

Ethnic cleansing on historic scale: the Islamic State's systematic targeting of minorities in northern Iraq

Summary

The group that calls itself the Islamic State (IS)¹ has carried out ethnic cleansing² on an historic scale in northern Iraq. Amnesty International has found that the IS has systematically targeted non-Arab and non-Sunni Muslim communities, killing or abducting hundreds, possibly thousands, and forcing hundreds of thousands of others to flee the areas it has captured since 10 June 2014.

Ethnic and religious minorities – Assyrian Christians, Turkmen Shi'a, Shabak Shi'a, Yazidis, Kakai and Sabeen Mandaeans – have lived together in the Ninewa province, much of it now under IS control, for centuries. Today, only those who were unable to flee when IS fighters seized the area remain trapped there, under threat of death if they do not convert to Islam³

Hundreds of Yazidis, most of them women and children from the Sinjar region, were abducted as they fled the IS takeover of the area in early August. . At the time of writing, they continue to be held by the IS and, with a few exceptions, little is known of their fate or whereabouts. Some of those who managed to make contact with their families said they are being pressured to convert to Islam and some have reported that some of the women and children – both girls and boys – from their families were taken to unknown locations by their captors . Some families say their detained relatives have told them there have been cases of rape and sexual abuse of detained women and children.

Lawyer Mirze Ezdin is among those desperately awaiting news of his family. After patiently listing the names and ages of 45 relatives – all women and children – abducted by IS fighters, he showed Amnesty International a photo of two of his nieces on his mobile phone.⁴ Struggling to hold back the tears, he said:

“Can you imagine these little ones in the hands of those criminals? Alina is barely three; she was abducted with her mother and her nine-month-old sister; and Rosalinda, five, was abducted with her mother and her three brothers aged eight to 12. We get news from some of them but others are missing and we don't know if they are alive or dead or what has happened to them.”

Hundreds of Yazidi men from towns and villages in the Sinjar region, which put up armed resistance in a bid to repel the IS advance, were captured and shot dead in cold blood, scores in large groups, others individually, seemingly in reprisal for resisting and to dissuade others from doing so. It is from these towns and villages that most of the women and children were abducted.

Hundreds of Yazidi 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 Yazidi fighters and some civilians have been sheltering since 3 August, surrounded by IS fighters). There is little doubt that those shown in the video converted to save their lives and in the hope of being freed. However, even those who converted have so far not been allowed to leave.⁵

Although the overwhelming majority of these minority communities managed to flee before IS fighters reached their towns and villages, they escaped with their lives and nothing else. They had to leave their homes and everything they owned behind and even the little they could carry – especially money and jewellery – was often taken from them by IS fighters manning checkpoints on the perimeters of the areas they control. Their homes have since been appropriated or looted by IS fighters and their supporters among the local Sunni population, and their places of worship destroyed.

While IS fighters have mainly targeted the minority communities, many Arab Sunni Muslims known or believed to oppose the IS or to have worked with the government and security forces, or previously with the US army (present in Iraq until 2011), have likewise been forced to flee to avoid being killed, and their homes have been appropriated or destroyed.

Since 10 June, more than 830,000 people, have been forced from their homes in northern Iraq,⁶ resulting in a humanitarian crisis which prompted the UN to declare its highest level of emergency on 14 August.⁷ Most of the displaced are sheltering in the semi-autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan, under the control of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), with small numbers sheltering across the borders in Syria (10-15,000) and Turkey (add figure).

The humanitarian conditions for the overwhelming majority of them are dire – lacking shelter, many sleep in building sites, makeshift encampments and parks with no sanitation, others in schools, halls and other public buildings. KRG officials have admitted that they are overwhelmed and unable to cope, while the response of the international community has been slow and inadequate, though the UN's recent designation of the crisis as its highest level of emergency should result in measures being swiftly taken by the relevant international humanitarian agencies.

The forced displacement of Iraq's ethnic and religious minorities, including some of the region's oldest communities, is a tragedy of historic proportions. Amnesty International's field investigations have concluded that the IS is systematically and deliberately carrying out a program of ethnic cleansing in the areas under its control. This is not only destroying lives, but also causing irreparable damage to the fabric of Iraq's society, and fuelling inter-ethnic, sectarian and inter-religious tensions in the region and beyond.

Entire communities in large swathes of territories in northern Iraq, where the population is overwhelmingly non-Shi'a, were abandoned to their fate without protection from attacks by the IS when the Iraqi army and security forces, which are Shi'a-dominated, fled the area in June.

The scale and gravity of the abuses and the urgency of the situation demands a swift and robust response – not only to provide humanitarian assistance to those displaced and otherwise affected by the conflict, but also to ensure the protection of vulnerable communities who risk being wiped off the map of Iraq.

The state has an obligation to provide equal protection to all communities within their borders. Successive Iraqi governments have failed to do so. Further, they have contributed to the worsening of the situation by tolerating, encouraging and arming sectarian militias, in particular Shi'a militias in and around the capital, Baghdad, and the south of the country in recent months. In responding to the current crisis, the Iraqi central government and the KRG (whose armed forces now control some of the areas abandoned by the Iraqi army) must prioritize measures to ensure the protection of the

civilian population regardless of religion or ethnicity.

The new Iraqi government, whose formation is currently being negotiated, must prioritize the constitution of non-sectarian government, military and security institutions capable and willing to restore security and the rule of law and to provide protection and recourse for all sectors of the population without discrimination. At the same time, it should disarm and disband militias responsible for extrajudicial executions and other gross violations and bring perpetrators to justice...

