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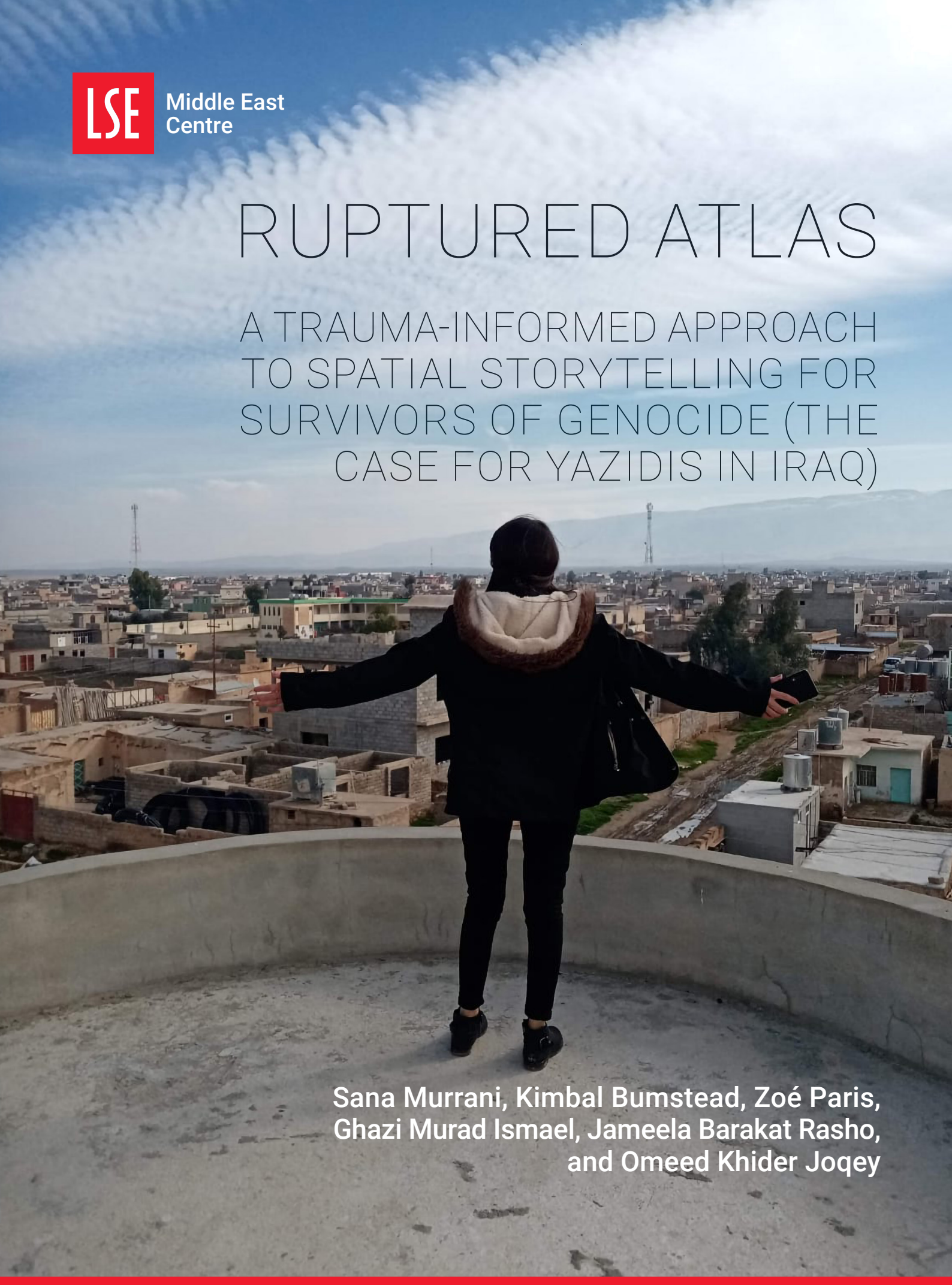
RUPTURED ATLAS

A TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH TO SPATIAL STORYTELLING FOR SURVIVORS OF GENOCIDE (THE CASE FOR YAZIDIS IN IRAQ)



Sana Murrani, Kimbal Bumstead, Zoé Paris, Ghazi Murad Ismael, Jameela Barakat Rasho, and Omeed Khider Joqey

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Ruptured Atlas: A Trauma-Informed Approach to Spatial Storytelling for Survivors of Genocide (The Case for Yazidis in Iraq)

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Abstract

The Ruptured Atlas project (December 2023 – December 2024) employs innovative, participatory mapping techniques to document the complex spatial and lived experiences of the Yazidi community in the aftermath of the genocide perpetrated by ISIS, which commenced in August 2014. This collaborative effort involves 15 Yazidi researchers and key partners, culminating in an online atlas and a trauma-informed policy toolkit. Designed to influence housing and migration policies in both Iraq and the UK, the project prioritises trauma-informed practices and community empowerment. The online atlas was not only a conceptual device, but a vital visual tool, enabling participants to represent trauma through non-verbal means. For many Yazidis involved, who had never previously spoken about their traumatic memories – not even to family members – participating through visual methods offered a culturally resonant form of expression. In a context where dwelling on trauma is often perceived as taboo, the ability to communicate through drawing, mapping, and image-making became a form of catharsis. This visual participation enabled a sense of closure and empowerment, allowing participants to reclaim control over their personal histories and futures. This paper examines the project's context, methodology, and outputs, analysing its impact and the unique contributions of its Yazidi collaborators.

