

## Saeed Oral History Interview Transcript

July 18, 2022

**Seth:** In your opinion, what does it mean to be a Yazidi? What are the most important aspects of your Yazidi identity?

**Saeed:** Yazidism is a very closed religion. No one born outside of the religion can become a Yazidi, and no Yazidi can convert to any other religion. It's not like being a Christian or a Muslim or a Jew, you know. It's *our* religion. We have our own identity, culture, and traditions.

**Seth:** In terms of Yazidi values, philosophy, and moral precepts, what are the main aspects from your experience growing up as a Yazidi that the Yazidi religion teaches?

**Saeed:** There have been 74 genocides against the Yazidi people, as well as against their culture and identity, because of their religion. In 2014, the Islamic State (IS) tried to kill many Yazidis, and they did. Their goal was to destroy Yazidi culture and identity.

**Seth:** What would you say are the main misconceptions that non-Yazidis have about the Yazidi people and their religion?

**Saeed:** Yeah, nobody can become Yazidi, you have to be born Yazidi. That is unique.

**Seth:** What would you like non-Yazidis to know about the Yazidi people? If there was one thing that non-Yazidis like me, or other people, like Muslims and Christians, could learn about them to correct their misperceptions, what would that be?

**Saeed:** Everyone should come and learn from Yazidi culture. If you come to Iraq, you will see Yazidi culture and people. The Yazidi community has very, very old stuff, like temples, that go beyond 2,000 years ago. If you check out Lalish Temple,<sup>1</sup> it is over 2,000 years old. It is the holiest place for all Yazidis around the world. They must go there to worship and pray once every year. It's like for Muslims: they go on the Hajj, and so the Lalish Temple is very holy for Yazidis, and that's why many people go there.

**Seth:** How do Yazidis see God and the Divine?

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<sup>1</sup> Lalish Temple is located in the Sheikhan District of northern Iraq. It is believed to contain the tomb of Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, who is the most important saint in the Yazidi religion.

**Saeed:** They worship God, and then they worship the King of Angels, who is Malak Tawus. They also believe in the sun and the moon. The Yazidi religion and way of life is very old and historic.

**Seth:** Before the genocide in 2014, what was life like for you and other Yazidis living in Iraq?

**Saeed:** Every Yazidi has their own story before the genocide. For example, I have my own that I have written down that is almost 3,000 words. I want to rewrite it in a professional way, but I don't have time, and sometimes, when you go back to imagine the past, it is very difficult to write down on paper. Before the genocide, life was normal for all Yazidis. It was a simple life, you know. Right now, 80% of the Yazidi people live in camps in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Some of them live in Shingal,<sup>2</sup> and many people are going from Iraq to the USA or Australia, Canada, or Germany. Most Yazidi immigrants live in Germany right now as refugees.

**Seth:** What was the community like in terms of where you grew up in Iraq? What was your town like? Was there any persecution before the genocide? Did people get along well?

**Saeed:** My life was very, very difficult. I grew up in a very poor family in a very bad situation, but I didn't give up on anything in my life. Praise the Lord and Praise God, I finished my high school education here in Iraq after the genocide. I went to the University of Duhok. I started in 2016, and I finished my college education in 2020. So, I have a Bachelor's Degree right now. It's been two and a half years since I graduated. I've worked for a long time with many NGOs and groups of American people. I've worked as an English teacher and interpreter. I have been doing a lot.

**Seth:** In terms of your experiences during the genocide, if you would be okay with sharing, do you have any memory of where you were when the genocide began? What do you remember of it?

**Saeed:** It's very difficult. We left our houses and homes on August 3, 2014. The first day of the genocide was August 3. Everybody was trying to escape from IS and trying not to be killed. So, we went to the mountain, Mount Shingal.<sup>3</sup> My family and I stayed there for nine days without any food or water. Then, some groups opened the border from Syria into the Iraqi border. We came from Iraq into Syria, and then we went again from Syria into Iraqi Kurdistan. We stayed in

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<sup>2</sup> "Shingal" is the Northern Kurdish equivalent to "Sinjar," which is an Arabic placename. Shingal refers to the Shingal District of northern Iraq, which, along with the nearby Sheikhan District, constitutes the historical homeland of the Yazidi people. Shingal also refers to the eponymous town, which serves as the district's capital and was largely destroyed during the 2014 genocide.

<sup>3</sup> "Mount Shingal" refers to the highest point of the Shingal Mountains, which border the town of the same name. The mountains are religiously significant to Yazidis, and they have served as a refuge for Yazidis fleeing persecution in the past.

a hole, a very old hole, for about nine months. So, after that, we came back here [to a refugee camp in Kurdistan]. We have been living here since the beginning of 2015 till now.

**Seth:** Thank you for sharing that with me. If you don't mind me asking, what town were you living in at the time?

**Saeed:** I was living in Duhok province.

**Seth:** And did you hear the news of IS advancing from people in your community? Or, was it a total surprise?

**Saeed:** I was asleep! Even my family didn't know that I was asleep. Everybody was trying to get out of the village. I was on the top bunk of my bed and was asleep. So, I woke up, and there were no people there. I tried to walk for a while, and then I saw my family who were on a tractor. We were about 84 people driving on the tractor, and from the village, we drove to the mountain [Mount Shingal] having nothing. Not enough water, no food, nothing.

**Seth:** I can only imagine. I saw pictures and photos of people on the mountain. What were conditions like on the mountain? It must have been hard to survive up there.

**Saeed:** Yes! I can't imagine it or I'll cry.

**Seth:** Were there any people who stayed behind in your town, and do you know what happened to them?

**Saeed:** Yeah, very few of them stayed, but they were killed by IS. IS wanted their state, so that was why they killed them.

**Seth:** Why did IS commit genocide against the Yazidis? What justifications did they give?

**Saeed:** Because of our religion. They wanted us to convert to their religion.

**Seth:** In your opinion, is the genocide still ongoing? Has it ended, or is it still going because there are women, at least 3,000 or more, who are still abducted?

**Saeed:** Yes, 3,000 women are still missing. They were kidnapped.

**Seth:** Are there still efforts being made to find them? Like with NGOs, the military, or not anymore?

**Saeed:** I don't know... Today, one guy, I think he's 14, escaped from IS in Syria. So, now he is safe and back with his family.

**Seth:** And he just recently escaped, so he was in IS captivity up until the present moment?

**Saeed:** He is 14, so he was around seven, seven-and-a-half when IS came to take him... It's been almost eight years... It's horrible.

**Seth:** So, after IS' atrocities, what has been done to rebuild Yazidi towns and infrastructure?

**Saeed:** No, nobody is trying to rebuild anything. I can't go there and work. I don't want to, because it's not safe. There's no support from anyone, so... You don't know which moment you get killed, by groups of evil people.

**Seth:** And is it partially because of issues with the Iraqi government not allocating the direct funds?

**Saeed:** Oh, there are many problems, yeah.

**Seth:** What are some ways that people who are outside of the Yazidi community, people like myself, can get involved to help Yazidis in Iraq and elsewhere?

**Saeed:** There are many ways that you can come and help... I have my own story, and I get very sick when I go to rewrite some of it... This is a story that I have written, is about five to six years old, so it's from a long time ago.

**Seth:** Thank you so much for sharing your time with me. I know it must be difficult, but it takes a lot of courage. I appreciate it.

**Saeed:** No problem. God bless you.