



THE YAZIDI GENOCIDE

A Report on Crimes Committed by the Islamic State

*By the Independent International Commission of Inquiry
on the Syrian Arab Republic*

In the early hours of August 3, 2014, fighters from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) flooded out of their bases in Syria and Iraq, and swept across the Sinjar region of northern Iraq. There, hundreds of villages were scattered around the foot of Mount Sinjar, an arid one-hundred-kilometer-long mountain range, which forms the region's heart. Lying less than fifteen kilometers from the Syrian border, Sinjar is home to the majority of the world's Yazidis, a distinct religious community whose beliefs and practice span thousands of years, and whose adherents ISIS publicly reviles as infidels.

The ISIS attack was well organized with hundreds of fighters acting in concert with each other as they seized towns and villages on all sides of the mountain. As they moved into Sinjar, ISIS fighters faced little or no resistance. The Iraqi Kurdish forces, the peshmerga, reportedly withdrew in the face of the ISIS advance, leaving much of the region defenseless. As word spread that the peshmerga had left their checkpoints, ad hoc groups of lightly armed local Yazidi men mounted a limited defense of some villages in an attempt to give their families and neighbors more time to escape. By day-break, Yazidi families from hundreds of villages across Sinjar were fleeing their homes in fear and panic. They took little with them. Others were advised by Arab neighbors to stay in the villages and raise white flags over their houses.

By the time ISIS entered Sinjar, there were few military objectives in the region. ISIS fighters focused their attention on capturing Yazidis. After controlling the main roads and all strategic junctions, fighters set up checkpoints and sent mobile patrols to search for fleeing Yazidi families. Within hours, Yazidis who had been unable to escape to the nearby city of Duhok found themselves encircled by armed, black-clad ISIS fighters.

◁ Yazidis observe the religious new year, Lalish, Iraq, April 19, 2016. *Andrea Diczno/European Pressphoto Agency*

Those who fled early enough to reach the upper plateau of Mount Sinjar were besieged by ISIS. A humanitarian crisis quickly unfolded as ISIS trapped tens of thousands of Yazidi men, women, and children in temperatures rising above 50 degrees Celsius and prevented them from accessing water, food, or medical care. On August 7, 2014, at the request of the Iraqi government, President Barack Obama announced American military action to help the Yazidis trapped on Mount Sinjar. American, Iraqi, British, French, and Australian forces were involved in airdrops of water and other supplies to the besieged Yazidis. ISIS fighters shot at planes airdropping aid, and at helicopters attempting to evacuate the most vulnerable Yazidis.

Hundreds of Yazidis—including infants and young children—died on Mount Sinjar before the Syrian Kurdish forces called the People’s Protection Units (YPG) were able to open a corridor from Syria to Mount Sinjar, allowing for those besieged on the mountain to be moved to safety. Together with Yazidi volunteers, they repelled ISIS attacks on the corridor, as it sought to reestablish the siege.

On lower ground, ISIS fighters captured thousands of Yazidis in their villages or on the roads as they fled between August 3–5. Almost all villages were emptied within seventy-two hours of the attack, with the exception of Kocho village which was not emptied until August 15. In the process of capture and transfer, hundreds of ISIS fighters operating across a vast territory in the Sinjar region systematically divided Yazidis into three distinct groups: men and boys aged approximately 12 and above; women and children; and later, drawn from the pool of male children who had remained with the women, boys aged 7 and above. Each group suffered distinct and systematic violations, sanctioned under ISIS’s ideological framework.

Yazidi Men and Boys Aged Approximately 12 and Above

After we were captured, ISIS forced us to watch them beheading some of our Yazidi men. They made the men kneel in a line in the street, with their hands tied behind their backs. The ISIS fighters took knives and cut their throats.

—Girl, aged 16 at capture, held for seven months, sold once

Following capture, ISIS swiftly separated Yazidi men and boys who had reached puberty from women and other children. ISIS fighters summarily executed men and boys who refused to disavow Yazidism and convert to Islam. Most were executed by gunshots to the head; others had their throats cut. ISIS fighters carried out executions of male Yazidis in the streets of towns and villages, at makeshift checkpoints, on roadsides as well as on the lower sections of the roads ascending Mount Sinjar. Other captives, including family members, were often forced to witness the killings. In at least two villages, Kocho and Qani, ISIS executed Yazidi men and boys en masse. The

bodies of those killed on capture were often left in situ. Yazidis, captured and forcibly transferred to Mosul and Tel Afar in the days following the attack, described being driven along roads, the sides of which were littered with corpses.

