Matthew Travis Barber Interview Transcript

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Matthew Travis Barber is a Ph.D. candidate in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. His research focuses on the 2014 Yazidi Genocide, the political history of the Yazidi people throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, and the historical and contemporary existence of religious minorities in Iraq. Barber was in Iraq during the 2014 genocide and was one of the first scholars and activists to publicize it to the wider world. He interviewed survivors, documented mass graves and killing sites, and organized efforts to provide aid to the Yazidi people by petitioning the governments of the United States, Canada, and other countries. For more information about Matthew Travis Barber's work, click here.

Seth: Thank you so much for being here and choosing to speak with me.

Matthew: It's a great pleasure, and I'm really happy about your interest in the Yazidi Genocide.

Seth: Thank you. My first question is, when did you start working with the Yazidi community?

Matthew: I learned about the Yazidi community for the first time in a class when I was a college student, an undergrad. It was [during] a course on religious minorities in the Islamic world. The professor was assigning us articles about the history, politics, and religious systems of quite a large number of groups, and that was the first time I'd ever heard about this community.

I was quite fascinated by [the Yazidis'] continuing existence, considering that they don't see themselves as part of the Abrahamic tradition. Parts of their religion are very much influenced by or contain elements of local indigenous traditions that are quite old. I was just fascinated that this still existed in a region that has so much emphasis on a certain interpretation of monotheism that, at least, in some forms isn't very tolerant of communities that are outside the trajectory of what Islam calls "People of the Book,"[1] which tends to be the legacy coming from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. That was a very interesting encounter for me through the literature, and I wanted to know more about the Yazidis.

From 2010 to 2011, I lived in Syria. I was there when the civil war began, [and] this was the first time that I interacted with Yazidis. I traveled into northern Iraq from Syria and made contact with Yazidi communities and visited a number of their villages, including Lalish,[2] at that time. In 2012, I was doing a summer research program at Columbia University's History department. It

[1] The Islamic term "People of the Book" (or *ahl al-kitab* in Arabic) refers to Jews, Christians, Sabians, and Zoroastrians, who possess holy books or texts (such as the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament) that are grounded in monotheistic divine revelation. These books and texts are seen as preceding the Qur'an, which Muslims believe is the word of God and is the culmination of God's revelation.

[2] Lalish Temple is located in the Sheikhan District of northern Iraq and is the holiest site in Yazidism. It is believed to contain the tomb of Sheikh Adi ibn Musafir, who is the most important saint in the Yazidi religion.

was a special focused strategy program thinking about religious violence in different contexts. They supported me to go back to northern Iraq and do some research about how Yazidis engage with the legal system in the country. That was the beginning of a long-term project that is still developing today. It was quite a while back, but… parts of it may be published before too long. I was in northern Iraq for the third time in 2014 when the genocide began. I already had quite a strong connection to the community by that point and had interacted with them over a number of years and happened to be there again doing research when this whole terrible tragedy began to unfold.

Seth: When you were there, how did you witness the genocide unfolding around you? When did you first become aware of it and how did you experience it firsthand?

Matthew: I was living in Duhok[3] when it began, and around Duhok, you have a number of Yazidi towns, and then there are more Yazidi communities in the Nineveh Plains.[4] The primary Yazidi population center is Sinjar Mountain, or what Yazidis call it in Kurmanji [the northern dialect of the Kurdish language], "Shingal."[5] [Sinjar] Mountain is three hours away from Duhok. [Sinjar] was the epicenter of the genocide, so not very far from where I was. The morning that it was attacked, a Yazidi man called me and said, "Come to my office immediately." I said, "What's happened?" He said, "Shingal has been attacked by Daesh.[6] It has been conquered," and I said, "The city? Part of Shingal? Or all of Shingal?" He said, "All of Shingal."

I still remember those very ominous words. It was just a moment when everything kind of stops. I went to his office and began writing an article about what was going on, talking to a lot of people that same morning. That was the moment advocacy work began, the first moment that the genocide began, the first day. In Duhok, I saw streams of displaced Yazidis from Shingal because, as everyone knows, over 300,000 Yazidis were displaced. I saw caravans of people streaming into the city, children hanging out of the trunks of cars.

You might have a family of 12 people with one tiny little sedan and it's impossible to carry everyone and all the belongings, so it was a dire situation. People were camping on the sides of the roads in every empty building, every empty school. It was summer, so schools were empty. Every school in the Duhok Governorate pretty much became a makeshift, temporary lodging place for displaced Yazidis. This was before camps began to be developed. At that early stage, everywhere you turned, it was a humanitarian disaster.

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[3] Duhok is a major city in northern Iraq and serves as the capital of Duhok Governorate in Iraqi Kurdistan.
[4] The Nineveh Plains is a region in northern Iraq that is located to the northeast of the city of Mosul (see page 4). It includes the Sheikhan District, which is part of the Yazidi people's historical homeland.
[5] Sinjar Mountain, also known as "Mount Sinjar," marks the highest point of the Sinjar Mountains. The Sinjar Mountains border the town of the same name and are religiously significant to Yazidis. They have served as a refuge for Yazidis fleeing persecution in the past and the present.
[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.

Seth: For those who are unfamiliar, what is the Islamic State and why did it perpetrate the Yazidi Genocide in 2014?

Matthew: This is such interesting question, because the Islamic State evolved in stages. It was [established by] a Jordanian man named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In the '90s, he was in Afghanistan fighting against the Russians alongside the other Afghani and Arab *mujahideen*[7] who were supported by the US. He had a relationship with Bin Laden, but he was also somewhat separate. He had a tense relationship because I think he liked to run his own show. He developed his own jihadist organization and later came back to the Middle East from Afghanistan. When he came back, he settled in Iraq and was actually located in a village in Kurdistan. The CIA knew where he was and wanted to take him out, as he posed a significant threat. He was probably the most significant jihadist ideologue in the country at that time or, at least, he posed the threat of becoming such in the future. When Dick Cheney[8] learned that the CIA wanted to assassinate him, he stopped them because he was trying to develop various arguments in justification for the war in Iraq, which had not begun yet.

There were all of these arguments, "Well, Iraq has weapons of mass destruction. Well, maybe they're friendly with al-Qaeda," all of these false arguments that we know were lies, but Cheney wanted some cause to try to malign Saddam Hussein.[9] Of course, with Saddam, you don't really need to malign him. He was a bad guy, but in terms of a threat posed to our country, there wasn't really anything there. When Dick Cheney learned about al-Zarqawi, he said, "We're going to make the claim that Saddam is harboring a dangerous jihadist." Now, of course, this guy was up in the mountains in Kurdistan, where you had a lot of resistance against the Iraqi regime.

Saddam didn't always maintain direct control over every part of Kurdistan. [Al-Zarqawi was] just hiding out in some isolated village. Saddam certainly was not harboring him. If Saddam had the ability to or had known where he was or had the striking power in that area, he would've killed al-Zarqawi himself. But Colin Powell[10] gave a speech before the United Nations [on February 5th, 2003] and he mentioned al-Zarqawi's name [about] 21 times. I don't remember the exact number, but this has all been described in a [PBS] Frontline documentary that has talked about Powell's speech. Powell later downplayed the fact that he was talking about al-Zarqawi,

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[7] The Arabic term *mujahideen* refers to those who wage war in defense of Islam or the broader Muslim community (*ummah*). The term was most notably used by Afghan guerilla fighters in their war against the Soviet Union during the 1970s and 1980s. It has since been used by many Islamic militant and jihadist organizations around the world.
[8] Dick Cheney was the Vice President of the United States from 2001 to 2009, serving under President George W. Bush. He was instrumental in facilitating the United States' War on Terror following al-Qaeda's attacks on September 11th, 2001. He was also a strong advocate for the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, accusing then-president Saddam Hussein of building weapons of mass destruction and supporting al-Qaeda.
[9] Saddam Hussein was the President of Iraq from 1979 until 2003, when he was deposed during the United States' invasion of the country. Hussein's government was authoritarian, repressive, and responsible for various human rights abuses against its own people.
[10] Colin Powell was the United States Secretary of State from 2001 to 2005, serving under President George W. Bush. His speech to the United Nations outlined the justifications for the US' impending invasion of Iraq. However, the speech was based on largely inaccurate information, which Powell himself later admitted.

but in reality, he very much referred to al-Zarqawi in his speech as evidence that Iraq was harboring dangerous jihadists, and that was why the US should invade. Of course, having this public speech given in the UN gave al-Zarqawi the opportunity to escape and go into hiding in a new place where he couldn't be detected. At that point, his whereabouts were lost to US intelligence, and then when the war began, al-Zarqawi started the strongest movement of resistance that importantly wasn't just about resisting the US' invasion, but was also about fomenting sectarian civil war in Iraq. Al-Zarqawi's technique was to attack Shiites and blow up their mosques in order to elicit on their part reprisal attacks against Sunnis in order to create this kind of apocalyptic war that he wanted to engineer. In a way, he was successful at engineering that. The US then had its hands full for many years trying to squelch this massive civil conflict.

This even produced tension between al-Zarqawi and al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda was telling [him], "You can't just go and kill Shiite civilians like this. You will engender the enmity of many segments of the general Muslim population who will reject this kind of behavior." Al-Zarqawi was really extreme. He was more extreme than al-Qaeda back in those days, and that extremism would continue into the mentality that underpinned the Islamic State. The US was dealing with that for quite a long time. Al-Zarqawi ended up being killed, but the movement he started, the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), would later find its new iteration as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) [which later changed its name to "the Islamic State" in 2014], and that was made possible by the Syrian civil war.[11]

Jumping forward to 2011, the loss of Bashar al-Assad's[12] regime's control over areas of eastern and northern Syria allowed jihadists to begin proliferating there in a really robust way. While al-Zarqawi was out of the picture, the inheritors of his legacy used this opportunity to start developing jihadist forces inside of Syria, whereas in Iraq, the US had finally succeeded in suppressing this movement to the point where it only existed underground.

In Syria, [the Islamic State] had the opportunity to start operating openly and really build up an army. Then, they would attack rival Sunni jihadist organizations and make them join their forces. They would basically compel all rival entities to join them, expanding their territorial and military power until they were strong enough to reenter Iraq, which they did in 2014. [The Islamic State] attacked Mosul[13] in early June 2014. That then set the stage for the genocide, which started around two months after [the jihadists] had openly invaded Iraq from Syria and conquered Mosul.

[11] The Syrian civil war began in 2011, when protests against the government of President Bashar al-Assad erupted into fighting between government forces, rebel militias, and jihadist groups. The conflict continues to this day.
[12] Bashar al-Assad is the President of the Syrian Arab Republic, having served in that position since 2000. Al-Assad's dictatorial rule, which has been characterized by the repression and murder of political opponents and the surveillance of Syrian citizens, resulted in the Syrian civil war in 2011.
[13] Mosul is the second-largest city in Iraq and is the largest city in the north of the country.

Why did [the Islamic State] conduct this genocide? It's interesting to think about the distinctions between their stated reasons versus true motivations. The Islamic State had their theological justifications for this genocide. They talked about the "fact" that Yazidis needed to be exterminated as an entire community because this was God's will, and that God was going to judge Muslims for having allowed this polytheistic, non-People of the Book minority to continue to have existed for this long.[14] On Judgment Day, God would be angry with Muslims for not having killed the Yazidis centuries prior.

[The Islamic State was] very open about the fact that this was a genocide and they gave these theological justifications for their enslavement project. We know that female sexual enslavement was the most visible feature of this particular genocide, with over 3,500 women and girls kidnapped and enslaved on a single day, the first day of the genocide, August 3rd, 2014. The Islamic State provided this rationale by referencing the practice of slavery among the earliest generation of Muslims, when Islamic law had specific provisions about the nature of slavery and how to perform it in a legally acceptable fashion.

Slavery has been outlawed throughout the Muslim world following its virtual global abolishment [in the 19th and 20th centuries]. There have been vestiges of it in certain parts of the Islamic world that took a long time to eliminate slavery. It was still practiced in the Gulf in the 1950s, 1960s, and possibly even later. Even in countries where it was abolished, it continued to be practiced locally in different forms and certain contexts. But, by and large, it was abolished and is illegal in most Muslim countries, and so the practice has declined. We could talk about new forms of economic slavery, like the way that South Asian workers are treated in Qatar and other countries in the Gulf. We know about people having their passports taken away and basically being treated as chattel, even building the stadiums for the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. In general, however, formalized slavery has been abolished.

