

The lost souls of Shingal

It was an ordinary Wednesday afternoon on August 14 2007 when the three suicide bombs went off.

Life in Shingal was usually quiet and safe until it wasn't. A steady city blown by the wind. Just as its root got comfortable everything would turn upside down. They built a system for themselves only for that system to be torn up every time. The people in Shingal learned to always keep an eye open while sleeping. On top of that constant fear, they built homes and lives for themselves, not letting the fear be the only thing in their lives. It was home to many, a nightmare to some, and a target to others.

This did not change the beat of its steady melody. Shingal has fallen down more times than one could count, just as it has gotten back up multiples times more. It is not a city to bully because it pushes back harder than it fell.

Shingal is known for its Yazidi population. The Yazidi people follow Yazidism, a religion of its own. Although Kurds categorize Yazidis as a religious sub group of Kurds, where else Yazidis are a distinctive entail religious group.

Yazidis believe in one God, the beginning and creator of all, making them monotheists. They are known as the people of the Peacock Angel. They are little-known and little understood. They also believe in the Divine Heptad, the seven Great Angels of God, who are his emanations.

The protector of the Yezidis is Tawsi Melek-the Peacock Angel. Yazidis live all around the world but mostly in Northern Iraq. There are Yazidi communities in Syria, Georgia, Armenia, America, Canada, France, and now Australia. The number of Yazidis is uncertain.

At a time, there were millions but genocides against them have shortened that number greatly now many claim only half a million Yazidis in Iraq alone. They are an origin different from the rest of humankind. The Yazidi religion is the oldest religion on earth. Unlike other religions, Yazidis did not originate with Adam and Eve.

Additionally, there are castes among Yezidis. The caste is inherited from the parents. It's not possible to change one's status or caste, it is among the things one is born with. Yazidis have three endogamy castes.

The three castes are Murid, Pir, and Sheikh. The Sheikhs and Pirs make up the clerical caste, while the Murids are the general public. Murids are only allowed to marry other murids, pirs can only marry pirs, and sheikhs can only marry sheikhs.

Each Sheik or Pir family has its own specialty. Some families are known to cure snake bites; others cure madness believed to be induced by Jinns. While others protect against the evil eye. These are still believed even today. They are among our traditions and not something we believe to be false.

Yazidis have many holidays. All the holidays bring us together in different ways. We get to celebrate our customs and traditions as a whole. We also get to share these traditions with our communities. We are able to show the things we love, and celebrate them, all the while seeing

other cultures do the same. It creates a very strong connection within people as they realize how much they have in common.

They all have different customs just as we do. Our customs vary from region to region as well as from people to people. Some people celebrate all the holidays while others celebrate some. They all respect the value of their traditions the same.

Shingal is a city located in northern Iraq, and isn't typical of Iraqi towns. Unless in your typical city people slept on their roofs and ate outside on a daily basis. It isn't the safest place, but for a time, it was home.

We had dangerous dust storms in the summer. These storms would disrupt our activities. As soon as anyone saw a dust storm coming, they would warn us all. This way we could take shelter inside our houses. We always made sure to cover even the sides of the doors, cracks where little light would be visible through, because we didn't want to take any risks.

I remember during one particular dust storm, Faleh put all of us kids in the living room and told us to cover all the light we saw through the door cracks. I watched him through the window as he told everyone to get inside. I was scared that he would stay outside because of the scary stories we were told about dust storms. Most of these stories were being told just to scare us into staying inside during the storms.

These storms would turn the air red from dust, that alone was enough to scare people into taking shelter inside their homes. Many of the houses were made with blocks so the heavy winds that came along with the dust storms could not damage them. Although, some people had houses made of mud brick, which were not strong enough against the dust and winds.

The storms would cut off the electricity. There was no internet. The big storms came about twice a year, and the small ones came a lot. The big storms lasted over 24 hours depending on how big the storms were. After the storms calmed down, people would go outside to see everything covered in dust, and the skies an unrecognizable color.

