

Client Group: YAZIDI



Note: This series of information sheets are internal STARTTS documents and are designed to give staff a broad understanding of the socio-political and cultural contexts that STARTTS' clients have come from, and the implications for STARTTS' work. Staff should use this information as a base to help them explore the unique realities of individual clients and their communities. It is not intended to stereotype cultures and behaviours, or to serve as 'recipes' for interventions. This information is assumed to be correct at the time of writing and will need to be updated periodically as circumstances change. Please contact someone in the training team if you find any information that is controversial, missing or incorrect.

Numbers of clients seen by STARTTS

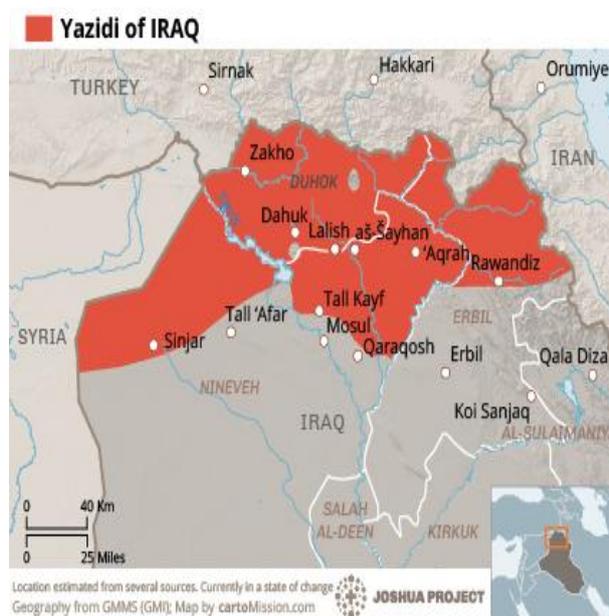
Yazidi or Yezidi is not a recognised cultural or ethnic group in the *Australian Standard Classification of Cultural and Ethnic Groups*, which STARTTS uses for client ethnicities. Yazidis may have previously been included under Iraqi nationality in the the category of 'unknown ethnicity'.

Country of origin: Iraq, Syria and Turkey.

Population: From 70,000 to 500,000 globally¹, although their population is difficult to estimate considering their dwindling numbers over the last century due to constant persecution.

Language(s): The Yazidis' cultural practices are Kurdish and almost all speak Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish), with the exception of some villages in northern Iraq where Arabic is spoken. Kurmanji is the language of almost all the orally transmitted religious traditions of the Yazidis².

Ethnicity: The Yazidis are a Kurdish people located primarily in the Nineveh province of northern Iraq. The sacred valley of Lalish is the centre of their culture. Some also live in Armenia and Georgia and many have migrated to parts of Europe. Sweden has had a significant Yazidi population since 2008.³



¹ Darke, D. (2014, 8 August). Who are the Yazidis? *BBC News*. Retrieved at <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-magazine-monitor-28686607>

² Asatryan, G. & Arakalova, V. (2002). *The Ethnic Minorities of Armenia*. Retrieved from <http://www.minorities-network.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/The-ethnic-minorities-of-Armenia.pdf>

³ Ibid.

Reasons for persecution: Their ongoing persecution is based both on a misunderstanding of the Yazidis' religion as 'devil worship' and a misunderstanding of their name. Sunni extremists, such as the Islamic State, believe their name derives from the second caliph of the Umayyad dynasty Yazid ibn Muawiya (647-683), despised for his drunkenness, loose lifestyle and for killing the grandson of the prophet Muhammad. However, modern research has clarified that the Yazidi name has nothing to do with Yazid or the Persian city of Yazd, but is taken from the modern Persian "ized", which means angel or deity. The name Izidis means "worshippers of god", which is how Yazidis describe themselves.

Religion: It is worthwhile explaining the Yazidis' religion in some detail, as they are largely persecuted because of other groups' misunderstanding of it. Below is summarised from Bergul Acikyildiz's experiences of living amongst the Yazidi and her research on Yazidi culture and religion.⁴

