

NADIA MURAD AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE SINJAR GENOCIDE: FROM SURVIVAL TO COLLECTIVE MEMORY

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Abstract

This article examines the 2014 Sinjar Genocide as a process through which survivor testimonies, particularly that of Nadia Murad, are transformed from individual experiences into collective memory and, ultimately, socially and institutionally recognized knowledge. Rather than treating testimony solely as a source for documenting past violence, the article conceptualizes it as an active epistemic practice that contributes to the production and legitimization of knowledge about genocide.

To analyze this transformation, the article proposes an input-process-output epistemological model. The input stage consists of survivors' individual experiences, testimonies, memories, and community narratives. The process stage encompasses the social, cultural, legal, academic, media, and institutional mechanisms through which these experiences are mediated, interpreted, transmitted, and incorporated into collective memory. The output stage refers to the institutionalization of knowledge through legal recognition, international reports, academic research, commemorative practices, and public memory policies. Nadia Murad's testimony serves as an applied case demonstrating how an individual survivor's experience can acquire representational significance and contribute to international awareness and recognition of the Yazidi genocide. The study argues that knowledge about genocide emerges not merely through documenting events but through the interaction of testimony, collective memory, cultural heritage, sites of memory, and institutional validation. The proposed model offers a framework for comparative research on the transformation of survivor testimony into collective memory and institutionalized historical knowledge.

Keywords: Sinjar Genocide, Yazidi community, Nadia Murad, testimony.

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Introduction

Despite the existence of international legal and institutional mechanisms for the protection of human rights and the prevention of genocide in the 21st century, mass violence continues to manifest itself in various geopolitical and social contexts. The cases of Darfur (2003), the genocide of the Yazidis in Sinjar (2014), mass violence against Uyghurs, and crimes committed against the Rohingya demonstrate that genocidal violence is not limited to past events but continues to shape processes of social memory, identity formation, and knowledge production (Woven Teaching, n.d.). Comparative genocide studies indicate that, despite differences in historical contexts, certain structural mechanisms may recur across cases, including the dehumanization of targeted groups, policies of exclusion, the spread of hate ideologies, and organized violence (Stanton, 1996).

Theoretical approaches regarding the non-linear and repetitive nature of history, including Vico's philosophy of historical cycles, Spengler's model of civilizational development, and Nietzsche's concept of the "eternal recurrence," suggest that certain patterns may reappear within historical processes (Vico, 2020; Spengler, 1918-1922; Nietzsche, 1990). This perspective is also significant for genocide studies, as different genocides, despite their unique historical characteristics, often contain recurring patterns and warning signs. Gregory Stanton's "Ten Stages of Genocide" model demonstrates that genocidal processes often develop through a gradual sequence, from classification and symbolization to discrimination, dehumanization, organization, and extermination (Stanton, 1996). At the same time, each genocide requires a distinct historical and cultural analysis, as the experiences of victim groups and the processes of memory formation vary significantly. This understanding lies at the foundation of the principle of "Never Again," which seeks, through the study of past genocides, to identify future risks and develop mechanisms of prevention (Montgomery, 2007).

However, the study of genocide is not limited solely to the analysis of the emergence and mechanisms of violence. It is equally important to understand how these experiences are preserved, transmitted, and transformed into knowledge. Within memory studies, Maurice Halbwachs demonstrated that memory is formed within social frameworks and depends on the processes through which societies reinterpret and transmit experiences of the past (Halbwachs, 1992). Based on this theoretical framework, this article examines the case of the Sinjar Genocide (2014) to explore how the individual testimony of Yazidi survivor Nadia Murad is transformed, through social, cultural, and institutional mediation, into collective memory and publicly recognized knowledge. The case of Nadia Murad is selected not as a comprehensive

representation of all Yazidi survivors' experiences, but as an analytical example through which the mechanisms of knowledge production-from individual testimony to international recognition-can be examined. Her narrative provides an opportunity to analyze how a survivor's personal experience acquires representational significance and becomes a component of international memory formation concerning genocidal violence committed against the Yazidi community.

This article applies the concept of epistemology as an analytical framework to examine how knowledge about genocide is produced, transmitted, validated, and institutionally recognized. From this perspective, testimony is understood not merely as a representation of past events, but as a transforming epistemic object that, through social, cultural, legal, and political mediations, contributes to the formation of collective memory and publicly legitimized knowledge.

