

Zaher Oral History Interview Transcript

January 30, 2023

Seth: Where did you grow up?

Zaher: I grew up in Iraq, in Sheikhan, in the north of Iraq. When I was 16, I left Iraq. I traveled through Turkey, Greece, and then Belgium.

Seth: What was your family like? Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Zaher: We lived well. My father is an English teacher and my mother is a housewife. I have four brothers and two sisters.

Seth: Before the genocide in 2014, what was life like for you, your family, and other Yazidis living in your community?

Zaher: Before the genocide, we lived well. Everyone was working. There were people who were doing quite well, who lived normally. But, there were always problems in Iraq, like the al-Qaeda attacks.¹ In 2007, there was an attack on the town of Sinjar. At the same time, there were 1,000 people injured and hundreds dead in Tel Ezer, a village that is not far from Sinjar. Apart from that, there was also a kidnapping of a bus of workers, Yazidis who were working in the city of Mosul. These people were killed. 25 people were arrested and 24 were shot by al-Qaeda. There is one who survived. He was injured, but he survived this attack. Then, at the end of 2008, I left, but I was a student. Apart from that, though, we lived normally. There were no problems like there were in 2014.

Seth: How did non-Yazidis, like Muslim Arabs and Kurds, treat Yazidis in the area where you grew up? Did you or anyone else you knew in the local Yazidi community experience persecution because of your identity?

Zaher: With Kurdish Muslims, the situation in Iraq is a bit complicated. The Yazidis are always seen as inferior to the others, as we are neither Muslims nor Christians. I will give you an example: when we go to the hospital or a store, if they see that we are Yazidis, they will always pass us or give us the last item. They look at us with an inferior gaze because we are Yazidis. Other than that, Muslims generally don't want to eat meat that was made by the hands of Yazidi families. Some of them accept it, but the majority don't.

¹ On August 14, 2007, a series of suicide bombings took place in the villages of Tel Ezer and Siba Sheikh Khidir in northern Iraq. The bombings targeted the villages' Yazidi communities, killing nearly 800 people and injuring over 1,500. No group took responsibility for the attacks, but they closely resembled similar bombings carried out by al-Qaeda.

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

Zaher: As Yazidis, personally, it's a unique religion that's not really different from the others. We believe in one God, like all the others, but we don't have a [holy] book. We believe in our ancestors. The Yazidi religion was transmitted orally, father to son, grandfather to father. It's transmitted like that. You can't become a Yazidi by conversion, no. You have to be born a Yazidi. We very much appreciate our identity as Yazidis, like all other religions.

Seth: What moral or philosophical lessons does Yazidism teach?

Zaher: We are taught religious values and lessons from the family and from the teachers at school. We receive a lot of information on religion because it is given orally. We have a book that explains all the steps. It does not take long. I think this book came out 40 years ago. It is also transmitted to all the children at school. They learn how to practice prayers, how to know a lot about religion, how to know where we come from, and how the religion has existed for centuries. Some say it's been 4,000 years, some say it's been 7,000 years that we've existed as Yazidis.

We also have Lalish, the temple.² You may know it, which is located in northern Iraq. This is a sacred place for the Yazidis. Every newborn Yazidi child must be blessed in Lalish. All over the world, in Europe, in the USA, it must be blessed with Lalish water. Also, we have many important religious people. The Mir is the king of the Yazidis; he is from the family of Tahsin Beg.³ There is also the Baba Sheikh, who is the most important man in the Yazidi religion. The man who is still in Lalish is the Baba Chawish. Finally, the Baba Peshimam works with the Baba Sheikh.⁴ He is always with him in all religious meetings and ceremonies.

Seth: What are the main misconceptions that non-Yazidis have about the Yazidi people and religion?

Zaher: Non-Yazidis in Iraq, but not all of them, not those who know us well, consider all Yazidis to be unbelievers. Unbeliever, you understand? They think that we pray to the Devil. They say, "You pray to the Devil, you don't pray to God." It's the non-Yazidis, they tell us things like that, but it's not true.

² 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.

³ The Mir serves as the political leader of the Yazidi people. Hazim Tahsin Beg is the current Yazidi Mir as of 2023, and has reigned since the death of his father, Tahsin Said, in 2019.

⁴ Regarding other positions in the Yazidi religious hierarchy, the Baba Sheikh serves as the religious leader for all Yazidis. The Baba Chawish serves as the custodian and guardian of Lalish Temple. The Baba Peshimam is an important religious leader in Yazidi society, leading specialized prayers, facilitating weddings, and organizing the payment of dowries, among other tasks.

Seth: What would you like non-Yazidis to know most about the Yazidi people, their religion, and their culture?