- The religion of Yazidism is a monotheistic faith linked to ancient Persian religions. Their central belief is in one god who created the world and entrusted its care to seven archangels, headed by the 'Peacock Angel', Tawûsê Melek. They believe that God first created Tawûsê Melek from his own illumination after which he created the archangels and ordered them to bring him dust from the Earth and build the body of Adam. God gave life to Adam from his own breath and instructed all archangels to bow to Adam. The archangels obeyed except for Tawûsê Melek, who replied to God, "How can I submit to another being! I am from your illumination while Adam is made of dust." God praised him and made him the leader of all angels and his representative on Earth. Therefore the Yazidis believe that Tawûsê Melek is the representative of God on the face of the Earth, both a mediator between God and the Yazidi people and a manifestation of God. As God himself is too sacred to address directly, Yazidis pray to God in Tawûsê Melek's form, the peacock.
- Yazidi religious beliefs have been handed down orally through types of musical hymns known as 'qawls', and it has been historically difficult for researchers to accurately document Yazidi religious doctrine because of the focus on song and storytelling rather than text. The qawls are now being collected with the agreement of the community and are full of cryptic allusions that usually need to be accompanied by stories to explain their context.
- The Yazidis believe that souls pass into successive bodily forms (transmigration) and that gradual purification is possible through continual rebirth. Spiritual purification of the soul can be attained through continual reincarnation within the faith group, but it can also be stopped through expulsion from the Yazidi community; this is the worst possible fate, since the soul's spiritual progress halts and conversion back into the faith is impossible⁵.

⁴ Acikyildiz, B. (2014). *The Yazidis: a History of a Community, Culture and Religion*. IB Taurus: London.

⁵ Darke, loc. cit.

- Tawûsê Melek is also known as 'Shaytan' and is often identified by Muslims and Christians with Satan. Yazidis, however, believe Tawûsê Melek is not a source of evil or a fallen angel but the leader of the archangels. For this reason Yazidis are often referred to as 'devil worshippers' by both Muslims and Christians alike, a description they reject.

Yazidi Culture

- Two key features of Yazidism are religious purity and a belief in reincarnation. Their strict beliefs in religious purity express themselves in a caste system and a variety of taboos governing many aspects of life.

Explanation of the caste system

- There are three Yazidi castes: Shaykhs or Sheikhs, Murids (laymen), and Pyir (clergy), who marry only within their group.
 - Murids or Myur belong to the lay caste, regardless of the wealth or position of the individual members. Each Yezidi is the disciple of a specific sheikh or pyir, who performs certain important rituals for the disciple. The Jab-Nabba is a subgroup of the Murid caste who defend the sacred beliefs of the Yezidis.
 - Clerical ranks are largely inherited and are drawn from the remaining two castes, Pyir and Shaykhs, who enjoy special prestige in Yezidi society. The priests are typically men but women may also inherit a priestly office and she will be treated with the same respect as a man.
 - The principal ranks (not to be confused with the identical caste names) are the sheikhs, the pyirs, the kawwâls and the fakîrs. The sheikhs derive from only five families, which trace their ancestry to the pupils or brothers of Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir (who died 1162), whom the Yazidis believe was sent by the Peacock Angel to educate and guide the Yezidis. His tomb near Mosul is the most important site of pilgrimage in the Yezidi religion. The chief sheikh is chosen from among the descendants of the previous chief and is regarded as the chief authority on spiritual matters and the interpretation of the Yezidi scriptures. A woman can never function as sheikh, regardless of her caste.
 - The pyirs are priests of lesser rank who preside at religious festivals, weddings, circumcisions, etc., for which fees are paid to them.
 - The kawwâls are singers and musicians who perform at festivals and processions. Kochak are dancers who perform at Yezidi festivals.

- The fakirs are the lowest order of clergy. They perform menial tasks at the tomb of Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, such as hewing wood, drawing water and collecting contributions for the upkeep of the shrine.⁶
- Yazidis consider marriage outside their faith to be a sin punishable by death to restore lost honour⁷.
- As described above, Yazidi society is strongly hierarchical. Each Yazidi, regardless of caste, is entitled to have spiritual tutors from the Shaykh and Pir families, and, above all, a “brother” or a “sister of the Next World”. The spiritual tutorship is a crucial element of the Yazidism society, the basic element of cultural and religious preservation and self-awareness. No significant event in a Yazidi’s life can occur without spiritual tutors taking part. Spiritual tutorship ensures preservation of the three basic principles of Yazidi communal identity: a ban on caste mixing, a ban on mixed marriages and adherence to Yazidi religious tenets⁸.
- Like the Mandaeans, the Yazidi are strictly endogamous and only marry within their own group. Strict segregation and honour killings of those who form relationships outside the community have brought them into conflict with other groups in Iraq. In 2007, Yazidis carried out an honour killing by stoning to death a teenage Yazidi girl who had fallen in love with a Muslim man and converted to Islam. In apparent retaliation for her death, Muslim gunmen shot dead Yazidi factory workers in Mosul not long after⁹.
- Important Yazidi holidays¹⁰:
 - Jamayi (Eda Hechiya), 6th to 13th October: the Gathering and Feast of Seven Days, known as the Jamayi and referred to as ziyaret. It lasts for seven days. All Yezidis attempt to make the pilgrimage to the sacred site of Lalish to unite as one people at their holiest shrine.
 - Roji and Eda Rojiet Ezi (Yezidi Fasting), around mid December: the three Day Fast of December is one all Yezidis are expected to observe. Fasting occurs from dawn until sunset after which there is a party with feasting and prayer. It falls on Friday after three days of fasting and occurs from about mid December.
 - For a comprehensive list of Yazidi holidays, visit <http://www.yezidisinternational.org/abouttheyezidipeople/holidays/>

