Justice, Memory, and Healing: A Qualitative Study on Psychosocial Support for Families of Christian and Muslim Mass Grave Victims in Sorya, Duhok Governorate, Iraqi Kurdistan

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Abstract

Background and objectives: Iraq is covered with multiple mass graves, families of Christian and Muslim victims experience the compound grief, displacement, and socioeconomic distress due to the exhumation processes, but there is minimal evidence regarding the connection of forensic/legal processes and culturally based psychosocial care. This paper examined the aspects of loss and grief, commemoration and memory, justice and accountability, psychosocial support needs, and healing pathways within the affected families.

Methods: Using Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology, we conducted semistructured interviews with purposively sampled relatives of massgrave victims (n=10; 7 men, 3 women; 37–66 years) in July–August 2025. Interviews (70–90 minutes) were recorded, transcribed, translated, and thematically analyzed following Van Manen's six activities, and relevant themes and subthemes were extracted.

Results: Five main themes emerged: (1) Experiences of loss and grief; (2) Memory and commemoration; (3) Justice and accountability; (4) Psychosocial support needs; and (5) Pathways to healing and resilience.

Conclusion: Forensic truth-seeking and cultural attuned psychosocial care and pragmatic accompaniment should be applied to survivor-focused responses that combine interfaith and culturally sensitive approaches with forensic truth-seeking and trauma-informed justice. Memorialization that is inclusive, spiritually encompassing, and uses interventions that are intertwined can reinforce resilience, reinstate dignity and cohesion in post-atrocity environments.

Keywords: Iraqi Kurdistan; Sorya mass graves; bereavement; psychosocial support; transitional justice; forensic identification

Introduction

There are many mass graves in Iraq, one of them at Sorya village in Duhok Governorate, where Christian and Muslim victims were buried, and recent forensic exhumations have documented the extent of loss, and the difficulties that family

members have in identification and repatriation (Amin & Othman, 2020). Family members struggle with trauma, grief, and long-term grief overlaid with displacement and socioeconomic stress; in conflict-affected populations, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorders are significantly higher than the average in the entire world (Charlson et al., 2019; Silove et al., 2017). Yet bereavement trajectories and coping are shaped by personal resources, family dynamics, and faith practices that confer meaning and resilience.

Individual and family histories such as stories, photographs, and testimonies are memory anchors and testifying vehicles, whereas community rituals, religious celebrations and memorials place personal loss in communal histories (Hirschberger, 2018). The design of such practices can facilitate social cohesion and reconciliation during inclusive, supportive of truth-seeking and acknowledgment processes (Cilliers, Dube, and Siddiqi, 2016). Meanwhile, families always demand acknowledgment and justice in the face of investigation, trial, and official recognition, which the sphere of transitional justice calls to take center stage in response to the lost and the slain (Robins, 2011).

The evidence-based mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) models promote layered care in which counseling, peer and family support, and community-based interventions with preference to local cultures and religions are integrated (Tol et al., 2011). Religious coping and spiritual rituals in the pluralistic Iraqi Kurdish religious landscape are the main avenues of healing in Christian and Muslim families (Koenig, 2012). This study is necessary to be conducted due to the absence of context-specific evidence to correlate forensic, legal, and psychosocial processes in Duhok Governorate despite the constant exhumations (Amin & Othman, 2020). In this regard, the current qualitative study explores experiences of loss and grief, memory and commemoration, justice and accountability, psychosocial support needs, and pathways to healing and resilience among families of Christian and Muslim victims identified in mass graves in Sorya.

Methods

Study Design

The current qualitative study used Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Van Manen, 1990). This methodological choice allowed obtaining the deep-rooted knowledge of the experience of the families of the victims of the mass graves found in Sorya, Duhok Governorate, Iraqi Kurdistan, and to hear the personal stories connected with the idea of memory, grief, and psychological state.

Participants

Purposive sampling was employed in the current study to select 10 family members of victims of the mass graves in Sorya of the Duhok Governorate, Kurdistan Region-Iraq (7 men and 3 women). The relatives of mass grave victims in Sorya, willing to participate in the study, and the first-hand experience were taken as the inclusion criteria. Those family members that refused to participate in the study were shut out. The participants were aged 37-66 years.