MethodologyThis report is based on field investigations carried out by Amnesty International in northern Iraq, including several towns and villages subsequently taken over by IS, and the city of Mosul when it was already under IS control, between June and September 2014 . The organization interviewed hundreds of witnesses, survivors, and victims, including the families of those who were killed or abducted, and many others who were forcibly displaced by the actions and threats of IS fighters. Amnesty International also met with civil society groups, local officials, and local and international human rights and humanitarian organizations.

Mass killings

Amnesty International investigated mass killings in several parts of the Sinjar region in the first half of August 2014, including one carried out on the edge of the village of Qiniyeh, where scores of men were killed on 3 August and another in the village of Kocho (also known as Kuju), where scores, possibly hundreds, were killed on 15 August. .

In addition to the two massacres detailed below, Amnesty International interviewed dozens of witnesses to the killings of smaller groups of men. In some cases the men were initially captured with their families and were subsequently separated from the women and children and taken to nearby locations where they were shot dead.

Amnesty International interviewed a witness to one such mass killing in Solagh, a village south-east of Sinjar city. He told Amnesty International⁸ that on the morning of 3 August, as he was trying to flee towards Mount Sinjar , he saw vehicles with IS fighters in them approaching, and managed to conceal himself. From his hiding place he saw them take some civilians from a house in the western outskirts of Solagh:

“A white Toyota pick-up stopped by the house of my neighbour, Salah Mrad Noura, who raised a white flag to indicate they were peaceful civilians. The pick-up had some 14 IS men on the back. They took out some 30 people from my neighbour’s house: men, women and children. They put the women and children, some 20 of them, on the back of another vehicle which had come, a large white Kia and marched the men, about nine of them, to the nearby wadi [dry river bed]. There they made them kneel and shot them in the back. They were all killed; I watched from my hiding place for a long time and none of them moved. I know two of those killed: my neighbour Salah Mrad Noura, who was about 80 years old, and his son Kheiro, aged about 45 or 50.”

Kocho

On the morning of Friday 15 August the nightmare which had haunted the residents of Kocho (also known as Kuju) for the previous 12 days, came to pass, when IS fighters killed at least a hundred, and possibly many more of the village’s men and boys and abducted all the women and children.

Since the IS had taken control of the Sinjar region on 3 August, many of the residents of the small Yazidi hamlet, with its population about 1,200, had been trapped in the village some 15 km south of the town of Sinjar, unable to flee and afraid of being abducted and killed.

Survivors of the massacre told Amnesty International that the village residents were assembled by IS militants at the secondary school, on the northern outskirts of the village, where they separated men and boys from women and younger children. The men were then bundled into pick-up vehicles – some 20 in each vehicle – and driven away to different nearby locations, where they were shot.

Amnesty International has spoken to eight survivors from six different car-loads, which contained a total of some 120 people. According to these witnesses, around 100 of these men and boys were killed, and about a dozen are thought to have survived. . Because the killings were carried out in separate groups and at several locations, it is not possible to establish the exact number of dead, although nosurvivors have been found from other groups of men who were driven away from the school at the same time. Family members from outside of Kocho have received no news of the fate of the 3-400 other men and boys who were taken from the village on the morning of 15 August, and it is feared that they were likewise killed.

Elias , a 59-year-old nurse, told Amnesty International⁹:

“IS militants initially spoke to our Sheikh [community leader] and said that if we handed over our weapons we would not be harmed. So, we gave them our weapons but still feared they would kill us. Some of them demanded that we convert to Islam, which we refused to do, and threatened to kill us if we did not. Then later we were told that, following interventions by Sunni Muslim tribal chiefs from Mosul, we would be spared. But we were under siege and not allowed to leave....

“At 11-11.30am [on Friday 15 August] IS militants called all the residents to the secondary school, which has been their headquarters since they came to the village two weeks ago. There they asked that we hand over our money and our mobile phones, and that the women hand over their jewellery.

“After about 15 minutes they brought vehicles and started to fill them up with men and boys. They pushed about 20 of us onto the back of a Kia pick-up vehicle and drove us about one kilometre east of the village. They got us off the vehicle by the pool and made us crouch on the ground in a tight cluster and one of them photographed us. I thought then they'd let us go after that, but they opened fire at us from behind. I was hit in the left knee, but the bullet only grazed my knee. I let myself fall forward, as if I were dead, and I stayed there face down without moving. When the shooting stopped I kept still and after they left, I ran away.

“Five or six others were also alive and they also ran from the place. The rest were all killed. I know two of them, they were right next to me: Khider Matto Qasem, 28, and Ravo Mokri Salah, about 80 years old.

“I don't know who the others were; I was too scared to look around, I couldn't focus. I don't know what happened to my family, my wife, my seven children (my two daughters and my five sons; the youngest is only 14), my son's wife and their two children; I don't know if they are dead or alive or where they are.

I only now learned from one of the survivors from another group that my brother Amin and his 10-

year-old son 'Asem were both killed, God bless them. I can't contact anyone as they took our mobile phones and so I have lost all the numbers. After the killings I ran to Mount Sinjar. There were other survivors who also ran away. I saw five others; one of them, Rafid Sa'id 'Ammo, was badly injured. I found him later on Mount Sinjar; that is the only escape route and I think all the survivors ran there."

Two other survivors from the same group, Khider and Rafid Sa'id 'Ammo, interviewed separately by Amnesty International, gave similar accounts.¹⁰ Khider, a 17-year-old student, who escaped with what looked like superficial bullet wounds to his back, told Amnesty International that he was also part of the first group of men and boys who were bundled into vehicles and taken to the village's outskirts and shot.