Acknowledgments

The project acknowledges the invaluable contributions of the 15 Yazidi researchers, Yazda Iraq, Sinjar Academy, IOM Iraq, and the LSE Middle East Centre. Funded by the AHRC Impact Accelerator Fellowship, the Ruptured Atlas project builds on the success of prior projects, continuing its mission to advocate for displaced and marginalised populations.

Introduction

Ethnic and religious minorities, and indigenous groups in Iraq, including the Yazidis, have faced centuries of discrimination and violence. The Yazidis, an ethno-religious minority primarily residing in the Sinjar (in Kurmanji, *Shingal*) and across the Nineveh Plains region of northern Iraq, have historically maintained a distinct identity shaped by religious traditions, linguistic heritage, and geographic rootedness. Yazidism, a monotheistic faith with elements of ancient Mesopotamian traditions, has often been misrepresented, contributing to systemic discrimination.[1] The Sinjar Mountains and surrounding villages have long been central to Yazidi culture, both as a spiritual sanctuary and a last refuge in times of persecution.[2] Prior to the 2014 genocide, the Yazidi population in Sinjar and the wider Nineveh province was estimated at around 400,000, with their society structured around religious caste divisions and endogamous practices.[3] Their settlements, including villages such as Kocho and Tel Qasab, were known for agricultural and pastoral livelihoods. Despite facing repeated episodes of violence throughout history amounting to what Yazidis believe to be genocidal campaigns, including Ottoman-era massacres and Arabisation policies under Saddam Hussein, the community remained resilient in their geographical and cultural identity.[4]

The ISIS-perpetrated attack,[5] which began on 3 August 2014, was a systematic campaign of genocide against the Yazidis, branding them as *mushrikeen* (polytheists) and justifying mass executions, sexual slavery and forced conversions.[6] The Peshmerga, who had previously controlled Sinjar, withdrew abruptly, leaving the community defenceless.[7] As a result, thousands of Yazidis fled to the Sinjar Mountain, where they were besieged for days without food or water (Figure 1). The mountain, historically a place of spiritual significance, became their last line of defence, mirroring past instances where Yazidis sought refuge from persecution.[8] More than 6,800 – primarily women and children – were kidnapped, subjected to torture, sexual violence including sexual slavery, forced conscription, forced transfer, forced conver-

[1] Emre Basci, 'Yazidis: A Community Scattered in Between Geographies and Its Current Immigration Experience,' *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies* 3/2 (2016), pp. 340–361.

[2] Sebastian Maisel, 'Syria's Yezidis in the Kurd Dagh and the Jazira: Building Identities in a Heterodox Community', *The Muslim World* 103/1 (2013), pp. 1–22.

[3] Valeria Cetorelli, Isaac Sasson, Nazar Shabila, and Gilbert Burnham, 'Mortality and Kidnapping Estimates for the Yazidi Population in the Area of Mount Sinjar, Iraq, in August 2014: A Retrospective Household Survey,' *PLOS Medicine* 14/5 (2017), e1002297. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1002297 (accessed 4 June 2025).

[4] Nelida Fuccaro, 'Communalism and the State in Iraq: The Yazidi Kurds, c.1869–1940', *Middle Eastern Studies* 35/2 (1999), pp. 1–19.

[5] Throughout this paper, the terms 'Islamic State of Iraq and Syria' (ISIS), 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant' (ISIL), and 'al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham' (Daesh) are used interchangeably to refer to the same group responsible for the 2014 genocide.

[6] Vicken Cheterian, 'ISIS Genocide Against the Yazidis and Mass Violence in the Middle East,' *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 48/4 (2021), pp. 629–641. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2019.1683718 (accessed 4 June 2025).

[7] Eszter Spät, 'Yezidi Identity Politics and Political Ambitions in the Wake of the ISIS Attack,' *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 20/5 (2018), pp. 420–438. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2018.1406689 (accessed 4 June 2025).

[8] Payam Akhavan, Sareta Ashraph, Bayan Barzani, and Darryl Matyas, 'What Justice for the Yazidi Genocide? Voices from Below', *Human Rights Quarterly* 42/1 (2020), pp. 1–47. Available at: https://muse.jhu.edu/article/747390 (accessed 4 June 2025).

sion, and other forms of physical and psychological abuse. Over 2,600 Yazidis, along with survivors from other communities, remain missing to this day.[9] This systematic abduction of women and children, deliberate destruction of homes and villages, cultural loss, and enduring trauma of exhuming mass graves and internal displacement are issues that still persist a decade on.[10] According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), approximately 200,000 Yazidis remain displaced, with return conditions in Sinjar still precarious.[11]