Our water sources were very far. We got our water from village tanks owned by farmers. The village tanks were about an hour away on foot depending on how many tins they had to carry. The man rarely went to get the water, the women would go to get the water. The men felt ashamed to bring the waters because they felt it was the women's job to do that. The people with a car or a donkey had it easier than others. The others had to go on foot every time their water ran out.

The women had to carry big oil tins for over an hour on foot to and from the village tanks owned by farmers. Each tin weighed about 42 pounds. Many people would fill two tins at once, one tin on each shoulder when they were desperate for water or if they had a big family.

Sometimes the farm owners would allow the people to get water for free. They would say, "For the next 30 minutes, water is free!" This was not helpful to the majority of the people because they were too far from the farms.

There were two ways in which they would get their water from the village tanks. Both ways were difficult in different ways. One way was that they had to buy a water hose of their own. They would buy a hose, depending on how rich or poor they were. Some people could only afford cheap hoses, while others had the strong expensive ones. In the long run this was the best way for us to get our water but it took a lot of hard work to put the hoses under ground. Depending on how far their houses were, they would buy that many meters of hose.

This did not work for us all because some of us lived too far from the village farms, and that much hose was expensive. Even if people had that much hose, the water was not guaranteed to reach them because of how far they lived. It would sometimes stop halfway through the hoses. They had to make sure their hose was securely placed in the tanks and underground.

The other way in which we got our water was simpler but harder in the long run. This way was with the oil tins. The people that had a car or a donkey did not have to worry about carrying these tins for miles on foot. The ones that did not have a car or a donkey had to carry these tins. This caused a lot of back problems for the woman at a very young age.

Girls as young as 7 to 9 year old would carry these tins sometimes everyday early in the mornings because they needed to provide the water for their families.

Even with all the hard work on a daily basis life in Shingal was peaceful, for a time. But that time rarely lasted. There was a somewhat rhythm to Shingal. The rhythm you see in "back in the day" movies. A flow we got so used to. This rhythm and flow live in our blood, they are our "call home." Anywhere far from this call, felt strange and unfamiliar.

As children, we spent time outside with friends, because all our neighbors were relatives. I remember always feeling safe despite the dark clouds above. Some may have seen disaster when they saw Shingal but I would have seen home. Little girls walking around together, most of the time discussing school or absolutely nothing. That may seem boring but not for us. This was our way of life, the only thing we knew.

We rode our bikes all the time. I did not have my own so I would ride my brother's bike instead. We played with toys outside instead of inside. We also played a lot of soccer in the streets. There were rarely any cars driving by so it was somewhat safe to play in the streets.

A lot of the time, American soldiers would drive by our houses in their big cars. They would hand us small things, such as toys, accessories, or candy.

Every time they passed by, we would all get excited. It never got old, the thrill of seeing people so brave from somewhere so beautiful. They were heroes in our eyes, as they still are. They were protecting us and we were always very thankful for that.

I always knew they were here when everyone would gather outside. The soldiers made us believe in a lot of things. They made us believe that even with a school system like ours, we could go beyond everything out of our reach.

School was a key factor of our young lives, even if it was far and loose dogs would end up chasing us. It was something we looked forward to because we understood its importance in our lives.

Boys played soccer in the sand or even in the mud, the girls played soccer as well sometimes. Even when it rained, we played in the mud. The rain made our games more exciting because we saw the rain as a blessing from god, a reason to keep playing.

All our neighborhoods were connected somehow, so all the kids always played together like family, and friends. Everyone knew one another. The people that lived around me were all relatives, as far as I knew.

Some days were so quiet that you could almost hear the silence. Other days were so loud and chaotic, one would think silence did not exist in Shingal. Although all silence, and chaos isn't the same. It used to be peaceful silence now after so much horror I can only describe such silence as dead silence. The kind you don't want to be around. The kind that makes you hide because you

could sense the pain lurking in the air. It is as if the genocides left prints on the grounds, on the walls, and in the air; prints that were just waiting to return before we fully washed them away.

I remember looking down from the roofs and loving the fresh air and chaos. Now not many people sleep on the roofs. The streets are not familiar anymore. The people next door are strangers. The roads are filled with ghosts of haunted guns. There is not much to look forward to, everyone wants a way out.

