

Still in Captivity: Ezidi (Yazidi) Survivors, Families and Activists Demand Action to Find and Support Missing People Abducted by Islamic State (ISIS)

22nd February 2021

In 2014, the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) engaged in a brutal and organised campaign to erase the Ezidi (Yazidi)¹ ethno-religious group as part of their takeover of Iraq. This was recognised as a genocide by a UN-mandated Commission of Inquiry in 2016². A recorded 6,417 Ezidis were abducted by ISIS during the group's invasion of Ezidi ancestral lands and 2,768 remain missing to this day.

August 3rd 2021 will mark the 7th year of captivity for some individuals, and the 7th year of loss for their families. The psychological impact of this on individuals, families and the Ezidi community as a whole is severe. For as long as those abducted remain in captivity, the crimes of ISIS against the Ezidi community continue.

No comprehensive international or governmental effort to search for missing Ezidi people has taken place. We, Ezidi survivors of captivity, families of the missing, activists, individuals involved in rescuing captured Ezidis and organisations supporting Ezidi survivors demand action from the government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), as well as the international community, to find and support missing people.

Barriers to return of missing Ezidi (Yazidi) people

Lack of information:

The territorial defeat of ISIS in 2017 did not lead to the identification and return of all missing Ezidis, and the location and fate of many remains unknown. During captivity, Ezidis were deliberately moved to various parts of Iraq or Syria in an attempt to prevent escape, and many have been sold and taken to different countries. Many in captivity do not know the location in which they are being held. Ezidis who have managed to escape and return to Iraq, usually through the sporadic and individual efforts of rescue groups and families, have come from locations in Idlib and Jarabulus in Syria, Mosul in Iraq, Istanbul and Ankara in Turkey. Through those who have managed to return, we also know that Ezidis are being held in camps for ISIS affiliated women and children such as Al-Hol in North East Syria, as well as detention centres in Syria and Iraq for men and boys who were captured fighting with ISIS.

Statistics on the number of individuals kidnapped and those returned are held by the Office of Kidnapped Ezidis in Duhok, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, yet without knowing exactly how many Ezidis were killed by ISIS it is impossible to know the exact number of those still missing. Attempts to open mass graves across Iraq by the governments of Iraq and the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) with support from UNITAD and the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) are essential but have been progressing slowly. A lack of coordination between different actors and no centralised system for reporting the missing nor a unified database for DNA samples means that Ezidi families are often required to give samples in multiple locations. There is a general lack of clarity on the processes they must go through to identify family members during exhumation. The UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances in December 2020

¹ We use the spelling Ezidi throughout this statement as this is preferred by the Ezidi community. We reference the spelling Yazidi for clarity, as this is more commonly understood.

² Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 2016, *"They Came to Destroy": ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis*, Conference Room Paper - A/HRC/32/CRP.2, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf

expressed concern over the large number of unidentified bodies and mass graves in Iraq, and recommended that Iraq should establish a national database of cases of disappearances.³

Lack of cross-border coordination mechanism:

Sharing intelligence, searching for missing and captured Ezidis and ensuring those who wish to return to Iraq can do so requires cross-border coordination between authorities of various states. Rescue operations are extremely time-sensitive: even short delays in action can result in losing contact with missing people. Survivors have faced issues during rescue operations that could be avoided with better coordination, for example being denied entry at the Iraqi border when trying to return from Syria.

The governments of Iraq and KRI established a 'Committee to search for kidnapped Ezidis' in June 2020. This initiative is commendable but lacks any practical actions: until now the Committee has not met and does not include representatives of the community it claims to serve, most importantly survivors of captivity and families of the missing.

