



Save the Children

A CHILDHOOD OF FEAR: THE IMPACT OF GENOCIDE ON YAZIDI CHILDREN IN SINJAR



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A CHILDHOOD OF FEAR

Introduction

On 3 August 2014, the armed group the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) attacked the Yazidi community of Sinjar. At the time, Sinjar was home to the world's largest population of Yazidis, with an estimated 400,000 living in the region.¹ Within a few days of the attack, an estimated 2.5% of the population, approximately 10,000 people, were either killed or kidnapped.² Throughout the attack ISIS perpetrated gross violations of human rights, child rights, including grave violations, war crimes and crimes against humanity against the Yazidis.³ The United Nations (UN),⁴ the Iraq Parliament,⁵ and the Kurdistan Regional Government,⁶ have recognised the ISIS attack on the Yazidis as an act of genocide.

Children were disproportionately affected by the genocide: Half of all Yazidis executed were children; almost all (93%) of those who died on Mount Sinjar from injuries or lack of food and water were children, and children were much less likely to escape captivity than adults.⁷ Across the governorate, over 5 million Iraqis, including the Yazidi communities, were displaced by the ISIS attack; half of them children.⁸

Yazidi children experienced and witnessed extreme acts of violence. It is well documented⁹ that they were used by ISIS as human shields, suicide bombers, and subjected to extreme acts of physical and emotional abuse, including torture, poisoning, and rape. Younger children were also made to watch the torture and rape of their family members. Yazidi boys were separated from their families and communities and forced to convert to Islam. They were sent to ISIS military camps or training schools to be indoctrinated into ISIS ideologies, and then forcibly recruited and used in battles against their own people. Yazidi girls were abducted, sold, and experienced extreme forms of sexual violence and exploitation. Although children accounted for a third of total abductees, they account for less than a fifth of those who have escaped.

RECOGNITION AS GENOCIDE

In May 2021, the United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD) concluded that "there is clear and convincing evidence that the crimes against the Yazidi people clearly constituted genocide".¹⁰ As well as the United Nations¹¹, a number of national governments and parliaments have recognised the treatment of the Yazidi as genocide.

¹ Cetorelli, V., Sasson, I., Shabila, N. and Burnham, G., 2017. [Mortality and kidnapping estimates for the Yazidi population in the area of Mount Sinjar, Iraq, in August 2014: A retrospective household survey](#). PLoS medicine, 14(5), p.e1002297.

² *Ibid.*

³ See, for example, HRC 32nd session, [ISIS crimes against the Yazidis](#)

⁴ See, for example, HRC 32nd session, [ISIS crimes against the Yazidis: United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes committed by Da'esh/ISIL \(UNITAD\)](#). <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/05/1091662>

⁵ United Nations. 30 September 2021. [Iraq: 'Moral obligation' to ensure justice for Yazidi and other survivors of ISIL crimes](#).

⁶ 3 August 2021. [A message from the KRG on the Yazidi genocide](#).

⁷ Cetorelli, V., Sasson, I., Shabila, N. and Burnham, G., 2017. [Mortality and kidnapping estimates for the Yazidi population in the area of Mount Sinjar, Iraq, in August 2014: A retrospective household survey](#). PLoS medicine, 14(5), p.e1002297.

⁸ UN OCHA. 2017. [The UN remains deeply concerned for the safety of civilian populations](#).

⁹ See, for example, HRC 32nd session, [ISIS crimes against the Yazidis](#)

¹⁰ <https://press.un.org/en/2021/sc14514.doc.htm>

¹¹ The United Nations first concluded that the treatment of the Yazidi people by ISIS constituted genocide in a 2016 report, "[They Came to Destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis](#)," presented to the Human Rights Council, June 2016. The terminology has since been shared by a range of UN agencies including the [UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#), the [Office of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General on Sexual Violence in Conflict](#), [UN Women](#), the [Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Iraq](#), and [UN in Iraq](#).

- In March 2021, the Parliament of Iraq passed the Yazidi Survivors' Law, which states that the crimes against the Yazidi "are considered as a genocide".¹² The Kurdistan Regional Government shares this description.¹³
- Other governments and parliaments to have made this determination include: the European Parliament¹⁴, the United States' Department of State¹⁵, the US House of Representatives¹⁶, and the Parliaments of the UK¹⁷, Australia¹⁸, the Netherlands¹⁹, Canada²⁰, France²¹, Belgium²², and Armenia²³.

Who are the Yazidis?

