Transcript

00:00:00 Speaker 1

Good evening, everybody.

00:00:01 Speaker 1

My name is Pascale Minori.

00:00:02 Speaker 1

I'm the El Saud Professor for the Study of the Contemporary Arab World.

00:00:07 Speaker 1

Welcome to this seminar.

00:00:09 Speaker 1

I'm very, very happy, very honored to have you here.

00:00:13 Speaker 1

Professor Houman Oliae is coming to visit us from Massachusetts, where he teaches at Wesley College.

00:00:22 Speaker 1

Houman did his MA in anthropology at the University of Tehran, and then a second MA

00:00:29 Speaker 1

in anthropology at Brandeis University and then a PhD in anthropology at Brandeis University.

00:00:34 Speaker 1

You're also one of my former advisees.

00:00:36 Speaker 2

Yes.

00:00:38 Speaker 1

And thank you, Human, for making me feel so old because I think it's the first time that I'm introducing one of my former advisees who has a book, and a brilliant book at that, and a tenure track position.

00:00:51 Speaker 1

So welcome to this space.

00:00:56 Speaker 1

I think we'll give you

00:00:58 Speaker 1

35 to 40 minutes, right?

00:01:00 Speaker 1

And then we'll have a Q&A.

00:01:03 Speaker 1

And I hear that we're going to have dinner tomorrow night.

00:01:10 Speaker 1

So please join me in welcoming Professor.

00:01:19 Speaker 2

OK, thank you.

00:01:20 Speaker 2

Thanks for this really generous and kind introduction.

00:01:24 Speaker 2

And thanks, everyone, for being here tonight.

00:01:27 Speaker 2

I am very honored to be here at Oxford to just discuss my book, which was released a few weeks ago.

00:01:34 Speaker 2

So it came out in early April.

00:01:37 Speaker 2

And I'm really glad that I can have this conversation here at Oxford at this event that brings together both the Middle Center and also the Refugee Study Center, because I think that the book is in conversation with both fields.

00:01:52 Speaker 2

So

00:01:53 Speaker 2

Hopefully, you're going to have a lot of questions for me at the end of the talk.

00:01:59 Speaker 2

And also, again, a particular thank to Pascal, who I think that besides me in this room is the only one who has read this book several times and still generously angry to moderate the talk.

00:02:12 Speaker 2

So I really appreciate your generosity.

00:02:15 Speaker 2

Please don't get a restraining order, yes.

00:02:20 Speaker 1

I'm a returning customer.

00:02:21 Speaker 2

Thank you.

00:02:23 Speaker 2

Before I get to the argument of the book, I just want to talk about how I get to this research.

00:02:27 Speaker 2

So I went to Iraqi Kurdistan in 2018 for doing a completely different project.

00:02:34 Speaker 2

I went there to study a religious conversion movement.

00:02:37 Speaker 2

Some Iraqi Kurds had started to convert from Islam to Zoroastrianism because they were saying that Zoroastrianism is the true roots of Kurdish people.

00:02:47 Speaker 2

And one of them suggested to me that I should visit

00:02:50 Speaker 2

the camp for displaced Yazidis near the city because as he argued, Yazidis are the original court, so I have to go and meet them.

00:02:58 Speaker 2

So I went to this camp for internally displaced people and literally after two weeks into my research, I completely changed my whole project for my PhD.

00:03:11 Speaker 2

And to give you a really brief overview of the

00:03:17 Speaker 2

geography of the region, for those of you who might be less familiar with Iraq and Yazidis.

00:03:23 Speaker 2

So the Yazidi homeland, so first of all, Yazidis are an ethno-religious minority, meaning that they believe that they have their own distinct ethnic identity and also religious practices.

00:03:34 Speaker 2

And most of them, most of Iraqi Yazidis live in this city in northwestern Iraq called Sinjar, or as they call it in Kurdish Shingol.

00:03:43 Speaker 2

And

00:03:44 Speaker 2

Part of Yazidis also live in this shaded area on the map, which is the autonomous region of Kurdistan, which is part of federal Iraq, but at the same time it has its own government, its own security forces, and they gain independence, not independence, they gain the autonomous status in the early 90s.

