

A report on the current situation of the Yazidi refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan with a special focus on women and children



This report was written upon request of the Women Committee of the Parliament of the Kurdish Autonomous Region (KRG) in October 2010 by Falah Murad Khan Shakarm, Project Coordinator of Wadi in Iraq.

Introduction

The emergence of the terror organization ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, now calling themselves the Islamic State) as a true threat throughout Iraq has created a humanitarian crisis unparalleled in the history of the war torn nation.

Following the takeover of Mosul and subsequent attacks on adjacent areas including Sinjar (Shingal in Kurdish) by the group, the plight of the Yazidi people has become one of the most pressing topics in the region and has gained the attention of the international community, captivating many who were previously wholly unaware of the indigenous Yazidi minority of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Much information on this topic has been provided by the Iraqi Kurdistan parliament and government, activists and various other parties, and it has been the subject of a significant amount of international media coverage.

Thus, the aim of this report is not to repeat what has been said before by various parties, but rather to provide a detailed account of the current situation of the Yazidi refugees along with recommendations based on 16 years of experience in treating genocide victims and assisting refugees.

It is imperative that the cause of the massacre of Yazidis not be used by various parties, as has unfortunately already been done by some members of the parliament and the government.

The current unfortunate situation of the Yazidi people must be properly understood as a result of the ongoing war in Iraq, and, for the purpose of efficient communication, it is most helpful if all concerned parties take a common approach in describing the events that have occurred rather than confusing the situation by applying different names and concepts.

Indeed, as much of the world has only recently learned of the existence of the Yazidis, clear communication when seeking to raise awareness is imperative.

The labels assigned to the crisis have included, among others, the cause of “Yazidi girls and women,” the cause of “Shingal’s girls and women,” or that of “victims of ISIS.” In seminars, events, and public statements, it is most helpful to focus on one name/concept to most effectively push for the international recognition of and, ultimately, assistance with the crisis.

We believe, for the sake of simplicity, that the crisis should be described as one affecting the Yazidi girls and women. Indeed, while much of the international community is now aware of the Yazidi people, there is much less familiarity with the town or district of Sinjar (Shingal).

Furthermore, it is important to focus on the Yazidi identity of the victims as they have been specifically targeted for subjugation and elimination by ISIS due to this identity, a fact that has been officially acknowledged by the terror organization itself.

Official acknowledgement of slavery

HRW distributed a report on 12 October 2014 accusing ISIS of enslaving Yazidi women and children. The enslavement of Yazidis was later acknowledged, and theologically justified, by the ISIS terror organization in their official English-language publication *Dabiq*.¹ It is vital for lawmakers and other concerned parties to acknowledge the fact that ISIS has committed these crimes against the Yazidi women and girls and has officially acknowledged and gone to great lengths to justify these crimes, stating that, unlike Kurdish Muslims, Christians, and Jews, the Yazidis are not “people of the book,” but rather unbelievers.² While this type of violence has been used through the Islamic history, nonetheless many religious figures insist that what ISIS is doing is not compatible with Islam. While ISIS has used violence against various groups including Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims and Christians, the systematic use of violence and slavery against

1 http://mawtani.al-shorfa.com/ar/articles/iii/features/2014/10/16/feature-01?gclid=CMej_qXLysECFW3JtAodIF0ATW

2 <http://www.betnanews.com/iraq/17187>

Yazidis is both exceptional and by design. If we try to convince ourselves that what ISIS did with the Yazidis is a normal act and they act similarly in other places and with other peoples, we are incorrectly propagating the narrative that no special discrimination has been practiced against the Yazidi people. Indeed it must be acknowledged that discrimination against Yazidis did not begin with ISIS and throughout history, many of their neighbors have considered Yazidis to be unbelievers and an unclean people. Kakais and Christians have faced similar discrimination as well.³

What should we do for Yazidi victims?

