



Immigration, Refugees  
and Citizenship Canada

Immigration, Réfugiés  
et Citoyenneté Canada

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# Population Profile: The Yazidis

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Since August 2014, the Yazidi people in Iraq and Syria have been subjected to a genocide at the hands of the extremist group known as Daesh. Believing them to be infidels and “devil-worshippers”, Daesh has undertaken a systematic approach to eradicating the Yazidi people and culture by committing summary execution, forced conversion and indoctrination, slavery, torture, rape, and the destruction of cultural and holy sites. It is believed that Daesh forces continue to hold approximately 3,200 Yazidis (mostly women and children) in slavery and captivity.

The violence that took place in the summer of 2014 in Northeastern Iraq prompted the displacement of some 200,000 people (mostly Yazidi, Christian, Shia, and other non-Sunni Muslim groups) to camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and several thousands to Syria, Turkey, and later to Greece and the European Union. The conditions of the camps vary according to country, location, and population, but most have only limited access to food, water, medical supplies, education, and electricity. However, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, most refugees do not live in camps but amongst the Kurdish population.

Yazidi refugees are likely to have limited access to formal education and high needs for health services, and for psychological and social support. Some of the primary health concerns for the population are malnutrition, trauma, and physical and psychological effects of sexual and gender-based violence. It is unlikely that a significant proportion of the Yazidi population will have proficiency in either of Canada’s official languages.

Adequate translation and interpretation services will be crucial for resettled Yazidis to enable access to community-based support and services. Most Yazidis speak a dialect of Kurdish known as Kurmanji and some identify as Kurdish; however reported tensions between Yazidis and Kurds could potentially create challenges for both language and community support. Some Yazidis refuse to identify themselves in any way with the Kurds.

The Yazidis are a traditionally close-knit people whose beliefs forbid to marry outside one’s caste and with non-Yazidis. It will be best to resettle the population near existing Yazidi communities and provide access to services that are sensitive to their culture.

## BACKGROUND

### Introduction

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, Iraq has experienced prolonged political and civil instability. One driver for this instability has been the tension and distrust between Iraq's Shia majority and its Sunni, Christian and Kurdish minorities.

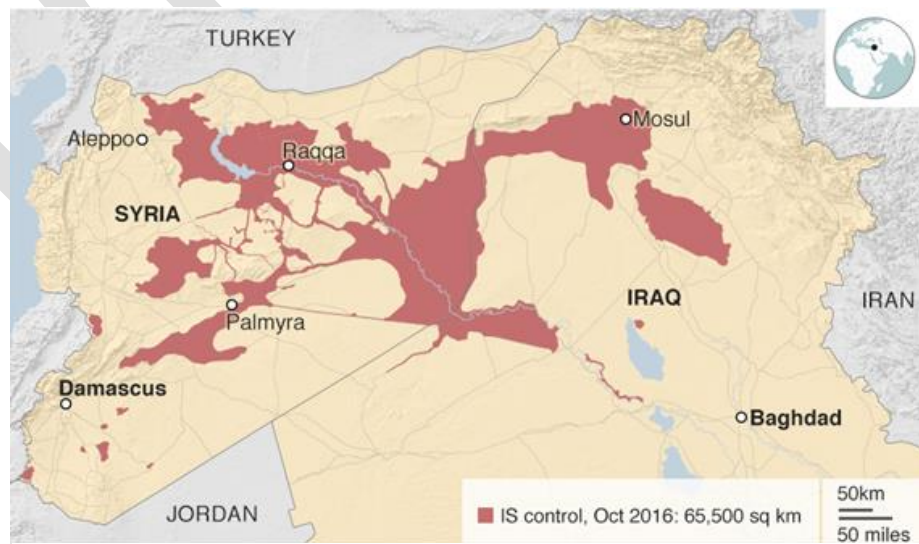
After the United States armed forces withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, Iraq's Sunni population began to express a growing dissatisfaction with the government of former Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki. Al-Maliki's largely Shia government had become increasingly hostile to Sunni political interests and sought to exclude Sunni leaders from government. With little avenue for legitimate political representation, disenfranchised Sunnis found support among more radical and revolutionary factions.

