

Notes and Policy Recommendations on the Resettlement of Yazidi (Ezidi) Survivors of Sexual Enslavement to Canada; Prepared for a Briefing for the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration to Be Held November 9, 2017

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Summary: The resettlement to Canada of female Yazidi genocide survivors who were subjected to sexual enslavement by the Islamic State organization (IS) can be an instrumental step in their recovery. This option should be pursued by the Canadian government; detailed recommendations follow. This form of assistance for the post-Genocide Yazidi community should also be accompanied by support for the Yazidi community that remains in Sinjar, Iraq, also detailed below.

Background on my involvement with the Yazidi Community: I am a PhD student at the University of Chicago, studying Islamic thought and modern Middle Eastern history in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations. I have been involved with the Yazidis of northern Iraq since prior to the Yazidi Genocide, having conducted research there in the past. When the Yazidi Genocide began on August 3, 2014, I was living in northern Iraq. For the next three years I worked closely with the community on a wide range of advocacy and humanitarian projects. I later returned to Iraq and served for one year (2015-2016) as the Executive Director of Yazda in Iraq, managing a number of humanitarian projects for the Yazidi community, in both the camps for the displaced and among the returnee population of Sinjar. This included a number of supportive projects for female survivors of sexual enslavement who had been rescued from IS captivity. At this time, Yazda has so far registered over 1,300 female survivors of sexual enslavement (the vast majority of those who have escaped enslavement). The purpose of registration was to coordinate relief and services, including a monetary assistance program conducted in cooperation with the central government in Baghdad. I also worked with Australian authorities to locate, vet, and process Syrian-born Yazidi refugees for a resettlement program to Australia, a project that was later expanded to also resettle Iraqi Yazidi enslavement survivors and their families. The notes and recommendations that follow are based on extensive involvement in both the immediate and longer-term response to the Genocide; intimate knowledge of the Yazidi community; and prolonged contact with the survivor population.

1. The Dilemma of Emigration

As a vulnerable minority in Iraq, Yazidis have long been susceptible to persecution, discrimination, and various political pressures that have endangered the continuity and stability of their fragile communities. Of all events faced by the Yazidis in over a century, the Yazidi Genocide of 2014 has had the most destructive impact on the community. Though the majority of Sinjar's Yazidis (several hundred thousand people) remain in camps for the displaced in northern Iraq, many thousands have fled the country and are now scattered around the globe. The Genocide has involved material destruction that

has set the Sinjari Yazidi community's development back by decades and has jeopardized the survival of the Yazidis as a component of Iraqi society. Emigration from Iraq is a double-edged sword, offering both advantages and risks for the Yazidi community. Resettlement for survivors can be beneficial, but needs to be approached in an informed manner and conducted with a comprehensive strategy to make sure that the whole community is benefited in the long run.

a) Yazidi Heritage and the Religious/Cultural "Center"

Yazidi religion involves a very strong connection to the land. Important holy sites, located in northern Iraq, constitute the locus of much of Yazidi religious practice. Yazidi temples/shrines are established on sites where mythic figures of Yazidi religious lore are believed to have been active upon the earth; temples, therefore, are not merely buildings that can be quickly and easily erected anywhere, as can churches and mosques. Yazidi temples are fewer than the houses of worship of other religions and are importantly associated with place. Some shrines that IS destroyed in Ba'shiqa/Bahzane (near Mosul in the Nineveh Plain) are now being rebuilt, but significantly are being rebuilt on the exact same sites where they were located prior to the destruction, as the soil beneath those shrines is considered holy. This rebuilding process therefore constitutes the continuity of a single shrine whose physical building is merely being replaced; the sacred site remains the same. Establishing a new sacred site is no simple matter. There is also no portability of religious structures; as their establishment consecrates the soil beneath them, all Yazidi shrines become permanent. For this reason, no shrines (that would correspond to a Western conception of a house of worship) have been established by Yazidis within the IDP camps in the last three years since the initial displacement.

Though centers of Yazidi religious learning have been created outside of Iraq, it is unlikely that Yazidi sacred sites can be easily replicated within diaspora communities. The focus of religious feeling among Yazidis is often directed toward Iraq, which is seen as the place of spiritual origins for the community as well as the home of its most sacred places. Iraq is therefore a religious and cultural "center" for the Yazidi community worldwide, a factor that must be kept in mind while developing any resettlement plan.