00:04:04 Speaker 2

So Yazidis, who are an ethnic religious minority, they were attacked by the so-called Islamic State or ISIS in 2014 in August.

00:04:13 Speaker 2

As the result of the attack, around 5,000 people were killed.

00:04:19 Speaker 2

7,000 people, mostly women and children, were kidnapped to this date.

00:04:24 Speaker 2

There's still 2,500 of them missing.

00:04:26 Speaker 2

So this is an open room for the community.

00:04:30 Speaker 2

But another dimension of the genocide was that around 300,000 people were displaced.

00:04:35 Speaker 2

So as you see, they were in the same jar

00:04:41 Speaker 2

result of the genocide and violence, they had to go and live in the autonomous region of Kurdistan in northern Iraq.

00:04:46 Speaker 2

So around 300,000 people were displaced and they went to live in Kurdistan in camps and in mostly urban settings.

00:04:56 Speaker 2

And this is the camp that I did my research for the entire book and for this talk.

00:05:04 Speaker 2

I'm using pseudonyms because of the IRB regulations.

00:05:06 Speaker 2

I am not

00:05:07 Speaker 2

allowed to disclose people's names, and also the camp's real name.

00:05:11 Speaker 2

But the camp was opened in 2015 under UNHCR supervision, and it was also administered by this part of the Courtesan region's government.

00:05:22 Speaker 2

It was called Joint Crisis Coordination Center, or JCC.

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So those were the ones who were administrating the daily lives of the camp.

00:05:31 Speaker 2

And there were numerous NGOs and humanitarian organizations

00:05:36 Speaker 2

basically working with displaced people inside the camp.

00:05:40 Speaker 2

At the time of my fieldwork, the camp had around 40,000 people, and 3,000 of them were disease.

00:05:45 Speaker 2

And I'm going to get into who else was living in the camp in the talk.

00:05:49 Speaker 2

So with that introduction, let me start with what the book starts or the moment that during my fieldwork basically put together all those dissonances of fieldwork into a research question for me.

00:06:01 Speaker 2

And I'm going to start with

00:06:03 Speaker 2

the short conversation that I had with one of my Yazid interlocutors.

00:06:08 Speaker 2

On November afternoon in 2019, a Yazidi man in his late 30s stepped into the tent that displaced Yazidi, the cab, had converted into a coffee shop.

00:06:19 Speaker 2

As Isai entered, I noticed his face contorting into a mixture of anger and sadness.

00:06:24 Speaker 2

He held an open letter in one hand, while a half-burned cigarette smoldered between the fingers of the other.

00:06:30 Speaker 2

He signaled for me to join him outside, and I followed.

00:06:33 Speaker 2

Once outside, Issa explained that he had just received a letter from the Australian Embassy regarding their decision on his application for a humanitarian visa.

00:06:43 Speaker 2

Despite years of waiting and enduring life in the camp, his application was denied.

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The rejection had no real explanation, just a generic line.

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The government had set priorities and only quote unquote, the highest priority applications will be successful.

00:07:02 Speaker 2

Isa had already had the letter translated.

00:07:04 Speaker 2

He knew what it said, but he asked me to read it again.

00:07:08 Speaker 2

And when I finished, he said something that reshaped my entire research.

00:07:14 Speaker 2

They never tell you what a true reason is, and I'm quoting Isa.

00:07:17 Speaker 2

I am an internally displaced person, not a refugee.

00:07:20 Speaker 2

Having applied as a refugee from Turkey, I would already have my visa.

00:07:24 Speaker 2

In Europe and America, people speak of humanity and human rights every day.

00:07:29 Speaker 2

when it comes to Yazidis in Iraq, everyone forgets we are also human.

00:07:33 Speaker 2

Yazidis have no place, not in Iraq or anywhere else.

00:07:39 Speaker 2

The first thing that struck me, that struck me about Isa's response was that he was right, not metaphorically right, but bureaucratically right.

00:07:46 Speaker 2

Yazidis who fled the same genocide, who walked through the same route through Syria and Turkey, found their futures, determined not by the violence they escaped, but by where they stopped running.