The Yazidis are an ethnic and religious minority group, the majority of whom live in northern Iraq, primarily in Nineveh Governorate, as well as in Syria and Turkey. Yazidis are predominantly ethnically Kurdish, and speak a shared dialect of the Kurdish language called Kurmanji. The Yazidi is a closed religion; it does not accept the conversion of outsiders into the faith. To be Yazidi, a child must be born to a Yazidi father and mother. Knowledge of the religion is transferred from one generation to another through oral stories. Historically, the Yazidi community has been widely misunderstood, and has repeatedly experienced extreme violence and persecution.

THE RESEARCH

While much has been documented around the impacts of the genocide on adults, and particularly women and the sexual violence experienced at the hands of ISIS, there has been less exploration of the impacts of the genocide on younger children, and in particular vulnerable groups of child survivors. Many of the Yazidi children who were very young or just infants when they lost mothers, fathers, siblings, and extended family to the genocide are now aged between 7 and 17 years old. **Their first decade of life has been characterised by intense grief, loss, and fear.**

In the second half of 2021, Save the Children in Iraq initiated research to explore the impacts of the 2014 genocide on young children, and how it has affected their childhoods in the eight years since. Save the Children spoke with 33 caregivers (17 women; 16 men) and 117 children (58 girls; 59 boys):

- a third, now adolescents, who were school-aged when the genocide took place;
- a third who were very young in 2014, and now in their formative school years; and
- a third who would have been infants or not yet born during the genocide.

¹² [Yazidi Survivors Law](#) - Full text English translation

¹³ 3 August 2021. [A message from the KRG on the Yazidi genocide.](#)

¹⁴ European Parliament [resolution](#) of 4 February 2016 on the systematic mass murder of religious minorities by the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh'

¹⁵ [Remarks on Daesh and Genocide](#), Secretary John Kerry, US Department of State, 17 March 2016

¹⁶ [Defining certain atrocities as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide](#), Congressional record Vol 162, No.40 (House - March 14, 2016)

¹⁷ [Daesh: Genocide of Minorities](#), Hansard Vol. 608: debated on Wednesday 20 April 2016

¹⁸ [The pain of hearing: Australia's Parliament recognises Yazidi genocide](#), Lowy Institute, 8 March 2018

¹⁹ [Recognition of crimes committed against the Yazidi as genocide](#), Yazidi Legal Network, 1 July 2021

²⁰ [Hansard](#) (Parliament of Canada), Number 097, 25 October 2016

²¹ Proposition de [resolution](#) invitant le Gouvernement a utiliser toutes les voles de droit pour reconnaitre les crimes de genocide...', du Senat le 14 Novembre 2016

²² [Belgian Parliament recognises Yazidi genocide](#), ANF News, 1 July 2021

²³ [Armenia recognises genocide of Yazidis in Iraq](#), France 24, 16 January 2018

Further, Save the Children undertook a comprehensive review of the literature, applying a child rights lens to the impacts and consequences of the genocide on children, directly or indirectly through the experiences, losses, and traumas of their families.

THE IMPACTS OF GENOCIDE ON YOUNG YAZIDI CHILDREN

A childhood of fear

"I fear that what happened to us in 2014 and what ISIS did to us will be repeated, and I fear that the bombing of the area will be repeated."

- 7-10 year old girl

Eight years on, many Yazidi children in Sinjar are still displaced from their communities. They live in unsafe environments where they are surrounded by physical reminders of the violence experienced at the hands of ISIS, including destroyed homes, schools and hospitals.

"When I wake up in the morning I see exploding and demolished houses."

- 7-10 year old girl

Children of all ages told Save the Children about their fears and the lack of safety and security in their daily lives. Amongst adolescents, 39 of the 40 Save the Children spoke with reported they do not feel safe where they live.

The list of fears shared by children is long and pervasive, affecting all aspects of their childhoods. Children reported fearing:

- Bombings
- Abductions
- ISIS and other armed groups
- Sexual violence or harassment
- Recruitment
- Lack of education or feeling unsafe at school
- The destruction of their homes
- Further family loss or separation
- Their neighbours
- Being on the streets, or in the mountains
- Unsafe water and not having enough to eat
- **That the conflict will not end.**

These fears speak to the day-to-day reality of Yazidi children, and of the present state of their living conditions. Their communities are not safe, particularly as Sinjar remains a disputed territory. Many children continue to experience aerial bombardments and attacks, as well as the presence of armed forces and armed groups in their communities.

