many countries in the West that are designed to prevent or minimize the flow of migrants from sending

countries. While a policy of deterrence is widely used to send 'negative signals' to potential migrants, a wide range of externalization of migration policies (such as agreements with third countries and countries of origin) are used to keep people away from the borders or in protracted situations on the borders.

In this context, the vulnerability criterion is used as a political instrument whenever needed in the legal-administrative asylum procedures of the European migration regime. Like all Yazidis, our respondents fled their native homeland in a desperate bid to survive and sought refuge in the UK to be safe. However, the UK's asylum policy has only increased their precarity and vulnerability, adding to their trauma. At the time of our fieldwork, our Yazidi respondents were living a precarious life, stuck between their present-life marked as 'safe' and what Hage (2009) calls their 'existential waiting' for their beloved ones held in captivity by ISIS. Often, this 'existential waiting' is also nested in the waiting time for a decision on their asylum applications. Thus, the uncertainty and the powerlessness they experience daily have introduced multiple levels and forms of precariousness to their lives. From this notion of precariousness, we have developed the concept of 'nested' and 'multilayered' vulnerabilities.

Nested vulnerabilities: Building a future on a traumatic past

We argue that traumas function as a constant source for the production of *nested vulnerabilities*. Non-healing trauma adds new layers of vulnerabilities onto existing ones. All of our respondents have been faced with the challenges of building a future on a traumatic past. The 2014 genocide caused mass displacement and trauma. This has triggered a specific type of temporality among Yazidis, which Serres and Latour (1995: 86, 109) refer to as 'folded time' where the temporal distance of past and present sufferings becomes subjective experience embodied within the context of the present.

Our respondents have stressed how their memories continue to affect their life in a new country. Some, like Berivan, a young Yazidi girl in Germany, have developed coping strategies. She undertakes a range of activities to keep herself 'busy' so that she will not have flashbacks about what happened in the past:

> When we first arrived here, the first year, I dreamt about ISIS; then, I got better after that. Now I'm good, but only worried about school. I make myself busy playing volleyball and swimming. (V_Y_15:12)

Our respondents were all going back and forth between their past and everyday life challenges in Europe, where boundaries between the two have become blurred. When we asked Dilan how she felt that day, she answered,

‘Whenever I put my head on the pillow, I recall that movie in my head. I tell myself all that happened in my head every night; it’s continuous, just like a movie’. Dilan then started counting the family members who were still in ISIS captivity: ‘My daughter, she was 13, and my son, who was 19. Also, my husband, my brothers, my sister with her two children, my father and mother; all of them. And, my father and mother-in-law, and brothers-in-law […]’ (V_Y_30:11). Although she managed to settle in Germany — far away from the scene where she experienced the horror herself—in her thoughts, day and night, she is with her loved ones who are still missing.

Referring to what she experienced in ISIS captivity, Shirin, a young adult, told us that she cannot trust anyone anymore, ‘even here in Germany’ (V_Y_32:3). Her pain and sorrow run deep: ‘We have no more tears left’. At night she prays to God that she can sleep because her thoughts are continuously going back to what she experienced at the hands of ISIS. ‘During the day, the German people are providing help to distract us. Otherwise’, Shirin says, ‘we would think [about what happened] during the day as well’. (V_Y_32:8). She believes that bringing back her loved ones from ISIS captivity and, even more importantly, burying the bodies of the dead would comfort her and help her heal. Her thoughts about the importance of freeing her people from ISIS and being able to bury loved ones are shared by all the Yazidis we talked to.

Earlier studies on different groups (Atto 2015; Çetrez 2018; Hirsch 2012) have shown the strong influence of collective memories on people’s present-day self-identification. The suffering resulting from the 2014 genocide has also recalled collective memories about previous massacres transmitted over generations, as expressed by the young adult Lama: ‘Our fathers and grandfathers were telling us about what they had to endure in Iraq. So, we don’t believe that this [genocide] will be the last time. We are afraid that it will happen to the next generation as well’ (V_Y_35:4). The danger of such accounts is that it can lead to a strong sense of victimization as it constructs the present and future as a fatalistic path firmly based on the past. Thus, both at the individual and collective level, the lived trauma has added another level to Yazidis’ earlier vulnerabilities.