"There was no order, they [the IS militants] just filled up vehicles indiscriminately. My cousin Ghaleb Elias and I were pushed into the same vehicle. We were next to each other as they lined us up face down on the ground. He was killed. He was the same age as me, and worked as a day labourer, mostly in construction. I have no news of what happened to my parents and my four brothers and six sisters. Did they kill them? Did they abduct them? I don't know anything about them.

"After the IS armed men who shot us I ran away, stopping to hide when I thought someone might see me or when I could not walk any more. I had to walk many hours to reach Mount Sinjar."

Another survivor, Khaled Mrad Bessi, a 32-year-old shop owner and father of three, told Amnesty International:

"IS militants who had been controlling the village since 3 August had promised repeatedly that we would be allowed to leave. I thought this was the day as I followed many people from the village... When we reached the school, the women and children were sent to the upper floor and we the men were kept on the ground floor. IS militants told us to hand over our money, our phones and any gold. Then they started to fill pick-up vehicles with men and to drive away.

"I was still thinking that they were going to take us to the mountain as had been promised. About four vehicles left, two at a time. Then I was put in a vehicle with about 20 other men. We stopped near the last house on the edge of the village and they got us off the vehicle, I knew that they were going to kill us as this was not the way to the mountain. We were on the edge of a hill and as I looked down I saw a group of bodies below by the wadi.

"They told us to stand in line and one of the men in our group, the son of the sheikh, told them 'this is not what was agreed; you were going to take us to the mountain'. They shot him multiple times. We threw ourselves to the ground and they shot at us for several minutes and then they left. After they left, another man, Nadir Ibrahim Ismail, and I got up. All the others were dead or dying. I was shot three times, twice in the left arm and once in the left hip.

"Nadir and I walked for about three km and then I heard a car come and I hid in some straw nearby but Nadir was behind me and did not manage to hide on time and was shot dead. I stayed hidden in the straw for several hours, until the evening, and then I kept walking towards the mountain".

Later that night on the way to the mountain Khaled Mrad Bessi met up with his younger brother,

Said, and another man, Ali Abbas Ismail, who had been part of another truckload and had also survived. Said, 23, was shot five times, three times in his left knee, once in the left hip and once in the left shoulder. At the hospital where the brothers were being treated for their injuries, Said showed Amnesty International the bullet doctors had just removed from his knee.

Khaled and Said are lucky to have survived, but are now grieving for their seven brothers who are believed to have been killed in the massacre. Elias, Jallu, Pessi, Masa'ud, Hajji, Kheiri, and Nawaf, aged between 41 and 22, were also at the school and have not been heard of since. "It has been two weeks.¹¹ There is just the two of us left now. Those who survived have by now made it back and my brothers are not among them. I think they are all dead. I hope that they died quickly, that they did not lie there in pain for hours," Khaled said as he broke down in tears.

Some of the victims of the 15 August massacre died of their injuries hours, possibly days, later, having been left for dead and being too seriously wounded to drag themselves away. One of the survivors (name withheld for security reasons) told Amnesty International that as he lay injured at the massacre site he heard other survivors cry out in pain.

One of the survivors (name withheld for security reasons) who managed to hide and survive near the massacre site for 12 days thanks to the help of a Muslim neighbour, told Amnesty International

"Some could not move and could not save themselves; they lay in agony waiting to die. They died a horrible death. I managed to drag myself away and was saved by a Muslim neighbour; he risked his life to save me; he is more than a brother to me. For 12 days he brought me food and water every night. I could not walk and had no hope of getting away and it was becoming increasingly dangerous for him to continue to keep me there. He gave me a phone so that I could speak with my relatives (in the mountain and in KRG) and after 12 days he managed to get me a donkey so that I could ride to the mountain, and from there I was evacuated through Syria and on to the KRG".

Another survivor, Khalaf, a 32-year-old father of three young children, told Amnesty International:

"I was in the third car-load . Before me, they [IS militants] took away two other vehicles full of men and youth. We were driven a very short distance east, maybe 200-300 metres. We were 20 or 25 crammed in the back of the pick-up, I don't know for sure. When we got there they made us stand in a row and then one of them shouted 'Allahu Akbar' ['God is Great'] and then there was shooting. There were maybe 10 of them, but they were behind us. I don't know how many of them opened fire. I was hit twice, in the left hip and the left calf.

"After the shooting stopped I heard the vehicles leave and another man and I got up and ran. I went in one direction and he in the other. I don't know where he is now. I don't know where anyone is, my children, my family. Where are they? Have they taken them? How can I find them?..."

"Among those killed near me was Amin Salah Qasem, the brother of Elias [the nurse who survived the first group killing], and his son 'Asem, aged 10-12, and seven others whose names I know and another 10 or 12 whose names I don't know because I could not see properly. I was so terrified; I kept my head down and when it became quiet and I was sure they had left I just ran away."

Many of the hundreds of women and children, who were abducted from Kocho on 15 August are currently held in Tal Afar – halfway between Sinjar and Mosul – where IS groups are holding other

abducted Yazidi civilians. According to Kocho residents with whom Amnesty International was in contact prior to the massacre, the village had a population of more than 1,200. The organization has been unable to contact them since 13 August. Relatives of some of the abducted women and children have told Amnesty International that they have not been able to make contact with them since they were abducted and are extremely concerned for their safety.

Qiniyeh

In the afternoon of 3 August scores of men and boys were summarily killed on the edge of the village of Qiniyeh, south-east of the town of Sinjar. Amnesty International spoke to several survivors and witnesses of the massacre, all of whom gave very similar accounts. They were interviewed separately and in some cases did not know each other.

According to their statements, a large group of up to 300 or more Yazidis, most of them from the nearby village of Tal Qasab and many of them from the same extended family and tribe, became trapped in Qiniyeh as they were making their way to Mount Sinjar. Most of them were women and children, but there were also scores of men, many of whom were armed and had earlier engaged in prolonged armed clashes with IS fighters, in an attempt to prevent them from storming their villages.

