



“We need help, please ...”  
Current Situation of Yezidi Women in Iraq

Seyedeh Behnaz Hosseini

Nachdem der sogenannte Islamische Staat im August 2014 3.929 jesidische Frauen gefangen nahm, befinden sich zwei Jahre später noch immer 1.934 Jesidinnen in Gefangenschaft. Jene Frauen jedoch, die sich durch Flucht, Befreiungsaktionen oder Lösegeld befreien konnten, sind nun mit der katastrophalen Situation in den überfüllten Flüchtlingslagern in den kurdischen Regionen des Irak konfrontiert. Es fehlt Nahrung, Obdach, Schutz vor den extremen Wetterverhältnissen und an Elektrizität.

Auch die mangelnde gesundheitliche Versorgung und die fehlende psychologische Unterstützung durch Hilfsorganisationen und NGOs verhindert eine Aufarbeitung der Traumata und Teilhabe am gesellschaftlichen Leben. Es gibt keine Arbeit und für die Kinder keinen Zugang zu Bildung. Außerhalb der Lager befinden sich noch ca. 5.000 Familien in den Bergen Sindschars, wo ihnen lebensnotwendige Ressourcen wie Wasser und Nahrung fehlen.

Yezidism is an ancient religion dating back to the Sumerian period of Mesopotamia. The great majority of Yezidis, numbering close to 600,000, live in Iraq, predominantly in Sinjar in the western part of the Nineveh province; their ethnicity is Kurdish. Most maintain a closed religion and do not seek to convert others. I interviewed women in refugee camps on their situation after being captives of the Islamic State.<sup>1</sup>

After an attack by the Islamic State (IS or ISIS) in August 2014, under the name of Islam, ISIS militants took approximately 3,929 women and girls by force to the Tal Afar citadel in Iraq's Nineveh region. They divided the captives between their soldiers or presented them as gifts to those fighting in Syria. Between 2014 and 2016 some of these women have escaped the hands of ISIS. Families bought a great number back from IS itself, some organizations helped to liberate others, and some people purchased female captives as sex slaves and later released them. Some captives were able to escape on their own. Around 1,934 women and girls are still in captivity, suffering torture under the Islamic State.



After the IS attack, some of the former captives emigrated to Germany, but huge numbers are living in terrible situations in refugee camps in Kurdistan, contending with trauma, economic problems, sickness and hunger. Despite these difficulties, the Yezidi women are very strong and are beginning efforts toward making peace. Some of them have married since their captures, and some have returned to their families and husbands. They tell their stories and try to keep their families together. However, some of their family members are still in captivity or have been killed. They do not lose hope and pray for the release of their children. They visit psychologists, but they cannot forget their grief over those they have lost. The economic situation of women is another issue: most are jobless, and they do not have money to visit doctors for treatment of diseases they acquired while in captivity.

#### Some numbers and experiences ...

According to the Endowment organization, which opened in December 2014 to focus on Yezidi liberation and rehabilitation in Duhok, IS has abducted 6,389 Yezidi people. From this number, 3,929 are females and 2,860 are males.

According to their most recent information from June 1, 2016, there are 2,592 liberated survivors: 936 women, 326 men, 671 girls, and 659 infant girls. The remaining 3,797 captives are still with ISIS: 1,934 women and 1,863 men. A total of 360,000 people are displaced.

Women formerly held captive by IS suffer from psychological problems. They were put through traumatizing experiences including much depravity. They saw ISIS killing their families before their eyes. They were terrified when they escaped from the hands of their captors. The escapees set up tents in refugee camps. Many of them have family members that are still held by ISIS, and therefore they are alone in their tents and in the camps. They seek every opportunity to receive assistance. When they approach an organization within the refugee camp to aid them in leaving the country for a safe place, they need to know someone in that organization who will work on their files. If they do not have any connections within the organization, the employees place their files at the end of a great number.

Survivors are forced to wait in their tents, often alone. There are also many children in the camp. More than 5,000 families are still in the mountains of Sinjar, and some villages there are depleted of resources. They have no fresh water, no proper nutrition, no electricity, no clothing, no foundations or organizations to assist them; there are no services in those villages. Water is only available by transfer from a tank from far away. However, survivors still live there because they are not given a place in any camp. These families in the mountains are still alive, but suffer through terrible conditions. They remain hopeful, thinking someone will come take care of them, but they are constantly scared. There is an overwhelming sense that they are not safe.

#### In the refugee camp

Some women in refugee camps must live with ten people in the same tent because they do not have the money to buy a tent themselves. Despite the various NGOs and organizations, some are left without a tent at all. They have lost everything. Trauma and grief, along with their seemingly insurmountable financial problems, have led some to commit suicide. Their visits to professionals and doctors often cannot relieve their psychological problems; as one refugee questioned, "How can we have a better situation when my daughter or my parents or my husband or my son is in captivity?" Some of them must sell the few goods they have, such as the food an organization gave them, in order to earn enough money to see a doctor. Many women have lost their husbands and must take care of their children alone. In addition to these numerous difficulties, fear of the reign of and future attacks by IS further increases the tension for these women and their families.

