



# THE UNKNOWN FATE OF MISSING YAZIDIS: 8 YEARS ON AND STILL WAITING

SEPTEMBER 2022



## *“We Hope, but We Receive Nothing in Return”<sup>1</sup>*

### FOREWORD OF THE YAZIDI SURVIVORS NETWORK<sup>2</sup>

The topic of missing persons is very important to us as survivors of the Yazidi genocide and survivors of ISIS captivity, and for all the victim's families. It gives us the hope that some long overdue attention will be brought to this issue. We demand to know the fate of our loved ones, so we can have peace of mind, and that our concerns need to be prioritized and supported by the government.

We have received promises for 8 years, now it is time to see some action and results. We cannot continue to be neglected; it is unbearable. Each year that passes we lose more hope. We need to know the fate of our loved ones: are they alive, are they still in captivity, or are they laying in unexhumed graves? The uncertainty is excruciating and robbing us of our dignity. Additionally, the exhumation process is too slow and lacks transparency. We need urgent action to exhume all mass graves and provide answers to victim's families.

We are hoping that this report will trigger more concerted advocacy and action to shed light on the missing person issue, something we have been asking for and hoping for many years now. We hope that this report will be the starting point for more serious efforts from the governments and international community to search for our loved ones. The governments and international community must take our pleas and demands seriously before momentum is lost. We are running against the clock. Not knowing what happened to our loved ones means that this genocide continues 8 years on.

### ABOUT YAZDA

Yazda is a global organization that strives to bring justice, sustenance, healing and rejuvenation to Yazidis and other vulnerable ethno-religious minorities who have suffered under or are affected by the ISIS genocidal campaign in Iraq and Syria. Yazda was founded by Yazidi students and professionals in the US and Europe in response to the genocide that began on August 3, 2014. Yazda is a registered as a nonprofit in the United States, Germany, Iraq, Sweden, the United Kingdom. Since its establishment in 2014, Yazda continues to be the central engine of raising awareness and advocating for the rights of victims of a 2014 genocide perpetrated ISIS. Yazda implements a multidisciplinary approach to support ISIS victims.

Yazda documents the genocide through various means and provides immediate and long term support; including support to undertake international and national awareness and advocacy campaigns. Yazda has sponsored and supported several survivors to undertake their international advocacy campaigns, including Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Nadia Murad and Farida Abbas Khalaf, author of the book 'The Girl Who Escaped ISIS'. Yazda's advocacy contributed to the formal recognition of genocide by the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Armenia, Canada, France, and Scotland, the European Union, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.

Yazda's advocacy campaign further led to the passage of UN Security Council Resolution 2379, which allowed the creation of a team to investigate ISIS and collect evidence of international crimes. In addition, Yazda and its legal counsel Amal Clooney are seeking to hold ISIS accountable for the crimes committed against the Yazidi community in Iraq and Syria. The crimes include genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity; including mass executions, sexual enslavement and trafficking, recruitment of child soldiers, destruction of cultural heritage and forced displacement.

Yazda's humanitarian mission is to provide trauma counselling, case management, health and medical care, livelihood and emergency support, education. To this end Yazda is works with many UN, International and local NGOs to provide necessary services to survivors, IDPs, refugees and other vulnerable groups.

---

<sup>1</sup> A Yazidi survivor who participated in a focus group discussion conducted for the purposes of this report (see methodology section).

<sup>2</sup> The YSN was launched by Yazda in February 2020, to raise awareness of survivors on transitional justice issues in Iraq and empower them to advocate for their rights: Yazda, [Yazda Launches the Yazidi Survivors Network to Advocate for the Rights of Survivors](#), 3 February 2020.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On August 3, 2014, the so-called Islamic State attacked Sinjar, launching a campaign of genocide against Yazidis and other minorities in northern Iraq. In the aftermath of the attack, the Yazidi community has suffered devastating consequences. It is estimated that 6,417 Yazidis were abducted, women and girls were sold into sexual slavery, and young Yazidi boys were captured and forced into re-education camps and ideological schools. Searching for and identifying Yazidis who have gone missing since 2014 is one of the biggest challenges facing the Yazidi community. It is estimated that 2,763 Yazidis remain missing.

This report examines local, national, and transnational initiatives addressing the issue of missing Yazidis and discusses the shortcomings of these efforts. It identifies several problems associated with projects and efforts aimed at addressing the issue of missing Yazidis. These include the lack of a clear understanding about the scope and impact of the issue, inadequate responses to the issue of missing Yazidis, and insufficient support for survivors and their families.

The case of missing Yazidi has created an existential crisis for the community and survivors. This report concludes with a few recommendations to facilitate the development of an advocacy strategy on the issue of missing Yazidis.



Photo1: Genocide Commemoration Ceremony, Hardan, Sinjar, 2019 © Yazda

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>5</b>
Early Efforts after the Genocide	5
<b>METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>6</b>
Limitations of the Research	6
<b>SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1. DEFINING THE SCOPE OF THE ISSUE</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1 How many people are missing and who are they?	7
1.2 Individualistic Framework	8
<b>2. RESPONSES TO THE ISSUE OF MISSING YAZIDIS</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1 Current Government Responses	8
2.2 The Lack of Cooperation	10
2.3 Legal challenges	11
2.4 Politicization of the Plight of Yazidis	11
<b>3. SUPPORTING SURVIVORS AND THEIR FAMILIES</b>	<b>12</b>
3.1 Inadequate Support for Survivors and the Families of Missing Yazidis	12
3.2 No Consultation with the Survivors or the Families of Missing Persons	13
3.3 The Issue of Missing Yazidis is Becoming Unduly Protracted	13
3.4 Media Coverage	14
<b>4. RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>14</b>

## INTRODUCTION

The attack by the so-called Islamic State (henceforth ISIS) on Iraq's Sinjar Region and on the Yazidi community on 3 August 2014, resulted in the mass killing and kidnapping of almost 12,000 Yazidis.<sup>3</sup> The ISIS attack, also known as "The Black Day" (*Roja Reş*), is inscribed in Yazidi lore as the 74th genocide against the community. In the wake of the attack, ISIS systematically targeted Yazidi families and villages, destroyed Yazidi homes and places of worship, and kidnapped Yazidi women and children. Yazda estimates that on the first day of the attack, ISIS killed more than 1,200 Yazidis. In early 2021, the UN team investigating ISIS atrocities established "clear and convincing evidence" of genocide against Yazidis.<sup>4</sup>