00:07:58 Speaker 2

If they stopped in Turkey, they became refugees.

00:08:01 Speaker 2

If they stopped, if they returned to Iraq, they became internally displaced persons.

00:08:06 Speaker 2

The distinction between a refugee and IDP, or internally displaced persons, determined the horizons of their lives.

00:08:12 Speaker 2

As refugees, Yazidis have at least a tiny chance of resettlement, or 1% chance of living a normal life as refugees in Turkey, as Issa put it.

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As IDPs, however, even that 1% disappeared.

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Issa's situation was not exceptional.

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By the end of 2024, internally displaced people made-up almost 60% of world displaced population.

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They substantially outnumber refugees, and yet the refugee remains the figure through which displacement is most often imagined, theorized, and governed.

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We have a sophisticated literature on refugees,

00:08:52 Speaker 2

decades of legal architecture, theoretical framework, comparative ethnography, and what it means to cross the border.

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On the IVP body comparison, we have very little.

00:09:01 Speaker 2

This is what I started to ask in this book.

00:09:04 Speaker 2

What is this category?

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How does it work in the daily lives of people living inside it?

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And what does its existence tell us about citizenship, sovereignty, and humanitarian protection?

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The IVP is an institutionally young category.

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It emerged in the 90s when the end of the Cold War brought more internal conflict

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at the same time that asylum policies in the Global North were tightening.

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Humanitarian agencies were equipped to assist those who had cross borders, but classical sovereignty kept them out of places where most displacement was not happening inside states.

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The category of the IDP, together with the doctrine called sovereignty and responsibility, was the answer.

00:09:46 Speaker 2

Sovereignty became

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not just a right to govern without external interference, but a responsibility to protect the people inside one's own border.

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And when the state fell, its displaced citizens could become a legitimate concern for the international community.

00:10:02 Speaker 2

The formulation sounded humane, and in many ways it was, but it produced an unstable political subject.

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Someone still a citizen of a sovereign state, yet also an object of transnational humanitarian care.

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And yet their lives were an object of humanitarian care, where lives were increasingly organized by humanitarian agencies, camp rules, security clearances, and the politics of the turf.

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So the central question of the book became, what kinds of borders confront the displaced who have not crossed one?

00:10:37 Speaker 2

When the state that failed to protect you remains the state to which you belong, what does that look like day by day in a camp

00:10:45 Speaker 2

and in conversation about your homeland's future.

00:10:48 Speaker 2

And what does this condition do to Hannah Arn's famous claim that statelessness produces rightlessness, that abstract human rights means nothing without a political community willing to protect them?

00:11:00 Speaker 2

My answer in the book is that internal displacement is not simply an administrative name for people who remain within state borders.

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It names a person held at several thresholds at once.

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Still a citizen, but not fully protected by citizenship.

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Not the refugee because they have not crossed the right order and not fully recognized because the legal vocabulary for what was done to them does not align with the bureaucratic vocabulary for what is owed to them.

00:11:27 Speaker 2

What Yazidis show is something Arendt didn't quite anticipate.

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Citizenship itself can produce rightlessness, not through revocation, but through retention.

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The international community does not refuse to see Isa and thousands of other Yazidis.

00:11:43 Speaker 2

it sees them precisely as Iraqi citizens.

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And on that ground, concludes that protecting them is somebody else's responsibility.

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The book traces the suspension across 3 dimensions, time, space, and citizenship.

00:11:59 Speaker 2

And I want to walk you through these three steps, through these three thresholds, and I'm going to start with time.

00:12:09 Speaker 2

In late June 2019, the GM camp officials

00:12:13 Speaker 2

official Facebook page posted a notice.

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It informed residents that the management had identified violations regarding kitchens and bathrooms.

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Some families had built small partitions, made small modifications, tried to give their tents a little more dignity than thin plastic walls allowed.

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The post gave residents one week to dismantle this violation or face legal action.

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When I showed this post to one of my interlocutors, assuming the rationale was the fire safety, he laughed at me and said, and I caught him, do you really think they care about our safety?

00:12:47 Speaker 2

This is not about safety.

00:12:49 Speaker 2

They want to control and interfere in everything.