Data Collection

The data was collected via semi structured interviews that were conducted between July and August 2025. The interviews were conducted either at the interviewees' homes or in other places which they considered secure and comfortable. Data collection continued till thematic saturation was achieved, where no more themes were identified as a result of further interview. The following questions were part of the questions asked during the interviews:

- Can you tell me about your loved one who was found in the mass grave?
- How has losing your loved one in this way affected you and your family?
- What does it mean to you to have your loved one's remains identified?
- Are there memorials, ceremonies, or traditions that feel meaningful to you?

- When you think about justice for what happened, what comes to mind?
- How do you feel about the efforts made to investigate and document these crimes?
- What do you hope authorities, courts, or international organizations will do in the future?
- Have you or your family received any form of support – emotional, social, or spiritual – since the killings?
- How have Christian and Muslim families come together – or been separated – during this process?
- Is there anything I haven't asked that you feel is important to tell me?

Time limit on all interviews was seventy to ninety minutes, and they were all recorded, with the consent of the participants. The tapes were then transcribed verbatim and translated into English to be analyzed.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Van Manen (1990) six methodological actions. Being a forensic, genocide, and Anfal researcher and as a part of the related community, the major researcher initiated the initial exercise by redirecting the focus on the nature of lived experience and basing the investigation on intimate acquaintance. The second step was to investigate the experience since the relatives and family members had lived through it. The next exercise identified the major subjects in terms of phenomenological thematic analysis. The fourth assignment was to describe the phenomenon in paper and revise it with voices of the participants. The fifth activity, where the topic in question was the proper description of the event, was rated on the high level of the issue of internal consistency due to the fact that each of the themes was substantiated by the experience of the participants. Stabilization was the last aspect that involved matching the parts and whole that were observed through alternating between the coded transcripts and the holistic themes (Van Manen, 1990).

Trustworthiness

Credibility of the results was offered through long-term engagement of the respondents, the member-checking technique and debriefing with professional peers. Close data collection was also feasible and easy since the participants had a friendly relationship with the researchers. The fact that the researcher is quite experienced in the fields of forensics, genocide, and Anfal studies contributed to the credibility and background of the study. The descriptions given by the participants were translated precisely once the transcripts were weighed several times.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by Hawler Medical University College of Nursing Ethics Committee (Project No. XX; Approval Date: DD MM YYYY). The participants were made aware of the study purpose, the confidentiality measures to be adhered to and their rights, especially their right to withdraw at any given time. All respondents signed a voluntary statement form and informed consent form. To ensure the safety of all the digital or physical data involved, the respondents were provided with a code (P1, P2, etc.) to secure their anonymity.

Results

When mass graves were discovered, Sorya, Duhok Governorate families provided the most personal description of loss, faith and endurance. Their considerations go through sorrow and recollection, the quest to get justice and the reinforcement they require to continue. The voices below, based on Christian and Muslim households, emphasize what is beneficial and what is detrimental, what is absent and what can be done. These quotes, put together, form a path of remembrance that leads to responsibility and how healing develops, gradually, through society and nurture. They also indicate practical means in which psychosocial support may honor culture, religion, and lived realities.

Main Theme 1. Experiences of Loss and Grief

Families explained grief as a sudden break and a long shadow which comes back in cycles with the anniversaries and the usual sounds. The loss not only affected the body but also the mind and the spirit and reorganized everyday life.

"The day we got the new, it was as if the air was knocked out of the house. Even now, laughter feels like a guest who is afraid to stay." – P3

"Grief sits with me at breakfast and follows me to sleep. Some days it is heavy, and some days it is just a whisper that still hurts." – P8

Subtheme 1.1. Emotional and Psychological Impact

Participants described shock that lingered as nightmares, sudden fear, and numbness that slowly thawed. The emotional landscape shifted over time but rarely felt "finished."

"When they told me, my hands trembled so hard that I spilled the tea. At night, I woke to the sound of doors in my head, and then I remembered why." – P9

"Years later I still startle at trucks on the road because they sound like the engines from that time. The sorrow does not end; it changes shape." – P2

Subtheme 1.2. Coping Mechanisms

Coping was practical and spiritual: small routines, shared chores, and prayer circles that held people together. Families learned to pace their exposure to painful memories.

