

Comment

Comment on Moralee (2018). It's in the Water: Byzantine Borderlands and the Village War. *Humanities* 7: 86

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Abstract: This response to Jason Moralee's article comes from members and associates of the Êzidi (Yazidi) team working on *Sinjar Lives/Shingal Lives*, a community-driven oral history project funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council. They are all survivors of the Êzidi genocide committed by ISIS in 2014. They explore Moralee's themes of securitisation, imperialism and violence—especially the 'village war', its roots in imperialist thought and its consequences—from the perspective of those who call the village home. Beyond securitisation, they discuss borders both geographical and socio-cultural and the contemporary political significance of the elusive victim voice.

Keywords: Sinjar; Êzidi; ISIS; securitisation; genocide

This response comes from members and associates of the Êzidi (Yazidi) team working on *Sinjar Lives/Shingal Lives*, a community-driven oral history project funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council. Professor Moralee's article notes the 2014 genocide perpetrated by ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) against the Êzidis, an ethnoreligious community 300,000 strong living around Mount Sinjar (henceforth Shingal, in line with Êzidi naming convention) (Moradi and Anderson 2016; Travis Barber 2021). 3000 Êzidis were massacred and 7000 enslaved. Others perished attempting to escape, stranded on Shingal mountain itself. Almost all were displaced to IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps in the Kurdistan region over 100 km away. Facing numerous obstacles, few have been able to return home (Dulz 2016).

Our response consists of an overview of the current context of Shingal, followed by a conversation, conducted on 16 December 2021, between three poets, who are also close friends, from the Êzidi community in Shingal: Zédan Xelef and Emad Bashar, field directors of the *Shingal Lives* project, and Jaff, a translator and psychologist who works under a mononym.¹ Whereas Zédan and Jaff grew up in Shingal, Emad lived in Syria as a small child and returned to Shingal aged 11. In conversation with the international coordinators of *Shingal Lives*, Professor Christine Robins (University of Exeter) and Dr Alana Marie Levinson-LaBrosse (American University of Iraq at Sulaimani),² they explore Moralee's themes of securitisation, imperialism and violence—especially the 'village war', its roots in imperialist thought and its consequences—from the perspective of those who call the village home. Beyond securitisation, they discuss borders both geographical and socio-cultural and the contemporary political significance of the elusive victim voice.

Less than 10 km from Syria at its nearest point, Shingal Mountain stretches 100 km from east to west above the Nineveh Plain in Iraq, some 150 km north-east of Mosul by road. For Êzidis, it is a holy mountain, its crests and valleys dotted with shrines commemorating divine presence and interventions. Also inscribed on the landscape are narratives of flight and shelter, of Christians, Êzidis and others fleeing the massacres of the late Ottoman period and First World War, particularly after the Armenian genocide of 1915. The new



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post-war map placed Shingal in an Iraq under British Mandate, looking out across French Mandatory Syria toward Atatürk's Republic of Turkey. Although the British authorities manipulated Shingali Êzidi leadership disputes, bombing 'rebellious' Êzidi villages,³ it was in the 1970s that Êzidis felt the full impact of the twentieth-century nation-state, with the Arabisation policies of the Ba'ath régime. Villages were emptied, ecosystems destroyed and populations regrouped into collective settlements (*mujama'at*), whose resources were tightly controlled by the government. Meanwhile, Arabs were settled in non-Arab areas. Formally designated 'Ummayad Arabs', Êzidis were given a religious origin-story unacceptable to many, while Shingal remained a 'left-behind' region with low literacy rates and poor healthcare (Spät 2018, pp. 422–23).

During the Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988), Shingal did not suffer the brutality experienced by the regions bordering on Iran; nevertheless, the Arabic-only schooling and media affected the culture of the Kurmanji (Northern Kurdish)-speaking Êzidis. Even after the Gulf War of 1991 led to the creation of the Kurdish autonomous region, Shingal remained under government control. After the Ba'ath régime's end in 2003, Shingal became a disputed territory, contested between the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), who considered the Êzidis to be Kurds. Many Shingalis felt co-opted by the KRG as they had been by the Ba'ath, especially since the KRG thwarted their attempts to migrate to the Kurdistan region and benefit from its relative prosperity (Dulz et al. 2008). Meanwhile, security in Iraq deteriorated; Êzidis were persecuted as they travelled to work in Mosul; in 2007, two vehicle bombs in Shingali communities claimed hundreds of victims. Since 2014, reconstruction in Shingal has been delayed by the militarization of the entire zone. Strained relations exist between Iraqi People's militias, KRG *peshmerga* fighting forces and YBS (Shingal Protection Units)—Êzidi militias with connections to the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers' Party from Turkey and its ally in Syria, the PYD (People's Protection Units). The situation is further complicated by airstrikes from Turkey, which considers both the PKK and the PYD national threats.⁴

We began with the question of *asphaleia* (security):

Christine: How would you define 'security'?

