

# REPORT

## WORKSHOP ON UNTOLD EXPERIENCES OF VULNERABLE REFUGEES

**21-23 September 2017, Gothenburg**

The workshop focusing on the specific experiences of vulnerable refugee groups is organized within the framework of the Gilgamesh Project which is financed by the Swedish *Riksbanken's Jubileumsfund*, and supported by the University of Gothenburg, Uppsala University, Museum of World Cultures (SE), Cetrez.com (SE) and the Inanna Foundation (NL). It has been organised by Dr Onver Cetrez, Dr Naures Atto and Soner Barthoma.

The workshop took place at the Centre on Global Migration (CGM), University of Gothenburg with the participation of international scholars and NGO representatives who have expertise on the situation of vulnerable refugee groups originating from the Middle East. In the opening of the workshop, director of the hosting institution (CGM) Andrea Spehar introduced the interdisciplinary research profile of their Centre and emphasized the importance of developing a specific focus on vulnerable groups. After this opening speech, on behalf of the workshop organizing committee, Onver Cetrez (Assoc. professor, Uppsala University) briefly presented the Gilgamesh project and underlined the overall aims of this workshop, followed by the introduction of the participants.

The workshop was structured along several thematic sessions where the participants discussed different vulnerable communities and their survival strategies, and focused on the trauma aspect that these groups are experiencing on different dimensions.

**Ewelina Ochab** (legal researcher, PhD candidate in International Law, Human Rights and Medical Ethics at the University of Kent) in her presentation, *Iraqi Christians after Daesh: the challenges faced and the needed response*, provided an overview on the consequences of IS attacks and massacres particularly on minority groups in the region based on her field research in IDP camps Ankawa-Erbil region. Ewelina first gave information about the living conditions of these refugee camps. She also visited Amman to prepare a report about the situation of Christian refugees who are numbering ca 20 thousand. Different from Northern Iraq, in Jordan, Christian refugees don't

live in designated camps. Not only Christians, but other religious minorities also do not prefer to live in camps. Christians in Jordan do not have a legal status and work permit. Applying for a work permit is an expensive and lengthy process. They are living in a limbo situation. Teenagers cannot go to school because of school fees. The situation in Lebanon is similar. Iraqi living in Lebanon live there with no legal protection. Those still living in Iraqi Kurdistan hope to return back to their homes. Over 3000 families returned to their homes among 19000 of those who escaped from the IS. One of the main challenges in front of their return is the security and human safety. Ewelina ended her presentation with the analysis of the recent UN Security Council's decision regarding establishing an investigation committee on the IS crimes.

**Ingvill Thorson Plesner's** (Center for Studies of Holocaust and Religious Minorities – CHM, Oslo) presentation titled *The impact of minority status for flight and return for Syrian and Iraqi refugees*. Since 2015, CHM has coordinated a network of researchers and practitioners within the field of minority rights, the Minority Network. In 2017, the Center received funding from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a three-year project, including internationalization of the Minority Network and funding for the current research project. This network project aims to bring academics, policymakers and practitioners working on the ME and North Africa together. The network project addresses issues of minorities among minorities from diverse perspectives. One of the conclusions drawn so far is that minorities are not comfortable with the term "minority". The concept has a negative connotation. Instead they prefer the term "being component of society". Ingvill mentioned that the framework they are working within, is that minority rights are derived from basic human rights, not exclusive. The central questions of this new research project are:

To what extent and in what way was the minority status, on ethnic and/or religious basis, a reason for the flight? And how does it influence considerations of return, e.g. in terms of reflections on political and social conditions for security and inclusion?