Politicians should take a number of important steps:

1. Work diligently for the release the victims who remain with ISIS
2. Study and address the various psychological, physical, and social effects of the situation on the victims and their families
3. Work for international recognition of the acts perpetrated against the Yazidi people as genocide

Of course, it is imperative that all involved parties should concentrate on where we can effect change rather than making grand sweeping statements and promises with little chance of follow through. Unfortunately, the ministries, directorates, health institutes, and social foundations in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) are slow in implementing projects for the victims and seemingly not very devoted in doing so. Whenever help is requested, they say they are unable to do so due to budget constraints.

After visiting a number of Yazidi refugee sites in Dohuk six times, we have concluded that the government and relevant organizations are not acting in a compassionate or effective manner and cannot provide the refugees with basic

³ <http://www.alalam.ir/news/1643750>

necessities. However, our primary aim is not to addressing the issue of basic needs, we want to focus on the victims and their families in the following ways:

There has been no psychological and sociological preparation made for the victims who return from ISIS.

For instance, S is a 14 year old girl who lives at Khanke camp. Despite all she has been through with ISIS, after the killing of her brother and her sister-in-law remaining in the custody of ISIS, she has yet to see a female doctor. When meeting the WADI team, she was on the verge of fainting and barely able to communicate.

That night, the WADI team helped her and tried to arrange some basic assistance for her. From some unofficial sources, around 100 women have escaped the custody of ISIS and are back and situations similar to S, and they are being used only for the media and political purposes – being asked to tell their stories to journalists and political officials but receiving no special assistance following their terrible ordeals.



S, 22 October 2014, Khanke Camp

Here are some important questions we must ask ourselves:

- Do we believe that the KRG will be able to rescue all the kidnapped women?
- Do we believe that all the kidnapped women in Mosul and other occupied places will return to their homes?
- With all the bureaucratic procedures necessary in working with the various ministries and institutions, what will be done for these victims, and what capabilities will be necessary?

What if hundreds of them are pregnant, what will be done?

Where can victims be sheltered?

A complicated problem of this magnitude is problematic for a disorganized government such as our own, and indeed would even prove quite challenging for any European country facing the same circumstances.

In 1987-88, the Anfal campaign and chemical attacks against the Kurdish people occurred, after 27 years what has the government done psychologically and sociologically for the women and girls of Anfal? The answer, unfortunately, is nothing, providing a ominous precedent for today's victims of war and mass violence.

What will happen now?

If we cannot provide real assistance to the refugees, the current problem will only increase in magnitude and political speeches and sloganeering will do nothing to help the situation.

On 20 October 10, 2014, the Human Rights Committee, with the help of the Iraqi Kurdistan parliament, conducted a meeting with two female Yazidi victims of ISIS.

While it was said that they would receive help, two days after this meeting, one these young victims in the Muqublah camp personally asked for help once again. All of these women need help and whatever is being done for them is not enough.



Sb, 22 October 2014, Muqublah camp

However, as horrific stories emerge from those claiming to be victims of ISIS, we must remain aware of difficult lessons learned from the recent past. Indeed, following the Anfal genocide, many falsely claimed to have been effected by the genocide to receive certain benefits. I believe that in the near future we will encounter similar behavior including:

- Fabricated stories
- Families registering as a previously deceased relatives as victims of ISIS
- Families falsely registering children as returnees from ISIS custody
- Various other related claims

Following the Anfal genocide, many people became “fake martyrs” to receive salaries and/or get promotions at work.

Working on behalf of the true victims of ISIS is difficult but necessary work, and the bureaucratic procedures which are such a large part of daily life in Iraqi Kurdistan also get in the way of providing these victims with necessary assistance.

Families which have unready lived through unspeakable horrors, who have lost everything and are trying to cope with grave psychological effects of their ordeal, are now forced to deal with a difficult bureaucracy just to receive basic assistance.

This is a picture of a family that, at present, are forced to live in the terrible circumstances:



Ali with his 6 siblings, victim of ISIS

Ali is 39 years old and after, after surviving the attack on Sinjar (Shingal), is living in unfinished building that does not have any doors or windows near the Khanke camp, 20 km from the city of Dohuk. In this unfinished building, he lives with 19 other families and takes care of his sick brother and 5 other siblings. He showed

us his government food form, which states that they are a family of 14 in total, and 7 members of his family (his mother, father, grandmother, 2 sisters, and 2 brothers) are still with ISIS.

