Yazidi refugees live in unfinished houses.
Photo: Christian Werner

The Yazidi Homeland

Lost to War

FOREVER DAD

MODERN CONFLICTS

When Islamic State militants stormed into the Yazidi heartland in northern Iraq in the summer of 2014, they killed and abducted 10,000 people in a matter of days. Four years later IS has been forced out, but thousands of Yazidi women and children are still missing and refugees cannot go home ***OLGA YOLDI*** *reports.*

Fawaz was sleeping soundly in his bed in a village in the Sinjar district of northern Iraq when his family woke him up in the dead of night and told him they had to flee. The day before had been a hot Sunday in August 2014, and Fawaz had celebrated the end of the fasting period with his family and friends. They had shared food, drinks and conversation, but the atmosphere was tense. There were rumours of an imminent attack and people shared their worst fears. A sense of foreboding grew as darkness fell.

That night, local Yazidi men stayed up to patrol the streets. But when convoys of cars started to approach the village, there was little anybody could do but flee. With the Kurdish Peshmerga fighters gone there was nobody left to protect the men or their families, so they collected a few personal belongings and fled to nearby Mount Sinjar to hide.

Fawaz, who is now living in the NSW regional town of Wagga Wagga, was 11 years old at the time he was forced to leave his home. He describes the fear, despair

and uncertainty he felt, trapped in the mountains with another 50,000 Yazidis in sweltering temperatures of up to 50C, but with no water, food, shelter or medical supplies, and surrounded by fighters from Islamic State (IS). Many of his fellow Yazidis died of dehydration, starvation or illness during the siege. Fawaz and his family survived on dry bread and water airdropped by American and British forces.

Fortunately, Turkish Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) fighters and People's Protection Units (YPG) intervened and helped the Yazidis flee the area, via a safe corridor that took the refugees through Syria to a safe side of the mountains in Iraqi Kurdistan, where about 300,000 remain displaced.

Fawaz and his family managed to escape to safety, but many fellow Yazidis were trapped. Once Yazidis in Mount Sinjar began leaving, the IS fighters turned back to the villages, blocking roads and killing anyone who tried to escape. Human rights reports say about 10,000 were killed or kidnapped, and 3,100 were murdered – either shot, beheaded or burnt alive while 6,800 women and children were enslaved, with many boys kidnapped to be trained as child soldiers.

"The true scale of the horror is impossible to know, as thousands have disappeared, and are either dead or remain in captivity," says a study published in May 2017 by PLOS Medicine journal *Mortality and kidnapping estimates for the Yazidi population in the area of Mount Sinjar, Iraq, in August 2014: A retrospective household survey*, by Dr Valeria Cetorelli et al.

According to the study, families were rounded up en masse and divided up as part of a systematic genocide that saw men and boys massacred if they refused to convert to Islam.

Lead author Cetorelli says the toll may even be higher because of the reliance on survivors to report deaths and disappearances. "Because the attack was so indiscriminate, in many cases entire families were captured together if they didn't escape in time … it is possible that no one managed to escape, so there are no survivors and zero possibilities of being included in the survey."

She writes that at least one household member needed to survive to report the killing or kidnappings of others. The study found children were disproportionately affected, as they were the least likely to escape IS captivity, and made up 93 percent of the reported deaths.

Four years later, the legacy of the genocide is still fresh, high levels of traumatisation and displacement are common among survivors, 3,000 women and children are still unaccounted for, and 70 mass graves have been discovered.

For the past four years, thousands of displaced Yazidis, scattered throughout northern Iraq, Syria and Turkey, have been living in plastic tents, surviving on donations of food and clothing, and enduring extreme temperatures. With no access to housing, jobs or education and still haunted by horrific memories, all they want to do is return home and rebuild their lives, but many are too afraid to do so.

For centuries Yazidis, a religious minority group, have led a simple life, farming their land on the foothills of Mount Sinjar in the Nineveh plains of northern Iraq, one of the poorest and least developed areas of Iraq. The group was comprised of some 550,000 people before the genocide. They also live in southeast Turkey, northern Syria, the Caucasus regions and parts of Iran.

They practice Yazidism, an ancient and mysterious religion that, according to historian Philip Kreyenbroek, remains little known and often misunderstood, not only in Kurdistan but also to Western literature and scholarship. Kreyenbroek writes that Yazidism emerged in the 12th century, but it is unknown when or how it developed into a highly syncretistic religion in which elements of mystical Islam, Christianity and Judaism were integrated into and reconciled with elements of ancient Iranian religions.

Yazidis worship God and seven angels, including the archangel Tawusi Melek, who at the creation took the form of a peacock and painted a desolate Earth with the colours of his feathers. Orthodox Muslims consider the peacock a demon figure and see Yazidis as devil worshippers, something Yazidis find most offensive. Since Yazidis are not a "People of the Book" like Jews, Christians and Muslims, they are not protected under Islamic Law.