00:12:52 Speaker 2

They check what we do, what we eat, who visits us, where we go, and what we say.

00:12:57 Speaker 2

The camp is like a prison.

00:12:59 Speaker 2

And then let go.

00:13:01 Speaker 2

This was not the first time I heard people describe the camp as a prison, and it would not be the last.

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And in many ways, the description fits.

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The camp was 2 kilometers from the nearest city.

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The entrance had a rusted iron gate, surveillance cameras, and armed guards from the KRG security services.

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Overnight guests required to get prior security clearances, and speaking with journalists required authorization from the camp management.

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But the most revealing piece of the architecture wasn't the gate or the fence.

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It was a policy almost nobody outside the camp knew about.

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It was about cement.

00:13:42 Speaker 2

When the camp opened in 2015, each tent sat on a small concrete platform with a short concrete back seat, as you see in this picture.

00:13:50 Speaker 2

So the camp basically came with this pre-made shower and bathroom rooms.

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There was one room here that was designed as a kitchen.

00:14:01 Speaker 2

And this was the tent platforms that people could just put up their tents on top of that.

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So the residents, when they moved into the tent, they didn't see these platforms, the tent platforms, as only concrete paths.

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They saw them as the beginning of something.

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With a few blocks, that back seat could become a full wall.

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A tent could become a room.

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A row of tents could become something that began to feel like a home.

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But as people began to move those blocks that were leftovers from the previous constructions,

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and brought some construction materials, the camp management issued a warning that any construction using cement or concrete is strictly prohibited.

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People who had already used the leftover blocks were asked to return them, otherwise legal action would be taken.

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For displaced as it is, those changes were meant to make your living space more convenient, private, or put it simply, to make it feel like a home.

00:15:01 Speaker 2

But from the management perspective, those unauthorized changes

00:15:04 Speaker 2

were seen as threats to the humanitarian order.

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Why would a humanitarian space that is supposed to provide shelter prohibits precisely the modification that would make a shelter livable?

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What was so threatening about cement?

00:15:21 Speaker 2

The answer is that the camp was not designed to let shelter become home.

00:15:26 Speaker 2

It was designed to institutionalize the temporariness that the whole humanitarian framework rests on.

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The ban on cement was the camp making temporariness material, turning impermanence into a wall you couldn't build, a room you couldn't have.

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So what does humanitarian prison mean here?

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Is it another instance of Agamben's space of exception where the camp's temporariness sediments into permanence, or is something else happening here?

00:15:53 Speaker 2

The camp manager in an unguarded moment told me what he thought he was doing in the camp, and I quote him.

00:16:01 Speaker 2

They, meaning the camp residents, shouldn't think that aid is always available or living in the camp is permanent.

00:16:08 Speaker 2

Our view is that we should give them enough support, but also to discourage them to think that they can stay here indefinitely.

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Who wants to leave the camp?

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We give them whatever they need or want.

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End of quote.

00:16:19 Speaker 2

What was described, what he was describing as a, what he was describing was a calibrated insufficiency.

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Aid had to be enough to keep people alive

00:16:28 Speaker 2

but never enough to let them imagine a future there.

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The GM camp wasn't engineered to become permanent.

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It was engineered to dissolve itself, to use temporariness as an instrument of expulsion.

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You don't have to deport someone if life inside a tent becomes unbearable enough to make them leave on their own.

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This was also the logic behind the official language of quote unquote closing the IDP file.

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To treat the violence of genocide as something

00:16:57 Speaker 2

already passed and convert the displacement into an administrative problem and make leaving the camp look like a resolution.

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But temporality was only the first threshold.

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The second was a spatial.

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And the camp's geography did not stay.

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standalone.

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It was embedded in a long-running dispute between the federal government in Baghdad and Kurdistan regional government over who governs which parts of northern Iraq.

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Sinjar, the Yazidi homeland, as you see again from this map, sits inside what Iraq calls the disputed territories.

00:17:31 Speaker 2

And those are areas that are left unresolved after 2003.

00:17:35 Speaker 2

And those are areas that were shaped by decades of Ba'athist Arabization and forced displacement of Kurdish and Yazidi families in the north.

