

Chapter 18

The Future of the Yezidis in Kurdistan

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Currently, Yezidis number about 550,000 people in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), with about 400,000 of them spread across 16 camps inside the KRI. They lost everything: their land and their entire livelihood. For three years, the Yezidis have been displaced, and they account for the largest number of Internally Displaced persons (IDPs) in the Kurdistan Region. Not only have they been displaced, but they have also been punished and continuously discriminated against because of their religious background. ISIS has killed and captivated many Yezidi women and children, destroying most of the Yezidi cities and villages across the region. As if this is not enough, the poor economic situation of most Yezidi families has added gravely to their burden. Their displacement and the loss of their land has resulted in a loss of culture as well, as their lives had been dependent on agriculture, nature, water springs, and holy sites.

The Yezidi Women Still in the Hands of ISIS

To quote Nadia Murad,¹ “there are still around 3,400 Yezidi women in the hands of ISIS.”² Their future is uncertain and nobody knows if they will ever return. The hideous crimes committed against them cannot be described. The same practices, with the mentality of “everything you conquer belongs to you,” used by armies during the Islamic conquest 1,400 years ago, have also been used by ISIS. It is the same pattern of killing and looting women and children and the destruction of holy sites.

¹ Yezidi human rights activist, and the first Goodwill Ambassador for the Dignity of Survivors of Human Trafficking of the United Nations.

² Murad, Nadia, *The Independent*: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/nadia-murad-yazidi-survivor-kept-as-isis-sex-slave-describes-moment-her-family-were-massacred-a6875346.html>

What Yezidi Leaders are Doing to Rescue Them from ISIS

The Yezidis are attempting to rescue all those that were abducted by ISIS. The head of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Nechirvan Barzani, has facilitated these efforts, providing financial support for the paying of ransoms and smugglers in order to return those who were taken. There is an office in Duhok with a large number of people working on rescuing the kidnapped women and girls. More than 3,400 Yezidi girls, children and women have been freed from the hands of the terrorist organization. We need to ensure that the provincial government pays all expenses, and that the work and coordination between several parties continue to this day in order to free all the abducted.

The Role of Yezidis' Leadership

The spiritual leadership of Yezidi community has responded to the atrocities of the Yezidi women with care and caution. For the first time in the history of the Yezidis, the leadership ordered pardon for those who were kidnaped forcibly by ISIS. The reason for this forgiveness is the fact that the Yezidi women were taken by force, not by choice. Any Yezidi woman who has managed to escape from ISIS has been welcomed back into her religion and culture.³

Following the invasion of the Yezidi land in Shangal, and the call for the killing of Yezidis and the kidnapping of women and children by ISIS, Prince Tahsin Said, the Amir of the Yezidis, and His Eminence Sheikh Baba Sheikh (the spiritual leader of all Yezidis in the world) issued a historic and important decision to receive survivors with respect and appreciation. The decision to welcome back the female survivors was taken by Yezidi leadership and was appreciated by the entire Yezidi community, because abducting the Yezidi women and using them as sex slaves by ISIS was an organized, well-thought operation, committed by ISIS against the Yezidis.

The Yezidi culture is built upon respect and equal partnership among other ethnic and religious backgrounds in Kurdistan and the entire Iraqi society. However, since ISIS attacked the Yezidis, and the crimes were committed especially against women and children, the Yezidis have become increasingly open to the outside world. Yezidi leaders and society as a

³ The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/jul/01/i-was-sold-seven-times-yazidi-women-welcomed-back-into-the-faith>

whole have sincere respect for our victims and survivors, and they are working on reintegrating them into their social order and helping them take care of their wounds, both physical and psychological. The survivors are set to receive special religious decrees held at the Lalish Temple Din al-Yazidi and be re-baptized in the “*Kanya Spî* (White Spring-Water)” in the presence of Baba Sheikh, the Amir and a member from the House of Amir Yezidis. Symbolically, this has a very deep meaning as it is done in the presence of the highest religious Yezidi authorities.⁴

What the Future Holds for Yezidis in Iraq

The KRI has been the homeland of Yezidi-Kurds for 10,000 years, and this represents their sole homeland. The future of Yezidis in Kurdistan is linked to the future of the Kurdistan Region as well. The Yezidis will be safer within the boundaries of Kurdistan region. As long as the KRI continues to be a state based on secular, non-Islamic rules and customs, the Yezidi minority can continue to live and progress. The future of Yezidism is linked to the future of secular parties and government institutions that take a step away from extremism and tribalism.

How Will Yezidis Vote on the Referendum in September?

The Yezidis have paid a heavy price for their homeland, suffered 74 genocides,⁵ and have been forced to abandon their religion and culture. However, they have managed to preserve their Kurdish language and identity, culture, literature, and religious philosophy, which dates back to more than 10,000 years. Lalish is the most important holy place in the Yezidi culture and religion, but it has also been a safe haven for thousands of people, whenever they faced genocide. Wherever the Yezidis are, they always face towards Lalish when they pray. In 2014, when ISIS began committing atrocities, Lalish was once again a safe haven for the Yezidis. Their homeland is Kurdistan, even if they all migrated to other countries, they may physically survive, but not spiritually and mentally.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Schwartz, Stephen. <http://www.meforum.org/5313/yezidi-genocide>

What the Prospect of Yezidis is in the Kurdistan Region, Unity of Kurdish Society

Yezidis are Kurds by nationality and ethnicity but their religion is different. The original religion of Kurds is Yezidism; during the Islamic conquest around sixth century, most Kurds converted into Islam by force. Those who maintained their original religion had to leave their homes or hide. Yet, those people preserved their faith until today. These people are now known as the Yezidis, and their future depends on the future of the Kurds.

Two positive aspects of post-ISIS should be mentioned here: first, is the welcoming back of the kidnapped girls who were raped by ISIS jihadists; second, the increased integration with other communities. Previously, any Yezidi who married a non-Yezidi, willingly or forcibly, was regarded as an outsider and no longer a Yezidi. Now, with the pardon by the Yezidi spiritual leader and council of Yezidi leadership, the women who were forcibly taken away by ISIS can come back and reclaim their faith. In relation to integration, there used to be less incorporation between the Muslim communities and the Yezidis. However, in the face of adversity, there is much more cooperation between the various communities in the KRI. There is much less fear of each other now and there is a lot of respect for people with different faiths and ethnicities.