Men and older boys who were forcibly converted to Islam became ISIS captives. Separated from women and children, they were quickly transferred to sites in Tel Afar, Mosul, and Baaj where they were later forced to work, laboring on construction projects, digging trenches, and looking after cattle. They were forced to discard their Yazidi identity, to pray, grow their beards and hair, and follow other religious dicta as interpreted and promulgated by the terrorist group. Those who attempted to escape were executed upon capture.

By the spring of 2015, ISIS appeared to have determined that any conversions that the Yazidis had made were false. Little information is available about the fate and whereabouts of the Yazidi men and older boys who had been forcibly converted after this point.

Yazidi Women and Girls Aged 9 and Above

We were registered. ISIS took our names, ages, where we came from and whether we were married or not. After that, ISIS fighters would come to select girls to go with them. The youngest girl I saw them take was about 9 years old. One girl told me that “if they try to take you, it is better that you kill yourself.”

—Girl, aged 12 at capture, held for seven months, sold four times

After the killing of the men and older boys, Yazidi women and their remaining children were forcibly transferred to temporary holding sites where they remained for between one and twenty-four hours. There, ISIS separated those who were married from those who were not. Only girls aged 8 years and under were allowed to remain with their mothers. For the most part boys were not separated from their mothers at this stage. Quickly surmising that the greatest danger lay in being placed in the group of unmarried females, unmarried women and girls pretended their younger siblings or nephews or nieces were their own children. Married women who had no children to provide evidence of the marriage did likewise.

Fighters recorded the names of the women and girls, their age, the village they came from, whether they were married or not, and if they were married, how many children they had. Some women and girls reported ISIS fighters taking photographs of them. ISIS forced Yazidi women to give up valuables, including gold, money, and mobile telephones. As the fighters did so, women rushed to write and memorize telephone numbers of relatives who, they hoped, might be in a position to assist them later.

They were then moved to designated holding sites in Mosul, Tel Afar, and Baaj, deeper inside ISIS-controlled territory. These sites held hundreds, sometimes thousands, of Yazidi women and children, and were surrounded by armed ISIS fighters. Captives were given little food or water. Many, particularly infants and young children, became very sick. No medical care was provided.

From the moment that Yazidi women and girls entered the holding sites, ISIS fighters came into the rooms where they were held in order to select women and girls they wished to take with them. Interviewees described feelings of abject terror on hearing footsteps in the corridor outside and keys opening the locks. Women and girls scrambled to the corners of the rooms, mothers hiding their daughters. The selection of any girl was accompanied by screaming as she was forcibly pulled from the room, with her mother and any other women who tried to keep hold of her being brutally beaten by fighters.

Yazidi women and girls began to scratch and bloody themselves in an attempt to make themselves unattractive to potential buyers. Some committed suicide at holding sites in Tel Afar, Mosul, and in Raqqah city. Some women and girls killed themselves by cutting their wrists or throats, while others hanged themselves using their headscarves.

While individual incidents of rape committed by ISIS fighters at the holding sites in Tel Afar and Mosul were reported, mass rape of Yazidi women and girls did not occur. Such is the rigid ideology governing ISIS's treatment of Yazidi women and girls as chattel, as well as the control it exerted over the majority of its fighters. Sexual violence, including the sexual slavery, being committed against Yazidi women and girls is tightly controlled by ISIS, occurs in a manner prescribed and authorized, and is respectful only of the property rights of those who "own" the women and girls.

Captured Yazidi women and girls were deemed property of ISIS and are openly termed *sabaya* or slaves. ISIS sold most of the Yazidi women and girls in slave markets, or souk *sabaya*, or through individual sales to fighters who come to the holding centers. In some instances, an ISIS fighter might buy a group of Yazidi females in order to take them into rural areas without slave markets where he could sell them individually at a higher price. Approximately one-fifth of Yazidi women and girls were kept as collective property of ISIS for distribution to military bases throughout Iraq and Syria.

