



Breaking the Chains: Nadia Murad's Journey from Captivity to Crusade in *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity and My Fight Against the Islamic State*

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Abstract— *The present study examines Nadia Murad's insightful memoir, providing a comprehensive examination of her dramatic transformation from the confines of captivity to the vanguard of an international campaign against sexual assault and genocide. The tale told by Murad is a poignant illustration of both the horrors carried out by the Islamic State on the Yazidi population and the tenacity of the human spirit. This study delves into the themes of identification, activism, and resilience. It illuminates how Murad's personal story goes beyond individual suffering to reflect the collective agony and unwavering strength of the Yazidis. It also explores Murad's journey from victim to activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner, highlighting her contribution to drawing attention to the Yazidi massacre and promoting justice on a global scale. This discusses the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and human rights while revealing the larger significance of Murad's struggle through an analysis of her moving narrative. In the end, it is analysed as a story of bravery and survival as well as a call to action, imploring the world community to recognize and alleviate the continued suffering of the Yazidis and other persecuted minorities across the globe.*



Keywords— *Nadia Murad, Genocide, Islamic State, Yazidis Massacre,*

Nadia Murad, a Yazidi from the small village of Kocho in northern Iraq, embodies resilience and hope. Her autobiography, *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity, and My Fight Against the Islamic State*, published in 2017, recounts her harrowing experiences. Captured by ISIS militants, Nadia endured unspeakable horrors, including brutal assault and repeated violation. Her narrative, delivered in a reflective first-person voice, vividly describes the savage attacks on her village by ISIS, the torture and murder of her people, and the systematic abuse she and other women and girls suffered. In an interview with UNODC Goodwill Ambassador, Nadia recalls:

How could people commit such horrible crimes against each other?" As a young girl, I had humble ambitions – to finish high school, stay with my family and open a beauty salon in our village. But

my dream quickly became a nightmare. (United Nation, Webstories, 2020)

Despite these atrocities, Nadia's story is ultimately one of courage and escape, culminating in her journey to safety in Germany. Her life and words serve as a beacon of empowerment and advocacy for women and girls subjected to the cruelties of the Islamic State.

Yazidis are a distinct group that mostly practice endogamy and speak Kurmanji when speaking, setting them apart as a non-Muslim minority with strong roots in the Kurdish regions. Their ancestral homeland is spread across parts of Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq. Presently, they mostly inhabit the contested northern parts of Iraq in the Middle East. The meaning of the term 'Yazidi' is 'the servant of the creator,' reflecting their deep spiritual affinity. This community maintains unique religious rituals

and beliefs, a rich legacy that has been painstakingly passed down through the years.

The story follows the Yazidi community's migration to Kocho, starting in the 1950s when the first families made their way among Mosul landlords and Sunni Arab farmers in the area. In order to expedite their purchase of property and secure a long-term ownership in the land, these forward-thinking Yazidi families hired a reputable Muslim attorney. The Yazidis prospered at Kocho, building sturdy shelters to shield their families from the harshness of the desert and providing a plenty of grass for their cattle. Though they lived close to Sunni Muslims on the southern edge of Iraq, the fertile soil allowed them to cultivate, yet there were perils associated with that position. Since ancient times, Muslims have persecuted the Yazidis for their theological convictions. They are frequently called "kuffar," or unbelievers, and suffer the consequences of this name.

In her memoir, Nadia unfolds the vast eternity of her childhood which was like a calm springtime in the West. She was a student who enjoyed the small things in life. Despite her difficulties with English, she had a special affection for history, a subject in which her intelligence frequently showed through. Beyond her schooling, Nadia had dreams of becoming an entrepreneur and starting a beauty shop. Sadly, the start of the Iraqi civil war put a shadow over her intentions, causing a dramatic change in her life's trajectory.

The testimony records that at the tender age of 19, while residing in Kocho, Nadia's life was irrevocably altered. The Islamic State militants orchestrated a vicious assault on the Yazidi community in her village, resulting in the tragic loss of 600 lives, including six of Nadia's brothers and stepbrothers. During this tumultuous period, Nadia, along with other young women, was subjected to the unspeakable horrors perpetrated by Abu Batat, a commander of the militants. Despite her belief in the sanctity of Muslim principles and her appeal for compassion, Nadia's plea was met with utter disdain and brutality by the commander when he snapped at her and said:

I don't know what you thought we had taken you for. But you have no choice. You are here to be sabaya, and you will do exactly what we say." It was the first time I had heard the Arabic word applied to me. When ISIS took over Sinjar and began kidnap-ping Yazidis, they called their human spoils sabaya [sabiyya is singular], referring to the young women

they would buy and sell as sex slaves. (Murad 122-23)

ISIS has persistently denigrated the Yazidi faith, branding them as "devil worshippers" and imposing a brutal ultimatum: convert to Islam or face death. The group maligns the Yazidis, criticizing their sun worship and labeling them as pagans. Contrasting with the Yazidi belief in reincarnation—a belief that provides solace in times of loss and strengthens familial bonds—such a concept is not recognized within Islam. In this framework, Nadia's powerful testimony not only sheds light on the true essence of the Yazidi faith but also vividly depicts the stark condemnation and harsh misconceptions perpetuated by ISIS, shedding light on the reasons behind the wrongful portrayal of Yazidis as "devil worshippers."

Her narrative shows how ISIS militants suffocate women. She remembers how the Yazidi women were confined to a single room in their camps. They were housed like cattle in a shed, and the heat was oppressive. She also remembers the training that the young lads underwent. During the course of several weeks, the instructors tried to indoctrinate students and destroy their Yazidi identity. The kids were given new names, made to stand at checkpoints, exposed to violent content, and trained to handle live weapons. The kids were allegedly threatened with rape and flogging if they disobeyed the instructions. In this context, the words of an anonymous 17 years old captive are well quoted when she said:

We were registered. ISIS took our names, ages, where we came from and whether we were married or not. After that, ISIS fighters would come to select girls to go with them. The youngest girl I saw them take was about 9 years old. One girl told me that "if they try to take you, it is better that you kill yourself". (<https://www.ohchr.org/>)

Nadia's narrative also sheds light on the harrowing moments she endured under Hajji Salman, who took her as a sabiyya, or sex slave, a disturbing practice among ISIS militants. These militants, notoriously recognized as a terrorist organization, forcibly married Yazidi girls, exploiting them in a grotesque display of sexual violence and dominance over young, innocent victims. Her account includes a chilling episode where Judge Husayn, noted for his stern demeanor, formalized her forced marriage to Hajji Salman. The ceremony demanded Nadia to remove her niqab, reveal her face, and recite the "Shahada," marking her coerced conversion to Islam—a ritual aimed at demonstrating the convert's allegiance. This act by Judge Husayn not only symbolized ISIS's perceived victory over the Yazidi community but

also underscored the deep-seated patriarchal oppression faced by Yazidi women. In her story, Nadia painstakingly details the relentless suffering, harassment, and molestation she endured during her time in captivity, painting a vivid picture of the unspeakable atrocities committed by ISIS militants. She notes down:

With the “marriage” ISIS continued their slow murder of Yazidi girls. First they took us from our homes and killed our men. Then they separated us from our mothers and sisters. Wherever we were, they reminded us that we were just property, there to be touched and abused, the way Abu Batat squeezed my breast as if he wanted to break it or Nafah put cigarette out on body. All of these violations were steps in the execution of our souls. Taking our religion from us was the cruelest ... who was I if I wasn't Yazidi? I hoped that God knew that even I recite shadada, I didn't mean it. As long as my soul, murdered by ISIS, could be in the afterlife with God and Tawusi Melek, then ISIS could have my body. (Murad 151)

Nadia further sheds light on the most brutal ordeal she faced at the hands of Hajji Salman and his associates. She vividly describes a horrific incident where she was subjected to the inhumane act of gang rape by six militants, including Morteja, Yahya, Hossam, and three others. The brutality of the assault was so severe that it left Nadia unconscious, a stark testament to the unimaginable cruelty inflicted upon her. Subsequently, in a dehumanizing act reminiscent of a transaction, Salman callously 'sold' Nadia, treating her not as a human being but as an object to be traded among militants. In this environment of relentless torment, every member of the Islamic State exhibited extreme cruelty towards Nadia. Yet, within this context of pervasive brutality, Hajji Salman's actions stood out for their particular viciousness and degradation, marking him as the embodiment of the most severe and deplorable abuse. She pens down this situation by saying:

Hajji Salman was the worst, in the part because he was the first to rape me and in part because he acted the most like he hated me. He hit me if I tried to close my eyes. For him, it was not enough just to rape me – he humiliated me as often he could, spreading honey on his toes and

making me lick it off or forcing me to dress up for him. (Murad 185)

Nadia's testimony skillfully intertwines her personal narrative with the collective memories and historical milestones of the Yazidi community also. One such poignant event unfolded in 2006, capturing international attention. Dua Khalil Aswad, a young Yazidi woman, became the center of a tragic incident within the Yazidi community. Driven by love, she embraced Islam to marry a Sunni Muslim man, a decision that led her away from her family. After her conversion and marriage to a Sunni cleric, Dua received letters from her family, seemingly offering a safe return. However, the reality she faced upon her return was starkly different. A crowd of 2,000 awaited her, not in celebration, but in condemnation, culminating in a public and brutal lynching—a harrowing episode that underscores the deep-seated tensions and tragic outcomes of cultural and religious divides.

