



*"Nadia Murad, a human rights activist and survivor, delivers remarks" by US Dept of State, U.S. Government Works/cropped & re-sized from original*

## The First Nobel and the Last Girl: Nadia Murad's Quest for Justice

### Vision and Motivation

By most standards, the village of Kocho is a small and out-of-the-way place. Close to the isolated outcropping of Mount Sinjar in Iraq's northwest, it was home to approximately 2,000 members of the Yazidi minority. Living simple and largely rural lives, the first school was only built in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Yet, despite its backwater appearance, Kocho was Nadia Murad's whole world. Life was hard, but happy, and simple life in a close-knit village community meant she never wanted to live anywhere else. "I loved my village so much that when I was a child, my favorite game involved creating a miniature Kocho out of discarded boxes and bits of trash," she would later recount. Most importantly, Kocho was where her family was.<sup>2</sup> Even

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1- Murad, Nadia. *The Last Girl, My Story of Captivity, and My Fight Against the Islamic State*. New York, NY: Tim Duggan Books, 2017. Google Play Ebook. p. 37

2- Ibid. p31.

as other parts of Iraq descended into violence and insurgency, Nadia's world and aspirations remained in the yet-untouched tranquility of her village.

In August 2014, that world would be utterly destroyed. As the advancing forces of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, known regionally as Daesh, swept through northern Iraq, their barbaric and violent ideology singled out the Yazidis for persecution. Within days of their occupation, Daesh began a series of systematic abuses of the worst possible kind. Yazidi men and boys over twelve years old were forcibly converted to Islam or systematically murdered, often en masse with their bodies callously left in situ.<sup>3</sup> Women and girls were openly sold as sex slaves, or *sabaya*, and subject to terrible abuse and sexual assault, while several older women were exterminated, like the men, in a mass killing.<sup>4</sup> Caught in this whirlwind of trauma was Nadia. She lost her mother and six of her brothers, and she was sold into slavery as a *sabaya*.<sup>5</sup> Her first attempt at escape was punished with a gang-rape of exceptional cruelty, and things got no better from there. Her old life, her freedom, and her joy had gone. She'd been subjected to the worst of what a human being should endure.

At some point, there was rape and nothing else. This becomes your normal day.... You stop thinking about escaping or seeing your family again. Your past life becomes a distant memory, like a dream. Your body doesn't belong to you, and there's no energy to talk or to fight or to think about the world outside. There is only rape and the numbness that comes with accepting that this is now your life.<sup>6</sup>

Miraculously, her second escape attempt would succeed. Though Nadia found safety, she found little solace and less purpose. Like other survivors, the bonds of family and village life had been their lives, and the holes their absence left behind made it difficult to think about the future. "Yazidi girls were going to have very different lives from what we had imagined as children. We weren't looking for happiness, just to survive and, if we could, to do something meaningful with the lives we had been so randomly allowed to keep."<sup>7</sup> Previously, Nadia had imagined becoming a teacher or owning a hair salon. Now, a chance meeting with the NGO Yazda would drive her to seek justice for the wrongs she and her community had suffered. "[When I learned] about Yazda and the work they were doing – particularly

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3- United Nations Human Rights Council. "“They came to destroy”: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis\*”. UN HRC, 33rd sess, Agenda Item 4, Un Doc A/HRC/32/CRP.2 (15 June, 2016). pp. 8-9 [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A\\_HRC\\_32\\_CRP.2\\_en.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf)

4- Ibid. pp. 9-16

5- "Nadia Murad Basee Taha (ISIL victim) on Trafficking of persons in situations of conflict - Security Council, 7585th meeting". *UN Web Tv*, 16 Dec 2015, <http://webtv.un.org/meetings-events/security-council/watch/nadia-murad-basee-taha-isil-victim-on-trafficking-of-persons-in-situations-of-conflict-security-council-7585th-meeting/4665835954001?sort=popular&page=2?lan=russian>

