



## **Free Yezidi Foundation Statement**

### *Six-Year Commemoration of the ISIS Genocide against Yezidis*

3 August 2020

Once again, on 3 August, the Yezidi community gathers to mourn those we have lost, remember those who are still missing, heal those who are suffering, and strive toward a better, safer, brighter future for our people. This year, the Free Yezidi Foundation has five concrete recommendations designed to promote recovery and development for the Yezidi community. A critical component of progress in the Yezidi community in Iraq is to ensure that the international community does not strive only for a return to the pre-2014 status quo. That will not be good enough, and that will leave Yezidis vulnerable to the same sort of horrors that occurred six years ago today. Instead, as stakeholders throughout the world seriously consider the welfare and future of Yezidis in Iraq, it is incumbent on all those who care about Yezidis to combat at least some of the fundamental root causes that have led to the othering and isolation of Yezidis, and to ensure that this ethno-religious minority group can enjoy the rights and freedoms that all people deserve.

#### 1. Education and employment opportunities for Yezidis in Iraq

The process by which Yezidis have suffered marginalization and discrimination in Iraq did not begin or end with ISIS. As international efforts grow to support Yezidis and other minorities to return to their homelands, we must not forget the underlying root causes of Yezidi suffering, including the causes of the 2014 genocide. Yezidis have historically had, and still currently have, fewer educational and employment opportunities than others in Iraq. This must end immediately if our people have a chance to improve their daily lives and avoid a return to disenfranchised lives of poverty and destitution. Discrimination that prevents Yezidis from accessing employment should not be acceptable, and employers should never be able to make decisions based on religious or ethnic discrimination against any Iraqi citizen.

Universities in Iraq must make tangible, real efforts to include Yezidis in scholarship and enrollment plans. Foreign governments who support Iraqi students seeking scholarships should have a strictly enforced, generous quota for religious minorities, with special attention to Yezidis, and it must be more than a symbolic effort. Basic education must be scaled up dramatically for the next Yezidi generation to have any chance at a better life. And foreign and domestic companies and businesses should make a concerted effort to include minorities in job placements to the greatest extent possible. Subsistence farming with agricultural methods from previous centuries will not bring the Yezidi people protection or a successful future. For those seeking to help in the rebuilding and reconstruction of Sinjar, we hope donors will focus on building the skills and capacities of Yezidi men and women who are seeking work just as much as housing, infrastructure, and basic services. Smart, targeted skills and job trainings can provide Yezidis with livelihood options that will stay with civilians for many years, empowering the Yezidi workforce of tomorrow. That is one reason why FYF puts a great deal of effort and funding into building the capacity of Yezidi men and women, even while they are in the IDP camps.



## 2. Iraq-wide education reform, to include accurate information about Iraqi ethnic and religious minorities

In 2014, ISIS members from all over the world participated in the massacres, kidnapping, and rape and torture of our people, on our own lands. How can a sovereign state allow its own citizens to be subjugated to such terror and abuse? One reason is that Yezidis are discriminated against and misunderstood by their fellow Iraqi citizens. If other Iraqis will not eat food made by Yezidi hands and consider us devil worshippers, can we realistically expect anything better from that country's governments?

To replace and abolish this level of religious intolerance and discrimination, Iraq should embark upon an ambitious and wide-ranging educational curriculum whereby every single primary school throughout the country is mandated to teach the true, accurate history and characterization of Iraq's rich ethnic, religious, and cultural components. Citizens are not born with false information or ignorant hatred against Yezidis – they learn it. And if the hate can be taught, the tolerance can also be taught. As this genocide has occurred on Iraqi soil, the Iraqi government has a solemn, moral responsibility to prevent this from ever happening to our people again. And the first step is educating the next generation about the dignity, value, and rights of all communities in Iraq, including Yezidis, even though we are not Muslim. The international community should apply pressure to the Iraqi Ministry of Education to implement such steps as soon as possible.