Once they realized they had no hope of halting the IS advance they fled north towards Mount Sinjar, getting stuck in Qiniyeh. There IS fighters caught up with them, separated the women and children from the men and boys and took a group of up to 85-90 men and boys – including boys as young as 12 –and shot most of them dead. The massacre seems to have been carried out to punish those who had, or were suspected of having, tried to repel the IS attack on their villages, and/or to dissuade others from putting up any resistance to IS advances. A few people survived the massacre, and some others managed to escape in the melee as they were being marched to the site of the massacre. Here are some of their accounts:

Fawas Safel 'Ammo gave Amnesty International a list of 28 men from his family who have been missing since the massacre and whom he believes were killed. He said:

“Me and my family fled Tal Qasab in the morning [of 3 August]. There was a huge number of people fleeing towards the mountain [Mount Sinjar]. Those who had cars could go on more easily. We did not have a car so we stopped in Qiniyeh, in a house on the edge of the village. We were about 200, mostly women and children. A military vehicle came with some IS militants. They asked us for weapons and we said that we did not have any. We did have weapons but we had hidden them around the area. They said that they would search the area and if they found weapons or if we tried to run away they would kill us and if not they would not harm us. I was in a group with 72 other men and boys and we stayed put, without trying to run away.

“They left and after half an hour a convoy of IS vehicles came, 10 or 12 of them; about four saloon cars and the rest pick-ups. They again asked for weapons and we said we had none. They told us to hand over our mobile phones and we did so. They sent a Yazidi man who was with them to collect the phones from the women. Then they put us into two lines: men and boys in one line and women and children in the other.

“They marched us men and boys towards the mountain, about 15 minutes' walk away. We stopped at a place where there was a big hole, by the wadi; we were on the edge of the hole. They opened

fire and some tried to run away. I let myself fall in the hole, and others fell on top of me. I stayed still. After the continuous fire stopped, IS militants fired individual shots, at those they saw were not yet dead. After they left – I don't know how much time passed exactly – I got up and so did my friend Ezzedin Amin and we ran away. Neither of us were injured. We walked to the mountain and there we found three others who had also escaped alive from the massacre; they were injured, one very lightly and two more seriously.”

Another villager, Mohsen Elias Ma'ajo, told Amnesty International:

“After the Peshmerga who used to protect our villages fled in the night between 2 and 3 August, me and many other men from the village [Tal Qasab] took our weapons (most of us had Kalashnikovs, for the protection of our families) and clashed with IS militants . At about 7 or 8am we ran out of ammunitions and ran away toward the mountain (Mount Sinjar). We stopped in the village of Qiniyeh, near the foot of the mountain. We were about 90 men and youths and with us were more than 100 women and children from our families.

“At about 1pm or so IS militants came and spoke to us and said that they were only looking for Peshmerga and asked if we had weapons and said they would kill anyone found to have weapons. We had hidden our weapons and said we had none. They said we could go home soon and left. After half an hour some 20 IS vehicles came and surrounded us. My relative Nasser Elias tried to run away and they shot him dead.

“They split us into two groups, men and boys of 12 and older in one group and women and younger children in another group. They started to load the women and children in the vehicles and made us (men and boys) walk to the nearby wadi. The youngest of the group was my brother Nusrat, 12 years old. We were made to squat by the edge of the wadi, which was deep. They told us to convert to Islam and we refused.

“One grabbed me by my shirt from behind and pulled me up and tried to shoot me but his weapon did not fire. My brother Nusrat was scared and was crying. They opened fire from behind us. I fell into the wadi and was not injured. My brother Nusrat was right next to me and was killed. My father, Elias, and my four brothers, Faysal, Ma'amun, Sa'id and Sofian, were all killed. Most of the other men and boys were also killed, including 28 of my relatives [Mohsen provided a list to Amnesty International]. After the IS men left I waited a bit and then ran away to the mountain. I only know four others who survived: my neighbour Fawas and Khalaf Mirze and his son 'Ayad (Khalaf had been shot in the back, shoulder and leg, and 'Ayad in the shoulder) and another man called Ziad. I don't know if any others survived.”

Hawwas Hashem Kashan, another of those who had stopped in Qiniyeh, told Amnesty International that he had hidden himself nearby:

“After hours of clashes with the IS militants who were attacking our village we were overpowered and fled toward the mountain. Many of us stopped in Qiniyeh; there had been no clashes there and we thought we would be safe. There were many families, men, women and children. Hundreds all together.... . The IS men left and after a while they came back with several vehicles. Four of the vehicles surrounded the house where I was with my family.

“I ran away and hid in a nearby hill. From there I could see what was happening. It was early

afternoon – broad daylight. They brought all the people out of the houses and divided the men from the women and children. They put the women and children in vehicles and drove away and marched the men and some young boys to the wadi nearby, towards the mountain. They made them kneel or crouch along the edge of the wadi, which has a deep opening in that spot, and shot them in the back. I counted about 67 who were killed and some others survived and ran away after the IS militants left. Then I ran away from the hill to Mount Sinjar.”

The names and details provided by the survivors, relatives of some of those killed and witnesses indicate that some 65-70, possibly up to 80-85, men and boys were shot dead on the edge of the village of Qiniyeh. Many more are reported to have been killed in smaller groups further away from the village, most as they were trying to flee to Mount Sinjar and some after they were captured near the foot of the mountain as they came down to fetch water and food for themselves and their families who were stranded there.