6- Murad 2017a. p.193

7- Ibid. p.303

helping to free and then advocate for women and girls who had been enslaved by ISIS – I could see my future more clearly...I wanted to be just like them”.<sup>8</sup> This vision of justice: for her people, for victims of genocide and sexual violence, and for a safe and bright future all come down to one motivation- “I want to be the last girl in the world with a story like mine.”<sup>9</sup>

### Goals and Objectives

To a large extent, Nadia’s goals reflect those of the broader Yazidi community: a recognition of the genocide they endured, justice, and a safe return home.<sup>10</sup> To that end, Nadia has spoken in more than two dozen countries to thousands of people, including politicians, diplomats, film makers, and journalists.<sup>11</sup> Yazda, the NGO with which she is closely associated, has supported her advocacy work and that of other survivors whilst conducting genocide documentation work, among other projects.<sup>12</sup> These efforts have already yielded some tangible results. In 2016, the United Nations published its report outlining the genocidal actions of Daesh against the Yazidi population. Recognitions of genocide have also come from the governments of the United States, Canada, the European Union and more.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, various countries have taken in more Yazidi refugees and talks of a safe zone for religious minorities in Iraq have renewed momentum.<sup>14</sup> Beyond yielding genocide recognition, Nadia’s activism also aims to instill an intrinsic valuing of pluralism in society. “Yazidism should be taught in schools from Iraq to the United States, so that people understood the value of preserving an ancient religion and protecting the people who follow it, no matter how small the community. Yazidis, along with other religious and ethnic minorities, are what once made Iraq a great country.”<sup>15</sup>

Following on from recognition of the crime, the next objective is prosecution. For Nadia, this would not be an exercise of vengeful retribution, but a procedural exercise of international human rights law where all Daesh criminals would be

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8- Ibid. p.309

9- Ibid. p.313

10- Guest, Robert. “Nadia Murad’s fight to bring the Islamic State to justice.” *1843*, Feb/March 2017. <https://www.1843magazine.com/features/nadia-murads-fight-to-bring-islamic-state-to-justice>

11- Chick, Kristen. “Reluctant champion: How Nadia Murad has become the international face of Yazidi suffering - and resilience.” *Christian Science Monitor*, 24 Sept. 2017. <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2017/0924/Reluctant-champion-How-Nadia-Murad-has-become-the-international-face-of-Yazidi-suffering-and-resilience>; Murad 2017. p.310

12- “Documentation Project.” *Yazda*. <https://www.yazda.org/documentation-project>

13- “Global Advocacy.” *Yazda*. <https://www.yazda.org/news/categories/advocacy>

14- Murad 2017a. p.311

15- Ibid. p.307

judged. “They should all be put on trial before the entire world, like the Nazi leaders after World War II, and not given the chance to hide.”<sup>16</sup> In this arena progress is slow but not inert. In 2017, the UN Security Council unanimously passed a resolution to pursue accountability for the atrocities Daesh committed in Iraq, cooperating with and reinforcing Iraq’s own criminal proceedings.<sup>17</sup> Successful prosecution could very well entail capital punishment, but for her own captor, Nadia does not envision prosecution ending in execution. Like educating the world on the importance of pluralism, her goal is for him “to remember what he did to me and understand this is why he will never be free again.”<sup>18</sup>

## Leadership

Nadia is only one of many Yazidi women Daesh forced to endure abuse and torture, and by her admission many suffered worse than she did.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, she stands out as a leader for her personal resolve and the strength of character she displays in the telling, and continual re-telling, of her story. The international attention and praise that telling her personal story has brought was never something she sought out or desired, “but it just got bigger and bigger...And the bigger it gets, the more tired I become.”<sup>20</sup> By taking it upon herself to speak for her fellow survivors, she is forced to relive the horror and delay her own healing. In one 2016 interview, she calmly recounted her harrowing ordeal until the interview finished, but broke down shortly afterwards, saying “I swear to God we are all so tired.”<sup>21</sup> Even before her international exposure, her willingness to be a leader and stand up for truth and justice were evident. As Daesh led her village to execution, she couldn’t contain her indignation and ran up as close as she could to a militant to spit on him.<sup>22</sup> Later, after her escape, she back-talked to the Kurdish farmer she and other refugees were working for, unafraid to blame the withdrawing Peshmerga he was praising for leaving the Yazidis at Daesh’s mercy. Though it lost all the Yazidis their jobs at the farm, the fact that she was honest “from the beginning” reflected well on her in the camp.<sup>23</sup>