Adding to the problem was the outbreak and escalation of the civil conflict in Syria, where radicalized Iraqi Sunnis could join like-minded combatants who sought to overthrow the predominately Alawite government of Bashar Al-Assad. It was in this confluence of Sunni radicalism and revolutionary combat that the Islamic State, also known as Daesh, was created. By the summer of 2014, Daesh had grown powerful enough to enter into northern and western Iraq, seizing territory on both sides of the border in which it established an Islamic caliphate. Non-Sunni populations under their control have been oppressed or murdered.

### Situational Overview

After having captured Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, in June 2014, Daesh forces moved quickly to seize more territory in northern Iraq. In early August 2014, Daesh forces invaded Nineveh governorate, which is home to a majority of the world's Yazidi population. The speed of Daesh's advance meant that Yazidi, Christian, Shia, and other non-Sunni populations fearful of Daesh rule were left with little option but to flee. It was in the aftermath of this invasion that Daesh's genocide and ethnic cleansing of the Yazidi people began.

In the first days of the Daesh advance into Sinjar, approximately 200,000 people fled into nearby Iraqi-Kurdistan and into neighbouring Syria and Turkey. Among those who fled, were a group of approximately 50,000 Yazidis who retreated to the arid plateau of Mount Sinjar where they were eventually encircled by



Source: *BBC News*, December 22, 2016

Daesh forces. With little food, water or aid, the conditions of trapped Yazidis prompted the United States to lead a coalition of international forces undertaking an aerial campaign to provide support. The campaign involved air drops of food and aid, coupled with military strikes to stem the advance of Daesh forces. With the aid of aerial support, Kurdish forces (Peshmerga) were able to break the Daesh siege of Mount Sinjar, allowing many of the Yazidis to migrate into Iraqi-Kurdistan or remain and wait for an opportunity to return to their homes.

Yazidis captured by Daesh in the aftermath of the initial attack were reportedly separated according to age and gender. Women and children under the age of seven were transferred to holding sites. The women were sold as sexual slaves to Daesh fighters in Iraq and Syria, often with their young children. Males above the age of 12 who would not renounce their faith were summarily executed. These men who were forcibly converted to Islam were sent to various territories in Iraq and Syria to perform manual labour. Boys between the ages of 7 and 12 were sent to Daesh indoctrination and training camps to become fighters themselves. Girls above the age of 9 were separated from their mother and sold as slaves. It is estimated that Daesh forces summarily executed 5,000 Yazidis, captured 7,000 Yazidi women in the initial attack, and have since displaced nearly all of the 400,000 Yazidis who lived in the Sinjar region. The United Nations estimates that 3,200 women and children are still in captivity by Daesh forces.

Since the summer of 2014, the territorial gains of Daesh in Iraq have been halted and slowly recaptured by a coalition of Iraqi government forces, Kurdish *Peshmerga*, and Shia militias, aided by ongoing aerial support from allies in the Global Coalition to Counter Daesh. In October 2016, the forces arrayed against Daesh began operations for the recapture of Mosul.

A significant portion of Nineveh governorate and the Sinjar region has been liberated from Daesh, but the devastation caused by the fighting is extensive. Few Yazidis have returned to their homes, opting instead to remain in host communities and displacement camps.

## DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

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### *Yazidis in Canada*

The exact number of Yazidis living in Canada is unknown; however, estimates gathered from *Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada's* (IRCC) regional networks in the summer of 2015 and other sponsors estimate that the total population in Canada is between 1,000 to 1,500 people, with the greatest concentrations in Winnipeg, Toronto, London and Calgary. While it is likely that some Yazidis were resettled to Canada during the government's earlier resettlement commitments with Iraqi and Syrian refugees, it is unknown exactly how many were resettled to Canada as IRCC does not track refugees according to race, religion, sexual orientation or ethnicity.

### *Size of Population*

The global population of Yazidis is estimated to be between 700,000 and one million people. Before the Daesh assaults in the summer of 2014, approximately 600,000 Yazidis lived across various regions in northern Iraq with the greatest concentration – approximately 400,000 – living in the district of Sinjar. Since the Daesh attacks in August 2014, almost the entire Yazidi

community in the Sinjar region has been displaced, killed or captured. These population numbers are rough estimates, and it is difficult to know how reliable any one estimate may be.

### *Languages and Ethnicity*

The majority of Yazidis speak a dialect of Kurdish known as Kurmanji; however, there are some small populations who primarily speak Arabic. The Yazidis are generally accepted to be ethnically Kurdish, but many Yazidis dispute this and consider themselves to be a distinct ethnic group.

