
Conflict and modern slavery:

Surviving the unimaginable,
but thriving only when we
disrupt the cycle

ESSAY BY
**NADIA
MURAD**

UNODC Goodwill
Ambassador

Nadia Murad, a proud Yazidi woman, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, and UNODC Goodwill Ambassador, is a leading advocate for survivors of genocide and sexual violence. The Yazidi community, largely located in the north of modern-day Iraq, is an ancient population united by their ethnic and religious identity. Throughout their long history, Yazidis have faced discrimination, persecution, and severe forms of exploitation. In 2014, in the most brutal of attacks, militants from the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terror group led a systematic campaign to destroy the Yazidi community. Sexual slavery was used as a weapon of the genocide.

In this essay, we learn how Nadia's own escape from ISIS captivity led to an unwavering pursuit of justice for her community and for survivors of sexual violence worldwide. Nadia explores the ways in which exploitation is both a weapon and consequence of war, and offers hope that with community-driven and survivor-centric approaches, persecuted communities can not only survive, but thrive.

Genocide does not happen by accident. The enslavement and sexual abuse of women does not happen by accident. The decision by ISIS to brutalise and break my Yazidi community in Sinjar in Northern Iraq was no accident. Centuries of persecution had exacerbated our vulnerabilities, so that when the militants surrounded us in the summer of 2014, we were left like lambs to be slaughtered.

When the terrorists entered my village of Kocho, men and women were immediately treated differently. The men were murdered and the young boys captured and brainwashed. Women and children were captured, forcibly converted, subjected to domestic servitude and many were forced to marry fighters. Through this institutionalised sexual violence — and the indoctrination of our children — they sought to destroy our community first through our bodies, and then in our minds.

As with other genocides, they did so with precision and planning. They bureaucratised rape and violence against women, first with “guideline” pamphlets for fighters, then through the use of online platforms like Telegram to buy and sell women. They opened a road between Iraq and Syria for the express purpose of trading Yazidi girls, hoping their presence might lure more fighters from across the globe.

The sexual violence ISIS unleashed on us was a weapon of war, but our experience was not wholly unique. If you look back at human history, the sexual enslavement and abuse of women and girls caught in conflict happens over and over. We read of it in Homer's Iliad, we heard about it through the testimonies of the women during the Second World War and today we still watch as journalists report on it for the news.

How can it be that, as we enter the third decade of the 21st century, a century in which society is making huge advances in so many ways, our treatment of women in conflict is still stuck in the Bronze Age?

Why is it that even though I, and others, have told our story over and over, the international community seems to have lost interest in pursuing those who perpetrate sexual violence?



While I am proud to have successfully advocated for the passage of resolution 2467 at the UN Security Council, which expands commitments to end sexual violence in conflict with a survivor-centric approach, it is not enough.

Neither the International Criminal Court nor the national courts in Iraq have yet convened to formally try ISIS members for the genocide and sexual violence they perpetrated. To date, only two criminal proceedings have been brought against fighters and their co-conspirators. Both of which resulted in German courts handing down convictions for crimes of genocide, including through the systematic enslavement of Yazidi women and girls.

In the aftermath of the ISIS invasion, the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD) collected evidence against more than 2,100 perpetrators of sexual violence. So, two trials from over two thousand does not seem much of a future deterrent. I believe we must use every tool we have, from sanctions through to universal jurisdiction, to show the entire world that sexual violence in conflict will not be tolerated.

My book “The Last Girl” is so-called because I want to be the last girl in the world with a story like mine. However, that will only be the case if the international community truly fights for justice, and if we address the gender inequalities and societal vulnerabilities that puts communities at risk of these kinds of barbaric crimes.

That is why rebuilding communities and advocating for survivors of sexual violence became my mission. In 2018, I founded Nadia's Initiative to create peace

and safety for women and girls, and to support the healing and re-development of besieged Yazidi communities. As we approach the ninth anniversary of the genocide, more than 2,800 women and children are still missing and enslaved by ISIS.

I began this essay by writing that genocide does not happen by accident.

Sexual violence in conflict does not happen by accident. The root causes of our vulnerability as Yazidi women are achingly familiar to so many other marginalised groups whether in Afghanistan, Yemen, or Democratic Republic of the Congo. We must uproot poverty, inequality, political oppression, and the norms that legitimise such discrimination, wherever they are found.

Secondly, we must take a holistic approach to increase access to basic needs and comprehensive protections where and when they are needed most. This should include embedding gender-responsive approaches and modern slavery considerations within all humanitarian responses, including facilitating access to justice.

Finally, we must ensure that calls for justice and meaningful survivor-centric support for women and girls do not cease when global media turns its attention elsewhere. Only then will we begin to break the patterns of abuse that instil vulnerability to violence and exploitation throughout generations.

See page 58 “Modern slavery: A weapon and consequence of war” for a wider discussion on this intersection, including recommendations for government action.

**Mosul, Iraq,
August 2014.**

Thousands of Yazidi people flee their homes in the Sinjar region of Iraq after it was invaded by Islamic State militants, who orchestrated a strategic ethnic cleansing of the community. During the invasion, over 6,000 women and children were abducted by the Islamic State, many of whom were forcibly married and traded as sex slaves by fighters. Although the extremist group was defeated in 2019, many of those taken are still missing today. Photo credit: Emrah Yorulmaz/ Anadolu Agency via Getty Images.