Zaher: Personally, I follow people in these areas. I send a message to others, that what others believe about us is not true. They must know the truth that I am someone like you, like the others. I am a human. Just as you practice humanitarian laws in your countries, we also want to be respected. We don't want you to get an impression of us that we're not good. That's false. For us, [Yazidism] is a religion of peace. We never hurt anyone. Even in our prayers that we pray, we pray for others after we pray for ourselves. You understand? I pray for all people after I pray for myself.

Seth: Did you experience the Islamic State's genocide in 2014? If so, would you feel comfortable with describing your experiences during that time?

Zaher: No, I was in Belgium. My uncle was living in Sinjar. After that, he came north and fled. I started going to Iraq, it was December 2014. After four months, I worked in New York. I worked with an organization for Yahad-In Unum in 2015, collecting testimonies [of Yazidi survivors] with Father Patrick Desbois.⁵

Seth: Why did the Islamic State commit genocide against the Yazidis? What justifications did they give to support their atrocities?

Zaher: Why? Because the Islamic State was telling the Yazidis, "You have no choice: either convert to Islam or be shot." The [Sinjar] region was controlled by the Islamic State, "Daesh."⁶ The genocide was not far from Syria, it was on the border, the border of Syria, and it was a strategic place. They wanted to raze the Yazidis, to kill everyone. They raped women and kidnapped children, putting them in training camps and transforming them into terrorists. The reason for the attack by the Islamic State was that we were Yazidis, non-Muslims. That's why they didn't accept [our religion]. They said, "We are here, you must convert to Islam, you are obliged."

Seth: In your opinion, is the genocide still ongoing? If so, why?

Zaher: The genocide by the Islamic State... The Islamic State is now no longer a state; they are gone. There are still Yazidis in Syria in the al-Hol refugee camp. We don't know where many of

⁵ Yahad-In Unum is a French nonprofit that researches and educates about genocides all over the world. It is led by Father Patrick Desbois, a Catholic priest and educator.

⁶ "Daesh" is a pejorative Arabic nickname for the Islamic State. It is derived from the Arabic letters of the group's 2013 acronym "ISIS," and the nickname is pronounced in an insulting, aggressive tone.

our children are. Since they are among the families of Daesh, the terrorists do not want to leave them behind. Because some Yazidi girls have had children [through rape by IS fighters], Daesh puts it in their heads that the Yazidis are bad, and that if the girls return to the Yazidis in Iraq, the Yazidis will kill them, but that's not true. There are a lot of Islamic people in Iraq, and the Yazidis do not kill them.

Seth: How long have Yazidis been persecuted for their religion? Is Daesh's genocide part of a pattern of historical persecution against Yazidis?

Zaher: The Yazidis have been persecuted by other religions for centuries. According to my information, the Yazidis have had 74 genocides. Many genocides have occurred in Turkey, in Iraq, and indeed in Sinjar. It was always because of religion. They wanted to convert the Yazidis to Islam.

Seth: What has life been like for Yazidis in Iraq after the genocide?

Zaher: The majority of people live under canvas tents in Kurdistan and Iraq. Some were able to return to the town of Sinjar, but not many. There are still Turkish bombings on the militias located in the Sinjar Mountains. Among these bombings, some Yazidis are victims. The situation is not stable. There are several militias there. The Yazidis say, "We are not going to return to be killed by the bombings or by the conflicts of the militias that are in the Sinjar region." Besides, as you see, the Yahad-In Unum organization is still working with these displaced people. They still live in tents in the camps. There are 17 camps. I admit that the situation of people in the camps is not good. They live in difficulty.

Seth: After Daesh's atrocities in 2014, what has been done to rebuild Yazidi towns, infrastructure, and communities?

Zaher: As I told you, the city is not yet rebuilt, the city of Sinjar. It's still destroyed. If you see the photos, it seems like the attack was yesterday. The destroyed houses are still there. If you can't rebuild a city, you can't go back into it. As a result, many people who lost all their possessions and their homes are not going to return. Some people say, "The city must be rebuilt for me so that I can go and live in the city." Today, the city is still as before. There are no buildings there, at least according to what I saw with Father Patrick Desbois last year.

Seth: What can non-Yazidis do to best help the Yazidi people in Iraq and around the world?

Zaher: The first thing that's needed is to rebuild the city [of Sinjar], hospitals, and schools, and [to restore] electricity in the city. People need all of these daily necessities as well as security. They still need security so they don't have a lot of militias bombing the city. If the city is rebuilt,

they will have electricity, water, and security. [Ideally,] they will be protected either by Kurdistan or by the Iraqi state, which means that people can return and live well in their homes.

Seth: Thank you so much for your time, I really appreciate it.

Zaher: Thanks. Have a nice day, Seth.