The central argument of this article is that the significance of Nadia Murad's testimony is determined not only by her individual traumatic experience but also by the processes through which this experience moves beyond the boundaries of personal memory and becomes an important component in the formation of international knowledge about the Sinjar Genocide. The aim of this study is to develop and apply an input-process-output epistemological model in order to explain how, in the case of the Sinjar Genocide, a survivor's individual testimony is transformed into collective memory and institutionalized knowledge. The main research question is: through what epistemological mechanisms is Nadia Murad's individual testimony transformed into publicly recognized knowledge about the Sinjar Genocide?

The study demonstrates that social memory, cultural heritage, sites of memory, and mechanisms of international institutional recognition play a central role in this process. Together, they form an interconnected system through which individual experience is transformed into collective historical consciousness and contributes to the formation of institutionalized knowledge. During the preparation of this article, an artificial intelligence tool (OpenAI ChatGPT) was used exclusively for language editing and stylistic refinement. The analytical interpretations, theoretical framework, and scholarly conclusions remain entirely the responsibility of the author.

The Legal Recognition Process of the Sinjar Genocide and the Epistemological Model

The concept of "genocide" emerged as a fundamental category of international law for defining forms of systematic destruction that extended beyond the traditional legal framework of warfare. The term was coined by the Polish

lawyer Raphael Lemkin in 1944 in his work *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*. It derives from the Greek word *genos* (“people,” “nation,” or “kin”) and the Latin suffix *cide* (“killing”) and was intended to provide a legal framework for describing the intentional destruction of national, ethnic, religious, and cultural groups (Lemkin, 1944; United Nations, n.d.).

In 1946, the United Nations General Assembly recognized genocide as an international crime, and on December 9, 1948, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was adopted. This document not only established the legal criteria for defining genocide but also created a framework through which mass violence could be classified, recognized, and incorporated into international legal and memory discourses. According to the Convention, a central element of genocide is *dolus specialis*—the specific intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group (United Nations, 1948; United Nations, n.d.). The legal category of genocide can be understood not only as a description of violence but also as a mechanism of knowledge formation. It establishes the criteria through which historical events are transformed into legally recognized and publicly acknowledged knowledge. In this study, the concept of epistemology is applied as an analytical framework for understanding how survivor testimonies, legal processes, and responses by international institutions contribute to the formation of recognized knowledge about genocide.

An important example of this process is the Sinjar Genocide (2014), perpetrated by the Islamic State (IS/ISIL) group in northern Iraq (Liu, 2025, p. 7). In August 2014, IS carried out systematic mass violence against the Yazidi community of Sinjar with the aim of destroying the foundations of Yazidi identity and cultural continuity. The atrocities included mass killings, forced displacement, abductions, sexual slavery, and forced religious conversion. As a result of IS attacks, approximately 5,000 Yazidis were killed, around 6,800 people were abducted, and hundreds of thousands were displaced (Yazda, n.d.; Jesuit Refugee Service, n.d.).

Investigations conducted by the United Nations documented that these actions resulted in severe disruption of the community’s demographic, social, and cultural structures (United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 2024). The actions of IS corresponded to several stages of genocide preparation and implementation described in Gregory Stanton’s “Ten Stages of Genocide” model, including classification, symbolization, dehumanization, organization, persecution, and extermination (Stanton, 1996).

The recognition process of the Sinjar Genocide has developed at multiple levels, involving legal, political, academic, and human rights actors. This

multidimensional process is significant not only for establishing accountability but also for understanding the mechanisms through which survivor testimonies and documentary evidence are transformed into publicly recognized knowledge.

Judicial proceedings have primarily taken place in several European countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium, and France. These processes have contributed to the legal assessment of crimes committed by IS and the prosecution of direct perpetrators. At the same time, it is necessary to distinguish between national judicial proceedings and international judicial recognition, as no international tribunal has yet issued a final judgment specifically concerning the Sinjar Genocide (Demir, 2026). The position of the Republic of Armenia played a significant role in the recognition process. On January 16, 2018, the National Assembly of Armenia recognized the genocide committed against the Yazidi people in Iraq by terrorist organizations. A continuation of this process was the decision adopted on April 16, 2024, to designate August 3 as the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Sinjar Genocide against the Yazidis. The initiative was introduced by Rustam Bakoyan, a Yazidi member of the “Civil Contract” parliamentary faction of the National Assembly (Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, 2024; Armenpress, 2024).

These state recognitions function not only as expressions of political positions but also as mechanisms of memory institutionalization. They enable the integration of community memory into the framework of state and international memory policies. International organizations have also played an important role in the genocide recognition process. The United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry concluded that the actions of IS against the Yazidis constituted the crime of genocide. Human Rights Watch likewise documented killings, abductions, sexual slavery, and other grave violations (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2016). The Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe also recognized that Daesh had committed genocide against Yazidis, Christians, and non-Sunni Muslim minorities in Syria and Iraq. At the same time, it emphasized that, in the absence of a specialized international judicial mechanism, the primary processes of accountability should be pursued at the national level (Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, 2017).

