

Ezidikhan Rises from Genocide: 66 Indigenous Nations Establish Middle East/North Africa Confederation

By Patrick Harrigan

ABSTRACT

For more than 6000 years, Yezidi have celebrated their place in the fertile region between the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers in Mesopotamia. Now they are situated in the states of Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Armenia, and Iran. Since the formation of the Ottoman Empire (1300-1922), which was originally established in Anatolia—the location of contemporary Turkey, the Yezidi have suffered innumerable crises threatening their lives and property including numerous genocides.

The Yezidi government of Ezidikhan leads the effort to form the first multi-region indigenous nations' Confederation forming the Confederation of Indigenous Nations of the Middle East and North Africa (CINMENA). Having suffered massive genocidal attacks, the Yezidi Justice Minister Nallein Sowilo is described as having confronted the attacks on her people by the Islamic State in 2014, establishing the Confederation and initiating the effort to establish the Nations' International Criminal Tribunal.

Keywords: Mesopotamia, genocide, Kurdish Regional Government, Iraq, Confederation, Tribunal

With little fanfare, many Indigenous nations, and community organizations spanning the entire Middle East and North Africa have set mutual suspicion and mistrust aside to form this vast region's first-ever bloc of Indigenous nations. While these nations or communities differ vastly, they share a genuine desire to govern themselves and decide their destinies free from outside interference.

The origin of the Confederation of Indigenous Nations of the Middle East and North Africa (CINMENA) may be traced to the 2014 assault

by ISIS extremists upon the Yezidi nation of Ezidikhan in northern Iraq. Still, its roots extend far back to the dawn of civilization.



Figure 1: Confederation of Indigenous nations of the Middle East and North Africa (CINMENA banner)

From the Jews of Morocco and the many Amazigh (formerly ‘Berber’) tribes of North Africa to the dispersed communities of the ancient Zoroastrian nation, from Bedouins of the desert to the Ma’dān or Marsh Arabs of Mesopotamia, they are the modern-day representatives of nations seemingly as old as the desert sands. Their communities often face harsh discrimination from corrupt and despotic states’ governments that deny them the full benefits of citizenship and even their very identity as ancient nations.

Indigenous nations — particularly in unstable regions such as the Middle East — have been deliberately deprived of their human rights and fundamental freedoms, resulting in the dispossession of their territories, lands, and resources. They are obstructed from freely exercising their right to development according to their needs and interests. But thanks to the recent widespread introduction of cell phones and the Internet, even poor, remote communities are now capable of networking to empower themselves to escape the vicious cycle and enter the modern era on their terms.

Every nation possesses the inherent right to determine their political status. But that right is

not realized without a struggle, as nations have learned to their regret for centuries. Instead, autonomous nationhood is something that Indigenous peoples must consciously choose and actively struggle to transform into a social, legal, and political reality.

For every Nation—a Place under the Sun

What does it take to bind together such a disparate collection of nations when each has distinct traditions, and each is distrustful of outsiders? Their common aim is to level the playing field. Each nation can assert its right to determine its own political identity and fulfill its destiny according to its customary laws.

The Islamic State’s (ISIS or ISIL)¹ bloody 2014 onslaught targeting Yazidis² set the stage for change. Thanks in no small part to ISIS extremists’ genocidal rampage, Ezidikhan and other Indigenous nations of the Middle East and North Africa are now organizing themselves to end all forms of discrimination and oppression wherever they occur and to provide for a common defense. Intent on destroying the Yazidi nation of Ezidikhan,³ they have instead helped to raise

¹ The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, known as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), is a Sunni Muslim revivalist and fundamentalist movement devoted to practicing Wahhabism, a reformist 18th century doctrine advanced by Arabian Islamic scholar, theologian, preacher, and activist Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (c. 1703-1792). Al-Wahhab formed the Muwahhidun movement in the Najd region of central Arabia—now Saudi Arabia. The movement he promoted emphasizes purging practices such as veneration of Muslim saints and pilgrimages to their tombs. Al-Wahhab was inspired by the thirteenth century scholar Ibn Taymiyyah (1262-1328) who advocated followers returning to the “purity” of the first three generations (Salaf) to expunge the faith of so-called inauthentic behaviors.