Lucrative human trafficking:

In addition to the trade of selling enslaved Ezidis between ISIS members, the group established a lucrative industry forcing Ezidi families to pay huge amounts of ransom money in order to return their kidnapped family members. Prices demanded by ISIS have increased over time from around \$500 to \$20,000 or more. Often the families must also pay a network of intermediaries and smugglers to enable the return. Families have been tricked into paying individuals for information on the whereabouts of missing relatives, for those individuals to disappear before providing this information. Families are often in a dire economic situation as a result of displacement and must borrow money in order to pay. The huge profits made from this are a disincentive for captors to release Ezidis.

Misidentification and perceived affiliation to ISIS:

One of the main barriers to return for captured Ezidis is misidentification. As part of their attempt to eradicate the Ezidi ethno-religion, ISIS indoctrinated captives, taught them that Ezidis are *kuffar* or 'infidels' and told them the Ezidi community would not accept them if they returned. As a result, many in captivity no longer identify as Ezidi. In camps such as Al-Hol, Ezidis do not always know they can, or feel safe enough, to approach those managing the camp and identify themselves as Ezidi in order to be released. Ezidis may have Arabic names, speak only Arabic, and wear the Niqab, making identification challenging. Many others in the camp retain a strong affiliation to ISIS and so self-identifying as Ezidi can risk their lives.

Male adults and youth who were forced to fight with ISIS may be held in detention as punishment for taking up arms, due to perceived affiliation with ISIS and without recognition that this was not through choice. For the same reasons, they may be unable or unwilling to identify themselves as Ezidi.

Unique challenges facing children:

Some children were very young when they were kidnapped or were born in captivity. Physical development over time makes their identification challenging. ISIS indoctrination turned children against

³ UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances, 2020, Observations on the additional information submitted by Iraq under article 29 (4) of the Convention, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CED/C/IRQ/OAI/1&Lang=en pages 1, 2

the Ezidi identity, and children can be resistant to have any contact with other Ezidis or reconnect with families. For boys, this is compounded by the profound psychological impact of fighting on the frontlines.

Many Ezidi women have given birth in captivity to ISIS members as a result of sexual violence. Some of the families of these women are not ready to accept these children born to ISIS fighters because this contradicts the laws of the Ezidi religion. Iraqi law is also not favourable as these children cannot be identified legally as Ezidi. Some mothers are therefore forced to make the difficult decision not to return to Iraq in order to remain with their children.

We respectfully make the following recommendations:

1. Establish and implement a new committee to search for the missing which includes representation from Ezidi (Yazidi)⁴ survivors of captivity, families of the missing and other key members of the Ezidi community.

Ezidi survivors of captivity, families of the missing, local organisations and other relevant community members can provide valuable intelligence, advice and recommendations that are needed for such a committee to succeed. The determination of the Ezidi community to locate and support those still missing should be utilised to ensure that this committee is proactive. We request the establishment of a new committee by the governments of Iraq and KRI, whose membership includes these parties as well as representatives from the UN, ICRC, UNITAD, Ezidi Genocide Office and Office for Kidnapped Ezidis in Duhok who can assist it in carrying out its functions. A secondary option is to revise the membership of the existing committee and rethink its mandate.

The priorities of the committee should be to:

- Act upon intelligence from survivors, families and elsewhere in order to provide swift assistance to those in captivity.
- Coordinate with the governments of Turkey, Syria, representatives of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, and any other relevant parties to share intelligence on locations of missing people.
- Coordinate with the authorities of camps in Syria, particularly Al-Hol camp.
- Organise visits to the camps in Syria with required legal, consular and security arrangements to increase identification and ensure any identified Ezidis can be appropriately supported.
- Ensure any Ezidis that are identified and contacted are provided information on their rights and options.
- Ensure any Ezidis who want to return to Iraq are provided the necessary security and consular support to do so.
- Examine support needed for survivors upon return to Iraq, including legal documentation and rehabilitation services.

This is in line with the recommendations of the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances from 2020 which state that a mechanism should be established to coordinate the activities of authorities responsible

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for search and investigation of missing people, and that this mechanism should be endowed with the resources needed to carry out its work.⁵

2. Strengthen coordination to enable faster and more efficient exhumation of mass graves.

The governments of Iraq and KRI should continue to open mass graves in Iraq. The international community and specialised actors such as UNITAD and the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) should continue to provide technical and financial assistance to ensure this process can happen quicker.

