

WESTERN FOREIGN FIGHTERS AND THE YAZIDI GENOCIDE

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**COUNTER
EXTREMISM
PROJECT**

*“I want the whole world to know
what they have done.”*

**The Role of Western Foreign Fighters
in the Yazidi Genocide**

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“Islamic State was not only composed of Iraqis or Syrians. Its members were from everywhere. For the first time in our lives, we were seeing Germans, French, Russians and so many other nationalities. These foreigners committed crimes against us. Islamic State is not just an Iraqi or a Syrian problem, it is a global one. So why is the international community not doing more to bring these people, their own nationals, to justice?”

– Members of the Yazidi Survivors Network¹

“The horror inflicted on Yazidi men, women and children during Islamic State’s reign of terror has demonstrated once again where extreme dehumanising ideologies can lead. Defeating such violent extremism is only truly possible if we hold out the prospect of justice for its victims, and pressure for justice for the Yazidi people must flow from greater awareness of the terrible crimes they endured in this period. This vital report documents the scale of IS atrocities and can thus help bring justice for Yazidis a step closer.”

*– Lord Walney, John Woodcock, HM Government
Independent Advisor on Political Violence and Disruption*

1 Testimony provided by Yazda

“In 2016, I met a Yazidi man in a refugee camp. He told me his story: how while he was away from Sinjar on business, Islamic State fighters abducted his family. They sold his wife and daughters into slavery; they broke and brainwashed his sons into becoming cubs of the Caliphate. As he spoke to me, I could hear sobbing from behind a curtain: the moaning of his wife, whose owner had shot her in the head, and then sold her back, mentally and physically crippled, to her husband. “What can be done?” I asked him, in horror. “Nothing,” he answered. “You in Britain, in the West, will do nothing. There are Muslims in the West, and they will stand up for Muslims. There are Christians in the West, and they will stand up for Christians. But there are no Yazidis in the West, and so no one will care.” I assured him he was wrong - but so far, at any rate, it seems that he was all too right.

Thank goodness, then, for this report. May it serve to waken us in the West to the scale of Yazidi suffering, and to the role played in it by citizens from our own countries. May it serve to waken us from our solipsism. May it serve to remind us that it was not the torturers of the Yazidis who rank as victims, but the Yazidis themselves.”

– Tom Holland, Best-Selling Author and Historian

COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

ABOUT COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

The Counter Extremism Project (CEP) is a not-for-profit, non-partisan, international policy organization formed to combat the growing threat from extremist ideologies. Led by a renowned group of former world leaders and diplomats it combats extremism by pressuring financial and material support networks; countering the narrative of extremists and their online recruitment; and advocating for smart laws, policies, and regulations.

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INTRODUCTION

Summer 2015. A five-year-old girl is chained to a window and left outside under the blistering desert sun of Fallujah, Iraq – a punishment for wetting the bed while feeling unwell. The little girl would slowly die of thirst in temperatures exceeding 50 degrees Celsius. Condemned to the same inhumane punishment was the girl’s mother, made to suffer the additional and unimaginable horror of helplessly watching the life drain from her daughter’s body before her eyes.

The mother and child were members of Iraq’s marginalised Yazidi religious minority. Their captors and tormentors, members of the group known as Islamic State (IS). One Iraqi, one German. The little girl and her mother were kidnapped and enslaved by IS alongside thousands of Yazidi women and children, while the men and those women considered too old for sexual enslavement were rounded up and executed on the spot in the Sinjar region of Iraq – the ancestral home of the Yazidi people.

“It is very difficult to see your own daughter die in front of your eyes. I want the whole world to know what they have done.”²

– Yazidi Mother to Munich Court

2 Remarks made by Yazidi Mother of murdered five year old, as recorded in remarks by Amal Clooney: “Final UN General Assembly speech-Deash Accountability,” *Doughty Street Chambers*, September 26 2019: <https://www.doughtystreet.co.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/2019.09.26%20-%20FINAL%20UNGA%20Speech%20Daesh%20Accountability%20%28circulated%293.pdf>

Four years after the little girl died in Fallujah, in 2019 a 27-year-old woman named publicly only as Jennifer W is charged with crimes against humanity by a court in Munich. According to the German courts, Jennifer W had joined Islamic State and was responsible for the murder of the Yazidi child, who was kidnapped and enslaved alongside her mother.

Around the same time as the Jennifer W case began in Munich, the exhumation of the first mass graves began in Kocho village, containing the remains of Yazidi men and boys that Islamic State had executed in their initial assault on Sinjar.³ After killing Yazidi fathers, husbands, sons, brothers and uncles, IS rounded up and enslaved thousands of Yazidi women and children throughout the group's territory, which sprawled across large swathes of Iraq and Syria at the time.

The Yazidi minority of Iraq was specifically targeted for mass rape and genocide, yet, as noted by leading human rights barrister Amal Clooney in an address to the United Nations General Assembly, at the time the Munich case represented the only instance of an Islamic State member facing prosecution for their crimes against the Yazidi minority anywhere in the world.⁴ Since the Jennifer W case, five other individuals have been charged – all in Germany,

3 Yazda has documented over 70 kill sites and mass graves in Sinjar and published two reports summarising its findings: : “Mass Graves of Yazidis Killed by the Islamic State Organization or Local Affiliates On or After August 3, 2014,” https://www.academia.edu/37176156/2016_Yazda_Mass_Graves_Report_of_Yazidis_Killed_by_the_Islamic_State published on 28 January 2016, and “Working Against The Clock: Documenting Mass graves of Yazidis Killed by the Islamic State,” https://www.academia.edu/37174833/Yazda_Mass_Grave_Report_03.08.2018 on 3 August 2018.

4 “Final UN General Assembly speech-Daesh Accountability,” remarks by Amal Clooney

and four of whom are German – for atrocity crimes (war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide).⁵

Over six years on from the Islamic State assault on the Yazidi community, beginning in August 2014, some 250,000 Yazidis languish in Internally Displaced Person (IDP) camps. Many of those kidnapped, trafficked and enslaved by Islamic State remain unaccounted for, while new mass graves are uncovered with grim frequency in Iraq. In addition, Yazidi women and girls are still found living among their torturers and tormentors, often in the hastily constructed camps for former members of IS. Long after the collapse of the group’s “Caliphate”, for some Yazidi women the nightmare ordeal continues.

Many of the surviving Yazidis are crying out for justice for the crimes committed against their community, their families and friends. Justice which has so far not been delivered.

In the European and Western imagination, the Yazidi genocide was a distant horror committed against a religious minority most have never heard of – regrettable but disconnected and detached from problems closer to home. With a tiny diaspora and few public advocates for Yazidis in the West, the matter has largely gone overlooked in the aftermath of the “Caliphate” in both public discourse and policy responses. Yet, as the Jennifer W, Sarah O, and Omaima A atrocity charges demonstrate, Europeans and Westerners who joined Islamic State (of whom there were several thousand) were very much a part of these crimes. Not only Westerners, but Western women, complicit in the most cruelly misogynistic and sexualised crimes against other women and girls.

5 Taha A.J., Sarah O., Omaima A.

Even among those who perhaps did not participate directly, many chose to join the group after their campaign of persecution and enslavement against the Yazidis was common knowledge and well publicised, mostly by Islamic State's own propaganda.

The matter of foreign IS members – the thousands of citizens from Western Europe, North America and Australasia – has largely been approached from a counter-terrorism and security lens. In mainstream discourse, it is not uncommon to find the agency of those who willingly chose to join IS actively downplayed.

This mythology of the vulnerable and misled jihadist has been repeated back to Western audiences by the now-captured or stranded recruits. Through tales of grooming and brainwashing, Islamic State's Western recruits have sought to minimise the severity of their actions, positioning themselves as more sinned against than in sin. A cynical plea for leniency which has too often found a receptive audience in the West. This too has helped to soften the public and institutional demand for justice and accountability.

As this paper will demonstrate, Western recruits to Islamic State were in many cases enthusiastic participants in, or at least ideologically committed supporters of the genocide. At the time of writing, however, the handful of cases in Germany represent the only attempts to bring these recruits to justice.

A number of Western foreign returnees have been able to return to their home countries and get on with their lives. In fact, in the case of the United Kingdom, the vast majority of "returnees" have arrived home to no sanction, while the many communities of Iraq

and Syria they oppressed and persecuted will be unable to recover for generations, if at all.

Foreign recruits have flowed from the West to jihadist conflict zones for several decades, from Afghanistan and Bosnia to Chechnya and Somalia, and in all likelihood another conflict will attract others in future. The damage of sending the implicit message that thousands of our citizens can be allowed to travel to the Middle-East to commit atrocities against local populaces with near impunity should not be underestimated.