However, the recognition process does not end with legal assessment. A distinction remains between the recognition of genocide and the broader process of community recovery, as the social, cultural, and psychological rehabilitation of survivors continues to represent an unresolved challenge. This demonstrates that recognition is not merely a record of past events but

an ongoing process connected to justice, memory, and community reconstruction (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2024).

In the case of the Sinjar Genocide, a central element of the epistemological process is survivor testimony. In particular, Nadia Murad's narrative became one of the means through which the violence committed against the Yazidis gained international visibility. Her testimony does not represent the entirety of all survivors' experiences; rather, it serves as an important analytical example for understanding how individual memory can be transformed into public knowledge and become an instrument of legal recognition (Murad & Krajewski, 2017; Nadia's Initiative, 2023). Testimony functions not only as a source of information but also as a knowledge-producing social practice. At the initial stage, narratives circulate within families and communities, forming communicative memory. However, when incorporated into legal processes, international reports, and academic studies, these narratives move toward the level of cultural and institutional memory (Halbwachs, 1992).

In the case of the Yazidi community, the transmission of memory has particular significance, as a substantial part of historical knowledge has been preserved through oral traditions, rituals, and spiritual narratives. Therefore, the memory of the Sinjar Genocide is shaped not only through documentary evidence but also through the living mechanisms of communal memory (Usman, 2026). The territories of Sinjar and Lalish function in this context as sites of memory where historical experience, religious identity, and cultural continuity intersect. Consequently, the loss of territory represents not only physical displacement but also a disruption of the continuity of memory and identity (Usman, 2026).

This article presents the recognition process of genocide as an epistemological model in which the immediate experience of violence is gradually transformed into publicly recognized knowledge. The model consists of three interconnected stages: experience (input), mediation (process), and institutionalization (output). At the first stage, survivor testimonies, personal memories, traumatic experiences, and community narratives serve as the initial sources of knowledge. Testimony is understood here not merely as a description of past events but as a knowledge-producing source that conveys the human, social, and cultural consequences of genocide. At the second stage, individual and communal experiences undergo processes of social and institutional mediation. Legal investigations, documentation efforts by human rights organizations, academic research, media discourse, and memory policies transform survivors' narratives into subjects of public and legal recognition (Jelin, 2003;). At the third stage, the institutionalization of knowledge takes place, resulting in stabilized and legitimized knowledge about genocide. This knowledge is expressed through state recognitions,

reports of international organizations, judicial proceedings, scholarly research, and forms of commemorative policy. At this level, previously individual or communal experiences become historical knowledge recognized by the international community.

Thus, the epistemological model of the Sinjar Genocide demonstrates that genocide recognition is not a single legal act but a dynamic process of knowledge formation. Survivor testimonies function as initial epistemic sources, while legal, political, cultural, and memory institutions serve as mediators responsible for validating, preserving, and disseminating this knowledge. The model makes it possible to examine not only what happened but also how the experience of violence became recognizable, interpretable, and transmissible knowledge (Halbwachs, 1992; Jelin, 2003).

Nadia Murad's Testimony as an Applied Example of the Epistemological Model

The applicability of the epistemological model of the Sinjar Genocide is most clearly demonstrated through the analysis of Nadia Murad's testimony. Her narrative provides an opportunity to examine how an individual traumatic experience is transformed, through social, cultural, and institutional mediations, into collective memory and institutionalized knowledge. Within the framework of this study, Nadia Murad's case is selected as an analytical example because her testimony demonstrates the key mechanisms of the knowledge-producing process through which individual memory is transformed into international recognition. Her narrative reveals the conditions and forms of mediation through which a survivor's story acquires representational significance and becomes a factor in the formation of public knowledge.

Within the proposed input-process-output model, Nadia Murad's testimony is examined as an example of three interconnected stages of knowledge formation. The input stage includes the initial experience as the foundation of individual memory and testimony; the process stage refers to the social, cultural, and institutional mediation of this experience; and the output stage represents its transformation into publicly recognized knowledge.