De-nationalized modes of belonging

One other factor influencing people’s vulnerabilities in the context of settlement is their perceptions about their home, homeland and belonging. The Yazidis have left their homeland with no intention to return. They consider themselves indigenous to the Middle East, even though they have been living in a subordinated position for centuries with increasingly limited space to express and live their collective identity freely. Having no space to return to makes their group-specific experiences different from those of members of

majority groups who still have strong ties and attachments to Iraq. Baran, a young Yazidi girl, who was at the time of our interview living in a refugee camp in Germany, told us about her trip back to her village while encamped in Turkey:

> There is no future and no happiness there anymore. […W]hen I visited my village, I went to our street, the street where I grew up, and I saw the places where I was playing with my friends, where I was going to school with my friends. I remember the time when we were going to wedding parties together, and everyone was happy. But when I went there, everything was destroyed, and there was no one there. […F]or each house in the street, they said one or more family members had been killed, kidnapped by ISIS or are still missing. I am sure it is the end of life there. (V_Y_38:8)

A large majority of Yazidis share this pessimistic view about a future in the historical homeland. Their former homeland is no longer a liveable place for them. Having been uprooted repeatedly overtime in their historical homeland has conditioned their strong desire to establish new homes and root themselves elsewhere. Their migration has therefore functioned as a remedy for their earlier experienced vulnerabilities. For instance, despite our respondent Miho's asylum application being rejected by the UK Home Office, he insists that his future is in the UK because he and his family are very sure that there is no future for them in Iraq. Like all of our other respondents, the family no longer feels they belong to Iraq because they have lost trust in both the authorities who were supposed to protect them and their local neighbours, some of whom aided or joined ISIS, attacked Yazidis, and seized their properties. The middle-aged Yazidi man Haco answered our question about the possibility to 'return' with a question:

> I have no one in Sinjar and our Arab neighbours, nobody punished them, no government and they steal from us, they are free [to do so]. I ask myself: How can we live with people who kill us and are free [to do so without punishment?]. How can we look into their eyes? (V_Y_24:7)

Cekdar, a young Yazidi, told us that he feels like he doesn't have a home anywhere anymore because the country can no longer service this purpose (V_Y_38:10). Gule, a mother of three children, expressed her strong will to settle in Germany: 'No Christians or Yazidis are able to live in Iraq anymore. We came here for our children […]. We just wanted to escape Iraq'. (V_Y_22:5). Similarly, Jemal, a middle-aged, educated Yazidi, articulated his ideas about the future of the community:

> I think the Yazidis would be lost if they didn't receive help from European countries. I'm sure all the families in Sinjar will pay with one of their hands to be cut off for their families to be in a safer place such as here. (V_Y_23:21)

Our respondents, who were all interviewed in Europe, see their future in Western countries and unanimously reject the idea of returning to their historical home. This constitutes a transformation about the perception of 'home' and 'homeland' but also its geographical location. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* Arendt (1973: 293) explains statelessness as a structural feature of the nation-state and stresses 'The first loss which the rightless suffered was the loss of their homes, and this meant the loss of the entire social texture into which they were born and in which they established for themselves a distinct place in the world'. In both Arendt (1973) and Butler (2012), 'the right of belonging' is vital for human life, which can also be seen as a response to state politics that renders some groups stateless, and thus, 'homeless'.

There were seemingly mixed discourses about home/homelessness and their existing lives in Europe among our respondents. While some of our respondents expressed that their displacement has ripped them off from their historical home and has made their life meaningless, among the majority we observed a desire to make a new home in their new countries. In *Parting Ways* (2012), Butler discusses the very possibility of an 'ethical relation' different from national modes of belonging. We argue that the positive-ness we observe among Yazidi refugees in Western countries is an indication of such an ethical relationship that Yazidis are trying to establish with their new homelands.