**Jan Ilhan Kizilhan** (Professor, Psychologist, trauma expert, director of the Special-Quota Project, Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University) in his presentation *Trauma and sexual violence: ISIS crimes against the Yazidis* discussed the main results of his research among traumatized Yazidi female victims. He personally interviewed and conducted psychological tests with 1403 Yazidi women who were brought to Germany within the framework of the Special-Quota project. One difficult question raised by a child and difficult to answer as a professional is: "why are human beings so poor [bad]?" Dr Kizilhan also interviewed "DAESH fighters" in Iraq and in Raqqa,

Syria. Based on these interviews, he concluded that these fighters are very 'normal' people with families and they believe that they're doing normal things according to their religious thought. Dr Kizilhan underlined the importance of understanding this extremism within its social context and high support caters (e.g. 3 million supporter in Turkey according to a survey) in many countries. Dr Kizilhan shared also some important results from his interviews. One main question is how people can cope with trauma and the future: the culture of shame and honour is central. One young woman said: "I want to be ugly in order not to be raped again." Women don't express the trauma primarily in a cognitive way, but more through the body. The majority of the victims whom he interviewed do not want to go back again. They don't see any future in Iraq. Dr Kizilhan furthermore elaborated on the impacts of the trauma both at collective and individual levels. In the discussion session, participants raised questions that are very important for future research, such as: How are women who are "purified" by a priest accepted by men in the community; how can they survive? How will the abducted Yazidi child soldiers be re-integrated into the society? How are children born from rape received within the community? How do we build up empathy among people who lack empathy?

**Fazil Mouradi** (social anthropologist, Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Halle-Wittenberg,) in his presentation *The Êzîdîs' deferred futures: On abandonment and the politics of the right to survival* elaborated on memories of forced displacement and massacres and the question of survival in the future. Dr Mouradi first gave a brief background information about the history of Ezidis and showed how Ezidis historically have been living on the edges in a "minority marginality", survived from 74 *fermans* (massacre or genocide). In the second part of his presentation, Dr Mouradi talked about the impacts of this genocide on the Ezidi survivors. Accordingly, abandonment is a common psychological condition in and outside of the camps which can be observed and understood in statements like "We are not worth anything" and "We can no longer trust people". In order to illustrate the memory of fragments of abandonments, Dr Mouradi read and analysed a poem written by a victim. The gravity of the poem goes back to safety in mother's arm as a child. The poem searches for safety as a "human condition" and strikingly says that there is still no home to return to. Surviving the genocide, living in camps, becoming orphans, all these elements show how a meaningful life has been destroyed. And overall, disappearance of Mount Sinjar and control of memory in the aftermath of genocide turned the Ezidi homeland to "disputed territories" and Ezidis to "disputed populations". Furthermore, Dr Mouradi drew our attention to children witnessing this genocide. In the question session, the participants elaborated further on how Ezidis coped with this trauma and how Ezidi women have started to speak publicly on behalf of their people.

**Fiona Bunn** (Office manager at Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East – FRRME) in her presentation *(Re)building a faith community through reconciliation and peace making* explained how difficult it is to convince Iraq's minority displaced people to return home and underlined that currently, the timescale is measured at 45-60 days. According to the survey of Action churches in Need (ACN), 41% of these Christian IDPs indicated that they wish to return to their homes. Following the Foundation's field research, Fiona talked furthermore about how the Christian minority groups in particular face a genuine and immediate existential threat as the indigenous people of Iraq. They believe they have been forgotten by both their own government and the international community. The main questions that Fiona asked and tried to answer were: How can host communities, particularly through the churches in receiving countries, help Iraqi Christians? Can receiving countries be helped to understand more effectively the interconnectedness of the Iraqi Christian geographic identity which includes their religion and culture? Can a faith community such as the Iraqi Christians, in fact be rebuilt in host communities, or has the impact of sectarian violence, recognised genocide, and displacement made this irrecoverable? As concluding remarks, Fiona gave information about their work as a foundation aiming to develop strategies for minority groups in the region through peace-building and reconciliation process which is very crucial for the coexistence of different ethnic and religious groups in the same geography.