Aside from those who returned, other foreign IS recruits remain stranded in Northern Syria, under the watch of the Kurdish-led, US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Many have had their citizenship revoked, as states seek to avoid dealing with the problem of repatriation. Some have escaped and their whereabouts are unknown.

Published over six years on from the beginning of the Yazidi genocide, the purpose of this paper is not to build a case against any individuals, but to re-energise a forgotten conversation on the continued suffering of Yazidis, to raise awareness of the fight for justice, to advocate for justice and accountability, and to stand at least in part as a historical record of the role that Westerners played in these abhorrent crimes – a record which is in danger of being forgotten or overlooked.

This paper is simply a start. It sought to collect information from social media, news reporting and other accounts which connects Western citizens to the crimes committed against the Yazidi people. To support this effort, some original testimony was collected from a network of survivors, as well as a small amount of data relating

to their experience in captivity. This was all possible thanks to the hard work of Yazidi human rights NGO, Yazda.

The role of citizens of dozens of Western states in the mass rape and attempted destruction of the Yazidi people should not be omitted from our historical understanding of grim episode of history during which Islamic State's so-called "Caliphate" existed.

Not only do many states have an obligation to pursue justice for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, it can also be effective counter-terrorism practice. Overwhelmed security services in the West are dealing with the fallout of thousands of fighters and recruits who joined Islamic State. Investigating and prosecuting atrocities where found can help to ease this burden and ensure longer convictions which can keep the public safe.

In other words, justice for the crimes against the Yazidis is not only the right thing to do; it will make us all safer. It will also send a strong message to future generations of extremists that travelling overseas to commit atrocities against local civilians is intolerable and unacceptable.

I. THE YAZIDI GENOCIDE

“Before 3rd of August, I was just like any other mother, I was working very hard so that my children could have an education. Finally they graduated from university, one as a doctor, the other one as an engineer. My life changed for the better, I was very happy with these achievements. But then, the 3rd of August happened. They killed my children and with them my soul.”

*- Yazidi survivor. 44 years old,
IS captive for 8 months⁶*

The crimes committed by the Islamic State group represent one of the clearest examples of genocide committed in recent memory. The campaign was a carefully orchestrated, pre-planned and systematic attempt to destroy a minority community, through mass executions of men of fighting age and the mass kidnapping and trafficking of Yazidi women and children into slavery as the ‘spoils of war’. Apart from the human atrocities, in a textbook campaign of ethnic cleansing, IS embarked on the intentional destruction of Yazidi spiritual, cultural sites and temples in Sinjar and Bashiqa-Bahzani. A total of 68 Yazidi temples, shrines and cultural sites were destroyed.

This section will provide background on the attack on Sinjar, the ancestral home of Iraq’s Yazidis, as well as how both the operation itself and the theological justification for the crimes against Yazidis were carefully premeditated with the intention of destroying the

⁶ Testimony collected and provided by Yazda.

Yazidi community and sexually enslaving women and girls. As this section will attempt to detail, the Yazidi genocide was both an effort to destroy the Yazidis as a people, as a religious community, down to the demolition and total subjugation of captured and enslaved Yazidis as individuals.

Assault on Sinjar

“Shortly before the attacks, the security forces in the area told us, ‘do not be afraid, we will protect you’. In the night of 3rd of August, IS members fired 40 mortars towards our village. We were counting them. Yazidi men from our village and neighboring Yazidi villages fought them the whole night. But they had mortars and we only light weapons. At 8 am we began to flee, families were running towards Sinjar mountain for protection. IS captured me and my family before we could reach it.”

*- Yazidi survivor. 25 years old,
IS captive for 9 months⁷*

The Islamic State assault on Sinjar began on the night of 2nd of August 2014 and extended into the 3rd August, overwhelming a community that was completely ill-prepared to mount resistance against the jihadist offensive. The local Kurdish Peshmerga forces had largely withdrawn in advance of the attack, a fact not communicated to the local Yazidi population, leaving them fatally exposed to the heavily armed Islamic State, which was scything through US-backed and equipped Iraqi Security Forces.

⁷ Testimony collected and provided by Yazda.

Sinjar was not a military target. Nor were the marginalised and mostly defenceless Yazidi people an immediate threat to the expanding Islamic State project. Although Sinjar was of some strategic significance, the intent of the campaign was straightforward: to seize Yazidi women and children as Sabaya – prisoners, or rather, *spoils of war*.

The attack was launched from multiple directions and set out to seize a number of roads and escape routes, forcing thousands of Yazidis fleeing for their lives to take refuge on the barren Mount Sinjar. On Mount Sinjar, those Yazidis who escaped the initial assault faced an impossible choice: death from starvation and thirst on the mountain or descending the mountain into the arms of the surrounding jihadist forces. The latter would spell certain death for the men and sexual enslavement for women.

On the mountain, reports surfaced of Yazidis eating leaves and the bark from trees to survive. Several hundred, including many children, are believed to have perished from thirst amid the blistering heat.⁸ The plight of the Yazidis stranded on Mount Sinjar and the proximity to American personnel in Erbil prompted US President Barack Obama to begin airstrikes against the surrounding Islamic State forces; the first strikes in what would become a multi-year, multinational fight against the group.

President Obama articulated the impossible situation facing the Yazidis in an address announcing the air campaign:

“As ISIL has marched across Iraq, it has waged a ruthless campaign against innocent Iraqis. And these

8 Jeremy Courtney, “My People May Soon Be Gone,” *TIME*, August 11, 2014 <https://time.com/3094260/yazidis-iraq-isis/>

terrorists have been especially barbaric towards religious minorities, including Christian and Yazidis, a small and ancient religious sect. Countless Iraqis have been displaced. And chilling reports describe ISIL militants rounding up families, conducting mass executions, and enslaving Yazidi women.

In recent days, Yazidi women, men and children from the area of Sinjar have fled for their lives. And thousands -- perhaps tens of thousands -- are now hiding high up on the mountain, with little but the clothes on their backs. They're without food, they're without water. People are starving. And children are dying of thirst. Meanwhile, ISIL forces below have called for the systematic destruction of the entire Yazidi people, which would constitute genocide. So these innocent families are faced with a horrible choice: descend the mountain and be slaughtered, or stay and slowly die of thirst and hunger.”⁹

Several other countries, including the United Kingdom and Germany, began humanitarian airdrops for the stranded Yazidis on Mount Sinjar, as biblical scenes of an exodus of civilians splashed across global front pages.¹⁰

Those unable to outrun the initial Islamic State assault faced inconceivable horrors. Despite IS propaganda showing Yazidi men renouncing their faith and converting to Islam, in most (but not

9 “President Obama Makes a Statement on the Crisis in Iraq,” *The White House*, August 7, 2014 <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2014/08/07/president-obama-makes-statement-iraq>

10 “Germany to send airlift, US to continue airstrikes,” *DW.com*, August 14, 2014 <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-to-send-airlift-us-to-continue-airstrikes/a-17855475>

necessarily all) cases, captured men were not afforded this choice. Instead, they were executed on the spot, whereas the women and children were kidnapped and enslaved as war booty. Estimates vary, but it is thought that over 3000 Yazidis died in the initial assault on Sinjar, with approximately 6,800 abducted and enslaved by IS.¹¹

“My children were not captured when my husband and I were, as we squeezed them in our neighbor’s car and asked that they take them along to Mount Sinjar. We had no car, so my husband and I had to walk to the mountain, but we were stopped by ISIL before safely arriving. My husband was immediately executed, right in front of me with 15 other men, while I was taken captive with other women.”

– Salma, a 26-year-old Yazidi returnee.

As told to FIDH¹²

The Theology of Genocide

“When we were asking ISIS members, why do you treat us like this? Why are you committing these crimes against us? Why do you hate us? They were simply telling us: ‘You

11 Gina Vale, “Liberated, not free: Yazidi women after Islamic State captivity”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 31:3, 511-539 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09592318.2020.1726572>

12 “Sexual violence against Yazidis: ISIL foreign fighters should be prosecuted for genocide and crimes against humanity,” *FIDH*, October 25, 2018 <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/north-africa-middle-east/iraq/sexual-violence-against-yazidis-isil-foreign-fighters-should-be>

are infidels, you don't worship God, you worship the devil. You deserve all of this."

- Yazidi survivor from the south side of Sinjar mountain, 24 years old, IS captive for 4 years and 7 months¹³

"Attacking Sinjar and taking girls to use as sex slaves wasn't a spontaneous decision made on the battlefield by a greedy soldier. Islamic State planned it all: how they would come into our homes, what made a girl more or less valuable, which militants deserved a sabaya as incentive and which should pay. They even discussed sabaya in their glossy propaganda magazine, Dabiq, in an attempt to draw new recruits."¹⁴

- Nadia Murad, genocide survivor and 2018 Nobel Peace Prize Winner

As discussed above, the mass enslavement and execution of Yazidis was not merely opportunistic. The assault and its immediate aftermath were carefully predetermined and systematic. Islamic State scholars pored over scripture to interpret and determine the fate of the Yazidis, while the group's propaganda machine went to great lengths to justify and advertise the campaign of sexual abuse.