The Islamic State's position regarding slavery follows the arguments of certain Salafi[15] jurists, contemporary Salafi muftis,[16] and exegetes. These thinkers argue that slavery never should have been abolished because it was the practice of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. Therefore, slavery is legitimate, and there was no basis for reformers to eliminate it. This is an argument that most Muslim intellectuals today would reject, but you do have quite a robust segment of thinkers in the Salafi vein who have maintained positions like this. The Islamic State

[14] Yazidis believe in a monotheistic religion and are not "devil worshippers." However, many Muslims and jihadist groups, including the Islamic State, have incorrectly identified the Peacock Angel (*Tawusi Melek* in Kurmanji), who is God's most important emanation and embassador to humanity in the Yazid religion, with the figure of *Iblis*, or Satan, in the Qur'an. Yazidis have been persecuted and killed for centuries because of this false association.
[15] Salafism is an Islamic theological movement that aims to revive what its members see as the "pure" and "authentic" form of Islam that was practiced during the time of the Prophet Muhammad, his companions, and his companions' followers. See the Yazidi Genocide Archive's interview with Dr. Cole Bunzel for a detailed analysis of Salafism.
[16] A mufti is a jurist who interprets Islamic law and produces nonbinding legal opinions, or *fatwas*, that resolve outstanding legal issues and questions.

believed that it was restoring true Islamic practice by reviving slavery, and it was very proud of this. In 2014, the group advertised this revival of slavery in its *Dabiq* magazine[17] and other publications.

Now, these are the stated reasons, but like I mentioned previously, there's a distinction between theological justifications and true motivations. In reality, this genocide was just about rampant selfishness. It wasn't like the Islamic State was making some great sacrifice to do this. If the genocide had been detrimental to their movement and agenda, the [jihadists] wouldn't have conducted it. They did this because it was incredibly profitable and sexually gratifying.

I think there were three main reasons for the Islamic State's motivation to commit genocide against the Yazidis. One was strategic territorial control. [During the genocide,] the Islamic State expanded the land that they were controlling. The second reason was material plunder. The Islamic State set the Yazidi community back in terms of its development by 50 years. They plundered decades of wealth that the community had managed to slowly build up over time. I say slowly because the Yazidis were one of the most disadvantaged communities in Iraq, one of the most marginalized.

The Islamic State plundered farm equipment, vehicles, and gold that [Yazidis] had in their houses, which is the form of savings that is common for people to keep in Iraq. Livestock was also a heavily plundered commodity. Yazidis were farmers and pastoralists, so there were massive sheep herds in the Sinjar region. The Islamic State was able to seize all of this. I refer to the third reason as "sexual selfishness," because the normal channel whereby a man satisfies his sexual needs requires effort, work, and sacrifice. He has to undergo the process of building a relationship and creating an acceptable context in which a sexual relationship can happen. This enslavement project was the circumvention of that.

This project involved a large number of people. It was hundreds or thousands of young men saying, "No, we are going to seize these women by force, en masse, and take them as our own." In some instances, that took the form of marriages. There were even Islamic State jihadists who performed weddings with women whom they wanted to marry. With others, you had more of the phenomenon of chattel slavery, just passing women from one man to another, selling women. Some women were owned by an entire string of men by the time they escaped or were rescued from enslavement. There were different forms that the enslavement took, different personal motivations on the part of individual actors, different modes of treatment that the men and their families who participated in their enslavement would manifest toward these women. I think that those three broad motivations are the key factors behind why the Islamic State wanted to conduct this genocide.

[17] *Dabiq* was an English-language propaganda magazine published online by the Islamic State from 2014 to 2016. It aimed to spread the organization's ideology to and recruit new members from English-speaking populations.

Seth: Which Islamic State officials or bureaucratic bodies oversaw the creation and implementation of this genocide? In other words, how was this genocide planned and who planned it?

Matthew: I think, for the purpose of this conversation, it might not be really beneficial for me to go into the specific actors involved. One reason for this is because a lot of these figures are not very publicly known. We don't even have pictures or images of some of them. There are analysts who have tried to piece together who some of the primary actors were based on scant online evidence. Some of these people were not very public figures. They were not on television advertising themselves.

I think there's still a lot of mystery regarding this issue. Certainly, we know some of the key names, some of the people who led contingents of the Islamic State's forces. But in terms of the planning, structure, and implementation of this, there were clearly many actors involved, and there are many of them who are unknown. There are women who escaped from enslavement and then reported the names of their particular captors. In some cases, they were able to provide intelligence about the rank this person might hold within the Islamic State. Not every woman who was enslaved really had access to that level of information, but some did. There are documentation projects still trying to piece together as much information about that as possible. Nothing has really been published about that.

In my research, I focus on thinking about different actors that were responsible for this genocide, either active or passive actors. The Islamic State is clearly the number one actor, but it is not the only actor that holds responsibility for this genocide. The US bears responsibility because it could have prevented this genocide and it did not. Then, after the genocide began, the US' response was quite poor, and it took extremely insufficient steps to resolve this genocide. That's a state of affairs that continues to the present. There is responsibility there.

An even greater level of responsibility is held by the KDP, the Kurdistan Democratic Party.[18] Their role in allowing this genocide to take place [is significant], and I would go so far as to use the word "facilitating" this genocide. I know that some people would immediately find that very controversial, but when you understand the nature of what happened, I think there's no other way to think about it than facilitation. They are second only to the Islamic State in terms of the degree of responsibility held for this genocide.

Then, you have more peripheral actors that still hold responsibility. You have the Gulf countries, [from] which many jihadists came to fight in the Syrian civil war. They ended up joining the Islamic State and then attacked Sinjar and the Yazidis. There was tacit approval in the Gulf

[18] The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) is the largest and most dominant political party in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which controls vast amounts of territory in northern Iraq. Grounded in Kurdish nationalism and autonomy from Iraq, it has long been associated with the Barzani family, which has led the party since its founding in 1946.

countries for some of that activity on the part of certain figures there. However, it was Turkey that played a direct role in supporting and benefitting the Islamic State, which clearly ended up having an effect on the genocide. Something like this that happens in a geopolitical context involves many actors on many fronts. There are different players who, in one way or another, either supported or allowed the Yazidi Genocide to happen.

Seth: I find what you said about the United States, the Kurdistan Democratic Party, and Turkey very fascinating. Maybe we could break down each party's involvement, starting with the US. What role, from the initial 2003 invasion of Iraq to the Yazidi Genocide in 2014, did the US have in enabling this atrocity to happen?

Matthew: I think, for time, we probably can't go through the entire list I have. People can look up the material if they're interested in learning more about that. Let's focus on the US and the KDP as the two most consequential actors after the Islamic State. I did leave out the local Arab tribes in the vicinity of the Yazidi communities in the Sinjar region who joined the Islamic State and participated in the genocide. That's another phenomenon. In one sense, you could couple that with the Islamic State and see that as part of the broader Islamic State phenomenon, although they weren't necessarily part of that movement. They were local actors who, in some ways, joined with the Islamic State out of fear, because they knew it was very powerful, but then they opportunistically participated in the rampant plunder of the Yazidi community, and, in some cases, the enslavement process as well. You had many members of those tribes join the Islamic State or help facilitate this genocide.

There were cases of local Arabs and Kurdish Muslims who saved Yazidi lives. There were some Arabs who died trying to shield Yazidis from the Islamic State's violence. These are very important and powerful stories. Unfortunately, they're far less common than the broader phenomenon of certain tribes as a whole joining with the Islamic State to participate in the genocide. That's all under the umbrella of the Islamic State phenomenon. Like I said, after the Islamic State, we have the KDP as the second most important player bearing responsibility for this, and then we have the US.

The US was aware that Islamic State forces were building and encroaching upon Sinjar. This was not a surprise. This genocide didn't happen without warning signs because, like I mentioned, the Islamic State had invaded Mosul and taken over that area around two months prior. In those two months, the Islamic State slowly consolidated control over all Arab areas around Sinjar Mountain until it was almost an island. It was almost fully surrounded by Islamic State control. During this time, Iraqi officials were calling the US administration and asking for airstrikes. They were begging for it.

In some cases, they were speaking on the phone with Joe Biden, who was Obama's vice president in 2014. The US was rebuffing their requests. The reason the US was doing that was

because it was afraid that Nouri al-Maliki,[19] the Prime Minister of Iraq, was moving in a more despotic direction and that he wasn't going to be honoring elections. He needed to step down, let a successor take place, and allow elections to proceed. The US was afraid that Maliki wasn't going to do that. He was going to consolidate control and become a new autocratic ruler.

The US wanted pressure to mount against Maliki to try to make him step down. They pursued this policy by letting the Islamic State proliferate: it conquered Anbar Governorate and Salahuddin Governorate and Nineveh Governorate. As the Islamic State was expanding rapidly through these Sunni-majority areas of Iraq, Iraqis were asking for air support because they couldn't stop [the jihadist group]. The US said no.

You have to think about what the cost was for that policy. Maliki didn't care that Sunni areas were falling. As long as he controlled Shiite majority regions in central and southern Iraq, that was enough for him. That was enough power. That mattered more to him than the loss of those Sunni areas. This opened the door for massive ethnic cleansing of the Assyrian Christian population, whose cities and towns in the Nineveh Plain were just drained and the entire Christian population of Mosul was expelled by the Islamic State. Then, the Yazidi Genocide happened. That was the price paid for this policy that didn't even work very well. Maliki only ended up stepping down once Iran joined the international community and called for him to leave. Did this policy even succeed? He didn't seem to care about what the West was saying, but when Iran said, "Okay, yes, you need to go," then he did.

There was ample time to stop the Islamic State's expansion. When did the US finally intervene? Well, it intervened when Erbil was threatened because Erbil has a US consulate.[20] Not only that, but I think the US was invested in protecting the Kurdistan region generally because of the political relationship it has with the US. The genocide began on August 3rd, Sinjar was attacked, and then Islamic State forces almost made it to Erbil. They were encroaching on Erbil at the same time.

When Obama announced the airstrikes, he cited stopping a genocidal phenomenon or potential genocide as the reasons for [US intervention against the Islamic State]. He knew that enslavement was happening, even on the very first day [of the genocide]. US intelligence provided that information to him because he mentioned enslavement [in his August 7th, 2014 speech to the American people]. He talked about the jihadists and said that they enslaved [Yazidi] women. Then, he cited the situation with Erbil.

[19] Nouri al-Maliki was the Prime Minister of Iraq from 2006 until 2014. He was a longtime opponent of Saddam Hussein and worked with the United States during and after its 2003 invasion of Iraq. He later drew the US' ire for his government's increasing corruption and provoking sectarian and ethnic conflict.
[20] Erbil is the capital and largest city of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). As the KRI's capital, it is home to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which is the region's executive body.

When you think about the course of action pursued by Obama, you have to think about a couple of things. It's clear that this policy of allowing the Islamic State to expand, to put pressure on Maliki, was devastating for Iraq. It allowed the Islamic State to get entrenched. That was a policy mistake no matter what. In terms of ordering the airstrikes, that was actually quite a controversial thing for Obama to do in 2014. This was because there was such a sense of war fatigue on the part of American society, which was really tired of the war in Iraq. People wanted the war to end and Obama had promised to end it and bring the troops out. He had brought most of the troops out [by 2011], if I remember correctly.

Part of this was his own fault because he was advised by senior diplomats, including the former ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, not to bring these forces out. [These diplomats believed that] Iraq may not be ready to defend itself from the jihadist threat that was still present. That was a very prescient prediction, but Obama was really pursuing that policy [of military withdrawal] because he wanted to be seen as the president who ended these wars [in Iraq and Afghanistan].

When Obama did finally order these airstrikes, even though they were airstrikes without putting any boots on the ground, he still took flak from people on the left. You had these voices immediately saying, "Oh, this is American imperialism again." Well, clearly, the war in Iraq was. When Bush invaded Iraq, that was imperialism, but there are instances where you have a mess and the only way to save thousands of people is military intervention. The situation never should have existed in the first place. That was the US' fault. It wasn't Obama's fault.

Obama's intervention against the Islamic State to try to [protect] Yazidis wasn't imperialism, but you had voices on the far left in this country [saying that it was]. In the fall of 2014, I remember being in Portland, Oregon. I am from the Northwest, and I had come back after the genocide had begun. I was listening to an extremely leftist radio station called KBOO, which is very popular in Portland. There was some talking head on there just laying into Obama about how [the airstrikes were] American warmongering and neocolonialism. I had just come back from being right in the center of where this was happening and seeing what was happening to the Yazidis. I was shaking my head. "How can anyone talk like this? Do you not understand that this is the only way to save all of these lives?"

What was surprising was that you also had certain voices on the libertarian right that echoed the same exact message. Senator Ron Paul was one of them. He was immediately condemning Obama for ordering these airstrikes. It didn't make any sense. It was very controversial. Obama was scared because it contradicted the image that he had sought to cultivate about himself as the president that would be ending these wars. Sadly, that fear made his response too little. It minimized the degree to which he was willing to pursue action in response to this crisis, and that brings us to the next little component of this failure.

The US ordered food aid to be dropped on Sinjar Mountain five days into the genocide. Several scores of children had already died from sun exposure, dehydration, and starvation on top of

Sinjar Mountain. Women were having miscarriages as they tried to climb up the mountain. There were women trying to keep their babies alive with their own saliva. People were eating leaves. People were killing domesticated animals and eating raw meat. This was the hottest time of the year in Iraq. There were elderly people who couldn't walk.