Conclusion

Drawing on the case study of the Yazidis of Iraq, the chapter has explored the complex concept of 'vulnerability' from a range of salient perspectives (relational, contextual and temporal). In so doing, it has shed much-needed light on the multilayered nature of vulnerability and the way its experience can be transformed through migration and resettlement. In seeking to understand the Yazidis' present-day vulnerabilities, directly related to the 2014 genocide and forced mass displacement, we have offered a detailed analysis of how the Yazidis have been systematically alienated, denied livelihoods, threatened with precarious conditions, and made to suffer disproportionately in their historical homeland in the Middle East. Indeed, the subjugation and marginalization of Yazidis over centuries has created a sedimentary form of powerlessness and deeply rooted and internalized fear and dependency. Yet, at the same time, Yazidi communities have exhibited agency by developing a range of survival strategies.

Since the 1980s and increasingly since 2014, one such strategy has been emigration to Western countries. The Yazidis have lost any hope of a future in their historical homeland, which, from their perspective, is no longer a liveable place. Therefore, migration has emerged as the only way for the

community to chart a secure future, despite their awareness of the challenges to their cultural survival in the diaspora. This explains why Yazidis, like many other minorities, have eagerly embraced new opportunities to live their identities freely after settling in host countries in Europe, such as Germany and the UK.

The political subjectivities of Yazidis have determined their experiences of refugeehood. We have observed how they have drawn effectively on their collective knowledge and experience to foster resilience in the face of challenges to their survival and settlement in their new countries. Their perseverance and determination to settle outside their homeland have allowed them to successfully navigate securitized border regimes, which bolsters their resilience and sense of community.

The Yazidis evident positivity vis-à-vis Western societies in which they have settled is partly related to their lived subordination in their historical homeland. As we detailed above, the far-reaching gratitude the Yazidis feel towards the states and societies that have offered them refuge has the potential to hinder their participation on full and equal terms by reinforcing problematic discourses of 'indebtedness'. Nevertheless, the Yazidi's positivity is just as likely to reinforce their determination to root themselves anew, enabling settlement and ready integration into their new countries.

In sum, the Yazidis perceive migration as a remedy to their previous subordinated position in Iraq, characterized by ontological insecurity and marginalization. Their migration and settlement in Western countries marks a kind of 'critical juncture' in the lived historical experience of the community and triggered a process in which their experience of earlier vulnerabilities is transformed. Even as they continue to address the legacies of the subordinated position they have long endured in their homeland, their forced displacement has turned them into 'stateless refugees' at the margins of a new society, who must navigate the challenging process of resettling in challenging and unfamiliar places.

Settlement in new countries thus creates a new prism through which the past vulnerabilities are seen and understood. While subjectively feeling safe, equal and empowered in their new countries of settlement, they are once again defined in terms that are marginalizing, this time as 'refugees and immigrants'. The settlement context has also made it possible for Yazidis to foster a non-national mode of belonging to the new spaces that provide them with the essentials they were deprived of in their homelands. Their claims for citizenship, demands for justice, longing for safety and equality, and positivity towards the new host countries are indicators of change among the Yazidis' political subjectivity at the intersection of old and new political contexts.

Vulnerabilities have diverse sources and take on a variety of forms. Considering the omnipresent role of trauma as one of these sources, we have used the term 'nested vulnerabilities' to illustrate and explain the multilayered manifestation of the Yazidis' vulnerabilities. Their narratives about earlier massacres, displacement and forced conversion are inscribed in their history of exclusion and marginality. In order to understand how their vulnerability and political subjectivity are reflected in their demands for justice and recognition today, it is, therefore, necessary to shed light on the traumas they have lived through and lay bare the mechanisms and processes of precariousness that continue to condition their collective experience.

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