The assault on Sinjar was not simply a land grab for the expanding "Caliphate," it was also a sexual conquest with the specific intention

13 Testimony collected by Yazda.

14 Nadia Murad, "I was an Isis sex slave. I tell my story because it is the best weapon I have", *The Guardian*, 6 October 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/oct/06/nadia-murad-isis-sex-slave-nobel-peace-prize>

of destroying the Yazidi community and kidnapping women and girls for sexual enslavement.

Islamic State's religious scholars and students determined that Yazidis practiced a pre-Islamic faith, and so could not be treated as *murtadeen* (a community which had abandoned Islam). Instead, they were deemed to be *mushrikeen*, or, polytheists.¹⁵

Other religious minorities, such as Christians and Jews, were deemed by Islamic State to be 'people of the book' and therefore eligible to live under the group's rule by paying the *jizya* (tax). On the other hand, the distinction of the Yazidis as *mushrikeen* meant that according to Islamic State ideology, faithful Muslims would be held to account for the continued existence of this religious community on judgement day. This sanctioned the group to conduct forced conversions, mass executions, and the taking of women and children as *sabaya* (slaves). Islamic State members routinely, and incorrectly, referred to Yazidis as "devil worshippers."¹⁶

In the fourth issue of *Dabiq*, Islamic State's official English language propaganda magazine, an extensive justification was issued in an article titled 'The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour,' in which the distinction between the treatment of the Yazidis and other minorities was explained:

"Unlike the Jews and Christians, there was no room for jizyah payment. Also, their women could be enslaved

15 "Sexual and gender-based crimes against the Yazidi Community: the role of ISIL foreign fighters," *FIDH*, October 2018, p. 16

16 "They came to destroy: ISIS crimes against the Yazidis," *UN Human Rights Council*, Thirty-second session, 15 June, 2016: 20 https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A_HRC_32_CRP2_en.pdf

unlike female apostates who the majority of the fuqahā' say cannot be enslaved and can only be given an ultimatum to repent or face the sword. After capture, the Yazidi women and children were then divided according to the Sharī'ah amongst the fighters of the Islamic State who participated in the Sinjar operations, after one fifth of the slaves were transferred to the Islamic State's authority to be divided as khums."¹⁷

Far from simply “mindless” or “senseless” violence, as has sometimes been suggested, Islamic State’s persecution of minorities, including the Yazidis, was carefully ideologically justified, the influence of which is seen in captor behaviour. Although as Gina Vale has pointed out, despite IS rulings on treatment of slaves, survivor testimony suggests treatment varied considerably according to captors.¹⁸

“They distributed us, I became a slave of an Islamic State member who was beating me and torturing me. He hung my feet with iron chains. He burned down my leg while he was raping me. The traces are still printed on my body and legs.”

*- Yazidi survivor. 45 years old, IS captive for 1 year and 2 months*¹⁹

17 *Dabiq*, Issue 4, October 2014

18 Gina Vale, “Liberated, not free: Yazidi women after Islamic State captivity”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 31:3, 511-539 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09592318.2020.1726572>

19 Testimony collected and provided by Yazda.

New York Times reporter, Rukmini Callimachi, illustrated the extent of this ideological justification in a 2015 article, ‘ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape.’²⁰ Speaking to Yazidis survivors and escapees from Islamic State captivity, the accounts detail how the ideological justifications influenced the behaviour of the captors:

“In the moments before he raped the 12-year-old girl, the Islamic State fighter took the time to explain that what he was about to do was not a sin. Because the preteen girl practiced a religion other than Islam, the Quran not only gave him the right to rape her — it condoned and encouraged it, he insisted.

He bound her hands and gagged her. Then he knelt beside the bed and prostrated himself in prayer before getting on top of her.

When it was over, he knelt to pray again, bookending the rape with acts of religious devotion.

“I kept telling him it hurts — please stop,” said the girl, whose body is so small an adult could circle her waist with two hands. “He told me that according to Islam he is allowed to rape an unbeliever. He said that by raping me, he is drawing closer to God,” she said in an interview alongside her family in a refugee camp here, to which she escaped after 11 months of captivity.”

Throughout history, many states, regimes and even non-state actors conducting ethnic or religious cleansing campaigns have

20 Rukmini Callimachi, “Isis Enshrines a Theology of Rape,” *New York Times*, August 13, 2015 <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html>

attempted to downplay or obscure the nature and severity of their crimes. However, as discussed the persecution of Yazidis was ideologically and theologically justified under the strand of Salafi-jihadist ideology practiced by Islamic State. For this reason, the group made no secret of the genocide it waged against Yazidis, and celebrated it as – *in their view* – the restoration of the ancient and worthy institution of slavery.

Additionally, openly advertising the genocide also acted both as recruitment tool and psychological warfare against future opponents. The promise of a *Sabi* (slave) for male members served as a sexual incentive for joining the Islamic State group, while the subjugation of the Yazidis also acted as a warning and form of psychological terror directed at those who would soon clash with its expansion.²¹

Months after the *Dabiq* issue celebrating the revival of slavery, a subsequent issue featured an extensive justification for slavery in English by a female IS member, Umm Samayyah Al-Muhajirah. Umm Samayyah even rebuked those IS supporters who initially sought to deny or downplay the reports of slavery when they first surfaced. She writes:

“I write this while the letters drip of pride. Yes, O religions of kufr altogether, we have indeed raided and captured the kāfrah women, and drove them like sheep by the edge of

21 See, for example, IS spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani’s warning to the West: “We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women,” statement reproduced in: Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” *The Atlantic*, March, 2015 <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>

the sword. And glory belongs to Allah, to His Messenger, and the believers, but the hypocrites do not know!"²²

The assault on Sinjar was carefully and coldly calculated with the specific intent of capturing Yazidi women and children as *sabaya*, to be spread as loot from battle among faithful Islamic State followers and fighters. It was an attempt to systematically destroy a religious minority community and to humiliate and defile individual captives. The group's own documentation and propaganda, which proudly advertised the return of slavery, often provides the most comprehensive evidence of these dreadful intentions.

22 *Dabiq*, Issue 9

II. ISLAMIC STATE'S FOREIGNERS AND THE YAZIDI GENOCIDE

“A German Islamic State member came and forced me to marry him. He took me to Tal-Afar (Iraq) for two months and he raped me several times, tortured me. When he got tired of me, he sold me to another IS member.”

– Yazidi survivor. 27 years old, IS captive for 1 year

“The person who took me was a British citizen. He raped me in the worst possible ways.”

– Yazidi survivor. 24 years old, IS captive for 1 year²³

When it comes to the matter of several thousand European and Western citizens travelling to Iraq and Syria to Islamic State territory, counter-terrorism and security considerations have understandably dominated.

By 2018, some 1,765 IS foreign fighters (out of a total of 5,904, according to ICSR figures) were thought to have returned to Western Europe, and the policy responses of European governments varied significantly.²⁴ Some states sought to avoid over-securitising the response to returnees, while others struggled to gather sufficient evidence of terrorist activities overseas to bring charges.

²³ Testimony collected and provided by Yazda.

²⁴ Joana Cook and Gina Vale, “From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’: Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State,” ICSR, July 2018:15 <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICSR-Report-From-Daesh-to-%E2%80%98Diaspora%E2%80%99-Tracing-the-Women-and-Minors-of-Islamic-State.pdf>

In the case of the United Kingdom, some 400–450 foreign members are thought to have returned, of whom just 40 have faced any charge at the time of writing. Some of these convictions have been related to their activities in the conflict zone, while other convictions have been the result of subsequent counter-terrorism or criminal investigations.²⁵ None of the charges have related to crimes against Yazidis or local civilians in Iraq and Syria.

A number of IS Western recruits are also held in detention centres or in refugee camps in Northern Syria, controlled by the US-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The public debate over the issue of these stranded citizens has so far overlooked the plight of Yazidi and other civilian victims in Iraq and Syria almost entirely.