ISIS began to transfer women and girls into Syria for sale as early as August 17, 2014, after which multiple forced transfers of Yazidi women and children took place. Most were taken to either or both of two locations in Raqqah city: an underground prison or security base, and/or a group of buildings densely surrounded by trees, referred to by ISIS fighters as "the farm." Some—generally unmarried women and

girls—were purchased by fighters and removed in a matter of days. Some women, often those with more than three children, might remain at the holding sites for up to four months before being sold.

Yazidi women and girls were sold to individual fighters directly from the holding sites as well as in slave markets across ISIS-controlled Iraq and Syria. A central committee, the Committee for the Buying and Selling of Slaves, organizes the slave markets. Where the central committee authorizes the opening of a slave market in a particular town, it devolves some of its functions to a local committee and commander. In the last year, ISIS fighters have started to hold online slave auctions, using the encrypted Telegram application to circulate photos of captured Yazidi women and girls, with details of their age, marital status, current location, and price.

Some Yazidi women and girls were present at their sale. Most were simply informed by their fighter-owner that he had bought or sold her. Once ISIS sells a Yazidi woman or girl, the purchasing fighter receives complete rights of ownership and can resell, gift, or will his “slave” as he wishes. Fighters who buy and sell Yazidi women and girls, as well as those who arrange the trading of them, come from all over the world.

While held by ISIS fighters, Yazidi women and girls over the age of 9 are subjected to brutal sexual violence. Most of those interviewed reported violent daily rapes by their fighter-owners. Some were handcuffed behind their backs during the rapes while others had their hands and legs tied to the corners of the beds. Girls as young as 9 were raped, as were pregnant women. Many women and girls reported being injured as a result of the rapes, suffering bleeding, cuts, and bruising. Attempts to escape have been met with beatings, and in some instances, gang rape. Many Yazidi women and girls reported that they were forced to take birth control, in the form of pills and injections, by their fighter-owners. Other women were given no birth control.

Fighters routinely beat Yazidi women and girls in their possession. Where Yazidi women and children are injured by rapes or beatings, ISIS fighters do not permit them access to medical care. Yazidi women and girls were often forced to work as domestic servants in the fighters’ houses, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of their children. Living conditions were poor with a pattern of fighters not providing adequate food or water to Yazidi women and children they were holding captive.

From the moment of capture, through the various holding sites and while being bought and raped by ISIS fighters, Yazidi women and girls were verbally abused by ISIS fighters. Insults were specifically directed at their Yazidi faith, saying that they “worshipped stones” and referring to them as “dirty *kuffar*” and “devil-worshippers.”

As “spoils of war” ISIS does not permit the reselling of Yazidis to non-ISIS members. Such sale is punishable by death. The financial incentives for an individual fighter to break this rule, however, are tremendous. Whereas Yazidi women and children are

sold among fighters for between \$200-1,500, they are generally sold back to their families for between \$10,000-40,000. Many of the families of the Yazidi women and girls who were sold back are now heavily in debt and worry not only about making payments, but also about how they will be able to afford to buy back other relatives that fighters wish to sell in future.

Many of the Yazidi women and girls interviewed bore physical wounds and scars of the abuse they suffered. More apparent, however, was the mental trauma. Most spoke of thoughts of suicide, of being unable to sleep due to nightmares about ISIS fighters at their door, and of being consumed by fears for family members missing or still held by ISIS.

Young Children with Their Mothers

When he would force me into a room with him, I could hear my children screaming and crying outside the door. Once he became very angry. He beat and threatened to kill them. He forced two of them to stand outside barefoot in the snow until he finished with me.

—Woman, held for eleven months, sold seven times

Hundreds of Yazidi children continue to be transferred around ISIS-controlled areas of Iraq and Syria as their mothers are sold and resold. Once a Yazidi girl reaches the age of 9, ISIS takes the girl from her mother and sells her as a slave. When a Yazidi boy reaches 7 years of age, he too is taken from his mother and sent to an ISIS training camp and from there on to battle.

Children held with their mothers are often aware of their mothers being the victims of prolonged and intense violence. The extent of their understanding of the sexual nature of the violence depends on the age of the children, and whether rapes occurred in their presence. ISIS fighters often beat Yazidi children for making too much noise or for clinging to their mothers. Incidents of ISIS fighters killing Yazidi children have also been documented.

ISIS fighters and their families routinely told the Yazidi children that they and their mothers were “*kuffar*” and that they were dirty.