**Göran Larsson & Simon Sorgenfrei** (Göran is professor in Religious Studies at University of Gothenburg and Simon is lecturer in Religious Studies at Södertörn University College) elaborated on a recent report "Ethno-Religious Minorities from the Middle East and Turkey in Sweden" that was commissioned by the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities (SST), and discussed the organization of some newly established minority groups (Yazidis, Maendean and Alevi) in Sweden and their group-specific challenges in a new context. The main question that they elaborated was: Does the new exile situation indicate that these religious traditions will disappear or does it mean that we will see a revitalisation and novel forms for how these traditions could be expressed? They pointed out the lack of religious experts and leaders for these groups as one challenge to continue their group specific religious traditions and rituals. Another related question they have underlined was: To what extent do these groups challenge our understandings of concepts such as 'religion'? How are these groups to be categorised? How can we delineate between ethnicity, culture and religion regarding these communities? They also emphasized lack of academic knowledge about these groups.

**Daria Vorobyeva** (PhD Candidate in the Department of International Relations at the University of St Andrews) talked about Syrian-Armenian forced migrants in Armenia, and elaborated on their economic integration in Armenia based on her PhD research. In her presentation, *Double-edged integration: Syrian-Armenian forced migration to their perceived ethnic homeland, Armenia (2012-2016)*, Daria mentioned that after the start of the Syrian civil war, half or even more of these left the country. Armenia became one of the main countries chosen to flee to. Armenia was attractive mainly due to its image as an “ethnic Armenian homeland” and due to the welcoming policies of the Armenian state. Despite the fact that both the Armenian state, and to a large extent Armenian society, have had a welcoming attitude towards their Syrian counterparts, the process of integration has still had complications. Daria concluded her presentation by underlining a number of factors that affect the integration of Syrian-Armenians: The group had unrealistic preconceptions of Armenia and a lack of knowledge of the socio-economic realities on the ground. They have feelings of guilt towards people left in Syria, with a constant worry about people and possessions left in their country of origin.

M. S. Sanders (PhD candidate in the School of Middle Eastern & North African Studies, University of Arizona) talked about the untold experiences of Ezidis in the US. She focused on how Ezidis in the US are dealing with displacement and the language of victimhood in the post-migration context based on her ethnographical research conducted among the group in Arizona and Nebraska in 2016-17. One of the main findings of her research was that the Ezidi community of Arizona articulates its collective trauma through activism, where the language used reveals their ability to adapt to a new political environment, and seek potential alliances outside of their community based on common traumas. Their position as activists is informed by their collective trauma, affinities with other victims of ethnic-religious violence, and appropriation of the xenophobic rhetoric that is proliferating under the Trump Presidency (e.g. working closely with the right-wing Indian diaspora organizations).

**Andreas Schmöller** (Historian and Associated Researcher at the Center for the Study of Eastern Christianity at the University of Salzburg), with the title *“We lived together peacefully, but not I can’t” – Religion and sectarian discourse in biographical narratives of Syriac Christian refugees in Austria* presented his research project (2014-16) results among Syriac and Coptic Christians in Austria. He focused on the role of religion, religious identity and sectarianism in the post-migration context. Andreas elaborated on how the sectarian dynamics of the war in their countries of origin affect ethno-religious minorities in particular in the diaspora. In order to illustrate this, he presented four biographies/discourses: (1) “God gave me this

opportunity” – religious explanation of individual experiences; seeing refuge as a window of opportunity. (2) “My body is here, but my soul is still there” – to show the disruption of belonging and life changes; (3) “No future for Christians in Syria” – to show how they have lost everything (family members, friends, home, property etc.) what they have owned in the pre-war conditions; and (4) “People have to open their eyes” – message to outside. Andreas, furthermore, discussed about how sectarianism as a narrative strategy is modelled by and responds to contexts in the host society.