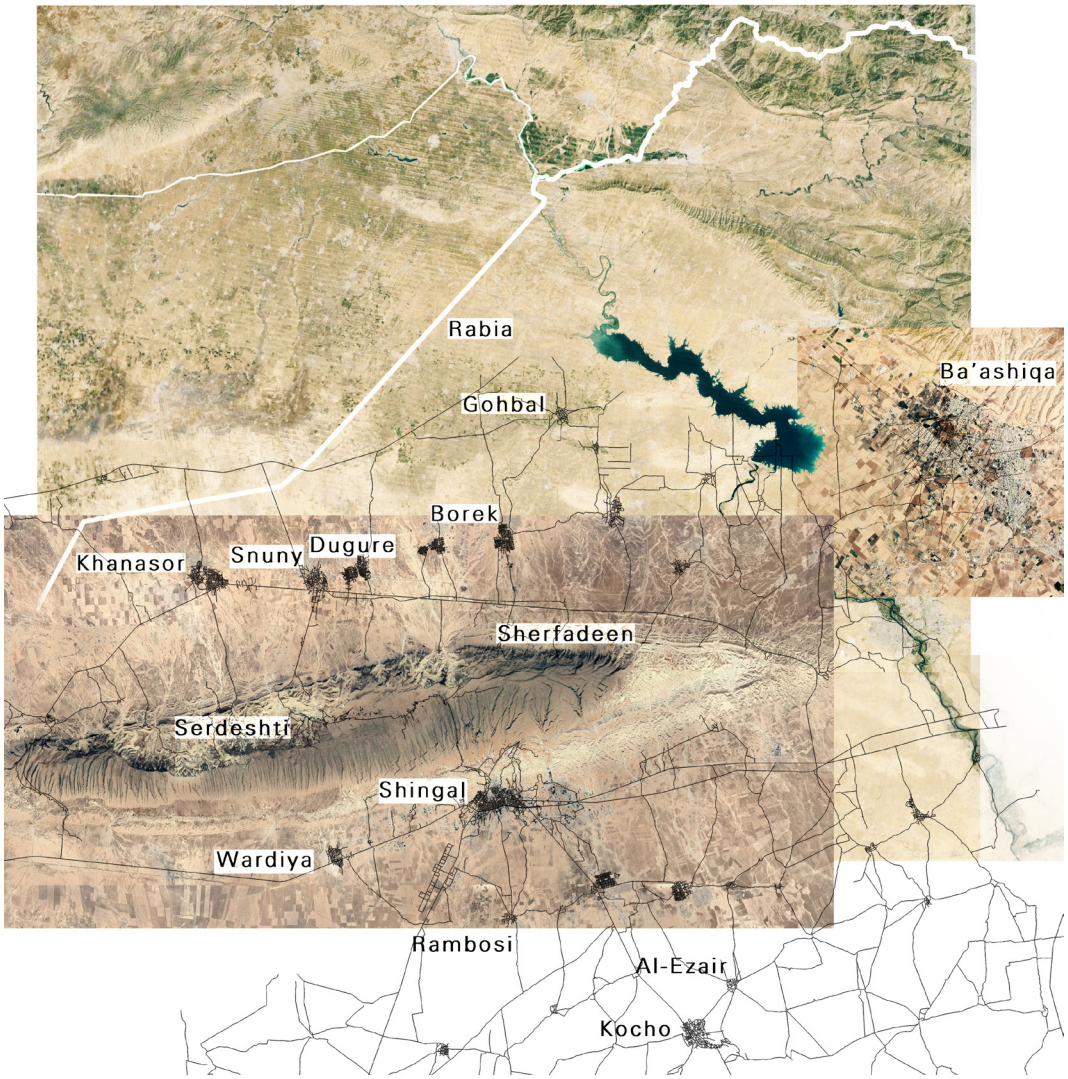

Figure 1: Map of the Sinjar Mountain (south of the river Tigris) and the surrounding villages and Ba'ashiqa (north of the Tigris, near Mosul) where Yazidis fled from on 3 August 2014. This is not a comprehensive list of locations; rather, the map and the village names reflect the origins of the group of Yazidis who participated in the project.

[9] Yazda, 'Working Against the Clock: Documenting Mass Graves of Yazidis Killed by the Islamic State,' (2018). Available at: https://irp.cdn-website.com/16670504/files/uploaded/Yazda_Publication_2018_DocumentingMassGravesYazidisKilledISIS_28062021_Download_EN_vf.pdf (accessed 20 February 2025).

[10] Yazda, Coalition for Just Reparations, Jiyan Foundation for Human Rights & See Foundation, '10 Demands After 10 Years of Genocide,' (2024). Available at: https://irp.cdn-website.com/16670504/files/uploaded/10_Demands-_10_Years_After_the_Genocide_by_ISIL_English-3ac7675d.pdf (accessed 19 February 2025).

[11] International Organization for Migration (IOM), 'Yazidi Displacement and Migration from Iraq: Trends, Drivers, and Vulnerabilities,' (2024). Available at: https://iraqdtm.iom.int/files/BorderMonitoring/20244304316478_iom_iraq_protection_yazidipaper_digital.pdf (accessed 20 February 2025).

Following the genocide, Yazidi society faced an existential crisis. While many survivors were forced into Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps (Figure 2) in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), many others sought asylum in Europe and North America.[12] The identity politics of the Yazidis have since evolved, with increasing calls for self-determination, international protection, and recognition of their distinct ethnonational status.[13] While traditionally integrated into Kurdish society, the betrayal of August 2014 has fuelled tensions, with many Yazidis advocating for political and administrative autonomy for Sinjar.[14] The diaspora communities, particularly in Armenia and Germany, have played a significant role in shaping a transnational Yazidi identity. The genocide committed against Yazidis in Sinjar reinforced their historical narrative of victimisation, but it also catalysed efforts to reclaim and redefine their identity through political activism and cultural preservation.[15] Autobiographical narratives of Yazidi women, many of whom survived sexual slavery under ISIS, have contributed to a counter-discourse that challenges dominant narratives of Yazidi victimhood, positioning them instead as agents of resistance and renewal.[16]

