



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom  
Women in FoRB: Making a Difference  
North Congressional Meeting Room (CVC 268)  
Capitol Hill, Washington, D.C.

March 22, 2024

## **STANDING IN UNITY: SUPPORTING THE YAZIDI COMMUNITY AGAINST ONGOING PERSECUTION AND GENDER AND RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION**

Dear Esteemed Members and Supporters of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom,

As we come together for the "Women in FoRB: Making a Difference" event, it is imperative that we confront the harrowing realities that underscore this gathering. The Yazidi genocide represents not just a tragic chapter in modern history, but the culmination of centuries of systemic persecution endured by the Yazidi community and other minorities in Iraq. This enduring oppression led my family and me to seek refuge in Canada in 1999. Alarming, 25 years later, the predicament for Yazidis and other minorities has only worsened. ISIS's barbaric acts—mass executions, rape, sexual slavery, forced labor, and religious conversion—have particularly devastated women, highlighting the dire need for our mission in Canada.

In August 2014, our lives in Canada were shattered by horrific reports from Sinjar. This spurred our Winnipeg community into action, with the Jewish community emerging as a crucial ally. Together, we formed Operation Ezra, inspired by a historic mission that relocated Jews from Iraq to Israel post-World War II. Operation Ezra, in collaboration with the Canadian Yazidi Association, has now become a multi-faith initiative dedicated to supporting the Yazidi community in Canada, focusing on family reunification, community rebuilding, and advocating for justice for survivors.

Our collective efforts have brought significant achievements, such as the private sponsorship of 65 Yazidis, raising over \$1.5 million for initiatives, and providing support to more than 1,000 government-sponsored Yazidi refugees. Our initiatives include launching integration and healing programs, creating Canada's first Yazidi cemetery, and founding the Healing Cleaning Company to offer employment to Yazidi survivors, with a particular focus on young women. Furthermore, our collaboration with Canada's War Crimes Program has been instrumental in amplifying the voices of Yazidi women and girls, ensuring their stories are heard and justice pursued.



At the heart of our mission lies the objective of family reunification, a priority highlighted by Canada's new policy in November 2023 that aims to reunite 400 principal applicants with their families. However, the urgent need for more funding to broaden services and bolster support for the Yazidi community emphasizes the necessity for a comprehensive, trauma-informed strategy to ensure survivors not only recover but flourish in their new circumstances.

Nearly a decade after the genocide began, the Yazidi community in Iraq still faces ongoing challenges: over 300,000 Yazidis living in displacement camps with inhumane conditions. More than 2,700 women and children remain in ISIS captivity, the Sinjar region has seen negligible reconstruction, security issues severely limit the possibility of return, and the significant harm to Yazidi cultural and religious heritage.

Legal frameworks aimed at protecting human rights, including those of religious and ethnic minorities under the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, face significant challenges in realization, especially for Yazidis. Judicial biases, influence from non-state actors like ISIS, and displacement undermine effective protection. Legislation targeting minority needs lack clear safeguards against forced conversions, sexual violence, and forced marriages, leaving gaps in protection. The Sinjar Agreement and Yazidi Survivors Law, despite their intentions, suffer from slow implementation and bureaucratic hurdles, exacerbating the plight of Yazidis, especially women and girls. This underscores the urgent need for comprehensive strategies and international support to overcome these barriers.

The resilience of Yazidi women and girls highlights the stark gap between rights on paper and their application, particularly in the face of gender and religious discrimination. Their strength compels action — it's a moral imperative. As the Yazidi community, especially its most vulnerable members, work toward recovery, your support and advocacy is crucial.

Sincerely,

*Jamileh Naso*

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