

# Evaluating the Progress and Impact of the **Sinjar Agreement**



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Cover Photo: Destruction in Sinjar, Iraq.

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## About the Free Yezidi Foundation

The Free Yezidi Foundation (FYF) is a non-partisan, Yezidi women-led nonprofit organization established in response to the 2014 Yezidi Genocide. FYF is dedicated to the empowerment and support of the Yezidi community through the provision of comprehensive advocacy, justice, mental healthcare, psychosocial support, education, and livelihood services. With a special focus on women, girls, and survivors of SGBV, FYF's initiatives aim to enable those most vulnerable to rebuild their lives with dignity and resilience.

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## List of Acronyms

CRSV	Conflict-Related Sexual Violence
FYF	Free Yezidi Foundation
GOI	Government of Iraq
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
REM	Religious and Ethnic Minority
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
YBS	Sinjar Resistance Units



## 2014 Yezidi Genocide

On August 3, 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) launched a genocidal campaign against the Yezidi ethno-religious minority. This campaign involved ethnic cleansing through mass executions, forced conversions, forced displacement, kidnappings, and widespread sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). These atrocities led to the massacre of Yezidi men and older women, enslavement of over 6,000 Yezidi women and children, and the displacement of more than 400,000 Yezidis to Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. Other religious and ethnic minority communities also faced displacement and endured crimes perpetrated by ISIL.

A decade later, the Yezidi community remains profoundly impacted, with half of its population still internally displaced. Survivors continue to endure significant trauma, compounded by inadequate support for their healing and recovery.



## Executive Summary

Although the Sinjar Agreement, signed in October 2020 between the Government of Iraq (GOI) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), was intended to address instability in the disputed and volatile Sinjar region, its implementation has encountered significant challenges. The Agreement, deemed crucial for stabilizing the area following the 2014 Yazidi genocide, has marginalized key local stakeholders, thereby impeding substantial progress despite international support for peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts.

Moreover, conflict resolution processes have consistently failed to incorporate the perspectives of local communities, particularly Yazidis, and to adequately address the needs of female survivors of mass atrocities and conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). The inadequacies in drafting the Sinjar Agreement and the obstacles faced during its implementation are closely tied to the challenges surrounding the return of the Yazidi people. Many Yazidis are hesitant to return to their homeland due to ongoing security concerns, inadequate infrastructure, and unresolved grievances related to justice and accountability. The lack of meaningful inclusion of Yazidi voices in the Agreement's drafting and implementation exacerbates these concerns, perpetuating a cycle of distrust and uncertainty within the community. Without comprehensive

measures to address these complex issues and ensure the safety and rights of returning Yazidis, efforts to stabilize Sinjar and facilitate sustainable return and reconstruction will continue to falter.

## Recommendations for the Road Ahead

The following recommendations are derived from FYF's extensive work with displaced Yazidis residing in camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Fundamentally, all reconstruction and return efforts must prioritize the concerns of IDPs and adopt a gender-sensitive approach to address the distinct needs and perspectives of female survivors of mass atrocities and CRSV. Incorporating gender perspectives into peace-building processes fosters inclusive decision-making and enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of post-conflict reconstruction efforts.[1]

- Reconstruction efforts in Sinjar require collaboration with local actors and community members to establish sustainable stability in the region. This includes fostering dialogue and cooperation among all local stakeholders to build trust and implement security measures that are inclusive and responsive to community needs.

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[1] UN Peacekeepers, [Practical Guidance for Gender-sensitive conflict analysis](#). See also, Conciliation Resources, [Gender-sensitive conflict analysis facilitators guide](#) (October 2020).