Mass abductions of men, women and children

Survivors of the Kocho and Qiniyeh massacres and their relatives and many other families have provided Amnesty International with the names of scores of the women and children who were captured with, and subsequently separated from, the men and boys who were killed. All of these and many other women and children continue to be held by the IS. Some of the women have been able to communicate – some regularly and others only sporadically – with their families. They say they have been detained in a variety of locations, including Badush prison outside Mosul, schools and public buildings in Tal ‘Afar, Mosul and Bi’aj (south-west of Sinjar) and most recently in empty houses which used to belong to Turkmen Shi’ia residents (who have fled) in a village west of Tal ‘Afar.

Hundreds of other men who were captured on 3 August in the Sinjar region by IS fighters are still unaccounted for; only a handful were subsequently released or have been able to communicate with their relatives. Most were initially presumed by their relatives to have been killed after their capture but an IS video released around 21-22 August showing scores of Yezidi men converting to Islam, as well as some more recent information obtained from some of those detained, indicates that many are likely still to be alive in IS captivity.

According to the pattern emerging from the scores of testimonies collected by Amnesty International from families of those who have been abducted by IS fighters, most of the abductions – like most of the killings – took place on or since 3 August in and around the towns and villages south of Mount Sinjar, where armed clashes took place between IS fighters advancing on the Sinjar region from the south and armed residents trying to repel the IS advance.

Virtually all those abducted have been Yezidi residents of the Sinjar region who were abducted as they were trying to flee the area. The Sinjar region is remote and surrounded on all sides by areas which have been under IS control since June. Flight from the region thus involved a long and perilous journey through IS-controlled areas.

Residents of towns and villages further east of Mosul that were overrun by the IS in the days following 3 August (mostly on 6-7 August) had, by contrast, generally managed to escape ahead of the arrival of the IS. These town and villages are close to Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, with easy access to main roads linking Erbil and Dohuk, another major Iraqi Kurdistan town, and other

areas under the firm control of Kurdish Peshmerga forces.

Some residents, however, did not manage to leave before the arrival of IS fighters. Among them were several Christian families who were trapped in Qaraqosh (al-Hamdaniya area), one of the area's main Christian towns. On Friday 22 August, as some of them were finally allowed to leave by the IS, a three-year-old girl, Kristina Khoder 'Abada, was abducted by one of the fighters. Her distraught mother told Amnesty International: "One of the armed men took her from me and walked away with her in his arms. She was crying. There was nothing I could do. I pray to God that they will release her soon and let her come back home. I cannot sleep; all I can think of is my little girl." Several other Christians were reportedly also abducted from the area at around the same time and remain unaccounted for.

Entire families abducted

The abductions have in some cases devastated entire Yezidi families in the Sinjar area. Among those abducted are four generations of the family of Mohsen Elias Ma'ajo, one of the survivors of the Qiniyeh massacre. He told Amnesty International that 18 women and children from his immediate family and more than 25 others from the extended family were abducted on 3 August and are still missing. His voice shook and his eyes filled with tears as he listed those taken:

"My wife, Nawruz; we are newly married and she is pregnant; she is 19 years old. My mother, Shirin. My nine-year-old brother Assa'ad and my three sisters, Manal, 10, Nisrin, 18, and Shukriya, 20. My two stepmothers (my father has three wives), Sari and Shirin. My two stepbrothers, Amjad and Sami, aged 10 and 11. And my eight stepsisters, Gaure, Goule, Maryam, Shaha, 'Amshe, Samira, Yusra, and Zarifa, aged between nine and 22. What will happen to them? We don't even know where some of them are, if they are alive or dead. My baby is not even born and is already a prisoner. What can we do to get them back?"

Several other women and children from the family are also still being held. These include the wives and children, some of them infants and toddlers, of his brothers and cousins, and the mothers of his stepmothers, aged 60 and 75. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of women and children are currently held in and around Tal 'Afar. However, no information is known about the fate and whereabouts of several girls, aged 16 to 20, who were reported to have been separated from their relatives in their previous place of detention in Mosul.

On 17 August hundreds of women and children were moved from a school in Tal-Afar to a village west of the city where they are being housed in empty houses belonging to Turkmen Sh'ia residents of the village who fled when IS took over the area in June. Since then more women and children are reported to have been moved to the same and other areas around Tal-Afar, also into houses abandoned by owners who had fled. Residents of Tal Afar have confirmed to Amnesty International that Yezidi women are being held there.

Fawas Safeel 'Ammo, a survivor of the Qiniyeh massacre, told Amnesty International that nine women and children from his immediate family who were abducted in front of him on 3 August were still being held. His mother, Laila Wunjo 'Aadi, 60; his 18-year-old wife, Nawruz Hassan Khalaf; his two brothers, Sa'ad and Sami, aged 12 and 13; and his five sisters, Susanne, Hala, Samia, Sonia and Samar, aged five to 18. According to the latest information received by the family, the nine women and children are held in Tal 'Afar.

'Amshe Hodeida Qasem, 35, was abducted on 3 August with three of her children and nine other relatives. Her husband, Elias Khider 'Abdallah, told Amnesty International:

"My wife was taken as she was trying to flee from Hattin [north of Mount Sinjar, east of Snuni] with our youngest children, my son Talal, nine, and my two girls, Vian and Breti, aged five and seven. Nine other family members were also trying to flee from Hattin. They were with my 70-year-old mother, Ghazal Silu Hassan, my brother Hajji and his wife, Ferial Musa Khider, and my other brother, Seidu, his wife Wahida RASHU 'Aido and their four daughters, Khaula, 16, Randa, 12, Dalia, nine, and Sandrella, one.