There is an increasing amount of tension between Yazidis and Kurds, stemming primarily from the Yazidi community's anger over the withdrawal of Kurdish *Peshmerga* forces from the Sinjar region before and during the Daesh attacks in 2014 and from the ongoing local and regional disputes between the Kurdish Regional Government and the Iraqi government over control of areas of Sinjar that have been recaptured from Daesh forces. There is a growing perception among Yazidis that these political battles have delayed the capture and reconstruction of Sinjar.

### *Access to Education*

Even before the events of 2014, Yazidis in the Sinjar region of Nineveh Governorate had limited access to formal education as there was an inadequate number of schools. Because Sinjar is a contested territory between the KRI and Iraq, both administrations were reluctant to invest in the region. The schools that did exist were often too small and lacked essential supplies. The incursion of Daesh in the summer of 2014 and the subsequent displacement of the Yazidi population resulted in a disruption of at least half a year of the studies of most Yazidi youth that had been in school. Makeshift schools that have been built in displacement camps in Iraqi-Kurdistan struggle to meet the educational demand of the displaced population. Camp schools suffer from over-crowding, as well as shortages of qualified instructors and funding.

These overall conditions mean that many Yazidi refugee populations lack even basic levels of education. For example, of a sample of 144 Yazidis that have been resettled to the United States in 2016, 83% had little or no primary or secondary education.

## **CONDITIONS IN IRAQ**

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According to the International Organization for Migration, there are over 3 million internally displaced people in Iraq. The vast majority of Iraqi IDPs do not live in camps. There are more than 300,000 internally displaced persons living in camps in Iraqi-Kurdistan. Most of the Yazidi population in Northern Iraq has been displaced to camps dotted throughout Nineveh Governorate and Iraqi-Kurdistan. The camps tend to be situated near major population centres like Dohuk or Erbil and are generally segregated by religious and ethnic groups. There are approximately 50,000 Yazidis in camps in Duhok and about 60,000 are out of camp living in informal settlements, and in host communities. As is common in most camps in the region, shelter within the camps is often limited to one tent per family and can be lacking in adequate protection against exposure from severe seasonal conditions.

Camps offer few opportunities for employment and as a result, the displaced population rely heavily on the aid from the government and the international community. Government and civil society organizations struggle to provide basic services such as water, medical care, education, and reliable access to electricity; especially in camps that are situated in more isolated locations. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has noted how authorities in Erbil and in other parts of the country have increasingly imposed movement restrictions on civilians fleeing the conflict. Furthermore, the battle for Mosul that has intensified since October 2016 increasing the pressures on camps, which had to provide services to an additional 160,000 displaced people.

Those Yazidis and other internally displaced populations who have opted to live outside of the camps have struggled to find shelter (for example in unfinished construction sites) on the outskirts of major urban centres. These populations are required to fend for themselves with little or no social supports and generally must barter or offer their labour in exchange for rent payments and other shelter. This is in the context of an economic crisis in Kurdistan where the State struggles to provide minimal services while public employees are not paid regularly. The presence of IDPs living in communities therefore becomes a burden on already strained public services, as they enroll in school, use hospital services and are in competition for jobs.

## COUNTRIES OF ASYLUM

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While a significant majority of Yazidis remain internally displaced inside Iraq, there are notable refugee and asylum-seeking populations in neighbouring countries. The exact number of Yazidis in these countries is unclear and most sources can only provide rough estimates on population sizes. This is due to the fact that large portions of Yazidis have continually migrated either into Europe, or back to Iraq, making the tracking of such flows difficult.

### **Syria**

Based on estimates by Yazda, a global non-governmental organization that has provided support for Yazidis, Syria is host to an estimated 5,300 Yazidis, with the greatest concentration likely living in Camp Newroz in the northeastern part of the country near both the Turkish and Iraqi borders. Like most internally displaced population and/or refugee camps in Syria, Camp Newroz is almost entirely dependent on outside aid to provide basic necessities. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the continued civil conflict in Syria has meant that some 13.5 million people are in need of some form of humanitarian assistance, including some 6.1 million internally displaced persons. As a result, United Nations agencies, the World Food Program, and other organizations struggle to provide adequate water, food, medical, educational, and electrical services to any groups fleeing the conflict.