Of the Yazidi regions within Iraq, Sinjar is home to the largest population of Yazidis in the country, was the worst hit area of the Yazidi Genocide, and is home to a number of Yazidi holy sites that comprise an indispensable portion of the Yazidi spiritual and cultural heritage. Sinjar is one of the key regions to which much of Yazidi history and heritage are connected and the loss of the Sinjar homeland could potentially have devastating effects on the survival of the Yazidi religious and cultural tradition.

b) Yazidi Attitudes Toward Resettlement and Emigration

The Yazidi community is not unified in its opinion on emigration from Iraq. A part of the community supports emigration, believing that life in the West will provide greater security and opportunity, which will contribute to a stronger Yazidi community of the future.

Following the experience of the Genocide, some even strongly believe that there is no possible future for the Yazidi people in Iraq, that real security will never be enjoyed by the Yazidi people, and that another genocide will eventually be inevitable. Those of this persuasion want to see as many Yazidis as possible have the opportunity to start lives in Western countries, free of discrimination and violence, and where educational opportunities can contribute to the building of new skillsets among Yazidi young people who can liberate and emancipate their marginalized and oppressed community. Some of them believe that the homeland is not worth fighting for due to the cost involved (“cost” meaning potential loss of life if future violence occurs), or believe that the Iraqi homeland is simply not viable. Yazidis already in diaspora are more likely to possess this attitude, and this view may be the one most encountered by Westerners involved with the Yazidi community in the West.

Another segment of Yazidi society is staunchly committed to remaining in their homeland and rebuilding Sinjar. These include the families of Yazidi fighters who worked hard to defend Sinjar from IS, farmers and herders who are very connected to the land and do not wish to leave it, others who do not wish to face the challenges of emigration, and those who generally view Iraq (and Sinjar in particular) as an important cultural and religious homeland that must be retained. Those who want to stay in Iraq often believe that better security for the Yazidis in the future is possible with the right kind of government engagement and administrative development. They believe that their homeland is worth fighting for and struggle to cultivate hope about a future in Sinjar even amid the many challenges that they face in Iraq. Yazidis with this perspective tend to look upon emigration with disapproval.

The community is highly divided on this issue with many supporting each side. Many Yazidis of older generations, who have more historical perspective, point out that the community has survived numerous previous campaigns of persecution in its history and maintain that this is no different. They believe that Yazidis must approach the issue with longer-term perspective and work to preserve the homeland. Many younger Yazidis—not only considering the results of the violence but also keenly aware of the oppressive effects of discrimination in Iraq and Kurdistan on the ability of Yazidis to build their community—believe that the community has no future in Iraq and that emigration is the only option. However, age is not a clear factor in identifying these sentiments; some Yazidis of the younger generation are committed to rebuilding Sinjar while some older Yazidis prefer to emigrate or have already done so.

c) Risks to Yazidi Tradition in Diaspora if the Center Does Not Hold

An above section described the importance of Iraq as a “center” of Yazidi cultural heritage and religious affections, and of Sinjar as an integral region within that center. Some Yazidis, including those already in the diaspora, express the concern that if the erosion of this center takes place, it is uncertain whether Yazidi tradition will be able to survive in diaspora. The

fact that some Yazidis in diaspora already feel apprehension regarding this hazard warrants attention; for them it is essential that the center hold.

d) Brain Drain

Yazidis displaced by the Genocide do not only leave Iraq because of security concerns, but also because of the interruptions it creates for the natural trajectory of life. Yazidis from Sinjar who are still in the camps inside the Kurdistan Region have been living in tents for over three years, with their lives on pause, waiting for the opportunity to resume their lives. Marriage, the building of a family or of a physical home, and higher education are all difficult or impossible in the context of displacement and camp life. The harmful politics of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the economic blockade that it imposed on Sinjar (2016 to early 2017) further delayed the return of normalcy to Yazidi life. Weary of indefinite wait and uncertain as to what future would be possible in Sinjar, many Yazidis have chosen to pursue a future outside of Iraq.

Yazidis with education, those from the upper and middle classes, those with professional skills, and those with greater economic means have been the first to leave the country. In fact, since 2014 the Yazidi community in Iraq has experienced a draining of its professionals, including doctors, nurses, pharmacists, other medical professionals, teachers, community leaders, social workers, journalists, and so on. The loss of this segment of Yazidi society has been detrimental for the much larger base of poorer and less educated Yazidis (primarily farmers, builders, retailers, and those performing various forms of manual labor) who remain in the country to fend for themselves. Though the majority of the Yazidi population remains in Iraq (several hundred thousand people), they have lost much of the socially active segment of their community that was able to conduct advocacy for the community. NGOs working in Iraq have lost much of their Yazidi staff and volunteers who possessed higher forms of literacy and language skills, especially English speakers.

