



FYF Executive Director Pari Ibrahim
USCIRF Congressional Hearing
“Religious Minorities Fight to Remain in Iraq”

26 September 2019

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Free Yezidi Foundation, I would like to thank the US Commission on International Religious Freedom for the Yezidi voice in this important hearing.

Just over five years ago, ISIS terrorists began the genocidal campaign against Yezidis. This was a planned and carefully targeted attack, aimed to eradicate Yezidis not for territory or wealth, but simply to destroy our people because of our religion.

One young Yezidi man was brought to a mass grave, shot multiple times, and was incredibly lucky to survive. He hid under dead bodies until the ISIS shooters left, and later crawled to safety. He has now been united with his wife and two children. The other men, dozens of them, were killed in that mass grave.

One woman was among the hundreds held captive in a town called Talafar. This was after her brothers, mother, and father had been executed. She led a daring escape, bringing a dozen Yezidi women and little children to safety. They walked for miles under cover of darkness, finally climbing Mount Shingal and reaching safety. These are the fortunate ones.

The other women and girls were literally sold on slave markets. That is not a metaphor. Until the fall of the ISIS caliphate, Yezidis were literally brought to physical slave markets, where ISIS members would buy and sell human beings at negotiated prices. Slave markets, in the 21st century. There were judges to approve the sale of human beings, documents to catalogue ownership and price, and paperwork to ensure the business of selling our women and girls. I am saying this to convey the systematic and organized nature of the sexual violence that was perpetrated, a fundamental part of the ISIS genocide against Yezidis. There has not been a single indictment, anywhere in the world, for those actions.

The Yezidi community is grateful to the United States for its forceful voice and its commitment of resources in support of Yezidis and other religious minorities in Iraq. I believe Yezidis are well aware of the programs and efforts from the US government to pay close attention to the future, if any, for religious minorities in Iraq.

The purpose of this hearing is not to look backward, but to see how to best respond to needs of our communities. In this regard, it must be underscored that the causes that brought forth ISIS still remain: discrimination, ignorance, and hatred against Yezidis. There were already serious, multi-faceted problems facing Yezidis *before* the ISIS attacks. The fall of the ISIS caliphate does not eliminate those root causes and the dangers that continue to face Yezidis.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In response to these pressing and, in fact, existential threats to the Yezidi community in Iraq, Yezidis must be empowered, informed, and supported to attain sustainability and stand on our own feet. Yezidis must not become dependent on aid or on any government. We therefore urge the United States and all donors to ensure that tools, skills, and education for Yezidis are included as fundamental aspects of assistance.

The following five areas of concern are of the greatest importance for the sustainability and, in fact, survival of Yezidis in Iraq. We believe these are priorities that merit special attention, particular in terms of resources and attention from policy makers.

1. Opportunity for Education and Employment.

On an individual level, on the ground, we know that many families struggle to find work, ensure education for their children, and shape a dignified future. Yezidis have always been the last in Iraq to receive any opportunities. At the most basic level, more must be done to ensure that Yezidis have the education, skills, and chances to govern their own lives on a daily basis. Our adults must get better chances for jobs, and our children absolutely must have fair chances for basic and university education. I do not believe any progress is possible for Yezidis in Iraq without this. Yezidis will not survive in Iraq through subsistence farming or outdated ways of living; we must have the chance to join the modern economy.

2. Security.

One of the fundamental goals of US assistance is to help minorities, like Yezidis, return to their areas of origin. When we speak to Yezidis in the IDP camps, there is always one primary reason for not returning: security. This is not to say that Shingal is in conflict all the time. But for families to return, there must be reliable, non-discriminatory, sustained security for our people every day. Most families simply do not believe it. In that sense, assistance must be designed very carefully. Return must be voluntary and safe, and we must not lure minorities back into dangerous situations with promises that could put their safety at risk. Most Yezidis tell us that security is the primary necessity, more than roads, infrastructure, water and electricity.

3. Political Representation.

Yezidis are woefully under-represented in every way. In Baghdad, in Erbil, and at governorate, district, and sub-district levels. There is only one Yezidi member of parliament in Baghdad. There are established quotas for number of seats in the Kurdistan Region Parliament for Christians (5), Turkmen (5), and Armenians (1). But there is no quota for Yezidis. Without a voice, Yezidis are easily excluded from decision making. This is as damaging at the local administrative level as at the regional or national levels, and it is totally unacceptable. Fair, proportional representation is essential, especially for religious minorities.

4. Justice.

It is not possible for Yezidis to return home without a successful effort to bring perpetrators to justice. These criminal atrocities – the worst criminal acts – must be punished. We are pleased with the progress that UNITAD has made, and the efforts to reach out to the affected communities. But the entire world must work hard to build case files and bring indictments for



these crimes, especially those committed by their own citizens. It is outrageous that so many ISIS members have returned to Europe or sit in Al-Hol camp, and no relevant charges brought forward for the horrific human rights violations they committed or facilitated.

5. Diverse Religious Education.

As I mentioned, the root causes of the ISIS genocide against Yezidis have not been eliminated. If prejudice and religious intolerance remain, Yezidis and other minorities will forever be in danger. Iraq needs its educational system to include respect, accuracy, and fairness in how children are taught. Many Iraqis grow up learning vicious stereotypes against Yezidis. Iraq should make a nationwide effort to change this. Children should learn the different religions in Iraq with respect and goodwill. This will be important if we wish to bury, once and for all, the poisonous ideology that ISIS and hatemongers use to build up their support.

Distinguished Guests,

I would like to again thank the US Commission on International Religious Freedom for its attention to the minorities in the Middle East, including Iraq, and for support to the endangered Yezidi community. Thank you.

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