

Agonistic Peacebuilding Practices, in Practice?

A Study of INGOs Programmatic and Advocacy Work
With and For Yazidi Survivors in Northern Iraq

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Abstract

After the 2014 invasion of contested areas in Iraq by the so-called Islamic State (IS), the Yazidi community has suffered dire consequences. Genocide, sexual enslavement, forced religious conversion and forced displacement were some of these horrendous acts committed by IS against the Yazidi community and other minorities in Iraq and Syria. This thesis builds from the infusion of agonist theory in peacebuilding. It uses theory of agonistic peace and thick recognition to explore the extent of agonistic practices present in the work of three selected Yazidi International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs). The study uses a partly inductive thematic content analysis to systematically analyse annual reports as in a document study. The findings show that some agonistic practices are present. It also shows that some practices are not outspokenly agonist but could serve as stepping stones to reach an agonistic peace. These findings are divided into two main areas: 'direct' and 'indirect' agonism. This new concept, a division of the notion of agonistic practices into direct and indirect agonism, is this study's main contribution to the research field.

Key words: Agonistic peace, Thick recognition, Peacebuilding, Yazidi community, Iraq

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Table of contents

1	Introduction.....	1
1.1	Purpose and Research Question	1
1.1.1	Research Question.....	3
1.2	Disposition	3
2	Theory and Previous Research.....	4
2.1	Agonism	4
2.1.1	Agonism in Peace Research	5
2.1.2	Reaching Agonism by Initiating Recognition: ‘Thick’ and ‘Thin’	7
2.2	Sectarianism	9
2.2.1	De-sectarianism.....	10
3	Research Design and Methods.....	12
3.1	Qualitative thematic content analysis in a document study	12
3.2	Case Selection	14
3.2.1	Material selection	14
3.3	A Detailed Description of Data Handling	15
4	Previous Research on the Yazidi Community, the 2014 Genocide and Some Background Information About the Case.....	19
4.1	Explaining the Sectarian Nature of Iraq Politics, and the Stance of the Yazidi Community.....	19
4.2	The Yazidi Genocide in 2014.....	20
4.3	The Aftermath of the Genocide and Yazidi IDPs	21
4.4	International Law and Justice for the Yazidis	22
5	Analysis.....	23
5.1	Introducing the INGOs.....	24
5.2	Direct Agonism	24
5.3	Indirect Agonism.....	27
5.3.1	Self-awareness and Recognition	28
5.3.2	Inclusion	29
5.3.3	Justice	31
5.3.4	Humanitarian Relief as a Foundation for Further Possibilities to Agonistic Practices	31
5.3.5	Advocacy.....	33
6	Discussion and Concluding Remarks.....	34

7	References.....	36
7.1	Materials.....	36
7.2	Literature	37

1 Introduction

In 2014, the so-called Islamic State, IS (also known as ISIL/Daesh), committed several horrendous crimes against the Yazidi people living in the northern region of Iraq and parts of Syria. A particular massacre which took place in Sinjar, among other acts which led to the forced displacement of the Yazidi community members have been deemed as a genocide by both the United Nations as well as multiple governments world-wide (UNITAD, 2023). The Yazidi people is an ethno-religious minority which was specifically targeted by IS since they are not “people of the book”, and hence infidels. The killings, captivations, and forceful conversion of religions, as well as the wide-spread enslavement of girls and women for sexual purposes, have shaken the world. A big part of the Yazidi population was killed, and another big part had to flee their homes. Today, 9 years after the massacre in Sinjar, many Yazidi people live in Kurdish controlled Internally Displaced Person-camps (IDP camps). Even though IS is not seemingly active in the area anymore, except from sleeper cells, the Yazid people still face many hardships both in IDP camps, as refugees, and when trying to return to their ancestral homelands. In order to facilitate and help recreating a flourishing life and a meaningful wellbeing for the Yazidi survivors, there are many International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) working for this cause, both locally and globally.

In peace- and conflict studies, a fairly new idea of using agonist theory in peacebuilding has been on the rise during the last few years (Shinko, 2008, 2022). This idea stems from a critique against the research field of liberal peacebuilding practices, and its main takeaway is the thought that conflict can be turned to something constructive and should therefore be allowed to take place, but in a controlled setting, preferably a mutually accepted democratic one.

Combining the case of the INGOs work to help make better lives for the Yazidi community, with these theories building on agonism, recognition and peacebuilding constructed to suit the local context, this thesis will explore how INGOs working in northern Iraq use agonistic practices in their advocacy as well as their programmatic work.

1.1 Purpose and Research Question

Agonistic peace and agonistic peacebuilding practices are a relatively new branch in the field of peace and conflict studies. This thesis will explore the implementation of agonism in programmatic and advocacy work done by three selected Yazidi International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs). In a

heavily sectarian environment, it is of special interest to see how INGOs work with efforts towards agonism: are such practices at all present, and if they are, in what ways are they presented? Can an INGO focused on only one group in the sectarian web of groups, be a suitable actor to bring in an agonistic perspective in the bigger picture? These questions have not yet been fully answered in previous research and hence this thesis will try to fill this research gap by contributing with a case study exploring agonistic practices made in INGOs peacebuilding efforts directed towards the Yazidi population in the genocide aftermath.

Also, as doing research which contribute to the field of peace and conflict studies, it is important to note the critical dimensions of the discipline. Many see it as a duty, as a researcher, to raise awareness of suffering and find legitimate policy implications which can help humans living in such harsh conditions as violent conflicts (Jutila, Pehkonen and Väyrynen, 2008). By doing this research, the Yazidi case will be highlighted and hopefully remembered.

The study will explore the work of a few chosen organisations which are all made up of personnel from the Yazidi community, or which are in some way closely related to it. It would be impossible to look into all organisations which are present in the region and working with IDPs, refugees and returnees, so the choice was made to limit the thesis to explore three core organisations more deeply. The chosen organisations, which will be presented in more detail in the analysis chapter are:

- Nadia's Initiative
- Free Yezidi Foundation
- Yazda

The purpose of the thesis is to explore how agonist theory can be used in peacebuilding practices, and answer to a debate if agonism should be implemented as a means of work, seen as an ultimate goal of peacebuilding or just a tool which researchers should use when theorising about peace and peacebuilding. The thesis will also give nuance to the thought of self-awareness and in-group identity change, which is an idea present in theory of recognition. Since the case of the Yazidi INGOs operate within a highly asymmetric post-conflict societal context, it can seem unjust to claim that it is essential to recognise one's own errors and faults to be able to find recognition, when one side has been clearly dominated and exposed to horrendous crimes while not taking part in violent combat themselves. There is a delicate balance to be found here, and my thesis aims at exploring dimensions of self-awareness in relation to this specific context which has not been researched much before. One purpose of this thesis is to broaden perspectives of agonism, and to explore in-group changes which could lead to a bottom-up creation of agonistic peace.

To avoid possible confusion, I will mention that this study is not aimed at evaluating nor judging the full context of the situation in the Yazidi community, nor how the peace process is turning out in a general manner, but rather how INGOs present their work, and if there are traces of agonism in their practices, or if agonism is even a goal which can be found in their work.

1.1.1 Research Question

The research question guiding this thesis is as follows:

To what extent are agonistic peace-building practices present in the work of Yazidi INGOs working in the asymmetric sectarian post conflict area in northern Iraq?

1.2 Disposition

The thesis will begin with an outline of the theoretic background to agonism and how this idea is applied to the peace- and conflict research field. Naturally follows a description of theories relating to agonism, such as thick and thin recognition and notions on how agonism can be used as a theoretic framework for analysis of post-conflict situations. Mentions of sectarianism will also be present. After the theoretic background and previous research on agonism and thick recognition is described, I will present the methods used in this study. In the methods chapter, I will clarify why the Yazidi community and more specifically the three INGOs were chosen as a case for this study. After this, I will present what materials were selected and how it was used to reach the conclusions presented in the end of the thesis. After the methods chapter, I will present what has been previously done in research regarding the Yazidi community specifically, to give context and background information about the case. After this, my findings will be presented in the analysis chapter which is organised into ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ agonistic practices. Finally, I will conclude the thesis in a chapter which presents the conclusions reached from my findings, as well as a discussion on the significance of this study. I will also give some ideas of future research, inspired from my findings.

2 Theory and Previous Research

This thesis is based on theories stemming from the field of peace and conflict studies within international relations, and more specifically the infusion of Mouffe's term "agonism", in peace studies. In this section, I will present what agonism means in itself, as well as how it is used by peace scholars. I will also present how agonism can be used when researching peacebuilding efforts, and it will become clear that agonistic peace seems to be an ideal type which should be worked towards in both active conflict as well as post conflict settings, to ameliorate the chances of establishing successful, long-term peace.

I will present some thoughts on how agonism and sectarianism combines in peace work, as well as some notions on recognition and narratives in conflict between enemy parties. The thesis aims at exploring how agonist notions such as creating or finding thick recognition between enemies are present in ongoing peacebuilding efforts in a heavily sectarian post conflict setting such as the one in northern Iraq. By using the notions of thick recognition as a theoretical base, this will help explore inhibiting and driving factors for agonistic peace.

2.1 Agonism

Agonism is a term which was introduced by Mouffe. Agonism is associated with contestation and competition, and has its roots in athletics where the thought is to measure oneself against others. In political science, the theory of agonism incorporates dimensions of relationality and intersubjectivity; one's identity is dependent on the recognition and respect of others. The foundational thought is that politics is based on conflict, that politics is even inherently conflictual, and that contestation is constructive and therefore should be seen as a natural part in political settings. This means that allowing a struggle to play out, it can lead to a change in the system and hopefully a development towards something which is considered better. Agonism is also attentive to the social and cultural differences and identities between the struggling parties (Shinko, 2008, p. 478).