² Taylor, L. (2017). “Nearly 10,000 Yazidis killed, kidnapped by Islamic State in 2014, study finds.” Reuters May 9, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-yazidis-idUSKBN18527I> ISIS forces entered the major Ezidikhan city of Shingal (Sinjar in Arabic) (formerly 80,000 people) to destroy a people whose name “Yezidi” was misinterpreted to mean “of the devil.” In reality “Yezidi” means followers of the Peacock, “followers of god.”

³ Ezidikhan means: “land of the Yezidi.”

the once little-known Yezidis from obscurity to a leadership role in the West Asia⁴ and globally.

Yezidi Role

The Yezidi is an ancient nation long settled in the upper Fertile Crescent with territories extending far to the north, with roots extending deep into antiquity. They maintain a calendar to this day that that records more than 6600 years of Yezidi history. According to Yezidi tradition, the neighboring Kurds⁵ were once Yezidis who fell from their ancestral faith and converted to Islam at the point of a sword.

Yezidi religious practices draw heavily from Mesopotamian cosmology.⁶ They are characterized by the worship of an “archangel” figure called Melek Ta’us; the ‘Peacock Angel’ created in the beginning by God and entrusted as His Regent or Viceroy on Earth.

On August 3rd, 2014, Yezidi activist Nallein Sowilo was en route to her native Shingal (Arabic: Sinjar) in northern Iraq. Kurdish Peshmerga forces⁷ that occupied Shingal under the pretense

of defending Shingal were secretly preparing to evacuate that very night as ISIS forces entered Shingal. The Peshmerga had advance knowledge of what would be the mass genocide that was to be unleashed by ISIS on the peaceful Yezidi population of Shingal.

Ms. Sowilo’s flight was diverted to Istanbul. She had no option but to turn back—and yet she vowed that she would never again turn back in her mission of justice with peace and dignity for her Yezidi nation.



Figure 2: At right, Ezidikhan Justice Minister Nallein Sowilo attending a friend’s wedding in Ezidikhan in 2021

⁴ West Asia includes Anatolia, the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, Mesopotamia, the Levant, the island of Cyprus, the Sinai Peninsula and part of the Caucasus. Yezidi people are primarily located in what is now northern Iraq between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (known in ancient scripts as Mesopotamia), but communities of Yezidi are also located historically in northern Syria, western Turkey, Armenia, Georgia, and diaspora in Russia and western Europe.

⁵ The term “Kurd” appears to have been introduced by Arabs in the 8th or 9th century with the meaning of “nomads” though Islam is suggested to have become accepted by tribes labeled “kurdish” in the 8th century. SEE: Martin van Bruinessen, “The Kurds and Islam”. Working Paper no. 13, Islamic Area Studies Project, Tokyo, Japan, 1999. [this is a slightly revised version of the article in *Islam des Kurdes* (Les Annales de l’Autre Islam, No.5). Paris: INALCO, 1998, pp. 13-35]

⁶ Religious in Mesopotamia four thousand years ago was exceptionally localized and politicized. Each community had its own patron deity. The role of the deity was negotiated between the communities depending on the status of the community. Religion wasn’t a matter of the existence of gods or representatives of a god with their own place in the social order. See: <https://brewminate.com/ancient-mesopotamian-cosmology-and-mythology/>

⁷ *Peshmerga* (those who face death) serve as the Kurdish branch of the Iraqi Armed Forces acting at the direction of the autonomous Kurdistan Regional government. The Peshmerga were originally formed in the 18th century when the Ottomans controlled the Kurdish territories.

Fluent in her native Kurmanji and Arabic but with limited English, Nallein realized the need for non-Yezidi volunteers who could help Ezidikhan achieve internationally recognized autonomy. However, she had few resources and no one she could rely on but herself. With nothing more than a cell phone, she began reaching out to Yezidis and others worldwide, to anyone who might help.