Eight years after the genocide, many Yazidis remain stranded in camps throughout the Kurdistan region and other countries, and thousands are still missing. The Yazidi community is still haunted by painful memories and other effects of the Yazidi genocide. The search for and identification of Yazidis who have gone missing since 2014 is among the major challenges facing the Yazidi community. It is estimated that there are still 2,763 Yazidis missing.<sup>5</sup>

This report examines local, national and transnational initiatives addressing the issue of missing Yazidis and discusses the shortcomings of these efforts. It highlights how the case of missing Yazidi has created an existential crisis for the community and survivors. Based on focus group discussions with survivors and families of missing Yazidis, along with interviews with national and international stakeholders, the study concludes that despite grand promises from national and international organizations, the responses to the issue remain inadequate. Eight years after the genocide, as momentum to support Yazidi survivors' wanes, the issue of missing Yazidis is a particularly painful example of the lasting injustice faced by the community.

## EARLY EFFORTS AFTER THE GENOCIDE

The August 2014 attack on the Sinjar Region was unprecedented in its scope and scale, leaving local and international authorities unsure of how to respond. The Iraqi Army and Kurdish Peshmergas were unable to stop the ISIS attack,

and it took three days for the United States government to authorize airstrikes to avert an all-out massacre.<sup>6</sup>

One of the first grassroots organizations formed after the genocide was the Sinjar Crisis Management Team, which was a coalition of Yazidi activists from Europe, the U.S, and Iraq. This organization was tasked with organizing humanitarian campaigns providing critical services to affected Yazidis. Displaced Yazidis faced a variety of challenges. Several emergency needs had to be addressed, including shelter provision, medical and psychosocial support, as well as rescuing and finding missing Yazidis, which were clearly beyond Sinjar Crisis Management's capabilities. Nevertheless, the founders and volunteers of this grassroots organization were among the first to initiate a coordination between government and non-governmental stakeholders aimed at locating missing Yazidis and rescuing those kidnapped. Later, members of the Sinjar Crisis Management Team formed Yazda Organization, which has taken several initiatives to support survivors and document the 2014 genocide.

In addition to Yazidi grassroots organizations, Kurdistan Regional Government officials and Yazidi volunteers facilitated a few rescue missions as well.<sup>7</sup> These efforts, however, were largely unorganized, and there was no clear leadership to coordinate stakeholders. Families of missing persons did not know where or how to seek assistance, and rescue missions were conducted on an *ad hoc* basis. Prior to Mosul's liberation in 2017, forensic investigations were nearly impossible in the Sinjar Region, and rescue operations were extremely challenging. Families of the missing Yazidis were forced to find and save their loved ones through every possible route, including contacting smugglers and mediators with access to ISIS detention facilities and asking old neighbors and friends.<sup>8</sup>

Following ISIS's territorial defeat in Iraq, more governmental and non-governmental organizations became involved in the issue of missing Yazidis.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the efforts of the family members, currently, locating, and collecting information on missing Yazidis, as well as supporting the survivors, are undertaken at three levels: First, through a few Yazidi-led organizations such as The Yazidi House in Al-Jazeera.<sup>10</sup> Given

3 Cetorelli, Valeria, et al. "Mortality and kidnapping estimates for the Yazidi population in the area of Mount Sinjar, Iraq, in August 2014: A retrospective household survey." *PLoS medicine* 14.5 (2017): e1002297.

4 Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, "[They Came to Destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis](#)," 15 June 2016.

5 Ewelina U. Ochab, "[The Missing Yazidis Women and Children Must Be Located And Rescued](#)," *Forbes*, 25 September 2021.

6 United Nations Human Rights Council, "[They came to destroy": ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis](#)," *A/HRC/32/CRP.2*, 15 June 2016.

7 Remote interview with a Yazidi activist conducted in May 2022.

8 Remote interview with a Yazidi activist conducted in May 2022. Also, a few Yazidi survivors mentioned that they had to be in contact with smugglers at Al-Holl camp to rescue their siblings and family members. FGD conducted in April 2022 in Dohuk, KRG.

9 FGD conducted in April 2022 in Dohuk, KRG.

10 The Guardian, "[Still going through hell' the search for Yazidi women seven years on, 3 August 2021](#)."

that these organizations are composed of Yazidi activists and spiritual persons, they are often the most trusted sources of support for the families of missing persons and the survivors. Second, on the national level, the organizations that are directly working on this issue are The Office for Rescuing Yazidi Abductees Affairs (commonly known as ‘the Office of the Kidnapped’) in the Kurdistan Region, and The Martyrs Foundation based in Baghdad. The last is a governmental institution of the Iraqi Council of Ministers created in 2005, whereas the Office of the Kidnapped was created after the Sinjar attacks, specifically for the purpose of looking for Yazidis. Third, transnational organizations, such as the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP), International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Organizations for Migration (IOM), and the United Nations’ Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da’esh/ISIL (UNITAD) have taken initiatives in addressing the issue of missing Yazidis.

As will be discussed in this report, despite some progress, these organizations have not been able to adequately address the multifaceted nature of this existential crisis for a variety of reasons. In this study, the shortcomings of initiatives relating to the missing Yazidi case are examined, and several recommendations are made for how such initiatives could be improved in the future.

## METHODOLOGY

Primary sources of data for this study have been obtained through unstructured and semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGD), and secondary data analysis. These methods were used to collect data from the relevant parties and stakeholders, which were divided into three main types. First, Yazidis personally subjected to ISIS brutalities (henceforth Yazidi survivors), second, activists within the Yazidi community, and finally, national, and transnational organizations involved in addressing the case of missing Yazidis. The main method used to identify research participants within these three groups was purposive sampling, which involved selecting a research sample of individuals and institutions that have been directly involved with the issue of missing Yazidis.