It is important to note that agonism is not a means to end struggle, rather it converts the energies of conflict in a democratic setting leading to a decrease in violence. Agonism should therefore be considered a means to lessen violence in conflicts (Shinko, 2008, p. 489).

2.1.1 Agonism in Peace Research

The idea of infusing agonistic democracy theory in the field of peace and conflict studies within international relations, was introduced by Shinko in 2008 in her paper “*Agonistic Peace: A Postmodern Reading*” in *Millenium*. The idea came about as a reaction against the heavily dichotomised representation of war and peace in International Relations theory; where peace was only seen as the absence of war. Instead, agonism and agonistic peace brings a new focus towards violence in peace studies (Shinko, 2008, p. 474). Agonistic peace serves to give nuance to the concept of peace, by opening up for new ways of thought around this abstract notion. Bringing in agonism when discussing peace, helped re-envision what peace could be, and that it could exist in a way where struggle and contestation can still be played out in multiple layers but in a less violent way, by using words and policy instead of direct violence. (Shinko, 2008, p. 490). Shinko thought of this concept as something where peace was more “*active, provocative and engaged*” rather than the opposite, something which is difficult to both understand and even more so, reach (Shinko, 2022, p. 1400).

Apart from the fact that agonistic peace theory was created as a reaction to the war/peace dichotomy, it also stems from a critique against the more traditional and liberal form of peacebuilding which has been highly prevalent in peace research for many decades. In liberal peacebuilding, confrontation between enemies is seen as inherently bad and should therefore not be allowed in any way or shape. It is thought to be dangerous to allow confrontations between former enemies, and even contestation within the newly put in place democratic settings should be avoided as much as possible since this can lead to spoiling of the newfound liberal peace (Aggestam, Cristiano and Strömbom, 2015, pp. 1738–1739). In an agonistic peace process however, these confrontations are to be encouraged, and space needs to be created to play out the conflict between the enemies, but in a controlled and non-violent setting. During the peacebuilding process, these spaces need to be created so that relations are allowed to be reformed and transformed. Images and beliefs of the other need to be reshaped, from enemies to adversaries. It is important to note that an agonistic relation can be just as conflictual and confrontational as an antagonistic one, but the main difference is that it is played out in democratic procedures where the rules are both decided upon and respected by all the adversaries (Aggestam, Cristiano and Strömbom, 2015, p. 1738).

With the theoretical tool, which is agonistic peace, Shinko claims that research should acknowledge that peace cannot exist without agonism. If peace is what is reached for, and there is a possibility to establish peace after conflict, agonistic practices should be included and highly valued, even preferred, in comparison to other practices. Agonistic peace gives a better definition of peace than many other theories, and it makes peace something which is reachable, instead of something dreamlike, hard to reach and hard to define (Shinko, 2008, pp. 489–490).

Agonistic peace was launched to open up a critical research agenda for peace which should question domination, marginalisation and the imposition of western ideals in peacebuilding, which liberal peacebuilders have been heavily critiqued

for doing (Shinko, 2008, p. 473). The advantages when studying peace with a focus on agonism is the possibility to politicise the concept of peace, and make sure that the peace work does not mean slipping back to structures of domination between the parties, but instead have the possibility to lead to something new. When studying agonistic peace, researchers must be vary not to slip back into such thoughts, and instead stay open to critically assess both normative and structural components of peace. Also, researchers must be careful not to define nor judge peace for others, but should always take into account every specific context and listen to many different voices, especially the local ones who know the context best (Shinko, 2008, p. 475, 2008, p. 490).

Since politics and contestation are inseparable, so are peace and power. Therefore, peace should be studied as an agonistic political activity. In agonistic peacebuilding, the idea is to make spaces that are controlled democratic and political, so that the conflict can change and that it instead of being played out violently, it can be played out in an ideational realm where words and dialogue are used instead. There is a right to defend ideas, and contestation and different views should still be allowed, but they should be contained within the space made for dialogue. If both sides do not adhere to a common understanding of democratic principles, and a compromise is being made to force the adversaries into dialogue in such a setting, this will not be sustainable in the long term and is most likely to break down, leading to a new eruption of violence in the conflict once again. It is very important that the political setting is made up by both parties together, and rules should be made in accordance with all parties for the best results (Shinko, 2008, p. 480). It is also important to note that agonism must grow from each specific context and cannot be imposed, since this will lead to recreating the structures of hegemony and dominance anyway. These are supposed to be avoided at all costs when trying to create or find agonistic peace, since contestation is highly praised for its constructiveness. Researchers have to be very attentive to not impose or favour western liberal democratic values when studying agonism and remember that this is a critical theory which makes room for context specific differences and needs. Without this critical dimension to the study of agonistic peace, Shinko claims that agonist theory loses its core value and is easily misused (Shinko, 2022, p. 1404).

To study peace with an agonist infused analysis, Shinko suggests that the most crucial aspects include locating structural inequities and the power resources which aims at keeping such structures in place, as well as looking for the withholding of recognition and respect between enemies when it comes to economic, political, and social structures in society (Shinko, 2008, p. 491).

To reach an agonistic peace, one of the foundational principles will be to focus on the relations between the enemies and the transformation where instead of enemies, they see each other as worthy opponents or adversaries in a political manner. This is where theory about recognition comes in.

2.1.2 Reaching Agonism by Initiating Recognition: ‘Thick’ and ‘Thin’

Recognition is important to understand to be able to properly analyse agonistic peace. Recognition and respect are the foundation to making the change from enemy relations into adversary relations, as claimed by Shinko.

A thought among constructivist scholars is that if conflict is to be continued, its narrative must be re-invented at many levels in society; in both the elite, middle and grassroot levels. Since narratives of conflict can be reinvented, it seems logical that also narratives of peace can be reinvented. By institutionalizing narratives of thick recognition, this can be done to promote a narrative of peace instead than that of conflict. It also shows the importance of including all societal levels in the work to transform conflicts, no level can be left out with an expectation of long-term sustainable peace after conflict (Strömbom, 2014, p. 170).

Previously, recognition as a concept in International Relations research has mostly been used to explain relations between and the identities of states, i.e. who is a legitimate state with legal rights, and who does not qualify as such. Even though this is an important factor when studying conflict, it does not explain the full picture of why and how conflicts come about or how they can be solved. It also leaves out all other levels than the very top, the state itself. To mitigate this, Strömbom has advanced the theory of recognition by introducing a concept which differentiates recognition so that it can be used on different societal levels, and gives the concept of recognition different meaning depending on who or what entity is concerned: this is called ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ recognition (Strömbom, 2014, p. 171).

The main idea is that when initiating thick recognition in a conflict setting, this puts a new focus on the relationship between parties which can hopefully be transformed into a more peaceful one where acceptance and respect of the other is found. Thick recognition means that the adversaries are open to seeing both the legal and judicial rights of the opponent, but also accepting their differences in social identities. The goal of thick recognition is not to always agreeing and finding one big and collective narrative of the conflict or the conflicting parties, but to give room to recognise mutual suffering and transforming images of the other which has often been affected by misrecognition due to the conflict (Strömbom, 2014, p. 171).

Whereas recognition, as by the old definition, only takes state legitimacy into consideration, thick recognition is thought to be able to be initiated at all levels of society. Therefore, in agonistic peacebuilding practices, thick recognition can be initiated on levels such as between communities and individuals and grassroots organisations as well as political parties. When thinking about recognition as thick recognition, this distinction can help understand how seemingly intractable conflicts can transform and be peacefully resolved since this has to do with identity change and relational changes between the enemies (Strömbom, 2014, p. 169).

On the other hand, misrecognition is oftentimes found to be both a cause and a driving factor of conflict. Misrecognition means the lack of understanding between parties, where the enemy is illegitimated in a way that it is believed they have neither legal rights nor rights to being different culturally or socially. If misrecognition is targeted and instead replaced by thick recognition, the hope is that the conflict can be transformed, and become less violent (Strömbom, 2014, p. 169).

There are several facilitating and inhibiting factors which have been found to affect the likelihood of finding or being able to create thick recognition in intractable conflicts. One of the biggest facilitating factors to create thick recognition between parties to conflict is to include previously neglected narratives in communication on different levels in society, where a representation of the other as a legitimate actor is being made (Strömbom, 2014, p. 179). It seems as when initiating thick recognition in this way, top-down, it can start to grow and expand leading to it spreading to new levels.

Inhibiting factors, on the other hand, includes when violence increases, when fear of the other and fear of their physical threats increase, an overall polarization in society and the use of narratives which legitimizes violence against the other, while at the same time banning counter-narratives. These factors are to be avoided for thick recognition to be able to work and be implemented (Strömbom, 2014, p. 179).

The process of thick recognition is dependent on identity transformation, both of oneself and the other. There needs to be a process of self-transformation to be able to move past previous assumptions of oneself, to re-evaluate the position one is in and be able to question this (Strömbom, 2014, p. 171). Past views of reality need to be brought up to the surface and re-evaluated, and many times this should be part of a self-critical process. A self-transformation helps in creating or re-creating a more objective view of oneself in the context of the conflict. This can often mean that there is a decrease of the view that the in-group individuals are the only one who has suffered, and that the sufferings of the others are being recognised as well. Hence, the transformation of oneself is strongly linked to the transformation in view of the other too. In this process, key elements are to recognize aspects of identity of the other, and to show awareness of the grief of the other parties to the conflict, too. The goal is not to achieve a forced unification, but to show respect and awareness, to recognize and validate the other which hopefully leads to the relation becoming more positive. If a perpetrator shows awareness of the grief of the victim, the grief is validated and this can become a spark to help ease the rough relation (Strömbom, 2014, p. 176).