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16- Ibid. p.149

17- Kaufman, Zachary D. “New UN Team Investigating ISIS Atrocities Raises Questions About Justice in Iraq and Beyond.” *Just Security*, 28 Sept. 2017. <https://www.justsecurity.org/45411/expect-team-investigating-isis-atrocities-iraq/>

18- Murad 2017. p.184

19- Murad, Nadia. “Outraged by the Attack on Yazidis? It Is Time to Help.” *New York Times*, 10 Feb. 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/10/opinion/sunday/yazidis-islamic-state-rape-genocide.html>

20- Chick

21- Ibid

22- Murad 2017a. p.100

23- Ibid. pp. 289-290

Apart from leading by the example of her admirable personal qualities, Nadia is the leader and founder of her own nonprofit organization, Nadia's Initiative. The organization's mission is to advocate for vulnerable women and minorities and to assist in stabilizing and redeveloping communities in crisis.<sup>24</sup> Starting at home with the Sinjar Action Fund project, Nadia's Initiative is a leading actor in helping Yazidis return to their ancestral homes as soon as possible.

### Civic Environment

Like virtually all genocides, the campaign by Daesh against the Yazidis fed off a reservoir of long-standing and widespread prejudice, mistrust, and animosity held by the local Muslim majority that the post-2003 violence in Iraq helped tip over into overt violence. Historically, the Iraqi education system instilled practically no valuing of minorities, being more concerned with 'Arabizing' them instead of celebrating their differences.<sup>25</sup> As Nadia puts it, "[n]o one who had been through an Iraqi school would think that we deserved to have our religion protected."<sup>26</sup> Although they share a history of persecution with other ancient Iraqi minorities such as Christians, Jews, and Mandeans, Yazidis have often been singled out for particular vilification as so-called 'devil worshippers,' a label stemming from a misinterpretation of the story of Tawusi Melek, a central figure of Yazidi reverence. The story of this chief angel's defiance of God has been erroneously conflated with that of Satan/Iblis by locals and westerners alike.<sup>27</sup> As late as 2007, articles could be found in well-regarded western media outlets which all but said Yazidis were in fact devil worshippers.<sup>28</sup> Daesh would later draw on this 'devil-worshiper' narrative to justify the worst excesses of Yazidi mistreatment, from forced conversion to sexual slavery and extermination. Placing them even below other minorities, the Daesh publication *Dabiq* would label Yazidism "so deviant from the truth that even cross-worshipping Christians for ages considered them devil-worshippers and Satanists."<sup>29</sup>

Before 2014, Yazidi historical memory already recorded seventy-three pogrom-style attacks, called *firman*, conducted by outside powers attempting to destroy

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24- "Our Mission." *Nadia's Initiative*. <https://nadiasinitiative.org/about/>

25- van Zoonen, Dave & Wiry, Khogir. "The Yazidis, Perceptions of Reconciliation and Conflict." *Middle East Research Institute*. Pp. 8-9. <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Yazidis-Perceptions-of-Reconciliation-and-Conflict-Report.pdf>

26- Murad 2017a p. 37

27- Ibid. pp. 34-35; Allison, Christine. "YAZIDIS i. GENERAL," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2004. <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/yazidis-i-general-1>

28- Thomas, Sean. "The Devil worshippers of Iraq." *The Telegraph*, 19 Aug. 2017. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1560714/The-Devil-worshippers-of-Iraq.html>