"Their conditions are very poor, and especially so for the children and the older people; they get little food, they don't have milk for the children. I heard that three children died on Friday 15 August and that the women were threatened with rape. My wife and my mother would prefer to be killed than to stay there. Why can't someone intervene to rescue them?"

According to information received by the family, 'Amshe and her children and relatives were first held in Badush prison in Mosul, then in a school in Tal 'Afar and since mid-August in a village west of Tal 'Afar in houses which belong to Shi'a Turkmen who fled when IS took control of the area. They were reportedly held with some 500 other families, comprising a total of up to 2,000 individuals. They heard that, while they were detained in the school in Tal 'Afar, the girls had been separated from the rest of the family but that they had recently been brought back; 'Amshe's brother-in-law Seidu, on the other hand, had not been seen since the beginning and his family fears that he has been killed.

Sa'd RASHU Younes, a 45-year-old farmer, was abducted with his wife, nine daughters and two sons, and his brother's three children, on the morning of 3 August in the village of Rambussi, near Sinjar, as the family was fleeing towards the mountain. His brother told Amnesty International that the family had received no information about the fate and whereabouts of their disappeared relatives.

Out of all those captured in Sinjar on 3 August, M., a 24-year-old man (who is not being named out of fear for his relatives still detained) his 80-year-old grandfather and nine other men are the only ones known to have escaped or been released by their captors. M. told Amnesty International:

My grandfather, my uncle and I were abducted with 14 women and children from the family. They took us from the street as we were leaving our town, al-Jazeera, in our two cars. At that time my 15-year-old brother, Mohsen, ran away from the car and they shot him dead.

"They took us to al-Bi'aj and the following day they took all the women and children to another place. I later learned that they had been taken to Mosul. My grandfather was released after four days and the other men and I were taken to Tal Banat and held there for another three days. They told us that we would be killed if we did not convert to Islam. Then they told us we would be released.

"On 10 August me and nine others escaped. We walked for 10-12 hours to reach the mountain. While we were detained they took a group of boys aged about 12-15 years who were held with us to another place; maybe they took them for military training. My uncle who did not manage to escape is still being held, now in Tal 'Afar in a place with many other men. The women and children from my family – my 70-year-old grandmother, four of my aunts and their 11 children – who were taken with me, are still detained, also in Tal 'Afar but in a separate place, not together with my uncle. Among

them there is a little baby and a 12-year-old boy with a disability. We sometimes receive news via another family who is in contact with their detained female relatives.”

Pressure on captive populations to convert to Islam

Most of the members of non-Muslim communities being held by IS who have been able to communicate with their families have reported consistent pressures on them by their captors to convert to Islam. The pressures have ranged from promises of freedom to threats that they will be killed if they do not convert.

In Kocho, where scores of male residents were murdered on 15 August, residents with whom Amnesty International had been in contact during the previous week reported being told that they would be killed if they did not convert.

In a video distributed on social media around 20 August showing hundreds of Yezidi men who were captured on 3 August converting to Islam, an IS commander states 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).

Some have told Amnesty International that they converted in order to save their lives and have not been allowed to leave the areas they are trapped in. A member of one such family told the organization on 16 August:

“We are in a very difficult situation. We agreed to convert because we thought this would solve our problem but we are under surveillance and cannot leave. We cannot just try to leave on our own; we are scared of what could happen to us. Can someone come to get us out of here? It is too dangerous for us here. We need help please.”

This situation contrasts with an earlier case, in June 2014, of a group of Yezidi men in the Sinjar region, most of them members of the Iraqi security forces, who were captured by the IS and pressured into converting to Islam. On this occasion, a ransom was demanded in exchange for their release and the men were released when this was paid (add footnote link to June statement).

As part of its ethnic cleansing policy, the IS has also reinforced its message to ethnic and religious minorities that there is no place for them in Iraq by systematically destroying their places of worship and cultural heritage. Since taking control of Mosul on 10 June, the IS have systematically destroyed and damaged places of worship of non-Sunni Muslim communities. Among the first targets were Shi'a mosques blown up in Mosul and Tal 'Afar in June; the same month, the Christian Tahira (Immaculate) Church in Mosul had a statue of the Virgin Mary removed from its roof. In July, the tomb of the Prophet Jonah in Mosul was demolished and, in August, the Shi'a Imam Redha Maqam (a Shi'a shrine) near Bartalla, the Yezidi Three Sisters Temples in Bashiqa and Sheikh Mand Temple in Sinjar, and the Kakai Mazar Yad Gar and Sayed Hayyas Temples in Hamdanya were all destroyed.

International humanitarian law and the conduct of the IS

International humanitarian law (IHL, the laws of war) applies in situations of armed conflict. In Iraq, there is currently a non-international armed conflict involving forces aligned with the central

government and the Kurdish Regional Government and the armed group the Islamic State and other armed groups opposed to the government. The rules of IHL therefore apply and are binding on all parties to the conflict, including the IS. These rules and principles seek to protect anyone who is not actively participating in hostilities: notably civilians and anyone, including those who were previously participating in hostilities, who is wounded or surrenders or is otherwise captured. They set out standards of humane conduct and limit the means and methods of conducting military operations.