The streets lead to danger or nowhere. Now people are afraid to let their guards down even for a second. The schools are not there anymore but their ghosts lay out in the open. Even the buildings filled with people felt empty. Some schools were filled with "teachers" that did not teach enough, that did not care enough, or that did not know enough. They were people that needed a job to provide for their families and the schools needed people with any knowledge to teach these kids a future.

Now kids miss the running to school, the mud blocking their way, and the dogs chasing them. They yarn for those desperate days, because no matter how bad those days were, they were better than the days they now see.

Those days were colorful compared to the grey they now experience. Just plain grey, not even black and white. Shingal is now so quiet that it's silence makes you deaf. You can hear the pain along with the lost souls that once called Shingal home. After 74 genocides, they are simply tired. Tired of all that they wish they had not experienced. All that they did not deserve to pay for. They fought and continue to fight every day. It used to be home, now it is Shingal.

The things I can remember now are frozen in my mind whether they were good moments or scary ones. I was very young when we moved away but old enough to keep a hold on any moment I could.

I grew with my dad's side of the family. There was his mom and dad, his 6 brothers, and his 6 sisters. His brothers are Jassim, Qassim, Saleh, Faleh, my dad, Jamal, and Adam. His sisters are Ronak, Nada, Wadha, Nazo, Marina, and Zeyneb. We all lived in one house.

Adam had four kids, Zayneb had five, and there was also me and my younger brother. We all did everything together. We grew up as siblings.

I know for sure that our house was always my favorite thing in Iraq and it will always be my favorite. No house can ever replace our home. No house can compare.

It was beautiful in my eyes. It was once our safe haven. It was where we all lived, slept, ate, cried, and laughed together. My parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents all live under the same roof. It was home to more than twenty people. Our house wasn't too big or too small. It was painted white and pink. Few inches from the ground up were painted all pink and the rest painted white. It had a total of six rooms including the kitchen. Our back yard was surrounded by the rooms, and it was mostly smooth concrete.

A little part of it was not concreted and it's where we planted things, like our own mini garden. Depending on the weather we'd decide whether to eat or sleep inside or outside. Eating outside felt peaceful. The sun felt delicate and warm on our skins. We didn't eat on tables with chairs; we ate on the floor.

As I look back I only saw chairs and tables on very special occasions when people came over. Our floors were always freshly washed every day. Mostly in the Summer, Spring, and sometimes even in the Fall we would eat outside and sleep on the roofs.

We would not sleep on the roofs when it was raining and in the winter. I don't know how to explain the feeling of sleeping on the roof other than it being calm. It felt like sleeping on the clouds and waking up to the roosters never got old.

Yes, the roosters. They woke us up every morning. Without them it did not feel like a normal morning. They woke up with the sun. My favorite room in the house was our second living room. The first one was mostly for company. It was our grandparents' room.

The second one was our place to watch movies, soap operas, and sports matches. It was the one room we all went to together and most of us slept there as well. We watched a lot of soccer, sometimes tennis as well. When the sport matches started Faleh would sometimes come in and watch with us.

When Leonel Messi, our favorite soccer player, would make a goal we would all scream at the top of our lungs. Grandpa and Faleh would tell us to lower our voices, which we would of course, until Messi made another goal. When Faleh wasn't around we were always extra loud during the matches. He always had a sense of maturity that made us want to act good around him, even though he was only 18 years old. He was like a bigger brother to us all; constantly looking out for us and wanting the best for us.

He always tried his best to help us stay in school because he understood the importance of education throughout our lives.

School was important to us but we didn't go to school to learn our mother tongue. The schools taught us Arabic mainly and as we got to the third and fourth grade then they would teach a little of Kurdish and some English. We all grew up speaking a language but not really learning it. We went to school to learn a whole other language.

The schooling was all memorization. There were no hands on activities but rather memorizing those hands on activities.

We didn't have preschool; in fact, it was never something that came to mind. Kids would go to school at the age of 6 except kids with disabilities. They had no system for them and sadly they could not go to school.