Sinjar Mountain is incredibly steep. I have walked the route that people took over the crest of the mountain to trace at least a little bit of some shadow of what the experience might have been. You can still see discarded clothing and cooking implements, and whatever people had grabbed in their hands is just strewn all along these goat trails up over the mountain. People who were with disabilities, elderly people, people who were ill, handicapped people, they couldn't make this trek. Many of them died in their homes, killed by the Islamic State. Some tried to get up the base of the mountain, had heart attacks, and died. There were young men who had to choose, "Which parent am I going to carry?" There are images you can see of this. There's an image of a young man picking up his mother on his back as his father sits alone and is left behind. This was possibly the father's choice. Who knows how the deliberations played out in that moment.

On the fifth day of this catastrophe, the US dropped food aid. Airstrikes against the Islamic State didn't start until a full week into the genocide. Then, you had the village of Kocho, Nadia Murad's village.[21] It was surrounded by [Islamic State fighters] on August 3rd with all of its people inside. That remained the case for almost two weeks. There was an opportunity to save that village if the US had been willing to put boots on the ground, to do an intervention there. At that point, there were not a lot of jihadists guarding the village. I was calling people inside of Kocho every day to check on their status. Furthermore, I was already being called by US officials from Washington because of the speaking I was doing on social media and with journalistic outlets.

I was pushing for action, as was the Yazidi advocacy team that had started forming here in the United States, on the first day of the genocide. These Yazidi activists would later end up being the founders of the Yazda organization, which became the most prominent voice of Yazidi advocacy.[22] Beginning on the first day of this crisis, they formed a team here in the US and were immediately engaging with the US government. Their message was, "You must intervene now to save these people. You can save Kocho. You can't save the people that are already dead. You can save the people on the mountain with protection and more aid, but there are still places like Kocho that are surrounded where lives can be saved."

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[21] Nadia Murad is a Yazidi activist and survivor of the 2014 Yazidi Genocide. Born and raised in the village of Kocho, the Islamic State abducted and sold her into sexual slavery on August 15th, 2014. She escaped her captors a few months later and began her work as an activist, raising awareness about the genocide, the enslavement of Yazidi women, and sexual violence against women around the world. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018 for her efforts and founded Nadia's Initiative, a nonprofit organization that provides aid and counseling to survivors of sexual violence and mass atrocities.

[22] Yazda is a global Yazidi nonprofit that provides humanitarian aid to Yazidi refugees in Iraq and Syria. It also performs advocacy work about and research on the 2014 genocide.

That message was coming from the Yazidi community through the form of people who were here in the country who spoke English and established contact with people in the US government. That message was coming from me. It was coming from other people. There were some journalists covering this and some people in the UN who commented on it. On August 14th, US military personnel who visited Sinjar Mountain by helicopter declared that the situation was over. [They claimed that] the humanitarian disaster wasn't as bad as they had anticipated because, by that point, a lot of food aid had been dropped.

The PKK[23] had helped evacuate Yazidis off of the mountain through its north side and then across the Syrian border. They said, "Oh, this is not as bad as we thought it was," and Obama declared victory. That same day [on August 14th, 2014], an article that I wrote was published by the *New Statesman* periodical in the UK.[24] I basically said the very opposite message, "If you don't intervene, a lot more people are going to die," and I mentioned Kocho.

The Yazidi leaders and community were furious with this message coming from Obama, the US, and the general [international community] because it gave this false sense that the peak of danger in the conflict had passed. That just wasn't true at all. The next day [on August 15th, 2014], the Kocho Massacre happened. Everybody inside that town, except for younger women and children, were murdered.[25] It was one of the cases where even middle-aged and elderly women were killed.

In many places, the Islamic State took all women captive, regardless of age. Even if they weren't interested in an elderly woman for sexual enslavement, they were using these older women for forms of domestic servitude in homes. They were also making a lot of money by ransoming people back to their families. But in the case of Kocho, they slaughtered even the women that were middle-aged and over. Like I mentioned before, there were differences in how actors treated people in different parts of Sinjar and different areas of the mountain.

On August 15th, I announced the genocide on Twitter: "I'm sad to have to inform everyone that there's been a massacre in Kocho, [which was] one component of this larger genocide." These years were so intense, [with] the advocacy response and everything. I had forgotten a lot of my own communications in those early days. It wasn't until I was assisting with the editorial process

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[23] The PKK, or "Kurdistan Workers' Party" in English, is a left-wing Kurdish nationalist political party and militia. Founded in 1978, the group has been involved in a guerilla war against Turkey since 1984. The PKK's goal is to obtain Kurdish rights and autonomy in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran, and has frequently clashed with the rival Kurdish nationalist Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the dominant political party in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

[24] This article is "The Yazidis are starving, traumatised and still unsafe," *New Statesman*, August 14, 2014, https://www.newstatesman.com/world/2014/08/yazidis-are-starving-traumatised-and-still-unsafe.

[25] Nadia's Initiative and UNITAD (United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL) estimate that the Islamic State murdered hundreds of Yazidi men, boys, and middle-aged and elderly women in Kocho. The jihadists also abducted and sold thousands of Kocho's young women and girls into sexual slavery.

for Nadia Murad's book[26] that I looked at some of my early communications, early social media output and realized that I had, on the 15th, announced that the genocide had occurred. There were people who didn't believe me. There were people saying, "This is really irresponsible to say. You're claiming something that's not proven. You're making wild claims."

There were a lot of online Islamic State jihadists that were regularly fighting with me over all of my claims. Later, they would fight about the enslavement issue. They were denying that it was happening. There were a lot of Islamic State supporters internationally that didn't want to believe that it was happening because it offended their moral sensibilities. Initially, they were saying, "No, you're trying to defame this movement. This caliphate is a beautiful thing and you are trying to tear it down." Some of the things I was saying were met with disbelief, and yet, the estimate of numbers killed turned out to be so conservative compared to the real number of people slaughtered in Kocho. That was a moment that was directly preventable. The US could have prevented that massacre. There are layers of failure here.

If the failure to prevent this genocide was the first failure, Kocho was the second major failure, and then the third was the failure to respond and conduct rescues of women and girls. That was almost the most heartbreaking of all these forms of US failure because that came after a greater period of time in which everyone could really learn what was going on and understand the dynamics [of] the situation. It also came after such a long period of advocacy.

I came back to the US in late September [2014], not long after the genocide had begun. I was contacted by Murad Ismail, who was one of the key figures in forming a couple of organizations that were created to respond to this crisis. He emerged as the leading figure driving the advocacy movement. He contacted me just as soon as I arrived in the US. I didn't know him at all.

I thought that once I was back in the US, I wouldn't be able to do much more, but suddenly I heard this passionate voice on the phone. I had never heard a voice like that before. This guy was a force of nature who could get a meeting with almost any head of state in the world. He could get his way into any governmental office by the sheer force of what he was demanding. There was an authority that was produced by the gravity and necessity of the situation that was conveyed by Murad's voice, and anybody who heard it was moved, sometimes to tears. It was very powerful. I will probably never see anything like it again for the rest of my life.

Something awoke inside of Murad because of the seriousness of the situation, and he was able to rally people to action. He was able to give a call that was incredibly compelling. [After] just a few minutes of talking with him, he said, "Will you work with us?" I said, "Yes." That began several years of advocacy work with a fairly robust team of people who didn't have experience or knowledge about how to perform advocacy. But, [they performed this work] in a very grassroots way and out of desperation began doing everything they could to try to bring attention

[26] This book is *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity, and My Fight Against the Islamic State* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017).

to this crisis and elicit action. From that point through the rest of the fall of 2014, we were working together to convince the US administration to rescue [Yazidi] women.

It's sick to have to contemplate this, but when you conduct a project to enslave an entire population, and suddenly you have 3,500 captive women and girls, there is a bureaucratic [and] administrative dimension to that. It requires an organized process. You cannot immediately transport all of them into cities and communities in Iraq and Syria, which will be their final abodes. There is a process of sorting and selecting and organizing, deciding who deserves what, who gets first pick, what prices are going to be charged. There's a lot going on there.

For several months, there were large numbers of women held in areas in the Sinjar and Tal Afar regions.[27] We had detailed information on where they were and how many there were because a lot of those women had smuggled their cell phones into captivity with them. They were able to call out to family members, and then those family members were connecting them to our team.

Murad and I were writing detailed intelligence reports for the US government. We were sending them to anyone who would listen. We had contacts in the Department of Defense, State Department, and White House. [After the genocide began,] we were able to make contact with these agencies in the US government and we were begging them to act: "Here are the coordinates. Here's how many women are inside this house. Here's a satellite image showing you the exact house they're in. Here's the number of jihadists guarding the entire complex. It's only four, for example."

Anytime airstrikes were happening against Islamic State military vehicles in the area, these jihadists would scamper for cover. Women were reporting this to us and they were saying, "If you can just do a sustained attack on this location, we'll be able to run away." Sometimes they were saying they could do that even without boots on the ground. That was actually how some of the first women were able to escape. Some of them were able to escape the enslavement machine before really even being taken into it.

Right in these early days, there were moments when airstrikes occurred, jihadists took cover, and women would run out of a house in the Sinjar region and head toward the mountain, which was kilometers away. If the jihadists didn't see them or couldn't leave the others [who they were guarding], there were [many opportunities for people to escape]. What all of this told us was that rescues at this early moment were extremely feasible.

If the US was willing to use some special forces and [conduct] some operations on the ground, we estimated that [between] 800 to 1,000 women could have been saved and shielded from the most horrific aspect of this genocide. The entire enslavement experience ensued over the subsequent years for many women, which included things as varied as gang rape to forced

[27] The Tal Afar District is located northeast of the predominantly-Yazidi Sinjar District in northern Iraq. It is mostly populated by Iraqi Turkmen, an ethnically and linguistically Turkish minority.

pregnancy, forced abortions, and giving birth to children of men they didn't know, the men that had killed their families. This could have been prevented for a very large number of women and girls, and the US didn't act.

[Around] October and November, we saw that this window of opportunity was closing. [The Islamic State was] starting to move out the last of the women and we were telling the US, "The window of opportunity is closing. We're not going to be able to rescue anyone." We sat in the Roosevelt Room of the White House: a delegation of Yazidi leaders, tribal and religious leaders from Iraq and Europe, members of the Yazidi advocacy team here in the US, and then myself.

We, this big delegation to Washington, had a week-long series of meetings with many state department officials, people on Capitol Hill. I gave an open briefing to US intelligence agencies. [This was] a session that anyone could attend from any intelligence agency. I didn't know the people to whom I was speaking, but it was a massive, packed room. Finally, [we went to] the White House, where we sat in a room adjacent to Barack Obama's office and spoke with the key White House staff members that worked on Middle East affairs. We sat there with Ben Rhodes [the Obama administration's Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications] begging for action to save these women, and [he] wouldn't act. [The government] didn't act.

There's a journalist named Susan Shand who worked for *Voice of America*. She published a book that chronicles the first couple weeks of [the Yazidi advocacy movement] and how it unfolded.[28] She focuses a lot on the advocacy work that took place in Washington. It didn't include the delegation that I just mentioned to you because that was in October [2014]. She was talking about early meetings that happened in Washington, and she describes how some of those officials described the tears in their eyes and how they were weeping by the time they were done listening to the Yazidis talk about this plight.

Well, [the US government] apparently thought that the airstrikes against the Islamic State were sufficient responses. After that, we saw no sustained intervention of any kind, either to prevent Kocho, to save women before they were enslaved, or to rescue any women later. There was also something that gets more into my area of expertise: the failure to pursue any kind of political intervention in the subsequent years to [decide] the status of Sinjar so that the genocide could be resolved, which would allow Yazidis to return home. We didn't see any of this. It just became a forgotten issue, kind of put aside, or perhaps [the US government saw] other concerns or challenges as too important or too great.

At each stage of the US' failure, there was always the opportunity to start doing the right thing, and that never happened. Well, you didn't prevent the genocide, but you could intervene to save Kocho. That didn't happen. Well, you didn't intervene in Kocho, those people all got slaughtered, but you could save these women and girls. No, that didn't happen. That's the third

[28] The book is *Sinjar: 14 Days that Saved the Yazidis from Islamic State* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2018).

failure. Well, you didn't save the women and girls, but you could get involved in all of the political morass that is really preventing Yazidis from rebuilding their lives. That's the most egregious thing of all. I know we're coming to that, but that didn't happen either. This was just a very difficult saga for Yazidis to witness year after year of negligence and a lack of intervention.

That's the responsibility I'm placing on the US, but this is just the tip of the iceberg. In subsequent years, the US failures got so much worse. There have been three administrations in place since the Yazidi Genocide began: the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations. All three have been bad, but of the three, the Obama administration was the least bad. It got a lot worse under Trump. The Biden administration has continued all of the Trump-era policies. Sorry to paint such a bleak picture, but this has to be known for history.

Seth: Absolutely.

Matthew: This has to be known for future generations, the indifference, and I know that no one in the US government would see themselves as indifferent. They would all see themselves as caring individuals and actors, but they would find themselves constrained by one thing or another, some concern, and then the political will just didn't exist to really make something happen.