## 3. Stable security infrastructure in Sinjar

As families begin returning to Sinjar, there is a glimmer of hope that a new, safer, brighter future for the Yezidis in that area could emerge. But dangers face Yezidi families from every direction. First and foremost, all military attacks against Sinjar should be immediately halted, and the Coalition to Defeat Daesh must be steadfast and vocal about this. The Turkish airstrikes in Sinjar constituted a blatant violation of Iraqi sovereignty and an outrageous attack against the people in Sinjar trying to return and rebuild after genocide. The international community must be firm and unyielding in rejection of such actions. Security certainly is best handled in Sinjar by Yezidis, although ensuring the safety of families will be no easy feat. The international community may be hesitant to offer permanent military support in this area, but the Coalition can and should take some symbolic actions in Nineveh province to demonstrate its support and concern for persecuted civilians trying, bravely, to rebuild their towns and villages.

## 4. Trauma treatment

The collective and individual trauma facing nearly every Yezidi in the IDP camps is overwhelming. Humanitarian aid is being delivered, and much of it is naturally designated to reconstruct the areas throughout Nineveh province that were destroyed by ISIS. But the destruction has not only been physical.

The damage to men, women, children, and families is immense. Suicide rates are on the rise in the IDP camps. Our Foundation and most other organizations working with these communities can attest to a hopelessness and despair that is slowly becoming permanent and pervasive. Mental health and psychosocial support are sometimes misunderstood as less tangible and therefore less



important than the construction of homes, roads, and provision of electricity and water supply. But trauma treatment is absolutely essential after mass-scale atrocities like the ISIS genocide against Yezidis. We have seen what miracles trauma therapy can deliver, and we also have seen what happens when suffering individuals are left alone with their pain, fears, trauma, and feelings of loss and despair. Provision of aid must continue to flow, and creative solutions can be found to maximize the use of this aid in providing comfort, care, and trauma treatment to Yezidis: men, women, and children alike.

#### 5. Justice and accountability for ISIS crimes all over the world

Although it has been six years since the genocide began, there has been little concrete justice so far. International justice for atrocity violations requires a long, difficult, and slow road. We understand that, and Rwanda and former Yugoslavia have illustrated just how long the process of justice can be. On the other hand, it has not been difficult for Iraq, the United States, and European countries to bring charges against ISIS members for material support for terrorism or membership in a terrorist group. That is a first step; perhaps, but to understand ISIS members as terrorists misses an enormous point. ISIS crimes of kidnapping, rape, and enslavement are not minor details. The enormous scale of enslavement and sexual violence have not yet registered properly in domestic or international courts. These are terrorists, that is true, but the crimes that have been committed were more sinister, brutal, and sadistic than suicide bombings or IED traps. Genocide, crimes against humanity, torture, and enslavement are categorically different than terrorism.

As a deterrent, there should be special protection for endangered minorities groups in Iraq, and one piece of this can be the legislation and enforcement of increased punishment for hate crimes. Even during times of peace, Yezidis have at times suffered from targeted attacks. Like minorities in other parts of the world, Yezidis would benefit from laws that impose stiff sentences on those who commit hate crimes.

Nonetheless, in the last six years, something has changed. Now, ISIS members are the hunted ones. The Yezidi community will never cease in its efforts to identify and bring to justice ISIS perpetrators, if it takes 5, 10, 20, or 50 years. We know that thousands of ISIS members are hiding in Syria and Iraq. They have returned to their lives and act like they have not committed crimes. But we are looking for them. And there are also thousands of ISIS members in foreign countries, especially in Europe, who travelled to Iraq and Syria, plundered, destroyed, raped and murdered, and then returned home as if it had all been a vacation for them. But they will not be able to return to their previous lives. They now must wonder when the Yezidi community will identify them, with the benefit of law enforcement, court injunctions, investigations, technology, and any legal tools to bring the rapists, pedophiles, slave traders, kidnappers, murderers and genocidaires to justice. We will never stop until perpetrators are held to account for what they have done, and we urge international and domestic mechanisms and law enforcement agencies to maintain and increase the pressure until these criminals, the worst of all criminals, are brought to justice.

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