00:17:44 Speaker 2

As a result of many of those Arabization campaigns, many Yazidi towns were destroyed during Saddamerah, and basically they were forced to go and live in collective towns known as Mujamalas.

00:17:59 Speaker 2

So the post-invasion constitution promised a process of normalization, census, and referendum to resolve the status of these contested areas.

00:18:07 Speaker 2

But 2 decades later, the dispute has hardened into a permanent feature of Iraqi politics.

00:18:13 Speaker 2

The dispute also entered the camp through the question of where Yazidis could lead.

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For the Kurdasan regional government, Yazidis mattered as part of the demographic claim to Sinjar because the Kurdish political leadership has long insisted that Yazidis are simply a religious rank

00:18:29 Speaker 2

religious branch of Kurdish nation.

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Within the Yazidi community, this framing is deeply contested, especially after 2014 when the withdrawal of Kurdish forces facilitated the genocide.

00:18:41 Speaker 2

For many Yazidis, August 3rd of 2014 is known not only as a black day, but as the day of betrayal.

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So when the KRGS spoke of protecting Yazidis, it was simultaneously conscripted then.

00:18:57 Speaker 2

On the other hand, for the Iraqi government, the pressure to return Yazidis to Sinjar preserved the fiction that displacement could result within the existing Iraqi estate.

00:19:05 Speaker 2

So despite the dispute, both governments had reason to resist Yazidis resettlement in the Kurdistan region.

00:19:11 Speaker 2

So when Yazidis came to the Kurdistan region, they could not reintegrate and resettle in the Kurdistan region for all these political disputes between the federal government and the Kurdistan region.

00:19:23 Speaker 2

But if Sinjar was a disputed territory, what was the Gian camp?

00:19:26 Speaker 2

It was supposed to be the answer to the question of this problem in neutral space.

00:19:31 Speaker 2

A place where the political conflict outside the gate got suspended for the duration of emergency.

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That in principle is what humanitarian protection means.

00:19:41 Speaker 2

It promised to gather everyone under one category, IDPness, and to set political distinctions aside.

00:19:52 Speaker 2

So

00:19:53 Speaker 2

As I briefly mentioned at the beginning of my talk, there were 14,000 people living in the camp.

00:19:59 Speaker 2

And this is just the camp layout that I created.

00:20:04 Speaker 2

So the camp had eight sections in 2015, and four sections were allocated to the mostly Sunni Muslim Arab displaced, who were displaced by ISIS as well.

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And this white area, there were sections that were given to Yazidis.

00:20:23 Speaker 2

So the relationship that basically people had to the violence was different.

00:20:28 Speaker 2

So they were all displaced by the same violence, but the relationship that they had was different.

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Yazidis had not seem to be displaced.

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They had been targeted publicly and collectively as Yazidis.

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Many Sunni Arab families had also fled ISIS.

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They were no less its victim, but for Yazidis the category of Muslim Arab could not be separated from recent memories of complicity and betrayal.

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So to put 14,000 people under one humanitarian roof, the camp would have had to act as if the histories didn't exist inside the gate.

00:20:59 Speaker 2

But the spatial design, as you see in this photo, said otherwise from the beginning.

00:21:04 Speaker 2

In 2017, for example, the fence that was in between these two groups were tested as a humanitarian solution to the division within the camp.

00:21:16 Speaker 2

Muslim students counted

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classmates as devil worshippers, rocks were thrown across the dividing line, and for nearly a week, the entire camp was placed under lockdown.

00:21:27 Speaker 2

Residents permitted to move only through a narrow corridor at the gate.

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The partition extended beyond the fence into the camp's infrastructure.

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The Muslim section had a hospital, a health center, two schools, a soccer field, a playground.

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The Yazidi section, however, had only one building that served a primary, middle, and high school.

00:21:47 Speaker 2

Yazidi families who needed to get essential services had to cross into the Muslim section.

00:21:53 Speaker 2

So they had to go over the fence to go to the hospital.

00:21:57 Speaker 2

And this is just a photo of the blue fence.

00:22:00 Speaker 2

So there was one corridor when Yazidis needed to go to the health center of the camp.

