

Escape from hell: Torture and sexual slavery in Islamic State captivity in Iraq

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SUMMARY

As they swept through large parts of northern Iraq, fighters with the armed group calling itself “Islamic State” (IS) [1] systematically targeted members of non-Arab and non-Sunni Muslim communities, as well as Sunni Muslims who oppose them. But even within the context of its persecution of minority groups and Shi’a Muslims, [2] the IS has singled out the Yezidi minority, [3] notably its women and children, for particularly brutal treatment. [4]

In August 2014, IS fighters abducted hundreds, possibly thousands, of Yezidi men, women and children who were fleeing the IS takeover from the Sinjar region, in the north-west of the country. Hundreds of the men were killed and others were forced to convert to Islam under threat of death. [5] Younger women and girls, some as young as 12, were separated from their parents and older relatives and sold, given as gifts or forced to marry IS fighters and supporters. Many have been subjected to torture and ill-treatment, including rape and other forms of sexual violence, and have likewise been pressured into converting to Islam.

Up to 300 of those abducted, mostly women and children, have managed to escape IS captivity, while the majority continue to be held in various locations in Iraq and in parts of Syria controlled by the IS. They are moved frequently from place to place. Some are able to communicate with their displaced relatives in areas outside IS control but the fate and whereabouts of others are not known.

Some of the women and girls who have escaped IS captivity, as well as some of those who remain captive, have given harrowing accounts to Amnesty International of the torture and abuses they have suffered.

Rape and other forms of torture and sexual violence, hostage taking, arbitrary deprivation of liberty and forcing persons to act against their religious beliefs constitute war crimes. Some of the violations and abuses documented in this report also constitute crimes against humanity, including torture, rape and sexual slavery. The IS continues to hold hundreds of captives, including children. Any party, in Iraq or outside, with influence over the IS should use that influence to secure the release of these captives and put an end to abductions, forced marriages, rape and other abuses. Those who have escaped or been released must be provided with adequate and timely medical care and support services.

METHODOLOGY

Between September and November 2014, an Amnesty International researcher in northern Iraq interviewed 42 women and girls who had escaped from the IS, and was able to contact four others, by phone, who remain in captivity. Amnesty International also interviewed scores of displaced Yezidis whose female relatives were or remain in IS captivity, Yezidi community leaders and activists, and medical and humanitarian workers. Several families have provided lists of names of their captive relatives, among them hundreds of women and girls.

Some names, places and other details which could lead to victims being identified have been changed or withheld for security and confidentiality reasons.

For the full report, go to:

[Torture and sexual slavery in Islamic State captivity in Iraq](#)

Footnotes

[1] Previously known as Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)

[2] Shi'a Muslims make up the majority of Iraq's population but were a minority in the areas which have been seized by the IS.

[3] Yezidis are ethnic Kurds who practice an ancient monotheistic religion, which has links to Zoroastrianism, a pre-Islamic religion which originated in the Persian Empire. They worship the "Peacock Angel", considered by some Muslims and followers of other religions as representing Satan and the reason why Yezidis have endured centuries of persecution on accusations of "devil worshipping". See for example: the Guardian article - available on ESSF (article 33927), [Northern Iraq: Who are the Yazidis and why is Isis hunting them?](#).

[4] For more details see:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/gruesome-evidence-ethnic-cleansing-northern-iraq-islamic-state-moves-wipe-out-minorities-2014-0>

and

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE14/011/2014/en/b3a0980f-ee7a-4554-b1ce-108e0a496440/mde140112014en.pdf>

[5] Yezidi men who manage to escape from IS captivity have told Amnesty International that they had been forced to convert to Islam under threat of death. Scores of Yezidi men who were captured on 3 August, when IS fighters stormed the Sinjar region, were shown converting to Islam in a video distributed on social media around 20 August, in which an IS commander says that those who do not want to convert can die of hunger and thirst "on the mountain" (a reference to Mount Sinjar, where Yezidi fighters and some civilians have been sheltering since 3 August, surrounded by IS fighters).