Despite the lack of attention given to the crimes against Yazidis committed by Western foreign recruits and returnees, there is evidence in the public domain which points to involvement by Islamic State's Western contingent. On social media, in propaganda and in witness testimony from defectors, returnees and captured or stranded IS members, as well as survivors of the genocide themselves. For example, according to the accounts of defectors collected by the *International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE)*, Western foreign members were

25 Reply by Baroness Williams of Trafford, "Islamic State: British Nationals Abroad: Written Question-HL1240," Parliament, February 17, 2020 <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Lords/2020-02-03/HL1240/>

often privileged above local recruits, receiving extra material and financial incentives, and sometimes female slaves.²⁶

On determining the activities of foreign members, journalism can play an integral role where authorities are stretched. For example, the crimes against humanity case against Omaima A in Germany made it to the courts after journalists Jenan Moussa and Harald Doornbos came into possession of the German IS recruit's cellphone.²⁷ In the subsequent police investigation, it was determined that Omaima A had enslaved a thirteen-year-old girl. Phone conversations were also heard in court in which Omaima A discussed slaves, casually remarking: "*You only have to give slaves enough food and clothes. Nothing more.*"

However, in some of the coverage and commentary on individuals who joined the group, there have been few references to the crimes against Yazidis, and there has even been a tendency to downplay the agency of the thousands of men and women who willingly travelled to Iraq and Syria to join Islamic State – allowing a number of recruits to claim they were manipulated or brainwashed into their actions.²⁸

It should not be forgotten or overlooked that many of these individuals joined the group well after their abuse and crimes

26 Anne Speckhard, "Eyewitness accounts from recent defectors from Islamic State: Why they joined, what they saw, why they quit," *International Centre for the Study of Violent Extremism*, December 1, 2015 <https://www.icsve.org/eyewitness-accounts-from-recent-defectors-from-islamic-state-why-they-joined-what-they-saw-why-they-quit/>

27 Jenan Moussa's tweet: "She returned to Hamburg and now lives as if nothing happened," (@jenanmoussa, April 15, 2015) <https://twitter.com/jenanmoussa/status/1117720212680392710>

28 Simon Cottee, "The warped world of the British Isis fugitive Tooba Gondal," *The Spectator*, October 6, 2019 <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-warped-world-of-the-british-isis-fugitive-tooba-gondal->

against local civilians, as well as executions of hostages were well publicised – both in international media and Islamic State's own propaganda.

Foreign fighters in Yazidi survivor testimony

“Thousands of Islamic State members were captured and thousands of survivors can testify against them. Yet, not much is being done to hold them accountable for their crimes committed against us.”

– Yazidi survivor²⁹

“I was bought by a French man who brought me to live with his mother and two sisters in Raqqa. I knew he was French from the daughter of their neighbour, who was also French and told me they all were. His sister was also married to a French man in Deir Ezzour.”

- Katrin, 30-year-old survivor. As told to FIDH delegation³⁰

A number of NGOs, journalists and human rights groups working with Yazidi survivors have collected personal testimony and eyewitness accounts which point to widespread involvement of Western Islamic State recruits in the enslavement of the Yazidi people. At the very least, the involvement of Westerners in the mass rape and enslavement of Yazidi women and children was more widespread than public perceptions or prosecution rates would suggest.

²⁹ Testimony collected and provided by Yazda.

³⁰ FIDH p.32

The issue of female returnees has also proved an emotive issue for many Western countries, amid intense debate over the extent of their crimes and individual agency. However, the Islamic State's female recruits feature prominently in Yazidi testimony, as willing participants in the captivity and sexual abuse. Of course, it should be noted that at the time of writing the only charges against Westerners for crimes against Yazidis have been brought against women. Some of the survivor testimony collected for this paper highlights the active role played by IS women in the enslavement and rape of other women:

“An Islamic State member asked his wife and his friend’s wife to help him to rape me. His wife tied my hands and his friend’s wife tied my feet while he took off my clothes in front of them and then they went out, he closed the door and he raped me.”

- Yazidi survivor. 24 years old, IS captive for 4 years and 7 months³¹

“The woman asked me to wear a dress, she put makeup on me and prepared me. I did not understand the reason behind it until she took me to another Islamic State member.”

- Yazidi survivor. 22 years old, IS captive for 4 years and 2 months³²

To collect this testimony, CEP worked with Yazidi human rights NGO, Yazda, to secure information from a network of survivors

31 Testimony collected and provided by Yazda.

32 Testimony collected and provided by Yazda.

in both Europe and Iraq. Some of this evidence is reproduced throughout this section and elsewhere in the paper. A number of eyewitness accounts included were collected by other organisations, but reproduced here in order to build a fuller picture.

The survivors contacted for this research came into contact with foreign members from all over the world while in captivity. As well as recruits from Iraq Arab states and other Muslim majority states, Yazidis surveyed came into contact with Russian, German, French, Belgian, British, American, Australian, Chinese, Dutch, Turkish and Chinese IS members while in captivity, among a number of other nationalities.³³

Because of the sensitivity of the crimes committed and the documentation of evidence through official bodies, information about the types of crime is limited in this paper, but the survey shows that the overwhelming majority came into contact with foreign IS recruits in captivity. Some respondents were held captive by foreign IS members, although a statistical breakdown cannot be made here due to data limitations.

33 The responses cover those who were directly held as captives by IS foreign fighters and those who came into contact with foreign fighters while in captivity in other ways and were able to identify the nationality. In some cases, Yazidi survivors identified foreigners and Europeans but could not identify the exact nationality.

Of 67 survivors surveyed, only ten had not come into contact with foreign members, meaning some 85% had come into contact with foreign Islamic State members during their time in captivity.

Just over 50% of respondents had come into contact with Western Islamic State recruits, from Western Europe, North America or Australia, while in captivity.³⁴

17 respondents (25%) had encountered Islamic State members from more than one Western country.

Despite the gravity of the crimes committed against them, and the ongoing torment felt by displacement and violations of honour, there has been little in the way of justice, and a sense of pessimism and resignation among some survivors:

*"I have testified to police and prosecutors from Germany and US but I have so far not seen any trials against IS. I don't see any point in speaking out but I will do it anyway."*³⁵

Another survivor expressed frustration at the lack of action on accountability:

"I only heard about a case in Germany, nothing in Iraq. this is not enough. No IS member is being held

34 Other survivors identified foreigners but could not identify the nationality, so the figure may be higher.

35 Testimony collected and provided by Yazda.

accountable for their crimes. IS didn't just die because they were territorially defeated. I would like to see IS members in court."³⁶

On the issue of Western recruits participating in the crimes against Yazidis, one survivor emphasised how Westerners had been a part of the crimes and so should be a part of the solution:

*"I was very upset to see German and Swiss people join IS and do such harm to Yazidis. I also heard about another case in Germany through a friend. I try to find as much information as possible on social media on legal cases. I feel like Yazidis are being convinced that they are receiving all the humanitarian and legal support there is but the reality is that they are not receiving close to the support they need and Western and other countries are a part of what happened and should be part of the solution."*³⁷

Another survivor expressed frustration that IS members have been able to continue their lives in their home countries, also emphasising the role of women in their captivity:

"IS members live as civilians and nothing is done to put them on trials. It's very important for us survivors to know if and when an IS fighter is put on trial. It gives us more strength and motivation to know about this and it would feel like our voices are being heard. These ongoing cases are not enough, there are tens of thousands of IS

36 Testimony collected and provided by Yazda.

37 Testimony collected and provided by Yazda.

*members, and not only men. Some of the women treated us worse than the men.*³⁸

Based on the testimonies collected, the overwhelming majority – some 85% – reported coming into contact with foreign recruits during captivity. Over half had come into contact with individuals they identified as being from a Western country (Western Europe, North America or Australasia), although the actual figure could be higher.

The survey also showed that out of the 67 questioned survivors, 40 were not aware of any legal actions against IS members. A number complained about a lack of outreach. The remaining 27 survivors often had incomplete information.

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Other accounts from Yazidi survivors points to involvement and abuses committed by Western IS recruits. In particular, evidence collected by Paris based human rights NGO, FIDH, provides one of the most comprehensive collections of survivor testimony pointing to Western IS member involvement.

In 2015, one 20-year-old Yazidi woman visited the US to testify in Congress about her captivity and rape at the hands of an American foreign fighter, known in the public realm by his kunya, Abu Abdullah Al Amriki (signifying American origins). The fighter is thought to have been a white convert in his early twenties who

38 Testimony collected and provided by Yazda.

joined the group and “purchased” at least nine Yazidi women, keeping two in captivity to himself.³⁹

In a similar detail to those captured in the New York Times report, the American fighter prayed and ritually cleansed himself before and after raping the Yazidi woman:

“Before raping me, he would pray for like fifteen minutes or half an hour. And after that, even if it was 2 a.m., 3 a.m., after raping me, he would go take a shower and pray again. There was nothing left to do to me. They did everything.”⁴⁰

The Yazidi witness account also identified another American foreign fighter known as as “Abu Zeyd.”⁴¹

Another Yazidi witness account suggests the involvement of one of the higher profile British jihadists, Siddhartha Dhar, a convert from East London and former bouncy castle salesman. Dhar, known among jihadist circles as Abu Rumaysah, was a member of the extremist group al-Muhajiroun, currently a proscribed terrorist group in the United Kingdom.