I learned from all of this that governments are only compelled to action when their constituencies make loud enough noise that it will drive policy. They're really narrative driven more than being morally driven. You can have a situation that, on a moral level, calls for action, whatever it is. It could be about anything, not just atrocities and military intervention. You will not see effort and treasure being put behind [responding to an immoral situation] when there's not a major public outcry that creates a kind of political capital or issues related to image to pressure a government to act. That's the sad lesson I had to learn by doing advocacy work.

[Regarding] the Yazidi community, it's extremely small and unknown. The world had never heard of it prior to the genocide. Most of my professors at the University of Chicago knew almost nothing about the Yazidis because they were so marginal for Islamic history. They're a community that has an oral tradition rather than leaving behind textual sources. [From a historiographical perspective,] there was not a whole lot coming from the Yazidi community through the centuries in order to explore different historical questions.

Yazidi studies in academia was this very, very niche field. It was kind of a subset of Kurdish studies, which was already a niche field. You just didn't have any kind of broader awareness. You also had less Yazidi diasporic connections to major governments in the West. At the time the genocide began, the Yazidi diaspora in the US was pretty much a first-generation diaspora. [There were virtually no people who were] of adult age who were native English speakers or writers. I emphasize writing because of the importance of being able to take a message to social media to write articles [and raise awareness about Yazidi issues].

This has changed over the years because we're in the ninth year of the genocide right now. You have an entire generation of people who have grown up [during the genocide], many of whom have been displaced into Western countries and have learned those countries' languages. Now, they're able to better represent [their community to the general public]. You see all these Yazidi social media accounts in English spreading information about the genocide to the world.

When the genocide began [to be publicized] on Twitter, there were no more than a handful of Yazidi accounts tweeting in English. Now, Germany has the largest Yazidi diaspora. That's the one country that did have a significant Yazidi diaspora prior to the beginning of the genocide. There was a lot of engagement with the German government on the part of the Yazidi community there, not that it translated into any meaningful action. During this crisis, Europe and the UK have taken the position of, "If the US pursues a course of action, we can support it."

Seth: Thank you for explaining all of that to me. It really fleshes out the context, even if it is bleak. As you said, it's the truth and is worth telling for accountability and historical reasons. Maybe we could use the remaining time to delve into the KDP and their immense share of the responsibility for both facilitating and prolonging the genocide.

Matthew: Absolutely. It's really important to talk about this because there's not enough attention on it, not enough awareness. I think part of that problem has to do with the fact that the Islamic State and the jihadists had the primary role. They conducted the genocide, and the nature of their action was also the most visible. There's been a lot of attention on the enslavement phenomenon as the most striking aspect of this genocide. That's all about the Islamic State.

The KDP's role is less evident. There's been less interest in pursuing reports about it or gathering information to contextualize and explain it. That's what I'm doing. I will not go to my grave without this being known. This is incredibly, incredibly important. When the Islamic State attacked Mosul in June [2014], and their forces started to gradually get closer and closer to Sinjar, many Yazidi people wanted to evacuate. They were prevented from doing so by the Kurdish forces that controlled Sinjar.

Those Kurdish forces were the Peshmerga and the associated secret police.[29] The Peshmerga are kind of like the military forces of the Kurdistan region. However, both they and the secret police are not a sort of national or subnational entity for the Kurdistan region. They are beholden to political parties. Throughout the 20th century and up to the present, major Kurdish political parties have basically had their own armies. They are parties with armies.

[29] The Peshmerga officially serve as the armed forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which governs the autonomous Kurdistan Region in northern Iraq. In reality, however, a large faction of the Peshmerga serves the KDP, which is the dominant political party in the KRG. The KDP's secret police force is the *Asayish* and is responsible for maintaining "domestic security," gathering intelligence, and quashing dissent. For simplicity's sake, the *Asayish* will be referred to as "secret police" throughout this transcript.

The primary party in the Kurdistan region is the KDP, or the Kurdistan Democratic Party, which is essentially the family organization and personal military of the Barzani family. [The latter's] role in leading Kurdish nationalism goes back about 80 years. [The KDP] is an entity that has been around for a while. Although it was about Kurdish nationalism and defending the Kurdish people to some degree in its early years, it also quickly became about competition with other Kurdish tribes, crushing rivals in order to consolidate control and monopolize the representation and articulation of Kurdish nationalism. [It also became focused on] financial gain, power and money, economic preeminence, and territory.

The KDP has quite a checkered history in terms of alliances. There were alliances made with Saddam [Hussein] against other Kurdish parties and entities. There have been a lot [of different alliances]. Barzani Kurds have also been targeted with genocide. [On July 31st, 1983,] Saddam conducted a massive slaughter in the village of Barzan. They are people who have been victimized at times, and at other times they have been the victimizers.

When it comes to the Yazidis, they have been a subject population, third-class citizens at best. I am not exaggerating. The level of discrimination and entitlement that the KDP has had in terms of believing that it has the right to annex Yazidi areas to the Kurdistan region and then rule them and control them economically is really serious. The KDP gained control of Sinjar after the fall of Saddam [in 2003], and they ruled it for a decade before the genocide happened. That's a really important backdrop [because it] historically sets the stage for the genocide.

Let's go back to 2014 and talk about how this [crisis] began. Like I mentioned, the Peshmerga and secret police were beholden to the KDP. They were affiliated with the KDP, stationed at Sinjar Mountain, and prevented Yazidis from evacuating [prior to the Islamic State's attack]. In general, you had freedom of travel for Yazidis into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Prior to that, they couldn't necessarily work and have jobs in the KRI unless they joined the KDP. So, there was still movement for [Yazidis] to go and visit people in Kurdistan. That stopped after the Islamic State gained control of the area. The KDP was worried that there might be large numbers of Yazidis who would try to leave Sinjar. They wanted to preclude a mass influx, so they stopped allowing people to go to the Kurdistan region.

Now, after this genocide happened, the KDP made three claims: (1) "It was a surprise attack, we didn't know it was coming." (2) "We didn't have enough weapons. America and the West, they just didn't provide us with enough weapons. We were not able to defend the Yazidi people because they never gave us enough weapons." (3) "Well, we fought back until our lines broke and we were overwhelmed. Then, we were forced to withdraw."

These are the three primary claims advanced by the KDP regarding the Yazidi Genocide and why they had to withdraw and abandon the [Yazidi] people. All three of these were lies. Let's start with the first one, the idea that it was a surprise attack. Well, in the two months [preceding the genocide,] you could observe the Islamic State's movements and encroachment on Sinjar.

There's an Arab belt around Sinjar. The Islamic State ended up consolidating control over all of those areas. There were Arabs in some of those towns who had Yazidi friends inside Sinjar, and they were calling those friends and professional colleagues. They were calling Yazidis with whom they had relationships, friendships, and they were saying, "Something is going to happen, we're hearing that some kind of attack may be imminent. You need to leave."

Of course, word like that traveled throughout the Yazidi community. They were watching everything. The Islamic State expelled all the Shiites from Tal Afar, which is a predominantly Shiite town east of Sinjar. All of those people fled to Sinjar in June [2014,] right after the Islamic State arrived [in Tal Afar], and the Yazidis witnessed that. Everybody knew the track record of the Islamic State's behavior toward minorities. US intelligence knew that. Kurdish intelligence knew that.

There was no surprise, even to the point that there were some small attacks on outlying Yazidi communities in Sinjar prior to August 3rd. [The Islamic State conducted a] few machine gun attacks and launched mortars into some [Yazidi] towns. At one point, they attacked some KDP political personnel that were militarized and stole their military vehicle and guns. There were certainly signs of aggression.

Then, two days before the genocide began, it was very evident that something was building. A lot of Yazidis began trying to evacuate and were turned back to their homes at checkpoints right outside their towns and villages by KDP secret police. You'd have a whole family with kids, blankets, some foodstuffs, and their IDs, everything, basic essentials, trying to leave.

Secret police personnel guarding these villages would shame them: "You should be ashamed for your cowardice, trying to flee your nation while we are here defending you." Then, in the early hours of the morning of August 3rd, as Islamic State forces came toward the mountain, every single KDP personnel, secret police, Peshmerga, and other officials collectively withdrew from Sinjar ahead of civilians without warning them, without providing cover as civilians [fled].

It's the most egregious instance of cowardice I have ever witnessed in my life. They allowed all of those people to be slaughtered. They abandoned them inexcusably without reason. There are little hamlets tucked into the foothills of Sinjar Mountain itself that were never conquered by the Islamic State because a handful of farmers with hunting rifles, the high ground advantage, and the cover of rocky outcroppings could prevent jihadists from taking those little areas.

Imagine the lives that would've been saved had the Peshmerga provided cover and conducted an evacuation. But, they didn't even inform local people that they were leaving or warned them in any way. People had made calls to the authorities hours prior, saying, "Are you going to protect us? Should we leave? What's going on?" They were given assurances, "We will protect you. We will defend you."

There's a man who was the head of the entire KDP political-military secret police apparatus in Sinjar. His name was Serbest Bapiri. His name must be remembered because he has blood on his hands. He personally told people on the phone, "No, everything's fine. We're going to protect you."

The real order for the withdrawal came from Erbil. According to Kurdistani law… I'm saying Kurdistani because I'm talking about the political institutions, the governing apparatuses of the Kurdistan region. According to that legal framework, from what I'm told by Kurdish officials who understand that law very well, supposedly the order could only have come from Masoud Barzani[30] himself in terms of his role as commander in chief over those Peshmerga forces.

There's been speculation whether the order could have come from another member of the family, like his son, Masrour Barzani, who had some role within [the KDP's] military forces. Could the order have come from a general? The problem is that even the highest-ranking general responsible for the military forces in Sinjar couldn't have issued an order like that without getting approval from Masoud Barzani, the president himself.

[Regarding] the people involved who bare responsibility, it's unclear who they all were. [But] the blood on their hands runs thick. There is clearly responsibility on the part of local actors. By "local," I mean Peshmerga commanders stationed locally in Sinjar. At that point, it was morally incumbent upon them to disobey that order and say, "No, we will not abandon this entire population to slaughter."

Yazidis have always been quite independent. Many of them reject a Kurdish identity. They maintain a separateness, saying, "No, our identity is just for Yazidis. We're not Kurds." That's not the case for all of them, but for many it is, especially for Sinjaris [Yazidis from the Sinjar region]. They have wanted to be left alone. It has been difficult for the KDP to generate political loyalty on the part of that population to effectively advance their claim of sovereignty over Sinjar in order to annex the territory.

One of the techniques that they have used [to gain Yazidi territory and allegiance] is to propagate a narrative that refers to the Yazidis as the original Kurds. [This narrative holds] that Yazidis belonged to a religion that, in a number of ways, was pre-Islamic. So, before many Kurds converted to Islam during the Islamic conquests, they were Yazidi. [This was] not just during the Islamic conquests, but also during the medieval era because Yazidism really developed during the 12th century and afterwards. Possibly the majority of Kurds were Yazidi at one point, and many Muslim Kurds today have Yazidi backgrounds. Their families and entire tribes were Yazidi. In the 17th, 18th, and partially 19th centuries, there was a lot of conversion.

[30] Masoud Barzani is the President of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and was the first President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), serving from 2005 until 2017. He has been instrumental in shaping the governance and policies of the KDP and KRI, including the former's treatment of Yazidis before, during, and after the 2014 genocide.

[The KDP] pushed this motif that, “The Yazidis are the original Kurds,” as a way to co-opt them into the Kurdish nationalist narrative that they control. [They wanted] to try to create a governable citizenry: “You are us, you’re Kurds, you belong to us, we’ll protect you.” It’s striking that, after a decade of that kind of messaging toward the Yazidi community, there was a moment in the 2000s when Masoud Barzani declared that Sinjar was the capital of Kurdistan. This was a meaningless gesture, but there were KDP people in Sinjar who celebrated this.

After all of this, after this legacy [of nationalist outreach to Yazidis], they just abandoned this entire population to slaughter in a single moment. The shame of this must not be forgotten. They prevented the Yazidis from evacuating. Then, they withdrew in the early hours of the morning [on August 3rd, 2014]. Yazidis begged them to leave weapons behind so that they could protect their families. In every case, that was refused. [Yazidis] were told, “No, those are not our orders.”

There was a town called Zorava on the north side of Sinjar Mountain. Some young Yazidi men there tried to grab rifles away from departing Peshmerga forces. The Peshmerga fired on them and killed them. They killed Yazidis before the Islamic State arrived in that area. This is how the genocide was facilitated. It was incredibly deliberate. The claim that this was a surprise attack and the other claim that, “Well, we tried to defend [the Yazidis] but were overpowered,” were lies.

In almost every case that I’m aware of, there were different commanders in different areas who withdrew their troops at different hours in the morning. But, in all cases, it was collective and organized. It was not, “Oh, we were in a fight and then we had to run away because we were overcome.” No, this was a direct order, an organized withdrawal that took all military equipment and vehicles with [the Peshmerga and secret police] prior to the arrival of the jihadists.