The process of thick recognition, is meant to lead to more positive relations where identity differences are still accepted and where exclusion of the other is avoided. The process of self-transformation means that the perception of oneself goes from feeling insecure and threatened, to instead realizing a more complex understanding where the own group is seen as capable of doing both good and bad deeds. This will lead to making room for taking responsibility for the bad deeds a group has committed, and the other's claims of victimhood are better understood and seen as more justified than before. Re-thinking narratives of one self, the

other and the conflict can lead to questioning the threat which lies in the differences between the groups, and can hence lead to a realization and acceptance that the differences are not something to be afraid of or act on to destroy. This is not an easy task since identity construction is often very sensitive as well as something which is highly protected, both by the collective and by individuals within. It can be a very hurtful process to realize the shortcomings of oneself, and then act to change these ways (Strömbom, 2014, p. 175, 2014, p. 176).

So, in short, to reach an agonistic peace, creating thick recognition of the adversary is of uttermost importance. Recognition in this way refers to seeing your enemy as a rightful other, which is also protected by laws and has the right to life and different cultural practices. It makes the enemies see the other as a person, and recognize a mutual hurting, that the other part has also suffered during the conflict. In this thesis, the focus will be put on exploring and understanding how INGOs use tactics to reach an agonistic peace. These tactics, and what will be explored in the project, will be explained more in depth in the methods chapter below. In the next part of this theory section, I will touch upon theories of sectarianism. This is important since the case explored in this study, the Yazidi community in Iraq as represented by three chosen INGOs, exists in a heavily sectarian context.

2.2 Sectarianism

The literature and theory on sectarianism is very broad. In this section I will highlight some focal points from the literature to give context to the sectarian nature of the society in which the Yazidi community exist.

One approach of understanding sectarianism is the primordialist view that sectarian identities are historically rooted and given without choice, the actors of today have no agency to change these identities. This is a common view amongst many scholars today, but the biggest opposition comes from the constructivists which claim that actors are believed to be influenced by their group identity and re-create it continuously and subconsciously. A third view, the instrumentalist, thinks that elite actors can use sectarian means to gain personal power and advantages. A fourth and final view is institutionalist; it is thought that institutions can use means to increase or decrease sectarianism and decide what identities they want to recreate at any given moment. Of course, there are other ways to interpret this question too of how sectarianism comes about and operates, but these are some core ideas worth keeping in mind (Valbjørn and Hinnebusch, 2019, p. 7).

Sectarianism is an identity making process, as is the thought of using means of initiating thick recognition in peace processes and therefore they can be linked together. The identity making process in sectarianism is mainly using both ethnic, religious, national, or historical means to unite around as a group or community, and a key ingredient is the demonization of all others who are not part of the in-group. Sectarianization can be used to mobilise and politicise, as well as seeking

belonging and uniqueness for the group beyond just a shared socio-cultural or religious trait (Alghashian and Menshawy, 2022, p. 86).

Since sectarianism is a complex phenomenon which includes many layers and realms in its operating, we must be very careful when analysing what is happening in such contexts. To use mutually exclusive classifications, such as stating what is sectarian and what is not, is problematic since sectarianism should be seen as existing on a scale and not in black or white. If we start classifying what counts as sectarian and what doesn't, this might overlook contextual factors which are important. No case is the same, they can still be similar, but we must vary so that we do not get wrong answers in our research (Alghashian and Menshawy, 2022).

In my previous research on sectarianism, I used the instrumentalist way of understanding. This gives that since sectarianism can be used as an instrument, I could see it from a perspective of "sectarianization" instead and focus on actions and narratives used in the case to either legitimize certain actions or politically mobilise to gain certain advantages. Alghashian and Menshawy propose that research made on sectarianization should focus on exploring and analysing both rhetoric and linguistics, but not only since this can lead to a superficial analysis of the matter. It is important to analyse how the narrator positions themselves in the context and it should be analysed in a way which considers the political implications of meaning-making, how and why sectarianism is used is just as important as what words are used (Alghashian and Menshawy, 2022, p. 88, 2022, p. 89). This way of thinking about identity creation and meaning making will be used in the analysis of the case study in this thesis.

2.2.1 De-sectarianism

When speaking of sectarianism, I must also touch on de-sectarianism since there is a heavy debate in academia about both what it consists of, how it can be used and if it is even useful at all or only a means to spread western ideals in a neo-colonial way. I will not go into this debate in this thesis, but I will mention some ideas of what de-sectarianisation can look like.

The definition of de-sectarianization is difficult since there are as many ways of viewing this too as there were ways of viewing sectarianism itself, if not more. However, some strategies of de-sectarianism includes the reshaping of the thinking of differences between groups, and instead focus on shared beliefs, situations, and common history (Valbjørn, 2020, p. 15, 2020, p. 16, 2020, p. 17). This is similar to the idea of thick recognition, where enemy relations are initiated to be reformed into adversary relations instead.

Another de-sectarianisation strategy is to unite against a new and common enemy, which will shift focus from combatting each other to instead standing together against an outside threat. This can be effective, but it does not solve the question of violence since it is only being redirected towards another actor. A third strategy which do however target violence, is to create what Valbjørn calls "banal" sectarianism, where the previously radicalised sectarianism becomes de-radicalised and not as prone to using violence or harbouring strong negative

emotions between groups. The group identity is still relevant and can be strong, but the need to differentiate between in and out-groups are lessened (Valbjørn, 2020, p. 15, 2020, p. 16, 2020, p. 17).

3 Research Design and Methods

For this thesis I have decided to do a case study of Yazidi International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs). The research is exploratory, and it will describe and explain what the organisations do. The next step is to see in what ways agonism is implemented in this work. I will also give some thoughts on practices which seem to be indirectly agonistic, and what needs to be explored in more depth in order to advance theory. I use a qualitative research design consisting of a document study. I use thematic content analysis to answer the research question about the agonistic dimensions which are present in their programmatic and advocacy work. The document study consists of a pilot study and a main study.

3.1 Qualitative thematic content analysis in a document study

Qualitative content analysis in a document study is a method used to systematically explain the meaning of written data by categorizing parts of the material with the help of coding. The method is partly inductive: even though the researcher might have decided on broad themes and categories before starting, new themes and codes will be discovered during the work with the data processing (Boréus and Bergström, 2018, p. 50).

Content analysis is an unobtrusive way of researching, meaning that it does not disturb neither people nor processes. This is helpful when researching tough situations which contains sensitive topics. By doing unobtrusive research, I can stay away from accidentally re-traumatising individuals in the research process, as well as avoiding research fatigue which can occur when people are over-used in the name of research without gaining anything back from their efforts.

An unobtrusive content analysis research design can help eliminate some bias which could be present in other types of research designs such as interviews, where people tend to speak from their own thoughts or prejudice, or give answers which are not fully truthful because they want to conform to what is considered socially acceptable, or they lie or change details in their stories because they do not want to be judged by the researcher. It also avoids the Heisenberg effect, which means that people tend to change behaviour because they know that they are being observed and evaluated. Also, written data cannot be influenced by the researcher and gives better credibility to the study (Halperin and Heath, 2020, p. 374, 2020, p. 385).

A document study is also very effective since it gives the possibility to get hold on material and systematically analyse it to find evidence. A large amount of data can be analysed in a short time compared to interviews, with all the steps necessary to conduct them. To read a written source in hindsight is oftentimes more trustworthy than asking someone to recall what they remembered from an event. The written word stands, and documents are fixed meaning they don't change over time. Once written and published, the text does not change (Halperin and Heath, 2020, p. 385). This means the research done for this thesis could be easily reproduced.

Using documents gives access to places and people who we wouldn't have been able to reach otherwise (Halperin and Heath, 2020, p. 374). For this thesis, it was not possible to conduct fieldwork in the region of interest mainly because of security issues, but also due to the limited time and budget set for this study.

Agonism could, and maybe should, be analysed at many societal levels to get the full picture of the situation and how the peacebuilding efforts are going. Strömbom has presented a framework for analysis of agonistic peace, and it contains strategies to analyse both elite, mid- and grassroot levels (Strömbom, 2020). Doing such a big analysis of the situation is out of reach for me at this moment, since very much material from many different instances would be required, taking very much time. Therefore, the study has been limited to only explore agonist dimensions within a few selected INGOs work. The study will explore how the organisations present themselves, and therefore it does not result in a description of an objective truth, but rather their own account of it. The study uses agonistic peace as an ideal model, as something worth working with and towards as presented in the theory section above, and with this lens the thesis aims at exploring if there are any signs of agonism in either their mission or vision of these selected INGOs, or if their work might indirectly have consequences which can lead to agonistic peace.

There are multiple factors which can affect the quality of a document study. If a document is poorly written or vague, this can lead to errors in understanding the message which was supposed to be conveyed, or even the creation of new faulty meanings if the researcher tries to fill in the gaps without the proper knowledge of the original message. This is to be avoided, and therefore a clear set of rules and an unambiguous coding guide is of big importance. Word meanings and category definitions need to be firmly set in order to avoid mistakes when coding and analysing the material. It is also important that the researcher is objective when coding, meaning not to read in messages into the text which are not actually there (Halperin and Heath, 2020, p. 385). Also, in a qualitative analysis, the findings are reliable and valid only to the degree of which they seem plausible to others. This means that it is very important to thoroughly explain the process of how the analysis was reached, and what elements and ways of thought was used to reach the final results (Halperin and Heath, 2020, p. 385). I will thoroughly explain exactly what I have done to reach my conclusions in the section below which is called "A Detailed Description of Data Handling".

In the next section I will explain why I have chosen the case and materials used in the study.