"I clear a small corner for prayer and breathe until my shoulders drop. After that, I call my sister, and we talk about ordinary things to anchor the day." – P6

"We agreed not to watch videos that reopen the wound before bedtime. Reading verses from the Bible together steadies the house." – P1

Main Theme 2. Memory and Commemoration

The need to memorize was a requirement and a consolation, maintaining that which one loved in the everyday environment. Rituals and storytelling made the past to be kept with dignity and not with silence.

"We keep a framed photo on the shelf and tell guests his story, so he is not reduced to a rumor. Memory is our way of saying he lived a full life before his last day." – P4

"We light candles in church and read prayers in the cemetery on the anniversary. It is lighter when people remember together." – P10

Subtheme 2.1. Personal and Family Narratives

Families edited narratives that put into the limelight character, talents and gentleness and not just the way of death. Witness accounts were recorded and replayed to teach children where they come from.

"I tell my son about his grandfather's kindness and the way he fixed radios for everyone. He should inherit more than fear; he should inherit his laughter." – P7

"My uncle described the last time he saw them, and we recorded his words on a phone. When the children ask, we play it, and his voice fills the room." – P5

Subtheme 2.2. Collective Memory and Cultural Practices

The memory of the people established unity among the religions and transformed the personal sorrow to the collective welfare. Religions were adjacent to each other and provided a common language of reverence.

"At the memorial, the priest and the imam prayed one after the other, and we stood as one line. For a moment, the wound felt carried by many hands." – P4

"We place names on a stone and bring food to share under the trees. The ritual does not fix the past, but it teaches us how to carry it." – P2

Main Theme 3. Justice and Accountability

Along with remembrance, the participants reported justice as truth, recognition and repair. They wanted open, dignified and punctual procedures.

"I do not want revenge; I want the verisimilitude to

be documented and instructed. May our children learn what was and that it was wrong." – P1

"Justice is justice means that the administration opens the file, arrives at the correct investigation and claims that our beloved ones were important. The marked grave is a big thing, and the signed paper is a big thing." – P7

Subtheme 3.1. Desire for Legal Recognition

Families demanded exhumations, identification and official recognition of crimes. Legal steps were seen as part of mourning, not separate from it.

"We require DNA testing, a death certificate which speaks the truth, a place to bury them with their names. It is only upon this basis that we can pray with a sorrow and certainty." – P3

"Go to court and allow witnesses to testify without intimidation. Accountability should not be time-bound even though years have elapsed." – P10

Subtheme 3.2. Perceptions of Injustice or Impunity

The injury was aggravated by repeated delays and silence of the institutions. Individuals sensed inequity in regard and in resources, which contributed to mistrust.

"Another time and again we turned in papers and had no reply. Our sorrow seemed to be waiting in a long queue that did not move." – P6

"They lay tarmac and trim ribbons, and the graves are still unmarked. That is what impunity is in our front yard." – P4

Main Theme 4. Psychosocial Support Needs

The participants focused on support that respects culture and religion, as well as individual speed. As important as clinical care was listening, presence and practical help.

"A counselor who knows our customs doesn't rush me past the tears. She lets the pauses speak, and that is when I finally find words." – P8

"Support that includes the church, the mosque, and the clinic makes me feel whole. I am not just a case file; I am part of a community." – P5

Subtheme 4.1. Emotional and Mental Health Support

People asked for accessible counseling, peer groups, and approaches that recognize trauma. Privacy, continuity, and trust were repeatedly named.

"In the group sessions, I learned that nightmares and guilt are common after trauma. Knowing I am not alone quieted the noise in my head." – P3

"The psychologist instructed me on grounding exercises that I can perform at the time of prayer. It was both deferential and convenient to the same degree." – P9

Subtheme 4.2. Social and Community-Based Support

NGOs, interfaith, and networks of neighbors alleviated pressures through companionship and resources, child support, transportation, and legal assistance.

"An NGO helped with bus fare to the court and a stipend for schoolbooks. That small help kept us from choosing between justice and rent." – P10

"When youth from the church and the mosque cleaned the cemetery together, my heart softened. Their hands made a sermon without words." – P7

Main Theme 5. Pathways to Healing and Resilience

Healing was described as gradual, uneven, and made of small, steadfast acts. People found strength in routine, relationships, and spiritual meaning.

