

# Surviving Islamic State: The Plight Of The Yazidi Community

By: Nikita Malik, for Forbes Online



A Yazidi woman receiving psychological treatment in Germany ritually represents her life story, using stones to mark traumatic events and flowers to show happy events, as part of Narrative Exposure Therapy

Earlier this month, BBC journalist Lyse Doucet covered the plight of the Yazidi community, who are finally returning to their homes in Iraq following the defeat of the terrorist group Islamic State.

The Yazidis are a religious minority predominantly made up of Kurdish speakers, who once inhabited large areas in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Today, their population is concentrated in Northern Iraq, primarily Sheikhan, northeast of Mosul, and also Sinjar, in north-western Iraq.

Estimating the size of the Yazidi population is made difficult by the fact that the areas they have inhabited frequently experienced conflict. Current estimates indicate that there are approximately 700,000 Yazidis around the world. However, this number varies according to the source, as 85% of the Yazidi population has been displaced.

While many other ethnoreligious groups in Iraq have been subject to violence from Islamic State, the treatment of the Yazidis in particular is one of the most pertinent examples of sexual violence and human trafficking as a tactic of terrorism.

Yazidis belong to a religion that originates from Zoroastrianism, a monotheistic religion preceding Christianity. Their ancient gnostic faith has made them a target of terrorist organisations. Beginning with the attack by Islamic State in Mount Sinjar in August 2014, authorities and human rights organisations estimate that between 2,000 to 5,500 Yazidi people have been killed, and over 7,000 Yazidi people kidnapped. In reality, it is likely that these numbers are much higher, given the uncertainty in estimating casualties in areas previously occupied by Islamic State. Most of the victims are children.

Propaganda plays a key role in disseminating and buttressing the ideology the connects the crimes of human trafficking, sexual violence, and terrorism. I wrote about how this works in practice last year. Islamic State has two departments dedicated to ‘war spoils’: one for the sale

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and movement of slaves, and the other to issue religious edicts. In 2014, *Diwan al-Iftaa wa al-Buhuth* (the Research and Fatwa Department of Islamic State) published a pamphlet providing ideological justifications for human trafficking including: freeing enslaved women from ‘shirk’ (disbelief) and bolstering conversions to Islam, punishment of ‘kuffar’ (disbelievers), illustrating the supremacy of Islamic State captors, increasing the offspring of the ‘mujahideen’ (fighters), and as a reward for the ‘mujahideen’.

Issue 4 of Dabiq, Islamic State’s propaganda magazine, provided more justifications for sexually abusing captured Yazidi women, declaring that enslaving the women of the ‘kuffar’ and taking the women as concubines is part of Sharia, an act that cannot be criticized as to do so would imply criticizing the Quran and the Prophet, and thus apostatizing from Islam. Notably, this [issue](#) of Dabiq also details the enslavement of abducted Christian women by Boko Haram and the mujahideen in Nigeria, presumably to draw parallels in the apparent righteousness of the propagated action.

Yazidi women taken as sex slaves by Islamic State have suffered both mental and physical harm. Studies by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the United Nations Human Rights Council show a higher frequency of suicide attempts, as well as actual suicides, committed by Yazidi women in captivity as well those who managed to escape. The same study by Human Rights Watch notes how those held captive have displayed evidence of “acute emotional distress”. The Yazidi culture does not typically accept intermarriage and sexual relations with people from faiths outside the Yazidi one. The consequences of such practices have, in the past, resulted in honour based violence.

In November last year I met Farida Khalaf, who at 18 years old was forced to leave her village of Kocho, in Iraq, when Islamic State invaded it. Single women and girls, including Farida, were forced onto a bus at gunpoint and brought to Raqqa in Syria, where they were sold into sexual slavery. She was once beaten so badly by her captors that she lost sight in one eye, and could not walk for two months. Although she was later reunited with surviving family members, members of her community thought that she had dishonoured her family when she was captured and raped.

New efforts have been put in place by leaders of the Yazidi community to reintegrate Yazidi women who escape Islamic State and return home, however. Baba Sheik, the spiritual leader of the Yazidi community has expressed sympathy towards victimized Yazidi women, and has urged the community to embrace them. New community rituals to reduce stigma, such as being ‘re-baptized’ into the faith are, and will be, essential in reducing post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as narrative exposure therapy, a combination of ritual and storytelling, to aid healing and reintegration.

As more Yazidis return home, focus must remain on the redevelopment of these areas, healing within the community itself, and continued international advocacy to ensure that human trafficking and sexual violence can never be used as a tactic of terrorism again.