3.2 Case Selection

I have chosen to analyse how Yazidi International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) work to initiate, create, or find agonistic peace for the Yazidi community in northern Iraq.

The reason to why I chose to research the Yazidi case is because I noticed there being a gap in research on INGO activity as well as that I have not found any other research done on agonism for this case. The Yazidi case is of big interest since it has many dimensions which are of interest to the research field of peace and conflict studies. It holds dimensions of both extremism, radicalisation, sectarianism, gender based and sexual violence in conflict. It also takes place in a context which is heavily affected by overspill from other conflicts, the tensions between the Kurds and the Central Government which operates as a consociational democratic institution. The fact that the conflict is highly asymmetric also brings a value as to why it needs to be studied. Other conflicts which were studied using agonistic peace as a framework or ideal type, were not as asymmetric as this one. The Yazidis have been presented in earlier literature as a peaceful and enclosed community which was targeted with excessive violence because they were misrecognised and lacked the right to exist according to extremists in IS. Other conflicts which have been studied before have had other contexts where both or all sides to the conflict were combatants, committing violent acts and therefore not corresponding to the same asymmetric context as the one studied in this thesis.

The three INGOs were chosen because they all have information accessible in English and a level of transparency which is in par with that of western organisations. The reasons to why I chose international NGOs over local ones were that it was very difficult to find documentation from these, and many does not have any information accessible online, or it is written in languages which I cannot command and therefore were unable to find or use in a good way.

The organisations explored in this study are:

- Yazda
- Free Yezidi Foundation
- Nadia's Initiative

3.2.1 Material selection

The material used in this study were the annual reports from the three organisations Yazda, Free Yezidi Foundation and Nadia's initiative. A total of 14 annual reports were used, and they cover the years between 2016 to 2022. The table below shows the spread of the material which was available and therefore used, as well as which reports were not available:

Organization/Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Yazda	X	X	X	X	X	X	-
Free Yezidi Foundation	-	-	X	X	X	X	X
Nadia's Initiative	-	-	-	-	X	X	X

Table 1 The table shows what reports were available and therefore used in this study. (“X” = available and used in the study, “-” = not available and not used in the study)

The reports will, from hereon in the thesis, be referred to in this manner: (Organisation, Year, Page) using the abbreviations ‘FYF’ for the Free Yezidi Foundation, and ‘NI’ for Nadia’s Initiative.

The annual reports are official documentation and contains official statements from the organisations. They consist of information about their visions and missions and gives a review of what has happened in the organisations during the previous year. The reports contain in-depth descriptions and explanations of the work that has been conducted: both the programmatic local projects carried out as well as in advocacy, and the organisations’ responses to outside events. It also states what is to come, and what goals and projects are going to be worked towards in the future, both long term as well as short term.

I have decided to use all reports available, to get as good of a coverage of the organisations’ work as possible. The material spans over 544 pages, which are fairly equally distributed over the 14 reports.

Since the annual reports are written to show results and legitimize the organisations’ work, they are written with a very convincing style which aims at gaining trust so that the organisations will continue to get the support from both old and new donors. They must be convincing and therefore it is important to note that they are written in line with both the views of the organisations themselves, but also in accordance with those who they seek to gain support from. This context has been considered when making claims in the analysis.

3.3 A Detailed Description of Data Handling

In this section I will explain how I went about using the material to analyse and reach the conclusions which will be presented in the analysis.

I used the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12 to analyse the materials, and followed a framework for thematic content analysis which was inspired by the suggestions made by Bryman (2018, p. 706) and Halperin & Heath (2020, p. 347) on the topic. The study consists of a pilot study and a main study.

First, I downloaded all reports from the organisations’ web sites and uploaded them to my NVivo project file. I then conducted a pilot study with a limited set of text by using the 2016 annual report from Yazda. The pilot study was aimed at exploring what kind of information was available in the texts, as well as to create a coding guide for the coming processing of the other 13 reports. The recording unit is themes. In the pilot study I identified 32 codes. These were later evaluated as to if they are actually important in answering to the research question or not,

and were later reduced to only 12 codes for the main study. It is a natural process to “overcode” and redact, and that is why a pilot study is important so that this can be avoided throughout the research so that irrelevant information is not given too much significance, time, or space.

When the pilot study was done, the coding scheme was used in the main study where I processed the remaining 13 annual reports. While the coding was used to identify themes rather than counting how many times something was mentioned, I also wrote memos in connection to interesting parts of the annual reports. These memos are the main ingredient in the analysis. When all documents were deep-read and coded, I took all the memos and organised them into subthemes. The analysis will be presented according to these subthemes in the analysis chapter. Below is a scheme which shows a timeline and what components was used in my research, to visualise how my analysis was created:

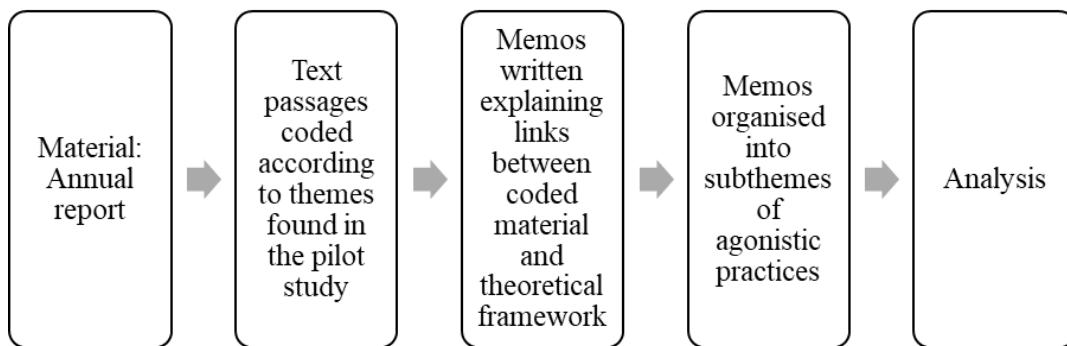


Table 2 This scheme shows the timeline and components of my research process during the main study.

The subthemes identified came from the organisation of my memos and thoughts, which came about when deep reading and processing the annual reports with coding. The coding in itself was not made to count how many times a certain word or aspect was mentioned, but it helped to link together primary themes in the text and showed to what extent they were present and recurring in the reports. Codes which were much recurrent shows that these are important aspects for the organisations. The coding also helped me see connections between themes and gave a fuller dimension of understanding when reading.

The memos came about as I used a combination of my previous knowledge from my bachelor’s and master’s studies, as well as using the analytical lens of agonism from the readings presented in the theory chapter.

To further clarify, I will give an example from the research process to show how a memo was derived from the coding work:

This was the text written in the annual report: *“FYF enables Yezidis, particularly Yezidi women, to better integrate into the economy and labour market, fostering independence while empowering women through supportive and restorative models.”* (FYF, 2022, p.19)

This passage was coded as “mission” in NVivo, and the memo I wrote adjacent to this passage reads: “The fact that they point out that this is done for

Yazidi women in particular is interesting. They have mentioned earlier, multiple times, that they also help women of other minorities. This seem to be a bigger thing and a way of work which is a norm in the organisation, so they feel they have to specify when something is done only for the Yazidis”. This memo was later organised into the subtheme of “inclusion” because it tells about how the work in the organisations are both directed specifically towards Yazidi women, but in many other places in the reports, other minorities are also included and explained to be receivers of their humanitarian work. The subtheme of inclusion relates to theory of agonism and recognition, as well as sectarianism. In this example, the inclusion of Yazidi women in society fosters an idea that they can take up space in society and make their voices heard in many different arenas, the political arena included. The inclusion of other minorities in the organisations’ work also points towards thick recognition between these groups, they recognize mutual suffering and help each other in the peacebuilding efforts. This discussion will become more clear in the analysis chapter below, where all the findings from the study will be presented.

Here below, I have presented all codes found in the pilot study as well as what codes were used in the main study. After that, there is a diagram showing the organisation of memos regarding agonistic practices, divided into direct and indirect agonism. This division will be explained in detail in the analysis chapter.

Advocacy	Agonism	Antagonism
Basic human needs	Culture perseverance	De-sectarianism
Donors	Education	Explaining events
Integration	International politics	Iraqi government
Justice	Long term marginalisation	Minorities
Mission	NGOs	Peacebuilding
Personal account	Progress	Redevelopment
Reparations	Security	Sensitive information
Survivors law	Thick recognition	Thin recognition
Vision	Wants	We-ing
Win	Yazidi genocide	

Table 3 Codes identified in the pilot study.

Thick recognition	Peacebuilding	De-sectarianism
Antagonism	Vision	We-ing
Yazidi genocide	International politics	Advocacy
Agonism	Mission	Justice

Table 4 The codes used in the main study.

