



## The Yazidi Refugee Crisis

### Background on the Yazidi Humanitarian Crisis

In the early hours of 3 August 2014, IS launched a coordinated attack across the Sinjar region of Northern Iraq, homeland to the Yazidi ethno-religious minority. The attack came from Mosul and Tal Afar in Iraq, and from Al-Shaddadi and the Tel Hamis region in Syria, besieging the population from all four sides. The Kurdish Peshmerga forces mandated to protect the area abandoned bases and checkpoints, leaving the local population unprotected and largely defenseless in the face of IS's advance. In the hours and days that followed, approximately 12,000 Yazidis were killed or abducted by IS. The perpetrators systematically divided Yazidis into different groups:

- Young women and girls, some as young as 9 years of age, were forcibly converted and transferred to and between various holding sites in Iraq and Syria to be used as sabaya (sex slaves) or forced wives by IS fighters, a practice that was officially endorsed and regulated by IS leadership;
- Yazidi boys who had not yet reached puberty were considered to have malleable identities. They were therefore separated from their mothers, brainwashed, radicalized, and trained as child soldiers; and
- Older boys and men who refused to convert to Islam, or in some cases even those who agreed to convert under pressure, as well as some of the older women, were summarily executed by shooting or having their throats cut, their bodies often left onsite or dumped in mass graves. Those who were forced to convert to Islam and spared were relocated by IS to abandoned villages and exploited as forced laborers. IS's attack also caused an estimated 250,000 Yazidis to flee to Mount Sinjar, where they were surrounded by IS for days in temperatures above 40 degrees Celsius. IS prevented any access to food, water or medical care in a deliberate attempt to cause large numbers of deaths. Hundreds of Yazidis perished before a coordinated rescue operation involving Yazidi volunteer defenders, the Syrian Kurdish forces (YPG) and Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), along with an international coalition led by the United States, led to the opening of a safe passage from Mount Sinjar to Syria from 7 to 13 August 2014.

The United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic ('Inquiry on Syria') found that IS's actions against the Yazidis amounted to multiple war crimes and crimes against humanity, as well as genocide. Many states and organizations have already recognized that the crimes committed by IS against the Yazidis constitute genocide. These have included the United Nations, the European Union and the Council of Europe, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, and Scotland.



## The magnitude of displacement

IS's advance over Northern Iraq caused unprecedented levels of forced displacement among the Yazidi population. According to the UN Inquiry on Syria, in the aftermath of the attack 'no free Yazidis remained in the Sinjar region, the 400,000-strong community had all been displaced, captured, or killed'. To this day, there are an estimated 360,000 Yazidis living in camps for internally displaced persons in the KRI, while a further 90,000 have fled from Iraq since 2014. Currently, there are around 1,800 Iraqi-Yazidis in Turkey, 1,500 in Syria and 1,000 in Greece. The number of Syrian-Yazidis who sought refuge in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Europe is unknown.

As IS attacked in August 2014, an estimated 250,000 Yazidis fled to Mount Sinjar. Yazidi villagers left in fear and panic, taking little with them. The Yazidis who reached the upper plateaus of Mount Sinjar were quickly surrounded by IS. A humanitarian crisis unfolded as Yazidi civilians were trapped on the mountain for days and forced to endure extremely hot temperatures with little access to food, water or medical care. Many Yazidis, particularly the most vulnerable - the children and the elderly – died on Mount Sinjar as a result of those extreme conditions, deliberately created by IS via systematic attacks and entrapment.

On 7 August 2014, at the request of the Iraqi Government, an international coalition led by the US, announced military action to help the Yazidis and started dropping water and other supplies to the besieged Yazidis on Mount Sinjar. 42 IS targeted the planes airdropping aid and at the helicopters which attempted to evacuate the most vulnerable Yazidis from the mountains. With nowhere to go, fleeing Yazidis settled on nearby roads, in unfinished buildings and in schools in the KRI, Turkey and Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan). After a few weeks, they were transferred to IDP camps in the KRI and some of them were ultimately able to reach third countries and apply for asylum, or eventually to apply for humanitarian visas from within camps in Turkey and KRI. During the subsequent three years, the level of humanitarian assistance has not been sufficient to meet the needs of displaced Yazidis.

Over 360,000 Yazidis in IDP camps in the KRI live in precarious conditions, and do not receive adequate humanitarian support. Among other concerns, Yazidis in IDP camps in the KRI frequently mention that:

- The tents in which Yazidi families live have not been replaced for nearly three years and many are in a terrible condition. These tents are not warm enough for the next winter;
- Electricity is available only a few hours per day which is especially difficult during summer when average temperatures fall between 40 - 50 C. Heating of tents is another issue;



- The frequent burning of garbage in and nearby camps, and the vicinity of the camps to oil wells, means the quality of the air Yazidis breathe on a daily basis is poor;
- The sanitation profile in the camps is deteriorating, which has led to outbreaks of diseases such as diarrhea, respiratory tract infections and skin diseases. The sewage system requires structural improvements, while access to clean drinking water needs to be guaranteed; and
- Health centers in the camps do not have adequate medicines, medical supplies or specialized staff (including specialist doctors and nurses).

### **Recommendations**

Given the persecution and terror Yazidis are escaping and the challenges they face on a daily basis, we urge the Government of Canada to:

1. Affirm its commitment to refugee resettlement as a life-saving mechanism to protect Yazidis fleeing persecution and unable to return to their homes or rebuild their lives in the country where they have initially fled.
2. Resettle Yazidis who are highly vulnerable including Yazidi men who have escaped ISIS captivity and survivors of mass grave shootings (men with suicidal tendencies due to trauma - even if they were not captives) and women and children with severe trauma related to conflict and displacement (even if they were not captives) and medical cases with a focus on children.
3. Increase the resettlement of Yazidis in Canada. Canada should resettle Yazidis who have already applied for resettlement and have been denied or placed on hold, and identify, process and resettle other Yazidis seeking safety.
4. Issue an exemption for all Yazidis and proactively identify, review and reverse Yazidi denials.
5. Immediately review all Yazidi cases that have been denied to see what exceptions can be made given the extenuating circumstances of Yazidis.
6. Expedite decisions for Yazidi cases that have been on hold to see that Yazidis' stories are fully understood and they can reunite with their families and find safety as soon as possible.
7. Allow local and international NGOs such as Yazda, to work directly with the Government of Canada to process cases for resettlement and bypass the UNHCR. There have been discrepancies within the UNHCR system of selecting and processing resettlement cases. Having local NGOs involved will eliminate these barriers.



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