



Beauty FOR ASHES

Even ISIS couldn't destroy
these survivors' faith

The summer of 2014 marked
the beginning of a dark time
for Christians in Iraq.

That June, the Islamic State (ISIS) launched a major military offensive against the northern part of the country. Their jihad swept across the region so rapidly that state security forces were quickly overwhelmed. The government, paralyzed, offered little help to minorities—including Christians—who stood in the path of the oncoming violence.

In August, as ISIS forces converged on the towns with the largest Christian populations—Qaraqosh, Tal Kayf, Bartella, and Karamlesh—they issued an ultimatum to those living there: convert to Islam, or die. Most chose, instead, to flee.

Tens of thousands fled, their numbers swamping Erbil and other places that were completely unprepared for the massive influx of refugees. Those who tried to stay to save their homes or help friends and loved ones paid a terrible price. Many were slaughtered; others were raped or tortured before being shot, burned, or buried alive.

According to estimates, the Christian population had shrunk from 1.4 million to under 250,000 in Iraq.

ISIS destroyed everything in its path, including churches, monasteries, monuments, and history that had been preserved since first century after Christ. The surviving Christians reeled from the losses. Families were torn apart; most were astonished at how quickly friends and neighbors they had known for many years turned on them rather than suffer the wrath of the terrorists.

Meanwhile, the governments of the world looked on with horror, debating, unable to

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agree on what measures to take or even whether to call the wholesale destruction of Christians, Yazidis, and other religious minorities “genocide” — a term rife with political implications too many nations were hesitant to embrace or even to investigate.

Now, three years later, ISIS has been driven back from the territory it conquered during that bloody, tumultuous summer. Some of the Christians have come home and begun to rebuild, but they remain wary of the extremist ideology that is still widespread, and doubtful of what the world can or will do to help if they are attacked again.

And many thousands of the refugees remain in limbo, trying to live some kind of normal life in strange lands or refugee camps, working at whatever job they can find, struggling to cope—and help their children cope—with the lingering physical and psychological wounds of their experience.

This photo essay is a snapshot into this traumatic period of these survivors’ lives. Some names have been changed for security reasons.



The Cost of Faith

“When the Islamic State gave them three options: convert to Islam, pay the tribute, or ‘the sword will speak,’ our people didn’t do those three options,” says Father Raf, a priest from Qaraqosh who escaped. “They said, ‘We will leave our money, and our homes, and all we own, because we will keep our faith.’ And I am happy for that. Because my people, they have great faith.”

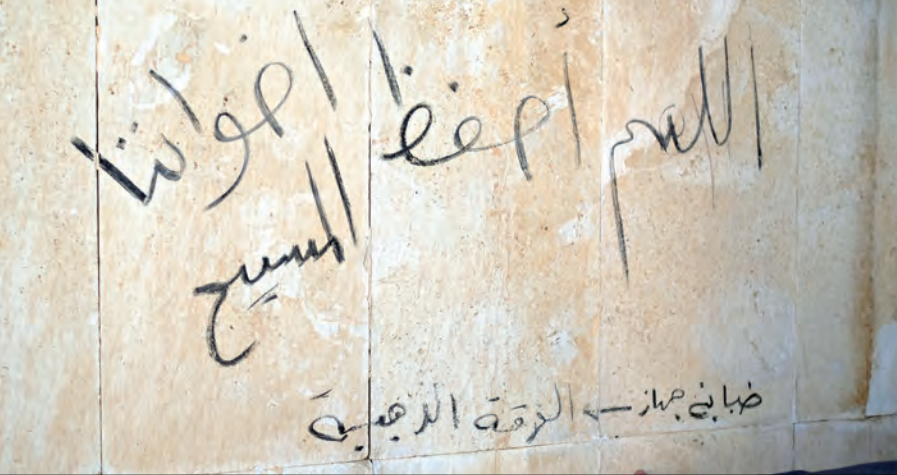
But survival has been difficult.

TOP LEFT: Jandark and her fourteen-year-old son Ismaeel were captured by ISIS. ISIS beat and tortured her repeatedly, and they routinely gave Ismaeel 25 lashings with whips made of wires. After two years, they escaped when the Iraqi army came to liberate the city; they now live in a Christian refugee camp in Erbil.

BOTTOM LEFT: Nadia and her three daughters escaped ISIS, but her husband was captured. Three years later, she has not had any news of him. She cleans the bathrooms in the camp to support her daughters and pay for medicine for the youngest (bottom center) who suffers health issues as a result of an ISIS soldier hitting her head on a table when searching her diaper for money.

TOP RIGHT: Badria and Zefania could not flee when ISIS came. The two women were imprisoned, stripped and robbed, routinely beaten, and kept under house arrest for over two years, where they nearly starved to death before they were liberated by Christian fighters. Zefania’s husband was tortured and imprisoned for those two years, and passed away before they could be reunited.