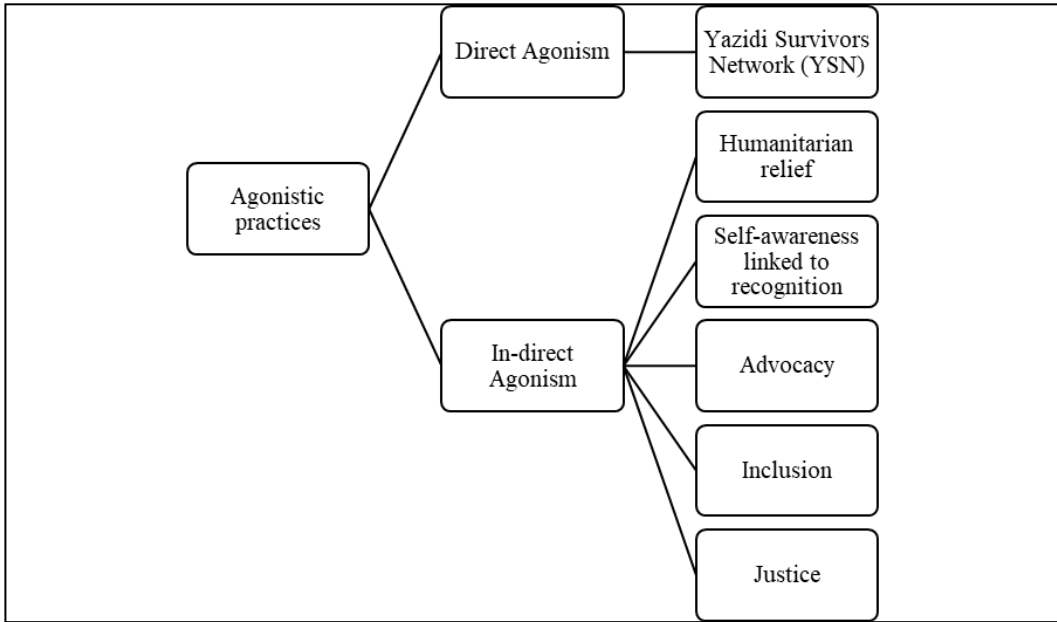


Table 5 Subthemes of agonistic practices identified from memos.

4 Previous Research on the Yazidi Community, the 2014 Genocide and Some Background Information About the Case

In this chapter, I will present a brief overview of interesting and important research which have been done on the Yazidi community. This is to give an introduction to, and some background information on both Yazidi culture, the genocide in 2014 and its aftermath, i.e. the consequences suffered by the Yazidi community to better understand the context in which the Yazidi INGOs operate.

There has been much research done on the Yazidi community in many disciplines ranging from political science, psychology and even medical sciences. This shows how the Yazidis were affected in every aspect of life, and it also gives the realization that a discipline can only explain as much as is considered to fall within its limits, even though the case surely has other important dimensions too. With this section, I want to highlight the context in which the three INGOs studied, operates today. Starting with giving an overview of Yazidi culture and its evolution during the last 20 years, I will continue to explain what the community suffered during the IS invasion and the genocide aftermath.

4.1 Explaining the Sectarian Nature of Iraq Politics, and the Stance of the Yazidi Community

The Yazidi community has mostly been present in northern parts of Iraq and North-East Syria. Iraq is a country with many different ethno-religious groups, where the majorities are the Shiite Arabs, the Sunni Arabs and the Sunni Kurds. There are also many minorities, such as the Yazidis, the Turkmen and Shabak, Christians, Jews, Sabean-Mandaeans, Kakayis and Baha'is. The mosaic of different beliefs, languages and cultural practices in Iraq have oftentimes been a difficult factor for politics, and to this day it is not fully clear how the Yazidi community thinks about their position in this arena. Due to the struggle between Arabs and Kurds taking place in the country, this has also led to divisions in the Yazidi community where some want to adhere to the Arabs and some prefer the Kurds (Ali, 2020, p. 811).

The Yazidis have very recently been recognized as a minority by the Iraq Central Government. Between the years 1921 to 2003, Iraq had a somewhat secular nature. This was changed due to wars, coups, and overall political unrest, which has cemented a sectarian and ethno-religious identity politics in the country (Ali, 2020, p. 812). The Yazidi identity has been shaped from both within and the outside during these years, and the fact that there are different views inside the community provides evidence that the groups is not exactly homogenous, but different views do exist. This has also raised the question if the group is actually ethnic or not, but the general understanding is that they are. Some argue that the Yazidi people have roots in ancient Iraq, and that they therefore should be considered a totally independent ethno-nationalist group (Ali, 2020, p. 818).

4.2 The Yazidi Genocide in 2014

The case of the Yazidi genocide has been of high interest to scholars partly because of its dimensions of gender based and sexual violence. This is not something new in conflict, but lately it has become more recognised and researched than ever before.

During the IS invasion, many Yazidis fell victim to massacres since they are not considered “people of the book”, i.e. they do not hold a status of protection or even the right to exist, in a radical jihadist meaning. The Yazidis have been accused of being “devil worshippers” and infidels since before, and it is not the first time they have been targeted with violence by other groups. When IS invaded the areas which were inhabited by Yazidis, they were either forced to convert religions or being killed. They had no right to pay the minority tax (*al-jizya*) or flee (Ali, 2022, p. 81). This was mostly what happened to the Yazidi men, who were the biggest victims of deadly violence in the massacres. For younger women however, captivation and enslavement for sexual purposes were the main experiences of the IS invasion. There are, however, many divided experiences among the Yazidi women. Old women were also killed during the massacres, while middle aged women were help captive and used as slaves for domestic purposes. Younger girls could be bought as slaves for sexual purposes, often as a gift from the IS wife to the IS man. Some of the slaves report being well treated and allowed to keep their Yazidi identity by following Yazidi cultural practices in secret, while other were beaten, tortured, and killed. Young Yazidi boys were taken captive and raised in new families, where they were indoctrinated to create an “enemy from within”. These are all stories from survivors who were interviewed in Vale’s study on liberation and freedom after the genocide (Vale, 2020). It is important to note that every experience is different, but the fact that extreme violence and enslavement is something every Yazidi has a relation to by either having endured or witnessed, this underscores the gravity of the situation. The Yazidi community remains physically and culturally fragmented, and many women struggle with the re-integration and acceptance on a community level

since they have been victims of rape and having been forced to convert. These are seen as grand taboos and bringing dishonour to both the woman and her family. The Supreme Yazidi spiritual council acknowledges the force used against the Yazidi women when it comes to the question of having been raped and forced to convert religions, but there is still a big division in the community when it comes to the question of children born from rape by the enemy, IS-born infants. This is a big obstacle when it comes to the reintegration of many Yazid women leading to big issues in mental health among both the victims and their relatives (Vale, 2020).

Černý has studied how the genocide and extreme crimes toward the Yazidi community has changed and redefined the otherwise traditional gender roles within the community. By field work in the Kurdistan region in Iraq, and semi structured interviews with IDPs, she has found that a significant change has happened. Due to the genocide, men have been unable to fulfil their traditional roles which has led to much frustration and disorientation. Women have been forced into new roles and have undergone a “forced emancipation” and taken on male obligations. Historically in the Yazidi community, men have had the duty to support the family materially as well as protect it from dangers, and now women have been forced to do so creating a “crisis of traditional masculinity”. This has led to contempt among many men increasing the risk of domestic abuse, but also strengthened many women giving them better confidence. This is however a sensitive topic, since these changes have come about because of extreme violence and targeted eradication of the Yazidi community, and Černý also point out that this might not be the case for all men and women in the community but only the few who were interviewed. It is also not sure if this is something which will last long term, or if the gender roles will move back to normal after time has passed (Černý, 2020).

4.3 The Aftermath of the Genocide and Yazidi IDPs

Ali Hassan Majid has researched the reasons to why displaced Yazidis cannot return to their homes, even now that IS is defeated and no longer active in the area. By semi-structured interviews with 25 Yazidi IDPs in three camps in Duhok, he explains the situation and gives the reasons to what impedes the return of these people: After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, much has happened geopolitically. The territory is divided between Shi’is, Sunnis and Kurds, with contested areas in Sinjar and Shekhan which host multiple minorities, there included the Yazidi community (Ali, 2022, p. 76). The survivors from the period of the IS invasion now mostly live in Kurdish controlled camps for IDPs. Sinjar, which is considered an ancestral homeland for the Yazidis, is destroyed and uninhabitable (Ali, 2022, p. 81). It is impossible to determine exactly how many people exist within the Yazidi community, and the latest data set is from 1997 which estimates around 500 000 people in Iraq. In Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi constitution, a “normalisation” of the area is inquired, but this has not been followed through and

Yazidi individuals have not been able to return to their properties following the genocide (Ali, 2022, p. 81). It is estimated that 250 000 Yazidi IDPs in the camps cannot return home due to the ongoing struggle for control in Sinjar, as well as the destroyed infrastructure and property. The area also holds several militias, and growing tension is a threat if returning home. The security vacuum, the lack of protection and the fact that the social peace between tribes of different sects is threatened, means that a safe return is hindered (Ali, 2022, p. 82). The question of return is very complex, and these are only the reasons mentioned by a few voices in the study.

Another very important aspect in the aftermath of the genocide is the widespread poor mental health among individuals in the community. In his 2018 study, where Yazidi women living in IDP camps, Ibrahim found that more than 80% of the girls and women assessed actually qualified for the diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). He also found very strong evidence that having experienced trauma, and the perception of social rejection in the community, led to depressive symptoms in almost all survivors. This is very serious, and urgent mental health care and psychosocial support is necessary for the Yazidi population (Hawkar Ibrahim *et al.*, 2018).

4.4 International Law and Justice for the Yazidis

El-Masri has studied how it would be possible to prosecute IS members for the crimes committed against the Yazidi population. The extreme nature of the sexual enslavement, massacres and other crimes should be prosecuted as much as possible but there are several factors which impedes this from happening. El-Masri's suggestion is to set up national truth commissions and courts, using courts in third party states as well as bringing cases to international courts, to bring justice to the victims. However, problems such as who will capture and deliver perpetrators to justice, and who will oversee the process and the collection of evidence, still need to be answered (El-Masri, 2018). De Vido has also studied the impunity and the lack of justice for Yazidi women specifically. Her claim is that since women can be seen as bearers of culture, women can be a main actor and a key in protecting Yazidi culture and heritage and should therefore be included in judicial processes to a much larger extent than what is normally happening in such cases. She proposes having specific women's tribunals, and going beyond formal justice where value is also seen in the fact that victim's voices are heard, and further discrimination is eliminated. Cultural heritage protection is essential for the Yazidis after the genocide, and women can and should be invited to play a big role in these processes (De Vido, 2018).