### **Turkey**

In the summer of 2014, an estimated 14,000 to 30,000 Yazidis fled to Turkey. That number has decreased significantly since, with thousands of Yazidis choosing to either return to Iraq, or continue migrating to Europe. Estimates place the current number of Yazidis in Turkey to be between 1,000 to 3,000 people. The largest concentration of Yazidis are believed to be living in the camps at Midyat and Diyarbakir in the south east of Turkey. The renewed violence between the Turkish government and the separatist Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), has resulted in an



increase in Turkish military and security presence in Kurdish majority regions of the country, especially where there are large concentrations of Kurdish and Yazidi refugees from Syria and Iraq. The increased violence and the enhanced military presence have served as a driving force for secondary migration of Kurdish and Yazidi refugees through a return to Syria and Iraq, or attempts to cross the Mediterranean to Greece in order to claim asylum in the EU.

While Turkey is a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, it does not formally recognize non-Europeans as refugees under the law and therefore, does not grant refugee status to Syrians, Iraqis and other non-European asylum seekers, including Yazidis. Any non-European asylum seekers recognized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees are considered conditional refugees. Turkey is labeling Syrian refugees as “guests”, limiting their movement to the region in which they registered and limiting access to some social services and the formal labour market. Thousands of Iraqi and Syrian refugees have departed from Turkey – some through dangerous smuggling operations at sea– in order to claim asylum in Europe.

### **Greece**

Yazda estimates that there are approximately 3,300 Yazidi refugees spread throughout multiple refugee camps in Greece. The greatest concentration of Yazidis are in Petra Camp on the island of Lesbos. The Petra Camp houses almost exclusively Yazidis asylum-seekers. Yazidis in other camps often live in mixed religious or ethnic environments where they claim numerous incidences of discrimination and intimidation from other migrant populations.

## **HEALTH CHARACTERISTICS**

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### *General Health Conditions in Iraq*

Information available on the health profile of Yazidis is relatively limited in comparison to other Iraqi refugees; this could be due to the fact that Yazidi society is very insular, its members not usually seeking services outside of the community. As a result, health information gathering in this population is difficult. IRCC’s internal data stemming from the Immigrant Medical Exam is limited by the fact that the exam is not meant to provide an exhaustive health assessment, but rather to screen for conditions that could pose a threat to public health and because they do not track patients’ religious affiliation. However, based on reporting done from internal displacement camps in northern Iraq, there are three main health conditions of concern that are examined below.

### **Gender-based Violence**

Many Yazidi women and girls have suffered from sexual violence; specifically, sexual slavery, rape, torture, forced impregnation and marriage, and abortions. In addition, many will have also witnessed the murder of their male family members and/or been separated from their children. These acts against women and girls are likely to have caused serious harm to their mental health and physical wellbeing. In addition, stigma and shame could impede the girls and women from reporting rape and other forms of sexual abuse, although the Yazidis’ religious and political leadership have taken steps to break the stigmas and welcome the women and girls back into the





communities, including giving strict directives to show the victims compassion and not reject them. Cultural stigmatization and a lack of knowledge and education about mental health and available services have been noted in Iraqi refugee populations in the past and may similarly contribute to Yazidi populations delaying or avoiding mental health care altogether. Therefore access to psychosocial services is recommended for Yazidi refugees shortly after arrival, including specialized care for children. Consideration should be given to the provision of educational materials to encourage this population to seek mental health care and childcare services should be offered to enable single female head of households to attend mental health sessions.

### **Communicable Diseases**

Acute upper respiratory infections and acute gastrointestinal infections appear to be the highest reported in Iraqi refugee camps. The World Health Organization has reported that acute respiratory infections accounted for 57% of deaths in Nineveh Governorate in the final week of 2016; acute diarrhea and suspected scabies were the next most common causes of death, accounting for 4% and 3% respectively. Cutaneous and visceral leishmaniasis (a parasitic disease that causes skin lesions and ulcers or that affect organs and can be fatal if untreated appears to be a common problem as well across various camps. Vaccine drives are being conducted in the camps to prevent outbreaks of diphtheria-pertussis-tetanus, haemophilus influenzae type B, measles, and hepatitis B. There is no unique Yazidi identifier at present to identify this population among the Iraqi refugees in various camps, and information more specific to this population is hard to ascertain.