Yazidi Boys Aged 7 and Above

The ISIS fighters told us, “Children are young. They are like animals. We can change them. But you are adults. We will not be able to change your mind.” They said this to us at the hall in Mosul.

—Girl, aged 17 at capture, held for seventeen months, sold eight times

When Yazidi boys reach the age of 7, ISIS removes them from their mothers' care, regardless of their location at the time. Mothers and siblings who try to keep hold of the boys are severely beaten. Women interviewed recounted ISIS fighters telling them that they were taking their sons to teach them to be Muslims and to train them to fight. A Saudi ISIS fighter showed some Yazidi women a video of young boys being trained in an ISIS camp, saying, "We are training them to kill *kuffar* like you."

ISIS forcibly transfers the boys to training centers or military camps in Iraq and Syria. Many training centers are set up in former schools. There the boys are registered and given Islamic names. From then on, the boys are only called by their new names, and are treated as ISIS recruits. Yazidi boys are mixed with Sunni Arab boys who are also being trained. The boys attend sessions in Quranic recitation as well as military exercises, including how to use AK47s and other weapons. They are forced to watch videos of beheadings and suicide missions. On a general level, the training and indoctrination aim to increase recruitment, and all children are treated as recruits regardless of their background. But on a specific level, targeting the Yazidi boys uniquely, the training and indoctrination serves to destroy their religious identity as Yazidis, recasting them as followers of ISIS-interpreted Islam.

After completing the training, Yazidi boys are distributed according to the needs of the terrorist group. Some have become fighters on the battlefield while others are deployed to guard ISIS bases or to perform other duties as their commanders require.

Determining Genocide

Article II of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, to which Syria and Iraq are parties, states that the crime of genocide is committed when a person commits a prohibited act with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group as such. Prohibited acts are (a) killing members of the group; (b) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic determined that ISIS was committing the crime of genocide, as well as multiple crimes against humanity and war crimes, against the Yazidis, a protected religious group within the meaning of the Genocide Convention. This finding was particularly notable for two reasons: first, ISIS was committing all five prohibited acts as envisaged by the drafters of the Genocide Convention; and second, though killings did take place, the genocide was perpetrated largely through non-killing, highly gendered crimes, notably acts of extreme sexual violence.

In a lengthy legal analysis, the commission found that ISIS sought to destroy the Yazidis through killings; sexual slavery, enslavement, torture and inhuman and degrading treatment and forcible transfer causing serious bodily and mental harm; the infliction of conditions of life that bring about a slow death; the imposition of measures to prevent Yazidi children from being born, including forced conversion of adults, the separation of Yazidi men and women, and mental trauma; and the transfer of Yazidi children from their own families and placing them with ISIS fighters, thereby cutting them off from beliefs and practices of their own religious community, and destroying their identity as Yazidis.

The sexual enslavement of Yazidi women and girls has received much focus in media coverage of the genocide and is personified in Nadia Murad, a survivor recently made UN Goodwill Ambassador. Following the jurisprudence arising from the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, and notably the Akayesu case, the commission found that sexual violence, including sexual slavery, constituted the infliction of serious bodily and mental harm on the victims, and was an integral part of the process of intended destruction of the Yazidi women and girls, their families, and their communities. The commission drew attention to the fact that rape and sexual violence, when committed against women and girls as part of a genocide, is a crime against a wider protected group, but it is equally a crime committed against a female, as an individual, on the basis of her sex. Yazidi women and girls, the commission posited, were doubly victimized on the basis of their religion and their sex.

The crime of genocide requires that the perpetrator have a special intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a protected group. The genocidal acts must be committed against a person because of their membership in a particular group and as an incremental step in the overall objective of destroying the group.

Historically, the special intent to destroy has often been inferred from conduct, including statements. ISIS, however, explicitly holds its abuse of the Yazidis to be mandated by its religious interpretation, and has not sought to reframe its conduct. In an article, “The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour,” published in ISIS’s English-language magazine *Dabiq*, ISIS indicated that its plan to attack Sinjar was presaged by research into how its religious interpretation mandated the treatment of the Yazidis, who were found not to be “people of the book” and who, consequently, could not be permitted to exist within the group’s conception of an Islamic State.