No matter how extensive resettlement programs for Yazidis become, there will always be a Yazidi population that remains in Iraq; this population has been negatively affected by the out-migration of much of the educated class of Yazidis following the 2014 Genocide. Addressing the effects of this trend is essential for any Western government seeking to understand how to best respond to the needs of the post-Genocide Yazidi community.

e) The Western Response

Non-Yazidis cannot decide what is best for Yazidis. Only Yazidis can determine what course is best for themselves and their families. Those who no longer feel secure in the country will, of course, prioritize the safety of their families over ruminations regarding the longer term impact of migration on Yazidi culture. It is important to pursue a policy that respects the choices of Yazidis on both sides of the emigration dilemma—those who want to remain and rebuild as well as those who feel safer leaving. A comprehensive response to the Yazidi Genocide can respect the opinions of Yazidis on both sides of the emigration issue and can

likewise provide robust assistance that addresses the needs of both groups. This should involve resettling those vulnerable survivors whose recovery depends on removal from their current environment, strategies to strengthen diaspora-center ties, and a program of humanitarian support and reconstruction for Yazidis who remain in Sinjar as a counterpart to resettlement programs.

2. The Potential of Resettlement for Female Survivors of Enslavement and their Unique Status and Needs

While the emigration debate often deals with what is best for the larger Yazidi community (as does the previous section, above), there is often more consensus about the benefits of resettlement for the female survivors of sexual enslavement, who are a special component of those effected by the Genocide. Resettlement can help facilitate the recovery of these survivors in ways that would not otherwise be possible.

a) The Post-Captivity Situation of Female Survivors of Sexual Enslavement

The IS organization has been removed from the Sinjar Region, but the effects of the trauma they endured remain. The following are some of the challenges faced by the survivors in Iraq which speak to the benefits that resettlement would provide to them.

i) The Need for Therapy and Emotional/Psychological Healing

Every woman and girl was affected differently by this abuse: some have undergone severe psychological damage and now have difficulty functioning in the ordinary aspects of day-to-day life, while others have found incredible personal resources of strength and resilience and now perform advocacy for their community, speaking out on behalf of other survivors. Regardless of the level of severity of the effects of the trauma, all survivors need access to better mental health resources.

Many NGOs have contributed to the mental health and well-being of survivors who have returned from IS captivity. However, the combined resources of NGOs working in northern Iraq are still completely inadequate in responding to the mental health needs of survivors, and of the displaced community in general. This problem is largely based in the shortage of Kurdish-speaking, clinically-trained mental health practitioners (those who have actually completed a practicum in counseling and not merely studied psychology in college). Western-trained psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors, and social workers working in Iraq who do not speak Kurdish natively are very limited in what they can accomplish. This is not to minimize the good that is being done—tremendous psychological support has been provided to many survivors and families through a number of NGOs—but the level of real therapy that can be conducted is quite limited, and any claim that the NGOs have this need covered is an exaggeration.

In addition to the lack of therapeutic resources, the environment that many women find themselves in after escape or rescue from captivity is often not conducive to healing and recovery. The situation in the camps is often bleak and hopeless, and the factors outlined in the next several sections also affect the potential for recovery.

ii) Economic Conditions

Sinjar was a rural, farming area where many families maintained a basic existence before the Genocide. In the aftermath, many families have lost what little they had to begin with. In order to contribute to the survival of their families, many survivors seek whatever work is available to them. Girls as young as twelve years of age have performed hard farm labor for long hours soon after transitioning from sexual enslavement to IDP camps, in Kurdish-owned farms in the Kurdistan Region. This scenario of desperation traps survivors and does not offer them the hope of a meaningful future. Education is often not part of the picture for many of these children. Families that have been able to return to Sinjar still face impoverished economic conditions as many farms and homes have been completely looted and physically demolished. For women suffering from mental health challenges, the conditions of this brutal survival struggle are hard to cope with. Suicides have occurred and many more are at risk.

iii) Political Conditions

Though IS is gone, Sinjar has not undergone a complete return to stability. Since late 2014, the Sinjar Region has been competed over by the PKK, the KDP (the ruling party of the Kurdistan Region), and Yazidis who favor local, semi-autonomous administration under the central government. Thankfully, the KDP has recently withdrawn from Sinjar, creating new opportunities to build a stable future for Sinjar under the administration of the local people. The KDP was the most abusive political actor in Sinjar and imposed its own policies and economic control over the local population with force—democratic elections in Sinjar were largely unknown. Since the Genocide, Yazidis have had a clear message: They want international support in helping them fashion a local, nonpartisan security force that can protect Sinjar and guarantee that no future instance of genocide occurs, as well as the development of a local, Yazidi administration that functions as part of the federal government. These constitute the most significant prerequisites in building a stable homeland that can ensure Yazidi survival in Iraq. Though the opportunity exists to facilitate this (if the international community will get involved), progress has been slow and some Yazidis have been reluctant to return to Sinjar, not because of the threat of IS, but because of the feuding between political factions hoping to dominate Sinjar, which has kept the area unstable. As part of this competition, the KDP implemented an economic blockade for over a year, preventing Yazidi families from bringing basic livelihood and farming goods to their homes in Sinjar—a measure designed to keep the people