The deliberate and summary killing of people in captivity – be they civilians, soldiers, members of militias, or suspected government “informers” or “collaborators” – is a flagrant and serious violation of international humanitarian law and constitutes a war crime.¹² Torture and cruel treatment, rape and other forms of sexual violence, hostage taking, arbitrary deprivation of liberty and forcing persons to act against their religious beliefs also are serious violations of IHL and also constitute war crimes.¹³

Under IHL, individuals, whether civilians or military, can be held criminally responsible for war crimes. Leaders and commanders of armed groups must be particularly diligent in seeking to prevent and repress such crimes. Military commanders and civilian superiors can be held responsible for crimes committed by their subordinates if they ordered such acts or if they knew, or had reason to know, such crimes were about to be committed and did not take necessary measures to prevent their commission, or to punish crimes that have already been committed.¹⁴ Individuals are also criminally responsible for assisting in, facilitating, aiding or abetting the commission of a war crime.¹⁵

Timeline of events

Mosul and surrounding areas

- 10 June: The IS (then known as ISIS) takes control of Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, and its surroundings. The Iraqi army and security forces flee Mosul and the entire north of Iraq without resisting. Several hundred thousand residents of Mosul (with a population of between 1.5 and 2 million), including both members of minority communities and Arab Sunni Muslims, flee the city, some for fear of the IS and others for fear of Iraqi government air strikes against the IS. Significant numbers of Christians, Shi’a Turkmen and Shi’a Shabak remain in their homes, in and around Mosul. Kurdish Peshmerga forces of the KRG take control of all areas not under IS control in the north of the country, including Kirkuk, a large oil-rich city south-east of Mosul with a mixed Kurdish-Turkmen (Shi’a and Sunni) population which has long been claimed by the KRG.
- 13 June: After Friday prayer the IS distribute a communiqué containing 16 rules, including a ban on smoking and a ban on women leaving the house unless necessary. These and other rules are not immediately enforced but are implemented progressively in subsequent weeks. IS fighters destroy the Qabr al-Bint (Tomb of the Girl) monument in Mosul.
- 16 June: IS takes control of Tal ‘Afar, a large town west of Mosul where the population (of up to 200,000) is almost all Turkmen (some three quarters of them Sunni and the rest Shi’a). Most of the Turkmen Shi’a flee the city westwards to Sinjar and from there make their way to Erbil on their way to the capital, Baghdad, and further south to Najaf, Karbala and other Shi’a majority areas.
- Third week of June: the IS remove a statue of the Virgin Mary from atop the Tahira (Immaculate) Church in Mosul and destroy the tombs of three well-known poets in the city centre.
- 25 June: Armed confrontations break out between IS fighters and Peshmerga forces east of

Mosul, on the outskirts of the majority Christian town of Qaraqosh (also known as al-Hamdaniya), prompting the entire population of the town to flee. Most residents return after the clashes end three days later.

- 27 June: Two Chaldean Christian nuns and three orphans (two girls and one boy) are abducted in Mosul when they visit the orphanage (run by the nuns) which they had fled soon after 10 June. Many Christians who had fled Mosul but had continued to visit their homes and their relatives in the city stop visiting Mosul.

- Late June/early July: Several men from the Turkmen and Shabak Shi'a communities are abducted and killed and their homes and places of worship are destroyed by the IS in Tal 'Afar, Mosul and surrounding areas, prompting most of the members of the two communities who had remained in IS-controlled areas to flee.¹⁶ Dozens of Yezidi border guards and soldiers are captured by IS fighters in north-western Iraq and taken across the border to IS-controlled areas in Syria, where they are pressured into converting to Islam. They are eventually released on payment of a ransom.¹⁷

- 14 July: The two Christian nuns and three orphan children abducted on 27 June are released unharmed but report having been pressured into converting to Islam by some of their captors.¹⁸

- 18 July: Christian residents of Mosul who had remained in the city flee after having been given an ultimatum by IS fighters two days earlier to either convert to Islam, pay *jizya*, a tax historically levied on non-Muslim subjects (in the Ottoman Empire), leave or be killed. Many tell Amnesty International that they were robbed of money and jewellery by IS fighters as they left the city.¹⁹

- 3 August: IS fighters attack towns and villages in the mostly Yezidi Sinjar region, in north-west Iraq, killing scores – possibly hundreds – of men, abducting more than 1,000 women, children and men, and forcing more than 100,000 (check UN figure if over 200,000) people - the entire Yezidi population, as well as the remaining small number of Christian residents - to flee the area. Most manage to flee to KRG areas but tens of thousands of Yezidis attempting to flee get trapped on Mount Sinjar, where they remain under siege for several days, surrounded by the IS and in dire conditions with hardly any food, water or shelter. Several die due to lack of water and medical care and the rest are eventually able to escape with the help of Syrian Kurdish separatist fighters from the People's Protection Units (known by its Kurdish acronym, YPG), who open a safe passage for them off the mountain, through Syria and into the KRG region of northern Iraq. Some who do not manage to flee remain trapped in the Sinjar region and unable to leave.²⁰ Thousands of Yezidi fighters and an unknown number of Yezidi civilian residents of villages on Mount Sinjar remain on the mountain area, determined to prevent the IS from taking control of the mountain area.

- 6-7 August: IS fighters storm and take control of more towns and villages north-east of Mosul, displacing tens of thousands of Christians, Yezidis and members of other minorities living in the area. Some who do not manage to flee remain trapped and unable to leave. Among those displaced from the area are thousands who were sheltering there after having fled their homes in surrounding areas in previous weeks, including thousands who were sheltering in a camp for internally displaced people (IDPs) in the al-Khazer/Kalak area, half way between Mosul and the KRG capital, Erbil.²¹

- 15 August: IS fighters kill scores, possibly hundreds of Yezidi men and abduct hundreds of women, children and men in the village of Kocho (also known as Kuju), south of the town of Sinjar. These residents have been trapped in the village, unable to leave since 3 August.²²

- 22 August: IS fighters abduct a three-year-old girl, two teenage boys and a 20-year-old woman – all Christians – as they and their families are finally allowed to leave the area of Qaraqosh (al-Hamdaniya), where they had been trapped in their homes for the previous two weeks. They remain unaccounted for.