As a result they have suffered centuries of religious persecution, particularly during the Ottoman reign and more recently during the 1991 Gulf War and 2003 Iraq conflict, which disturbed the fragile peace in northern Iraq where many minority groups live. Former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein inflicted decades of discrimination, marginalisation and neglect on Yazidis. Under his Anfal campaign, he resettled Yazidis in planned communities and pressured them to identify as Arabs, destroying many villages, denying them food and aid and conscripting men into the Iraqi army.

When Saddam was toppled in 2003, many Yazidis started to rebuild their villages. In 2007, 500 Yazidis died and 1,500 were wounded in one of the worst terrorist attacks in the history of Iraq, but it was in

A view of the destruction caused by heavy fighting to the city of Sinjar. November 15th, 2015.
Photo: Andrea DiCenzo

August 2014 when Yazidis faced the biggest threat to their existence. The UN formally recognised the IS attack as genocide but the international community was too slow to respond not only to avert the genocide but also to assist victims in the aftermath.

As George Packer wrote in *The New Yorker* in 2014, "The age of intervention is over, killed in large part by the Iraq war. Scepticism about the use of military force seems also to have killed off the impulse to show solidarity with the helpless victims of atrocities in faraway places. There is hardly any public awareness of the unfolding disaster in northern Iraq, let alone a campaign of international support."

It was only after intense pressure by a group of Yazidi refugees living in the US and requests from the Iraqi Government that Barack Obama decided to intervene, although the former US president's decision came too late. According to media reports a desire to prevent genocide was the motivating factor behind the US decision to intervene. Coalition spokesperson Colonel Ryan Dillon said that more than 28,000 air strikes were launched in Iraq and Syria to drive IS fighters out. However, once IS was driven out, the world's attention moved on and the plight of the Yazidis was no longer a priority. So it was left to local authorities to pick up the pieces, track and rescue the missing and give shelter to the displaced.

Four years later, displaced Yazidi communities still cannot return home and Sinjar remains a no man's land. According to media reports, landmines and makeshift bombs planted by IS fighters litter the area, homes have been reduced to rubble and basic services are non-existent.

Before the IS attack the region was part of Iraq, but Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) President Masoud Barzani claims that it is now part of Iraqi Kurdistan. Baghdad, of course, disputes that claim.

Sinjar was liberated by Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Peshmerga forces, Turkish Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) fighters and Sinjar Resistance Forces (YPG) with the support of US air strikes. When IS was finally driven out, these rival groups turned towards each other in a tense confrontation. They have been vying for power and control of the area.

"At a strategic crossroads between Turkey, Syria and

"At a strategic crossroads between Turkey, Syria and Iraq, Sinjar has become a flash point for Kurdish political rivalries fuelled by wider competing interests of Turkey, Iran and the Iraqi government."

— Loveday Morris

Iraq, Sinjar has become a flash point for Kurdish political rivalries fuelled by wider competing interests of Turkey, Iran and the Iraqi government," wrote Loveday Morris in *The Washington Post*.

Following the IS siege, PKK fighters, credited with helping refugees flee the area, trained and armed Yazidi militias, the Sinjar Resistance Force (YBS) emerged to fight IS following the massacre. For its part, the YBS was reported to be responsible for abducting and killing people suspected to be linked to IS. The YBS is linked to PKK militias and to the Hashd al Shaabi, also known as Popular Mobilisation Forces, an Iraqi state-sponsored umbrella organisation backed by Iran that now controls the area.

Initially the PKK stayed in Sinjar and declared it a self-administered area. This enraged the KRG, which began a bitter struggle for power with the PKK. President Barzani asked the PKK to leave Iraq.

"[The] PKK used the plight of the Yazidis to get another foothold in Iraq," professor of Istanbul Kultur University, Bora Bayraktar told *The Arab Weekly*. "It was an opportunity to turn Sinjar into another base for [the] PKK."

Then in March 2017, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan began operations against the PKK in Sinjar. Haider al-Abadi, Iraq's Prime Minister, described the Turkish move as "a serious breach of Iraqi sovereignty". The PKK withdrew, although they maintained a modest presence in the area.

When Syrian Rojava Peshmerga, trained by the KRG to fight against IS, encroached into an area controlled by YBS in 2017, the two rivals clashed, resulting in casualties on both sides. The few families who had returned to the area had to flee once again. In October 2017, KRG Peshmerga forces started to withdraw from Sinjar as the Iraqi army and its ally Hashd al Shaabi pushed them back and took control of the area. Hostilities ceased as a result.

In August 2018, senior PKK figure Ismail Ozden was killed in a Turkish airstrike. This angered Yazidi leaders. Ismail was credited with leading the rescue operation from Mount Sinjar. Nadia Murad, a Yazidi activist from Kocho who was held captive by IS tweeted, "Today is the anniversary of the massacre committed against my village in Kocho. Today Turkey carried out several air strikes in different locations in Sinjar. Sinjar continues to be a war zone. How can Yazidis recover from this genocide and go back home?".