"I have planted a pomegranate tree in memory of every loss we had, and I water them in the morning. Seeing how they grow teaches me to be patient with my own scars." – P1

"Healing is not forgetting, it is learning not to break while keeping memory. On some days I will carry it, and on some days my family will carry me." – P4

Subtheme 5.1. Rebuilding Daily Life

Going back to work, school and community life was an indicator of recovery without rejection of

grief. Adaptation was commonplace, but brave.

"I opened the tailoring store again and I had the measuring tape of my husband on the wall. Stitch by stitch I was reminded of how to start over again." – P8

"My son reverted to football, and I sat on the sidelines after many years. The noise of cheering was a door opening." – P9

Subtheme 5.2. Role of Faith and Spirituality in Healing

Prayer, scripture, and rituals provided comfort and a language of reconciliation. Religion established bonding among and among communities.

"Reciting the Holy Qur'an at dawn steadies my breath, and I ask God to make my heart soft. I have learned that forgiveness is a journey, not a switch." – P5

"In Sunday liturgy, when we exchange peace, I remember that grief connects us to each other. I leave the church lighter, even if the world has not changed." – P1

Discussion

This study from Sorya, Duhok Governorate, surfaces a tightly interwoven ecology of grief, memory, justice, and support that is highly consistent with, yet adds important nuance to, the recent research on families affected by mass violence and disappearance. In both Christian and Muslim families, respondents reflect mourning as a cyclic process, justice as part of mourning, and psychosocial support as a cultural, interfaith, and practically empowering intervention. In the following sections, these findings are compared with the previous studies, and convergences and divergences are pointed out in the framework of the overall literature.

The characterization of grief as recurring, sensory-triggered, and "never ended but changing shape" echoes two major strands of evidence: ambiguous loss and prolonged grief after mass trauma. According to Boss (2010), uncertainty about the fate of loved ones makes the mourning process more difficult; even in a situation whereby there are mass graves, postponed recognition can recreate the ambiguity and disrupt adaptation. The meta-analytic evidence supports lingering common mental disorders in war-affected adults (Morina et al., 2018), and recent evidence on prolonged grief disorder (PGD) indicates that bereavements related to conflicts may generate lasting longing and impairment (Killikelly & Maercker, 2017). It is noteworthy that the levels of startle reflex to familiar sounds reported by participants can be compared to the model of daily stressors, which demonstrates that the effects of the past trauma on the present mental state are often mediated by constant and ordinary stress and reminders (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010). The present narratives extend this literature by articulating how grief rhythms synchronize with local temporalities (anniversaries, prayer times) and the soundscape – specific, culturally inflected details that are often under-described in quantitative studies.

Families highlighted daily routines (work, chores), conscious speed of exposure to traumatic media, and practices rooted in spirituality (prayer circles, scripture) as stabilizing. This correlates with the fact that the everyday organizing and social role cushions distress among populations in conflict-affected settings (Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Panter-Brick & Eggerman, 2012). It is also similar to meaning-based and culturally modified coping strategies, such as aligning the grounding exercises with prayer sessions is used as a form of spiritually integrated practice that has been proven to enhance acceptability and adherence among religious populations (Pargament & Lomax, 2013). The directive against re-exposure to traumatic events prior to bedtime is a low-cost harm-reduction strategy potentially overlooked in the programmatic assessment that paves the way to psychoeducation that is media-ecological-specific to communities with conflict exposure.

The dual focus of the study on personal narrative (curating legacies of character and kindness) and on shared practices (interfaith ceremonies, naming stones, shared meals) is superimposed to the work that connects the concepts of continuing bonds and the role of memorialization in the adaptive

meaning-making following the mass violence. Comparative studies show that social connection and dignity can be fostered by public remembrance but can be re-traumatizing when politicized or exclusionary (Hamber and Gallagher, 2015). Sorya accounts stand out due to their interfaith choreography – priests and imams praying one after the other – which is a contrast to contexts in which memory practices reproduce division. This aids in the need to plan memorialization that is both interfaith and is based on foregrounding personal lives over death modalities, which has been identified to be less stigmatized and more cohesive in the community (Hamber & Gallagher, 2015).