Yazidis say that not a single bullet was fired in their defense, and in most cases, that was correct. There were a few members of the Peshmerga who stayed behind to fight [the Islamic State] and defend [Yazidi communities]. I’m not even aware if any of those people were themselves Kurds from KDP Peshmerga units. They were usually local Yazidis from those communities who also belonged to those units and stayed behind to fight. If there were any KDP Kurds who stayed and gave their lives on that day, I would be interested to find out [who they were].

The last of the KDP’s three defenses, “We didn’t have enough weapons [to defend the Yazidis],” was just a flat-out lie. Even if [they] were short on ammunition, [they] could have provided cover to civilians. I mentioned the [Yazidi] farmers who defended their communities.

In the period directly before the genocide, as the Iraqi Army was collapsing in areas of Nineveh and as the Islamic State [was invading the area around Sinjar], Peshmerga forces went [into Yazidi areas] and appropriated all [Yazidi] weapons. They seized entire depots full of weapons and ammunition. There were also defeated Iraqi forces who had held out and tried to fight [the jihadists], like in Tal Afar, who had to finally withdraw and pass through Sinjar to come back

around the Kurdistan Region through Erbil and then back down to Baghdad. KDP personnel stripped them of all military equipment, weapons, vehicles, ammunition, and even their uniforms. The political apparatus headed by Serbest Bapiri, whom I mentioned, [was responsible for looting these soldiers' gear]. [Bapiri] oversaw the KDP's political and military power in Sinjar.

[The KDP] took everything and sent those Iraqi troops home to Baghdad in plain clothes. A lot of these resources were sold on the black market for the profit of a few corrupt individuals. This kind of perpetual mantra that you hear from Kurdish government officials — "Oh, you never give us enough weapons." — Well, the West constantly gave them weapons. Germany gave them a lot of weapons, and then Peshmerga generals sold them on the black market. This is just a perennial phenomenon.

That was how the genocide began. I think that's a pretty good summary of the KDP's role in the initial facilitation of the genocide: preventing people from evacuating, promising to protect them, and then withdrawing all personnel at the last moment in a premeditated and deliberate fashion.

People want to speculate about why. Whenever I talk about this, the first question people ask is, "Well, why would they do that?" It's hard to say. It's possible that [the KDP] thought that by shattering Yazidi power within [Sinjar], and then later when the area was conquered by the Islamic State, it would be easier for them to annex and control it [after defeating the jihadists]. They always faced resistance from the local Yazidi population [starting around] when they occupied [Sinjar in 2003].

I don't know if that was [the main reason]. I don't know if it was sheer cowardice. There are a lot of theories. I can't really speak to any of them. Like with the US failure, after having played a role in inaugurating this genocide, [the KDP] still had plenty of opportunities to do the right thing later on. That's where we see a major shift to their abusing the Yazidi community.

The KDP, through the subsequent years [after 2014], has taken deliberate steps to prevent this genocide from resolving. Now, why have they done this? Well, after their abandonment of Sinjar, PKK-affiliated Kurds from Syria, YPG forces from Syria,[31] and PKK guerrillas themselves crossed the Syrian border, fought through Islamic State lines, and rescued possibly as many as 100,000 Yazidi people from the top of Sinjar Mountain. Then, they helped local Yazidis establish military entities to defend Sinjar and fight the jihadists.

Over the following years, those entities [became] comprised of local Yazidis and PKK-affiliated Kurds. They gave the most significant sacrifice in terms of Sinjar's defense, losing many lives in the fight against jihadists since the West never put any troops there. This allowed PKK elements

[31] The YPG, or "People's Defense Units" in English, is a Syrian Kurdish militia. It is part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of armed groups that serves as the official military of Rojava, an autonomous region in Syria.

to get established in Sinjar and develop civil society, governance, and institutions. This was very frustrating to the KDP because they wanted to control [the region] themselves. They were furious about this.

However, [the KDP] has no legitimacy because they abandoned the area. They allowed the genocide to happen, and now they want to waltz back in and say, "Oh, it's ours. We deserve to rule this area." Sadly, the US supports this narrative, not really vocally, but through action during all of these years. The US has a close relationship with the KDP, and they support them.

Now, the solution is not to create a PKK government and let them rule this region. It is to eliminate this entire phenomenon of parties with armies and create an actual civil administration in Sinjar under the Iraqi government where Yazidis can manage their own affairs. [This should happen] not in some kind of secessionist way, not even necessarily in a way like the Kurdistan region, which has autonomy. [It should exist] like any governorate or district in Iraq, where you have the people who are elected to serve in leadership capacities come from the local population.

There do need to be a few exceptional measures developed in order to prevent any future genocides against the Yazidis from happening. Part of that involves [creating] a local security force [through which] Yazidis can defend themselves. These have been the demands of the Yazidis from the initial period of advocacy in 2014 up to the present: a local administration that functions without control from external Kurdish parties; a nonpartisan defense institution; and a nonpartisan local militia that is under [the supervision of] the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Defense of [the Iraqi government in Baghdad].

[These are] tough, simple demands. In our 2014 meetings with the State Department and the White House, US officials were saying that they would pursue an agenda like that, and then they never did. Yazidis are kind of this powerless community inside of Iraq whose experience has basically been one of a patron-client dynamic. They have to have some kind of [external] sponsor, and there are Yazidis who have joined the KDP because there hasn't been an alternative.

[The KDP] can abuse them, kill them, and torture them. It can deny them the right to vote. It can even allow them to undergo a genocide. Yet, if there's no alternative and you don't even have money, you may end up joining the Peshmerga just to get a salary to feed your children. Then you're part of this political machine that in your heart you hate.

It's an ugly dynamic, but [it exists] because the Western countries that the Yazidis have begged for help in this post-genocide period have not taken action. The West has really failed to help resolve this genocide. They love to earmark humanitarian relief funds, let USAID implement some projects to deliver some support for NGOs,[32] send a bunch of food aid and tents, pat

[32] An NGO, or non-governmental organization, is a nonprofit organization that is dedicated to addressing social, political, economic, and environmental issues, such as war, poverty, famine, and climate change. These

themselves on the back and say, “Oh, we’ve done our part to help the Yazidi situation.” No, that’s not resolving this genocide.

People need to be safe, to go back to and rebuild their homes. That’s how the genocide is resolved. When you only fund this massive NGO industry, all you do is maintain a status quo. I’m not saying [that you shouldn’t] support NGOs that are feeding people. I’m saying that this whole process of just earmarking funds for humanitarian relief without addressing the systemic political causes behind what’s happening allows the genocide to continue.

That’s pretty much what has happened. There’s political competition between the KDP and the PKK. In Sinjar, the local entity of the PKK is called the *Yabishe*, or YBŞ [“Sinjar Resistance Units” in English]. Many Yazidis belong to it. The KDP has actively persecuted Yazidis who join any militia or political entity that’s not the KDP. They have expelled them from tents inside camps for displaced people, [as well as] the families of fighters who joined PKK entities to fight the Islamic State.

The [Yazidis who joined the PKK] weren’t fighting the KDP. They were fighting the Islamic State to protect Sinjar after a genocide that the KDP allowed to happen. [Now,] the KDP will take punitive action against them. It will arrest those fighters if they can, beating and torturing them. Many of them cannot come to Kurdistan to visit their families. Other times, their families are expelled. The same goes for Yazidi families who have members that are affiliated with the *Hashd al-Sha’bi* [“Popular Mobilization Forces”], the Shiite militias in Baghdad. The same has happened for Yazidis who have joined independent militia groups [that are not] KDP-affiliated.

This is not a democracy. This is, “There’s one way: there’s my way or the highway. You join the KDP or you’ll be silent and not join anything. If you join another party, then we’re going to persecute you.” It’s violent. They prevent Yazidi freedom of assembly. They abuse Yazidis who hold demonstrations about these situations. Yazidis have basically been trapped in camps like prisons because the KDP doesn’t allow them to go home. The KDP maintains these conditions because of the presence of its political competitors in Sinjar.

I think it’s necessary now to explain the [KDP’s] blockade [of Sinjar]. The blockade was the major mechanism whereby this policy [of post-genocide anti-Yazidi persecution] was implemented. It was already functioning by January 1st, 2016.

[First, I’ll explain what happened before the blockade.] Around August 10th through 12th, 2014, the PKK entered Sinjar and evacuated Yazidis from Sinjar Mountain. In December 2014, the Peshmerga pushed from the north, supported by US military planning and airstrikes. They reclaimed the north side of Sinjar Mountain from the Islamic State. This allowed the first Yazidi farmers to return and try to start rebuilding some of their farms on the mountain’s north side. The

organizations often work to combat these problems internationally, partnering with the United Nations, local governments, and other parties.

south side was still controlled by [the jihadists]. In November 2015, Sinjar City, the main urban center on the south side of the mountain, was also reclaimed through a combination of Peshmerga and PKK forces.

So, beginning in December 2014, the KDP and Peshmerga [established their presences in Sinjar after the genocide]. Then, they had to coexist [there amongst themselves and with] some other unaffiliated militias. It was quite complicated, [but] they did that fairly nonviolently. The [KDP] violence [that occurred] was directed at family members of PKK affiliates inside the Kurdistan region. [But] in Sinjar, they were afraid to fight with the PKK because they knew they'd be killed if they did that. This joint presence coexisted in Sinjar over the subsequent years.

[Yet, the KDP was afraid.] The Islamic State's presence was gradually eliminated in many areas and its power waned, which made Sinjar safer for resettlement via the return of displaced people. The KDP feared that Yazidi families would go back to Sinjar and form a support base for the PKK. [However,] a lot of Yazidis didn't want any [outside forces] there. They were very independent-minded and weren't fans of the PKK. They wanted a Yazidi future that didn't involve these external parties.

[However,] there was quite a lot of [Yazidi] support for the PKK as well, certainly more than for the KDP. The PKK won a lot of hearts and minds because they saved so many Yazidis. [To counter the PKK,] the KDP implemented a blockade policy at a checkpoint near the Fishkhabour crossing [from northern Iraq] into Syria. [The checkpoint was in] a tiny village called Sohela, [and it] controlled all traffic between the entire Kurdistan region and Sinjar. There was a main route that went from Kurdistan to the city of Mosul in Iraq, but it was controlled by the Islamic State and wasn't accessible.

This route [through Sohela] became the only route from the Kurdistan region into Sinjar during this time, the only access point for NGOs who wanted to work there, the only access point for Yazidi families who wanted to go back and visit their farms and houses, to see if there was anything to salvage or cultivate.

The KDP began this economic blockade to prevent [Yazidi] families from returning to and settling [in Sinjar]. They also prevented the entry of any goods that might enhance the ability of YBŞ and PKK entities in their fight against the Islamic State. They banned boots and good shoes, for example. You couldn't sell them in a store because that was something that your average soldier might need. [The KDP] inhibited the efficacy of the fight against the Islamic State because they didn't want their competitors to win.

They wouldn't let anybody enter with survival or material goods, as well as certain kinds of clothing. If somebody had a little shop and they were KDP-affiliated, they might let them take some goods in to sell, like food products. [However,] they wouldn't let anything in that might be used by Yazidis who belonged to the YBŞ.

This wasn't just a policy that affected [rival] military contingents. There was an entire population of displaced Yazidis who stayed on top of the mountain in tents rather than coming to the [displaced persons] camps inside the Kurdistan region. Many of them were the most religious Yazidis, the most committed to the sacredness of the mountain. [They would rather] die than leave it. Many of them had family members who belonged to the YBŞ.

[The KDP] wasn't just starving YBŞ military capacities, they were also starving the families [in Sinjar] whose members were fighting in these militias. The people making the hardest sacrifices to defend Sinjar Mountain against jihadists were the ones being punished and targeted by the KDP. [The KDP targeted these Yazidis] because of their political selfishness, because they couldn't accept the fact that they had lost [political authority over Sinjar] due to their gross negligence and abandonment of the [Yazidi] people. Their policy was, "Either we'll rule you or we'll starve you. Either we'll rule you or your area will remain uninhabited."

On the uninhabitable front, this went far beyond preventing goods from entering that might be used by the YBŞ or the PKK. [The KDP] prevented Yazidi civilians from taking in goods to rebuild their own lives, homes, and farms. Families couldn't take pillows, mattresses, blankets, chairs, furniture, or tables. [They couldn't take] tractor parts, irrigation equipment, pipes, wellheads, seeds, fertilizer, veterinary medicine, motor oil for harvester machines, or cinder blocks for rebuilding homes. They couldn't take cooking oil, flour, or sugar. They couldn't even take in a single bag of rice. [The KDP] knew that they would get in big trouble, even internationally, if they didn't let any traffic to go through. So, they'd let Yazidis enter if they wanted to visit Sinjar, but they wouldn't let them take anything on which they could survive.

When I say that the KDP basically continued the genocide that the Islamic State began, this is what I'm talking about. It's very real. It's not an exaggeration. It is not hyperbolic language. They prevented Yazidis from having a life. For example, a child who was ten or eleven when this genocide began has now lived their entire adolescence in a UN tent on gravel in a camp out in the middle of the desert.

