

# Yezidi Minorities Continue to Suffer after the Defeat of the Caliphate

by [Diliman Abdulkader \(/experts/diliman-abdulkader\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Diliman Abdulkader \(/experts/diliman-abdulkader\)](#)

Diliman Abdulkader is the co-founder and spokesperson for American Friends of Kurdistan, a Washington-based advocacy and education organization working to enhance American-Kurdish relations. Abdulkader is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

The reign of terror that ISIS conducted in their self-proclaimed caliphate shocked the world's conscious to the point that sworn enemies marshaled their resources to defeat the threat. Yet as Kelley E. Currie, senior State Department appointee and representative to the United Nations Economic and Social Council, stated at a recent USIP (<https://www.congress.gov/nomination/115th-congress/689>) talk with Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Nadia Murad, "The conflict isn't over until the healing of the people is done." The same efforts marshaled against the military threat of ISIS will be required to heal the physical and emotional wounds of the caliphate's countless victims.

Although Iraq proclaimed an end to the 'caliphate' in 2017, scars remain etched in Yezidi population's collective memory. Though [August 2019 will mark five years since the genocide took place; Yezidis continue to struggle \(https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/playing-dead-how-one-man-survived-massacre\)](https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/playing-dead-how-one-man-survived-massacre). The campaign against the Yezidi community brought immeasurable misery to the lives of thousands of individuals. Sectarian tensions mixed with religious intolerance led to the destruction of the ancient [Yezidi community in the Shingal District, Nineveh Governorate in Iraq \(https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/playing-dead-how-one-man-survived-massacre\)](https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/playing-dead-how-one-man-survived-massacre). Yezidi girls were forced into sex slavery, used as human shields, drugged, and indoctrinated, while men and older women were dumped into mass graves by the thousands. [Many remain missing, while those who survived continue to endure the grievances forced upon them. \(https://www.npr.org/2019/03/14/702650912/freed-from-isis-few-yazidis-return-to-suffering-families-many-remain-missing\)](https://www.npr.org/2019/03/14/702650912/freed-from-isis-few-yazidis-return-to-suffering-families-many-remain-missing)

Prior to the ISIS attack in 2014 (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/playing-dead-how-one-man-survived-massacre>), the Yezidi population was around 400,000 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/12/iraqi-yazidis-hazy-population-numbers-and-a-history-of-persecution/>). The United Nations estimates that nearly 10,000 were killed or abducted (<https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/press-release/four-years-after-daeshs-attacks-on-the-sinjar-region-of-iraq-survivors-of-sexual-violence-still-await-justice/>) and 6,400 were kidnapped in the wake of this attack (<https://www.jww.org/conflict-areas/iraq-yazidis/>). Yazda, a Yezidi awareness organization, reported similarly grim numbers, estimating the number of those killed at

12,000. According to the UN, 3,000 woman and girls are still missing. Today, **a majority of the remaining population are internally displaced in Iraqi Kurdistan (<https://www.npr.org/2019/03/14/702650912/freed-from-isis-few-yazidis-return-to-suffering-families-many-remain-missing>) or live in refugee camps in northeastern Syria (<https://www.npr.org/2019/03/14/702650912/freed-from-isis-few-yazidis-return-to-suffering-families-many-remain-missing>)**. Those who were able to **flee the region now reside across Europe and the United States (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/terrorized-by-isis-yazidi-refugees-find-welcoming-community-in-nebraska>)**.

The persecution of the Yazidis gained international attention, with U.S. Congress passing several bills related to support for Yazidis. In 2016, congress unanimously voted 393-0 to assist Christians, Yazidis, and other religious minorities living in ISIS-controlled areas with the **Justice for Yazidis Act (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/379/text?format=txt>)**. In 2018, it passed the **Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief Accountability Act (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/390?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22hr+390%22%5D%7D&r=1>)**, which “authorizes U.S. government agencies to provide humanitarian, stabilization, and recovery assistance for nationals and residents of Iraq and Syria, in particular ethnic and minority individuals at risk of persecution or war crimes.” The law also authorizes U.S. agencies to aid in prosecuting crimes related to these acts.

