

Free Yezidi Foundation Statement

Seven-Year Commemoration of the Yezidi Genocide

Every year on August 3rd the Yezidi community mourns those we have lost, remembers those who are missing, and seeks solutions for a brighter future. The Free Yezidi Foundation highlights the following issues this year in consideration of community-wide recovery and growth. These topics should be addressed as Yezidi, Iraqi, and international stakeholders consider the well-being and the next steps for our vulnerable community. Cosmetic solutions will not resolve long-standing challenges facing our people. Serious action is required if Yezidi families are to live safely in Iraq.

1. Bring Back Our Women & Girls!

It has been seven years since Daesh began its campaign to annihilate Yezidis. In the first months, thousands of Yezidis were killed or abducted and subjected to inhumane abuse including slavery and continual sexual violence. Since then, many of the abducted have reached safety, either through escape or rescue efforts. But many remain unaccounted for even today. In May 2021, this figure stood at 2,868 Yezidis. *It is incomprehensible that so many Yezidi abductees could remain missing and ignored seven years later.* Sadly, we know that some were murdered by Daesh or died by suicide. Even so, Yezidis deserve a serious effort to retrieve the remains of those we have lost.

At the same time, we know many women and girls are still alive. They are likely suffering to this day in the hands of Daesh members or associates in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, or further afield. This is an abomination. FYF calls upon the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh, the Iraqi Government, the Kurdistan Regional Government, the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria, Interpol, UNITAD, UNAMI, and other stakeholders to craft a plan and mount a serious effort to locate Yezidi abductees who are still alive and suffering. With the intelligence and logistical assets currently available, progress can be achieved. Let's bring back Yezidi women and girls.

2. Just Implementation of the Sinjar Agreement

In October 2020, the Iraqi Government and Kurdistan Regional Government arrived at a formal agreement for the administration, security, and reconstruction of Sinjar. The agreement was made with virtually no Yezidi involvement. Nonetheless, Yezidi activists noted that some aspects of the agreement could be helpful to the Yezidi community returning to Sinjar, even while other aspects were problematic. Unfortunately, key components of the agreement remain unimplemented.

Multiple militias continue to operate in and around Sinjar. Geopolitical interests from Turkey and Iran complicate a highly delicate security situation. For example, multiple airstrikes from Turkey, ostensibly targeting the PKK, have not only endangered thousands of lives but have also raised fear and doubt among Yezidi families considering a return to Sinjar. The proposal of a 2,500 local Yezidi police force to protect Sinjar is favorable in theory, although many argue that such a figure is far too low. This force has not yet been mobilized, despite an overwhelming response from Yezidi recruits to join. Municipal management of Sinjar remains unimplemented, despite the agreement calling for a mayor and governance without political connection to Baghdad or Erbil. Reconstruction efforts have been modest and are not nearly at the level to accommodate a large population. Meanwhile, Sinjar is among the world's most mine-contaminated regions, basic

infrastructure is almost non-existent, and beyond security positions, few employment opportunities are available. In many senses, the agreement has proven to be little more than a cessation of territorial dispute between Baghdad and Erbil. That in itself does give slightly more space and potential for the Yezidi community to envision a future in Sinjar. But implementation of the agreement remains at an impasse, and roadblocks still prevent Sinjar's citizens from returning.

3. Equal Opportunity for Yezidis

Every year the Free Yezidi Foundation advocates for tangible action in promoting equal opportunity in Iraq for Yezidis. Given the history of systemic exclusion and marginalization, this should take the form of proactive measures to ensure our community has access to education, employment, training, and government support when necessary. Yezidis do not want handouts or charity, but equal treatment. Sadly, the considerable wealth of the Iraqi state has, by all objective accounts, been largely squandered due to corruption and mismanagement. This negatively impacts every component of the country, but disproportionately affects those with least resources.

Equal opportunity for Yezidis could take many forms: allocated seats for Yezidis at universities, investment in Yezidi basic education, proactive efforts to promote a diverse workforce environment in the business community, and targeted aid and development to scale up skills and training for Yezidi laborers and professionals. Young Yezidis were not only forced to leave their homes for IDP camps, they were also forced to stop their education. Providing education, tools, and a reasonable prospect of a path forward in the modern economy may not seem like an urgent priority. But if these needs are neglected, it is difficult to envision Yezidi families emerging from subsistence and poverty. Our people were powerless and at the mercy of extremists in 2014. Building economic strength is a key solution to help our community care for itself and protect itself, one Yezidi-run business at a time. This is impossible without training and education.