- Priority should be given to establishing a coherent security framework in Sinjar and strengthening local government institutions to effectively address the challenges faced by returning Yezidis. Enhancing basic infrastructure and public services is crucial to incentivize and support the safe return and sustainable resettlement of Yezidi communities.
- Combating politically sanctioned corruption is essential for effective public service provision and the success of reconstruction efforts. Transparent governance and accountability mechanisms must be established to ensure that resources allocated for reconstruction are used efficiently and equitably.
- Establishing a financial accountability working group comprising various stakeholders is necessary to oversee Sinjar's funds and projects, ensuring adherence to standards and maintenance of quality. This group should include representatives from affected communities, civil society organizations, and international partners to monitor project implementation and prioritize community needs.

## Background

Located in western Iraq's Ninewa Governorate, Sinjar is a disputed territory caught in a prolonged and intricate conflict involving the GOI and the KRG. The absence of administrative clarity has hindered efforts to establish a stable governance framework. Despite efforts since 2005, including those outlined in Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution aimed at resolving the dispute, a lasting solution for the status of Sinjar and other disputed territories remains elusive.

Since then, multiple factors have contributed to conflict and instability in the Sinjar region. These factors include its diverse religious and ethnic composition, strategic location at the intersection of Iraq, Turkey, and Syria, and its role as a transitional area. While surrounded by Arab villages, it has security and administrative ties to Kurdish-majority areas to the north. Security collapsed in 2014 when ISIL seized control of Sinjar and Kurdish Peshmerga forces withdrew, leading to the Yezidi Genocide and mass atrocities perpetrated against other minority communities.[2]

The aftermath of this genocide has left deep scars on survivors and entire communities, exacerbating existing tensions between Yezidis, who form the majority of the region's population, and local Sunni Arabs.

[2] Chatham House, [Responding to instability in Iraq's Sinjar district \(2024\)](#).



Additionally, the genocide exacerbated pre-existing gender disparities in Sinjar. Despite efforts at conflict resolution, the perspectives and needs of female survivors have often been overlooked. Women continue to face challenges in political representation, access to essential services and resources, and decision-making power within households.[3]

The Kurdish Peshmerga's sudden withdrawal in 2014 created a security vacuum that deepened segregation and mistrust between Yazidis and Iraqi Kurds. Following ISIL's invasion, factions allegedly aligned with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) moved in to address this security vacuum, thereby establishing a presence in Sinjar. This move was perceived as providing protection for vulnerable Yazidis.

To date, the relationship between Yazidis and Kurds remains complex, with some identifying as Kurds and others as ethnic Yazidis. These identity issues contribute to discord and a lack of social cohesion in the Sinjar region.

The PKK's intervention in 2014 aimed to rescue Yazidis and shield them from ISIL, resulting in the emergence of local Yazidi militant groups such as the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), viewed by some as a PKK affiliate. Concurrently, other armed factions, such as the Ezidkhan Protection Units and Yazidi units aligned with Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), have also established

control in parts of Sinjar, further intensifying the region's instability.

Turkish airstrikes aimed at the YBS[4] have included targeted assassinations of Yazidis suspected of affiliations with the PKK,[5] worsening civilian suffering and insecurity. The failure of Iraq and the KRG to address these foreign military actions underscores deficiencies in enforcing safety and security measures for Iraqi citizens.

The persistent political turmoil and conflict in Sinjar continue to have profound implications for regional stability. Despite a growing number of Yazidi returnees, more than 180,000 remain displaced, enduring dire conditions in camps located in the neighboring Duhok governorate. Returnees face challenges negotiating with armed groups that control Sinjar. Delays and closures at border crossings between the Kurdistan Region and Ninewa Governorate worsen economic hardships and limit access to essential goods and services.

*"I do not feel comfortable with the idea of going back to my home again after my children and I were captured."*

Nasima (Yezidi Survivor and IDP)

[3] LSE Middle Eastern Centre, Zmkan Ali Saleem, [The Competition for Control in Sinjar: How External Actors and Local Interests Inhibit the Sinjar Agreement](#) (2024).

[4] <https://www.icsve.org/five-years-of-airstrikes-turkish-aggression-and-international-silence-in-sinjar-2017-2021/>.