Her narrative goes beyond condemning the brutal actions of ISIS militants; she also addresses a broader societal issue: the complicity and endorsement of such brutality by certain individuals, including women. She notes the disturbing stance of women like Morteja's mother, who not only condoned but also applauded the oppressive actions of ISIS. These women supported policies that kept others in the shadows, vulnerable and exploited, while individuals like Nadia suffered unimaginable atrocities. Her resolve is clear: she is steadfast in her commitment to challenging and putting an end to such barbaric practices, advocating for a change that respects the dignity and rights of all individuals, especially women who have been historically marginalized and mistreated.

Therefore, her resolve hardened after witnessing the terrible conditions that women face under the harsh rule of ISIS, a recognized terrorist group. She made the decision to raise awareness of the injustice and suffering caused by ISIS on a global scale. She came into contact with activists who valued her testimony while she was living in a camp for refugees. They offered strong proof of the genocide against her people and urged her to visit the UK to tell officials about her terrifying experiences.

Nadia spent her final months in the camp preparing for her advocacy trip and moving to Germany. She gave thanks to God for his assistance in her escape from ISIS by visiting the holy spot of Lalish prior to her departure. She fearlessly recounted her trauma to a large audience at her first major advocacy event in Geneva, where she pleaded with Sunni leaders to condemn ISIS and its barbarism—a request that highlighted the powerful role these leaders could play in stopping the carnage.

Positive responses from across the world have been observed in recent years. For example, Canada has boosted the number of Yazidi refugees it accepts. In addition, ISIS's persecution of Yazidis has been formally acknowledged by the UN as genocide. This acknowledgment has sparked discussions about creating a safe haven for Iraqi religious minority among different administrations. Most importantly, there is an increasing worldwide commitment to help and support these affected communities.

In addition, she launched Nadia's Initiative, which serves as a ray of hope for women and children who are suffering from the effects of mass murder, genocide, and the horrifying practises of human trafficking by ISIS fighters. The group diligently advocates for sustainable rehabilitation of the Yazidi homeland, guided by the wise leadership of its President and Chairwoman. It is an unwavering supporter of the rights and rehabilitation of victims of sexual assault everywhere, persistently pleading with authorities and institutions for their assistance.

Nadia's Initiative's main goal is to create a world where women may live in harmony and where communities that have been devastated by tragedy and pain can find strong support and renewal. It works on a worldwide scale, pushing for important changes in local, national, and international policies and resources in order to protect survivors and support their healing.

Within the short time it has been in operation, the Initiative has strengthened Iraq's security framework and aided in the rehabilitation of Sinjar by utilizing its extensive regional and cultural knowledge. Thanks to the persistent support of its sponsors, the Initiative has made significant progress in bringing those guilty of horrors like genocide and sexual assault against women to justice.

Therefore, since 2018 Her Initiative has earned the trust as a well-known worldwide symbol of community-based, sustainable development that supports women's security, justice, and peace. With the help of its quick deployment of regional and cultural expertise, it greatly bolstered national security and helped rebuild Sinjar in Iraq. The Initiative, which has unwavering backing, successfully takes on individuals guilty of horrible atrocities against women, such as sexual assault and genocide. It's creating laws to defend women's rights and uphold their basic human dignity, and it's making great progress in advocating for survivor restitution.

So, at the end it can be said that Nadia's tale is not limited to just one person; it is a mirror reflecting the struggle of hundreds of others who have experienced similar tragedies but are yet unnoticed and unheard. It is an essential reminder of the work that remains to be done in

order to tackle the injustices and atrocities that are perpetuated against marginalized groups across the globe. Hence, the time has come to call for action for each of us to recognize our role in the fight against the injustice of humanity. Within this context, her audacity to shatter the shackles of her past and transform her ordeal into a force for societal transformation compels us to engage actively in sculpting a society where the sanctity and rights of each person are recognized and safeguarded.

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