Political instability will continue to stand in the way of social, economic and physical development and prevent displaced communities from returning home. If the situation does not improve soon, Yazidi refugees and the internally displaced will have to stay in the same tents they have been living in for the past four years, with no job prospects, precarious living conditions and a grim future.

There was an expectation that once Sinjar was liberated the international community would help to find and rescue the abducted, rebuild shattered villages and the local economy, and assist in reconciliation and peace building. However for the past four years nothing has happened. There has been little global awareness of the Yazidi tragedy in the aftermath of the 2014 attacks, and the Yazidis appear to have been forgotten.

Assisting victims and ruined communities must be a priority for the anti-IS coalition, which is made up of 70 countries and international organisations. The first priority should be to help track and rescue the 3,000 women and children who are still missing. Many could still be alive, although nobody knows where they are. Since US and Iraqi forces refuse to get involved, even though IS sold and trafficked women and children using modern technology such as WhatsApp and Telegram,

A Yazidi boy – his face covered and hair matted with dust – re-enters Iraq from the Syrian Arab Republic, at a border crossing in the town of Peshkhabour in Dohuk Governorate. Photo: UNICEF/ Wathiq Khuzaie

local authorities have been left to try to find and rescue the missing.

Most of the rescuing has been done by Yazidi and Sunni rescue networks. However their mission became more difficult after IS lost its territory and its militants went underground or fled to nearby countries. It is estimated that some captives may have been killed when IS bases were bombed.

Hiwa Aziza, a former intelligence officer from Kurdistan, said in an interview that many women may even have been taken to Turkey by IS, and sold to human trafficking rings. Others believe that hundreds of captives may still be alive in Syria, and may be hiding within IS families. "A year ago it was easy to find women and children, but now IS is in a very small area and we won't get much information anymore. It is very hard." Almost every Yazidi family still has relatives missing but as time passes they are quickly losing hope of ever seeing their loved ones again.

While rescue networks have freed many, rescues are expensive. The price of getting a girl back is about US $15,000. Refugee families cannot afford such sums as they have lost everything. So rescue money has come mostly from private donations. But there is never enough funding. A large scale rescue operation is urgently needed.

The failure to bring perpetrators of crimes to justice has made healing difficult for victims. In 2016, the activist and survivor Nadia Murad addressed the European Parliament. "Three years ago I was one of the thousand Yazidi women kidnapped by IS and sold into slavery. I endured rape, torture, humiliation at the hands of multiple military before I managed to escape.

"Once I escaped I felt it was my duty to tell the world about the brutality endured. We received empathy and solidarity all over the world, but now what we really need is concrete action to get justice and allow our community to return to its homeland. I call on governments and international organisations to act. We need more than empathy … We live with the growing frustration that the perpetrators are getting away and the Yazidi religion is on the brink of dying out."

In September 2017, the UN Security Council finally approved a resolution put forward by the UK to create an investigation into war crimes committed by IS against the Yazidis. The investigation will collect evidence of atrocities and war crimes committed by the extremist group.

The biggest challenge for the Yazidis will be regaining authority and control over their own territory and institutions. Today Sinjar is controlled by Hashd al Shaabi Shia militias, backed by Iran. According to Bayraktar, given the perceived threat from Iran, "both Turkey and KRG want to push back the influence of Iran which backs the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), a rival of Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party." Bayraktar says that Iran has also a strong influence on the Shia-majority government of Iraq.

According to Joost Hiltermann from the International Crisis Group, the unclear status of Hashd al Shaabi within the Iraqi security forces has done little to fill the administrative vacuum left by KRG's departure, rebuild devastated towns, or encourage the displaced to return home. The militias operate as a parallel institution to the state security forces, with their own chain of command.

The biggest challenge for the Yazidis will be regaining authority and control over their own territory and institutions.

"Hashd al Shaabi has pursued the same divide and rule co-optation and security control approach as their Kurdish predecessors."

According to Hiltermann, the greatest challenge for Sinjar will be to restore the ties that linked community members to their land, to one another and to their cultural heritage. "A new leadership is needed not beholding to militias but willing to be able to reinvigorate local institutions under Baghdad's authority, as provided for by the Iraqi constitution and law."

For that to take place, safety and physical conditions will need to greatly improve, so displaced communities can return home. Then a local Yazidi administration could be established and Yazidi militias could be incorporated into the Iraqi army, with the assistance and investment from the Iraqi central government and the international community.

Restoring local governance will not be achieved without a peacebuilding plan that also addresses the deep-rooted causes and grievances of the conflict, with a focus on reconciliation, compensation, social cohesion, economic development and reconstruction. Otherwise displaced Yazidis will see their four-year exile become permanent as most of Sinjar remains deserted, ruined and off limits due to militia control, political instability and a complete lack of any reconstruction and development. R