[5] <https://freeyezidi.org/news-updates/statement-on-turkish-airstrikes-in-sinjar-iraq/>.

## The Sinjar Agreement and its Limitations

The signing of the Sinjar Agreement in October 2020 between the GOI and KRG supposedly aimed to facilitate the return of IDPs and stabilize the district through comprehensive reforms in security, administration, and governance. These reforms included the removal of armed groups, the establishment of a reconstruction committee, and the appointment of a new, independent mayor. Iraq committed 28 billion IQD (USD 18 million) to the Sinjar Reconstruction Fund as part of the Agreement.

On paper, the Sinjar Agreement is designed to resolve security disputes, promote reconstruction and basic service provision, and facilitate the safe, voluntary return of displaced populations. However, its terms are largely shaped by the political priorities of powerful factions in Iraq and influenced by the geopolitical interests of its two main neighbors, Turkey and Iran. Unfortunately, the international community often views the implementation of the Sinjar Agreement as the solution to the challenges facing Sinjar and its displaced residents. In reality, the Agreement includes provisions that are problematic and may escalate tensions rather than resolve them. To make a meaningful impact, the international community—particularly the UN and influential global actors—should prioritize the perspectives of the Sinjar

population instead of providing diplomatic support for an Agreement that is ineffective, unlikely to succeed, and primarily serves the political agendas of more powerful domestic and foreign entities.

Despite receiving support from influential international entities, such as the UN, US, and UK, the negotiations leading to the agreement overlooked the perspectives of local communities, particularly the Yezidis. Many Yezidis refused to participate in a peace process with Sunni Arabs without justice and accountability as central tenets. Sinjar continues to suffer from competing local administrations, which have impeded effective governance, delayed fund disbursement, and hindered progress. The Sinjar Agreement's call for the removal of armed groups seems primarily directed at local Yezidi militias, such as the YBS, which consist of community members committed to protecting their homeland. Consequently, the implementation of the Agreement has largely failed to meet the needs of affected communities. Moreover, the GOI's woefully insufficient investment in reconstruction efforts has meant that much of Sinjar remains in rubble.

During ISIL's genocide, 80% of the region's public and private infrastructure was razed to the ground. The subsequent failure to invest in the region's recovery and the lack of effective governance have resulted in a persistent absence of basic services,



such as healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. Critical infrastructure, including hospitals, schools, clean water sources, and housing, remains severely deficient.

Schools and healthcare facilities not only suffer from inadequate resources but are often damaged, exacerbating the already dire living conditions. Many schools are overcrowded, understaffed, or commandeered by armed groups. Additionally, local governance mechanisms remain in a beleaguered state, leaving residents compelled to seek essential civil services in other parts of Iraq.[6]

## The Issue of Return

The ongoing instability and flawed Sinjar Agreement have significantly hindered the Yezidi community's ability and willingness to return to their homeland. Sinjar has one of the lowest rates of return among all governorates in Iraq, currently standing at only 43%, leaving many Yezidis displaced. Moreover, individuals from Sinjar are among the most vulnerable to secondary displacement due to unsuccessful return efforts. In 2023 alone, hundreds of Yezidi returnees to Sinjar left once again, citing challenges such as inadequate public services, scarce job opportunities, and insufficient financial resources to support themselves in the region.[7]

In its engagement with Yezidis, FYF has observed a diverse sentiment within

the community regarding the prospect of returning to Sinjar. While some express a strong desire to reclaim their ancestral lands and rebuild their lives, others harbor reservations due to ongoing insecurity and insufficient reconstruction efforts. This division underscores the complex and multifaceted challenges faced by Yezidis and emphasizes the critical need to address their specific concerns to facilitate safe and voluntary returns. This is especially critical given the GOI's recent announcement to close IDP camps in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and compel IDPs to return, often against their will.[8] This situation intensifies the need to establish secure and sustainable conditions in Sinjar.