in the camps until the KDP could reconsolidate hegemony in Sinjar, but which ultimately failed.

Understandably, this environment is not conducive to the recovery of many survivors and demonstrates the value of a resettlement option.

iv) The Yazidi Family

The realities of the Yazidi family may be uncomfortable for some Yazidis to discuss, but are important for the experience of women who have escaped enslavement. As with families anywhere, each family is different. Some Yazidi families have provided acceptance and care to female family members who have returned from enslavement; others, however, have not treated their returning survivors well. Whereas the Yazidi religious leadership has officially promoted the acceptance of the survivors and mandated that they be embraced as Yazidis who were victimized by IS and who do not bear blame for what happened, issues of stigma and shame can still surface at the level of the individual family. The health of the particular family, therefore, is an important factor determining the well-being of women who have come back.

If a woman has lost most of her male family members in the Genocide and also has children, she may be under the control of her in-laws after returning from captivity. This scenario can be harmful because the autonomy and free agency of women are not always respected by their in-laws. If a woman wants to remain with her children, she must often submit to the “authority” of the family of her in-laws, who may lay claim to the custody of her absent husband’s children. (This has no legal basis but is a cultural tendency that exists separately from the law but which is not uncommon.)

A woman’s own family can also be an unhealthy place for her, in that it can be a kind of prison. Yazidi culture in Sinjar tends to have more relaxed norms than those of the general culture in Iraq on certain gender issues, such as freedom of male-female interactions. Nevertheless, some families can still exhibit repressive tendencies, and as a conservative and traditional farming society, little social mobility exists for most women. In the absence of opportunities for higher education, marriage is often the default path for many women. Quickly reverting to marriage and motherhood at a young age is often not helpful for the recovery of women who have suffered the trauma of enslavement; many of the survivors struggle with motherhood and their children can be negatively affected by the trauma that their mother experienced.

b) What Resettlement Can Offer the Survivors

Resettlement in Canada can help the recovery of Yazidi enslavement survivors in a number of ways. Chiefly, a woman will have the opportunity to build her own life—through education, acquiring skills, and pursuing work—in ways that are not available in her Iraqi context. It is important that a survivor be able to become her own person, rather than continue to exist for the remainder of her life under the perpetual control of male figures. After the experience of enslavement, this is an important part of the healing process. The improved economic environment that a survivor will experience in Canada should not be underestimated as offering survivors a better chance to reclaim their dignity.

In terms of mental health resources, though resettlement may not provide an instantaneous solution to the lack of Kurdish-language therapy options in Iraq, the acquisition of new language skills in the West will be the first step in a process that will allow many women and girls to receive important psychological therapy in the future.

c) Recommendations on Approaching Resettlement

There are several important ways that resettlement can be conducted that will ensure that the process functions smoothly, fairly, and in a way that will benefit the community and the individual survivors.

- i) Bring Family Members along with Survivors: It is important to not bring survivors in isolation from their families but to provide the option for whole families to move together. Some survivors who migrated to Germany without their families reported suffering due to missing their families.
- ii) Build a Cohesive Community: It is important that those being resettled in Canada not be scattered around the country, but placed in a geographical area that will enable them to build a Yazidi community. This is important for enabling them to keep Yazidi tradition and culture alive, and also important for ensuring that survivors have a social support system. This means settling survivors in the same neighborhood; not scattered in multiple locations within a single city. Remember that many of the female survivors have never driven a vehicle. Upon arriving, they should be able to visit each other just by walking. It is important that they not feel isolated or dependent upon others for transportation.
- iii) Proximity to Resources: It is important that survivors be located a reasonable distance from educational, medical, and therapeutic options. I spoke to some survivors that had been resettled in Germany who had only seen a doctor once in six months, not because of the availability of the doctors, but because they were housed far from where the medical options were located and had difficulty navigating the public transportation system.