5 Analysis

During the data processing work it became evident to me that there needs to be a distinction between what is considered agonist work and work which can lead to agonism as an end result. This also goes in line with Shinko's thoughts about how agonistic peace theory should be used in research of conflicts, which were presented in her review article. It discussed the theoretical value given to agonism, and it was critical to the fact that it has been used in ways which are not in line with the original thought, as presented in the theory chapter above (Shinko, 2022). Following the new stance of Shinko, I have decided to name these different forms of agonist work as 'direct agonism' and 'indirect agonism', for the sake of keeping them apart and making the distinction easier to follow. The naming of "indirect" agonism does not have to do with the quality of the agonistic work, but that it should be seen as a step towards an agonistic practice or that the goal for a certain project is not outspokenly agonist, but it can anyways be plausible to lead to agonism as an end result. I will dive deeper into this discussion later on in this chapter.

If something is thought to lead to agonism, i.e. it has qualities which are closely connotated to agonism or is deemed as a driving factor for agonism, this will be seen as indirect agonist work. Direct agonist work, however, is such work which is evidently agonist. This is a bit difficult to judge, however, since it raises the question about if the work must be done with intent of creating agonism, or if it can be agonist without having named this intent or mentioning it at all when describing either process or outcome of the work. The analysis is at risk of becoming speculative if this distinction is not made, and therefore I will try to clearly show why some practices can be seen as agonist and some not.

In the following section, the analysis and discussion part of this thesis, I will present my findings and thoughts on both direct and indirect agonism found in the materials. In short, the material showed only one instance of direct agonism which was a specific project made by FYF. The indirect practices have to do with projects which aim at giving the aid receivers the possibility to integrate and become politically active citizens, whether this means speaking up locally or globally, and driving for change in ways that help reform the perspective of oneself and of others, such as in thick recognition.

5.1 Introducing the INGOs

In this section, I will give a brief overview of how the organisations work and what kind of programs and projects they do.

The three organisations were created as a response to the humanitarian situation facing the Yazidi population after the IS invasion and genocide in 2014. They aim at giving relief to survivors and IDPs by doing projects which aims at rebuilding a functioning society and community. The organisations all work with and for Yazidis, as well as other minorities in the area. The organisations have programmatic work such as promoting the restoration of education, healthcare, livelihood, women’s empowerment, and cultural preservation (NI, 2021). All programs are survivor centric and community driven, and the thought is to foster long-term peacebuilding in the region as well as becoming self-sufficient as a community, to not rely on foreign aid (NI, 2021). Much work is also put towards advocacy, and mostly to raise awareness about and demand recognition from third party states for the Yazidi genocide (NI, 2021). All the organisations have a holistic approach to rebuilding the Yazidi community and help IDPs and survivors to live better lives with better mental health, since this is a big issue facing the community after the very violent acts they have lived through. There are several projects targeting trauma treatment and psychosocial support, which are both given by healthcare professionals as well as survivors who have received help themselves and decided to pay it forward by participating in education on psychological first aid to help more people in their closest circles. This project is called *Harikara* (FYF, 2022).

The organisations are very clear in the intent to follow international human rights standards, and specifically women’s rights ideals (FYF, 2021, p.56).

The Free Yezidi Foundation works in Khanke, Sheikhan and Sharya located in Northern Iraq. Yazda has offices in Duhok, Sinjar, Sinuni, Baghdad and Bashiqa. Nadia’s initiative works mainly in Sinjar. All organisations are international, and some have offices in the US and Europe. The focus in this thesis is put on the work which is conducted locally in IDP camps and villages in the Yazidi ancestral homelands.

5.2 Direct Agonism

In this research, the findings show that there was only one project within one of the three organisations which was qualifying as corresponding to agonistic practice. It is called the Yazidi Survivors Network (YSN), and is a project launched by Yazda in 2019 (Yazda, 2021, p. 24). The project is presented in the annual reports under the sections of “*Transitional Justice – survivor voice: empower survivors to speak out*” (Yazda, 2021) and as “*Mobilising Yazidi Women for Peacebuilding*” (Yazda, 2018, p. 15).

The project was created as a response to the high demand for victims to speak out and share their experiences of the genocide and sexual enslavement committed by IS. The network aims at empowering survivors to speak out about their experiences, fight for justice, express their and their community's needs as well as advocate for human rights and international accountability. Another goal for the network is to advocate for an expansion in local programs which will help survivors of the Yazidi community as well as other minorities. This advocacy is directed both towards the Central Iraq Government, the Kurdish Regional Government and third-party governments as well as high profile international organisations.

But even though YSN is a respected network which has been invited to many meetings which includes political dimensions and having had many words to say when decisions have been made, there is still a lack of involvement from the outside. One such example is that the Kurdistan Region Prime Minister Masrour Barzani had started to draft a legislation to install a court against IS in Erbil in April 2021, but only two of the participants in YSN had heard only vaguely of these plans even though they have been working closely since before, and the question is of high value to the network. This shows that even though the network, with its competencies and expertise, exists, they have still not been consulted in this process which is very concerning (Yazda, 2021, p. 25). YSN reached out to the KRI authorities shortly after this was revealed, and initiated several meetings to discuss such a process. In these meetings, both the Yazda leadership, YSN participants and UNITAD representatives were present. The process was going forward but was abruptly halted by the Central Government of Iraq because of the lack of recognition of KRG as a legitimate legislative power. This reminds us that these processes and steps toward justice, recognition and agonism does not take place in a vacuum, but there are many factors interfering or contributing to these processes such as political powerplay. There are disagreements present, and antagonistic relations between for example the Kurds, Turks and Arabs which become very present when entering political processes. There are clear spill-over effects from nearby conflicts which affect the Yazidi population, and also the agonistic peacebuilding process. One such example is the Turkish airstrikes against PKK in Sinjar, and the bombing of Kurdish controlled IDP camps where Yazidi IDPs live. Another such example is the difficulty to deviate which politics or entity the Yazidi community adheres to, regarding both the internal division in the Yazidi community as mentioned in the previous research section, as well as outside factors. One issue which is presented in the 2020 Yazda annual report is that the Central Government of Iraq wants to close the IDP camps in the northern regions, but the KRG are willing to keeping the camps open to avoid a second displacement for the already displaced IDPs. This puts the Yazidi community in the middle of things, and as Turkish airstrikes have intensified in Dohuk and Sinjar, this has led to many civilian deaths, uncertainty and fear amongst the Yazidi population (Yazda, 2020, 12).

In the Yazda annual reports, the YSN network is mentioned throughout and there are many photographs showing representatives in different settings such as high-profile meetings, pictures of YSN representatives giving speeches as well as

photos from workshops. When reading the reports, I get the impression that the YSN is very active in many different political rooms and with many different authorities, which implies that they are seen and recognised widely. Connecting this to theory of agonistic peace, it is evident that there has been a big development where Yazidi women are now welcome in both local and global politics, and that they have, by the help of Yazda, managed to create spaces where peacebuilding, justice and the future can be discussed in the ideational realm rather than using violence, which is mentioned in agonistic theory. It is also evident that the YSN representatives have been recognised both in the thin and thick manner, they are seen as individuals with rights, and their suffering is also discussed and taken into account when trying to bring justice to the Yazidi population. This thick recognition is both directed towards the representatives present in the political settings, but also the wider Yazidi population as well as other minorities.

This finding was the clearest example that was retrieved from the annual reports, which relates to the theories of agonistic peace and thick recognition. Maybe, this was the project which stood out since it actually resembles what a successful agonistic peace could look like, where there is room to air different views, where both the YSN representatives and extending to the wider community are recognised ‘thickly’, and where dialogue with former enemies can be held without escalating violence. Here I specifically intend the dialogue between the YSN and the Central Government of Iraq, since they have been pointed out in multiple places in the reports as having perpetuated long term marginalisation against the Yazidi population for a long time, which left them extra vulnerable when facing the IS invasion in 2014 (NI, 2021, p. 8).

The fact that these root causes of suffering of the Yazidi community is discussed openly also points toward an agonistic development in the country. The Central Government of Iraq has even launched a new law called the Yazidi Survivors Law in order to pay reparations to the survivors of the IS violence. This is presented in the annual reports as both something the INGOs have been at the forefront of pushing to make happen, but also something which is done by the government to ease relations and admit to previous wrongdoings. Having such a response shows taking responsibility and acting in a way which leads to more positive relations between the Yazidi community and the country leadership, instead of answering with violence or further marginalisation as a response to these claims and narratives about the long term marginalisation.

When studying agonistic peace in this case, questions about who was to be recognised and who was to be worked with as an adversary rather than an enemy was raised. Since IS is not a legitimate entity, neither in international politics nor in how their way of life is perceived by the broader international community, this raises concern of how reframing the enemy image between Yazidis and IS could even be possible. This relation seems to be highly unlikely to ever change since it is rooted in religious extremism and there is no space for dialogue to reframe this fact. Shinko claimed in her article that agonistic peace is an excellent tool for conflicts with genocidal dimensions (Shinko, 2008, p. 490) but in this very case it seems unlikely. Since IS does not recognise or respect democratic principles in

any form, they are not a suitable candidate to be involved in an agonistic peace process as a group. Maybe, on a grass-roots level, some individuals from IS could change their world view and hence become suitable to learn about democratic principles, but this would fall within theory of de-radicalization rather than agonistic peace, reframing of enemy images or thick recognition. Another problem I faced when thinking about the possible Yazidi and IS relation is that IS is not present in such a way that the organisation could meet leader to leader, or member to member. Many of the former IS fighters are incarcerated in Kurdish controlled prisons and camps, and the ones who are not are either dead or live life as normal in “sleeper cells” as described by Ali (2022). The way the organisations write “the “so-called” Islamic-State (IS)” in their reports when mentioning IS, shows the total lack of recognition, in a stylistic way.