29- Un Doc A/HRC/32/CRP.2 (15 June, 2016). p. 30 [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HR-Council/ColSyria/A\\_HRC\\_32\\_CRP.2\\_en.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HR-Council/ColSyria/A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf)

them.<sup>30</sup> The increased sectarian violence that followed the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime also foreshadowed increased hostility towards the Yazidis. In particular, the 2007 killing of Yazidi Du'a Khalil Aswad by her family, allegedly for having attempted to convert to Islam and marry a Muslim, was a catalyst for major reprisals against the wider community, with propaganda exhorting violence against the 'infidel' Yazidis mirroring that which Daesh would produce years later.<sup>31</sup> Many local Sunnis would then go on to collaborate with Daesh in the genocide. According to Nadia, the local Sunnis around Kocho "welcomed ISIS with an open arm at one o'clock".<sup>32</sup> At the same time, exceptions must be noted; the Sunni family that helped and sheltered Nadia after she escaped Daesh being an outstanding example. Nevertheless, even after the expulsion of Daesh, many Yazidis remain afraid: afraid of the Muslims they share the refugee camps with, and afraid to return home.<sup>33</sup> Yazidis are furthermore caught in a political tug-of-war between central government in Baghdad and the regional Kurdish government in Erbil, lending still more uncertainty to their future.<sup>34</sup>

### Message and Audience

As she travels the world relaying her story, Nadia's message reflects the advancement of her intended goals: justice and dignity for victims, peace and security for survivors. "We must remain committed to rebuilding communities ravaged by genocide. Survivors deserve a safe and secure pathway home or safe passage elsewhere".<sup>35</sup> Her message echoes that of the wider Yazidi community, addressed both to international political bodies and those back home in Iraq. "Either we get protection and we get our rights back, or we will become refugees and immigrate."<sup>36</sup> Justice is an essential first step, since with justice Yazidis can return to their homes "with trust."<sup>37</sup> While her immediate concern is her own community, Nadia's messages of justice and peace extend further. Her statement upon winning the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize appeals to a long-term commitment to better the lives of the vulnerable. "We must not only imagine a better future for women, children and persecuted minorities, we must work consistently to make it happen - prioritizing

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30- Murad 2017a. p.13

31- Ibid. pp. 54-56

32- "Overcome with grief, Nadia Murad, ISIS survivor, returns to hometown." *Rudaw*, 1 June, 2017. <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/010620173>

33- Bacchi, Umberto. "Yazidi survivor hopes Nobel Prize puts spotlight back on her people." *Reuters*, 5 Oct. 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nobel-prize-peace-yazidi/yazidi-survivor-hopes-nobel-prize-puts-spotlight-back-on-her-people-idUSKCN1MF254>; Guest

34- van Zoonen & Wirya. pp. 11-12

35- Umberto

36- Chick

37- Rudaw

humanity, not war.”<sup>38</sup> Telling her story is part of her message, and while she makes it clear that it never gets easier to do so, it is the best way to move justice forward.

My story, told honestly and matter-of-factly, is the best weapon I have against terrorism, and I plan on using it until those terrorists are put on trial. There is still so much that needs to be done. World leaders and particularly Muslim religious leaders need to stand up and protect the oppressed.<sup>39</sup>

Audience reception to Nadia’s message has been almost universally positive. Her courage and activism have been praised around the world and among her own community. She has remained staunchly nonpolitical, even as her increasing fame and influence have made this more difficult to maintain.<sup>40</sup> Concerns have been raised regarding a tendency for some foreign media to focus on the sex-slave aspect of her story, to the detriment of her broader message.<sup>41</sup>

### Outreach Activities

It was initially with the help of Yazda that Nadia was able to tell her story to the world. As Nadia explained, she had encountered an activist at the refugee camp who, “after listening to my story, wondered if I would feel comfortable going to the U.K. to tell officials what had happened to me. I said yes, not knowing how much that one trip would change my life.”<sup>42</sup> Since then, Nadia’s public outreach has brought her story and that of the Yazidis to wider prominence, and it has garnered increasing recognition. In 2016 alone, she was listed as one of *Time*’s Most Influential People of 2016, became a *Glamour* Woman of the Year Honoree, was made a UN goodwill ambassador for the dignity of survivors of human trafficking, and won both the Vaclav Havel Award for Human Rights and the Sakharov Prize.<sup>43</sup>