**Miriam Puttic** (Civilian Rights Officer for Minority Rights Group International; author of the MRG report *From Crisis to Catastrophe: The situation of minorities in Iraq – 2014*) in her presentation – titled *Drivers of displacement of Iraqi minorities, 2003 to present* – discussed her findings during her field research among Yazidis, Christians and Mandaeans. Miriam contextualized the recent ISIS attacks in long-term perspective, examined patterns of displacement and demographic change affecting Iraqi minorities in the post-Saddam period. She focused particularly on the experiences of the aforementioned minority groups, examining the consequences of conflict and displacement for the preservation of minority identity, culture and religious practice. Miriam provided some estimate demographic figures showing the impacts of war and sectarianism on these groups: the number of Christians in Iraq decreased from 1.4 million to 350 thousand; Yazidis from 700 to 500 thousand; Mandaeans from 30 to 5 thousand. Furthermore, she elaborated on the idea of return to home and she stated that these groups (especially IDPs) have mainly pessimistic views about returning to their homes. Political and security status of disputed territories are main obstacles. She stated that making Iraq safe for minorities to return not only requires the defeat of ISIS, but more than that, to build a more peaceful and inclusive post-conflict Iraq, in which minorities can safely return home.

**Qais Saidi** (lecturer at different universities in Germany, Mandaean activist) talked about *Mandaeans and their fear of extinction*. Mandaeans are not only the smallest minority in Iraq and Iran, but also the only heirs of one of the oldest oriental religions and cultures. Over hundreds of years, Mandaeans were exposed to persecutions and humiliations. Their existence, however, was not in such a way endangered as it became during the last 20 years, especially after US invasion of Iraq in 2003. As a consequence, the Mandaean community with about 60,000 followers worldwide is nowadays dispersed in about 15 countries (mainly in Sweden, Australia and the US). About 3,500 are left in Iraq and about 1000 in Iran. In their homeland, they are facing persecution and discrimination. Besides the everyday discrimination (e.g. hate speeches) that they face, the remaining

Mandaeans in Iraq and Iran fear revealing their real identities and practicing their religious rituals. Dr Saidi, in his presentation underlined several factors why the challenges of their new life in the Diaspora could also endanger their existence, such as: 1) The Mandaean religion is unknown mostly to the new societies; 2) Mandaean families are dispersed in more than one country or continents; 3) The differences in mentality between the parents and the children growing up in the new countries; 4) Lack of a common language of communication between parents and their children; 5) The new life conditions for men and women, that lead to conflicts of interest, instable family life and high rates of divorce, and 6) Mandaean religion is not missionary to accept others or allow to marry from other religions.

**Martin Lindgren** (independent researcher and PhD candidate at Uppsala University) in his presentation titled *Facing Oblivion: Cultural Survival as Virtue?* discussed how the Mandaeans are resilient to massacres from a historical perspective. Throughout their history of near two millennia the Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran have faced several dire threats. Like the previous speaker (Qais Saidi), Martin also pointed out how the current situation with the majority of the Mandaeans living in exile in the West has introduced entirely new challenges to the existence and future of this group. The Mandaeans have tried to face and cope with this situation in different ways. According to Martin, the main question in the diaspora however has been the challenge of self-definition. Are the Mandaeans first and foremost a cultural or a religious community? According to Martin, the answer is much more difficult than it can appear. At the bottom lies an even deeper conundrum: what is culture and what is religion and can you separate them? Martin ended his presentation by drawing our attention to the basic question: Despite the persecution that the Mandaeans have faced throughout their history, how did they survive? Referring to Jonathan Lear's book "Radical Hope", Martin emphasized that hope is a virtue, a courage for survival. Like all virtues it has to be practiced and expanded. Mandaeans have developed a culture of survival. The future for them is not decided yet; it is still in the process of making.