### **Malnutrition**

Chronic food insecurity has been a common issue affecting Iraqis since the Second Gulf War; this includes access to potable water, sanitation, and nutritious food. As a result, anemia is a common problem seen in many children and women of childbearing age. This may have an impact of child and fetal development, and clinicians should expect iron-deficiency, vitamin deficiencies, and be alert to the possibility of iodine-deficiency with resultant hypothyroidism. Furthermore, experiences with starvation and dehydration have been seen to cause mental health problems, including incidents of post-traumatic stress disorder.

## **CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS**

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### *Food and Dietary Restrictions*

The Yazidi faith has few religious proscriptions against any particular food or drink; however, due to certain regional tastes and norms, many Yazidis will generally abstain from eating lettuce and pork.

### *Families*

Yazidi family sizes tend to vary but cultural and traditional practices generally favour larger family units, particularly in the rural regions, where 10-12 children can be the norm. According



to Yazda, the average family size of Yazidis claiming asylum in foreign countries has been eight to nine members, although in Iraq it seems closer to seven.

Yazidi families also tend to express clear gender roles, particularly with older generations. Males generally represent the primary source of financial support, while females usually tend to matters of the household; however, cultural and religious practices do not restrict women from acquiring an education and playing an active role in both financial and family decisions.

## Religion

The Yazidi faith is one of the oldest religious traditions in the Middle East, with estimates placing its presence as far back as 4,000 to 6,000 years. It is a monotheistic religion that has absorbed many elements of Zoroastrianism, Islam, and Judeo-Christianity. Yazidis have for a long time relied on the passing of religious and cultural traditions orally from one generation to the next. In recent years however, they have started to put their religion into writing.

The Yazidis endorse the belief that there is a single creator god who placed the world under the care of an angelic order of seven divine beings. The most revered of those angels is Melek Taus – also known as the Peacock Angel – who had fallen from grace with god but was later redeemed and returned to heaven. Unfortunately, starting in the fifteenth centuries, surrounding Turkish and Arab Muslims came to equate Melek Taus with Shaytan the Tempter (Satan). The mistaken notion that Yazidis are “devil-worshippers” began centuries of slaughter and persecution that saw the Yazidis flee to the mountains of northern Iraq.

Yazidi religious practices are closely tied to the land. All Yazidis are expected to make a pilgrimage to the holy site of Lalish in Northern Iraq at least once in their life if they live overseas, or once a year if they live in Iraq. Other religious practices, like baptism, marriage and funeral ceremonies rely on the soil and water of two sacred springs in the region.

Yazidi religious tradition is insular and strictly endogamous. The Yazidis do not make efforts to spread their religion or allow for conversion into the faith. If a Yazidi marries outside of the faith, or converts to another religion, that person and any children they have are no longer considered Yazidi. These traditional norms have presented an obstacle for the re-integration of victims of the ongoing genocide into the Yazidi community. However, there has been some effort by Yazidi religious leaders to welcome victims of forcible conversion by Daesh back into the community.

## Culture

Yazidi society utilizes a strict, hierarchical caste system and is differentiated by the *Shiekh*, *Pir*, and *Murid* castes – with the *Murid* caste being the most common. Members of the *Shiekh* caste form a type of loose ruling class, which include a Prince and spiritual leader. Traditionally, Yazidis never marry outside of their caste.

Yazidis traditionally refrain from wearing the colour blue, and men are encouraged to have a mustache.



## *Challenges to Integration*

There are a number of potential challenges to the social and economic integration of Yazidi refugees to Canada. Yazidis who have escaped Daesh are likely to have family members still in captivity. This may have an impact on their willingness to permanently establish themselves abroad. Yazidis displaced by the forces of Daesh are likely to have limited to no understanding of Canada's official languages, and lack standard education. Because many Yazidi refugee populations lack even basic levels of education, literacy supports will be a priority for some even before language training. As a lack of knowledge of Canada's official languages will likely pose a challenge in terms of accessing settlement or other community-based supports so the availability of professional translation and interpretation services will be important.

Members of this population have experienced trauma, long-term malnutrition, and/or been subjected to sexual and gender-based violence. Medical and psychological needs are high for adults and children.

The Yazidi culture is traditionally close-knit and endogamous, so the successful social and economic integration of Yazidis will likely require resettlement near existing Yazidi communities and the provision and coordination of support services by all levels of government and other community actors that are sensitive to their culture.

## ANNEX (1) – Yazda Population Profile of Yazidi IDPs in Iraq

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