

The Horror in Northern Iraq: The Islamic State's Targeting of Iraqi Minorities in Ninewa United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

12 November 2015 The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) released a report entitled 'Our Generation is Gone – The Islamic State's Targeting of Iraqi Minorities in Ninewa'. The report details findings from a trip to northern Iraq by staff from the USHMM's Simon Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide in September 2015, when they gathered evidence of crimes committed by ISIL from June to August 2014. Among the key findings of the report is that ISIL committed crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing and war crimes against Christian, Yezidi, Turkmen, Shabak, Sabaeen-Mandaeen and Kaka'i people in Ninewa province between June and August 2014. Furthermore, the researchers concluded ISIL perpetrated genocide against the Yezidi people and continues to do so.

"In the summer of 2014, the self-proclaimed Islamic State carried out a violent campaign against civilians in Ninewa province in northern Iraq, home to many of Iraq's ethnic and religious minorities. As the Islamic State (IS), known locally as Daesh, and affiliated groups attacked cities, towns, and villages, they forced more than 800,000 people from their homes and deliberately destroyed shrines, temples, and churches. They also kidnapped thousands and killed hundreds, likely thousands, of people. In less than three months, IS decimated millennia-old communities and irrevocably tore the social fabric of the once-diverse region. Now almost no members of the minority groups IS attacked live in Ninewa province. Though the speed at which IS expanded shocked most people, the widespread and systematic attacks on ethnic and religious minorities should come as no surprise. Minority communities in Iraq were particularly vulnerable to mass atrocities. Early warning of the risks they faced existed, yet neither the Iraqi nor foreign governments appear to have made preventing atrocities and protecting these communities a priority.

In September 2015, the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide undertook a Bearing Witness trip to northern Iraq to learn about the atrocities that had occurred there, assess the current situation, and understand the future risks to ethnic and religious minorities and other civilians in the region. IS has perpetrated atrocities against Sunni, Shia, and non-Muslims throughout Iraq. Atrocities have increased following its seizure of the city of Fallujah in Anbar province in January 2014 and subsequent capture of other parts of Iraq. This report focuses, however, on the unique experiences of ethnic and religious minorities living in Ninewa, including Christian, Yezidi, Turkmen, Shabak, Sabaeen-Mandaeen, and Kaka'i populations, specifically from June to August 2014.

We found on our Bearing Witness trip that IS targeted civilians based on group identity, committing mass atrocities to control, expel, and exterminate ethnic and religious minorities in areas it seized and sought to hold. IS committed crimes against humanity, war crimes, and ethnic cleansing against the aforementioned communities in Ninewa. We also assert that IS perpetrated genocide against the Yezidi people. It is critical to underscore that crimes continue to be perpetrated against the men, women, and children whom IS kidnapped and still holds.

This report also stresses that there is an urgent need for more coordinated and deliberate physical protection of at-risk populations to address the ongoing risk of further atrocities and genocide. Currently, hundreds of thousands of people face prolonged displacement. Any efforts to liberate lands and return populations must be accompanied by the provision of genuine physical protection to all at-risk communities. This includes Sunni Arab populations in areas currently occupied by IS, who may face a risk of reprisal killings and displacement in the course of efforts to liberate those territories. In addition, long-term strategies should be developed to prevent a recurrence of mass atrocities. The response to the threat posed by IS and affiliated groups must be anchored in the prevention of and protection of civilians from new atrocities. This is true for Ninewa, and for all of Iraq.

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The Cycle of Atrocities in Iraq (2003–2013)

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Each of the individuals we spoke with stressed that all Iraqis, irrespective of religious or ethnic background, have faced and continue to face serious security threats. They attributed this to a number of factors, including (a) the extreme fragility of the state; (b) sectarianism on the part of the government, which most saw as Shia-aligned; (c) the absence of the rule of law; (d) a rampant culture of impunity; and (e) the weakness, corruption, and sectarianism of the state security forces.

The majority of those interviewed traced the rapid deterioration of the security situation throughout the country to the 2003 US-led coalition's overthrow of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and his Sunni-dominated Baathist party government. The disbanding of Iraqi security forces and the removal of Baathist party members from Iraqi civil and military service created a security vacuum, while infighting between the post-Hussein Shia-aligned government and Sunni political actors exacerbated existing tensions between Shia and Sunni communities. Persecution, impunity, and distrust between communities created a breeding ground where extremists could thrive, including an earlier iteration of IS, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). This created a deadly dynamic that fed the commission of sectarian atrocities across Iraq during this period.

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Early Warning of the Risk of Mass Atrocities Facing Minorities in Ninewa

Though it may have been difficult to anticipate how swiftly IS would move through Ninewa, many people we interviewed said that the long-standing risks extremist groups posed to ethnic and religious minorities in the region were known. Given the gravity of the crimes that occurred in Ninewa between June and August 2014 and the failure to prevent them, we sought as part of the Bearing Witness trip to better understand the dynamics that should have informed early warning and early action.