This religious interpretation determined the behavior of ISIS fighters during the attack on Sinjar and in their subsequent abuse of Yazidi men, women, and children. ISIS’s killing of the men and boys who did not convert, forced conversions, sexual enslavement and enslavement of Yazidi women and girls, and forced abduction, indoctrination, and recruitment of Yazidi boys to be used in hostilities, de facto converting

them, adhered seamlessly to the religious mandates set out by its “scholars” concerning how to treat Yazidi captives.

The notion of ISIS-interpreted Islam as a purifying force was present throughout all ISIS fighters’ interactions with the Yazidis. From schools in Tel Afar to houses in Raqqah city, fighters repeatedly told captured Yazidi women and girls, held as slaves, that they were “dirty Yazidis” and “*kuffar*.” The *Dabiq* article continues in this vein: “Their creed is so deviant from the truth that even cross-worshipping Christians for ages considered them devil-worshippers and Satanists.”

The public statements and conduct of ISIS and its fighters in their targeting and abuse of the Yazidis demonstrated that ISIS intended to destroy the Yazidis of Sinjar, composing the majority of the world’s Yazidi population, in whole or in part.

Protection and Justice

The Yazidi community of Sinjar has been devastated by the ISIS attack. In its aftermath, no free Yazidis remained: the community had all been displaced, captured, converted, or killed. Female survivors of sexual slavery have been shattered, with many experiencing suicidal thoughts, and intense feelings of rage interspersed with periods of deep depression and listlessness. There is limited access to psychosocial support. Furthermore, with hundreds of Yazidi men missing or dead, Yazidi women face a precarious existence in a society that has not encouraged their independence, or given many of them the tools to live autonomously. With regard to the youngest female victims of sexual slavery, some the families have had tremendous difficulty acknowledging the crimes committed against them.

Yazidi children, held with their mothers, are similarly traumatized but many have not, to date, received specialized therapy. Yazidi boys who were taken for indoctrination and training by ISIS suffer outbursts of rage, and are traumatized by prolonged exposure to violence, either directly at the hands of their instructors or in combat, or by witnessing it on the battlefield or in training videos.

Families, whether captured or not, are struggling to deal with the trauma experienced by those who were bought back or smuggled out, and by the profound distress of not knowing the fate or whereabouts of relatives still in ISIS-controlled territory. Many are in profound debt having sold all valuables, including land, and having borrowed money to buy back relatives offered for sale by ISIS fighters.

Over one thousand Yazidi women and children are receiving medical treatment, including trauma therapy, under the auspices of a program run by the Federal Republic of Germany. Many more, including female survivors of sexual slavery, are refugees in Europe, having placed themselves in the hands of smugglers and made dangerous journeys by land, and increasingly by boat. Yazidi victims of genocide, including but not limited

to victims of sexual violence, must be better identified and treated as a vulnerable group for the purposes of housing, psychosocial support, and with regard to asylum processes.

There is a sense of profound disappointment with the international community. While there is support for organizations doing humanitarian work in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps and, abroad, refugee camps, it is perceived that, at best, there is a paralysis, and, at worst, a reluctance regarding the taking of any action to rescue Yazidis still held by ISIS. This is compounded by reports of Yazidi captives being killed in airstrikes on ISIS bases and other military targets.

The ongoing attack by ISIS on the Yazidis is viewed by the community not as a standalone event, but part of a long history of historical oppression and violence against them. While most Yazidis said they wanted ISIS brought to justice for their crimes, few believed that international criminal justice was possible, citing centuries of impunity in relation to attacks on their community.

In its report, the commission made wide-ranging recommendations to the United Nations, the governments of Syria and Iraq, and the wider international community concerning rescue and protection of, and greater care for the Yazidi community of Sinjar. While noting states' obligations under the Genocide Convention, the commission repeated its call for the Security Council to refer urgently the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court, or to establish an ad hoc tribunal with relevant geographic and temporal jurisdiction.

Over 3,200 women and children are still held by ISIS. Most are held in the Syrian Arab Republic where Yazidi women and girls continue to be sexually enslaved and otherwise abused, and Yazidi boys, indoctrinated and trained. Thousands of Yazidi men and boys are missing. ISIS's trade in women and girls and its recruitment and use of boys have never ceased.

The genocide of the Yazidis is ongoing.

This essay is adapted from "They Came to Destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis," a report issued on June 16, 2016, by the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.