According to one Yazidi witness, Dhar kept her captive and raped her as a sixteen-year-old. The same survivor claims to have been

39 Mick Krever and Dan Wright, “Yazidi woman: I was raped by ‘American jihadi,’” CNN, September 29, 2015 <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/24/world/amanpour-yazidi-woman/index.html>

40 *Ibid.*

41 Jay Akbar, “Revealed, American jihadi is ‘top ISIS commander’ Yazidi slave reveals that she was beaten and held captive by US citizen who directs attacks and keeps a vial of poison to kill himself if he is caught” *MailOnline*, September 29, 2015 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3253107/Is-ISIS-commander-AMERICAN-jihadi-Yazidi-slave-reveals-beaten-held-captive-citize-n-directs-attacks-keeps-vial-poison-kill-caught.html>

kept captive by an Australian jihadist, Abdul Salam Mahmoud, prior to Dhar.⁴²

“His wife did not speak any Arabic, she did not understand the Yazidi matter at all. She kept asking me why I was there, but he told me not to say anything. She wanted me to leave. A few days later, he took me away from his family’s house to another house. He raped me there three times while handcuffing and gagging me.”

– Salma, 26-year-old returnee speaking of her French captor. As told to FIDH delegation⁴³

Foreign fighters and the genocide: *in their own words*

In addition to celebrating and glorifying violence and terror attacks against Western targets, many of Islamic State’s Western recruits and its supporters based in the West endorsed and openly supported the enslavement of Yazidis.

As previously discussed, Western policymakers should not overlook the fact that many foreign members and so-called “Brides” willingly travelled to join Islamic State’s “Caliphate” *after* the genocide, and after enslavement of Yazidi women and children was already well publicised. They travelled with knowledge of, and in some cases may even have been incentivised by these crimes.

42 Adam Withnall, “Isis sex slave kidnapped by British ‘new Jihadi John’ suspect Siddhartha Dhar,” The Independent, May 1, 2015 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/isis-rape-victim-kidnap-new-jihadi-john-siddhartha-dhar-speaks-out-terrorism-yazidi-islamic-state-a7008786.html>

43 FIDH p.33

Those now in Kurdish detention have shown little to no remorse for the plight of the Yazidis, and few have been pressed on the matter by journalists.

Furthermore, scattered across the internet there are scraps of evidence hinting at Western foreign fighter involvement and support for the genocide, often posted on their own social media accounts. A small selection of evidence to this end is detailed below. This is not with the intent to provide sufficient grounds to build a case, but to raise awareness of the role of Westerners in enslaving Yazidi women and children and to encourage governments, the media and the public not only to assess the foreign members question through the lens of counter-terrorism, but to assess involvement in human rights abuses and crimes against humanity as well.

The intention is also to provide a window into how Western IS recruits thought about and perceived both the institution of sexualised slavery, and their individual victims. As discussed below, a certain nonchalance and detachment from the severity of the crimes and the suffering is evident in several accounts. In some cases, feeble attempts to draw moral equivalencies and justifications are made.

Social media breadcrumbs

One of the most active Westerners on social media was Hoda Muthana, a young woman who left her home in Alabama to join Islamic State. Muthana was active across multiple platforms, imploring others to travel to Iraq and Syria, and encouraging and celebrating terror attacks in the West. At the time of writing, Muthana is stranded in Northern Syria and is not allowed to return

to the United States. Unverified social media accounts believed to belong to Muthana posted a number of times about captive Yazidi women and children.

An account believed to be connected to Muthana posted an image of two young boys - purportedly Yazidis - to Instagram with the caption “yazidi kidz lovin lyf under da state.”⁴⁴ Yazidi boys were kidnapped and indoctrinated by IS.



Screenshot taken by BuzzFeed News

44 BuzzFeed Reporter Ellie Hall tracked the accounts of Hoda Muthana and several other female IS recruits over a number of years. Records of Muthana’s social media activity were kept by Hall: Hoda Muthana (@_bintahm3d), “Yazidi kidz lovin lyf under da state” *Instagram*, April 19, 2015 <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/5988083/Instagram-Captured-Apr-19-2015-Photo-8.pdf>

On her *ask.fm* account (a Q&A platform), Muthana was also asked about *sabaya* (slaves), and responded that they were treated well, and that many had ostensibly converted to Islam voluntarily.

One user asked:

“Do you know many sabayas [slaves]?”

Muthana: *“I know a few. Did you know a lot of the sabayahs revert to islam after living with a Muslim here?”*⁴⁵

Another asked:

“How do the sabayat feel in Dawlah [ISIS]?”

Muthana: *“Welcome. As it is a part of the Sunnah to be kind to your slaves.”*

Needless to say, Muthana's account of how Yazidi women and children feel about their captivity is at odds with much of existing survivor and eyewitness testimony.

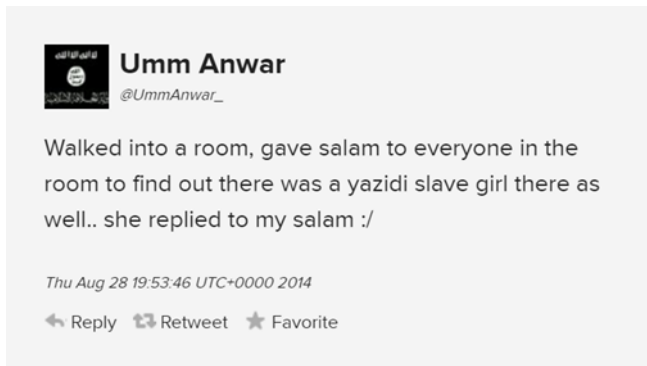
In 2017, the Kurdistan Region Security Council official Twitter account announced a successful operation to free a twelve-year-old girl who was being held as a slave by an American IS foreign fighter.⁴⁶

An unverified and now deleted account operating under the handle *@UmmAnwar_* on Twitter posted a tweet the same month as the assault on Sinjar and round-up of women and children, in

45 “Exclusive MEMRI JTTM Reports on Social Media Accounts of Hoda Muthana,” MEMRI, February 26, 2019 <https://www.memri.org/reports/exclusive-memri-jttm-reports-social-media-accounts-hoda-muthana-american-isis-member-alabama>

46 KR Security Council' tweet, “Our elite CT unit announces rescue of 12-year-old Yazidi girl, Khatrin Khodeda Murad, in West Mosul” (@KRSCPress, March 3, 2017). <https://twitter.com/KRSCPress/status/837725574458134528?s=20>

which she expressed surprise, if not contempt, that a “Yazidi slave girl” had replied to her greeting meant for fellow Islamic State members (pictured below).⁴⁷



A tweet from the handle *@abulmuthanna313*, an unconfirmed account of Welshman, Nasser Muthana, boasted to the CNN Breaking News account about the number of slaves IS had in Syria

47 Picture reproduced from BuzzFeed article: Ellie Hall, “Inside the Chilling Online World of the Women of Isis,” *Buzzfeed*, September 11, 2017 <https://www.buzzfeed.com/ellievhall/inside-the-online-world-of-the-women-of-isis>

(pictured above).⁴⁸ This tweet was posted just days after the initial assault on Sinjar and mass kidnap of woman and children.