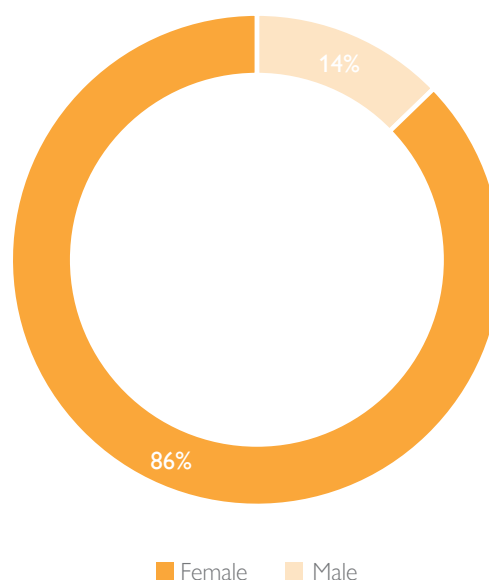
Data analysis was conducted on an ongoing basis during the data collection and involved three procedures: logging, transcription, and synthetic analysis of findings. Data logging was undertaken during the research to generate a database of persons interviewed, categories of identification, and key themes of conversations. To analyze the data collected during the research, interviews and FGD transcripts were reviewed to identify potential themes and then coded to identify general patterns. After transcribing interviews and coding transcripts, recurrent concepts and themes were identified with a special focus on the stakeholders’ perspectives on the issue of missing Yazidis and on the way this issue has been addressed. Inductive coding then was used to identify and evaluate po-

tential analytical themes as part of the data analysis process, and using the software. Lastly, responses were sorted according to their similarity and organized in piles according to different themes. Initial findings were used to refine observations and questions asked during the later portions of the research.

During the analysis process, collected data was stored in accordance with ethical research standards. Participants in the research gave informed consent and were informed they could withdraw their participation at any time. As per Yazda’s protocol, data collected during the study was kept confidential, and pseudonyms were assigned to all notes and reports immediately upon recruiting participants.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

Despite considerable efforts to recruit as many participants as possible, the research has faced a few limitations. One of the main challenges facing the data collection was the gender imbalance of the research participants. As shown in the figure 1, the majority of survivors who participated in focus group discussions were Yazidi women. As it will be highlighted in the report, the portrayals of the issue of missing Yazidis and the suffering of the Yazidi community have been affected by a highly gendered narrative, which has silenced the complexity of Yazidis’ experiences and subjectivities in post-genocide. It is important for future research to have a more holistic view of the challenges and problems faced by Yazidi survivors and individuals across gender and political spectrum.



The second limitation of this research was that the Yazidi participants were mostly men and women currently living in Iraq. Given that many survivors of the genocide were resettled abroad through humanitarian programs, it is important that future studies consider the insights of experiences the Yazidi diaspora as well.

## SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The study highlights several problems faced by projects and efforts to address the issue of missing Yazidis. They are grouped under the following categories:

1. The lack of a clear understanding about the scope and impact of the issue
2. Inadequate responses to the issue of missing Yazidis
3. Insufficient support for survivors and their families

The sections below detail the challenges faced by Yazidi survivors and stakeholders in each of these categories. The report highlights that in the absence of a clear definition of the issue and inadequate national and transnational support, the Yazidi community has been left on its own to deal with this existential crisis.

### 1. DEFINING THE SCOPE OF THE ISSUE

#### 1.1 HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE MISSING AND WHO ARE THEY?

The Yazidi community and stakeholders face a number of challenges, including a lack of clarity about the scope of the issue of missing Yazidis, and what that means for the survivors and their families. ICMP defines a missing person as “anyone whose whereabouts are unknown and who is being sought by another person.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, this conventional definition, shared by other organizations as well, is very broad and does not take into account the complexities of the challenges that the Yazidi community and survivors of the genocide face. The general category of “missing person” does not adequately reflect the highly intricate reality faced by thousands of Yazidis. During focus group discussions and interviews, it was clear that Yazidis who went missing following the genocide represent a heterogeneous group of people, which can be categorized as follows:

1. Missing people whose families have not been able to locate them since the 2014 genocide.
2. Several Yazidis, who went missing after the 2014 genocide, and were either temporarily identified by their family members or informed of their captivity by other rescued individuals. However, their location and survival status are unknown at the moment.

3. There are missing people whose families or authorities know their whereabouts but rescuing them has not been possible due to financial or security reasons.

It is important to note that the above categories are not mutually exclusive, and do not comprehensively reflect all possibilities. It is possible that a missing person could fall under more than one of these categories. For example, according to secondhand accounts and testimonies of rescued individuals, some Yazidis left their village, but their fates and whether they were moved again remain unknown.<sup>12</sup> Despite this, these categories are significant because they emphasize the complexity of the missing Yazidi case, and the necessity of a thorough investigation.

Among the many implications of the lack of a comprehensive understanding of the case of missing Yazidis is the lack of a database of those affected. Eight years after the genocide, there is no comprehensive database that contains updated information about those who disappeared during the genocide. Several national and international organizations have compiled lists with limited biographical information. As an example, the Office of the Kidnapped in the Kurdistan Region has attempted to compile a detailed list. However, as mentioned during the interviews with different stakeholders from local and transnational organizations, there are many gaps in these lists, as well as outdated and insecure methods of storing data. It was found in our study that there is no clear protocol for protecting missing Yazidis’ data. Even though these lists contain sensitive information, they are often stored in spreadsheets without any security measures.<sup>13</sup>



Photo2: Burial Ceremony, Kocho, Sinjar, 2021 © Yazda

<sup>11</sup> [ICMP, “Who are the Missing?”](#).

<sup>12</sup> [Survivors recounted stories of their captivity and identified other prisoners who were captured with them during the FGDs. However, it is unknown what happened to some of those individuals.](#) FGDs conducted in Dohuk in April and May 2022. \_

<sup>13</sup> [Remote interviews conducted with ICMP in June and July 2022.](#)\_

The lack of resources and staff have been among the main reasons that have hindered these agencies from updating their databases and launching investigations to gather new information on a regular basis. It is, however, important to note that the investigation into crimes against Yazidis is ongoing, and every finding could reveal more about the perpetrators. Several national and international organizations, including the Commission for Investigation and Gathering Evidence (CIGE), UNITAD, and ICMP, are gathering evidence of ISIS' crimes against Yazidis. It is possible to gain new insight into missing Yazidis' fate by combining survivors' testimonies with these investigations. Also, focus group discussions stressed the need for stakeholders to stay in constant contact with survivors and the families of missing Yazidis to collect updated data, a step that has not been taken so far.<sup>14 15</sup>

## 1.2 INDIVIDUALISTIC FRAMEWORK

A second problem associated with a lack of a comprehensive understanding is that the case of missing Yazidis is often framed as an individualistic issue, meaning it only concerns the missing individuals or their families. Yazidi survivors and their families repeatedly stressed that the issue of missing Yazidis has affected the entire community.<sup>16</sup>

Approximately 2,763 Yazidi individuals are missing, but the issue is not limited to them or their immediate families. At least 2,763 extended Yazidi families are suffering from the uncertain fate of their loved ones.