I remember my cousin starting school before me. She was a month older and when she turned 6 schools opened so she was allowed to go. I was still 5 when school began, so I had to wait until next year. I was just about as angry as any 5-year-old kid that wanted something they couldn't have. I didn't understand why I couldn't go, I thought they simply just would not let me go.

I loved school, I wanted to go with all my friends. A year later I got to start school. We slept pretty early and woke up anyways so for school my schedule did not change much. Even when we had no school we slept early and woke up at 9 in the morning. We would study weeks just to memorize a story, a paragraph, a sentence, or even a word. We always had to memorize material which was pretty difficult especially for the kids under 10. I mean a six-year-old can barely memorize how to tie their shoes.

While in the US, students had hands-on learning, reading a book, and answering questions, we had to memorize the books and the questions. They did not have enough money to give us anything more than books and knowledge and that was more than enough to us back then. So we took very good care of the books, or at least we tried to.

My book, like everyone else's, would get wrinkly once in a while. When they did get wrinkly, grandma would put blocks on top of them so that the pressure would take the wrinkles away. It was not easy to take care of all the books.

I was always excited to go to school and learn along with my friends.

We had tinted windows in our house where the outside was like a mirror, and you couldn't see the inside of the rooms. I would go there, brush my hair, and prepare myself for school. I made the front of my hair all shiny and not one hair was in my face.

My aunt always asked me why only the front of my hair was shiny. I thought that was a silly question. I was like no one is going to look at the back of my head.

There were school uniforms and some rules as well. Girls couldn't have long nails, nor could they paint them and they could not have their hair down. Boys couldn't have long hair or long nails either. These rules never upset us because at that age we did not care for these small details.

We loved the little amount of education we got, because it felt like so much more.

I remember the school and how it was not clean or new but it was enough. It was not that bigger than our house. We had recess there as well. A bell would ring only once a day, indicating it was time to go out and play. Our recess was not outside, it was inside and the classrooms surrounded it. It was basically within the walls of the school.

We had 4 hours of school, and not even every day. School ended at 12 for primary school. We didn't call it elementary, middle, or high school. We just knew that at 6 years old you start the 1st grade. I went to school with my two best friends, my cousin and my second cousin. Many of my other friends and family members went to school along with me. We were always together, studying and playing.

Despite how "okay" the educational system seemed to most, it was unfair to that many more.

The education system in Iraq could have been better in many ways. Kids were never taught enough about real world factors or so much more. This made it difficult to understand many things. In fact, they don't even think about it.

There is so much the young generations can do for this world but not all of them are taught the right material. We only learned simple reading and writing, not even our own mother tongue. We went to school to learn someone else's language in a place we were born, a place that was ours just as much as it was theirs. It is the only education they are given and with all the tragic events, the system just kept on breaking.

There are no elective classes. No sports, no arts, to look forward to. They learn to turn their passions into simple hobbies.

They went home with papers to memorize. The things they memorize do not benefit in ways they should. They studied day and night for a test that consisted of one question.

Due to the constant memorization, kids dropped out, as it got harder and harder. They did not have enough support to want to complete school. They were more focused on other things, such as taking care of family. Especially after the genocides, they felt school was not going to put food on the table, and give medicine to the ill.

They saw it as just a waste of time. Thus kids dropped out to work that way they could take care of their parents, grandparents, and younger siblings. Those that could not take care of themselves.

In the US, students went to college to pursue a degree in the field they most desired. While in Iraq, the field they ended up in was decided upon a certain score on their high school exams. The students' with the highest scores were put into medical and law schools, and the students with the lowest grades were put into engineering schools for an associate degree. Even after that degree they would only become assistants to engineers, never really being able to go into the field.

After the latest genocide, the school systems never recovered. In fact, it only got worse. Although some kids did not give up because they wanted a certain future they felt only school would bring them closer too.

Many failed more than twice but that never discouraged them from going back to school. It made them work harder.

One particular afternoon Falah was giving some of his sister's Arabic lessons. Jamal was working in a new business job that he got. Nada was shopping with her cousin. Ronak and Jassim were playing soccer outside with their friends. Everyone was scattered in different places. Zayneb was at her in-laws' house at the time and Adam was on duty, working as a translator for the US army.