It's awful that [the KDP] would do this to people. What's also awful is that instead of calling this out as an egregious violation of human rights, Western countries support it. They talk about the Kurdistan government as though it's a great partner. They provide funding, as does the UN, for the functioning of these [displaced persons] camps.

I'm not saying that the funding should just disappear and people be turned out into the rain. I'm saying that it's unacceptable to create a massive NGO industry that has a financial incentive to maintain a status quo. I'm not saying that anybody in the NGO industry would approve of the blockade. I'm saying that there's an absence of an incentive to combat [the blockade] when having people go home [to Sinjar] would result in the loss of your job. That can't help but somehow impact people's subconsciousness and the ways that they respond to this situation.

When I was running Yazda in Iraq, we were one of the only NGOs that was really speaking out against these practices. We had a hard time getting other NGOs to join us in calling out these abuses. [They] were becoming more apparent as I was working there, and no one wanted to talk about them. A lot of people weren't even aware of them, or they wouldn't investigate them. If we explained these abuses to [other NGOs], they would make excuses: "Well, it's not our mandate. We don't get into politics. If we start speaking out politically, it can jeopardize our access."

Well, that's true. That's why the entire NGO apparatus, which is organized by a UN hub, needs to collectively condemn these practices. There's strength in that kind of collective voice. They didn't do that. The [KDP] has a major incentive to keep the camps there because millions of dollars flow into the local Kurdish economy every month because of NGO activities.

I could see this even with our small NGO. If [we] conducted a project for Yazidis, we would be spending thousands of dollars in local Kurdish businesses and stores. [We'd have] to buy the supplies, goods, and equipment that we would need in order to take those things out into the camps, hold our activities, create projects, or provide our goods and aid.

I wouldn't even know how to begin to estimate the amount of money that the Kurdish economy profits off of hosting this displaced population. You've got that as another motivator aside from the political competition in Sinjar with the PKK. There were multiple reasons why the KDP had an incentive not to let people go home, but it was so wrong and no one was talking about it.

[There are some Yazidis who I call] the "Pioneers of Return" because they were the first people to go back [to Sinjar] and start resuming normal life. They didn't have access to education at all. This was another egregious human rights abuse that was part of the blockade policy. [Through my research,] I found that education was the single factor that most impacted the return or lack of return [of Yazidis] to Sinjar from the displaced persons camps in Kurdistan. It's not what I initially would've thought. [At first,] I would've thought, "Well, there are food issues, water issues, shelter issues, [a lack of medicine], the need for clinics. There are just so many things."

Well, a lot of people can make do in regard to those things, or they can find ways to become self-sufficient. The first people to return were those who had a more subsistence type of lifestyle. They had herds, crops, and gardens. They wanted to go back and start cultivating them. They were the first people who were able to return and produce a lot of their own food. They could rebuild basic shelters. There [were] some existing shelters that hadn't been destroyed. They could live in those [while] slowly rebuilding [their communities] over time. The one thing that they were not willing to give up was school for their kids. It's really important in [Yazidi] society that kids be able to go to school. Otherwise, they won't have any chances in the future. That's a major push-pull factor.

In the NGO community, there's a doctrine about not creating push or pull [factors]. You're not supposed to tell displaced people where to go. You're not supposed to artificially create

incentives for them to go back to their homeland if they don't want to go there. You have to follow what they want to do. You're not supposed to push them or pull them.

I had someone tell me this when I was talking about the need to reopen schools: "Well, okay, that's good, but you don't want to artificially create a pull by trying to open schools out there." [I responded by saying that] there are already kids and families [in Sinjar] who need school right now. There are other families saying that they want to go back, but they can't because there are no schools. The KDP targeted schools through the blockade. They prevented teachers and schoolmasters from bringing in equipment and basic supplies, which you need to run a school. They're creating an artificial push [in Sinjar] to keep people from going back. That is an egregious human rights abuse. I didn't see the UN's education cluster, the massive UN NGO apparatus there, speaking out about this. Maybe they eventually did once this got reported on.

I was talking about these things and the local government there came down on us. They got very angry at us, became abusive, and started to block our access to implement certain projects. We were bringing [the blockade] to light, and they hated that. These abuses were so egregious. That gives you an idea about the importance of education, how integral it is for people to come back.

Just to give you an idea of the seriousness of the blockade, listen to what some of the people whom I have interviewed have to say about it. Here is a quote from a schoolmaster who, after the genocide and the subsequent elimination of the Islamic State on the north side [of Sinjar Mountain in 2015], reopened a school there for the children of families, mostly farming families, who had returned. This experience probably occurred in 2016, when the blockade really began to function, although it continued for quite a few years after that.

"I was coming from Duhok back to Shingal and brought two water pumps. One was for a home and the other was for the well in the school. The secret police stopped [me] and opened [my] car. When they saw the pumps, they said, 'What are these?' I said, 'As you can see with your eyes, they are two well pumps. One is for our school where our students need it. The pump in our school is broken and we have no water for the students.' The secret police officer said, 'It is not allowed to bring them to Shingal. Go back to Duhok.'

I tried to argue with him, but he said, 'Don't discuss it with me. It's from above. You never talk to someone implementing a policy or responsible for a policy. These are orders being handed down from on high.' Once I brought the printer from our school to Duhok because it was broken and I needed to get it fixed. On my way to Duhok, they held me for an hour just to examine my printer. On the way back, they held me for two hours just for transporting a printer.

They asked me countless arbitrary questions: 'What is the serial number of the printer? What is wrong with it? What do you use it for? Where did you get it fixed?' They treated me so badly. I remember so clearly that, in that moment, I wish that I was dead. I had done nothing. I was just trying to fix my printer."

Now, why would this man recount this experience? Why would he say, “In that moment, I wished I was dead?” [He was] just [talking about] a printer that he was not allowed to take through. [Well, he recounted it because] this blockade was more than about just blocking goods. It was also about reducing the dignity of people to an absolute minimum in a way that would incentivize them to not even try to return, restart institutions, or rebuild their homes. That emotional component was a really important aspect of this policy.

Now, let me give a little background on how [the KDP’s political strategy developed], thinking about the decade prior to the genocide. When the US overthrew Saddam in 2003, it allowed the KDP to enter Sinjar and unilaterally occupy it. They didn’t really gain a consensus on the part of local people. Sinjar had never belonged to the Kurdistan region. [However,] Yazidis speak the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish, and throughout their history, Yazidis [have been] a component of broader Kurdish society. There have always been relationships there, although, of course, that doesn’t necessarily mean anything prior to the doctrine of nationalism. You can have a lot of people who speak the same languages, belong to a larger cultural family, and share certain cultural practices or customs, but there can be so much difference as well. [Different groups of Yazidis] didn’t necessarily identify as [part of] a larger collective. [For example,] the Yazidis who lived in Sinjar and followed the Yazidi religion saw themselves as a separate community. Suddenly, Saddam fell, and Masoud Barzani sent in troops to say, “You’re going to belong to us now.” The US presided over that. The US allowed that to happen.

Now, what techniques of governance did the KDP employ in this area? Because of their unilateral occupation, [Sinjar] became a disputed territory [with the Iraqi state in] Baghdad. It hadn’t been disputed before, but it became disputed because of this occupation. [Sinjar is] technically not part of the Kurdistan region, and the UN doesn’t recognize it as part of the Kurdistan region. So, what techniques does [the KDP] use to implement control there? One thing they did was create a very strong secret police network to spy on everyone. They would punitively target anyone who joined Iraqi political parties that sought representation in Baghdad, [in] their own parliament and government. They wanted Yazidis to only join the KDP and only work through the Kurdistan Regional Government’s parliament in Erbil.

But, there was a major Yazidi political party that formed that had a quota seat in the Baghdad parliament. Yazidis would elect a person to that seat and then they would interface with the [Iraqi] government instead of going through the Kurds and KDP. So, almost every active adult male member of that local Yazidi party in the decade prior to the genocide was targeted with arrests, beatings, intimidation, and even torture. It was very relentless. That was all happening while the US was there. The US allowed this system to materialize, and it was basically thwarting the development of any healthy democratic process. Yazidis wanting to engage in the [Iraqi state’s] democratic process were prevented from doing so by the KDP.

Another thing that they did was they controlled the economy. They would control the hiring for the two major sectors of employment [in Sinjar]. Like I said, most Yazidis were agrarian, living a subsistence existence. That's how a lot of people had lived for centuries. In [modern Yazidi society,] the education and health sectors were the two largest forms of public employment. The KDP would gain control of people hiring for those jobs, even though they were [Iraqi] central government institutions. It was [the Iraqi] central government's Department of Education and Department of Health, rather than the KDP's. If they could get the right people in place to control hiring for that, then they could deny jobs to anyone who didn't join the party. If you wanted to join the KDP, you would need to go to a party center. This is what I refer to as the "party center system," which mirrored the Ba'ath Party's[33] cell-based system for how party membership worked.

In the KDP's party center system, you had local *rekhkraws*, which was the smallest-tier level of a unit of political assembly. You'd have rekhkraws in many towns, neighborhoods, and little areas. The next level [of political organization] was called a *lijne*. You might have dozens or scores of rekhkraws reporting to a single lijne, which would be a party office in a major town. In Sinjar, there were several lijnes and they were organizing the rekhkraws.

Then, each of the lijnes reported to the central office, the top-level [political] institution, which was the *liq*. [Sinjar's] liq was located in Sinjar City, which is the major urban area on the south side of the mountain. Serbest Bapiri, the man I mentioned earlier who presided over the entire KDP structure [in Sinjar], was the head of Sinjar's liq at the time that the genocide occurred. Under his auspices, he controlled all of the lijnes and rekhkraws [in Sinjar], so [the KDP's] political party apparatus really wasn't separate from the Peshmerga and the secret police. The secret police would detain a political opponent, take him to a lijne, and interrogate him there. Of course, [after the interrogation,] the liq [in Sinjar would] report back to the KDP's headquarters [in Erbil]. The [KDP's] security and political apparatuses were combined and functioning as one cohesive entity. That was part of the KDP's pyramid of authority in Sinjar.

[There's no] opportunity for civil society institutions that are not politicized to emerge in this context. If anyone started their own NGO or humanitarian organization or even a poetry reading [, it could be shut down.] I interviewed high school students who started a poetry reading. If [their project] was popular and people were coming and attending, the KDP would send people to visit them and say, "Oh, you need to join us. We'll give you a place to host your events. That place will be in the lijne, come and join us." If people refused, they would find a way to make [them] uncomfortable and shut the project down.

This is particularly serious when we're talking about the economy, because once this structure is in place, if someone wants to get a job as a teacher in a school, they need to go to a lijne, sign a

[33] The Ba'ath Party was the ruling political party of Iraq from 1968 until its dissolution in 2003 following the US invasion of Iraq. Its ideology combined the principles of Arab nationalism with socialism and was characterized by authoritarian governance.

paper that says they've officially joined the KDP, and then go and have their job. If you're a staunch opponent of the KDP, don't like its occupation and de-facto annexation of your area, or want to belong to another party, [like] a party that interfaces with Baghdad, you won't get a job.

You also won't be granted a work permit to go and get a job inside the Kurdistan region. There are jobs to be had in [Kurdish] cities. A lot of the people working in the hotel and restaurant industries were Yazidis during these years. I heard some Kurds after the genocide talking about how ungrateful the Yazidis were: "Oh, we gave you jobs, blah, blah, blah." To get that job, you had to join the party. You had to sign a paper and basically adhere to this entity, whether you believed in it or not.

Okay, so that's the backdrop for how governance worked in Sinjar prior to the genocide. That right there should illustrate [the events that occurred] beyond the massive moment of the genocide [and] the abandonment of the Yazidis by the Peshmerga. [It should illustrate] the legacy of how the KDP ruled and why the Yazidis don't want the KDP to come back to Sinjar. They want to engage directly with the government of the [Iraqi] state. [They want to] have their own institutions and lives in Sinjar that are not independent from the state, but that are not partisan or politicized. They don't want Kurdish parties to come back and rule them.

Now that you understand the [political situation in Sinjar], I'll read you [another] excerpt from the schoolmaster who tried to reopen a school in a Yazidi town on the north side of Sinjar Mountain. This happened after the Peshmerga drove the Islamic State out of the area and established a presence there.

"The party was against me in opening the school, and the lijne opposed me. They would demand that I fly the Kurdistan flag. I would ignore them. Then, my friends would come and tell me, 'You have to bring a flag and be silent. It is better for our kids to have a school than no school.' I would say to them, 'These things kill me. I am standing under this flag and it was because of this flag that the mothers and sisters of our people are dead.' They pressed me and said, 'Don't be stubborn. You have to put up the flag. If you become stubborn, we are going to lose the school.' I went to the lijne and I said, 'I need a flag.' My heart was broken. I put the flag on the school. I would die inside each time I saw it. 12,000 Peshmerga left us in Sinjar and that flag was on their vehicles."