Ali said that when ISIS attacked, he was only able to save the children and get them to the car until they got to the mountain.

“My brother Bakir was with the animals and he has epilepsy, so he fainted and ISIS left him because they thought he was sick. However, the rest of my family was kidnapped with my cousin and so many other family members. I don’t know anything about them, and they say they are still in Tel Afar. The name of the kidnapped members are Zarifa, age 18, Amina, age 20, my mother Sewi and my grandmother Naham, and my father with my two brothers.”

He said that he tried to reach them and calls every day, and time he called, his sister and someone from ISIS answered and spoke in Arabic, shouting.

He is seriously damaged mentally and psychologically, and he said that even the order passed stating that each family could get one million Iraqi dinars does not help him as it can only be collected by the head of the family, the father.

Indeed, many Yazidi families who have fled the genocide are now facing serious bureaucratic roadblocks because they are unable to provide official identity papers.

Unbelievably, in addition to trying to cope with the physical and psychological trauma of working to survive a genocide after losing all their possessions, many are being denied necessary assistance or being forced to deal with various difficult if not impossible layers of bureaucratic requirements.

In a situation where reportedly some European governments are considering the cases of refugees without papers in an emergency basis, it is particularly

inexcusable that local institutions are showing very little flexibility for these victims of terror.

Hadi Dawud, a 25 year old Peshmerga from the village of Kocho, has a similar story. Now he lives in the Muqublah camp in Dohuk, after 43 people from his family including his sisters, brothers, mother, and father were kidnapped.



Hadi Dawud, age 25

As the government has not even been able to adequately address the situation of these few victims, how can they credibly promise to resolve the situation of kidnapped women and girls?

The issue of kidnapped girls and women

The situation of the kidnapped girls and women will be one of the most essential issues on both a local and global level.

Therefore, this issue must be addressed in an organized and systematic way.

There are various groups of actors affected by this current crisis or working to address it:

1. Women kidnapped after ISIS controlled Sinjar (Shingal)
2. Women returning from ISIS
3. Women whose their fate is unknown
4. The families of these women
5. The families and individuals working on freeing the girls and witnessing the situation

Thus, humanitarian and financial support is needed for each of the groups of actors mentioned above.

First we need to collect reliable information about cases and compile data to illustrate the reality of the situation to authorities and other relevant parties. All information used currently is being distributed by individuals and without any real reliable source.

We may think that we have the ability to compile scientific data, but this work needs the support of official, non-official, and international actors.

It is important to study and understand other countries' experiences with potentially relevant events and situations.

This is indispensable in Kurdistan and Iraq, as here we have no scientific data, and indeed nothing has been done for Halabja and Anfal and there is even a risk that this massacre could be substantially ignored as well.

Several days ago, the high women's council declared that they will work on data and Zhyan Group is implementing a parallel effort, however I think such data gathering efforts will provide only limited help as we need positional scientific data to properly serve the purpose and act as a source for future surveys.

Requirements

1. Create a task force including members of the Iraqi Kurdistan parliament, government, organizations, the UN, and activists. This force work toward formulating and implementing strategic plans and solutions for the released women
2. Work immediately for those women who return from ISIS custody and the establishment of a specific team to care for them and provide services for them, specially psychological and physical support
3. Provide reliable scientific data on the released women and those still in ISIS custody, and providing documentation about them in addition to day to day aid
4. Establish a center for those women who need shelter for those cases where such assistance is necessary or women's lives may still be at risk
5. Work with the families whose daughters are still in custody and keep current information on their situations
6. Seek new information on kidnapped women
7. Provide rewards for anyone who has information about the kidnapped women and attempt to assist with their release
8. Work internationally to gain recognition for this situation as the results of an ongoing as genocide

Most of this report consists of personal ideas, although all relevant visit are conducted by teams from WADI team, and WADI is currently working on several projects for Yazidi women

Falah Murad Khan Shakarm, 30 October 2014

This report was edited by Jeff Allan