00:22:04 Speaker 2

They had to cross and go to the Muslim side.

00:22:06 Speaker 2

And many of them felt to get uncomfortable just crossing to go into the other section.

00:22:13 Speaker 2

In late 2017,

00:22:16 Speaker 2

that ISIS's continuing displacement pushed another 6,000 Muslim IDPs into the camp.

00:22:22 Speaker 2

Five new sections were built to accommodate this increasing number of people who were basically displaced as the result of the ISIS war.

00:22:31 Speaker 2

But these sections were mostly added to the Muslim side, right?

00:22:34 Speaker 2

So they accommodated more Muslim, more Arab Muslim displaced people from Saladin and Mosul.

00:22:41 Speaker 2

And again, that put Yazidis in

00:22:44 Speaker 2

a minority position within the humanitarian space as well.

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And this expansion of the map for many Yazidis became another sign that this is a discrimination because as you see, most of the new facilities of the camp were also built into the Muslim site, not to the Yazidi site.

00:23:03 Speaker 2

So Yazidi section had only still one primary school and the other sections of the camp were accommodating more of this new infrastructure.

00:23:15 Speaker 2

So the fence was not only a fence, from my perspective, it was the point where the camp's humanitarian promise of neutrality stopped being the promise and became a contradiction you could see.

00:23:27 Speaker 2

To control the tension between the two sides, the camp had to separate them.

00:23:30 Speaker 2

But by separating them, it made religious difference into the organizing principle of everyday life.

00:23:36 Speaker 2

Movement, schooling, medical care, even the act of crossing from one side of the camp to the other became structured by the very history of that humanitarian neutrality was supposed to hold outside the gate.

00:23:48 Speaker 2

The camp would have still described everyone as IDPs, but no one moved to the camp simply as IDPs.

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So in reality, the camp did not resolve this spatial problem of internal displacement.

00:24:00 Speaker 2

It relocated it.

00:24:02 Speaker 2

Sinjar made return politically impossible

00:24:06 Speaker 2

but the camp showed that refuge was not politically innocent either.

00:24:10 Speaker 2

Humanitarian neutrality, in this sense, didn't mean the suspension of politics.

00:24:14 Speaker 2

It meant managing politics without naming them.

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And once this becomes clear, the third threshold that I talked at the beginning of my talk comes into view, and that's about citizenship itself.

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As it is, we're not only living in a temporary camp or divided from others by fences and controlled crossings,

00:24:35 Speaker 2

They were also constantly described by officials through a term that at first sounded generous, miwan or guest.

00:24:43 Speaker 2

Camp managers, local authorities, and political officials often use this language to speak about displaced Yazidis and other Iraqi displaced.

00:24:52 Speaker 2

It sounded like hospitality, but hospitality always makes a claim about whose home it is.

00:24:57 Speaker 2

A guest is welcomed by a host, and the host has the power not only to welcome, but eventually to ask the guest to leave.

00:25:06 Speaker 2

So what does guest mean in the context of internal displacement when the host is always your own country?

00:25:13 Speaker 2

Guest of whom exactly?

00:25:15 Speaker 2

Whose home is this if the displaced person is told it is theirs and yet treated as someone who must one day leave?

00:25:23 Speaker 2

This is what I think the IDP category quietly does to citizenship.

00:25:27 Speaker 2

It keeps you attached to it while suspending its substance.

00:25:31 Speaker 2

You are still a citizen on paper, but rights become favors.

00:25:35 Speaker 2

And home becomes a revocable promise to a guest.

00:25:39 Speaker 2

One of my interlocutors put it more plainly than any theoretical framework I could offer.

00:25:44 Speaker 2

Sitting in his tent, he placed his palm on the ground and said, and I quote him, this is Iraq, right?

00:25:50 Speaker 2

We are Iraqi.

00:25:51 Speaker 2

But look at how we live here.

00:25:53 Speaker 2

We are strangers in our own land.

00:25:55 Speaker 2

End of quote.

00:25:57 Speaker 2

That was a contradiction in one single sentence.

00:26:00 Speaker 2

Not foreigners, not stateless.

00:26:02 Speaker 2

Strangers in a country that was dirt.