*"Before the events of 2014, Sinjar was safe to live in, but after the genocide and being captured by ISIS, the situation changed. I have only been to Sinjar once since then, but no matter what happens, Sinjar remains our place of belonging. We will return if safety is provided and Sinjar is rebuilt."*

Renas (Yezidi Survivor and IDP)

Sinjari women, particularly survivors, face numerous challenges that impact their well-being. These include limited access to reproductive and mental

[6] Human Rights Watch: Iraq - [Political Infighting Blocking Reconstruction of Sinjar \(June, 2023\)](#).

[7] IOM: [Iraq Master List Report 131 \(December, 2023\)](#).

[8] Human Rights Watch: [Iraq - Looming Camp Closures in Kurdistan \(May, 2024\)](#).

healthcare, pervasive gender-based violence within their communities, and a lack of educational and employment opportunities. Additionally, survivors grapple with unique concerns related to their lives after escaping ISIL.

Official documentation of land ownership has become increasingly challenging in the aftermath of the genocide, as displaced families seek to reclaim their homes upon returning to Sinjar. However, a significant barrier arises when female survivors seek compensation, as Yezidi cultural norms often prevent women from having control over financial resources or land. Only a scant 2% of respondents in Sinjar indicate that women in their households possess land deeds, contrasting with 23% who report men in their households holding such documents. Overall, 75% of respondents do not possess land deeds.[9]

Access to education and job opportunities is severely constrained in Sinjar. Only 65% of children in the southern areas and 35% in the northern areas attend school three days a week, and merely 20% of households report having a member employed. [10] Gender disparities further exacerbate these socio-economic challenges. Particularly within conservative communities and rural settings, men often restrict their wives and daughters from pursuing education or employment, enforcing traditional

roles of homemakers and caregivers. As a result, women in Sinjar are keenly interested in initiatives that can generate income. A staggering 95% of surveyed respondents expressed interest in small business loans and similar projects to improve their economic prospects.[11]

Girls in REM communities in Sinjar continue to face the peril of early marriage. In numerous instances, families of child brides consent to these marriages in exchange for a dowry. This practice has proliferated as a detrimental coping mechanism within Sinjari households, with 88% of rural areas and 96% of semi-urban areas reporting incidents of child marriages. [12] For Yezidi and REM girls in Sinjar, early marriage poses a significant obstacle to obtaining an education and heightens their vulnerability to sexual violence.

These compounding factors leave returnees, especially women and girls, in a protracted state of vulnerability and hinder displaced Sinjaris from returning to their homeland.[13]

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[9] Internal FYF report, based on 400 respondents over the age of 18 (200 male and 200 female), representing each one household in Sinjar, across both the South and the North.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.


[13] Oxfam, UN Women, [Gender Profile – Iraq: A situation analysis on gender equality and women’s empowerment in Iraq](#) (2018), See also CSSF Women, Peace and Security Helpdesk, [Gender Equality and Social Inclusion \(GESI\) Assessment for Kurdistan Region of Iraq](#) (2023).

## Conclusion

The Sinjar Agreement, ostensibly intended to stabilize the region and facilitate the return of displaced Yezidis, has yet to achieve its stated goals due to persistent security challenges, political disputes, and insufficient reconstruction efforts. Achieving conflict resolution, lasting peace, and sustainable returns requires an inclusive, gender-sensitive, and community-centered approach that incorporates the perspectives of Yezidis and all Sinjaris into any

Agreement's design and implementation.

Central to this effort is fostering collaborative initiatives and empowering local communities to take ownership of mediation and dialogue processes aimed at peace and stability in the region. Key to achieving this civic engagement is the leadership of Yezidi civil society, recognized and trusted within the community, to spearhead reconciliation efforts.



***"We are afraid to return without security, services, or the rebuilding of our homes. If security was provided and Sinjar was rebuilt, we would return."***

Waam (Yezidi Survivor and IDP)





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Photo - Khanke Camp, Duhok, Iraq.