Nevertheless, the Yazidis still left in Iraq are caught in a power struggle between Baghdad and Erbil, while also navigating a constant tug of war between Iranian-backed Shiite militias. **The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), Iraqi security forces, Kurdish Peshmerga forces, and groups linked to the Kurdistan Workers Party (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/23/isis-may-be-gone-but-iraqs-yazidis-are-still-suffering-sinjar-ezidxan-pmu-nadia-murad/>)** (PKK)—designated by the United states and the European Union as a terrorist organization—and Turkey have all attempted to persuade Yazidis that they can provide the best security, though it was **PKK forces that provided the immediate security to Yazidis in 2014 when many other forces fled from both Baghdad and Erbil (<https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/After-pivotal-role-saving-Yazidis-from-ISIS-PKK-leaves-Sinjar-547874>)**.

Despite these competing attempts to be seen as the protectors of Yazidi minorities, a majority of the community continues to face harsh conditions. In the words of the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General for Iraq **Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert (<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/9ac5ed10-cc03-4cd5-976e-5efbbfa5fd99>)**, “I was shocked to see that now, nearly five years after the capture of Sinjar by Daesh (Islamic State) and the area’s subsequent liberation, many people are still living in tents, on the very mountain top they fled to at the onset of the terror campaign.”

Yet Yazidis fear that a return to their historical home region of Sinjar would have dire consequences. **The International Crisis Group (<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/183-winning-post-isis-battle-iraq-sinjar>)** reported that the PMF is believed to have the “political and military upper hand [in the area] and is providing a corridor for Iran to gain access to Syria.” In a 2018 **Foreign Policy piece (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/23/isis-may-be-gone-but-iraqs-yazidis-are-still-suffering-sinjar-ezidxan-pmu-nadia-murad/>)**, the Yazidi Ezidخان Protection Force deputy commander Edo Haydar Murad confirmed this assessment the PMF in Sinjar: “they want to use this area to control the top of the mountain, they want to control Israel, they want to control everything.”

On a more hopeful note, Yazidi leaders have managed to **secure four posts in the recently announced Kurdistan Regional Government cabinet (<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/3f6d2941-f96b-486a-802e-d42b7e4b823a>)**. KRG Prime Minister designate Masrour Barzani has reportedly approved the positions of deputy minister, minister for Yazidi affairs, adviser to Kurdistan’s parliament leadership to Yazidi affairs and director of general Yazidi affairs. And while it is difficult to assess whether the granting of such positions is more symbolic or if

the positions will carry authority, the latter circumstance may allow for Yazidis to exert a stronger influence on their own matters. Many Yazidis hope to hold accountable those responsible for the genocide, provide reparations for their family members, obtain security guarantees for their territories, and possibly pursue greater autonomy within Iraq.

Given the ongoing challenges facing Yazidis who hope to return to Sinjar, many Yazidis are now building communities outside of Iraq. In particular, those living within the United States enjoy the comfort of religious liberty, which is why the Yazidi diaspora have witnessed a period of rebuilding in America, away from the horrors of ISIS.

Lincoln, Nebraska is home to the largest Yazidi population in the United States and is numbered at around 3,000 people. There, the Yazidi population has started a new life while attempting to send assistance to their families back in the Middle East. Yazidi community activist [Khalaf Hesso](#)

[\(https://jewishjournal.com/cover\\_story/228865/diaspora-born-nebraska/\)](https://jewishjournal.com/cover_story/228865/diaspora-born-nebraska/) explains that members of the community “weren’t sure whether to stay here or move to the Middle East again. Then suddenly, all the Yazidis started coming here.” Knowing the small likelihood of being able to return home in the foreseeable future, the first action among community members was to build a cemetery—a strong statement when communities in the diaspora used to send bodies back to Iraq for burial.

The uncertainty of Sinjar—combined with the opportunities available in Lincoln—has encouraged family members to build their community, assist newcomers, and raise awareness of Yazidi issues, all while continuing to celebrate Yazidi traditions. As Yazda vice president [Hadi Pir \(https://jewishjournal.com/cover\\_story/228865/diaspora-born-nebraska/\)](https://jewishjournal.com/cover_story/228865/diaspora-born-nebraska/) explains, “the community has had enough suffering. We need to feel how we felt in Iraq—to have at least a little bit of normalcy.” Americans must continue to encourage stability and support for those who have suffered under such circumstances, as fair treatment and justice for the Yazidi minority community is critical in establishing regional norms that will provide a degree of stability in the Middle East. ❖

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