The case of missing Yazidis has transformed the social fabric of the entire community in different ways. A large number of Yazidi families have lost at least one member, and without information about what happened to them, there is no closure and the whole family is in perpetual pain. From the FGDs with Yazidi survivors, it was evident that the genocide had a significant impact on their extended families. A Yazidi survivor said that her husband and 18 family members are still missing, and another survivor mentioned that she was unaware of what happened to her two uncles and six cousins.<sup>17</sup> There have also been

other ramifications facing the Yazidi community, including the birth of children in captivity, providing spiritual support for the survivors, and providing social and financial assistance for those torn away from their communities and traumatized during and after the genocide.<sup>18</sup>

## 2. RESPONSES TO THE ISSUE OF MISSING YAZIDIS

The second section discusses the shortcomings of projects implemented by governments and non-governmental organizations. In addressing the issue of missing Yazidis, four issues are evident:

- First, despite occasional efforts, the Iraqi and Kurdistan Regional governments have not devised a comprehensive and systematic program to assist missing Yazidis, their families, and Yazidi survivors over the past eight years.
- The second problem is the absence of a mechanism that would allow both government agencies and non-governmental organizations to coordinate their activities.
- The third problem is the legal challenges facing the Yazidi community, which neither the Iraqi or Kurdish governments nor the international community have fully addressed to facilitate the rescue of missing Yazidis and provide them with support.<sup>19</sup>
- Finally, the problem of the politicization of the Yazidi plight amid the sectarian tensions in Iraq, which has hindered the recovery of the community and the development of a national strategy to address the issue of missing Yazidis.

### 2.1 CURRENT GOVERNMENT RESPONSES

The current responses of the Iraqi and Kurdistan governments in addressing the issue of missing Yazidis were key themes in the focus group discussions and interviews with Yazidi survivors, activists, and families of missing persons. With a few exceptions, most of the search and rescue efforts have been undertaken by the families of missing Yazidis, with

<sup>14</sup> FGDs conducted in April and May 2022 in Dohuk, KRI.

<sup>15</sup> Agencies involved in addressing the issue of missing Yazidis could also benefit from the research conducted in other contexts. For example, an analysis of the ISIS detention facilities conducted by Syria Justice and Accountability Center (SJAC) highlights that the detainees (including kidnapped Yazidis) were frequently transferred in between different facilities. A detailed analysis of the patterns and methods of these transfers, as well as the testimonies of the rescued detainees, could provide new information on the fate of the missing persons for authorities and their families.

<sup>16</sup> FGDs conducted in April and May 2022 in Dohuk, KRI.

<sup>17</sup> FGD conducted in April 2022 in Dohuk, KRI.

<sup>18</sup> *Yazda, Challenges & Solutions for Administration, Security, Safe Return, and Justice: Voices of the Yazidi Community*, 9 September 2020.

<sup>19</sup> A few survivors mentioned difficulties they have faced due to the precarious legal status of the missing family member. FGDs conducted in April and May 2022 in Dohuk, KRI.

humanitarian organizations and volunteers providing occasional support. In light of the passing of the Yazidi Survivors Law<sup>20</sup>, the government appears to be taking steps to address the issue of missing Yazidis more urgently (see below).

Although national authorities frequently promise to address this issue and support Yazidi survivors, little has been accomplished, and the empty promises of governmental organizations have increased frustration among Yazidi survivors and their families.<sup>21 22</sup> In the focus group discussions, Yazidi survivors and family members repeatedly asserted that they have not seen positive actions from the government. As one of the survivors put it: “So far, we have only heard words, and seen no action.”<sup>23</sup>

Iraq has recently taken a few initiatives through the Directorate for Survivors Affairs<sup>24</sup> and the Martyrs Foundation, respectively. The Directorate was established under the umbrella of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MoLSA) to implement the Yazidi Survivors Law which was passed in March 2021<sup>25</sup> and aims to provide comprehensive reparation to Yazidi survivors as well as survivors from the Turkmen, Christian and Shabak communities. The Yazidi Survivor Law was one of the most important – and long overdue – steps in addressing one of the most challenging ramifications of the 2014 genocide. Article 5.7 of the law provides that:

*“The Directorate undertakes the following means to achieve its goals [...] searching for the kidnapped of Yazidis, Turkmen, Christians, and Shabaks men, women and children, whose fate is still unknown. This work shall be done in coordination with the competent authorities inside and outside Iraq and the victims’ families, treating their conditions legally and granting them benefits and compensating them or their families in accordance with the relevant laws.”<sup>26</sup>*

In her interview, the Head of the Directorate explained that the agency has been involved in providing psychological and health services to survivors, supporting the excavation of mass graves, identifying remains and following up on their IDs. Other activities of the Directorate will include sharing survivors’ testimonies with authorities for prosecution of ISIS members, assisting in commemoration practices, and opening an orphanage<sup>27</sup>.

The Martyrs Foundation has also been in charge of exhuming mass graves in Iraq. Solely in Sinjar, the Foundation has exhumed approximately 17 mass graves in Kocho<sup>28</sup>, one in Solagh<sup>29</sup>, four in Hardan<sup>30</sup>, and six in Qiney<sup>31</sup>. To date the remains of 145 Yazidi victims have been identified and returned to the families for burial<sup>32</sup>. Some of those remains were returned to Yazidi families who were able to organize burials<sup>33</sup>. It seems however that these number do not affect the total number of missing persons, which again poses the questions of its definition. In an interview with the Martyrs Foundation, it was also noted that the agency faced multiple challenges, including a lack of resources, staff shortage and a lack of necessary infrastructure for the rapid excavation of killing sites and mass graves<sup>34</sup>.