As for Indigenous nations around the world, Yezidi traditions encapsulate arcane knowledge that stubbornly resists reduction into words or books, such as the interpretation of signs, omens, or portents. The same knowledge that Yezidis and other Indigenous nations preserve sustains them as peoples and nations.

Drawing upon Yezidi oral traditions, Nallein had long been drawn to a figure in the Hindu pantheon called Skanda or Murugan, exhibiting uncanny parallels with the Yezidis' own Peacock Angel Melek Ta'us. Although far removed geographically, the two figures nevertheless neatly align in a suite of core characteristics that outsiders (including eminent scholars) consider mere coincidences, including notably their mutual association with India's national bird, the peacock.

It was at this point that I entered the picture. Within a month of the first attack by ISIS in 2014, Ms. Sowilo reached out to me, a Florida-based Indologist,⁸ editor and publisher who had already long been advocating on behalf of Indigenous peoples of Sri Lanka. And thus began a synergistic partnership that continues to this day, not as a mere relief effort or band-aid but with the single-pointed objective of achieving political autonomy

for Ezidikhan along with lasting peace and justice for Yezidis.

Baba Sheikh

Soon after that, in October 2014, the Islamic State launched its second major assault intended to finish off the Yezidi nation. The late supreme spiritual leader of the Yezidis, the Baba Sheikh, Khurto Hajji Ismail himself, hastened to Washington DC to plead for any help from the State Department and the White House. The aged pontiff had also forwarded a curious request to meet me and visit a temple dedicated to Skanda-Murugan. That meeting occurred at seven pm on 29 October 2014 at the Murugan Temple of North America in nearby Lanham, MD, and just happened to coincide with the ritual reenactment of the pan-Indian war god's climactic final battle in his six-day war against a powerful demon named Cūr, literally 'fear' or 'terror' personified.

The Baba Sheikh, Khurto Hajji Ismail, had recently appointed Nallein to oversee the creation of a provisional government of Ezidikhan with a solid legal foundation so Yezidis might achieve international recognition and autonomous self-government within the Iraqi constitution.

If the August 2014 cataclysm that befell the Yezidis at the hands of Daesh had any positive outcome at all, it has been in the sense of a newfound sense of community and a common cause shared by Indigenous nations across the entire Middle East, North Africa and beyond.

⁸ The study of the history, cultures, languages and literature of South Asia – the Indian continent.

And not just a sense of solidarity, but a growing political movement by a growing bloc of Indigenous nations, tribes, and confederations of tribes representing a rainbow of beliefs and traditional knowledge — where all share a set of common interests and aspirations.

Indigenous nations of the Middle East and North Africa, like their counterparts worldwide, struggle with social, political, intolerance and economic bigotry. While this pattern has left them politically and economically weak, it also provides Indigenous nations with a set of shared concerns and a shared basis for collaboration.

Center for World Indigenous Studies and Ezidikhan

Nallein’s appeals to diplomats and prominent public figures continued to fall upon deaf ears despite her best efforts. Funds could not be found even for modest relief efforts, let alone run a shadow government for an autonomous Ezidikhan. Little diplomatic or political progress was made since she lacked expert advisors or fund.



Figure 3: Prime Minister Barjis Soso Khalaf meeting with Indian Ambassador Dr. Pradeep Singh Rajpurohit in Baghdad

The Kurdish Regional Government’s military renewed occupation of Ezidikhan, and the Iraqi government’s intransigence combined to frustrate the Yezidi plans for a plebiscite to formalize their government. Moreover, on 9 October 2021, an agreement was negotiated between Baghdad and the Kurd’s government in Erbil to separately determine the political future of Yezidis without seeking the Yezidi’s consent and without consulting Yezidi representatives of the Ezidikhan Provisional Government. In the words of Ezidikhan Prime Minister, Barjis Soso Khalaf, the deal “tramples upon the right of Yezidis to govern themselves as they see fit.”

Autonomy

The International Covenant on the Rights of Indigenous Nations (ICRIN), first ratified in Geneva, Switzerland, on 28 July 1994, is a comprehensive international agreement between signatory nations to address the rights and long-term social, economic, and political interests of indigenous nations.