38- “TEXT-Yazidi activist Nadia Murad on receiving the Nobel Peace Prize.” *Reuters*, 5 Oct. 2018. <https://af.reuters.com/article/commoditiesNews/idAFL8N1WL44S>

39- Murad 2017a. p.313

40- Chick

41- Whyte, Lara. “Nadia Murad may have won the Nobel peace prize, but the world failed her Yazidi people.” *oD 50.50*, 10 Oct. 2018.

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/lara-whyte/nadia-murad-won-nobel-world-failed-her-yazidi-people>

42- Murad 2017a. p.304

43- Enslar, Eve. “Nadia Murad.” *Time*, 21 Apr. 2016. <http://time.com/collection-post/4302382/nadia-murad-2016-time-100/>; Griswold, Eliza. “Meet Nadia Murad, the Woman of the Year Honoree Standing up to ISIS.” *Glamour*, 1 Nov. 2016. <https://www.glamour.com/story/women-of-the-year-nadia-murad/>; Haynes, Suyin. “Nadia Murad, Survivor of ISIS Atrocities, Named U.N. Goodwill Ambassador.” *Time*, 16 Sept. 2016. <http://time.com/4496933/nadia-murad-united-nations-goodwill-ambassador/>; “Yazidi survivor Nadia Murad wins human rights award.” *BBC*, 11 Oct. 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37617599>;

Iraqi Yazidi activists Nadia Murad and Lamiya Aji Bashar receive 2016 Sakharov Prize.” *European Parliament*, 13 Dec. 2016.

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/world/20161209STO55334/iraqi-yazidi-activists-nadia-murad-and-lamiya-aji-bashar-receive-sakharov-prize>

In 2017, she published her memoir entitled *The Last Girl*, which went on to be a bestseller. In 2018, she became the co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, becoming the first Iraqi to win a Nobel Prize in any category. A documentary film centered around her story, titled *On Her Shoulders*, was released in October.<sup>44</sup>

With respect to ensuring Daesh is held accountable for its crimes, one of Nadia's most significant outreach activities has been through the law. Together with Yazda, she successfully reached out to prominent human rights lawyer Amal Clooney, who agreed to take her case. She went on to bring much needed legal assistance and publicity to Nadia's cause during a year-long advocacy campaign. Apart from representing Nadia and other survivors, Clooney and her team have also helped gather evidence of atrocities, met with Iraqi and international leaders, gave speeches, provided legal analysis, and are working with national prosecutors to bring Daesh members to trial.<sup>45</sup>

Nadia's quest for justice and peace continues, and she remains entirely committed, pledging both her Nobel prize money and proceeds from her memoir to support her initiatives of helping survivors and pushing for accountability for Daesh crimes.<sup>46</sup> Though there is much that still needs to be done, her successes so far have been extraordinary.

Genocide, rape, slavery: to endure all three is a rare misfortune.

To selflessly fight to end them all is a singular inspiration.

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44- Underwood, Alexia. "Nadia Murad, a Yazidi woman who was captured by ISIS, just won the Nobel Peace Prize." *Vox*, 5 Oct. 2015.

<https://www.vox.com/2018/10/5/17941012/nadia-murad-nobel-peace-prize-denis-mukwege-yazidi-activist>

45- "Barrister Amal Clooney." *Yazda*. <https://www.yazda.org/amal-clooney>; Clooney, Amal, in Murad 2017a. p. 5

46- Chick; Deck, Jerica. "Nadia Murad Is Using 100% of Her Nobel Peace Prize Money to Fight Sex Trafficking." *Global Citizen*, 11 Oct. 2018.

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