Despite international condemnation of the genocide, justice remains elusive. Many survivors advocate for legal accountability, reparations, and the rebuilding of Sinjar, yet political fragmentation and ongoing security threats hinder these efforts.[17] The Yazidi struggle for recognition is not only about physical survival but also about reclaiming their history, space, and agency in a region where they have lived for centuries. The Sinjar Mountains, once a symbol of spiritual significance, now stand as a reminder of their endurance, loss, and the continuing fight for justice. Despite the adoption of the Yazidi Survivors Law in 2021, Iraq and the Kurdistan Region have yet to implement a comprehensive transitional justice process to ensure criminal accountability for the genocide while addressing its root causes. This failure by both the Government of Iraq (GoI) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has led to renewed violence, including in August 2024, when a surge in hate speech[18] targeting the Yazidi community prompted another wave of displacement and exile. One of Ruptured Atlas' Yazidi researchers, Omeed Khider Joqey, explains:

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[12] Hewi Haji Khedir, 'IDPs in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI): Intractable Return and Absence of Social Integration Policy,' *International Migration* 59/3 (2020), pp. 1–25. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12716 (accessed 4 June 2025).

[13] Spät, 'Yezidi Identity Politics and Political Ambitions in the Wake of the ISIS Attack,' p. 429.

[14] Allan Kaval, 'The Identity of the Caucasian Yezidi in the Wake of the Sinjar Tragedy,' *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 81 (2016), pp. 8–12.

[15] Christine Allison, 'Unbelievable Slowness of Mind: Yazidi Studies from the 19th to 21st Century,' *Journal of Kurdish Studies* Vol. VI (2020), pp. 1–23.

[16] Rasha Abuali and Zahra Akbari, 'The Discursive Construction of Identity in the Autobiographies of Yezidi Women,' *Language Related Research* 13/1 (2022), pp. 65–97. Available at: https://doi.org/10.52547/LRR.13.1.3 (accessed 4 June 2025).

[17] Akhavan, et al., 'What Justice for the Yazidi Genocide?', p. 39–40.

[18] Yazda, 'Under Constant Threat: Hate Speech Against the Yazidi Community in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq,' December 2024. Available at: https://www.yazda.org/under-constant-threat-yazda-launches-report-on-hate-speech-targeting-the-yazidi-community-in-iraq-and-the-kurdistan-region-urging-action-from-both-governments-and-the-international-community (accessed 20 February 2025).

Despite efforts to rebuild our communities, the lack of security and government support makes it difficult for Yazidis to return home. External pressures and forced assimilation further threaten our cultural identity. The Iraqi government and the United Nations must take urgent action to protect Yazidi villages, rebuild infrastructure, and preserve our religious and cultural heritage. Without these efforts, the Yazidi people risk losing their homeland permanently, leading to the gradual disappearance of their identity in Iraq.

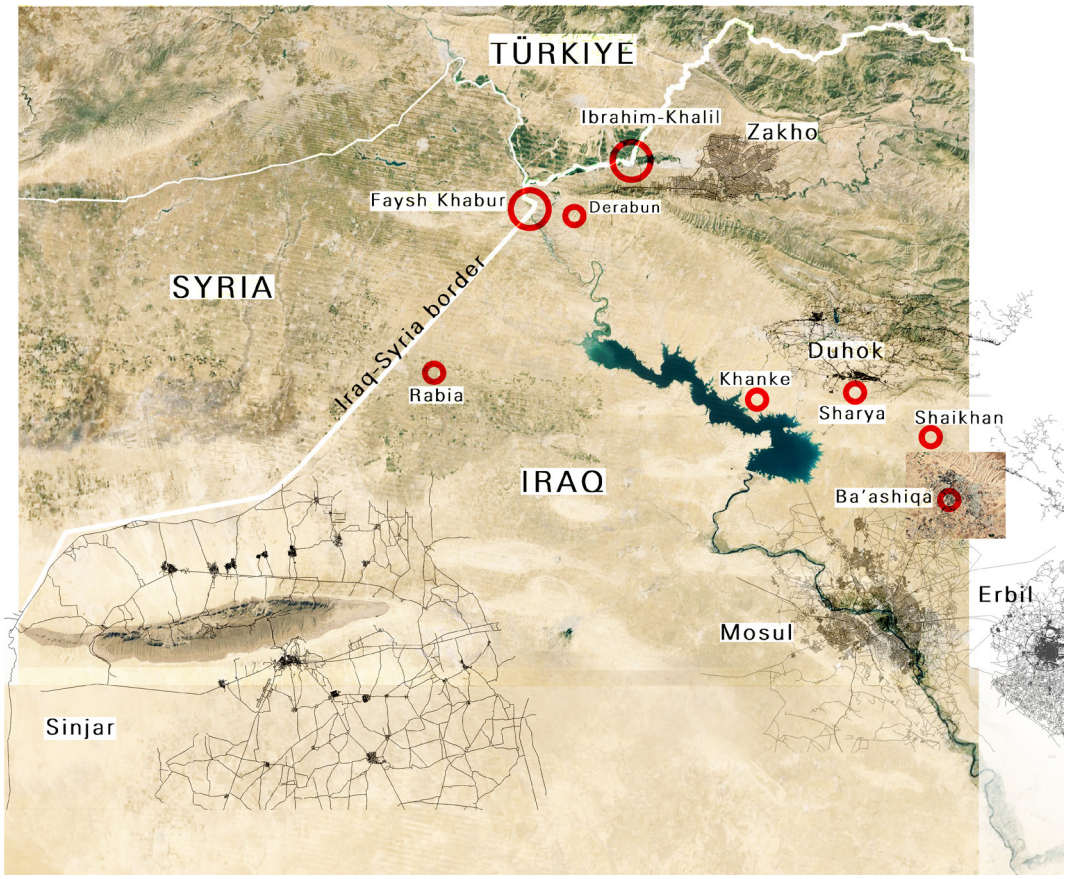

Figure 2: Map showing the north-east of Iraq where Sinjar is located, the river Tigris which cuts through Iraq, Syria and Türkiye, the larger red circles locate the two main crossing points between Iraq, and Syria and Türkiye while the smaller red circles show the main locations for IDP camps and cities where Yazidis took refuge over the past ten years, leaving their villages near Sinjar Mountain in ruins.