Now, I don't know about you, but when I hear those words, they are so powerful. It's like a knife in my own heart, and I'm not from there. That experience being conveyed through those words is so powerful. There's so much raw emotion there. He says that 12,000 Peshmerga left, and I should mention that that's not confirmed. There was a certain number of Peshmerga troops on paper versus the number that was actually there. It doesn't matter. There were a lot [of troops].

We've talked a little bit about how the [blockade impacted] schools. Like I mentioned, it could [restrict] pumps, printers, or groceries. One of the things that the [KDP] did was that they never

announced this blockade. It was never an official policy. That ambiguity allowed them to maneuver [the blockade policy] however they wanted. They could create a plausible deniability by saying, "Oh, no, yesterday, we allowed this to go through." They would occasionally allow certain things to go through [but] would restrict a lot of other things. They could sporadically implement [the blockade] and thereby achieve their agenda but claim that it wasn't happening. Then, no one would know for sure who was responsible.

From our position as advocacy workers, we didn't know who in the government to confront about [the blockade]. We were trying to talk to everyone about it and everyone would deny [responsibility]. Was it a Peshmerga general? Was it the Dohuk Governorate? Was it the Erbil Governorate? Was it the Barzani family? Was it the president's office? Was it the Asayish, the secret police? We didn't know who was really responsible. Anytime we would talk to someone, they would just say, "Well, that wasn't me," and blame another office.

There was genuine confusion [among] lower-level [KDP] bureaucrats because most of them didn't even know this was happening. Yazidis in the camps knew, but most people populating the vast offices of the bureaucracies of Dohuk and Erbil had no idea that this was happening. High-level people certainly knew it was happening. Then, we made such a stink talking to the US State Department about it that US officials began confronting Kurdish officials. Initially, they were very angry and would deny it was happening, but it was happening.

I eventually called Human Rights Watch.[34] I said, "You have to come and document this. Not a single journalist has written anything about this. This is what's happening. You have to come and do a report on this." I gave them all the facts. It took a long time because they have so many human rights abuses to document. They finally sent someone and they documented it. The person went to the [Sohela] checkpoint and observed [the blockade] happening directly on the spot. They photographed people who weren't allowed to go through [because they] were carrying a single sheep. Another family wasn't allowed to go through because they had some pillows and a mattress. [They weren't] allowed to go to Sinjar because they were carrying these things. [Around] late 2016, Human Rights Watch's report was published. Let me read you this excerpt from a conversation [with one of the people who was abused at the checkpoint].

"When I would pass through Sohela, [KDP forces] would treat me as though I was a guilty criminal. They would yell at me, 'Hey, hand over your ID.' If I made any small mistake or said a word they did not like, they would not let me through. I was very careful there. I even tried to avoid traveling between Shingal and Dohuk, postponing my work when possible. They were so rough with the Yazidi people. They acted as though we were the children of terrorists. You and I are sitting here now as people with our dignity, but when we would pass through Sohela, we felt that we were not human."

[34] Human Rights Watch is an international NGO that specializes in researching, documenting, and raising awareness about human rights violations.

That comment gets at what I was talking about [earlier], about this strategy to dehumanize people. If you make it painful at a visceral, psychological level to go through this checkpoint, you [don't] want to go through anyway because you don't want to be treated like that. You don't want to be treated like garbage. [This would go] beyond the inconveniences created by being turned away, by not being allowed to bring your goods through. They would lower the level of a person's dignity to that of an insect. It was so heartbreaking.

Here's another excerpt [that] touches on a phenomenon where [the KDP might] let you bring through only one sheep. This wasn't just about taking goods to Sinjar: there were farmers in Sinjar who had herds and wanted to take sheep to the [displaced persons] camps to feed their families. [However, the KDP] didn't want any commerce happening. They didn't allow you to bring a group of sheep through because they knew you were going to sell them. They wanted to keep people as poor as possible. Let me say that again: the KDP took active measures to keep the Yazidi people, a displaced [and] impoverished people who lost everything because of the genocide, as poor as possible and not allow them to rebuild their economies, their families, and their lives. If a man was coming through with a single sheep and said, "We're going to eat this today. There's an event," the [border guards] would tell him, "Oh, kill it here, then. Kill it in front of us. Slaughter it right here in the parking lot of the checkpoint."

[A Yazidi man who I interviewed] said, "My father was trying to bring three sheep from Shingal to Chamishko camp[35] for a Yazidi boy's circumcision party. When he reached the checkpoint, [the border guards] would not allow him to take the sheep through alive. They made him slaughter the sheep there at the checkpoint and then haul the slaughtered sheep to Chamishko. The meat did not spoil, but it made my father sad. They robbed him of his dignity."

Here's another account about this kind of humiliation from a man who was a driver. There were many drivers who tried to take different crops, [such as] vegetables, carrots, tomatoes, and cucumbers, [from Sinjar] to [displaced persons] camps or farms in the Kurdistan Region.

The man said, "In 2016, I had a truck, and a shop owner in Sununе paid me to transport a load of potatoes, tomatoes, cucumbers, and onions from Zakho to Sununе[36] in large crates. At the Sohela checkpoint, the [KDP] secret police asked me how many crates were in the back of the truck. I didn't remember how many had been loaded in. I said, 'I think there are four.' They went and looked in the back, and they said, 'You lied to us. There are six crates. You are working for the PKK. You must go back to Dohuk and leave two and come back with only four.'

Now, there was no rule that someone could only take four crates. They just said this to me because I had said four. I told them that I would give them two crates at the checkpoint. I would

[35] Chamishko refugee camp is located in the Zakho District of northern Iraq's Duhok Governorate. It is the largest refugee camp in the Duhok region and is home to approximately 27,000 people.
[36] Sununе is a Yazidi town located north of Sinjar Mountain. Zakho is a city in northern Iraq that is close to the Iraqi-Turkish border.

give them two crates if they would just let me pass with the other four. They said, 'No, go back.' I drove back toward Dohuk. I stopped at a Yazidi farm and dropped off two crates with the farmer and asked him to keep them until I could come back from [Sinjar]. Then, I drove back to the checkpoint. When I arrived, the secret police told me, 'You're not going to [Sinjar] today. Come back tomorrow.'"

One of the strategies that Yazidis would use to try to circumvent the blockade [was that] they would find an international, foreign NGO that had a permission slip that allowed it to work in [Sinjar]. They would then ask [NGO workers] to take some goods with them when they were on their way out [of Kurdistan or Iraq] and give it to them on the other side [of the blockade].

One reason why this wasn't sustainable [was that] an entire population obviously can't rely on a few NGOs to transport all of their goods. [Another reason was that] part of the blockade involved restricting NGO access. [The KDP] would deny a lot of permission attempts to gain access to Sinjar on the part of organizations that wanted to perform projects out there and help people, especially local NGOs. If you were a local Iraqi or Kurdish minority-run NGO, or any local NGO that wasn't international, it was easy for [the KDP] to deny your permission slip.

If you were a foreign NGO, they might grant [your permission slip], but only for a limited period of time. [They] would make it difficult for you to implement your project before your permission slip expired. There were all kinds of techniques; the runaround to get permission was quite intricate and time-consuming. You would have to visit sometimes ten different bureaucratic offices at agencies in Dohuk to try to get all these different papers signed in order to get your permission slip. Then, it would go to the Secret Police Bureau, and they had to approve it. These are bureaucratic techniques used to make it almost impossible to function in [this type of] environment. Even for a foreign NGO, sometimes it was very difficult to do the kind of work that humanitarian groups wanted to perform in [Sinjar].

[A Yazidi] man who [I interviewed] said, "An organization wanted to donate a quantity of crayons to a school that needed it. They also had 20 reams of paper that we could take to a school in [Sinjar], but we couldn't bring them because of the blockade. Then, we talked to some staff at MDM [Médecins du Monde, an international medical aid NGO] who were being allowed to do medical work, and they put the crayons and paper in their cars and brought them to us when they came to [Sinjar]."

Can you imagine? Having a small amount of paper and crayons for a school and having to approach a foreign organization doing medical work, stocking hospitals, and seeing patients, and asking them to bring these meager supplies so that you can have them for your school.

[So,] I have painted this picture for you of mechanisms employed by the KDP to prevent people from going home, people who had already suffered through a genocide. Think about all the people who are being subjected to these tactics. They are people who are deeply broken and

traumatized inside because some of their family members were killed in front of their eyes. Some of them have people who are still missing. They don't know if they're alive or dead. Some of them have enslaved female family members [who] they [have been] working months or years to try to rescue. Some of them are women themselves who have come out of enslavement and now are living in terrible [refugee] camps. Some of these women [have] said that life in the camps [has been] worse than life in jihadist enslavement in terms of certain conditions.

All of this is being done to a population that has already had its dignity reduced socially in [Iraq and Kurdistan]. Instead of being a citizen [who is] able to hold your head high as you walk by another person on the street, that changes when you become an internally displaced person, an internal refugee, basically. Suddenly, you're part of this "nuisance population" that is looked at as less than human because you don't have money anymore and live in a camp. You live in a tent. Your dignity is generally reduced within society. [Yazidis] have gone through that and now they want to reclaim some dignity by trying to rebuild their lives. Instead, they're just targeted with additional abuse. [This treatment of Yazidis in refugee camps is] really unconscionable and [has been] difficult for people to live through.

These camps are all run by a different UN agency or a prominent international NGO. They're funded internationally by these NGOs, which are supposed to operate according to certain codes of ethics about how displaced populations should be treated. [Yet, the UN does not have much political control over the camps.] Inside each camp is a secret police office. You [also] have a camp director who is a local person [appointed by the KDP]. The KDP always appoints KDP members to manage a population that is primarily not KDP-affiliated. This is an intentional strategy. Some of these camp managers [are] Kurdish. A good number [are] Yazidi, but [they are] always KDP members and almost never Yazidis from Sinjar. They [are] always KDP-loyalist Yazidis from the Dohuk or Nineveh Plains areas.

They would be selected by the [Kurdistan Regional Government] to manage the camps. The UN sees [the KRG as] the local government, and even though [the UN] runs and funds all the [humanitarian] services [in these refugee camps], [the UN allows] the [KRG, and therefore the KDP,] to run these camps the way it wants. This reached the point where after 2017 and 2018, [the KDP] made official rules [to prevent] Yazidis from going back to Sinjar without applying for permission from the secret police. They could get strung along so easily and never get this permission document. [So,] this went from an unofficial policy of not letting people transport goods to basically prohibiting them from moving home without getting cleared by the secret police. Otherwise, they wouldn't be allowed to take any furniture or any of their goods. That all happened right under the noses of the NGO community's leaders.

People [have been] protesting these conditions [and] problems that I've described. [They have been] trying to hold demonstrations in camps [regarding] the lack of a political response [to the 2014 genocide and] the lack of rescues of women. Some of these protests have targeted the West

[as well as] the fact that [Yazidis] have to stay in camps [and] can't go back [to their homes in Sinjar].

The KDP used secret police in the camps to terrorize people and keep them silent. There were a lot of beatings that would sometimes result in serious injury. People would be hospitalized because of what secret police [agents] did to Yazidis who would speak out. There were demonstrations where they went and beat protesters with the butts of their guns, [so] that people had bloodied faces. They would go into people's tents and harass them. They had many techniques to squelch dissent or even just the expression of concerns within a camp.

A woman told me this: "In 2016, the residents of Esyan camp[37] became very upset because the weather was so hot. We were only being provided one to two hours of electricity per day, or sometimes no electricity for a week at a time. There was no cool water to drink, no way to cool the tents, and it was impossible to sleep. There was a big protest in the camp, and people threw rocks at the camp manager's office and the office of the secret police and broke all the windows.

The people said that the camp manager's office always has air conditioning running, and we have nothing. My uncle was one of the protestors and the secret police arrested him. They locked him up for two weeks. No one was allowed to visit him and the secret police would not tell us where he was. When he came back to us, his whole body was red and black. It was terrible. He was not allowed to sleep in the jail and they did not give him food, only a bit of water. They interrogated him to find out who organized the protest, and they told him, 'If you ever protest again, you will never see your family again.' My brother lived in the US but was visiting us at the time and was in the camp that day. The secret police tried to arrest him along with the protestors, but he ran from them, escaped, [and] hid in some tents."

That's the end of that excerpt. I have another one [from the same woman]:

"One day, my husband was in Sinjar working for the television [station as a journalist]. I was in a tent in the camp with my kids at 1:00 AM. Two people wearing masks entered our tent and tried to take my husband's laptop because it had his investigative notes and reporting on it. My son was 15 years old, and when the masked figures entered the tent, he was traumatized. They were wearing black from head to toe and looked like Islamic State [jihadists]. My son could not stop screaming, and the men ran away.

We had to take him to the emergency room. His appendix had exploded and they had to do surgery and remove it. The trauma made it burst. After that, he did not eat or sleep for one week, and unknown men harassed us in other ways. They would throw stones at our tent in the middle of the night. They tried to terrorize us because my husband was a journalist. We had to move to a

[37] Esyan refugee camp is located in northern Iraq. It is close to the Yazidi town of Baadre in Iraq's Sheikhan District. In 2015, it was home to 15,284 people.

house in Sharya[38] after that in order to protect our family. We were scared every night and could not sleep. This is why we moved to America."