Under Article I, Paragraph 3 the Covenant states:

Indigenous Nations have the right of self-determination, in accordance with international law, and by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development without external interference.

The Covenant further states Article II, Part II, para 5.: “Each Indigenous Nation possesses the collective right to exist in peace and security

as a distinct people and to be protected against any type of genocide,” a matter of relevance to Ezidikhan considering the attacks by ISIS in 2014 and other attacks from Turkey, the Kurds and Iraq since 2014.

The immediate objective of Ezidikhan — and of most all Indigenous nations — is to bring about the conditions for their unhindered self-governing—a condition of political autonomy with self-governing institutions conforming to their customary laws as affirmed in the Covenant at paragraph 29.

Indigenous Nations have the right to freely determine their own political status and to exercise self-government in accord with the principle of self-determination.

Genocide Investigation

In 2018, Ezidikhan’s provisional government passed a law establishing an Ezidikhan Investigative Team on Genocide headed by a Senior Investigator. The Investigative Team was given a mandate to “independently undertake to investigate, collect, document, store and preserve evidence pertaining to crimes of genocide and crimes against humanity perpetrated against Yezidi and neighboring nations.” It was the first such genocide investigative team created by an indigenous nation.

The Senior Investigator of the Ezidikhan Investigative Team on Genocide was empowered to recruit and appoint experienced investigators and prosecutors from the Yezidi, Mandaean, Zoroastrian, Shia Kurd, Kuwliyan, and Shabakh nations to conduct the investigations.

The new investigative team was also authorized to probe all crimes and identify suspects, whether persons, groups, or institutions that may have committed genocide, including but not limited to Da’esh and its allies. In addition, the Ezidikhan team was to investigate crimes attributable to Iraqi government forces, at the federal or regional level, including militias such as the Popular Mobilization Forces or international forces.

The Investigative Team on Genocide set itself to work. It began to uncover evidence supporting allegations of collusion between ISIS and Kurdish security elements, depicting a pattern of genocidal policies of the Kurdish Regional Government. The Senior Investigator, Mohmand Raja, was so feared by the subjects of his team’s investigations that he ultimately paid with his life when he was assassinated outside his home by unknown assailants, effectively abruptly halting investigative efforts. Suspects of the murder include the Kurdish Regional Government colluding with organized criminal gangs involved in money laundering, human trafficking and the smuggling of illegal drugs and weapons. The Investigative Team on Genocide was within two weeks recommitted to document crimes against the Yezidi and neighboring peoples under a new leader who had been second in command. The Team continued its investigations and filing reports for several more months but was forced to stop when the second Senior Investigator was also assassinated. The records of the Investigative Team are secured, and the Ezidikhan Governing Council intends to use the documentation produced over two years by the brave team for the

purpose of lodging criminal charges of genocide and crimes against humanity against identified individuals, militias, and governments.

Kurdish-ISIS Collusion?

That ISIS committed massive atrocities against Yezidis from 3 August 2014 onwards is well-known and well-documented. Less well-known, however, is the despicable role of Kurdish Peshmerga forces that had been tasked with defending Shingal's defenseless civilian population.

A 2019 report of the Ezidikhan Investigative Team specifically singled out the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Asayish, the Kurdish secret police, as agents executing the genocidal policies of the Kurdistan Regional Government that rob Yezidis of justice, self-determination, natural resources, including petroleum, and even the cultural, linguistic, and religious identity of Yezidis.

Ms. Sowilo and other Yezidi survivors allege that before ISIS began its attack on Shingal and neighboring villages, the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga forces stationed in Shingal quietly withdrew at night, leaving Yezidi civilians to wake up and find ISIS fighters at their doorsteps. Eight years later, the memory of the 2014 'knife in the back' from Kurdish Peshmerga continues to haunt the politics of northern Iraq. Ezidikhan investigators' report concluded that:

Both governments have employed the resources of the state to attack, criminalize, and target individuals and entire communities. These government resources

include the Kurdish Peshmerga, and the Essayish, the Kurdish secret police. They have chosen to make state sponsored terrorism, human sex trafficking, murder, and rape the normal governmental response to demands for equity and equality of human rights, land rights, control over natural resources, and the establishment of an autonomous Yezidi region governed by the Yezidi people. All of which we allege were funded by profits from oil fields placed on seized Yezidi lands; and all of which was supported by President Barzani.