The Ruptured Atlas project (December 2023 – December 2024)[19] employs innovative, participatory mapping techniques to document the complex spatial and lived experiences of the Yazidi community in the aftermath of the genocide perpetrated by ISIS, which commenced in August 2014. This collaborative effort involves 15 Yazidi researchers and key partners, culminating in an online atlas and a trauma-informed policy toolkit.

The project seeks to foreground Yazidi voices by mapping their collective experiences of home, displacement, and resilience. This initiative builds on previous research into Yazidi

[19] Ruptured Atlas Project, 'Ruptured Atlas: A Trauma-Informed Atlas of Yazidi Displacement and Resilience'. Available at: https://ruptured-atlas.shorthandstories.com/ruptured-atlas/ (accessed 4 June 2025).

trauma and post-genocide resilience,[20] and the IOM's extensive reporting on post-displacement challenges.[21] Additionally, publications from Yazda, particularly 'Robbed of their Childhood and Still No Justice'[22] and 'From Resistance to Rubble',[23] provide crucial documentation of ISIS crimes and their impact on the Yazidi community. By employing trauma-informed and co-creative methodologies, the project engages Yazidis as active researchers and co-creators, addressing the urgent need for inclusive spatial narratives and culturally sensitive policy frameworks.

Methodology

Trauma-Informed and Co-Creative Practices

The project's methodology integrates trauma-informed approaches with creative mapping techniques. Participants were empowered through ethical protocols emphasising positionality, reflexivity, and data sovereignty. Trauma-informed practices, drawing on Herman's principles[24] of safety, empowerment, and trust, were central to designing workshops and storytelling sessions.

Three Phases of the Project

Phase 1: Mapping Workshops

- Seven online workshops engaged 160 Yazidis in co-creating ethical research protocols, deep listening exercises, cognitive mapping, GIS storytelling, photography, filmmaking, and multimedia storytelling.[25] Training took place online and was immersive and interactive where Yazidis would record, map, and draw their immediate context and lived experiences as part of the data gathering process. Sharing constituted a significant part of these workshops and contributed to debates and discussions around specific concepts such as rebuilding, return, migration and future existence of the Yazidis in Iraq.

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[20] Cetorelli, et al., 'Mortality and Kidnapping Estimates for the Yazidi Population in the Area of Mount Sinjar, Iraq'.

[21] International Organization for Migration (IOM), 'Yazidi Displacement and Migration from Iraq: Trends, Drivers, and Vulnerabilities,' *IOM Iraq*, 2022. Available at: https://iraqdtm.iom.int/files/BorderMonitoring/20244304316478_iom_iraq_protection_yazidipaper_digital.pdf (accessed 13 March 2024).

[22] Yazda, 'Robbed of Their Childhood and Still No Justice: The Voices of Yazidi Children at the Heart of Child-Centered Documentation, Investigation, and Prosecution Processes,' 2023. Available at: https://www.yazda.org/publications/robbed-of-their-childhood-and-still-no-justice (accessed 20 February 2025).

[23] Yazda, 'From Resistance to Rubble: The Ongoing Struggle of Yazidis in Sinjar,' 2023. Available at: https://www.yazda.org/publications/from-resistance-to-rubble (accessed 20 February 2025).

[24] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

[25] Sana Murrani, 'Mapping the Unseen: Harnessing Indigenous Knowledge Through Participatory Mapping to Address Displacement and Housing Challenges in Post-Invasion Iraq,' *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series* 78 (December 2023).

Phase 2: Atlas Storytelling

- Fifteen Yazidis shared personal stories through interviews and multimedia materials, focusing on themes of displacement, resilience, and return. The approach echoed methodologies of participatory narrative inquiry.[26] At the Mapping Workshops phase, the research team explained the criteria for the selection for the Atlas Storytelling phase. These predominantly were subject to continuous engagement in the interactive engagement and sharing of recordings, maps and drawings assigned to each session of the mapping training phase and the co-writing of ethics workshop. Autonomy was given to the Yazidis to start their story from a point of their choosing. Questions were given to them beforehand, but we did not ask much more than: where would you like to begin your story from? Although we had set out a notional end time to each interview/conversation, the majority took much longer, and we did not interrupt the flow of the conversation. Recordings of interviews were then translated, transcribed, and sent back to the interviewees who had the autonomy to delete, change and add more context.

Phase 3: Atlas Co-Making

- Collaborative synthesis of interviews and multimedia into a cohesive spatial atlas, ensuring participants' voices were central. This iterative process aligns with practices of collaborative cartography.[27] The online atlas which took three months to produce was developed accumulatively through regular meetings with the fifteen Yazidis over one-to-one and group sessions to bring the textual and the visual elements of the project together.

The Ruptured Yazidi Atlas

Purpose

The atlas documents the Yazidi community's lived experiences and trauma geographies. It combines story maps, drawings, photographs, and soundscapes, thematically reflecting the complexities of displacement and resilience. The project is considered by our partner organisations as an advocacy and storytelling tool and a documentation of the everyday trauma endured by Yazidis over the past ten years.