With these problems and facts in mind, in this thesis the focus is rather put on the relations between the Yazidi community, the Iraq Central Government, the Kurdish Regional Government and other international organisations and governments since they are easier to understand and find information about.

There was at least one major finding from the materials which shows that there exists something which could classify as being within theory of agonistic peace and thick recognition. Even though this recognition was not made between the Yazidi population and IS, it is still valuable information. There were also many signs that even though the remaining projects were not outspokenly agonist, they can still serve as stepping stones, contributing to pieces of improvements towards an agonistic peace. These findings are presented in the next section and falls under what I categorized as ‘indirect’ agonistic practices.

5.3 Indirect Agonism

When reading the annual reports, I find that the organisations do not mention agonism or recognition directly. However, since I am reading the reports with an agonistic lens, I find that many of the programmatic points will work in favour of agonism, rather than antagonism. It seems evident that peacebuilding should be described as something positive and that reconciliation, less violence and less hateful relations is a goal in all peacebuilding efforts. Since these values are also part of agonistic peace, I want to emphasise the perspective that agonistic peace can be a goal without being outspoken, and that if we view agonism as a theoretic explanation rather than an actual practice, many components can be viewed as such.

The intentions of the INGOs peacebuilding efforts and work are to strengthen the Yazidi community in different ways. While survival, economy, livelihood, and psychological care are big factors, advocacy and learning to take place is also a factor which could count as agonism. As one of my main findings when it comes to these indirect agonistic practices, I want to highlight the in-group changes which have occurred due to the work of these INGOs.

5.3.1 Self-awareness and Recognition

Can changes in in-group self-awareness lead to society change in an agonistic manner? As Strömbom pointed out, thick recognition needs a dimension of self-critique and self-growth for it to actually be able to be established after initiation. The process of recognising one-self should be parallel with the process of recognising others. This was mainly the case when it comes to understanding that oneself can be able to commit bad deeds. The thought is that this change in self-awareness could lead to the possibility to take responsibility for the suffering of the other, leading to that the relation can become more positive and understanding instead of only filled with hatred and further mis-recognition. When it comes to the Yazidi case, this part of theory does not fit very well since the conflict was highly asymmetrical with one main perpetrator, IS, and one main victim, the Yazidi community. It still needs to be acknowledged that there were smaller branches from the Yazidi community which joined both Kurdish and Arab militias to fight against IS during the invasion, but these branches were very small and therefore I feel confident to claim, as many others have done, that this is a highly asymmetrical situation (Ali, 2022). Therefore, in this analysis, I want to present findings which suggest that self-awareness as having agency can also be a crucial aspect in thick recognition and agonism, namely, to discover oneself as a worthy opponent and therefore starting to take up space in the political setting, should be seen as the in-group change which is necessary in such an asymmetrical context. With this realization, that one can be a victim, but still hold agency, is crucial so that the group will be included, or make themselves included in the political settings post-conflict. This line of thought came as a reaction to the seemingly harsh statement that all parties must accept and take responsibility for their wrongdoings, but since the only wrongdoing in this case as seen by the perpetrator is that the Yazidis are barely existing, this does not seem just.

There is much evidence that these efforts to self-awareness and taking agency over the situation, is pushed by all three organisations in their work, both in their programmatic projects as well as in their local and global advocacy. The organisations work as to lay a foundation which Yazidi individuals can build from to become active participants in society. The organisations also help intermediating local voices so that they reach global levels and can act to influence politicians and international organisations. Since the organisations are mainly built by Yazidi women, and the hired professionals are also part of the Yazidi community, and the receivers of the humanitarian help as well as programmatic work to better livelihoods are also Yazidi individuals, the organisations are really built by the Yazidi, for the Yazidi, and can be thought to represent the whole community.

In the political settings, the organisations work as intermediaries; they are recognised in the international community as well as respected by the local governments. They use this position to help raise the voices of individual survivors, so they can be heard on all levels in society. This would maybe not be possible in such a large scale if the organisations did not exist, and therefore I argue that one core function, which connects to theory of agonism and thick

recognition, is that these organisations are crucial to help Yazidi individuals become active parts in these political settings. Without this respected and recognized intermediary, the voices of individual survivors might not weigh as heavy, and risk not being taken into consideration in the political work in the aftermath of the genocide. Yazda describes themselves as having served as “*a galactic centre for guiding humanitarian projects with regards to the Yazidis in both Sinjar and the IDP camps*” (Yazda, 2020, p. 2). This shows that Yazda is considered a main actor in the context.

FYF writes in their 2018 annual report that their work “*helps the women to believe in themselves*” (FYF, 2018, p. 14). These INGOs give places for women to grow and regain strengths as persons with rights, and help individuals go from being illiterate to undertake education to learn how to read, write, start businesses and even learning how to call an emergency number. All this helps to create strong individuals who are ready to become active participants in society.

It is also evident that all organisations put much focus in the needs of every individual, one example from the annual reports read “*Through this information, Yazda hopes to better understand the physical and emotional needs of each victim*” (Yazda, 2017, p. 21-22). This focus on individuals is a crucial factor when it comes to help the people gain access to political settings, on their own terms. This also leads me on to the next part of the analysis of agonistic stepping stones, the question of inclusion which will be discussed in the next section.

5.3.2 Inclusion

All the organisations work with inclusion in many ways, both in-community inclusion but also when working together with other minorities in the Iraq society, who have also been affected by both long-term marginalisation as well as the crimes committed by IS during the invasion.

The inclusion of outside minorities is clearly stated in many places in the annual reports, and mentioned both in general when describing visions, and in some specific projects conducted in collaboration with other minorities. One such project was done by Yazda, where they helped to rebuild and restore a catholic church. The Catholic Christians in Iraq were also targeted by IS, and by collaboration between the minorities this shows that they support each other as well as recognise the suffering, which was mutual, and committed by an outside enemy. This restoration project also shows that the thought to include other minorities in their work is not only words without action, but this is a clear example of coming together to help each other out between groups (Yazda, 2017, p. 37). Other minorities are mentioned many times throughout the annual reports to explain that their efforts are directed not only to Yazidis, but other groups as well. Some examples from the texts are “*Yazidi and other minority groups*”, “*Yazidis and other vulnerable groups in Iraq and Syria*”, and other similar phrasings (Yazda, 2020, p. 1).

Another project aimed at meeting over culture lines is the “*Sugar is Sweet*” café project which was launched by the Free Yezid Foundation to give both

training and work opportunities to Yazidi women, as well as creating a place where people from different cultures can meet over coffee and cakes, without judgement or discrimination. For a long time, Yazidis have been seen as dirty by Arabs and Muslims in the area, and many would refuse eating anything cooked by a Yazidi. With this project, this misconception is challenged giving both a boost in self-confidence for the women working in the café, as well as contributing to changing this narrative about Yazidis amongst outsiders (FYF, 2021, p. 37).

In-community inclusion is also a big topic in the annual reports. These questions are mostly discussed when it comes to that they serve to help every individual of the Yazidi community which are in need of help. FYF mentions many times that their efforts are directed towards the most vulnerable individuals in the community. They also clearly state that they have no issues working with women who have had children being born from rape. This is a very complex issue within the community, since a person can only become Yazidi by birth from Yazidi parents. Conversion is not allowed, and marriage between a Yazidi person and a person from any other culture is traditionally frowned upon and even leading to exclusion. Also, since rape in itself is a very taboo topic in this community which has many quite traditional values, the question becomes even more complex to deal with. FYF claim to follow international standards and has an intersectional feminist agenda (FYF, 2021, p.56).

There are several personal accounts in the FYF annual reports, which tell the stories of some of the individuals who have received help and taken part in programmatic activities. One such personal account is made by Mayan who is a 38-year-old Yazidi woman from Sinjar (her name was changed for integrity purposes) which tells that since she was born with a disability that made her limp, she has been an outcast in the community since birth. She was married off at 14 years old and lived in poor conditions with her husband's family. When IS came to Sinjar, Mayan fled to the mountains and later came to the Syrian border. Today she lives in an IDP camp in Duhok with her children, but she suffers from poor mental health and have made suicide attempts as many other of the Yazidi IDPs. She has taken part of the mental health aid set up by FYF in her camp, and today she feels a bit better and is no longer suicidal. Mayan, who has been excluded in many ways in society prior, is very thankful and impressed with the work done by FYF (FYF, 2020, p. 29-30).

Nadia's Initiative have described their main focus as teaching women to become active in society by teaching them about their rights, by giving education and work, and skills so that they can advocate for themselves in the future. They also have a project where women can get help to fill out their applications to receive reparations from the Iraq Central government after the Yazidi survivors' law was passed. In this work, inclusion and outreach is an important aspect so that everyone who has the right to reparations is actually reached and made aware of these rights.

The fact that there is work done towards in-community inclusion is important, so that everyone has the chance to become involved and gain personal experiences and education. This community change, from within, should be highly valued as a stepping stone towards agonism. If everyone is onboard, and individuals are

taught that they have rights and agency, this can help the whole community in standing up to oppression and using their forces together. This is something which is important, not least to matters concerning justice, which will be discussed in the next section.

5.3.3 Justice

The organisations write much about justice and accountability, recognition of their suffering and human rights in the annual reports. By putting pressure on local as well as third party governments and organisations, they work to raise their agenda in many instances and ways. Justice is of big focus in all of the organisations, and they all present different but holistic views of what is included in this notion throughout their annual reports, such as legal, social and transitional dimensions. But is there a link between justice work and agonism?