It is important to note once again that the Yazidi Survivors Law provides that the Directorate for Survivors Affairs has a coordination role with the Martyrs Foundation. Article 5.8 states that the Directorate must coordinate “with the Martyrs Foundation / Department of Mass Graves’ Affairs and Protection in relation to mass graves to complete all procedures related to searching and investigating, opening mass graves, revealing the identity of the remains and return them to their families in order to bury them in a manner befitting their sacrifices.”

20 [Iraq passes law addressing women survivors of Yazidi genocide, Al-Monitor, March 2022.](#)

21 [FGD conducted in April 2022 in Dohuk, KRI.](#)

22 [Also see: Yazda, Interim Relief Program for CRSV in Iraq: Survivors’ Grant Scheme in practice and recommendations for its improvement, March 2021.](#)

23 FGD conducted in April 2022 in Dohuk, KRI.

24 [The Directorate was established under the umbrella of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs \(MoLSA\) to implement the Yazidi Survivors Law.](#)

25 [Al-Monitor, Iraq passes law addressing women survivors of Yazidi genocide, 1 March 2022.](#)

26 [Yazidi Female Survivors Law, English translation, C4JR.](#)

27 In-person interview conducted in Mosul in August 2022.

28 Yazda, [Yazda welcomes and supports the exhumation of the last Mass Graves in Kocho and the exhumation of Mass Graves in Solagh-Sinjar](#), 23 October 2020.

29 *Idem.*

30 Yazda, [Yazidi survivors, Yazda and Amal Clooney welcome the start of exhumation activities in Hardan](#), Sinjar, 21 February 2022.

31 Yazda, [Yazidi survivors and Yazda welcome the start of the exhumation activities in Qiney, Sinjar](#), 27 June 2022.

32 Yazda, [Yazidi Survivors, Yazda and Amal Clooney welcome the start of exhumation activities in Hardan, Sinjar](#), February 21, 2022.

33 Yazda, [Outreach video of the Second Kocho Burial Ceremony](#), 9 December 2021.

34 Remote interview conducted with the Martyrs Foundation in August 2022.

In spite of the slow and uncoordinated response to the issue of missing Yazidis, the passing of the YSL and the coordination role it gives the Directorate may have created momentum, creating potential for the Directorate to take the lead on this issue in addition to all the work it must do to implement the law.

As mentioned earlier in the report, the responses to the issue of missing Yazidis have been mostly uncoordinated and conducted on an *ad hoc* basis. A Yazidi activist stated in his interview that a large number of rescue missions have been undertaken by the family members. According to him, it is mostly the Yazidi community that should be credited for rescuing and locating nearly 4,000 individuals by 2022, bringing the number of missing persons down from 7,000 to less than 3,000.<sup>35</sup> The families of missing Yazidis are rarely provided with adequate financial and legal assistance during these difficult and dangerous rescue missions. The more active coordination between these organizations and the passing of the YSL could help ease the challenges facing families of missing Yazidis.

## 2.2 THE LACK OF COOPERATION

In addressing the issue of missing Yazidis, bureaucratic complexity and poor cooperation among stakeholders have all posed major obstacles over the last eight years.<sup>36</sup> Due to tensions between Erbil and Baghdad, governmental organizations have been unable to coordinate their support for families of missing persons.<sup>37</sup> In addition, transnational organizations have had difficulty developing a coordinated framework for addressing the issue of missing Yazidis. Cooperation between national organizations is primarily a political challenge in Iraq, while transnational organizations are reluctant to cooperate because they compete for donor funding and must define their projects independently.<sup>38</sup>

In light of the political tensions and competition between Baghdad and Erbil, government organizations have been reluctant to cooperate and share their resources. In the last few decades, Sinjar Region, one of the historical homelands of the Yazidi community, which is part of the

Nineveh Governorate, has fallen under the category of “disputed territories,” and a source of conflict between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Iraqi Federal Government. Prior to and after the genocide, tensions between the two governments have directly affected the Yazidi community. It continues to be a major challenge for the two governments in developing a comprehensive strategy to address the issue of missing Yazidis after the genocide. Baghdad and Erbil refuse to cooperate on the excavation of mass graves and the exchange of information about Yazidis who are missing.<sup>39</sup> Additionally, both governments have failed to acknowledge the deteriorating security situation in Sinjar following repeated Turkish airstrikes, which has made it difficult for local and transnational NGOs to document ISIS crimes and collect forensic evidence that may reveal the fate of missing Yazidis.

Meanwhile, securing funds and competing for resources have been major obstacles to the development of comprehensive strategies for transnational NGOs. Most organizations, regardless of their size, struggle to collaborate with others and prefer to carry out their own projects. The institutional logic of NGOs dictates that they develop independent projects to compete for funding. Additionally, they lack the resources and logistics needed to develop productive partnerships with other agencies.<sup>40</sup> The issue of missing Yazidis is a complex one, requiring expertise beyond the capacity of any one organization. NGOs have failed to establish a coordination framework to support the Yazidi community and families of missing Yazidis over the last eight years.

The lack of coordination has not only negatively affected the efforts to rescue and find missing Yazidis, but also created significant hardships for survivors and their families. An increased cooperation of national and international stakeholders with the Directorate for Survivors Affairs could significantly improve the responses to the issue of missing Yazidis on different levels. The political will of Baghdad and Erbil to support the families of missing persons who are fighting against the clock to rescue their loved ones is at the core of any comprehensive plan.

<sup>35</sup> Remote interview conducted with a Yazidi activist in the U.S. in May 2022.

<sup>36</sup> [Yazda, Challenges & Solutions for Administration, Security, Safe Return, and Justice: Voices of the Yazidi Community](#), 9 September 2020.

<sup>37</sup> [Ibid](#)

<sup>38</sup> [For a more detailed analysis see: Weiss, T. G. \(2013\). Humanitarian Business, John Wiley & Sons. And Dunn, E. C. and J. Cons \(2014\). “Aleatory Sovereignty and the Rule of Sensitive Spaces.” \*Antipode\* 46\(1\): 92-109.](#)

<sup>39</sup> [Remote interview conducted with ICMP in June 2022.](#)

<sup>40</sup> [Remote interview conducted in June 2022.](#)

## 2.3 LEGAL CHALLENGES

Since the 2014 genocide, the Yazidi community has faced a variety of legal challenges. An ineffective and complicated legal system has caused many Yazidis to struggle with gathering forensic evidence, prosecuting ISIS members, and retrieving their identification documents. In the last eight years, there has been no attempt to provide a legal framework for families of missing Yazidis and survivors to deal with their difficulties. The scope of this report does not allow it to explore all legal shortcomings, but these are only a few examples.

