

Free Yezidi Foundation Statement

Eight-year Commemoration of the Yezidi Genocide

Every year on August 3rd the Yezidi community mourns those we have lost, remembers those still missing, and recommits to recovery and a brighter future for the next generation. The Free Yezidi Foundation is highlighting the following five issues this year. Progress on these issues, with support from local and international stakeholders and policymakers, can contribute to the well-being, empowerment, and rehabilitation of the Yezidi community.

1. No-fly Zone over Sinjar

The slow return of Yezidis and other internally displaced Iraqi citizens is a humanitarian matter. Many factors influence the decisions of Sinjar's displaced families, such as the slow rate of reconstruction, lack of basic services, damaged infrastructure, dearth of employment opportunities, and confusing local and provincial governance. However, nothing deters returns more than security concerns.

An array of militias, with different and sometimes opposing allegiances, operate in and around Sinjar. This has resulted in small-scale conflicts that threaten to combust without warning. At the same time, Turkey conducts airstrikes ostensibly targeting the PKK, but instead killing Yezidi combatants and civilians alike. The establishment of a security plan for Sinjar will be an extremely difficult task. But one element of this must be the complete and permanent cessation of Turkish airstrikes targeting Yezidis in Sinjar. Yezidis are Iraqi citizens, and many took up arms to defend the community against ISIS. All Yezidi combatants must be integrated into Iraq's security forces. They certainly should not be assassinated by airstrikes from a foreign country. Relevant Iraqi authorities should work to reduce tensions in Sinjar. This will require local, regional, and national diplomacy, and may only bear fruit if the United States, Europe, the United Nations, and other responsible actors push authorities to act fairly and humanely regarding Sinjar's native residents. But to provide the security and diplomatic space for this to succeed, and to prevent further bloodshed and unnecessary civilian suffering, a no-fly zone should be established over Sinjar immediately. No more Yezidis should be target in assassinations from malign foreign actors, and Sinjar should not be the locus of the Turkey-PKK conflict.

2. Education and Empowerment of Yezidi IDPs

In the aftermath of the Yezidi Genocide, internally displaced Yezidis have now spent eight full years in camps or makeshift shelters. Some Yezidi children have never had access to formal education, and unemployment rates are unimaginably high. Ideally, displaced Yezidis will return home and rebuild their lives in Sinjar and surrounding towns. However, given the circumstances, we must also provide intelligent plans for the education and support of the young generation now. We must also provide skills to improve Yezidis' prospects of finding employment. The community is already largely marginalized and traumatized, but all is not lost. We have already seen that technology, basic mathematics, business, and language skills can considerably improve the lives of Yezidi job-seekers. Some Yezidis may return home, some may resettle in other parts of Iraq, and some may emigrate. But in each of these cases, Yezidis will benefit from



modern skills to improve their lives. In previous generations, Yezidis have lived on subsistence agriculture. But in the 21st century, our people will not long endure – in Sinjar or elsewhere – if excluded from education and the modern economy.

3. Functional Plan to Rescue Missing Yezidis and Support Survivor Recovery

More than 2700 Yezidis remain missing eight years after the Yezidi Genocide. As this agonizing fact lingers, it has tragically become normalized in our community. We know that a significant number of the missing were killed by ISIS in captivity. But we also know that many are still alive, most likely located in Syria, Turkey, or Iraq – the countries where ISIS members can operate most comfortably. While the Yezidi community has been successful in achieving genocide recognition and the sympathy of the international community, we have not been able to catalyze a realistic plan to identify and rescue the missing. Many of these Yezidi women and girls have children born from rape. This is a challenging and difficult issue within the community. But those who adhere to international women’s rights norms understand that the survivor, alone, has the right to decide to keep her child or not. Efforts must be made for this highly vulnerable and traumatized group of women and girls to escape from ISIS territory and resettle in safety and security. This task is fraught with security and logistical challenges, and we desperately need help in finding and protecting these survivors. Otherwise, they will remain in perpetual captivity.

Relatedly, thousands of Yezidis have escaped or been rescued over the last eight years. This includes many women and girls – the focus of much international attention – but also young men who were abducted during their childhood and forced into the so-called ‘Cubs of the Caliphate’. The Yezidi community welcomes the Yezidi Survivors’ Law that was passed in Baghdad last year, and we encourage the government to hasten funding and support to the Yezidi Affairs directorate. The trauma treatment, education, and acclimatization required for the survivor population is considerable. FYF is providing services to several young Yezidi men who spent much of their childhood in the hands of ISIS. The world already knows the suffering endured by Yezidi women. The Yezidi Survivors’ Law will thankfully provide some basic income and sustenance for survivors. Yezidi civil society should be empowered to lead the way in advancing care and recovery, with support from international stakeholders. This is also what members of the surviving community prefer.

4. Ensuring ISIS Perpetrators Held in Syria Face Justice

Many thousands of Syrians, Iraqis, and internationals chose to join the ISIS Caliphate, and more captured ISIS members are held by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Northeast Syria than elsewhere. The SDF – an ally of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS – hold tens of thousands of combatants and ISIS-affiliated members from various countries around the world. Most were captured during military battles against the SDF and are held in detention centers or detention camps. Collecting evidence and compiling dossiers of thousands of suspects is an expensive and painstaking task. However, few better options are available.

ISIS members could be released in an ad-hoc fashion, bypassing any prospect of meaningful justice. They could remain in custody indefinitely, as enemy combatants in Syria, without evidentiary trials or meaningful judicial redress for victims of their crimes. Neither of these options are acceptable under international law. Instead, ISIS members could be repatriated to their countries of origin and stand trial for their crimes there.



Alternatively, a tribunal mechanism for ISIS members could be established in Northeast Syria, Iraq, or elsewhere. No solution will be easy or inexpensive, and one must not dismiss the current administrative and financial burden on the authorities in Northeast Syria, federal Iraq, and the Kurdistan Region. However, the glaring absence of justice and the lack of prospective solutions is problematic. This further erodes confidence in the government, especially when ISIS-affiliated families are repatriated and reintegrated in Iraq at the Al-Jada camp with governmental support.

Some process must eventually be developed to evaluate the crimes, provide ISIS members with the right to defense in court, and move cases to trial. Inaction allows unindicted crimes to fester, impunity to linger, and extremist elements to gather in overcrowded and legally ambiguous detention centers and camps. A system of truth-telling, accountability, reparations, and when appropriate, criminal indictments is an antidote to injustice. It should be viewed as an essential element of the combating ISIS campaign, complementary to military action.

5. Allocation of Resources for Yezidi Civil Society

The Global Coalition and its allies on the ground have erased ISIS' ability to control territory, even though ISIS members continue to mount ad-hoc attacks in Syria and Iraq. However, although the immediate security threat from ISIS has receded for the moment, Yezidi society remains in disarray. Efforts to promote and protect Yezidi interests have been led largely by civil society, including a robust collection of organizations and activists in Iraq and from the diaspora community. As other crises demand funding and attention, Yezidi civil society is at serious risk. While we support international charities and UN agencies in their efforts to provide emergency aid and humanitarian support, the struggle and eventual disappearance of a vibrant Yezidi civil society would greatly damage the community. To the extent that the international community can support Yezidis, it will be essential to do so equitably through Yezidi civil society organizations. This helps Yezidis develop social and political maturity, which is necessary now and will be in the future. It is also by far the most sustainable investment in the affected community.

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