⁶ Cherchi, M., Platz, S. & Tuite, K. (1996). *Yezidis: Encyclopaedia of World Cultures*. Retrieved at <http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Yezidis.aspx>

⁷ Attewill, F. (2007, 15 August). Background: the Yazidi. *The Guardian*. Retrieved at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/aug/15/iraq>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Wikipedia. *Murder of Du'a Khalil Aswad*. Retrieved at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_Du%27a_Khalil_Aswad

¹⁰ Yazidis International: <http://www.yezidisinternational.org/abouttheyezidipeople/holidays/>

Socio-Political and Cultural Context – Political Conflict, Organised Violence and Human Rights Violations

- Yazidis began to face accusations of devil worship from Muslims from the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Organised anti-Yazidi violence dates back to the Ottoman Empire. In the second half of the 19th century, Yazidis were targeted by both Ottoman and local Kurdish leaders and subjected to brutal campaigns of religious violence.¹¹
- In the late 1970s, Saddam Hussein launched brutal Arabisation campaigns against the Kurds in the north. He razed traditional Yazidi villages and forced the Yazidis to settle in urban centres, disrupting their rural way of life. Saddam Hussein constructed the town of Sinjar and forced the Yazidis to abandon their mountain villages and relocate in the city.
- In 2014 Islamic State captured large areas of Iraq's north. In August 2014 they seized the city of Sinjar. In the next few days ISIS militants carried out the Sinjar massacre, killing 2000 Yazidi men and taking Yazidi women and girls into slavery, leading to a mass exodus of Yazidi residents, 50,000 of whom fled to the Sinjar mountains and were forced to choose between surrendering to ISIS forces or dying of dehydration, thirst and starvation on the mountain. The majority were able to be rescued by both Kurdish PKK fighters who broke the ISIS siege on the mountains and by a multinational rescue operation in which planes dropped supplies and helicopters evacuated refugees.¹²
- The persecution of the Yazidi people has been viewed as qualifying as genocide by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in a March 2015 report.¹³ Cited were numerous atrocities such as forced religious conversion and sexual slavery as being parts of an overall malicious campaign.
- In March 2016, the United States House of Representatives voted unanimously that violent actions performed against Yazidis, Christians, Shia and other groups by ISIL were acts of genocide and was confirmed a few days later by United States Secretary of State John Kerry, who declared that the violence initiated by ISIL against the Yazidis and others amounted to genocide.
- The Human Rights Council¹³ describes the Yazidi community of Sinjar as having been devastated by ISIS attacks, with no free Yazidis remaining in the Sinjar region. The once 400,000-strong community have all been displaced, captured or killed. While Yazidis are gradually returning to the retaken areas of Sinjar north of the mountain, the majority of the region's Yazidis live difficult and impoverished existences in IDP camps scattered throughout the Duhok region of northern Iraq.

¹¹ Asher-Schapiro, A. (2014, August 11). *Who are the Yazidis, the Ancient, Persecuted Religious Minority Struggling to Survive in Iraq?* National Geographic. Retrieved at

<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/08/140809-iraq-yazidis-minority-isil-religion-history/>

¹² Reuter, C. (2014, August 18). The drama of Sinjar: escaping the Islamic State in Iraq. *Speigel Online*. Retrieved at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/pkk-assistance-for-yazidis-escaping-the-jihadists-of-the-islamic-state-a-986648.html>

¹³ Human Rights Council. (2016). *"They Came to Destroy": ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis.* Retrieved at http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf

- The on-going ISIS attacks against the Yazidis is viewed by the community not as a stand-alone event but part of a long history of oppression and violence against them which has aggravated intergenerational trauma. According to the Human Rights Council, few Yazidis believed that international criminal justice was possible, citing centuries of impunity to attacks on their community.¹¹

Resettlement in Australia

- Until recently, there has been no history of Yazidi community resettlement in Australia. It is likely that due to reluctance in identifying as Yazidi to protect themselves against attacks from other faiths, individuals and families may have migrated to Australia under general Iraqi nationality.¹⁴
- As of August 2016, STARTTS is currently aware of only two Yazidi families in New South Wales. The Australian government plans to resettle 300 Yazidi refugees in Wagga Wagga in late 2016.