Each day there are injuries or deaths caused by explosive remnants of war littered across Sinjar.²⁴ Children and caregivers expressed fears of kidnapping; caregivers reported withholding their children from school out of fears for their safety and of being abducted.

"We do not feel safe because there are many problems in the area, that is, it is subject to bombing, and we are afraid of the recurrence of ISIS's return and from outlaw parties."

- 15-17 year old boy

"The area is not safe, I feel afraid of children being kidnapped by armed groups."

- 15-17 year old boy

"Every day we see young children carrying weapons and working with the security forces – armed groups, and they are still young, less than 18 years old."

- 7-10 year old boy

In addition, children of all ages and their caregivers spoke clearly of how difficult their lives are with little-to-no access to basic services and needs, such as schools or hospitals, either because they are too far away or do not exist. For children, this translates to the ongoing denial of their rights to education, to health, to safety and security.

Caregivers shared many of the same fears reported by children, with one stark addition, a direct consequence of the genocide and its impact on their community in the eight years since: **the fear that their children will have no future.**

THE MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS ON YAZIDI CHILDREN

The insecurity, uncertainty, and fears for the future – both real and perceived – are a commonly reported source of anxiety and distress for Yazidi children. Protracted uncertainty and stressors can have extremely negative effects on children, resulting in a range of negative physical and mental health outcomes from which children do not easily recover.

Critically, children can also be affected by the mental health impacts of the genocide on their caregivers and the adults in their lives. Children observe and absorb: described as “reservoirs of their parent’s trauma”.²⁵ The effects of inter-generational trauma can carry forward, for decades, not only affecting children’s own childhoods, but also their ability to grow into well-adjusted, contributing members of their communities, and impacting how they will care for their own children.

The children who spoke with Save the Children were aware of both the poor mental health of their peers, as well as the adults in their lives. They referred to the “psychological wounds that affected some of the individuals due to the conflict”. Children also described caregivers as depressed, withdrawn, and lacking in empathy. They described having difficulty communicating their feelings and emotions with their parents.

²⁴ MAG. 3 August 2020. [MAG phone calls help Yazidi families returning to mine-ridden Sinjar.](#)

²⁵ Fritzemeyer, K., 2017. "...yes, it's difficult, because we have to satisfy her heart" Exploring Transgenerational Effects of Collective Persecution and Genocide in Kurdistan-Iraq. *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, 14(1), pp.7-21.

"The behaviour of some families with relatively cold feelings, as it does not affect them, for example, when their children cry. Many of the post-war generation lack parental love in their childhood."

- 11-14 year old girl

"Children find it difficult to communicate emotionally with their parents and feel fear and insecurity."

- 15-17 year old girl

To overcome the trauma of the genocide, caregivers and their children need stability, security, a sense of orientation, and self-esteem.²⁶ Yet, despite the extensive documentation of the violations and horrors children experienced during the genocide, few studies have looked specifically at the mental health needs of Yazidi children. Worse still, there are a dearth of services to assist both children and caregivers in dealing with the trauma and aftermath of the genocide. This is more acute for particularly vulnerable groups of children, such as those who were abducted by ISIS.

THE IMPACTS OF ABDUCTION ON YAZIDI CHILDREN

For the Yazidi community, the impact of the abduction of its children, compounded by the grave violations they experienced in captivity - girls experiencing extreme forms of sexual violence and exploitation, boys being forced to engage in combat - are severe and acute. As a closed community, the loss of their dialect, culture, and religion with so many children is significant. Language barriers in particular are raised as challenges as some children have forgotten their Kurdish and the Kurmanji dialect - or were born in captivity and never learned it - making it difficult to communicate and connect with their families and reintegrate into their communities. Abducted children may eat differently, dress differently, and pray differently. These differences can exacerbate the stigma, isolation, shame, and rejection children experience upon their return.

Save the Children did not speak directly with abducted children, child survivors of sexual violence or recruitment, due to the risk of re-traumatization and the lack of available support services to which to refer children. Instead, findings from perspectives shared voluntarily by children and caregivers we spoke to are presented, as well as the available literature.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST THE ABDUCTED YAZIDI CHILDREN

"There is clear anxiety after the conflict. These events affected girls and women in the worst ways, as they were subjected to rape, kidnapping, and all kinds of abuse."

