

# Ten Years On—This Yazidi Genocide Documentary Film Examines ISIS Atrocities | Opinion - **Newsweek**

By Bared Maronian and Jackie Abramian

Four-Time Emmy Award-Winning Documentary Filmmaker; Veteran Corporate Communications Strategist

"[ISIS](#) attacked us because they said we weren't true believers. They said we didn't believe in God—but that's just not true. We have our own faith, our way of worshiping the divine. It's different sure, but that doesn't make it wrong. They tried to erase us, force us to convert, to forget our language, everything that made us Yazidi, but they failed," said former Yazidi slave, Faiza Qasim, featured in a new documentary [10 YEARS ON: The Yazidi Genocide](#).

The documentary unwraps the 2014 ISIS genocide against Iraq's 400,000 Yazidi community in Sinjar—a religious community, indigenous to Mesopotamia since the 12th century. An episode of the [Faces of Persecution: Exploring Global Religious Oppressions](#) documentary mini-series, *10 YEARS ON* is a harrowing visual journey of ISIS executions of Yazidi men and boys and the enslavement of nearly 7,000 women and girls forcibly converted and transferred throughout Iraq and Syria. Profiling former slaves' courageous escapes, and unyielding religious belief honors the 2,700 Yazidi women still enslaved by ISIS.

Interviews with religious historians, regional experts, and activists including [Matthew Travis Barber](#) (University of Chicago), human rights lawyer [Knox Thames](#) (Pepperdine University, Author: *Ending Persecution*), [Mirza Dinnayi](#) (Luftbrücke Irak), and [Pastor William](#)

[Devlin](#) (Widows & Orphans Foundation) provide historical backdrops, reveal rare scenes of ISIS brutalities against tens of thousands of Yazidis trapped on 4,800-foot-high Mt. Sinjar, and unveils sacred Yazidi religious practices.



Hala Safil, former ISIS slave, kidnapped at 16, is among those featured in the recently released "10 YEARS ON: The Yazidi Genocide" documentary film. Photo Courtesy of Armenoid Productions

## **Life As ISIS Slaves**

Faiza Qasim, just 10 years old when enslaved by ISIS alongside her mother and younger brothers, was sold multiple times before escaping. Resettling in Canada, her life remains on hold as she cares for her ailing mother. In a heartbreaking return to her hometown of Hardan (Iraq) now in rubble, she found her family home, and relived lurid memories of the 15 abducted family members who remain missing.

"They enslaved me—the scars they left defined them not me. I'm still a Yazidi. My faith is what keeps me going. I won't be afraid to pray anymore. I'll raise my voice, tell the stories of my people to let everyone know that the Yazidi spirit can't be broken," Qasim affirmed visiting her Yazidi temple.

[Read more](#)

## Two Views, One Story

Deep conversations between people with completely different political and social perspectives.

Hala Safil, kidnapped at 16 and thrust into sexual slavery, detailed her harrowing escape after years of being raped, resold, and brutalized. Struggling to rebuild her life in a crowded Iraqi refugee camp, her spirits remain unbroken.

"Forty-five-year-old men raped 12-year-old girls in brutal ways and sold them to other ISIS men. When we asked [ISIS] why they were treating us like this—they said we were infidels," she said.

ISIS declared Yazidis "apostates" Knox Thames explained, because the Yazidi "system of beliefs and view of ever-after" is dissimilar to "other Abrahamic faiths." Matthew Travis Barber argued against such theological justifications, explaining that ISIS' true motivations—expanding strategic territorial control, seizing Yazidi wealth, and sexual selfishness—led to "mass sexual enslavement that involved the kidnapping of over three and a half thousand women and girls"

citing similar theological justifications by the Ottomans in prior centuries.

Barber, who was conducting research in Iraq as the genocide unfolded, witnessed Yazidis' desperate measures—as suicides and death by starvation ensued atop Mt. Sinjar. While the U.S. intervention prevented the worsening, geopolitical games against the empowered former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki's "despotic actions" delayed the intervention, Barber said.

Following Pastor Devlin's visit to northern Iraq refugee camps where hundreds of thousands of Yazidis remain trapped, revealed desperate living conditions. Providing prayers to the forgotten refugees, he urged the public to visit Yazidi refugee camps "desperately needing hope and love" to offer support and encouragement.

Air Bridge Iraq's co-founder and a 2019 [Aurora Prize for Awakening Humanity](#) Laureate, Mirza Dinnayi, detailed his death-defying helicopter rescues of Yazidis trapped on Mt. Sinjar. After surviving a crash and resettling over 1,000 victimized Yazidi women and children in Germany, he dedicated his \$1 million Aurora prize to build Sinjar's House of Co-Existence. Ironically, in 2023, the Aurora Prize co-founder Ruben Vardanyan—kidnapped and imprisoned by Azerbaijan amid an ethnic cleansing of 120,000 Indigenous Christian Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh)—is profiled in another episode, *GENOCIDE 2.0: [Artsakh Ethnic Cleansing](#)*.

Survivor Layima Hajee Bashar—enslaved at 15, sold four times, and blinded in one eye while fleeing, offered a heartbreaking speech accepting the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought award she

shared with survivor and future Nobel Peace Prize winner, Nadia Murad.

While the [Yazda Foundation](#) leads mass grave exhumation, 80 mass graves remain unexhumed, and two-thirds of Yazidis still live in camps as thousands linger in ISIS captivity—some believed to be among the 60,000 in Syria's al-Hol camp.

"If that is true, it is tragic that we've abandoned the victims with their victimizers in this camp and thrown away the key," said Knox Thames.

*10 YEARS ON: The Yazidi Genocide documentary, made possible with support from the [Cultural Impact Foundation](#) in collaboration with the Vahe Fattal Foundation, is distributed worldwide by Java Films. Organizations interested in educational/community screenings can contact: [jackie@globalcadence.org](mailto:jackie@globalcadence.org).*

*Bared Maronian is a four-time Emmy award-winning documentary filmmaker with over 20 years of broadcast, film, and multi-media production experience. He is the director/producer of the Faces of Persecution educational documentary mini-series.*

*Jackie Abramian is a veteran corporate communications strategist and a regular magazine contributor. She is the documentary's writer/producer.*

*This is their fourth documentary collaboration.*

*The views expressed in this article are the writers' own.*