In the interviews and focus group discussions, Yazidi activists spoke extensively about the legal challenges facing Yazidi child survivors and their families.<sup>41</sup> There is no clear outline or legal backing for the process of obtaining civil documents for abducted children. Application for identity cards, residence permits, and birth certificates is complicated and uncertain. Without such documents, these children are deprived of their right to education, legal identity, and family unity.<sup>42</sup> Besides the harm caused to these children, their precarious legal status and unknown fate have had other consequences, including making rescue missions emotionally - and at times logistically - challenging for the families of missing Yazidis.<sup>43</sup>

A further challenge for Yazidi survivors and families of missing persons is that no clear legal provision has been developed to provide meaningful support for them. Although the Yazidi Survivor Law was ratified in 2021, it has not yet been fully implemented (see below for further information). The legal status of missing Yazidis is also not clearly defined, leaving their families in legal limbo. In one of the focus group discussions, a Yazidi survivor in her mid-twenties explained that her husband's ambiguous legal status as a "missing person" caused her significant difficulties. The government has not issued a death certificate for her husband, despite his disappearance since 2014. Therefore, she has not been able to file for any compensation.<sup>44</sup>

Another major challenge facing the Yazidi community in addressing the issue is the uncertain legal basis of rescue missions. The Iraqi government and other countries do

not have a clear legal provision to support Yazidi survivors and families of missing persons.<sup>45</sup> Many kidnapped Yazidis have been taken to other countries like Turkey and Syria.<sup>46</sup> According to interviews and focus group discussions, many missing Yazidis are believed to be located outside of Iraq, primarily in Syria, in camps set up for ISIS families.<sup>47</sup> Several kidnapped Yazidis have also been rescued from Turkey in the past.<sup>48</sup> Even though a large number of missing Yazidis are located outside of Iraq, there is no legal process that would allow transnational rescue operations to take place. Families of missing people are often forced to use extralegal means to rescue their loved ones, which is financially and legally burdensome. Because ISIS has been designated a global terrorist organization, it is forbidden to communicate with anyone affiliated with the terrorist group. When dealing with designated terror groups, it is unclear what consequences such contacts could have on the victims and their families. Ransom payments are also illegal in Iraq and many other countries, making the rescue of missing Yazidis impossible with the assistance of the Iraqi government or foreign governments.

## 2.4 POLITICIZATION OF THE PLIGHT OF YAZIDIS

As mentioned earlier in the report, in the years following the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Sinjar Region has been the arena for competition between several major political players, primarily the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Iraqi Federal Government. The tension between these factions has hindered the recovery of the Yazidi community following the genocide and has also directly affected the case of missing Yazidis. Several stakeholders have pointed out that the conflict between Erbil and Baghdad has overshadowed initiatives and projects aimed at rescuing Yazidis and supporting their families. Politicization of the missing Yazidi case has hindered the ability of Erbil and Baghdad to cooperate.

In addition, conflict over security and control in the Sinjar Region has slowed the excavation of mass graves. International and local organizations face significant challenges

<sup>41</sup> [FGD conducted in May 2022 in Dohuk, KRI.](#)

<sup>42</sup> [Amnesty International, Iraq: Legacy of Terror: The Plight of Yazidi Child Survivors of ISIS, 30 June 2020.](#)

<sup>43</sup> [Van Zoonen, Dave, and Khogir Wirya. The Yazidis: Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict. Middle East Research Institute., 2017.](#)

<sup>44</sup> [FGD with Yazidi survivors in May 2022, Dohuk, KRI.](#)

<sup>45</sup> [Remote interview conducted in June 2022.](#)

<sup>46</sup> See e.g. Yazidi Justice Committee, [State Responsibility and the Genocide of the Yazidis](#), July 2022.

<sup>47</sup> [FGD conducted in April 2022;](#) and the interview [with the Office of the Kidnapped conducted in July 2022.](#)

<sup>48</sup> [Al-Monitor, Online 'auctions' of Yazidi captives speak of ongoing Islamic State activity in Turkey, 5 March 2021.](#)

in collecting forensic evidence and supporting the families of missing Yazidis in this conflict-ridden area. Ongoing military operations and deteriorating security conditions also interrupted data collection for this research on numerous occasions.<sup>49</sup> Our interviews also revealed that the ongoing conflict and volatile situation in Sinjar could damage the killing sites, making it difficult – and even impossible – to collect reliable evidence.<sup>50</sup>

The politicization of the issue of missing Yazidis also manifests itself in the way Yazidi survivors are treated as political pawns. Generally, missing Yazidis are rescued by their own families, who search for them selflessly and raise funds to bring them home. One of the survivors stated during focus group discussions that Arab channels were prohibited from covering her story after she was rescued, and only Kurdish media were allowed to film her.<sup>51</sup>

Using these rescue missions for the benefit of Iraqi or Kurdish officials could be damaging to families and survivors who might be deemed to support a particular political party.

### 3. SUPPORTING SURVIVORS AND THEIR FAMILIES

The third section discusses the inadequate support given to Yazidi survivors and families of missing Yazidis. The international community is growing increasingly indifferent to the ongoing suffering of Yazidis. A large number of Yazidis, including survivors, remain stranded in IDP camps without a clear future. Furthermore, Yazidi survivors and families of missing persons are rarely consulted on projects that directly affect them.<sup>52</sup> Yazidis' suffering has become a protracted issue, and many are concerned that the momentum for helping missing Yazidis is waning.<sup>53</sup>

#### 3.1 INADEQUATE SUPPORT FOR SURVIVORS AND THE FAMILIES OF MISSING YAZIDIS

Despite the genocide's eight-year mark, Erbil and Baghdad have not adequately helped Yazidi survivors and families. The impact of the Yazidi Survivors Law, passed by the Iraqi Parliament in 2021 to provide assistance to Yazidi survivors of ISIS atrocities, has been challenged by Iraq's deepening economic woes and political instability.<sup>54</sup> Although the Yazidi Survivor Law represents a promising step toward reparation, its limited scope and lack of institutional infrastructure have hampered its full implementation. As stated in an interview with the Directorate for Survivors Affairs, the organization lacks resources and staff to process all requests quickly, leaving survivors and their families frustrated and unwilling to cooperate<sup>55</sup>. The frustration was reflected in focus group discussions as well where participants complained about not receiving government financial assistance. They mentioned that even though they have gone through the difficult – often retraumatizing – process of filing for reparation, none of the Yazidi survivors has received financial assistance in the last year.<sup>56</sup>