- male caregiver

ISIS systematically used sexual violence as a weapon against Yazidi women and girls. Girls as young as age nine were subjected to mass rape, sexual enslavement, forced impregnation, torture, and infanticide. The mental health impacts on girl survivors include post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, as well as other severe physical and mental

²⁶ Kizilhan, J.I. and Wenzel, T., 2020. Positive psychotherapy in the treatment of traumatised Yazidi survivors of sexualised violence and genocide. *International review of psychiatry*, 32(7- 8), pp.594-605.

health outcomes. Sexual violence was raised by children as they discussed their fears, and by caregivers speaking to the needs of child survivors.

“...the girls who were victims of ISIS harassment have left school and they need psychological and financial support...”

- female caregiver

The experiences and needs of *young* girls abducted by ISIS are not well understood or addressed. As a consequence, services for survivors of sexual violence are not tailored – or at times even available – for the specific needs of younger girls. Instead, these focus more on women. There is even less understanding on boys who experienced sexual violence, or of the children who were born in captivity. Both children and caregivers noted that the services and programmes available are insufficient and do not meet the urgent and overwhelming needs of child survivors.

THE ABDUCTED YAZIDI CHILDREN FORCIBLY RECRUITED

“I was forced to fight. I had to do it or die. I didn’t have any other option... When I came back... no one gave me any support. Of course, I would like to have psychological support now, I could really use it. It’s very important to give other young men and boys psychological support as well. But some of them have lost legs, hands, parts of their bodies, or they have shrapnel still stuck in their bodies. The psychological support alone is not enough for them – they have financial needs and basic health care needs too.”

- 15-year-old boy, as told to Amnesty International²⁷

ISIS systematically and forcibly separated boys as young as seven from their families and sent them to institutes or camps to be trained for combat and indoctrinated into their ideology. Using methods and techniques used in other conflicts, such as Afghanistan and Mali, ISIS perpetuated its genocide in Iraq by actively working to erase and replace the culture, dialect, and identities of the abducted Yazidi children. This indoctrination can have deep-rooted impacts on children, their families, and communities. Children can suffer significant emotional distress and adjustment difficulties. They may be isolated and stigmatized from and by their communities and families.

Similar to the girls abducted by ISIS, there is limited information and services tailored to the specific needs of boys abducted by ISIS. The implications for not providing adequate care and support for reintegration and rehabilitation can be significant, putting children at risk of loss of developmental potential and long-term mental health problems²⁸.

THE ABDUCTED YAZIDI CHILDREN STILL MISSING

“Return of the kidnapped and kidnapped from captivity.”

- 11-14 year old boy

²⁷ Amnesty International. 2020. [Legacy of Terror: The Plight of Yazidi Child Survivors of ISIS](#).

²⁸ Kizilhan, J.I., 2019. Providing psychosocial care to child soldiers living in post-IS Iraq. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT).

“The return of the kidnapped women from the hands of the terrorist ISIS.”

- 11-14 year old girl

Nearly 2,800 Yazidis, many children, remain missing after having been abducted by ISIS.²⁹ Children of all ages shared with Save the Children their hopes for their missing and separated family members to be returned – those who remain missing following abduction, as well as those separated through displacement as a result of the genocide.

“I lost my brother in the war and I tell myself he will come back one day.”

- 15-17 year old adolescent boy

Many expressed their desire to return home, to live once again with their families and friends, in their communities as they used to, and “live in peace”.

THE IMPACT ON CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

“We think about learning the same as those who get it in other areas.”

- 7-10 year old girl

Yazidi children told us that they want to learn. Yet, eight years on, they continue to be denied their right to education. While many of the barriers to accessing education are shared with other Iraqi children – such as financial barriers, overcrowding, the lack of quality materials and textbooks, staffing shortages – some are unique to children who experienced the genocide. Half of all school in the conflict-affected areas were destroyed during the war with ISIS.³⁰ For many Yazidi children, their closest schools sit empty, bombed and destroyed. Distances to functioning schools are far for most Yazidi children, and both parents and children alike have safety concerns and fear sending children to attend schools that are farther away.

“The fear of our sons and daughters going to distant schools because of the fear of kidnapping.”