Ethical Considerations

A robust ethical protocol guided all research phases, addressing cultural sensitivity, researcher positionality, and data ownership. Participants retained control over how their narratives were represented (Figure 3).

[26] Caitlin Cahill, Farhana Sultana, and Rachel Pain, 'Participatory Ethics in Qualitative Research with Marginalized Communities,' *Geoforum* 38/5 (2007), pp. 1000–11.

[27] Denis Wood, *Rethinking the Power of Maps* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2010).

Key Themes

The Materiality of Hope

- This theme explores how Yazidis find hope in small, tangible acts of life despite displacement. Amid the barrenness of camp life, where uncertainty looms and the past feels severed, even the simplest gestures of growth and renewal become powerful symbols of resilience. Naji reflects on the plants growing in the hard soil of their camp's backyard, a reminder that life can emerge even in the most inhospitable conditions. 'The idea of life growing in the camp is deeply connected to life starting again in Shingal. Seeing plants growing between rocks and hard soil symbolises that whenever there is life there is hope, and we are not hopeless at all.' This narrative speaks to the role of material symbols – gardens, plants, objects of remembrance – as quiet acts of defiance against despair. Through these, Yazidis reclaim a sense of agency and emotional recovery, fostering community connections even in displacement.

Trauma and Time

- Yazidis' experiences of trauma are often non-linear, with memories resurfacing unpredictably and disrupting conventional understandings of time. Trauma fractures the past, present, and future, forcing individuals to reconfigure their sense of belonging, not in place but in relationships. Maisaa's account captures this disruption, as she describes how displacement has altered her perception of home. 'I stopped rooting myself in place and instead my belonging is more associated with people. I learned the hard way that losing one's place is such a traumatic and disorientating experience, so I now connect more with loved ones regardless of their locality.' For Yazidis, home is no longer a fixed geography but a network of relationships, carried across borders. This shift speaks to the adaptability required to survive trauma, where forced displacement reshapes identity, attachment, and ways of remembering.

Routes and Roots

- This theme captures the Yazidi longing for stability and return to Sinjar, where home is both a physical space and a symbolic marker of identity. Displacement creates a rupture, forcing individuals to navigate the tension between the past they were forced to leave behind and an uncertain future they are struggling to reclaim. Ghazi's words embody this longing and the desire for recognition of Yazidis' right to a home. 'We as the Yazidi community deserve to have a normal life like everyone else; a better life in which we are no longer targeted for our identity, religion, and beliefs. We deserve to have a home!' His statement underscores how displacement is not just a loss of territory but an erasure of stability, dignity, and the right to exist safely. The 'roots' metaphor reinforces the deep ties Yazidis have to their homeland, a place that remains central to their collective identity despite the physical and psychological distances imposed by forced migration.

Community Narratives

- Stories of rebuilding and intergenerational trauma reveal a collective desire for reconciliation and societal transformation. As Yazidis grapple with the aftermath of genocide, their narratives reflect a broader struggle over Iraq's future, where issues of justice, coexistence, and collective memory remain unresolved. Jurya's reflections on Iraq's divisions speak to this tension.

  > We can't run away from our homeland. Any place that has racial conflict, anywhere else, will not progress unless it confronts its violence, discrimination, and racism. Especially places with people from mixed cultural backgrounds, ethnic and racial differences, always end up with conflict and wars. I do sometimes worry about Iraq's future and whether any of the prejudice and violence towards us will ever end.

  Her words highlight the importance of community-driven solutions, not only for Yazidis but for the broader Iraqi society. They reinforce that rebuilding cannot happen in isolation; it must be accompanied by a reckoning with past violence, systemic discrimination, and the structures that enabled genocide in the first place.

Criminal Accountability and Safety

- This theme examines how, ten years on, Yazidis continue to seek justice and demand accountability for the crimes committed by ISIS, as well as guarantees of safety in Iraq and the KRI. It highlights the urgent need for a transitional justice process in Iraq that ensures justice for survivors and provides safeguards against future atrocities. Omeed's story reflects this persistent struggle for justice and security.

  > My ultimate dream is for all Yazidis to return to their homes in Iraq, under the protection of the United Nations, the governments of Iraq and Kurdistan, and all the nations to recognise us [the Yazidis] as a minority in need of protection. We need support to rebuild our communities and ensure that future generations can live in peace and security.

  Omeed's words illustrate the profound need for sustained international efforts to protect Yazidis from further persecution and to provide them with the resources needed to rebuild their homeland. His testimony reinforces the urgency of transitional justice mechanisms, legal accountability, and long-term security guarantees.

Figure 3: A collection of multimedia stories with key themes for each of the 15 stories told.


Reaching beyond the borders of my universe
by Noori
Life and hope
by Naji
Returning home and reaching out to the world
by Basma
Becoming, Returning
by Haifa
Multiple journeys of displacement
by Zelal
Rising from the ashes
by Omeed
Keeping everyone safe
by Ibrahim
The trauma of return
by Murad

Policy Toolkit

Purpose and Audience

The toolkit, co-created with the Yazidi researchers and partner organisations, offers trauma-informed long- and short-term recommendations. In the long term, it advocates for the development of inclusive and just housing and migration policies that prioritise the needs of displaced Yazidis and other marginalised communities. In the short term, it focuses on addressing the root causes of genocide and violence in Iraq by strengthening protective mechanisms, ensuring accountability, and enhancing local and international responses to displacement.