One girl, 11 years old, refused to go to school. She was depressed, living in the Khankeh camp, because 20 of her family members were in captivity. Some of the women's families do not allow them to visit a psychologist. Instead,

» »



some women go to organizations that operate to help occupy their time and allow them to escape the terrible conditions of their tents for a while. Families should give psychological support to their female members, but often the girls work at home instead of attending courses provided for rehabilitation and psychological therapy. These educational and therapeutic sessions could help survivors return into society in a shorter amount of time if they are taking advantage of the opportunities.

According to one organization, the Narin Foundation, which supports lives and livelihood of Syrian and Yezidi women in Northern Iraq in Khanki-Duhok in Kurdistan, "Women are hurt more. During one month, two girls committed suicide despite [help from] the psychologist in the camp. They could not solve their problems."

Some of the young girls lost everything, including their homes, families and property, and some were sold more than eight times. Now, after finally escaping abysmal situations in captivity, they must live in the terrible conditions of the camps. They have physical and mental problems; they were hungry and thirsty, and were beaten often in captivity. I encountered one woman who had fled from ISIS four days prior with her small children. She suffered a great deal and was in the hospital because she had developed diabetes. She does not have enough food for her children nor the money to buy it. I also encountered two children who were babies when IS captured them, and they are now two and four years old. They could not speak Kurdish, their mother tongue, because they were in captivity with Arab-speakers and know only Arabic. The children suffered in deplorable conditions during their captivity and are not much better

off now. Their mother revealed to me, "The IS men, for fun, hung my children by their clothes on a nail on the wall for a long time. They pushed my children to the ground and beat them and brought them to Quran classes."

### Conclusion?

Through extensive interviews, I learned that the most important issues for Yezidi people, especially women and children, in these refugee camps today are hunger, the extreme heat in the summer and the lack of electricity. It is too cold to live there in the winter. Rehabilitation and reintegration into society cannot help them because most of their family members are in captivity or were killed in front of them; the psychological problems they endure due to these aspects of their experiences alone are too extensive to address here. They were hungry and thirsty for 12 days in the Sinar mountains, where ISIS attacked them in 2014. I spoke with a young girl who told me she had to leave her baby on the ground because she could not carry both of her children when she fled to the mountains. She told me that she did not have water to give to her baby. For the families in Sinjar villages, the situation is worse than in the camps. Yet, ISIS commits this violence and destroys lives in the name of Islam. According to one survivor in the Sharia camp in Duhok, "During the 3-8-2014 ISIS attack on Sinjar, we went to the mountain and waited for support. We stayed on the mountain for 12 days in a very bad situation. People died every day from dehydration and lack of food ... We live in camps now. Our situation is very bad: no [jobs], no support from anyone, no electricity. We have many illnesses and can't go to the hospital. We need help, please ..."

**Comment: 1** This research is part of my fieldwork in June 2016 in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. It is based on a qualitative research method and uses semi-structured interviews with Yezidi survivors as its main data collection technique. Data in this paper are derived from my personal interviews with the Narin Foundation for women (supporting lives and livelihood of Syrian and Yezidi women in Northern Iraq in Khanke-Duhok), a personal interview with the manager of the Greece community center in Sharia camp in Duhok (with focus on women and rehabilitation in the Sharia camp in Duhok city), interviews with people in Arbat camp in Suleymanieh City and the Qadia camp in Zakho village near the Turkish border and a personal interview with Emma organization for human development in Erbil.

**On the author:** Seyedeh Behnaz Hosseini completed her doctoral research with a focus on minorities in Iran and migration in the Department of Islamic Studies at the Institute of Oriental Studies. Her research interests include religious minorities in Iran and Iraq and forced migration.

Für zweijährige Projekteinsätze in Zentralamerika, Afrika und Ozeanien suchen wir MitarbeiterInnen in:

#### SOZIALPÄDAGOGIK

Nicaragua

#### ORGANISATIONSENTWICKLUNG

Tansania

#### UNTERNEHMERTUM

Mosambik

Weitere Stellen, Initiativbewerbung und nähere Infos auf [www.horizont3000.at](http://www.horizont3000.at)

HORIZONT3000, Wilhelminenstraße 91/II f, 1160 Wien  
Tel. +43-1-50 3000 3, [recruiting@horizont3000.at](mailto:recruiting@horizont3000.at)



ÖSTERREICHISCHE ORGANISATION FÜR  
ENTWICKLUNGSZUSAMMENARBEIT

HORIZONT  
3000