- female caregiver

“The lack of schools in the area is the biggest challenge for girls. We are afraid of the unknown future because most girls have left school”

- female caregiver

²⁹ International Commission on Missing Persons (icmp). 11 December 2011. [ICMP and Nadia's Initiative Launch Collaborative Effort to Help Families of Missing Persons.](#)

³⁰ Iraq Education Cluster. 2019. [Education Cluster Strategy.](#)

Civil documentation also hinders Yazidi children from going to school. Many Yazidi children and adults lost their identity documents during the genocide; younger children may not have been registered at birth. Without these documents, children cannot access basic services, like education, child protection, and health. The process for obtaining new documentation can be expensive and cumbersome. For children born as a result of ISIS sexual violence, an even greater challenge is posed: In Iraq, proof of paternity for children with unmarried parents is required at registration. Barring this, a child is registered as Muslim, rendering them both legally and culturally non-Yazidi, further stigmatizing them.³¹

Language of schooling is a complex and significant challenge for Yazidi children. One of the greatest impacts of the genocide on children is that as a community they no longer have a shared language and dialect. Some abducted children forgot – or in the case of children born of war, never learned – Kurdish and the Kurmanji dialect. Others are triggered by Arabic, associating it with ISIS fighters or the indoctrination camps to which they were subjected. Unless educational options, including accelerated learning programmes, are offered in both languages, a subset of Yazidi children will always be excluded.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Yazidi children continue to live in fear of what they and their families experienced at the hands of ISIS, and what they experience in their daily lives now. Their fundamental rights as children are still denied. The urgent care and support they need to help process their trauma and heal are still grossly lacking. Many children are still missing. If nothing changes, the impacts of the genocide on Yazidi children will only deepen.

To help protect all Yazidi children from further fear and impacts of the genocide:

- Yazidi children need justice, accountability, and reparations for the grave violations, crimes against humanity, and war crimes perpetrated against them during the genocide.
- Child survivors of abduction, sexual violence, and recruitment need a range of focused interventions and services that address their multi-faceted needs - including health, mental health, and education services, supported by dedicated social workers. These must be complementary, inclusive and community based.
- Yazidi children must have access to good quality education in a safe environment within their communities, to help normalise their lives and give them opportunities to reintegrate together.
- Yazidi children and families require new or replacement civil documentation, and access to the basic needs and services that this documentation facilitates.

Specifically, Save the Children is calling on the international community, including donors and humanitarian actors, to work with the Government of Iraq and Kurdistan Regional Government to:

- Ensure all accountability mechanisms include gender and child-dedicated expertise, and address in full the specific needs and experiences of children. This applies to both national and international, judicial and non-

³¹ Amnesty International. 2020. [Legacy of Terror: The Plight of Yazidi Child Survivors of ISIS](#).

judicial mechanisms. Where applicable and necessary, States should exercise Universal Jurisdiction to prosecute perpetrators of crimes against Yazidi children.³²

- Locate and reunite the missing Yazidi children and women with their families.
- Ensure that implementation of the Government of Iraq's Law No. 8 (2021), the Yazidi Survivors Law, extends to *a//*Yazidi child survivors, including children born of war.
- Establish, and fund in full, a range of complementary and inclusive community-based and focused interventions, including integrated mental health and psychosocial support services, for Yazidi child survivors to successfully reintegrate in their communities.
- Invest in quality education and access, and re-build, as a matter of priority, education infrastructure in Yazidi communities.
- Ensure entry points for Yazidi child survivors of sexual violence and recruitment to re-enter the education system, including mental health and psychosocial services supported by dedicated social workers.

Save the Children is calling on the Government of Iraq to:

- Facilitate all processes hindering Yazidi children from securing civil documentation, and in the interim ensure full and unrestricted access to basic needs and rights, such as education and health, for those without documentation.
- Amend all relevant Iraqi laws to allow the mothers of children born of war to choose the religion of their children at registration.

SAVE THE CHILDREN IN IRAQ

The Yazidi are among approximately 1.2 million people who remain displaced following the ISIS attacks and subsequent military operations of 2014-2017.³³ Many are acutely vulnerable children, all of whom experience high levels of poverty and barriers to accessing their right to health, education, and protection. As Iraq transitions from a post-conflict context towards stability and reconstruction, it is vital to remember the many children in Iraq who remain in a conflict-affected state, and are in dire need of ongoing, sustained humanitarian assistance.

Operational in Iraq since 1991, Save the Children is among the largest international NGOs responding to multi-sectoral humanitarian, recovery, and development needs of children, youth, and their families – including Iraqis displaced by conflict, Syrian refugees, and host and returnees' communities.

³² Universal Jurisdiction is a legal principle that enables national prosecutions of international crimes, even when the accused party has no connection to the prosecuting country. It has successfully been used in Germany to secure the [convictions](#) of individuals responsible for genocide against the Yazidi people.

³³ https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/iraq_humanitarian_response_plan_2022_-_issued_27_march.pdf