Aside from providing financial assistance, Yazidi survivors and their families face mental health and psychosocial challenges. As many of them continue to suffer from chronic trauma, short consultations and temporary visits cannot meet their psychological needs. Long-term solutions are needed to address the trauma they have experienced. There has not been enough investment in mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) for rescued Yazidis over the last eight years. The interviews also revealed that the MHPSS offered is of low quality because specialists often do not understand the language or cultural nuances of the Yazidi community and are not particularly trained in overcoming these cultural barriers.<sup>57</sup>

49 [As a result of the unstable security condition in Sinjar in May 2022, Yazda's research team had to delay the FGDs for a few weeks.](#)

50 [Yazda, Yazda Documentation of the Wildfires Currently in Sinjar and Recommendations to the Authorities, 27 June 2019.](#)

51 [FGD conducted with Yazidi survivors in May 2022.](#)

52 [FGD conducted with Yazidi survivors in May 2022.](#)

53 [Remote interview with IOM conducted in June 2022.](#)

54 [Yazda, Interim Relief Program for CRSV in Iraq: Survivors' Grant Scheme in practice and recommendations for its improvement, March 2021.](#)

55 In-person interview conducted in Mosul in August 2022.

56 FGD with Yazidi survivors conducted in May 2022.

57 [Remote interview with IOM conducted in May 2022.](#)

### 3.2 NO CONSULTATION WITH THE SURVIVORS OR THE FAMILIES OF MISSING PERSONS

The focus group discussions and interviews revealed that, in many instances, there is a lack of communication between the agencies dealing with the missing Yazidi issue and the Yazidi community. There are two major problems resulting from this lack of communication. First, Yazidi survivors and families of missing persons are not consulted in the development and implementation of projects directly affecting them. Most projects are developed from a top-down perspective by both international and national organizations.

Second, the lack of communication has resulted in the growing mistrust between Yazidi survivors and government and non-government agencies. Participants in focus group discussions repeatedly complained about not being informed about the process of identifying genocide victims and excavating mass graves. Several national and international organizations collect information (blood samples, testimonies, etc.) from Yazidi survivors and families of missing persons. However, Yazidi survivors mentioned that they are not informed of what steps are taken after samples are collected and they are left in the dark for an extended period of time. In some cases, the result of the investigations and information about their loved ones were not even shared with them, but rather with their village leaders (Mukhtars), which is ethically and legally irresponsible.<sup>58</sup> Because of the unclear process of gathering and analyzing data collected from Yazidi survivors, as well as the lack of protection for sensitive information, many survivors are skeptical as to whether these agencies can provide meaningful assistance to them, and they do not wish to cooperate with their projects.<sup>59</sup>

### 3.3 THE ISSUE OF MISSING YAZIDIS IS BECOMING UNDULY PROTRACTED

There has been a significant decrease in support for survivors and families of missing Yazidis in recent years. The issue of missing Yazidis has become yet another unresolved crisis among many, and the momentum for action is rapidly ebbing away. With transnational solidarity and compassion waning, and with Iraq's political stability at risk,<sup>60</sup> the Yazidi community has mostly been left to deal with the trauma of the 2014 genocide on its own. There are numerous challenges faced by families of missing persons and survivors of Yazidi genocide, and agencies that provide assistance to survivors have limited resources to address these challenges. As stakeholders noted in the interviews, the protracted nature of the missing Yazidi issue has made receiving funding for new projects increasingly difficult.<sup>61</sup> Getting government agencies and international organizations to act immediately to resolve the issue of missing Yazidis is becoming increasingly difficult. In their own words, Yazidi survivors say they feel forgotten by both the Iraqi and Kurdish governments, as well as by the international community.<sup>62 63</sup>

The feeling of abandonment that is prevalent among the survivors and families of missing Yazidis represents one of the biggest failures of humanitarian and government organizations in addressing the crisis that Yazidis are experiencing. Governments and non-governmental organizations view Yazidi suffering as a temporary problem, so they only meet short-term needs rather than addressing the long-term challenges of the community. The representation of the issue of missing Yazidis in the media also suffers from the same shortsightedness. Participants in the focus groups repeatedly suggested that media outlets in Iraq and abroad should do more to cover the issue of missing Yazidis and urge the authorities to act.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>58</sup> [FGD with Yazidi survivors conducted in May 2022 in Dohuk, KRI.](#)

<sup>59</sup> [Several stakeholders also noted in their interviews that the process for collecting blood samples had been unsatisfactory.](#)

<sup>60</sup> The instability of Iraq's politics and the inability to form a government over the past year have made addressing the needs of Yazidis a major challenge for national and international organizations.

<sup>61</sup> [Remote interview with IOM in May 2022. Also, Interview with Office of the Kidnapped in July 2022.](#)

<sup>62</sup> [FGD with Yazidi survivors in May 2022.](#)

<sup>63</sup> [In the focus group discussions, Yazidi survivors mentioned that they only received meaningful support in the first two years after the genocide, and that their suffering has been mostly ignored thereafter.](#)

<sup>64</sup> [Ibid.](#)

### 3.4 MEDIA COVERAGE

Survivors and family members of missing persons have been troubled by media coverage of Yazidi suffering. Yazidi survivors' stories are rarely reported according to clear ethical and security guidelines; interviews are conducted by people who are not trained to deal with traumatized or rescued individuals; and the privacy and dignity of rescued Yazidis are often neglected.<sup>65</sup> In many cases, media outlets publish photos of rescued people without protecting their privacy, which could have serious security repercussions, endangering future rescue missions. When rescued individuals are reunited with their families, it is also common for media outlets to broadcast the moment of reunion without their permission.