Nadia Murad's biographical experience constitutes the initial foundation of this process. Born in 1993 in the Yazidi village of Kocho, Iraq, Nadia Murad became a victim of the violence perpetrated by the "Islamic State" during the Sinjar Genocide in 2014. The killing of her family members, her captivity, her transfer to Mosul, and her enslavement became the experiential basis upon which her public testimony was later constructed (Murad & Krajeski, 2017). At

this stage, testimony functions as a narrative of individual traumatic experience. However, it does not remain limited to the sphere of personal memory. Testimony begins to operate as an epistemic mediator through which individual experience acquires cognitive and social value, becoming transformed into historical knowledge and a source of evidence relevant to legal processes.

At the process stage, Nadia Murad's testimony undergoes multilayered mediation. Her story moves beyond community boundaries and enters global public discourse through international media, human rights organizations, United Nations platforms, legal processes, and academic studies. This transformation does not occur automatically. Rather, it is shaped by interconnected mechanisms, including the public circulation of testimony, its acceptance by international institutions, scholarly interpretation, and its incorporation into frameworks of memory politics (United Nations, 2016).

The individual story gradually acquires representational significance by reflecting the structural dimensions of systematic violence committed against the Yazidi community, including mass killings, forced displacement, religious persecution, sexual slavery of women and girls, and the destruction of cultural heritage. The significance of Nadia Murad's testimony as a representative narrative of the Yazidi genocide lies in the fact that her story became evidence of the structural nature of violence directed against the community. Murad's narrative was transformed into a collective voice of the Yazidi community, particularly in relation to genocidal violence committed against women and children.

Nadia Murad, a survivor from the village of Kocho, is among the Yazidi women survivors who publicly presented their experiences on international platforms, incorporating them into the global human rights agenda. Her speeches, particularly at the United Nations, contributed to increasing international awareness of sexual slavery, abductions, and organized violence committed against Yazidi women and children. On September 16, 2016, Nadia Murad was appointed a United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Goodwill Ambassador for the dignity of survivors of human trafficking. This appointment became one of the significant stages in the international institutional recognition of her personal testimony (United Nations, 2016). Her memoir *The Last Girl* also became not only a form of documenting personal testimony but also an important source in the formation of public memory regarding the Sinjar Genocide (Murad & Krajeski, 2017). Within the output stage of the epistemological model, Nadia Murad's testimony becomes established as internationally recognized knowledge. It is incorporated into frameworks of human rights protection, legal accountability, genocide prevention, and memory politics.

One of the significant manifestations of this process was the awarding of the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize to Nadia Murad and Doctor Denis Mukwege from the Democratic Republic of the Congo “for their efforts to end the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and armed conflict” (Nobel Prize, 2018). The Nobel Peace Prize did not constitute legal recognition of the Sinjar Genocide itself; however, it became an important symbol of the international visibility of Nadia Murad’s testimony and its institutional legitimization within the human rights discourse. Therefore, Nadia Murad’s testimony can be understood as an epistemological bridge through which individual traumatic experience is transformed into an interconnected system of social memory, evidence relevant to legal processes, and institutionalized knowledge. It demonstrates that survivor testimony is not limited to documentary or biographical representation but can function as an active mechanism of knowledge production. Through this process, historical interpretations of genocide, legal claims, and forms of public memory are constructed.

The Cultural Legacy of the Sinjar Genocide and the “Witnesses of Memory”

Within the framework of the input-process-output epistemological model proposed in this article, the process stage is understood as the mediating space in which individual experience moves beyond the boundaries of personal memory and, through social, cultural, and institutional mechanisms, is transformed into collective memory. This stage encompasses the processes through which past violence acquires public meaning, historical interpretation, and the possibility of recognition, thereby becoming a source of knowledge production. In the case of the Sinjar Genocide, this process was shaped not only by human losses but also by the deliberate destruction of the cultural and spiritual heritage of the Yazidi community. For centuries, the Yazidi villages of Sinjar, together with their shrines, sacred sites, cemeteries, and settlements, sustained the continuity of the community’s religious life, identity, and historical memory. During the 2014 genocide, however, their systematic destruction disrupted the traditional mechanisms through which memory had been transmitted across generations.

To interpret this process theoretically, the article applies Pierre Nora’s concept of “sites of memory” (*lieux de mémoire*), according to which collective memory is preserved and reproduced not only through narratives but also through places, symbols, and material objects (Nora, 1989). In the context of the Yazidi Genocide, the shrines of Sinjar, Bahzani, and Bashiqa, the *ziyārāts* (sacred tombs), cemeteries, and destroyed settlements function as sites of memory in which physical space becomes not merely a trace of past violence but also a medium through which that violence is interpreted and transmitted. In this

sense, sites of memory also function as epistemological mediators, connecting individual testimonies with collective memory and, subsequently, with processes of institutional recognition. One example is the Yazidi Genocide Memorial constructed in the village of Solagh. It represents not only a monument commemorating the victims but also an example of the institutionalization of memory, linking survivors' experiences with community and international memory politics (Nadia's Initiative, 2023).