Implications for STARTTS' Work

General issues

- Most Yazidis are Kurdish speakers (depending on the region they are from) and although some may be familiar with Arabic, they may refuse to speak it as the language of their persecutors. Those from the north east of Mosul will speak Arabic.
- As Yazidi society is caste-divided, this may impact on relationships within the Yazidi community.
- Many Yazidis had once lived side by side amongst Muslims but when ISIS took over territory, many Muslims allied themselves with them and turned against the Yazidis. This has resulted in feelings of betrayal, anger, grief and suspicion which may result in Yazidis being cautious about resettling near Muslim Arabs and difficulties in trusting Muslim Arabic-speaking workers. In Iraq, there has been a complete breakdown of trust between the Yazidi community and their neighbours. While some Arab families in Iraq and in Syria helped Yazidis to escape, Yazidis most remember and recount the acts of Arab families who actively assisted ISIS in their crimes.
- Families, whether captured or not, may be struggling to deal with the trauma experienced by those who were bought back or smuggled out and by the distress of not knowing the fate or whereabouts of relatives still in ISIS-controlled territory. Many are deep in debt, having sold all valuables and assets and having borrowed money to buy back relatives offered for sale by ISIS fighters. This may be an added source of stress in the complex interaction of factors when resettling in Australia.

¹⁴ Chingaipe, S. (2014, August 20). Anguish for Aussie Yazidis amid Iraq turmoil. *World News Australia*. Retrieved from <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2014/08/19/anguish-aussie-yazidis-amid-iraq-turmoil>

- With hundreds of Yazidi men missing or dead, Yazidi women faced a precarious existence in a society that did not encourage their independence. STARTTS workers should be aware of referral pathways for Yazidi women who will most likely need intensive financial support and skills training if they are to be able to support themselves and their children.

Clinical

- Similar to many client groups from refugee backgrounds, professional counselling is not a part of traditional Yazidi culture which mostly relies on family members and community elders to resolve problems. However some clients may have come across counselling services in refugee camps and extra time may need to be spent in explaining what counselling is. Community development or group strategies may initially be more culturally appropriate for clients.
- Clinicians may see high levels of trauma, complex trauma, grief and depression due to genocide, enslavement, destruction of their homeland and the scattering of the Yazidi community across the world.
- Clinicians should be aware that some of their female clients may have been victims of sexual assault, rape and sexual slavery. They may not have received adequate support from their families or psychosocial services to deal with the impacts prior to resettlement in Australia. There may be a lot of shame and stigma associated with these experiences and female clients may be reluctant to disclose their stories to counsellors. This should be dealt with carefully by counsellors. The blanket use of female counsellors and interpreters with female Yazidi clients is advisable.
- The Human Rights Council reports that Yazidi children held with their mothers are similarly traumatised but many have not received specialised therapy. Yazidi boys who were taken for indoctrination and training by ISIS suffer outbursts of rage and are traumatised by prolonged exposure to violence, either directly at the hands of their instructors, through combat on the battlefield or in training videos.¹³

Group and community development work

- The Yazidi community in Australia is a small emerging community whose culture remains largely unknown and enigmatic to service providers in the CALD sector. The new Yazidi community in Wagga Wagga may initially need intensive support to establish itself and strengthen community leadership.
- As community members and families may have originated from different areas of northern Iraq, there may be caste, class and education differences that impact on community cohesion. Those from west of Mosul tend to be middle class, educated and speak Arabic, whereas those from the Sinjar province and east of Mosul tend to have led a more rural and agrarian existence and speak Kurmanji.

- As a strongly patriarchal culture where Yazidi girls and women are dependent on men, there may be future generational conflict as Yazidi children go to school and integrate into Australian life or form friendships outside their caste. Gender mixing may meet with disapproval and may affect the family's willingness to allow their wives and daughters to participate in STARTTS counselling, group activities and youth camps.
- Yazidis have historically been persecuted not just by Muslims but also by Christians, Kurds and other Iraqi ethnicities. There is likely to be suspicion towards other Iraqis and a desire to avoid contact and remain separate.
- Wednesday is a sacred day and no nakedness as a result of washing, bathing or swimming is allowed. This may affect the scheduling of activities at youth camps and after school activities that involve water.

Recommended Resources

- Acikyildiz, B. (2014). *The Yazidis: a History of a Community, Culture and Religion*. IB Taurus: London.
- Allison, C. (undated). *Yazidisim: a Heterodox Kurdish Religion*. Retrieved at <http://www.cais-soas.com/CAIS/Religions/iranian/yazidis.htm>
- Asher-Schapiro, A. (2014, August 11). Who are the Yazidis, the Ancient, Persecuted Religious Minority Struggling to Survive in Iraq? *National Geographic*. Retrieved at <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/08/140809-iraq-yazidis-minority-isil-religion-history/>
- Attewill, F. (2007, 15 August). Background: the Yazidi. *The Guardian*. Retrieved at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/aug/15/iraq>
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