Zêdan: Security is independence. The state forces our dependence, by destroying our land, resettling us on others' land, resettling us where there is no water except what comes from the state: this way, we can never be secure without the state. But our oral traditions tell us that even before the modern nation-states, Ottoman soldiers did the same to nomadic Êzidi tribes. Êzidis are a small group that has been constantly targeted. I remember seeing Dawoud Bey's photographs from his exhibit, "Night Coming Tenderly, Black", which flipped the idea of dark as bad and white as good; people ran from slavery in darkness because they'd be seen in the light. Êzidis too, maybe all powerless or defeated people, have experienced that feeling that night is more secure than day. In 2014, as we hid [from ISIS] on the mountain, people said, 'Don't walk in big groups, you'll be seen!' We have no better survival skills than our ancestors; there's nothing new: we are still just bodies running, trying to survive.

Jaff: This term 'security' is confusing: secure, safe from what? From yourself, from others, from time, from death? When we talk about security, we should think about our own dignity, freedom and that of others. Where does our own freedom stop and that of others begin? . . . it's complicated. And why feel safe? What is the purpose of feeling safe?

Emad: To be honest, I don't feel safe and I don't think I'll feel safe in the future. In this region, anyone can feel he has the right to kill you based on your religion. You can't express your identity. As Zêdan says, Êzidis worked to be invisible. During my first year at Mosul university, students worked to develop their Arabic so they wouldn't be recognised as Êzidi and get attacked by Al-Qaeda. From 2003 until 2014, everyone going to Mosul put on Arab clothing; even among themselves, they spoke Arabic to further obscure their identity.

Christine: Quoting Theophanes, Professor Moralee describes the violence the Byzantine army inflicted on their own citizens in Thrace as 'more grievous than a barbarian attack.' (Moralee 2018, p. 8). What is your own response to this?

Zêdan: Where I come from, ruling has always been about terrorizing people. After Saddam fell, people thought the region would be de-tyrannized, but it was just tyrannized in a different way, through the Asayish [the Kurdistan Region's security police]. We should feel safe when we see an Asayish officer, or our parents, when they saw a Ba'athist policeman, but no one does. Once, as we played football in the street with my friends, a uniformed squad of red berets holding Kalashnikovs dragged off two of our cousins. Their faces were bleeding. They'd been reported as draft dodgers. But, of course, young people, conscripted, taken from their homes for months on end, forced to fight Iraq's war after war: of course, they ran from the draft. We all would.

Jaff: The Asayish are just a tool the authorities use, to say they're protecting us. As the article says, the authorities have a lexicon of abstract words like 'national security', which they say they protect, but which means nothing to ordinary people. The authorities say 'It's not a problem if many die, we still have our land'. The 'land'—Iraqis say "Iraq", Kurds say "Kurdistan"—is more important than people's lives. When I was about seven, I couldn't do my schoolwork, I was so afraid the Ba'athists would come and get me. The USA arrived and destroyed Saddam Hussein's statues, so I cut his pictures [out of] all our books and burned them.

Emad: As a child, I remember in every Syrian movie the French military said, 'We're here to keep you safe.' Later, in Iraq, I was told Saddam built the *mujamma'at* [collective villages] to give people electricity, schools and water; but I understand now that he wanted people as far as possible from Shingal mountain so he could control them. And then the US army destroyed Saddam and said, 'We're here to save you from the Ba'ath.' In Shingal, the KDP *peshmerga* [militia] forces and Asayish said the same, 'You're part of Kurdistan, we want to save you and protect you.' They promoted their ideology, controlling everything through the community leaders, the police, the checkpoints. In 2014, the PKK and YPG came to Shingal and helped us. Now they refuse to leave. You saved us from ISIS, thank you very much, but this is our home, leave us in peace! But they say, 'We saved you from ISIS, you should embrace our ideology'. Same thing in the IDP camps in the Kurdistan region—the KDP tell people they're protecting them but really they're just keeping them away from Shingal, so they vote in the Kurdistan region. Given Shingal's geographic location, I don't feel positive that it will one day be safe. This could also apply to the whole governorate of Nineveh, as long as Turkey claims the whole area as Turkish. Meanwhile it's a disputed territory within Iraq—the Kurdish government believes it belongs to Kurdistan and the Iraqi government claims it for Iraq.

Marie: So what's happening in the geography is playing out inside each person, who becomes the embodiment of the contested territory.

Zêdan: Even our geography represents the interests of colonial powers! It's not how the region is shaped in terms of identity. Before the modern borders were established, Êzidis travelled as nomads with their flocks, up to summer pastures in what is now present-day Turkey. But internal borders still exist within Shingal itself—families with different political views, the traditional Êzidi 'caste' system of social and religious classes who don't intermarry, and also long-standing segregation between southern and northern parts of the mountain.

Jaff: I don't want to judge only from a political perspective. For me, we can't separate Êzidis from Kurdistan, or from Muslim Kurds . . . but I think the Êzidi community has low self-esteem. People laugh at you if you give your daughter a Kurmanji name like Khunav—they prefer an Arabic name like Nada!