Since 2003, an abundance of information emerged that— if properly discerned—could have prompted a more concerted discussion of options for early prevention and response. First, there was a pattern of mass atrocities perpetrated by both Sunni and Shia extremists since 2003 against minorities in Iraq. This suggested that minorities faced a heightened risk and revealed that they had few protective strategies— neither self-defense nor from external actors. Flight was their only option. Second, threatened communities in Ninewa faced a strong Sunni extremist presence in the region as well as confusion over the provision of protection for minorities by Iraqi and Kurdish regional authorities. Third, IS was active in Ninewa prior to its campaign in June 2014 and had expressed expansionist aspirations and a predatory stance toward minority groups, among others. It is difficult to know whether identifying and acting upon even one of the early warning signs would have had a mitigating effect on the ensuing violence against minorities, but delayed action surely allowed the circumstances for future violence to emerge.

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The Islamic State's Path of Devastation (June–August 2014)

The consequences of the failure to act on early warning signs of the risk of mass atrocities facing Ninewa's minority communities were shared with us in the tents, caravans, makeshift

shelters, and houses we visited. Irrespective of their religious or ethnic identity, many of the displaced persons whom we spoke to offered similar accounts of their fear of IS, the desperation they felt in fleeing, and their dismay at the failure of local, national, and international actors to protect them in advance of the onslaught.

Almost every person we interviewed told us that the Iraqi security forces and the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga failed to protect them from IS. The vast majority of those we interviewed (excluding those from Mosul) fled only after they realized that security forces were no longer present to protect them, as both forces retreated without warning local populations. This meant that some people had only minutes to flee IS's mortar attacks and fighters. A deep frustration toward, and distrust of, these security forces abounded.

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Genocide against the Yezidi

Based upon the public record and private eyewitness accounts, we believe the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) perpetrated crimes against humanity (right), war crimes, and ethnic cleansing against Christian, Yezidi, Turkmen, Shabak, Sabaeen-Mandaeen, and Kaka'i people in Ninewa province between June and August 2014. In our interviews, we heard accounts of the forcible transfer of populations, severe deprivation of physical liberty, rape, sexual slavery, enslavement, and murder perpetrated in a widespread and systematic manner that indicates a deliberate plan to target religious and ethnic minorities.¹³ Some specific communities— notably the Yezidi, but also Shia Shabak and Shia Turkman— were targeted for attack.

Our findings also suggest there is sufficient reason to assert that in addition to committing crimes against humanity and war crimes, IS perpetrated genocide against the Yezidi population living in Ninewa in August 2014.¹⁴ The determination of genocide against the Yezidi population is based on a preponderance of the evidence, and does not reflect the standard necessary for individual criminal responsibility. Any formal determination that genocide was perpetrated needs to be made by a court and based on careful consideration of the evidence.

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The Risk of Atrocities in Ninewa Remains

The self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) continues to present a serious threat to civilians. Those members of minority groups who were kidnapped and remain under IS control continue to be the victims of mass atrocities. Despite international efforts to degrade IS, the group is still able to hold territory, terrorize the primarily Sunni populations it controls, and will continue to pose an existential threat to minorities who seek to return to their homes.

Minorities cannot return to their homes in Ninewa unless their land is liberated. There appears to be considerable belief on the ground, matched increasingly within states that are part of the counter-IS coalition, that the liberation of Mosul and other IS-held territory needs to be a core goal of both local and international counter-IS efforts. IDPs whom we interviewed similarly stated that if given the choice to return home or go abroad, they would prefer to go home so long as their physical protection is guaranteed. IDPs who try to return before liberation may be forced to convert, and those who refuse to convert will likely face death. It is unknown whether

Christians who were given the option to pay a jizya or leave, instead of convert or face death, would still be given this option should they return now.

When minorities do return home, they must be provided with genuine physical protection. Given the chronic instability in Iraq and the presence of extremists groups, these communities again may become the targets of mass atrocities. It is unclear whether any governmental authority has the capacity and the sustained political will to protect them. Hence, the vast majority of the Christians and Yezidis who we spoke to said that they would only feel safe enough to return if there was an international protection force deployed to protect them.

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The Way Forward: Protecting Civilians and Improving Accountability

IS has perpetrated mass atrocities against Iraqi civilians, especially minority communities, in accordance with its extremist ideology and to advance its strategic objectives as it has established and consolidated control over territory in northern Iraq. Atrocities likely will continue within areas under its control and as the group works to expand its territory.

Counter-IS efforts also may pose risks to civilians. The commission of gross human rights violations and atrocities by local security forces in the course of counter-IS actions would undermine efforts to counter IS and tackle sectarianism.

In the absence of accountable and effective security afforded by the state, there will continue to be a proliferation of armed actors, each advancing its own interests and often preying on local populations.

Protecting Iraqi civilians from atrocities requires the full will of all local, national, regional, and international actors involved in counter-IS efforts. Protection of civilians has not to date been their principal focus. Even as those actors work toward short-term objectives of degrading the group's operations and reclaiming territory currently under its control, longterm risks of continued atrocities against civilians remain.”

Click [here](#) to read the report in full.