### **Interdisciplinary Gathering at Cetrez.com**

The second day the workshop participants had an interdisciplinary gathering with the staff members of a digital innovation company Cetrez.com, representatives of other companies, activists and community leaders in Gothenburg. The event was hosted by Cetrez.com at their new headquarters. Cetrez.com is based in Gothenburg and has branches in Germany and France. The company's founder and CEO, Simon Cetrez, in his opening speech briefly presented their company and chaired the

sessions. Simon stated that besides focusing on IT-based innovations, their company is aiming to be unique by delivering solutions and seeking for collaboration with scholars in the fields of arts, humanities and social sciences.

The second day presentations covered three sessions:

**Önver Cetrez & Soner O. Barthoma** (workshop organizers, Uppsala University, Free University Berlin) briefly summarized the first-day workshop presentations and gave more information about the Gilgamesh project's other two activities (Art exhibition and documentary movie about the same theme).

Furthermore, Dr. Cetrez presented a multi-level framework of determinants of mental health for refugees in a transit situation, where the approach used was the focus on protective factors that prevent negative health outcomes and/or promote health. Many Syrian refugees are in a vulnerable position during their odyssey to a safe heaven, but stuck in an uncertain intermediate situation, between what was their home and an imagined home in resettlement. Despite the many challenges, some refugees display a high quality of resilience, navigating their way to health-sustaining resources, where religion, family, community, and culture become meaning-giving. A problem with the common research approach, focusing on the mental-health of refugees before and after migration, pre- and post, is that this has some normative assumptions. The "pre" is understood as chaotic, unorganized, dangerous, lacking resources, undemocratic or simply much of that which is linked to the "other". The "post" is understood as the opposite, order, safe, having resources, democratic; simply that is connoted to "us", to the "receiver". We need to shift the focus to a more complex relation, where these assumptions are problematized. We need to develop the idea of the transit position, both conceptually as well as practically for those involved. The purpose of the presentation was to give a picture of refugees, not just as passers-by or victims of circumstances, but rather as creating and using networks, constructing spaces for own possibilities, cultivating solutions, and articulating relationships between disparate cultures by translating between them.

**Alexander Hultnér** (Cetrez.com) presented the vision of the Cetrez Academy which is an initiative to foster learning and premier curiosity by expanding collaborations with students and scholars in the field of technology.

**Andreas Rolén** (freelancing developer) talked about how Innovative technologies can be used to improve people's life and deliver solutions for the benefit of the most vulnerable groups in the society. Andreas presented also some examples on how they during 2015 initiated several local projects to help refugees and how effectively they were able to mobilize people locally to organize this solidarity action by using their innovative approaches. After

these two presentations, an open discussion was held about how interdisciplinary innovation can be applied to Arts, Humanities and Social science research and vice versa.

**Andrea Malanski** (Designer) presented her MA thesis project *Ruin in Reverse* (MA Design program in the Academy of Design and Arts at the University of Gothenburg). One of the issues explored in her project was the use of the design process and tools to map and to narrate stories of displaced persons. Andrea has used 3D scanning, 3D printing and other tools in design narrative practices to document and tell stories of vulnerable refugees. According to her, these tools can also be useful in a contemporary cultural heritage practice which considers everyday places and ordinary people as worthy to be protected as monuments and artefacts. Andrea also highlighted the importance of working in a multidisciplinary team that includes design, archaeology, anthropology and communities to “give voices to those silenced by society” by “working with living memories in connection to material culture”.

**Hawar Moradi** (psychiatrist, documentary filmmaker) presented his documentary movie *The remnants of the Ezidi genocide*. In the aftermath of the genocide, Hawar, together with a team visited the camps in Iraqi Kurdistan, and interviewed the Ezidi victims of IS genocide. Hawar questioned the term “untold experiences” and instead proposed “ignored or unlistened experiences”. The documentary illustrated very well the strength of victims, particularly children and provided an in-depth understanding how the victims cope with traumatic events and go on with their lives.

**Conclusion:** After the documentary, the workshop ended with a lunch reception. All the participants were pleased with the workshop results, and expressed their willingness for future collaborations. The organizers aim to publish the workshop papers in an academic journal.