00:26:05 Speaker 2

To pass a checkpoint, you need a residency letter issued by the Kurdish Security Apparatus.

00:26:10 Speaker 2

To renew an ID, you must appear in a home district you cannot safely access.

00:26:15 Speaker 2

Compensation, public employment, and social services, all are narrowed or conditional.

00:26:21 Speaker 2

And as long as you remain a citizen on Iraqi soil, you'll exclude from any forms of protection elsewhere because those are promised on refugee status outside the country.

00:26:32 Speaker 2

The IDP category then holds Yazidis in a strange position.

00:26:36 Speaker 2

It recognizes their displacement but not the political failure behind it.

00:26:41 Speaker 2

sees them as people who need temporary assistance, not as citizens whose state failed to protect them.

00:26:46 Speaker 2

So the question becomes, how do Yazidis push back against a name that keeps them in place?

00:26:53 Speaker 2

What other names do they use to make that IDP cannot?

00:26:59 Speaker 2

Yazidis are called many different names.

00:27:01 Speaker 2

They're called Yazidis, Iraqi Yazidis, Yazidi Kurds, IDPs, minorities, and genocide survivors.

00:27:09 Speaker 2

These labels sound descriptive, but each one carries a political project.

00:27:14 Speaker 2

The hyphenated identity of Yazidi Kurd ties them to the Kurdish nationalist project and it's claim over Sinjar.

00:27:21 Speaker 2

Iraqi Yazidis emphasize their belonging to Iraq, but binds them to a state that failed to protect them.

00:27:28 Speaker 2

Minority marks vulnerability

00:27:30 Speaker 2

but reduces their history to communal tolerance.

00:27:33 Speaker 2

I think he makes them visible to humanitarian agencies, but only as temporary subjects of aid and assumes that displacement is an interruption.

00:27:42 Speaker 2

People are forced out, assisted for a time, and then restored to place once conditions improve.

00:27:48 Speaker 2

But Yazidi's displacement was not only an interruption of residence, it was the result of an attempt to destroy them.

00:27:54 Speaker 2

It was a genocide.

00:27:57 Speaker 2

This is why genocide survivor becomes such a powerful name for Yazidis.

00:28:01 Speaker 2

IDPs made Yazidis visible to humanitarian agencies, but only a temporary subject of aid.

00:28:06 Speaker 2

People displaced by war and they return to their area of origin at the end of it.

00:28:11 Speaker 2

Genocide survivor was a name that did something different.

00:28:14 Speaker 2

By the time I was in the field, the distinction was no longer analytical.

00:28:19 Speaker 2

It had become practical.

00:28:21 Speaker 2

The ISIS crisis was officially over after the territorial defeat of ISIS in 2017, and many of these organizations or these humanitarian visas that Yazidis were employing to, they were rejecting them.

00:28:39 Speaker 2

So the international urgency for providing protection for Yazidis and helping them and giving them asylum visas had already passed.

00:28:48 Speaker 2

And many Yazidis were basically seeing more and more rejections when they were trying to go to Europe.

00:28:54 Speaker 2

And we actually see this trend becoming even worse over the last two or two years.

00:28:58 Speaker 2

Right now in Germany, they're having a lot of Iraqis who have been deported back to Iraq, including some Yazidis, and there are a lot of protests going on in Netherlands and Germany to stop the deportations of Yazidis who came to Netherlands and Germany for protection.

00:29:16 Speaker 2

So this is where the language of genocide mattered.

00:29:18 Speaker 2

It was a way of saying the question is not only whether a road is open or whether a house can be rebuilt or whether ISIS still control territory.

00:29:27 Speaker 2

The question is whether the political war that made genocide possible has actually changed.

00:29:34 Speaker 2

That question became very concrete in asylum interviews.

00:29:36 Speaker 2

Officers often ask Yazidis and similar to many other asylum applicants,

00:29:42 Speaker 2

whether they would return to Iraq if living conditions improved.

00:29:46 Speaker 2

On the surface, this question sound like a reasonable question, but my interlocutors heard it as a trap because the answer could decide whether their fear was still considered real.

