

Iraq's City of Orphans

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

The world came to the rescue of the refugees on Mount Sinjar, so why does it continue to ignore thousands more Iraqi minorities who face imminent threat of extermination by jihadists?

In northern Iraq, fighters from the Islamic State (IS) have besieged thousands of men, women, and children. For eight weeks, these people have been under daily attack and are now running dangerously short of food and water. They cannot get their elderly, sick, or wounded past the jihadist blockade -- and those that try to escape are often never heard from again. It is only a matter of time before they are overrun and massacred.

The world's attention has been focused on the plight of the Yazidis on Mount Sinjar, where the international community has mobilized to extract around 5,000 civilians under attack by Islamic State fighters, and President Barack Obama's administration has authorized airstrikes to rescue them.

But the plight I'm describing is in Amerli, a hardscrabble town of wheat and barley farmers located 200 miles southeast of Mount Sinjar, just outside of the city of Tuz Khurmatu. While the assistance from the international community and Iraq's Kurds has been largely successful in lifting the siege on the refugees on Mount Sinjar, nobody is providing assistance to the 12,000 Shiite Turkmen trapped behind IS lines.

This is Iraq's other humanitarian crisis, the one no one seems to care about.

Amerli lacks the drama of the Yazidi exodus to Mount Sinjar, but it is a bona fide humanitarian disaster. Its residents, 70 percent of whom are Shiite of Turkmen ethnicity, were persecuted by Saddam Hussein's regime for their Shiite identity -- and then attacked by the jihadist forerunners of IS, al Qaeda in Iraq, for the same reason. On July 7, 2007, al Qaeda attacked Amerli with 4.5 tons of explosives buried in a truck under a load of watermelons, killing 159 civilians and wounding over 350. Virtually everyone in the close-knit, multi-ethnic town lost a relative that day, making Amerli a city of orphans.

Now the latest incarnation of murderous jihadists is back to finish the job.

My connection to Amerli began with visits to the Tuz area before U.S. forces departed in 2011. I have been going back ever since, and have stayed in contact with people in the area, who are reaching out with ever greater desperation to tell their stories by cell phone, radio, and messengers coming and going by helicopter.

On June 20, 10 days after the fall of Mosul, IS fighters started to overrun Turkmen villages surrounding Amerli. By July 15, only Amerli was left unconquered -- the last bastion out of 31 Shiite villages in the area, cut off from an escape route to either the Shiite south or the Kurdish north. Since July 17, the densely-populated town has received daily rocket attacks. The town's defenders, around 400 local men armed solely with AK-47s, have beaten off many IS attacks, including a day-long assault that nearly succeeded on Aug. 3.

Accounts of the suffering in Amerli are shocking. The jihadists cut power to the town on July 22, and the water aqueduct from the IS-held town of Suleiman Beg was shut down two days later. Sweltering in 120 degree heat with only a trickle of hand-drawn well water to sustain them, the town's old, sick, and young began to die. The sole junior physician and handful of nurses are operating under nightmarish conditions. The town has also begun to starve, both for lack of food and the depletion of cooking gas bottles.

The only way to get supplies into Amerli or to get the sick out is by Iraqi military helicopter, which comes twice a week. The single helicopter makes a 220-mile round-trip from Baghdad, and can only bring enough food to provide a daily ration of less than one pound per family. To an even greater extent than Mount Sinjar, the flights into Amerli are hazardous: The small landing zone is under observation from IS positions just a mile away. Incoming helicopters are rocketed, sparking a mad dash each time one arrives. One Turkmen doctor recently told the story of how the 88-year-old father of a friend made it onto a helicopter, but was too frail to survive the flight and died en route to a hospital in Baghdad. Turkmen in Amerli also told me that a child -- one of around 7,400 in the enclave -- recently died on the landing zone waiting for her ride out.

Aside from these Iraqi helicopter airlifts, outside help has been minimal. Iraqi airstrikes have peppered IS-held villages in the area to little apparent effect; they only seem to be successful in prompting the jihadists to intensify rocket attacks on Amerli, apparently in revenge. The anemic Iraqi Army is stalled around 20 miles to the south at the town of Udaim -- only a half hour's drive away on a good day -- but have not made any headway in almost six weeks of inconclusive skirmishes. Shiite Turkmen militias from the city of Tuz Khurmatu, just 12 miles to the north, tried to relieve Amerli on Aug. 8, but were massacred when their untrained pickup truck-mounted fighters stumbled into an IS T-55 tank just four miles short of the town's perimeter defences, a fatal mismatch that resulted in 15 men killed and 59 wounded out of a force of 250 fighters.

The people of Amerli are reaching the end of their strength, and the Islamic State's jackals are waiting for their chance to overrun the town. Everybody there knows the fate of nearby Turkmen villages captured by the jihadists: When IS overran the Shiite Turkmen parts of towns like Tal Afar and Bashir it separated families, killed many of the men and boys, and took women and girls away to an unknown fate. In one compelling dispatch from the town of Tuz Khurmatu, a man called Qassem Ibrahim Ali recounted how he sent his son, wife, two teenage daughters, and their three-year-old to escape in their car. His daughters were returned amid a heap of decomposing corpses, and the others were not seen again. On Aug. 7, IS sought out survivors from these massacres at a Kirkuk refugee camp and hit them again with two car bombs, killing six and wounding 37.

These Turkmen ask why their traditional benefactor, Turkey, has apparently disowned them, why the Yazidis leap-frogged over them in the queue for urgent international relief, and why they are any less deserving of life than the other minorities that U.S. aircraft are currently protecting with daily airstrikes.

The reality is that U.S. airpower and Kurdish forces, working with local Turkmen volunteers, could relieve Amerli in a

day. The distance between Amerli and safety in the Kurdistan region is currently the same as the drive from the White House to the Pentagon. For U.S. protection of the Yazidis on Mount Sinjar to be more than a stunt, Washington must extend its support to other minorities, especially if only a minimal amount of military support would be decisive, as is the case at Amerli.

On Aug. 13, in preparation for expanded U.S. military support to the Yazidis on Mount Sinjar, Deputy National Security Advisor Benjamin Rhodes emphasized that expanded intervention was necessary because "we don't believe it's sustainable to have permanent airdrops" of humanitarian aid.

If this is true in Sinjar, where around 5,000 people are waiting for U.S. and Kurdish forces to open up a humanitarian corridor or airlift, it is doubly true in Amerli, a hellish cauldron where 12,000 people are being starved and bombed by ISIS.

Michael Knights is a Boston-based Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖

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