Areas south of Kirkuk

- Mid-June: Armed confrontations take place between IS fighters attempting to gain control of several Turkmen villages and Shi'a Turkmen fighters. Dozens of people from the Shi'a Turkmen community are killed in the clashes, most of them fighters and others unarmed civilians who may have been caught in crossfire or deliberately targeted while fleeing. Armed residents and members of Turkmen Shi'a militias are reportedly deliberately killed after having been captured by IS fighters. After the attack on the village of Beshir on 17 June, in which more than 15 people are killed, it takes villagers five days to recover the bodies, some of which have reportedly been burned or mutilated. Shi'a Turkmen residents of villages in the area are forcibly displaced as the IS take control of or lay siege to the area and armed clashes continue in and around some of the villages.²³

- Mid-June to late August: The small Shi'a Turkmen town of Amerli, south of Kirkuk, in the Salaheddine province, remains surrounded by IS fighters, who prevent all vehicular movement in and out of the town. Some 10-15,000 residents remain trapped in the town with no way of obtaining provisions other than by air. Residents of the town tell Amnesty International that Iraqi armed forces helicopters are flying to the town every few days, delivering some provisions and evacuating some civilians but that the provisions received are insufficient and that humanitarian conditions are dire, with no electricity or running water and severe shortages of food, water and medicines. On 23 August the UN expresses concern for the plight of the civilian population trapped in Amerli, calling for action "to prevent the possible massacre of its citizens".²⁴

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

² Amnesty International is using this term to describe a “purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas.” (Report of the United Nations Commission of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780 (1992), 27 May 1994, section III.B) As this briefing demonstrates, the IS is pursuing ethnic cleansing through the commission of war crimes and gross human rights abuses.

³ The possibility of paying jizya (minority tax) was mentioned in some cases, mainly to Christians, but generally not implemented and superseded by mass exodus due to increased threats. Most Yazidis have been told to convert or be killed.

⁴ Dohuk, 20 August 2014

⁵ The video has been removed from YouTube as the accounts which posted it have been closed, but is available on file at Amnesty International

⁶ IOM WEEKLY SITUATION REPORT #1: *WEEKLY UPDATE FOR 16-23 AUGUST*:

<http://www.iom.int/files/live/sites/iom/files/Country/docs/IOM-Iraq-Crisis-Response-23-August-2014.pdf>

⁷ UN declares Iraq 'Level 3 Emergency' to trigger more resources, speed up aid delivery, 14 August 2014:

<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=48483>

⁸ In Zakho's outskirts 17 August 2014

⁹ Amnesty International interviewed eight survivors of the Kocho massacre between 17 and 28 of August, in various locations in and around Dohuk and Zakho. Three of them were first interviewed in Derik hospital in Syria, where they were initially treated before travelling on to Iraqi Kurdistan,

¹⁰ Rafid Sa'id 'Ammo also spoke to the BBC: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28900054>

¹¹ Last interview was on 28 August 2014.

¹² International Committee of the Red Cross study, Customary International Humanitarian Law: Volume 1: Rules, J-M Henckaerts and L Doswald-Beck, eds, 2005 (“ICRC Customary IHL Study”), Rule 89 and Rule 156.

¹³ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rules 90, 93, 96, 99, and 104.

¹⁴ ICRC Customary IHL Study, Rule 153.

¹⁵ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Article 25.

¹⁶ See Amnesty International report: *No in rthern Iraq: Civilians in the Line of Fire*, 14 July 2014:

<http://amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE14/007/2014/en/8f5c6eb0-27e4-45d2-ac08-63fc5840d9a5/mde140072014en.pdf> and <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/iraq-evidence-spiralling-sectarian-killings-and-abductions-2014-07-14>

¹⁷ See *Iraq: Yazidis captured by ISIS amid mounting sectarian attacks*, 1 July 2014:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/iraq-yezidis-captured-isis-amid-mounting-sectarian-attacks-2014-07-01>

¹⁸ See an account of their captivity at: <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/expulsion-mosuls-christians-part-1-account-kidnapped-nuns/> Details of this account have been confirmed to Amnesty International by church sources close to the victims.

¹⁹ See *The flight from Mosul: “We left everything behind to save our lives”*, 28 July 2014:

<http://livewire.amnesty.org/2014/07/28/the-flight-from-mosul-we-left-everything-behind-to-save-our-lives/>

²⁰ See *Iraqis displaced by ISIS attacks in Sinjar 'desperate' for aid*, 5 August 2014:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/iraqis-displaced-isis-attacks-sinjar-desperate-aid-2014-08-05> and [Did you want to add another reference?]

²¹ See *Mass exodus from Iraqi towns and cities as ISIS advance prompts panic*, 7 August 2014:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/mass-exodus-iraqi-towns-and-cities-isis-advance-prompts-panic-2014-08-07>

²² See *Testimonies from Kocho: The village ISIS tried to wipe off the map*, 18 August 2014:

<http://livewire.amnesty.org/2014/08/18/testimonies-from-kocho-the-village-isis-tried-to-wipe-off-the-map/>

²³ In late June Amnesty International observed members of a reasonably well structured Shi'a Turkmen armed militia operating in the town of Taza, which was under the control of both this militia and Kurdish Peshmerga forces. Nearby villages where the casualties had occurred could not be visited because they were under ISIS control and armed confrontations were ongoing in some areas.

²⁴ UN Envoy Calls for Immediate Action to Prevent Possible Massacre of Iraqis in Amerli, 23 August 2014:

http://www.uniraq.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=2462:un-envoy-calls-for-immediate-action-to-prevent-possible-massacre-of-iraqis-in-amerli&Itemid=605&lang=en