An Unshakable Foundation

ISIS's objective wasn't limited to exterminating Christians—they sought to destroy all historical evidence of what is considered one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. ISIS didn't stop at beheading statues and chiseling the names of God, saints, and biblical figures from the fourth-century walls of the Santa Barbara Monastery in Bartella—they filled the rooms with over eight feet of dirt.

In Our Lady of Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Qaraqosh and other churches in the area, ISIS scrawled messages of hate on the walls (left) and set fire to the ancient sanctuaries.

But the Iraqis' faith is not easily extinguished.

TOP RIGHT: When Father Naadir fled Qaraqosh, all he packed were ancient Christian manuscripts. When the roads were blocked, strangers rallied to help carry the volumes, fleeing on foot as bullets rained around them.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Father Bajes returned alone and immediately set up the altar, to make it, once again, "a place of prayer."

LOWER LEFT: Efforts are underway in Bartella to excavate the monastery and preserve as many historical artifacts as can be found.





Making the Case for Action

In fall of 2016 when ADF International visited (top left), Shlomo, a non-profit organization, had documented over 65,000 testimonies from the Christians and other religious minorities targeted by ISIS, and evidence, like the prices for Yazidi and Christian women and girls (left).

But more meaningful action is needed at the international level.

"I think the Christian community, the European and American people, they can do something for us so that we can stay here," says Father Raf (bottom left). "But I ask them, 'Why, until now, didn't you do anything?'"

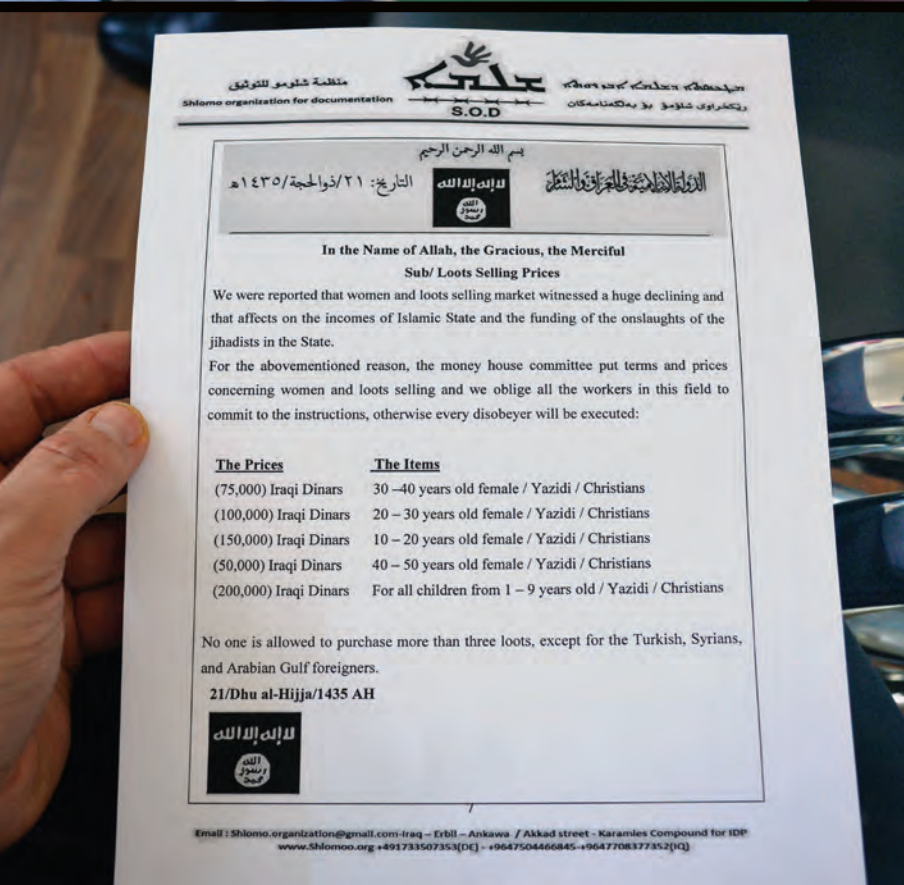
Numbers are giving up hope of returning to their homes and are trying to emigrate – a difficult process that can take up to three years. Those who remain are dependent on relief organizations (top right) and trying to hold onto hope.

"It's not just about food, and a place to stay," says Father Alman, a priest in Erbil (right) "These refugees need certification papers for travel, money to buy provisions, a job. And they need a sense of security – the assurance that the United Nations and the governments of the world will protect us if ISIS comes again."



10 Ways You Can Pray for Your Brothers and Sisters in Iraq

1. Pray that families will be reunited
2. Pray that they would sense God's presence and experience His comfort
3. Pray that they would know that we are praying for them and have not forgotten them
4. Pray for healing of physical and psychological wounds, and
5. Pray for their financial and physical needs to be met
6. Pray for doors to open to for them to share the Gospel
7. Pray for peace in their communities and that the rule of law would be established so they can rebuild their lives in safety
8. Pray for world leaders to fully recognize the persecution of Christians and hold their attackers accountable
9. Pray that world leaders would respond to refugees with wisdom and compassion
10. Pray that the refugees' faith would be strengthened in the midst of their suffering



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