A critical component of this effort is its engagement with ongoing border and migration policies that directly affect Yazidis, particularly in relation to restrictive asylum measures and bilateral agreements. We have criticised recent UK-Iraq border deal policies for exacerbating vulnerabilities rather than providing meaningful protection for displaced populations.[28] By highlighting these geopolitical dynamics, the toolkit urges policymakers in Iraq and the UK to adopt frameworks that prioritise the rights and safety of displaced Yazidis, rather than reinforcing policies that risk further marginalisation. The toolkit is designed for policymakers in Iraq and the UK, community leaders, and practitioners in trauma care and advocacy, ensuring that Yazidi voices inform both local and international policy discussions.

Co-created with Yazidi researchers, the toolkit combines narrative, visual, and analytical content to inform policy actors across both Iraq and the UK. The toolkit consists of the following key components:

1. **Fifteen Story Maps**: These digital and printed maps combine first-person testimonies, spatial memory, drawings, sound, and images. They document the geographies of displacement and return from the perspectives of Yazidi participants. Each story map includes spatial data on places of origin, displacement routes, and aspirations for return, offering granular, community-led insights into housing precarity, trauma geographies, and local rebuilding priorities.
2. **Thematic Briefings**: Based on participatory analysis of the story maps, a series of short policy briefs distil recurring themes into clear areas for intervention, e.g. trauma-sensitive design of return housing, youth needs in reconstruction, and culturally appropriate mental health provision. These are directly tied to community-identified needs.
3. **Ethical and Methodological Protocols**: The toolkit includes guidance for policymakers, NGOs, and planners on how to implement participatory, trauma-informed research and engagement practices when working with displaced or genocide-affected

[28] Alannah Travers and Sana Murrani, 'The UK-Iraq Border Deal is a Betrayal of Vulnerable Communities,' *Border Criminologies Blog, Oxford University Faculty of Law*, 10 January 2025. Available at: https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/border-criminologies-blog/blog-post/2025/01/uk-iraq-border-deal-betrayal-vulnerable-communities (accessed 10 January 2025).

communities. This includes data sovereignty principles and protocols for culturally sensitive engagement.

4. **Policy Translation Tools**: The toolkit offers ready-to-use policy translation materials (thematic summaries, visualisations of spatial needs, and narrative snapshots) tailored for ministries, local councils, and humanitarian stakeholders. These are intended to bridge the gap between community experiences and institutional frameworks.

The toolkit acts as a translational and dialogic mechanism. In Iraq, it helps reconstruction planners and policymakers identify priorities for return and reconstruction from the ground up, based on actual narratives and geographies of Yazidi survivors. For example, the visual maps and accompanying narratives identify not just where communities want to return, but under what conditions, e.g., safety, access to education, availability of infrastructure, access to mental health services, and acknowledgement of trauma. In the UK, the toolkit has been shared with migration and integration actors to inform more culturally attuned support systems for Yazidi refugees. It highlights the importance of continuity between spatial memory, belonging, and mental health recovery, offering insights for local councils and service providers on how to design welcoming and trauma-aware housing and integration strategies. The story maps, in particular, have served as a way to reframe refugees not as passive recipients of care, but as narrators and knowledge holders shaping their futures. This makes the toolkit not just a documentation output, but a method for policy engagement, one rooted in listening, co-design, and the ethics of care.

Recommendations

For Iraq

- Supervise reconstruction in Sinjar, prioritising safety and community needs.
- Coordinate rebuilding efforts with local talent and comprehensive development projects.
- Address root causes of genocide, ensure safety for minority communities and promote reconciliation.
- Legislate to criminalise hate-speech and violence against minorities.

For the UK

- Establish safe migration routes for survivors.
- Support community cohesion and fund local councils aiding refugees.

For Both Contexts

- Integrate trauma-informed care in policy frameworks.
- Enhance participatory development and cultural sensitivity.
- Advocate for international recognition of the Yazidi genocide.

Reflections from the Yazidi Researchers

The Ruptured Atlas project provided Yazidi participants with a transformative space to share their stories, map their displacement, and contribute to advocacy efforts. Their collective reflections highlight three key themes: the power of storytelling in reclaiming narratives, the innovative use of mapping as a memory and advocacy tool, and the enduring impact of the research on their sense of agency and visibility.

Storytelling as a Means of Expression and Healing

The interviews and storytelling sessions were deeply meaningful for participants, allowing them to reflect on personal memories and experiences they had rarely spoken about. Many expressed that the project encouraged them to discuss places, objects, and details of their journeys that had previously remained unspoken. By recounting their connections to their homes, villages, and sacred spaces, they were able to express not only their loss but also their enduring ties to their ancestral lands.

One participant noted that 'the interviews were a unique and meaningful experience, and they felt different from what I had expected. The focus on places and objects brought out memories and emotions that I don't usually discuss when sharing my story.' Another explained how revisiting the memories of displacement through storytelling made them more aware of the collective Yazidi experience, strengthening their understanding of shared history and trauma: 'I found myself talking about small details, like the objects I carried with me or the significance of certain locations, which I hadn't considered deeply before.'

Several reflected on the emotional weight of discussing familiar landmarks, such as their homes, the Sinjar Mountains, and community gathering places, which had either been destroyed or permanently altered. One participant expressed, 'The interviews encouraged me to revisit deeply personal and overlooked memories, such as my connection to specific places like my family's mountain home and the farm we were forced to leave.' Another remarked on the painful but necessary process of recounting their past: 'The interviews gave me a chance to talk about places and memories that I usually avoid or don't think about often. It was emotional but also a good way to reflect on the past.'