In the data processing, I have coded text passages under the node of “justice” when legal matters such as reparations, rehabilitation, repatriation, have been discussed. Maybe, justice in the political arena is being able to stand up for beliefs and having the possibility to being part of making political decisions. Maybe this is agonistic peace at its end result in such an asymmetrical context: to finally be able to participate in politics, i.e. participating in the conflict on equal terms, to address root causes and work towards justice? I do not have the answer to these questions, but since a large portion of the material speaks about justice, it would be negligent to leave this out when presenting my findings.

Another aspect which should be considered is that justice can also contribute to security and safety. For the Yazidi community, it would likely be a better situation if all IS members were prosecuted and put in jail, rather than having IS as a political opponent. This ties back to the claims made in the theory section that agonistic practices and agonistic peace only works if all parties involved, agree on and respect democratic principles. If democratic principles are imposed without true consent and true belief and true respect, the process is doomed to fail and for new violence to erupt. If IS was to be such a party to such a process, this would mean immense insecurity for the Yazidi and, what I believe according to the theory, an inevitable backlash because of IS’ stance to not respect any democratic principles.

5.3.4 Humanitarian Relief as a Foundation for Further Possibilities to Agonistic Practices

Much of the work done by the three INGOs categorize as humanitarian relief and aid work. This is something that was very present in all organisations upon their creation, as a first and foremost focus. As time has passed, humanitarian relief is

still an important part of the organisations' cores, but other programmatic points have been added too. This finding goes in line with the thought that humanitarian relief is the first and necessary step to take to even have the possibility to work further with practices aimed at re-integrating individuals in society, advocating for rights, giving loans and education to start businesses and so on. Without prior humanitarian relief, in a context where the suffering is so extreme and so immense, other projects would not be as successful.

From the beginning, the local work was much focused on survival and emergency response. Even though advocacy was a part of the organisations work from the beginning, this advocacy was mostly directed towards the international community, and it was first after a few years that the advocacy work was directed towards local actors as well.

Examples of what the humanitarian relief work consists of are emergency response such as the distribution of textiles which can be used for setting up tents and housing within the IDP camps, distribution of food, healthcare materials and clothes. It also consists of professional healthcare and trauma response as in urgent mental health care for survivors.

Even in the latest reports, I find evidence that humanitarian aid is still very much present and necessary. Especially since the camps were touched by the Covid-19 pandemic, haltering almost all work by international organisations directed towards the IDPs who lived there. It was only a few local organisations which decided to continue with their projects, but with some restraints given the circumstances and health hazards present in the camp. This is presented as a backlash in all organisations, where before they had started to see some improvement and less need for humanitarian aid among the Yazidi communities so that other programmatic work could be done, now there is a bigger need for such again leading to discontent and sadness conveyed in the reports. In the opening notions of the 2022 annual report from FYF, this discontent is displayed, and they claim that there has been no success for the Yazidi community during the year, and that there is still very much suffering which needs to be alleviated (FYF, 2022). In 2020, FYF described how their mission has changed regarding the programmatic work, and that they have had to become more focused on sustainability and development. This change was not made because there was less need for humanitarian aid, but because the help in emergency response from foreign actors was heavily diminished. The organisation now puts a bigger focus on how the Yazidi community can become self sufficient and not dependent on foreign aid, as this can be taken away very quickly leading to more suffering again (FYF,2020,2). This change is evident, as many projects regarding business education was launched and the personnel helped individuals to start businesses which was necessary for the community to be able to access basic services and help with economic growth inside the community.

5.3.5 Advocacy

Advocacy work is the last subtheme identified in my study. This type of work is very present in all organisations' reports, and is of very high importance.

The advocacy work is directed towards many different societal levels, and has been enlarged more and more as time has passed and the organisations have evolved, as described in the section above.

One key finding is the fact that there is a big focus put on survivor centric work, and the fact that letting victims' voices be heard and given opportunities to take part in politics at both local and global levels are very important as an agonistic stepping stone. This focus is described by Yazda in their 2018 report:

“Yazda’s advocacy project has [...] helped the Yazidi community speak up about their problems on the national level with both the central government in Baghdad and the KRG in Erbil. Yazda has provided the two governments with various information on the state of the Yazidis and other vulnerable communities in Iraq and Syria. Yazda is the first organization to support survivors and make their voices heard with the community and on the national and international levels.” (Yazda, 2018, p. 12).

The advocacy work is done both to help gain attention to the situation facing the Yazidi community after the genocide, to help attract donations and foreign aid. It has also been done to put the Yazidi community's situation on the agenda in both international organisations such as different UN-led initiatives. The question about recognition of the 2014 genocide has also been an eminent focus for all organisations. This advocacy work has been very successful, and the genocide has been formally recognised by several countries as well as by the United Nations in the UNITAD mandate for the Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD, 2023).

The advocacy work is agonist in a sense that it is done to both show political actors that these problems exist and need to be addressed in politics, but the organisations also create platforms for individuals to be heard in different political settings. The organisations also create spaces where they are the ones to invite outside politicians from the local governments to their own political spaces. This shows that they are very willing to be active participants in politics, and know their rights of doing such.

The advocacy work in some way ties together the picture of what the organisations stand for and what they want to achieve: survivors voices to be heard, justice to be administered for the Yazidi community and other minorities who have suffered from the IS invasion, and the inclusion and possibility for Yazidi individuals to participate in all levels of political avenues in the local and international community.

6 Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Following these findings, it is clear that the answer to the research question *To what extent are agonistic peace-building practices present in the work of Yazidi INGOs working in the asymmetric sectarian post conflict area in northern Iraq?* is as follows:

There is only one project which clearly operates in an agonistic manner, namely the Yazidi Survivors Network, YSN, which is run by Yazda. There are also several stepping stones towards agonism which are identified in the findings; the humanitarian aid as a base for all other advancements, the inclusion of all parts within the community as well as finding strength together with other minorities, the fight for justice leading to the sense of being worthy of recognition, and finally the use of advocacy as a tool to drive for change by giving a possibility for survivors' voices to be heard, to gain local and global traction to the situation facing the Yazidi community.

This thesis also brings suggestions to theory advancements such as the importance of self-awareness and the self-recognition as a political entity with agency which is necessary to reach agonistic peace, as well as the suggestion to divide agonistic practices into two categories of 'direct' and 'indirect' practices.

There is a clear tendency within all three organisations, where the focus has shifted from working mostly with humanitarian relief, survival of the community and catastrophe response, to sustainable development as to not have to rely on outside or foreign aid. Advocacy work has taken a bigger place in all organisations, following this development, and this has led to Yazidi individuals and the community as a whole to be able to take more space in politics, especially to fight for justice and getting recognition for the atrocities they have been put through.

In this thesis, agonism has been viewed as a solution to conflict and suffering. Even though there are findings which suggests that agonistic peace might be present already, since the organisations are included in political processes and recognised both for their legal rights and their suffering, the Yazidi community still faces very many challenges. Reaching agonistic peace is not something which happens over night, but it is a complex and multi-faceted process which takes time and effort from all sides to the conflict. Therefore, the focus on agonistic practices as stepping-stones can help shed light on what has improved and what factors still need to be worked on to help reach wellbeing for a society in a post conflict setting. The Yazidi community, although some agonistic practices have been worked with by the INGOs, still suffer much since a large number of individuals are still displaced in IDP camps, where many hardships in daily life are present.

The findings that humanitarian relief is a necessary foundation before launching agonistic practices comes with further questions. When is the ripe

moment to start focusing on agonism and politics, since the biggest question this far has been day to day survival and alleviating suffering which occurs here and now? Must there be an institutionalisation before this can happen? Or will such institutions grow naturally from an agonistic dialogue? Are agonistic practices a natural step taken when suffering is diminished even by a little bit, and focus can be put more towards the future instead of the imminent threats to survival? It also raises questions about how agonistic practices are initiated. Since the whole reasoning behind agonism being critical towards imposing of western ideals and practices on weaker post-conflict societies, there is a fine balance when researching such practices. All three INGOs have international structures with both local and internationally placed offices. They explicitly state that they follow western standards when it comes to human rights and women's rights, and it is no secret that they want to create wellbeing for the community by economic growth among other things. It is difficult to claim that the INGOs' work is imposing these ideals on the community, since they are created and run by Yazidi individuals for the Yazidi community. The discussion behind this reasoning of neo-colonialism might be a little dichotomized, and maybe in this case, taking inspiration from the western ideals is not the same as strictly imposing them, but actually choosing to implement what seems to fit the community in its own context. This is only a speculation, and these questions should absolutely be addressed in future research, comparing cases which are similar to this one.

The study also touches on questions regarding the theoretical connection between justice and agonism. In my findings I have not been able to explain this connection and cannot make claims as to how these work together without speculating. With further research on the topic, looking deeper into agonism and justice, and using other types of data, this interesting nexus could be explored.

This thesis also provides one possible answer to the question Shinko raises about agonism and agonist practices in her article "*A critical (re)reading of the analytical significance of agonistic peace*", relating to the discussion on if agonism should only be considered as a theory which we use to understand work done in peacebuilding, or if agonism could be an actual real world goal for peace organisations, even if their work is not outspokenly agonist (Shinko, 2022, p. 1406). From my findings, and the theoretical advancements suggested in this thesis, a possible answer is that the practices identified in this case study, which are not outspokenly agonist, can still be seen as stepping stones towards agonism because of their properties as discussed in the analysis chapter and that these practices are 'indirectly' agonistic. The question still stands if agonism is only something we as researchers read into peacebuilding efforts, or if this might be something which will be officially recognised as a strategy by those who work with and are engaged in such processes. Maybe time will tell, and this is something which will be of big interest to look further into, in the future.

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