

## **Outrage over the crimes committed against the Yazidi must not be allowed to diminish**

**By Alice Wairimu Nderitu,  
United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide  
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This month, the United Nations Headquarters is hosting the exhibition '*The Women Who Beat ISIS*'. This exhibition features the testimony of Yazidi women who survived the vicious violence committed by Da'esh in Iraq in August 2023. Their voices speak both of the terrible tragedy they experienced and of their tireless advocacy for memory and prevention. In May 2022, I had the opportunity of conducting an official visit to Iraq, which allowed me to meet many other victims, including in internally displaced camps in the Kurdistan region. There, too, eyes filled with sadness displayed a level of resilience that continue defying the fate of destruction that perpetrators put in motion with their vicious actions.

Resilience remains necessary, as does international attention, because the risk still exists. Great effort and resources have gone into attempts to stop the horrific crimes committed against the Yazidi by the Da'esh in the past decade. Unfortunately, these efforts have not gone far enough to end the suffering of this minority religious and ethnic group in the Sinjar Mountains on the Iraq-Syria border. In August, the world marked the tenth anniversary of the horrific crimes committed against the Yazidi, who were targeted because of who they were, and our sense of outrage should not be diminished by the passage of time. The outrage that galvanized the global community to band together to provide help is still needed.

Today, some 2,700 Yazidi hostages -- mostly women and girls -- are still in captivity. They must not recede from our consciousness and our conscience, especially because of the horror of their continued daily existence.

Ten years ago, the unspeakable violence began with the systematic gunning down of men and boys, burying others alive and killing old women. Boys were forced to change their religion and become fighters. Hundreds of women and girls were enslaved, to be trafficked for use as sex slaves. Testimonies from those who have been rescued from captivity detail continuing sexual violence against hostages that ranges from systematic rape and sex slavery to forced pregnancy, forced abortions and other forms of reproductive violence that has driven many to commit suicide by throwing themselves off the mountains.

But the violence that manifested in the most vicious way ten years ago was preceded by violence that was expressed in words. Over the years, the Yazidi have borne the brunt of baleful stereotypes and hate speech, which have been normalised in some parts of society and which, ten years ago, fed the narratives of those who sought to wipe them out.

Even this year, the week of ten-year commemoration of the crimes committed against the Yazidi was accompanied by over 1,000,000 documented hate speech messages against this group. Hate speech fueled this violence ten years ago. It can fuel it again today.

In the aftermath of the 2013 events, Iraq requested the assistance of the international community to bring the perpetrators of these serious crimes to account. The UN team to promote accountability for crimes committed by Da'esh (UNITAD) was thus established. During its years of

operations, dozens of mass graves were discovered in areas previously controlled by Da'esh, but a great deal of work remains to be done, even now that the team has winded down its operations. Thousands of Yazidi who fled their homes during attacks are still in camps for the internally displaced, and could be forced to return to their homes without any guarantees of safety. UNITAD has now concluded its mandate.

If history has taught us anything, it is that there are serious risks of genocide and related crimes when missions like UNITAD end. Doubtless, there will be transitional arrangements in place as the UN investigations and peace teams leave, but their departure is a source of great concern when justice, accountability and prevention questions have yet to be fully addressed.

The Yazidi Survivors Law, passed two years ago, three years since its first draft was tabled, is a significant step forward in acknowledging what has happened to the community. So are other initiatives undertaken by the Government of Iraq in supporting victims and their needs in Sinjar, as well as the official marking of 3 August as the day of countrywide commemoration. At the same time, there are still important gaps in addressing the future protection and accountability needs of this community. Iraq signed the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in 1959, however there is need to fully domesticate international crimes in national legislation. Failure to do so leaves vulnerable groups without explicit guarantees of national legal protection. The justice and accountability gap created by the absence of comprehensive legislation to address allegations of commission of such crimes in Iraq is one of the reasons for the continued suffering of the Yazidi and other minority communities in the country – Christians, Shabak, Kaka'i and others – and presents a risk of genocide and related crimes recurring.

Supporting Iraq in addressing these challenges must continue being a priority for the international community. Reparations, such as those proposed in the Yazidi Survivors Law, are most effective when delivered as part of a wider transitional justice programme that includes the obligation to investigate and prosecute the perpetrators of crimes that took place, if the people are to truly move forward with their lives. This requires a comprehensive reform of Iraqi criminal law to provide for punishment for genocide and related crimes.

A ray of hope shone from a court in Germany, early last year, when judges confirmed the conviction of a member of Da'esh for genocide against the Yazidi after he purchased a woman and her daughter, enslaved and tortured them. The judgment provides a positive example of judicial leadership on the use of international jurisdiction to deliver justice that has remained out of reach for the Yazidi for the past 10 years. Judicial proceedings in a number of countries against members of Da'esh have ensured and continue.

During my official visit to Iraq in May 2022, I joined the Yazidi at their shrine in Lalish. There, I expressed a wish -- that the more than 2,700 persons from the community believed to be in captivity of Da'esh would return to their loved ones. The Yazidi are waiting on the community of nations to affirm its commitment to the values that guarantee them the full enjoyment of their human rights, which is sacred, irrespective of their minority status or where they live.

The persistent vulnerability of minority populations and the insufficient steps being taken to guarantee their protection constitutes a stark reminder to the global community that acting to prevent genocide and related crimes is at least as important as pursuing accountability in the aftermath. In fact, when the crimes have been committed, one cannot go without the other.

We must continue honoring the victims of serious international crimes, while also acknowledging the fact that many of the risk factors that once led to the events of ten years ago still persist in Iraq, including widespread stigmatization and hate speech against members of specific and vulnerable communities. The international community needs to renew its commitment to protect them so that their existence may never again be threatened because of their identity.

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For media queries please contact:

Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect

<https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention>

Email: [osapg@un.org](mailto:osapg@un.org)