While some found the storytelling process cathartic, others mentioned the difficulty of revisiting painful memories. Despite this, they recognised that sharing their stories was crucial for advocacy and preserving Yazidi history. A recurring sentiment was the importance of having control over their own narratives rather than having their experiences interpreted or documented by external researchers. As one participant put it, 'Yes, the secret of the stories was the most important part of this project, as each of us showed our own side during our journey of displacement.'

Mapping as a Method of Remembering and Advocacy

The use of mapping techniques in the project was a novel and powerful experience for the participants. They emphasised that mapping allowed them to visualise their personal journeys, displacement routes, and connections to their homeland in ways that words alone could not capture. Many remarked that seeing their stories represented through maps provided them with a renewed sense of presence and belonging. One participant described the emotional process of mapping: 'The mapping process was a powerful and emotional experience for me. It made me reflect deeply on the places I've been over the past ten years and before – places of safety, loss, and transition.' Another added, 'Tracing my journey on a map brought back vivid memories of the struggles and resilience tied to those locations. It made me realise how much my story is connected to the spaces I've occupied.'

For many, the final visualisation of their collective displacement through digital and physical maps was deeply moving. One participant noted, 'Seeing the story-maps and the website after they were created was both moving and empowering. They visualised our journeys in a way that words alone couldn't capture.' Another described the impact of the mapping process on their perception of displacement: 'This project changed how I think about maps. I now see them not just as tools for navigation but as storytelling devices that hold personal and communal histories.' Some suggested that further iterations of the project could include expanded mapping exercises that capture Yazidi histories beyond displacement, incorporating layers of cultural heritage, pre-genocide community life, and future aspirations for return and rebuilding. As one participant emphasised, 'The maps that we learned and drew made us remember much of our past that we did not express. We feel that it is important that we do not avoid working on a project like this and that we participate with many people.'

The Research's Impact on Participants' Agency and Visibility

Beyond the immediate experiences of storytelling and mapping, participants reflected on the broader significance of the project. Many emphasised that being part of the research made them feel seen and heard, especially in a world where Yazidi voices are often marginalised. They valued how the project bridged personal testimonies with advocacy, ensuring that their lived experiences were recognised in discussions on displacement, justice, and reparations. The production of a policy toolkit and its dissemination to policymakers was widely appreciated. 'The toolkit produced through this project has the potential to make a significant impact on the Yazidi cause. By sharing it with policymakers, the project bridges the gap between the lived experiences of the Yazidi community and the decision-makers who can influence change,' one participant reflected. Another highlighted how the toolkit addressed often-overlooked aspects of displacement: 'What stands out is how the toolkit focuses on the spatial dimensions of displacement, which is often overlooked in policy discussions.'

Participants saw the collaboration with the LSE Middle East Centre as a meaningful way to amplify their voices within global academic and policy discussions. 'The co-produced paper with LSE Middle East Centre will further amplify these efforts by giving the project an academic platform. It can serve as a valuable resource for scholars, activists, and policy-makers,' one participant noted. Many participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to participate in an initiative that prioritised their agency, rather than treating them solely as research subjects. 'This is a great step for our community and we appreciate your work and effort on this. This will help the Yazidi case be more read, heard and seen,' one participant stated. Another acknowledged the need for sustained advocacy: 'The project was very important and brought together many Yazidi issues, but with the policies in place, we cannot see how these will work. This is not to say that the team hasn't done all they can, but hopefully, your/our efforts will be completed and we will see change happen.'

Despite the challenges and emotional toll of the project, participants overwhelmingly saw it as a vital and empowering experience. The combination of personal storytelling, mapping, and policy engagement made them feel like active contributors to their own history, rather than passive subjects of research. As one participant put it, 'The project fulfilled its impact in many ways, both in its effectiveness and its reach. It provided a unique platform for Yazidi voices to be heard, not just through personal stories but also through creative mediums like mapping and storytelling.'

Conclusion

The Ruptured Atlas project exemplifies the power of trauma-informed, participatory research in addressing complex socio-political issues. By centring Yazidi voices, the project not only documents their experiences but also advocates for policies fostering resilience and justice. Future iterations aim to expand the atlas and toolkit's reach, further supporting displaced communities. The project provided a rare and valuable opportunity for Yazidi participants to articulate their histories, map their displacement, and contribute to broader advocacy efforts. Through storytelling, they reclaimed their narratives; through mapping, they documented their past and present; and through research impact, they amplified their voices in spaces that had previously overlooked them. Crucially, the use of visual methods enabled many participants to engage with traumatic memories in ways that verbal accounts had not allowed. These creative modes of expression – drawing, mapping, photography, and spatial storytelling – offered a powerful alternative to language, especially in contexts where certain emotions or experiences are culturally unspeakable. Importantly, visual methods also bypassed the limitations and potential distortions of translation. Rather than relying solely on words, which risk losing emotional nuance or cultural specificity when moved across languages, participants could communicate their experiences directly, through imagery, spatial composition, and symbolic materiality. This shift not only preserved meaning but allowed new forms of expression to emerge – ones rooted in gesture, memory, and affect. For many, this created a dignified and emotionally safe route to expression, where storytelling could happen on their own terms and through their own mediums of meaning-making. While the project successfully achieved its goals, participants emphasised the need for sustained engagement, broader inclusion, and continued advocacy to ensure that their stories lead to tangible policy change.

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A photograph of one of the Ruptured Atlas researchers, Basma, taken from her rooftop upon her first return to Sinjar.
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