It was just another typical day in Shingal. People were going on with their everyday chores, taking care of their homes, their family members.

An hour after their lessons finished, Faleh went to his store.

My grandmother and our neighbors were standing by the door talking. Faleh went by Qassim and Saleh, their cousin, and the cousin's son in their electronic shop.

Later on Saleh went home on his bike. Their cousin was with two customers selling a phone in the shop while Qassim was standing inside by the shop's door. Faleh went to the balcony next to the shop when suddenly the shop's front wall fell, and the weather turned dark from smoke. It happened so fast that they had no time to think.

It was around dinner time at 7 pm, when three trucks drove in the middle of Siba Sheikh Khider and Till-Azeer, where me and my family lived.

Two of them were meant to go to Till-Azeer and destroy the whole town from its roots. All three of the trucks were filled with rocks so that it caused more damage. Even the people that did not get badly injured by the bombings got hit with the rocks.

One of these two blew up in the village, Gundi-Azeer on the way to Till-Azeer, turning the whole town into dust. Gundi-Azeer was a very small village so the bombing hurt everyone that lived there. A lot of the people died but the majority were severely injured. The second truck reached the center of Till-Azeer and blew up. People were gusted into bits and pieces.

The suicide bombings created such strong winds that many people lost their cloths and other things they held. Young ones hit walls and buildings. The wind literally knocked out their lives. Everyone in Shingal was affected in multiple ways, whether from injury or the death of a loved one. No one was left untouched by the multiple suicide bombings.

Houses were flat grounds and people were afraid to look under. They were afraid to find their loved ones under the bricks and stones. Body parts were scattered on the floors because of the bombs. People had literally gotten torn apart. Many were stuck under buildings.

Death covered way too much ground as well as door steps as people started to really open their eyes to their surroundings. People looked for missing loved ones, calling out their name, searching for a little hope that they're children, mothers, fathers, and everyone was okay. No one Yazidi in a million years could imagine an attack worse than this but sadly this was only the beginning for terrorists. While Yazidi fought every day to forget this nightmare, terrorists were preparing for another genocide, one they were sure would make greater history in the eyes of Yazidis.

From the overview Shingal looked like flattened land. The bodies looked like broken rocks that had shattered across all grounds.

The one question we always ask ourselves is,

“Why us?” Sadly, it is a question we have yet to find an answer too. At the moment we thought it was the deadliest attack we would endure. It was the 73th genocide committed against the Yazidis. Seven years after we realized that it was in fact the second deadliest attack in Yazidi history. Even as of this day many Yazidis mourn the ones they lost that day.

Even after over a decade later. Terrorists want to point fingers but in the end there is no excuse to ruin thousands of innocent lives. These people worked hours and days every single day for every drop of water they had. Their hands grew old from working in farms and working for their homes. Their backs ached from carrying water, gas, and huge bags of foods such as flour, rice etc. from far distances.

The sun burned their skins as they worked under it until much after it set. They saved every penny they could in hopes that one day they could afford to have their homes rebuilt for their families. All their hardships were blown away along with those trucks that took their people and homes. They shed tears for every second they worked, every drop of sweat, for every soul they lost.

Days and months went by as they looked for the parts of their loved ones. They didn't consider them gone until they found their bodies, until they found enough proof to lose all hope. They couldn't make a proper funeral, or say their goodbyes properly without the bodies. Even years later they tried to restore their lives. There was so much they could not replace.

To this day many of the body parts were not identified. Not many thought it was an unordinary thing because they were busy with their lives. Some people did think that the trucks were suspicious but they had no time to react. They had no time to warn everyone. Another truck blew up in Siba Sheikh Khider causing less damage because the town was not as crowded.

They were there to take souls along with their own. And they did just that. Their hatred was so strong that they would die just as long as they took as many souls with them as they could.

They purposely blew up in the middle of those two most known towns but no one knew it was bombings or to be more accurate a suicide bombings until after the bombings. No one was warned nor did they have any clue as to what was suddenly happening. One second they were planning tomorrow and then they were looking for yesterday.