



FYF Executive Director Pari Ibrahim
USCIRF Congressional Hearing

“Ending Genocide – U.S. Government Genocide Determinations & Next Steps”

12 May 2021

USCIRF Commissioners,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies & Gentlemen,

Thank you for holding this timely event on the critical value of United States determination of genocide and its impact on the world. I am grateful for the opportunity to share the Yezidi perspective at this forum. As genocide survivors, Yezidis sympathize with the Uygher and Rohingya communities. I would also like to note at the outset our appreciation of the recent US President’s recognition of the 1915 Armenian Genocide. Hundreds of thousands of Yezidis were killed in that genocide as well. I pay tribute to the Yezidis and to our Armenian brothers and sisters who were killed because of their identity in 1915.

Years after the 1948 Genocide Convention, the international community has proven unable or unwilling to prevent genocide and mass atrocities in many cases. Like other communities, Yezidis hope for a stable and just world that abides by the Genocide Convention and other intentional treaties and covenants intended to defend human rights.

We have seen in the Yezidi context that the American decision to determine whether genocide has been committed is of the utmost importance. I simply cannot overstate the value of the U.S. public genocide determination. In the Middle East, I believe there is no equal or substitute measure that could replace American recognition and action. In this regard, we would like to point out the powerful and leading role of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the first institution to make a public genocide determination in the Yezidi context, and a leading force that helped prompt the United States, the United Nations, and others to recognize and acknowledge what was happening on the ground to Yezidis.

The 2014 Yezidi Genocide

The Yezidi people have endured targeted violence for centuries. The 2014 genocide by Daesh, or ISIS, is the 74th such persecution upon our people. In the spring and summer of 2014, as ISIS expanded and eventually seized the city of Mosul, Yezidis were rightly terrified of an extremist Islamic terror organization bordering a vulnerable non-Muslim minority. Nonetheless, the protections or preventative actions that could have possibly deterred the ISIS attack on Sinjar and the genocide against Yezidis were absent, despite more than a decade of obvious warning signs.¹

¹ Iraq had already been confirmed a ‘country of particular concern’ by the USCIRF in April 2014, including over concerns of non-government militant violence against religious minorities, including the Yezidis.
https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/Iraq%202014_1.pdf



As those living in Sinjar were well aware, ISIS had surrounded Sinjar on all sides, leaving only a narrow route north of escape, where Peshmerga force checkpoints limited entry and exit. On 3 August 2014, when Peshmerga abandoned their positions and ISIS began their onslaught, the genocide began. ISIS kidnapped thousands of Yezidi men, women, and children. The group emptied Yezidi villages, and tens of thousands of Yezidis fled for their lives. ISIS besieged Yezidis on Mount Sinjar in scorching August heat. Only then did the world look at Sinjar; but by this time, thousands of men had been massacred *en masse* and women and girls forced into sexual slavery. Subsequently, for the next twelve days, the people in the village of Kocho waited in vain for assistance and rescue. None came, and on 15 August, the men and older women in that village were also murdered, and the women, girls, and children taken as slaves.

These meticulously planned atrocities have been recognized as genocide. This was not a difficult determination. ISIS was unusually explicit about its intent in regard to the Yezidis. As stated in ISIS's English language magazine *Dabiq*, ISIS religious 'scholars' believed that: "Their [Yezidis'] continual existence to this day is a matter that Muslims should question as they will be asked about it on Judgment Day..."² Further, genocide and murder was at the heart of ISIS. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi incited followers to commit atrocities: "It is obligatory for us [ISIS] to kill them [the 'unbelievers']...to cleanse the land of their filth."³

In their effort to eradicate the Yezidis, ISIS perpetrated atrocities in every category listed by the Genocide Convention. ISIS leaders ensured its members precisely implemented the plans across Sinjar, transferring thousands of Yezidi captives to pre-designated holding sites, separating out older boys and men for forced conversion or execution, and immediately implementing a complex system for registering and selling Yezidi women and children. This calculated destruction left no ambiguity: ISIS had deliberately planned to destroy the Yezidi people. And on March 17, 2016, the United States recognized ISIS's crimes against the Yezidis as genocide.

Value of Recognition

The first step towards any justice must be calling these crimes what they are: genocide. Recognition acknowledged the gravity of the harm caused by ISIS and endured by the Yezidis. It rallied attention to the Yezidi cause and underscored the urgency of providing resources and refuge. It means that the next time Yezidi territory is surrounded by an armed group, the world can recognize the danger that this might pose rather than waiting until it is too late.

The United States has demonstrated significant leadership in recognizing the crimes committed against Yezidis, marshalling resources for support to the surviving community, and most importantly, leading the coalition to destroy ISIS. In this case, the geopolitical interests of much of the world was aligned against ISIS. However, it would be naïve for us to suppose that the effort to destroy ISIS was mobilized specifically because of the atrocities committed against Yezidis. Still, ISIS behavior and brutality certainly helped reveal to the world the reality of its intentions.

² The Failed Crusade, "The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour", *Dabiq*, 11 October 2014.

³ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, translated by Cole Bunzel, "Expel the Rejectionist Idolaters from the Peninsula of Muhammad, Najd Province, May 29, 2015." Appendix B, in *Beyond Sunni and Shia: The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East*. Edited by Frederic Wehrey. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. 307-312.