Zêdan: This is a symptom of being Arabized.

Jaff: Of course!

Zêdan: They're unaware of being Arabized because they don't know anything else—they're programmed this way. I grew up listening to Arabic music more than Kurmanji. I hated the Kurmanji *strans* [ballads] and stories! We were programmed like *rats in a lab*, as Charles Simic says—you don't have choice, you're educated the way the system wants.

Emad: For a person to make choices, they need to be in an environment where they have options. Authorities should provide this. But we Êzidis, we also have our own taboos—predominantly against conversion [to Islam], but also against wearing blue, fraternising with Arabs, even—in the past—going to school. Such strict taboos that people were afraid and couldn't disobey. So I don't blame anyone for making poor choices.

Jaff: Why might people want to be in the dark? They don't know how to do anything else. They don't know how to survive. They're waiting for a western country to protect them. They don't have any projects or plans. When someone faces danger, he has three options: fight, flight, or freeze. The Êzidis choose freezing—staying still, doing nothing.

Christine: With all this external and internal control, do you think that victims' voices are heard now? Bearing in mind the success of Nadia Murad⁵ and others in speaking to the international community, have we seen a change in victim voices being heard?

Emad: This is something new. Those who compete for international attention need victim testimonies to make their propositions stronger. For example, after a long history of suffering, Kurdistan of Iraq has become a safe zone. So incorporating the story of the Êzidi genocide adds to the KRG's cause. When they approached the international community, they said 'Êzidi Kurds' genocide', not 'the Êzidi genocide'. But the genocide happened because they are Êzidi, not because they are Kurds! The KRG appropriated the victimhood to make themselves stronger—a new style of defeat within a new style of war.⁶

Jaff: The victim voices that survive are the voices of identity. For example, in *stran* [ballads], when the Ottoman army enslaves girls, the singers focus on Êzidi religion or identity, not on experience of slavery. Even now, survivors don't talk about what happened to them as a body, as a person—no, they'll say how painful for them it was to accept Islam. Some of them could have avoided torture or rape [by converting], but they didn't.

Zêdan: Survival as a group was what kept you alive. Many Ezidis lived to keep their religion and culture alive. Not to make money, or do business, just to transmit what they were told. Which is also a purpose, I think.

Jaff: It's always about identity. For minorities, between them and the majority, there are borders—meaning 'you are not me and I cannot be like you.' On this border, there is a kind of anxiety. We always feel unsafe.

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Notes

- ¹ Zêdan Xelef is a poet, translator, and culture preservationist who grew up in the Êzidî community in Shingal. He is a co-creator of the Êzidî oral history archive, Tew Tew. His work has appeared in Poetry, LARB, Word Without Borders, among others. His chapbook "A Barcode Scanner", was published by Kashkul Books in 2021. He attends the MFA program at San Francisco State University. Emad Bashar is a poet from Shingal. Born in Syria in 1992, he has published two books of poetry, *A Shadow* and *I and you are looking like you*. Jaff, writer and translator, was born in Shingal in 1994.
- ² Christine Robins (Christine Allison) published her PhD research in 2001 as *The Yezidi Oral Tradition in Iraqi Kurdistan*. After working at SOAS, London and INALCO, Paris, she came to the Centre for Kurdish Studies at Exeter in 2007. She has worked alongside members of indigenous communities of the region whose culture is endangered, including Êzidis, Mandaeans and Syrian Orthodox Christians. Alana Marie Levinson-LaBrosse is a poet, translator, and assistant professor. She holds a PhD in Kurdish Studies from the University of Exeter. Her writing has appeared, among other places, in *Modern Poetry in Translation*, *World Literature Today*, *In Other Words*, *Plume*, and *Words Without Borders*. Book-length works include Nali's *My Moon Is the Only Moon* (2021) and Pirbal's *The Potato Eaters* (2023). She is Kashkul's Founding Director and a 2022 NEA Fellow, the first ever working from the Kurdish language.
- ³ For the uprising of Shingali leader Dawûdê Dawûd, see Fuccaro (1999, pp. 96–101); see Allison (2001, pp. 231–34) for an account by Dawûd's son, from Sulaiman and Jindy (1977).

- 4 For a situation report which explains the lack of implementation of the UN-brokered ‘Sinjar’ agreement between the KRG and Baghdad, see [International Crisis Group \(2022\)](#) Report no. 235.
- 5 Nadia Murad Basee is an international campaigner who has survived ISIS massacres in her home village of Kocho and subsequent abduction and slavery. In 2016 she won the European Parliament Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought jointly with Lamiya Aji Bashar. In 2018 she shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Denis Mukwege, awarded ‘for their efforts to end the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and armed conflict’ [European Parliament \(2016\)](#); [The Nobel Prize \(2018\)](#).
- 6 See [Watts \(2017\)](#) for the example of Halabja, where political contestation between locals and the Kurdish government took place over ‘ownership’ of genocide.

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