A particularly significant place is also occupied by Kocho, the birthplace of Nadia Murad. Kocho functions as a site of memory not only because of the mass atrocities committed there but also because, through the international circulation of survivors' testimonies, it has become a symbolic center of the Sinjar Genocide. The spatial memory of Kocho and Nadia Murad's narrative complement one another, demonstrating how local experience is transformed into internationally recognized knowledge. Thus, sites of memory function not merely as spaces for preserving the past but also as mechanisms of knowledge production that enable the transformation of individual testimony into collective memory.

At the same time, the process stage is not limited to spatial memory alone. The transformation of individual testimony into collective memory is also shaped by socio-psychological and cultural mechanisms that facilitate the transmission, reinterpretation, and intergenerational reproduction of traumatic experiences. According to theories of collective trauma, when violence is directed toward the destruction of an entire community's identity, culture, and social relations, its consequences extend beyond individual trauma and become a collective experience. Daniel Render Turmaud argues that collective trauma disrupts group identity, mutual trust, and a shared sense of security (Turmaud, 2020). Under such conditions, survivors' individual memories gradually become components of the community's collective experience.

Furthermore, the Sinjar Genocide can be understood as a significant example of cultural trauma. According to Jeffrey Alexander's theory of cultural trauma, cultural trauma emerges when a catastrophic event transcends individual experience and acquires public significance, becoming embedded in collective identity, memory, and narrative representation (Alexander, 2004). In the case of Sinjar, the violence perpetrated by the Islamic State (ISIS) resulted not only in mass killings, forced displacement, and captivity but also deliberately targeted the identity, cultural heritage, and social structures of the Yazidi community. Within this process, oral tradition occupies a particularly important place as a mechanism of memory transmission among the Yazidis. Historically, the continuity of religious knowledge, communal identity, and social memory within Yazidi culture has been maintained through oral

tradition. Following the genocide, oral tradition acquired an additional function by becoming a means of preserving traumatic experiences, articulating demands for historical justice, and reconstructing collective identity.

Another concept of particular importance within Yazidi collective memory is *Ferman*. The term originates from the Persian word *farmān* ("order") and entered common usage through Ottoman Turkish. Within Yazidi historical memory, however, it has been reinterpreted as a symbolic designation for the repeated episodes of mass persecution and genocidal violence committed against the Yazidis throughout history. *Ferman* functions as a code of cultural memory through which different historical episodes of persecution are integrated into a single collective historical experience. A comparable concept exists within the Assyrian community, where the term *Sayfo* symbolizes the mass violence and communal destruction of 1915 (Gaunt, 2019).

Thus, cultural heritage, sites of memory, survivor testimonies, collective trauma, and oral traditions together constitute the process stage of the proposed input-process-output model. Through these interconnected mechanisms, individual experience is transformed into collective memory, which subsequently prepares the transition to the output stage, where this knowledge becomes embedded within legal, academic, and political discourses and acquires an institutionalized form.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study demonstrate that, in the case of the Sinjar Genocide, survivor testimony functions not merely as a description of past events or an expression of individual memory. Through social, cultural, and institutional processes, it is transformed into collective memory and institutionalized knowledge, thereby contributing to the formation of historical and public understanding of genocide.

The principal scholarly contribution of this article lies in conceptualizing survivor testimony as an active component of the knowledge-production process. The proposed input-process-output epistemological model provides an analytical framework for examining how individual experience is transformed, through social and institutional mediation, into historically recognized knowledge. Within this framework, the analysis of Nadia Murad's testimony demonstrates that an individual traumatic experience can acquire representational significance, becoming one of the central narratives of the collective memory of the Yazidi Genocide.

At the same time, this study has several limitations. It is based primarily on a single case study – Nadia Murad's testimony – and therefore the applicability of the proposed model to other genocides and cases of mass violence requires further comparative research. Moreover, not all survivor testimonies receive the same degree of public visibility or institutional recognition. This raises important questions concerning the conditions under which certain individual narratives become incorporated into collective memory while others remain marginalized.

The findings suggest that survivor testimony should be understood not only as a means of preserving memory but also as a mechanism of knowledge production through which historical, legal, and public understandings of genocide are constructed and legitimized. The proposed model may serve as an analytical framework for future comparative studies examining how survivors' narratives are transformed into collective memory and institutionalized knowledge across different historical contexts.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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