There still remain questions as to the value of genocide determination. One might believe that such determination would lead countries to act upon obligations as listed in the Genocide Convention. And while Yezidis are immensely grateful to governments around the world for recognizing the ISIS attacks against Yezidis as genocide, it is impossible to ignore the fact that many fundamental needs of the surviving community have been left unaddressed. Parties to the Genocide Convention are obligated to both prevent and punish acts of genocide. Currently, one could argue that both prevention and punishment in the Yezidi context have failed.

Prevention of Genocide

We hope that lessons from the Yezidi context will help the US Government recognize and prevent future genocides and protect Yezidis and others religious groups facing destruction. While there are unique aspects to the Yezidi experience, there are also common threads that are shared across genocides, including many violations that the US Commission on International Religious Freedom already monitors that may constitute warning signs of genocide.⁴ Efforts to prevent atrocities before they occur may not be catchy or newsworthy. But they save lives, prevent gross abuses, and an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Some precursors to genocide may be intangible, such as dehumanizing ethnic groups. In Iraq, the Yezidis have long suffered from discrimination and slurs based on broad misunderstandings of our faith. In fact, slurs against Yezidis in Iraq are commonplace. It is not just ISIS members or supporters who called our people “devil-worshippers,” this language has been widespread across Iraq. Many Iraqis refuse to touch food made by Yezidis. One of the factors that enabled the Yezidi Genocide was the large number of Iraqis who had already considered Yezidis as ‘other’.

In the Yezidi case, the crime of genocide is now internationally recognized and known. A spotlight has been turned onto the Yezidi people. The Iraqi and Kurdish Governments, who have never been held accountable for negligence of Yezidi welfare, also bear some responsibility for these crimes. The Iraqi government recently passed the Yezidi Survivors’ Law in March, although there is no clear indication of when it will be implemented or how benefits will be funded. Despite recognition of genocide, Yezidis remain on the edges of Iraqi society and have little hope of escaping the poverty and trauma from generations of abuse and genocide. In this way, while recognition of the genocide holds symbolic meaning for the Yezidi people and has helped us connect with supporters from around the world, long-term and sustained recovery and restitution have not occurred.

⁴ State Department’s SWL for countries where the government engages in or tolerates “severe” violations of religious freedom. Under IRFA, particularly severe violations of religious freedom mean “systematic, ongoing, [and] egregious violations . . . , including violations such as—(A) torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; (B) prolonged detention without charges; (C) causing the disappearance of persons by the abduction or clandestine detention of those persons; or (D) other flagrant denial of the right to life, liberty, or the security of persons.” Although the statute does not specifically define severe violations of religious freedom, in making SWL recommendations USCIRF interprets it to mean violations that meet two of the elements of IRFA’s systematic, ongoing, and egregious standard (i.e., that the violations are systematic and ongoing, systematic and egregious, or ongoing and egregious). <https://www.uscifr.gov/countries/2021-recommendations>



Punishment

Recognizing a genocide has occurred is an acknowledgment that one of these obligations has already failed. But it is never too late to bring perpetrators to justice. The U.S. Government has provided invaluable support for justice efforts in Iraq, including support of the Free Yezidi Foundation's own justice efforts. While there have been some successful individual trials, these are few compared to the thousands of perpetrators. Many survivors have already lost hope in the justice process. We at FYF still hear from Yezidi survivors in Iraq and elsewhere that their ISIS perpetrators walk free. Further, while militarily defeated, ISIS' ideology and many of its members remain in Iraq and Syria.

More must be done to support investigation and the development of legitimate judicial proceedings against suspected ISIS perpetrators. One genuine responsibility that the international community must take seriously is the thousands of foreign ISIS members who return to their countries of origin. They are not only terrorists! Providing material support and joining ISIS is certainly a violation of terror laws. But supplying resources and aiding in the commission of genocide, torture, rape, murder, human slavery, and other atrocities should be part of the charges laid upon ISIS members. The legal rubric should include terrorism. But participating in the enslavement and rape of thousands of women and young girls is something different than terrorism. One American woman, for example, purchased two young Yezidi women as slaves, who were then raped by her husband. What she has done is different than material support for terrorism, but she was only charged with terror-related offenses. We call on the United States and all countries who highlight the importance of justice and accountability to begin with the atrocities committed by their own citizens, in Syria and Iraq, against our people.

Ending the Yezidi's 74th Genocide

Although ISIS no longer controls territory in Iraq and Syria, in some ways the genocide has not yet ended. Yezidi families exist in fragments, the fates of their loved ones unknown. Some children return "brainwashed," adhering to the ideology of their captors. Suicides within the Yezidi community have spiked. The surviving community has concrete needs that must be met, beginning with security and rehabilitation in Sinjar, in addition to deep trauma that must be addressed collectively or individually. Yezidi individuals and civil society organizations have repeatedly outlined the needs of the vulnerable Yezidi community in Iraq.⁵ With smart, targeted assistance, communities can rebuild. The first step in this long process is the genocide determination. In the Middle East and in many parts of the world, American leadership in identifying and publicly naming human rights violations has no substitute. I am therefore very pleased that USCIRF has arranged this hearing on the value of genocide determination. If we cannot acknowledge and point honestly and plainly to what has happened, we will never be able to prevent, punish, or aid in recovery. It is the necessary first act in response to genocide, the crime of crimes.

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⁵ https://www.freeyezidi.org/wp-content/uploads/FYF_Statement_3Aug2020.pdf ; https://www.freeyezidi.org/wp-content/uploads/FYF_Statement_3Aug2020.pdf