On another occasion the account posted about the execution of Yazidi men and enslavement of women:

“Kuffar [non-believers] are afraid we will slaughter Yazidis, our deen [religious path] is clear we will kill their men, take their women and children as slaves insha Allah.”⁴⁹

A female Australian recruit also posted on Twitter, this time with a photograph of a small boy with a weapon positioned next to him. The caption read “From Yezidi to ISIS <3,” apparently in celebration of the small child’s forced indoctrination at the hands of Islamic State, after he was kidnapped, trafficked and enslaved along with thousands of others (pictured below).⁵⁰



48 Jenan Moussa’s tweet: “@cnnbrk I can confirm that we have hundreds of Yazidi slave women now in syria, how about that for news!” @jenanmoussa, August 14, 2014 <https://twitter.com/jenanmoussa/status/49988776473777665?s=20>

49 Ciaran Jones, “‘I’m getting good with these bombs’: Sick boast of Cardiff schoolboy who has joined Islamic State fighters,” *WalesOnline*, August 13, 2014 <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/im-getting-good-bombs-sick-7608546>

50 Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, “Till Martyrdom Do Us Part. Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon,” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, June 2015, p. 30 <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/ICSR-Report-%E2%80%98Till-Martyrdom-Do-Us-Part%E2%80%99-Gender-and-the-ISIS-Phenomenon.pdf>

A fellow Australian and former professional boxer, Mohamed Elomar, gained tabloid notoriety when he posted photographs of himself and his son holding decapitated heads in Raqqa, the de facto capital of the Islamic State. In addition, Elomar posted openly about kidnapped Yazidis on Twitter, discussing selling the captured women and girls like goods or livestock - claiming that he had “1 of 7 Yehzidi [sic] slave girls for sale” at a price of \$2500 each.⁵¹

In 2015, a number of freed Yazidi women came forward with testimonies which seem to confirm that Elomar and another Australian, Khaled Sharrouf, had raped and tortured Yazidi women and encouraged their young children to torture the “slaves.” One of four Yazidi survivors who made allegations against the two men said the pair had also threatened to make a video while cutting off their heads.⁵²

Perhaps Germany's most high profile foreign fighter, Denis Cuspert (once a popular rapper who had supported American hip hop star DMX) appeared in an IS propaganda video bragging of loot taken from Kurds and Yazidis near the town of Kobane in Syria.⁵³ Although the siege of Kobane was a distinct event to the assault on Sinjar in Iraq, this remains indicative of the crimes IS committed against local civilian populations, of which Western foreign members were a part. Cuspert, it should be added, was

51 Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, “Till Martyrdom Do Us Part. Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon,” p. 29

52 Sarah Crawford and Geoff Chambers, “Aussie Khaled Sharrouf teaches sons to torture girls after he rapes them,” *The Daily Telegraph*, January 22, 2015 <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/aussie-khaled-sharrouf-teaches-sons-to-torture-girls-after-he-rapes-them/news-story/247f945fcda433e269b8cf4b82887858>

53 Amos Barshad, “The Pop Star Of Jihad: The strange tale of Deso Dogg, the German rapper who fled to Syria to sing songs for ISIS,” *The Fader*, August 2, 2016 <https://www.thefader.com/2016/08/02/isis-denis-cuspert-deso-dogg-rapper>

the first husband of Omaima A, the German woman charged with crimes against humanity in Hamburg.

Another German foreign fighter posted on social media a number of times regarding buying and selling Yazidi women and girls. Although it is not possible to verify whether the pictures are real or not, the German foreign fighters posted multiple photos of young women, possibly teenagers, on Facebook with captions including:

“To all the bros thinking of buying a slave. This one is \$8000. I advise u guys to get married and then come dawlah [IS]”

A British user and Islamic State supporter, whose whereabouts was unknown, replied:

“That much for that? That thing should be buy 1 get that troll for free lol”⁵⁴

After the Caliphate

Some of the most notorious Westerners to have joined Islamic State now in captivity or stranded in Northern Syria since the fall of the “Caliphate” have been questioned on the Yazidi genocide by journalists. Most of the responses to journalists have demonstrated at best, indifference, and at worst satisfaction and support for the crimes against Yazidis.

In detention in Northern Syria, Londoner El Shafee Elsheikh, former member of the Islamic State’s so-called “Beatles” - a group of four British males with a reputation for brutality against

54 “German ISIS Fighter Claims To Sell Alleged Yazidi Slaves On Facebook,” MEMRI, May 22, 2016 <https://www.memri.org/jttm/german-isis-fighter-claims-sell-alleged-yazidi-slaves-facebook>

hostages - was pressed on the genocide by Lebanese journalist Jenan Moussa in an interview. Moussa is the journalist responsible for finding evidence of German woman Omaima A's involvement with Islamic State.

Elsheikh replied by justifying the enslavement of Yazidi women and children, and dismissing the abolition of slavery in the United States and the West:

"I don't denounce slavery... Just because America decided to abolish something... It does not mean that every person has to run behind America and say: This is now an abominable act."

"The reality is that slavery has been around since humans have been around."⁵⁵

The two surviving members of "the Beatles", both British foreign fighters, also admitted to coming into contact with American hostage, Kayla Mueller, believed to have been held personally by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the now deceased leader of Islamic State.⁵⁶ Mueller was also held in captivity alongside Yazidi women, so there is a high possibility that the two British fighters interacted with Yazidis as well.

Others have been less candid since the collapse of Islamic State's "Caliphate". Hoda Muthana, the American born recruit, claims

55 Jenan Moussa's tweet, "I had first interview with notorious ISIS member from UK, part of group dubbed 'The Beatles'", @jenanmoussa, April 8, 2018 <https://twitter.com/jenanmoussa/status/982935563694215168?s=20>

56 Ken Dilanian, Anna Schecter and Richard Engel, "Two of the ISIS terrorists dubbed the Beatles admit involvement in captivity of Kayla Mueller, James Foley," *NBC News*, July 23, 2020 <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/two-isis-terrorists-dubbed-beatles-admit-involvement-captivity-kayla-mueller-n1234584>

she never owned any Yazidi slaves, although she knew others who did.⁵⁷ Muthana's social media output, detailed above, suggests she held no objection to the kidnapping and indoctrination of Yazidi children at the very least.

“They told us we had to become good Muslims and fight for Islam. They showed us videos of beheadings, killing and Islamic State battles. [My instructor] said “You have to kill kuffars even if they are your fathers and brothers, because they belong to the wrong religion and they don’t worship God.”

*- Yazidi Boy, aged 12 at capture, trained in Syria*⁵⁸

Also stranded in Northern Syria, Shamima Begum, one of the three teenagers who left her home in East London for Islamic State territory in February 2015, was pressed on the plight of Yazidis by BBC journalist Quentin Somerville. Begum offered a similar equivalence and indifference as other Western recruits when she replied: *“Shia do the same in Iraq.”*⁵⁹

In another Quentin Somerville interview Dutch jihadist, Yago Riedijk, who was married to Begum in Islamic State territory,

57 Anne Speckhard and Adrian Shajkovi, “Born in America, Hoda Muthana Shares her Story of Joining and Escaping from the Islamic State Caliphate,” *International Centre for the Study of Violent Extremism*, April 23, 2019 <https://www.icsve.org/born-in-america-hoda-muthana-shares-her-story-of-joining-and-escaping-from-the-islamic-state-caliphate/>

58 “They came to destroy: ISIS crimes against the Yazidis,” *UN Human Rights Council*, June 15, 2016: 18 https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf

59 Quentin Sommerville tweet: “Shamima Begum still believe IS propaganda. When I asked her about the enslavement, murder and rape of Yazidi women by IS, she said, “Shia do the same in Iraq,” (@sommervilletv, February 18, 2019) <https://twitter.com/sommervilletv/status/1097441073138462720?s=20>

suggested that he knew of another Dutch jihadist who had kept a Yazidi woman of 40 years of age as a slave, but denied involvement himself.⁶⁰

Other jihadists, like former Irish defence forces member Lisa Smith, have declined to comment on the Yazidi issue whatsoever.⁶¹ Smith has since returned to Ireland, and in December 2019 was charged with terrorism offences.

One of the more complex cases involving a Western IS recruit is that of Samantha Elhassani, aka Samantha Sally, an American woman from Indiana who claimed to have been tricked into joining the group. However, shortly after headlines of the woman “forced to join ISIS” proliferated online,⁶² it transpired that Elhassani had trafficked cash to IS multiple times. Yazidi NGO, the *Free Yazidi Foundation* rejected Elhassani’s claims to victimhood, accusing her of playing into tropes of female IS recruits as vulnerable victims.⁶³

According to reports, Elhassani and her now deceased husband had allegedly kept three Yazidi “slaves,” with one young child

60 Quentin Sommerville, “Shamima Begum: What was life like for the IS couple in Syria,” *BBC News*, March 3, 2019 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-47435039>

61 Gabija Gataveckaitė, “I’m not a terrorist, I’m not out to kill anyone” – ISIS bride Lisa Smith denies she was radicalised,” *Independent.ie*, July 16, 2020 <https://www.independent.ie/breaking-news/irish-news/im-not-a-terrorist-im-not-out-to-kill-anyone-isis-bride-lisa-smith-denies-she-was-radicalised-38285281.html>

62 Jessica Roy, “Two Sisters and the Terrorist Who Came Between Them,” *ELLE*, August 27, 2019 <https://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/a28485965/samantha-elhassani-isis-sisters-part-one/>

63 “The Case of Samantha Elhassani aka Um Yusuf,” *Free Yazidi Foundation*, September 19, 2019 <https://www.freeyazidi.org/wp-content/uploads/FYF-report-Samantha-Elhassani.pdf>

claiming he had been treated well by his American captor.⁶⁴ Regardless, the boy was indoctrinated as a child soldier for Islamic State and forced to appear in propaganda videos.⁶⁵ In an interview, Elhassani admitted that her husband had repeatedly raped two teenage Yazidi girls kept as slaves, while a BBC investigation found the woman had become interested in IS propaganda well before her departure, undermining her claims to have been tricked.⁶⁶