- iv) Ensure that Women Are Making the Choice to Resettle: As mentioned before, some Yazidis want to resettle while others want to remain in Iraq. Some women may not like the idea of moving away from their homeland and may want to stay in Sinjar. It is important that a survivor herself—and not her male family members—make the choice as to whether she will move to the other side of the world or not. This process should be handled such that it is confirmed that the choice reflects the desire of the survivor, and not the desire of other family members to use her in order to secure visas to another country. The point is that female agency within the resettlement option must be guaranteed.

This can be accomplished by having women inside Iraq work closely with the female survivors being offered the resettlement option. Keep in mind that if the staff of an NGO being used to process resettlement applications for survivors is comprised of primarily male Yazidis (which is often the case), those staff members are naturally going to deal primarily with the male family members of a survivor. The result is that once again, men will be making all of the decisions. Even if male family members bring a female survivor to “confirm” her wish to resettle, it really does not reveal much as to her own private feelings on the matter. Ideally, female Yazidis (speaking Kurdish natively) would receive training on the resettlement process and would then work closely on every case, getting to know each survivor before she completes an application process. Due to the effects of “brain drain” as described above, it may be necessary to recruit and hire Yazidi women now living in North America (or Europe) to go and work on this project in Iraq. There are many active Yazidi women in the US and Canada, some of whom have started their own organizations to help the Yazidi community. It would be ideal to build the resettlement program in such a way that women are working with women to determine who wants to resettle and to complete the application process.

- v) Thoroughly Educate Survivors about What Resettlement Means: Many survivors have unrealistic ideas about the West, based on popular stereotypes. Many do not understand the kind of work that underpins a life in the West. It is important that survivors are educated about what emigration will mean, the new language skills that will need to be acquired, and so forth. Many survivors will embrace these tasks wholeheartedly, but they deserve to know what they are getting into in order to make an informed decision on such a life-changing scale.

- vi) Strengthening Diaspora-Center Ties

It is important to think now about ways that resettlement can be conducted so that the Yazidi cultural center be strengthened, not eroded. One option might be to establish a fund that would help Yazidis in Canada of lower income make a pilgrimage to Lalish (the holiest Yazidi sacred place in Iraq) once every five or ten years.

3. The Urgency of Supporting the Yazidis who Remain in Iraq and the Rebuilding of the Yazidi Homeland

As described in the first part of this report, the Yazidi community today faces a number of threats to the continuity of its tradition in its homeland. It is imperative that any resettlement program be accompanied with a humanitarian counterpart that focuses on strengthening the cohesiveness, recovery, and restoration of the Yazidi component of Iraqi society. There are hundreds of thousands of Yazidis in Iraq; it is not possible (nor their desire) that they all leave. The world, therefore, has a responsibility to assist those who have been affected by the Genocide within the country. This can be done in several ways.

a) Humanitarian Support and Reconstruction

Thousands of families have already returned to Sinjar from the IDP camps but their lives are very difficult due to the destruction of the economy, homes, and infrastructure. Yazidis need basic livelihood support now. They also need longer-term support for reconstruction. IS systematically destroyed thousands of Yazidi homes in Sinjar—governments in the West should assist in the reconstructions of these homes and farms as part of the response to the Yazidi Genocide. There is also a need for schools and for the rebuilding of other destroyed infrastructure. Utilities, especially electrical infrastructure must be repaired and medical services need to be enhanced. There is an immediate need for this to take place at present. The withdrawal of the KDP from Sinjar has simplified the political situation and has opened new doors for humanitarian work to be conducted now.

b) Mental Health Services

It is not only the female survivors of enslavement that have been affected by the Genocide. Most people of all ages and genders experienced significant trauma. Better mental health resources are urgently needed by the Yazidis in Sinjar. Men's needs are particularly neglected because most emphasis is (understandably) placed on serving the needs of the female survivors who were the worst affected.

c) Political Involvement and Development of Administration

Since the fall of Saddam, Sinjar has been a disputed territory, claimed by both Baghdad and Erbil. The KDP imposed external control onto Sinjar which many Yazidis resented. The KDP also used political oppression, the threat of violence, arrests, and other intimidation tactics to punish political opposition. This alienated many Yazidis long prior to the Peshmerga's failure to protect Sinjar on the day the Genocide began.

Yazidis have consistently demanded since August 3, 2014 that the international community support them in creating a local administration in Sinjar with a nonpartisan security force that is managed by their community. (Nonpartisan is the operative word since all Peshmerga forces were party militias with specific political alignments.) The withdrawal of the KDP provides the best opportunity to move forward with this goal that has been seen in the last three years.

However, Western governments that are involved in the response to the Genocide need to step up and engage with the Yazidis and with Baghdad to help facilitate this process.