I've given you a bit of a window into my research, and I hope that gives a window into the genocide itself. We've been talking for hours, and yet this is only the tip of the iceberg. There is so much more to be said about every aspect of what we've covered and many other subjects we haven't even had time to get to.

I hope that what I've been able to share with you today will have a meaningful impact on the people who hear it. These stories are very real and there are so many more. There are thousands of stories like these, but the little quotes I've [read to] you are emblematic of experiences shared by so many other people.

This [situation] is not finished yet because the KDP still maintains the position that it wants to control Sinjar. The US has not honored [Yazidi] requests to prevent that from happening [and has not] definitively said, "[Yazidis are] never going to be controlled by a Kurdish political party again. We're going to facilitate a process with Baghdad, with real talks that are public, where we engage with your leaders and hammer out an administrative system that works."

Instead, once Trump was elected [in 2016], the KDP's Peshmerga attacked Sinjar and killed Yazidis. That effort was not successful in dislodging [the] PKK entities [in Sinjar that the KDP opposed], so Turkey [, which also opposed the PKK,] began its campaign of airstrikes against the Yazidis in 2017. This never would've been allowed under the Obama administration. Trump gave Erdogan a green light to do this. We understand that he often has an affinity for despotic figures. That was clearly the case regarding Turkey, where Trump has a Trump Tower in Istanbul. He betrayed [America's] Kurdish allies in Syria who we had worked with for a number of years fighting against the Islamic State, allowing Turkey to invade and attack Kurdish areas inside Syria. This was something that alienated a lot of Republican members of [the US] military from Trump. It was just shocking.

This policy of Turkish airstrikes has continued in Sinjar until now, and they frequently kill Yazidis who belong to the YBŞ, the local PKK affiliate. They frequently kill civilians and children. [The US] government has become silent about this. A major case will occur and the State Department or the US consulate in Erbil won't say anything. If they do, they won't identify who the actor or target was. This is part of the genocide. This is part of the outcome of the genocide that has resulted from the chaos that ensued after George Bush's plan to invade Iraq.

The airstrike policy continues now. Biden has not reversed it, even though when he was elected [in 2020], he gave a tough speech about how he was going to hold Turkey accountable and not let Erdogan get away with all of his expansionism. No, [the US government is] letting it happen.

[38] Sharya is a village in northern Iraq that is about nine miles south of the city of Duhok. It is home to the Sharya refugee camp, which hosts approximately 18,000 displaced persons. Its inhabitants are predominantly Yazidis.

Our government is complicit in the ongoing thwarting of the resolution of this genocide and they say nothing about it. The Yazidi advocacy voice is small enough that they don't have to worry about much blowback from this.

[The Iraqi government's] negligence is also incredibly important. Baghdad hasn't played as directly abusive a role as the KDP has, but they have completely neglected any effort to restore a functioning administration and governance in [Sinjar]. [Sinjar] doesn't even have the typical community administrative leaders that every district in the country enjoys. The [Iraqi government] just neglects that. Some people speculate that they want to keep Sinjar as a bargaining chip to later pass on to the KDP so that they can get something else that they want.

That would be terrible for the Yazidi people, who do not want and have never been under the authority of the Barzani tribe. What right or historical connection is there for the Barzani family to claim that it should rule Sinjar? But, our government seems to go along with this KDP agenda. We don't hear them speaking out against this. I don't know what's been said behind closed doors, but I see nothing publicly, or mentioned by any official with whom I have contact, that suggests that the US has attempted to engage with Baghdad to [establish an] administration in Sinjar.

The KDP needs to be out for good. The KDP is out physically right now, because after Masoud Barzani's failed independence referendum [in 2017],[39] Baghdad got angry and reclaimed a lot of the disputed territories from Kurdistan, with Kirkuk[40] being the main one. There have been no Peshmerga in Sinjar since late 2017. Even with Baghdad firmly in control of it, they haven't appointed local officials. They haven't appointed a *Kaymakam*, which is a district head, nor have they appointed the other officials who serve under that office. There's supposed to be a local council election that results in the appointment of those officials. [However,] these councils in the Nineveh Governorate are controlled by the KDP. It's not as straightforward as Baghdad just saying, "Okay, we're going to [appoint local officials]." There has to be some new process that decouples this administration from KDP influence. The KDP has succeeded in controlling a lot of the Arab leaders in the Nineveh Governorate, [such as those in] the city of Mosul, the seat of power [in the region]. [This political influence] impacts [nearby Yazidi] districts, with Sinjar being the primary victim.

This [situation] just can't go on forever. The US always loves to turn things into a status quo: patch things up, do some kind of mediation, [and] bring the KDP back in. That's my fear. That's not what needs to happen. What needs to happen is a very engaged process where the US

[39] On September 25th, 2017, Masoud Barzani, the then-president of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), held a referendum for the region's independence from Iraq. Although over 92% of respondents voted for Kurdish independence, the Iraqi government refused to recognize the referendum, and its armed forces successfully captured swathes of Iraqi Kurdistan. In light of his failed bid for Kurdish independence, Barzani stepped down as president on November 1st, 2017.

[40] Kirkuk is a city in northern Iraq and is the fourth-largest city in the country. It is the capital of the Kirkuk Governorate, which was one of the territories that Iraq took from the KRI following the failed Kurdish independence referendum in 2017.

expends the necessary effort. It needs to create an international commission for the resolution of the status of Sinjar that secures an agreement [for the Iraqi government] to work inside the country and then create a new administrative order for Sinjar, not one that undermines Iraqi sovereignty over the area.

[This new form of governance] doesn't need to be to the degree of the Kurdistan region [of Iraq, which] has regional autonomy. But, [it must be] something that decouples Sinjar as a district from this coercive, abusive Kurdish control. It has to be administered directly by Baghdad and have the local officials who are part of that administration be drawn from the local population and non-partisan. I think a law ought to be passed that prohibits Sinjari administrative officials from belonging to parties. That's never been done before.

Let's do [this] for the first time and establish this precedent [so] it can help prevent future instances of this genocide recurring. That is a real concern. If Yazidis don't control their own security in the future, they could be abandoned like they were in 2014. They frequently talk about this. This is a major push factor for immigration, motivating Yazidis to leave [Kurdistan and Iraq]. They have been among the immigrants, including Kurds and Arab refugees from Syria, who have drowned in the Mediterranean when their boats capsized.

If Europe is so concerned about the influx of immigrants, why won't it work harder to resolve some of the problems that create push factors? Germany hosts the largest number of [Yazidi] refugees. It also has the largest historical Yazidi diaspora community. They owe this [support] to the Yazidis, but like the US, they [instead] earmark their funds for humanitarian relief for their major wing of the NGO industry, which is called GIZ.[41] It's like the USAID of Germany. [I] don't see any effort [on Germany's part] to force Baghdad to begin to create this workable administration and a security framework that will be controlled by Yazidis.

When the Peshmerga Rojava[42] attacked Sinjar in 2017, they used German weapons, some American weapons, and maybe Canadian weapons to kill Yazidi soldiers who had been fighting against the Islamic State for several years. They killed them because they belonged to the PKK. There was a temporary stink in the German media about it, and German parliamentarians convinced the government to halt any arms provisions to the Peshmerga. I don't know if that ban still stands now. Probably not. This stuff just gets normalized and the people trying to do advocacy go into fatigue.

[Activists and advocacy workers] cannot maintain this constant attempt to get a government to exert even minimal effort on [the KDP and the Iraqi government]. It is unconscionable to me that

[41] This is the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ), or "German Agency for International Cooperation" in English.
[42] The Peshmerga Rojava serve as the military force of the Kurdish National Council (KNC), a Syrian Kurdish political party. The KNC and Peshmerga Rojava are aligned with the KDP, with Masoud Barzani sponsoring the creation of the KNC in 2011.

a Sinjar task force has never been formed by the US government. [They haven't done this throughout the] nine years of this genocide, [even] when [Nadia Murad,] the first Iraqi winner of the Nobel Peace Prize [in 2018], came from the Yazidi community. The UN Syria Commission recognized [the violence against the Yazidis] as a genocide in 2016. The Yazda organization [, of which I was a part at the time,] was involved with this effort and contributed [research and] documentation to it.

Other governments and parliaments have recognized this as a genocide. [In the United States,] John Kerry gave a speech where he called it a genocide, but that was just a speech.[43] [There] wasn't anything formal from our Congress or our administration. Canada had a stronger level of recognition. There have been certain forms of recognition coming from the UK and some other countries in Europe. I think the Germans just recognized the genocide this past year. Get ready for more nothing. You can recognize the genocide and what does that mean? What actions will happen? What will that translate into? The UN recognized this as a genocide back in 2016. Nothing has happened.

Despite the high-profile work done by Amal Clooney, Nadia Murad, all of us in the Yazda organization, other organizations, and other people, not even a single individual has been assigned by [the US] government to work on researching an outcome to this genocide and then working toward that goal. The [US] needs to form an international commission, get an agreement with [the Iraqi government] to allow it to operate in [Kurdistan] where it will agree to abide by the [commission's] recommendations, and then implement an actual administration that does not involve the KRG in any way.

The UNAMI [United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq] is the UN entity that monitors human rights in Iraq. It tried to create what it called the "Sinjar Agreement" back in 2019 that did not unequivocally and decisively eliminate the KDP from having a foothold in Sinjar. Of course, [this agreement] hasn't been implemented. None of the Yazidis want it to be implemented. Its language talked about security being under the [Iraqi] central state, but there was still some way in which local officials could belong to the KDP and KRG. These foreign officials who get involved in [this conflict between the KDP and the Yazidi people] do not understand how the KDP works. It's an all-or-nothing [situation]. It will work forever to restore a situation where it has military control.

The US did not allow Peshmerga troops to come in and occupy Sinjar [after] Saddam fell [in 2003]. [To circumvent this restriction, the KDP] used a loophole where it cited the need to have security for [its] lijnes, for the offices that were part of [its] party center system. Then, those party centers ended up doubling as pseudo-military barracks, where you had military vehicles with machine guns. You didn't need a lot of [military equipment] to control a [Yazidi] population because the population had [no weapons or vehicles] like that. [They] didn't have a single pickup

[43] John Kerry was the US Secretary of State from 2013 to 2017, serving under President Barack Obama.

truck-mounted machine gun. If you had one of those at a lijne to protect it, you could control a whole town. Bit by bit, [the KDP] found ways to insert itself into [Sinjar's political] situation until it completely controlled the region. There's no such thing as a shared control model [between the KDP and the Yazidis] in this picture. [The KDP] needs to be out. This is important for the survival of the Yazidis.

I don't just say this like it's something that's out of a pipe dream, high in the sky. No, this is coming from the perspective of a historian who sees the Yazidi community having shrunk in recent centuries from a vast community that used to stretch from mountains in western Persia all the way to the Mediterranean Sea. Now, they live in just a few tiny enclaves in Iraq and some even smaller enclaves in Syria. Even those are under threat and were targeted with a genocide that was facilitated and then extended by the Kurdish authorities. [The KDP] is not part of the solution. It is the problem. It cannot be involved in working out an outcome and they do not deserve it. [The resolution of the genocide is] between Baghdad and the Yazidis. Baghdad is incredibly negligent, criminally negligent. Western countries, who are likewise negligent, need to take the role to exert pressure on Baghdad to make sure that this happens.

Seth: Absolutely. Thank you for everything you've said during our conversation. It certainly has illuminated the situation far more for me, and I definitely assume for everyone who will be reading and watching this as well. Thank you so much for your time, it really means a lot to me. Educating more [people] about this topic is very important.

Matthew: Thank you, Seth. I know it's a lot to digest in a single dose, but, like I said, this is just the beginning. This [information] is a couple decades of history and nine years of direct experience, [and I'm] trying to distill what is important and transmit all of that to you. This is why a task force really has to take charge of this [situation], because you can't just look at it through a few journalistic and human rights reports and determine an outcome. No, this is a full-time project for whoever would head up such a commission. It's a lot of information, but thank you for your interest and concern in learning about it and making it available to others. That's very important.

I think that all of us in the realm of Yazidi advocacy work have failed to sustain public awareness about this issue. We are all worn out. We survived on adrenaline during the early years. When I first began to build Yazda in Iraq in 2015, the entire team and I worked seven days a week for five months. We didn't take a day off for five months. We were still in that emergency mode where the sense of urgency was so strong that we just didn't feel we could sit. Several years of that level of intensity [makes] people get burned out. Also, when you don't have a strong response from the governments that you're beseeching for help, a lot of deep discouragement sets in.

Now, there is so much work, so much documentation, a clearer message, and a clearer understanding of what's happened in the past [that needs to be achieved]. This should be

platformed even more now, but it's not. It will be with time, and hopefully the issues will remain relevant and there will still be a chance to fix some things. I'm glad that you're being part of the solution by taking this information and making it available, [by] transmitting it to the public. That is important. Thank you very much.

Seth: Of course. Thank you so much.