In November 2020, Elhassani was sentenced to six and a half years for financing of terrorism.⁶⁷

New Zealander, Mark Taylor, grabbed headlines in an interview conducted from a Syrian Democratic Forces prison when he expressed that one of the only regrets of his time with Islamic State was being unable to afford a Yazidi slave: “I would have liked to have one, but I never got to,” he said.⁶⁸

Journalist David Thomson interviewed a number of French jihadist “returnees” for his book *Les Revenants (The Returned)*, in which a female recruit named pseudonymously as “Lena” spoke of coming into contact with Yazidi slaves in a *maqqar* – a holding house for

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- 64 Grant Morgan, “Attorneys for Elkhart mother accused of aiding ISIS say Yazidi slave testimony could help case – if they can get it,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 10, 2019 <https://www.chicagotribune.com/suburbs/post-tribune/ct-ptb-american-woman-isis-yazidi-testimony-st-0911-20190910-4kwqg5gzmbhptdumxneyovev6u-story.html>
- 65 David Wroe, “Yazidi former slaves emerge from Islamic State and want to tell their stories,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 28, 2019 <https://www.smh.com.au/world/middle-east/yazidi-former-slaves-emerge-from-the-islamic-state-and-want-to-tell-their-tales-20190328-p518da.html>
- 66 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54995445>
- 67 <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/former-elkhart-indiana-resident-sentenced-over-six-years-prison-financing-terrorism>
- 68 Adam Harvey and Suzanne Dredge, “New Zealand jihadist Mark Taylor captured in Syria and jailed in Kurdish prison,” *ABC News*, March 3, 2019 <https://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2019-03-04/new-zealand-islamic-statjihadist-mark-taylor-captured-and-jailed/10866382>

unmarried Islamic State women. In the *maqqa*r, conditions were tough even for IS women, but according to Lena's testimony, the upkeep and household tasks were performed by Yazidi slaves.

Lena recounted being moved by the plight of one Yazidi woman: *"There was one slave who used to go crazy every night. She'd drop to the floor and start crying because they'd taken her away from her father and mother."* According to Lena, the Yazidi woman had pretended her little brother was her son, in order to not be separated. The woman was treated harshly by the leadership of the *maqqa*r: *"when she got upset or when she cried, she'd get slapped. She was the one who cleaned up the sisters' shit."*⁶⁹

Lena also came into contact with a French jihadist (*"a French brother of Mauritanian origin"*) who came to the *maqqa*r to find a wife and admitted to owning two Yazidi slaves, regularly raping them. A prospective bride ended her conversation with the French jihadist after his confession, as recounted by Lena to Thomson: *"She told us how he treated them, he made them sleep with other brothers. They passed them around between each other."*

Two female recruits from the Caribbean, Abbey Greene of Barbados and Aliya Abdul Haqq of Trinidad, were interviewed for the Popular Front podcast by journalists Jake Hanrahan and Robert Evans. In which, the pair offered similar moral equivalence and justifications over slavery to their British counterparts.

As discussed by expert on Caribbean jihadism, Simon Cottee, the interview with Abbey Greene of Barbados and Trinidadian Aliya Abdul Haqq *"makes for spine-tingling listening, not because the*

69 David Thomson, *The Returned: They Left to Wage Jihad, Now They're Back* (Polity: 2018)

women sound like bloodcurdling monsters, but because of the cold and carefree detachment with which they talk about the genocidal violence of Islamic State". As Cottee explained, when pushed on the Yazidi genocide by their interviewers, "their default response is either to dodge the question or to rationalise ISIS's violence as a legitimate response to the violence meted out against ISIS."⁷⁰

At one point, Greene attempts to legitimise slavery according to Islamic State:

"Slavery in Islam is not like slavery back in the day — there are certain rules you have to follow, you have to show rahma (mercy), you must feed them, take care of them."

Abdul Haqq admits coming into contact with two Yazidi slaves, in the captivity of a Bosnian fighter:

"They were slaves to a Bosnian guy...and from what (one of them) told me, she said she really loved her slave-master, and she accepted Islam."

—

Unsurprisingly, many captured and returned Islamic State recruits have been less than forthcoming about their time in the "Caliphate". Few have admitted any role in fighting or executions and torture of captives, and even fewer have alluded to any role in the enslavement of Yazidi women and children. Nonetheless, there remain breadcrumbs of evidence in the public domain, scattered

70 Simon Cottee, "Trini, Bajan woman on life with ISIS: We thought it was irie", *Trinidad and Tobago Newsday*, February 13 2020 <https://newsday.co.tt/2020/02/13/trini-bajan-woman-on-life-with-isis-we-thought-it-was-irie/>

across social media and in testimonies which point to involvement in the crimes, or at the very least open knowledge of them, during their time with the Islamic State group.

It would have been impossible not to know about the crimes against Yazidis and local civilians before joining the group, not least because during the height of Islamic State's powers, the group's atrocities dominated the global news cycle. Even for those who would claim not to have trusted mainstream news, the organisation's own propaganda machine produced the most irrefutable evidence of its crimes. Given the current lack of information from foreign IS recruits, it is entirely possible that these scraps of evidence and remarks by captured or stranded members are just the tip of the iceberg.

III. ACCOUNTABILITY

“Seeing more legal cases would make us feel heard and taken seriously. It would empower us to speak up more, heal and move on with our lives with dignity.”

– Yazidi survivor⁷¹

“I know that some states have recognised our genocide. But this is all it is, a recognition. What we need now are actions. I was in captivity for more than five years and I reunited with my remaining family members in an IDP camp with difficult living conditions. When will Sinjar be safe, when will we be able to return? Will we ever be able to return? If not, where should we go, what will we become in 5, 10, 50 years? We need the international community to answer these questions along with their genocide recognitions.”

– Yazidi survivor. 28 years old, IS captive for 5 years and 4 months⁷²

So far, accountability for the crimes committed against the Yazidis and other minorities in Iraq and Syria by Islamic State has been a slow and painful process for the victims, survivors and their advocates. This is despite widespread recognition of the Islamic State campaign as a genocide.

71 Testimony collected and provided by Yazda.

72 Testimony collected and provided by Yazda.

A large number of foreign recruits are thought to have been killed in the fighting in Iraq and Syria, but a considerable number remain in the region or have returned to their home countries. For example, 300 to 400 British members are thought to remain in the region,⁷³ either in detention or at large, as well as some 700 French and 150 Belgian Islamic State members.⁷⁴

In Northern Syria, several thousand foreign Islamic State members, both male and female, as well as the children of foreign members are held in camps or makeshift detention centres under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The autonomous zone in Northern Syria is not a recognised state. In February 2020, authorities expressed an intention to put foreign IS recruits from dozens of countries on trial, although these trials were suspended shortly thereafter.⁷⁵

In Iraq, hastily convened trials have sentenced some of Islamic State's foreign members to death.⁷⁶ Concerns have been raised by a number of human rights organisations over due process, impartiality of judges and the conditions facing detained foreign members.⁷⁷

73 "Islamic State remains 'most significant' threat to UK," *BBC News*, July 22, 2020 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-53507552>

74 Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Colin P. Clarke, Emelie Chace-Donahue, "The Enduring Legacy of French and Belgian Islamic State Foreign Fighters," *FPRI*, Feb 2020 <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/02/enduring-legacy-french-belgian-isis-foreign-fighters/>

75 Heather Murdoch, "Trials of IS Fighters in Syria Suspended Indefinitely," *VOA*, April 2, 2020 <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/trials-fighters-syria-suspended-indefinitely>

76 Pilar Cebrián, "They Left to Join ISIS. Now Europe is Leaving Their Citizens to Die in Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, September 15, 2019 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/15/they-left-to-join-isis-now-europe-is-leaving-their-citizens-to-die-in-iraq/>

77 Anthony Dworkin, "Beyond good and Evil: Why Europe should bring Isis foreign fighters home," *European Council on Foreign Affairs*, October 25, 2019 https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/beyond_good_and_evil_why_europe_should_bring_isis_foreign_fighters_home#_ftn3

For those foreign members to have returned to their home countries, most states have either deliberately pursued a strategy of not overly securitising the issue or have struggled to build a counter-terrorism case, and prosecution rates are therefore low. Both of these approaches leave the crimes against Yazidis not only unprosecuted but overlooked and ignored in mainstream debate over the issue.