Ezidikhan government investigators had also uncovered video footage of Kurdish troops meeting with ISIS forces outside of Shingal on the morning of August 3, 2014. Kurdish troops are said to have helped ISIS carry out genocide against Yezidis by coming and taking weapons and boarding up some of the houses of particularly identified religious leaders on the day before the attack. Kurdish forces then quietly withdrew from Shingal but located tanks blocking the city's main escape routes and fired upon any Yezidi who attempted to leave the city.

Middle East Confederation

The Confederation of Indigenous Nations of the Middle East and North Africa consists of confederated nations, tribes, and other entities, including governments in exile and advocating bodies. These nations have adopted a joint legal approach to deal with a wide range of concerns and challenges common to Indigenous minorities, including security and international legal and diplomatic recognition. All 66 CINMENA nations

have ratified the International Covenant on the Rights of Indigenous Nations (ICRIN) as a precondition for membership.

Although the International Covenant on the Rights of Indigenous Nations (ICRIN) was first ratified in 1994 until recently, not a single Indigenous nation in the entire Middle East region had ratified (or even heard of) it due to a long history of isolation, conflict, and division. CINMENA came into being as a direct result of untiring efforts by Justice Minister Sowilo to achieve international legal recognition for Ezidikhan, first through ratification by Iraqi Ezidikhan and then by Yezidi communities of the region.



Figure 4: The logo of the Confederation of Indigenous Nations of the Middle East and North Africa reflects their diverse heritages.

Justice Minister Sowilo had long been in regular contact with representatives of other oppressed minorities across the entire Middle East. After learning from her about the International Covenant on the Rights of Indigenous Nations and how its ratification

reinforces signatory nations' push towards full legal autonomy, the nations and tribes came forward to request the Ezidikhan Justice Ministry's assistance so they too could draft and ratify ICRIN

By mid-2020, sixteen nations of the region had ratified the Covenant document, including all six branches of the Yezidi nation Ezidikhan and such nations as the Zoroastrians and Mandaeans in Iraq and Iran, Palestinian Bedouins, Ahwaz in Iran, Berber Tribes in Libya, and Shabaks in Iraq. Those nations who were able sent their delegates to Shingal, Ezidikhan, where on 21 August 2020 the Shingal Treaty of 2020 was signed.



Figure 5: August 2020: Leaders of oppressed minorities headed by the Baba Sheikh (at center) meet in Shingal.

Thanks to Justice Minister Sowilo's untiring efforts, since then, an almost constant stream of Indigenous tribes, nations, and smaller confederations have sought to join the Confederation. Her Ministry even set up a board of volunteer editors and legal experts to assist in drafting and editing documents of ratification of the Covenant tailored to fit the background and concerns of each applicant tribe or nation.

true in my lifetime is something that I and the Dulaimi tribal nation never thought we would see happen.

As always, many uncertainties surround an effort with a scope as vast and complicated as that of the Congress of Nations and States, even with decades of preparation. Even in the best of times, such an undertaking involving collaboration across multiple linguistic, religious, and political boundaries would face daunting challenges, including sponsorship. In 2022, with a war raging on the European continent, the crisis of Climate Change, COVID-19 restrictions, and a host of related crises including spiraling costs of fuel and food

staples, the stakes and the challenges could not be higher.

“Our creation story speaks of Melek Taus coming down upon Mount Shingal and planting a wheat seed,” says Justice Minister Sowilo. “And that seed grew into all that is life, creating the universe as it grew. Our stories view it as the site of the beginning of life. That is why Shingal is such a holy mountain for the Yezidi.”

Therefore, it is fitting and proper that Shingal, the capital city of Ezidikhan, which only recently endured unspeakable atrocities at the hands of intolerant ISIS extremists, is also the birthplace of the Middle East’s first-ever Confederation of Indigenous nations.

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