00:29:59 Speaker 2

If they said yes, return became imaginable and their case weakened.

00:30:04 Speaker 2

One of my interlocutors who eventually received a humanitarian visa to go to France told me that the officer asked him this question

00:30:12 Speaker 2

He answered that he would not return, quote unquote, even if Iraq becomes like strands.

00:30:17 Speaker 2

Asylum law asks for a well-founded fear of persecution, but that fear has to survive a strange temporal test.

00:30:24 Speaker 2

It cannot be only a memory of past violence.

00:30:28 Speaker 2

It has to remain active in the present and credible in the future.

00:30:32 Speaker 2

As crisis age, claims victims.

00:30:34 Speaker 2

So to call yourself a genocide survivor is not to simply describe what happened in 2014,

00:30:40 Speaker 2

it is to refuse the bureaucratic conversion of genocide into ordinary displacement and to insist that return cannot be measured only by improved conditions but by the unresolved question of protection.

00:30:53 Speaker 2

But behind the asylum officer's question that would the return to Iraqi conditions improve is a deeper assumption built into the IDP framework that displacement is something that can be solved.

00:31:05 Speaker 2

So what does that solution

00:31:08 Speaker 2

actually mean in the language of the humanitarian system.

00:31:13 Speaker 2

Official policies propose three durable solutions for internal displacement, return, local integration, and internal resettlement.

00:31:22 Speaker 2

But for Yazidis, each option is blocked because, for example, local integration is refused, they cannot resettle in Iraqi Kurdistan, and returning to Sinjar is also very dangerous because the area is still not safe.

00:31:38 Speaker 2

And resettlement outside of Kurdistan region and Sinjar also is really unimaginable in the current political climate of Iraq.

00:31:47 Speaker 2

So for many of Yazidis, none of those options answered the actual problem.

00:31:51 Speaker 2

A tent could be dismantled, a camp file could be closed, a family could be told that they were no longer displaced, but none of that rebuilt Sinjar, restored trust in the state, accounted for missing or made citizenship protected again.

00:32:06 Speaker 2

The force of that closure became clearest to me in the fieldwork, later in my fieldwork.

00:32:11 Speaker 2

I sat with Yazidi Sheikh in his late mid-60s, whose body warded deep scars of nine years in Iranian detention as a prisoner of the Iran-Iraq war.

00:32:22 Speaker 2

He had come back with the chronic pain and unexpected skill.

00:32:27 Speaker 2

He had learned Farsi from watching Iranian state television in his cell.

00:32:32 Speaker 2

Now he served some time as an interpreter for Yazidi families who needed medical care across the Iranian border.

00:32:39 Speaker 2

As we drank, he pulled up his sleeve and showed me a tattoo on his forearm, 1991, in faded blue ink.

00:32:47 Speaker 2

The years he was freed, the day he had marked himself as the line between one life and another.

00:32:54 Speaker 2

Then I asked him about the future of his community, and he answered, and I quote him.

00:32:59 Speaker 2

Yazidis will only be part of Iraq's history, not future.

00:33:03 Speaker 2

End of quote.

00:33:05 Speaker 2

He delivered that sentence in the same form of Farsi he had learned in prison, a language learned through one historical trauma now used to articulate another.

00:33:18 Speaker 2

I don't know if he was right.

00:33:20 Speaker 2

The book ends in the summer of 2024 with the forceful closure of the GMT.

00:33:26 Speaker 2

The tents came down, the tents concrete platforms remained.

00:33:30 Speaker 2

Those platforms are the clearest picture I can offer of what the IDP category does.

00:33:36 Speaker 2

It puts down a foundation but refuses to let anything be built on it.

00:33:41 Speaker 2

calls the refusal care and it calls underlying constrained sovereignty.

00:33:46 Speaker 2

And when the pretense can no longer be maintained, it dismantles the site altogether and calls the dismantling resolution.

00:33:55 Speaker 2

who live there are now formally no longer IDPs.

00:33:58 Speaker 2

They have become, by administrative agreement, residents of a country that has not made room for them, citizen of a state that has not protected them, and people living beside the homeland that has not been.

00:34:10 Speaker 2

Thank you.