Germany

- The **Jennifer W** trial in Frankfurt was the first time any state had brought crimes against humanity charges against an Islamic State recruit. Jennifer W, a German citizen, is accused of enslaving a five-year-old girl and her mother, and of taking no action to prevent the death of the five-year-old girl, who was tied up outside by her husband - an Iraqi IS member - in temperatures exceeding fifty degrees Celsius. Prior to the start of the trial, human rights NGO Yazda was able to identify the mother and helped her to join the proceedings. The trial began in April 2019 and was delayed in 2020 due to COVID-19. The mother is represented by Yazda's legal counsel, Amal Clooney.⁷⁸
- In April 2020, Germany extradited 37-year-old Iraqi citizen, **Taha A-J**, previously detained in Greece. Taha A-J was the husband of Jennifer W., and responsible for the death of the five-year-old Yazidi girl he chained outside in the heat. It is the first genocide trial for crimes against the Yazidis.⁷⁹

78 "ISIS Militant on Trial in Munich for Membership of a Foreign Terrorist Organization," *Yazda*, April 8, 2019 <https://www.yazda.org/post/isis-militant-on-trial-in-munich-for-membership-of-a-foreign-terrorist-organization>

79 "Genocide trial: IS suspect in court in Germany," *BBC News*, April 24, 2020 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-52409406>

- In October 2019, proceedings began in Düsseldorf against a 21-year-old German woman named as **Sarah O**, accused of keeping three Yazidi women captive. Sarah O is alleged to have married a fellow German recruit to IS after arriving in Syria as a teenager. Sarah O is on trial before the Higher Regional Court of Düsseldorf on charges of war crimes, terrorism, human trafficking and deprivation of liberty. One of the survivors in this case is represented by Yazda's legal counsel, Amal Clooney.⁸⁰
- The **Omaima A** trial in Hamburg is the second case involving crimes against humanity that Germany has brought to the courts, following the investigation by journalist Jenan Moussa and her colleague, Harald Doornbos. In the subsequent police investigation, it was found that Omaima A, another German citizen, had enslaved a thirteen-year-old girl. The trial began in May 2020.
- In the summer of 2020, Germany arrested another woman named as **Nurten J**. While married to another German recruit, Nurten J, is alleged to have requested a friend bring an enslaved Yazidi woman to her apartment to clean. As a German Federal Prosecutor remarked: "Nurten J. thus followed the ideology of ISIS, from whose perspective the enslavement of Yezidis was religiously justified."⁸¹

80 "Yazidi survivor joins proceedings against German ISIS member on trial for international crimes," *Yazda*, November 22, 2019 <https://www.yazda.org/post/yazidi-survivor-joins-proceedings-against-german-isis-member-on-trial-for-international-crimes>

81 Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Germany arrests ISIS woman who abused Yezidi woman in Syria," *Kurdistan 24*, July 27, 2020 <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/22879-Germany-arrests-ISIS-woman-who-abused-Yezidi-woman-in-Syria>

France

- In late 2019, France opened a genocide investigation into a jihadist from Toulouse, **Sabri Essid**. Essid was a well-known extremist in Toulouse and the surrounding area, and is thought to be connected to Mohammed Merah, the terrorist who killed French soldiers and Jewish schoolchildren in a shooting rampage in Toulouse and Montauban in 2012. It is believed Essid was killed in 2018.⁸²
- A second investigation was opened in the summer of 2020 against a French IS foreign fighter, named as **Nabil G**. According to *Liberation*, the individual was recognized by a Yazidi victim.⁸³
- In 2018, the French company, **Lafarge**, was subject to a criminal case and several of its executives charged with complicity in crimes against humanity and financing a terrorist organisation. In order to ensure the continued operation of a cement plant in a part of Syria under Islamic State control where Yazidis survivors were held captive, Lafarge allegedly made a number of multimillion dollar payments to the group.⁸⁴

The limited cases in France and Germany covered here represent the only charges for war crimes, crimes against humanity and

82 “Le jihadiste toulousain Sabri Essid soupçonné de génocide,” *La Depeche*, July 16, 2020 <https://www.ladepeche.fr/2019/10/27/le-jihadiste-toulousain-sabri-essid-soupconne-de-genocide.8507296.php>

83 Pierre Alonso, “Un second jihadiste français soupçonné de génocide contre les yézidis,” *Libération*, July 28, 2020 https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2020/07/28/un-second-jihadiste-francais-soupconne-de-genocide-contre-les-yezidis_1795485

84 “Yazidi survivors take a stand against French company found complicit in crimes against humanity,” *Yazda*, December 12, 2018 <https://www.yazda.org/post/after-french-company-found-guilty-of-crimes-against-humanity-yazidi-survivors-take-a-stand>

III. ACCOUNTABILITY

genocide brought against Western foreign members to have joined Islamic State. Other states have made few, if any, references to the crimes against Yazidis in the ongoing and heated public debates surrounding the fate of foreign members.

The United Kingdom for example, has pursued a policy of stripping citizenship of dual-national IS recruits remaining in the region, a decision several other European states have taken as well, despite calls from the United States government to repatriate. As this debate continues, the crimes against Yazidis, other minorities and civilians in the region should be at the centre of the conversation.

IV. CONCLUSION

“I came back from captivity and nothing had changed: our people live in camps, our country has not recognized our genocide yet or compensated us.

Justice is just an empty word.”

– Yazidi survivor from north side of Sinjar mountain, 33 years old, IS captive for 2 years and 7 months⁸⁵

This paper has attempted to plug a gap in understanding of the Islamic State’s “Caliphate” episode in our collective history. Of course, the understandable incentive is to scan the horizon for new and emerging security threats, but this leaves an incomplete picture and allows for mistakes to be repeated again. An immediate security first approach and paternalistic discourse on Western jihadists has not only obscured how the ISIS exodus came to be, but has glossed over the group’s atrocities. Crimes which Western jihadists participated in, as this paper has hopefully demonstrated.

The fallout from the Islamic State’s territorial project will be with us all for many years to come. It will take generations for Iraq’s Yazidi community to recover from the trauma and suffering inflicted on them by the group’s systematic campaign of persecution, murder, rape and child indoctrination. Over six years on from the initial assault on Sinjar, thousands of Yazidis languish in camps, while desperate families still hunt for news of loved ones and must beg or borrow enough money to free those still missing.

⁸⁵ Testimony collected and provided by Yazda.

IV. CONCLUSION

Years after they were taken from their homes, Yazidi women are still found living among their tormentors in hastily constructed camps in Northern Syria with grim frequency. Some of those found as adults were kidnapped as teenagers, their childhood destroyed. The rest of their lives destroyed. For these survivors, the nightmare of Islamic State captivity did not end with the organisation's territorial defeat. For those liberated survivors, the trauma, displacement and sense of humiliation remains.

Like the survivors, the spectre of Islamic State did not stop haunting Western states with the fall of Raqqa, or even following the group's last stand at Baghouz. The issue of returnees (several hundred of whom have returned to their home countries) and those stranded in Syria and Iraq is ongoing and a source of sometimes heated debate at home and between allies.⁸⁶

Five years after he first travelled to Syria to join the jihad, British jihadist Abdel Bary, once a wannabe rapper by the name of Lyricist Jinn, was discovered in Spain after years on the run. The case of Bary is likely to prove premonitory, as the impact of thousands of foreign recruits abandoning the West for the apocalyptic vision of Islamic State will likely prove a challenge for many years to come.

In this context, Western states will need to make assessments of the security threat posed by Islamic State's foreign contingent, and the continued internment of thousands of IS recruits in Northern Syria under Syrian Democratic Forces control is an unsustainable long-term solution. Furthermore, domestic intelligence and security services are, in many cases, completely overwhelmed by the number of individuals deemed a terror risk.

86 "Trump tells European countries to take back IS fighters," *BBC News*, February 17, 2019 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-47269887>

IV. CONCLUSION

Investigating both returnees and nationals stranded overseas for atrocity crimes, in addition to cases where robust terrorism charges cannot be brought, could present a vital opportunity to relieve some of this pressure and to deliver justice and accountability for the thousands of forgotten Yazidi victims.

Above all, states who failed to account for the involvement in a genocide of hundreds of their own citizens will leave an open psychological and social wound in our societies which will not quickly heal. From both a human rights and a national security perspective, ensuring accountability for the Yazidi genocide should be a top priority.

“On 2 August, the day before the attack, the Yazidis of Sinjar – farmers, teachers, doctors, housewives, and school children – spent their day like any other. Within 24 hours, their lives would become unrecognisable to them. The date of 3 August 2014 would become a dividing line, demarcating when one life ended, and – for those who survived – when another, infinitely more cruel, existence began.”

– Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014⁸⁷

87 “They came to destroy: ISIS crimes against the Yazidis,” *UN Human Rights Council*, Thirty-second session, 15 June, 2016: 6 https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A_HRC_32_CRP2_en.pdf



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