Participants framed justice as truth, recognition, and repair, demanding exhumation, identification, and dignified burial "with names", as well as timely legal proceedings. This is a close reflection to victim-based transitional justice studies that indicated that families of the missing demand information, recognition, and ritual as preconditions to mourning (Robins, 2011). The field of forensic literature also describes the use of humanitarian forensic action and DNA-directed identification as a legal and psychosocial intervention enabling culturally suitable funerals and closure (Cordner and Tidball-Binz, 2017). In line with the literature regarding ambiguous loss, bereaved family members deprived of their relatives, or with no official recognition, experience greater susceptibility to protracted grief and distress (Lenferink et al., 2018). Simultaneously, Rwandan evidence warns that involvement in the process of truth-telling may increase the symptoms of some victims (Brounéus, 2010), which highlights the importance of trauma-informed justice practices. The current paper introduces a tangible layer – transport stipends, legal assistance, and accompaniment – as the key facilitators of access to justice, a recommendation that has been frequently proposed in literature yet not implemented in practice.

Participants endorsed accessible counseling, peer groups, privacy and continuity, and, crucially, providers who respect customs and integrate religious life. This preference is fully congruent with best-practice guidance for mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) in humanitarian settings, which emphasizes layered, community-based care; cultural competence; and integration with protection and health systems (Tol et al., 2011; Ventevogel et al., 2015). Evidence for brief, scalable psychological interventions (e.g., Problem Management Plus) suggests such support can reduce distress when embedded in community structures and delivered by trained non-specialists (Rahman et al., 2016). The Sorya accounts sharpen these broad prescriptions by specifying faith-linked adaptations (e.g., grounding aligned with prayer), and by foregrounding interfaith platforms as vehicles for collective care – an implementation detail too rarely measured in trials.

Accounts of NGOs aiding transportation to court, churches and mosques, youth cleaning cemeteries, and networks of neighbors find their reflection in the social-ecological resilience literature: recovery is not necessarily exclusively intrapsychic but a product of enabling roles, resources, and relations (Ager & Metzler, 2017; Panter-Brick & Eggerman, 2012). Such horizontal solidarities might be of particular significance to reestablish trust between communities in Northern Iraq, where the conflict with ISIS resulted in mass victimization (Cetorelli et al., 2017). The current results indicate that interfaith civic projects may indeed be viewed as being a work of therapeutic civic, comprising of memorialization, restoring dignity and social bonding.

The healing was portrayed as lopsided and micro-based in routine (going back to tailoring, football) and permeated with spiritual significance. This trend is in agreement with the ADAPT model that recovery following mass trauma follows through the process of restoration of five pillars, including safety/security, bonds/attachments, justice, roles/identities, and existential meaning (Silove, 2013). The Sorya themes strike every pillar: fear and startle (safety), family and peer groups (bonds), legal recognition (justice), work and parenting (roles), and prayer/ritual (meaning). These stories, set against a background of that incessant population-level morbidity in war survivors

(Morina et al., 2018), provide more detailed insights into how ordinary behavior structures resilience without washing away grief.

In summary, two contributions stand out. First, the interfaith architecture of remembrance and support – priest and imam "one line," youth joint service – offers a pragmatic template for psychosocial programming that doubles as social cohesion work. Second, the insistence that justice processes are intrinsic to mourning reinforces the argument for "justice-psychosocial accompaniment": practical support (transport, legal aid), trauma-informed procedures, and forensic identification as a unified, survivor-centered pathway (Robins, 2011; Cordner & Tidball-Binz, 2017).

Conclusion

As is demonstrated in this work, grief, justice, and healing among families of Christian and Muslim victims of mass graves in Sorya are closely intertwined. The survivor-focused response should integrate forensic truth-seeking, trauma-informed justice, and culturally based, interfaith psychosocial care. Practical assistance, meaningful memorialization, and spiritual integration strengthen resilience, restore dignity, and foster community cohesion in the aftermath of atrocity.

Implications

These results suggest that post-atrocity psychosocial programs should be based on truth-recovery, justice, and cultural and sensitive healing. Family-oriented mental care should be prioritized in the policies, inclusive memory and inter-faith dialogue to mend the social nets. Such practices can inform humanitarian, forensic, and transitional justice players to develop support that is restorative as opposed to merely procedural.

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