Media coverage has been also dominated by heavily gendered narratives regarding the missing Yazidis and their ongoing suffering. Reports on Yazidi issues often depict graphic details of sexual violence and use dehumanizing terms like "sex slaves" to refer to Yazidi survivors.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, national and international media has focused primarily on Yazidi women and children in recent years, leaving out hundreds of missing Yazidi men. The gendered representation of missing Yazidis has largely silenced not only male survivors, but also those who do not fit the stereotype of a victim. Providing a simple, yet distorted media narrative of Yazidi suffering could have severe psychological implications for the survivors and families of missing Yazidis.

## 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

The case of missing Yazidis has been a long and painful aspect of the genocide against the Yazidi community. This report has provided an overview of the way this issue has been addressed and the failure of national and international authorities to provide meaningful assistance over the past eight years. As a result of Iraq's volatile economic and political climate, as well as limited resources of the international organizations, the issue of missing Yazidis has made minimal progress. Searching for those who went missing under ISIS and providing support for the survivors are long-term processes that requires the support of multiple stakeholders and coordination between different agencies. Below are the primary recommendations from Yazda to strengthen efforts aimed at addressing the case of missing Yazidis:

1. It is important to highlight the fact that Iraq's government has the primary responsibility for addressing the issue of missing Yazidis. Nearly 3,000 *Iraqi citizens* are missing, and the Iraqi government is obligated to provide meaningful support for the survivors and families of the missing Yazidis, and to prioritize rescue missions. It is long overdue for Iraqi politicians to frame the issue of missing Yazidis as a national issue, and as one of the highest priorities for the government.
2. Among the main problems identified by this study was the lack of coordination and the scattered nature of efforts to address the issue of missing Yazidis. National and transnational agencies have not been able to form a coordinated framework so far. A more active role of national organizations such as the Directorate for Survivors Affairs, composed of representatives of different political parties and of the Yazidi community, could pave the way to address the case of missing Yazidis more effectively. The leadership of such an organization could facilitate better coordination between stakeholders on different levels, as well as the depoliticization of the issue of missing Yazidis. At the moment, the issue is being addressed by separate agencies both in Erbil and Baghdad. This approach has proven ineffective so far and needs to be overhauled.
  - 2.1. A nationally led organization could also facilitate rescue missions outside of Iraq. The Iraqi State is an internationally recognized entity and can sign treaties with other countries to exchange information and lead a global campaign for identifying and rescuing missing Yazidis.
  - 2.2. The leadership of the Directorate for Survivors Affairs could also increase the effectiveness of government and non-governmental cooperation in addressing the missing Yazidis issue. As highlighted in the report, coordination has been one of the biggest obstacles in devising a comprehensive initiative. A national organization can assist in collecting data and identifying missing people more effectively. Currently, there is no database with updated information on missing Yazidis. A national organization could encourage stakeholders to share information and facilitate the creation of such a database.
  - 2.3. A clear protocol is also needed to protect the data collected and the privacy of individuals when agencies gather information on missing Yazidis. The leadership of a unified authority, such as the Directorate for Survivors Affairs, could help establish clear guidelines to protect data confidentiality.
3. Yazidi survivors expressed concern about not being consulted by national and international agencies, as well as not knowing how projects are developed

<sup>65</sup> See *The Murad Code by Nadia's Initiative, and the forthcoming Charter of Yazidi Survivors Network (YSN) on Ethical Standards for Interviewing Survivors and Documenting Conflict Related Sexual Violence*.

<sup>66</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the gendered representations, see: Buffon, Veronica, and Christine Allison. 2016. "The Gendering of Victimhood: Western Media and the Sinjar Genocide." *Kurdish Studies Journal* 4 (2):176-196.

and implemented. Stakeholders should devise plans to receive feedback from Yazidi survivors and their families as part of the initiatives addressing the issue of missing Yazidis. Assuring survivors and their families that progress is being made on the excavation of mass graves and killing sites, the collection of DNA samples, and the rescue of missing Yazidis can reduce the psychological toll that they have endured. A survivor-based approach is essential in enhancing the implementation and creation of projects related to the missing Yazidis.

4. Another major challenge facing the Yazidi community has been the inadequate legal framework for addressing the multiple challenges they face. Legal initiatives are most urgent and necessary in the following three areas:
  - 4.1. Creating a legal mechanism that can protect individuals who need to be in contact with those affiliated with ISIS. In light of ISIS' global designation as a terrorist organization, any contact with people affiliated with the group could have severe legal repercussions for families of missing persons, both in Iraq and globally. For Yazidi survivors and their families to be fully protected, the Iraqi state and international community must address the shortcomings in the current legal system.
  - 4.2. As discussed in the report, the Iraqi legal system is unable to deal with the multifaceted issues families of missing Yazidis and survivors face. Iraq's government needs to take legal initiatives to address issues such as children born in captivity, retrieving identification documents, and prosecuting ISIS members.
  - 4.3. A further area of improvement for the current legal system is how the Yazidi community is supported. Expanding previous legislation such as the Yazidi Survivor Law is necessary to assist Yazidi survivors and families of missing Yazidis.
5. Another major issue that needs immediate action is the way Iraqi and international media report on the issue of missing Yazidis. There are serious ethical and security concerns regarding the way in which the issue of missing Yazidis has been covered in the media, as it frequently violates the dignity and privacy of survivors and their families. It is imperative that media outlets that choose to discuss this issue establish a clear code of ethics, or strictly follow the existing code of conducts, such as the Murad Code or the Charter of Yazidi Survivors Network. Reporters who work with Yazidi survivors and families need to get explicit consent for their interviews. Additionally, journalists interested in

covering this issue and interviewing the survivors should undergo a series of training sessions to ensure they do not retraumatize the individuals they are reporting on.

### Acknowledgment

*This report was prepared by Dr. Houman Oliaei, volunteer researcher at Yazda Organization and Mellon postdoctoral Fellow at Kalamazoo College and Yazda Documentation Team.*

*Special thanks to the members of the Yazidi Survivor Network (YSN) as well as other community members who took part in this project. Without their support, writing this report would not have been possible. We hope that this report brings awareness to the suffering, spirit of hope, and humanity of Yazidi survivors.*

*Yazda is also thankful to national and transnational stakeholders who participated in this study.*

*Yazda is grateful to its donors, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and USAID, for their continued support of survivors of conflict-related violence. The views expressed in this report are the ones of Yazda and do not necessarily represent those of our donors or supporters.*



Photo3: Burial Ceremony, Kocho, Sinjar, 2021 © Yazda



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior written permission of the publisher.