A shared electronic DNA database across Iraq should be created to enable more efficient coordination between the governments of Iraq and KRI. There should be a unified search mechanism for families to attempt to locate their relatives. Families should only be required to give one sample in order to have their DNA matched in any mass grave exhumation in Iraq. Coordination should be enhanced to ensure this database can also be used as needed for exhumations in Syria and so that family members now residing in states outside of Iraq can also provide blood samples. Information on how to provide DNA samples, as well as planned exhumations and progress reports, should be shared widely with the Ezidi community.

3. Create a specific law, making the practices of slavery and human trafficking in Iraq punishable crimes and ensure individuals are held accountable.

Without criminal prosecution, families and individuals who still hold enslaved Ezidis live free and open lives in parts of Iraq. Without the threat of punishment, those engaged in the trade of human trafficking can continue unabated. The government of Iraq is recommended to enact a law which specifically prohibits all forms of slavery and human trafficking, meets international standards and includes a punishment regime. All parties should then ensure that individual cases are brought to justice. This will both help to return those still being enslaved, as well as to deter the use of slavery and human trafficking in the future.

The international community should support local efforts to strengthen criminal justice mechanisms and bring perpetrators to justice, in accordance with international standards.

4. Spare no effort and mobilise all available resources to ensure the rescue and return of abducted Ezidis

We ask for the governments of Iraq and KRI to do everything in their power to respond to this issue. We echo the call of the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances which ‘urges the State party [Iraq] to redouble its efforts to search for, locate and release disappeared persons’.⁶ The international community has a responsibility to support local efforts to locate and support abducted Ezidis. Resources, intelligence and personnel should be dedicated to this cause. Good will must be translated into practical actions.

⁵ UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances, 2020, Observations on the additional information submitted by Iraq under article 29 (4) of the Convention, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CED/C/IRQ/OAI/1&Lang=en page 4

⁶ UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances, 2020, Observations on the additional information submitted by Iraq under article 29 (4) of the Convention, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CED/C/IRQ/OAI/1&Lang=en page 5

Conclusion

Ezidi (Yazidi) survivors, families of the missing and the Ezidi community have the right to be involved in the decisions that affect them. The signatories of this statement are united in calling for these recommendations to be met and are ready to help achieve them. We request an initial meeting with all relevant parties to discuss how to take the recommendations forward.

Sympathy and acknowledgement for the past injustices against the Ezidis are meaningless without action to stop the continued crimes of ISIS. Ezidis in captivity have waited too long for help. We call on the international community and the governments of Iraq and KRI to act now, before it is too late.

Signatories:

1. Air Bridge Organization / Germany
2. Ashwaq Network for Survivors and Families of the Missing
3. Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights
4. DAK Organisation for Women
5. Duhok Genocide Office
6. Emma Organisation for Human Development
7. Ezidi Council in Sinjar
8. Ezidi 24 Media Foundation
9. Families of Victims
10. Farida Global Organisation/Germany
11. FIDH – Federation Internationale Pour les Droits Humains
12. Free Yazidi Foundation
13. Humanity Organisation
14. Jesuit Refugee Service
15. Jilan Organization for Care and Rehabilitation
16. Joint Help for Kurdistan
17. Kani Press
18. Kinyat
19. Layla Taalo, Ezidi survivor and activist
20. Mirza Dinnayi, human rights activist
21. Nadia's Initiative
22. The Office of Prevention of Violence Against Women and Children in Duhok
23. PI for Marketing
24. Rainbow Organisation
25. Springs of Hope
26. Sunrise Organisation
27. Voice of Ezidis
28. Yazda
29. Yazidi News Media Foundation
30. Yazidi Organization for Documentation
31. Youth Bridge Organization

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