4. The Yezidi Survivors' Law

On March 1, 2021, the Iraqi parliament passed the Yezidi Survivors' Law, which provides a comprehensive package of services and financial reparations for survivors of Daesh crimes. Those eligible are Yezidi women and girls who are survivors of sexual violence, women and girls from the Christian, Turkmen, and Shabak communities, and survivors of mass executions. The Law calls for a monthly salary, a plot of land or housing unit, support to re-enter school, and access to psychosocial and other health services. The Law is also Iraqi Parliament's first formal recognition of the Yezidi Genocide. The Yezidi community warmly welcomes this recognition and the services it promises. Although many would have preferred other clauses to have also been included in the legislation, this is a critical, symbolic, and necessary step forward for Yezidis in Iraq.

Nonetheless, skepticism remains, and significant challenges exist. Implementation has not yet begun. Bureaucratic hurdles must be overcome, accurate communication with individual survivors must be conveyed compassionately, and qualified officials must ensure proper implementation of the law and distribution of the compensation package, as stipulated. These obstacles are not impossible to surpass, but there have been past failures in the implementation of Iraqi legislation. It will be essential that United Nations agencies and the international community, including embassies in Baghdad, closely follow this process, assist with technical support where possible, and help ensure that actual implementation matches the letter of the Law, clause by clause.

5. Better Conditions for IDPs

The residents of Sinjar have the right to return to their areas of origin in a voluntary, safe, dignified manner. The Iraqi government announced the sudden closure of camps throughout federal Iraq toward the end of 2020. The federal government appears intent on forcing camp closures in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as well, where most Yezidi IDP camps are located. Iraq's Ministry of Displacement and Migration maintains its position to accelerate camp closures. This is a thorny issue that should be based on the humanitarian needs of the IDP population but has been affected by Iraqi politics. Meanwhile, conditions inside camps continue to deteriorate due to neglect.

In June 2021, 133 families lost their tents due to a massive fire that ravaged Sector B of Sharya IDP Camp. This fire was preventable and likely caused by unsafe electrical wiring. The camp's only firetruck was non-operational, resulting in a nearly one-hour response time. Earlier this year a fire broke out in Bersivé Camp, killing an entire family. Such neglect of basic utility infrastructure is unfortunately widespread throughout Iraq. It is particularly deadly in IDP camps with flammable tents; home to thousands of Yezidi IDPs for seven years. Iraq claims it seeks to close IDP camps due to poor conditions and to help Yezidis return to Sinjar. All Yezidis and humanitarian advocates agree that Yezidis have the right to return. But this must be voluntary and safe, not forced. Sinjar's current environment presents serious challenges for Yezidi families. While every effort must be made to improve security, infrastructure, employment, and basic services in Sinjar and surrounding villages, IDPs must be permitted to return when they – not the government – decide. Though IDP camps should not be permanent, they do offer basic protection and housing. All stakeholders should ensure that IDP camps are as safe as possible, including the implementation of fire prevention measures. Simultaneously, efforts to prompt return should be based on accepted norms and will be successful only if and when security and basic needs are met.

6. Justice & Accountability

This year the United Nations formally concluded that Daesh committed genocide against Yezidis. Some trials have been conducted, mostly in Germany, to try Daesh perpetrators for their crimes. But in most cases, included hundreds of cases in Iraq, trials have been held under the rubric of terrorism laws. Daesh members should be tried for terrorism – and for human rights crimes. It is a travesty of justice to omit the latter. In the past year, a great deal of attention has been paid to foreign Daesh members, particularly female Daesh members from Europe. Law enforcement agencies must not take the easy road and seek convictions only for terror-related charges. Evidence must be scoured, despite the difficulty and cost, to ensure that those who aided or participated in heinous crimes, including slavery, rape, murder, torture, crimes against humanity, and genocide, are held accountable. Put simply, those who committed genocide must not get away with it. Integrated effort among European law enforcement agencies, Europol, UN mechanisms, military and intelligence bodies, and their Iraqi counterparts should ensure that the dossiers of every Daesh member are accurate as possible and include alleged human rights violations, not only terrorism.

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For more information, visit www.freeyezidi.org.
For press inquiries, write to: info@freeyezidi.org.