

Iraq: Yazidis to accept children of IS rape victims into community

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Iraq's Kurdish region hosts more than 1 million displaced people, including many of the 200,000 Yazidis forced to flee their homes when the Islamic State militants attacked their communities in 2014.

Women and older children may have started to identify with their captors, as well, confounding search efforts. (AP)

Iraq: The children of Yazidi women raped by Islamic State men will be welcomed into the minority faith, a community leader said Thursday, allowing women taken as slaves by the militant group to return to Iraq from Syria.

Eido Baba Sheikh, son of the Yazidi spiritual leader Baba Sheikh, said the children of the formerly enslaved women will be treated as members of the faith, resolving one of the most difficult questions facing the community since the Islamic State group's 2014 campaign to try to exterminate the minority. Thousands of women and girls were forced into sexual slavery when the extremists attacked Yazidi communities in northwest Iraq. But the community shunned the women returning from captivity with children, a reflection of the deeply held Yazidi traditions to view outsiders with suspicion as a response to centuries of persecution.

U.S.-backed Kurdish forces defeated the last fragments of the IS group's self-styled "caliphate" in Syria, in March, raising the possibility that thousands of missing Yazidi women and children might be found and reunited with their families.

Still, some 3,000 Yazidis are still missing. Many of the children enslaved by militants in 2014 were separated from their parents and given to IS families for rearing. Boys were pressed into the militants' cub scouts, given military training, and indoctrinated in jihadi ideology.

Officials at the Beit Yazidi foundation in Kurdish-administered northeast Syria said Yazidi women with children who could have returned to Iraq were choosing to stay in Syria, instead, in order not to be separated from their children. Other women gave their young ones up for adoption to find acceptance among their community.

The Yazidi Supreme Spiritual Council issued a decree welcoming the survivors of slavery, and their children, into the Yazidi community, on Wednesday.

Murad Ismael, a founder of the global Yazidi charity Yazda, said it will nevertheless take time for the community in Iraq to accept the mothers and their children, because of the stigma of rape. "It will take a couple of years for the community to digest this fully," he said.

He said many women and children will have to seek resettlement in other countries, some to escape the stigma of their situation, and to find psychosocial services to heal after the trauma of slavery.

The community sent two representatives to search for Yazidi women and children in the camps in northeast Syria, where tens of thousands of civilians who survived the IS caliphate are waiting to be returned to their places of origin, said Eido Baba Sheikh. He said it is believed that there could be Yazidi children among foreign or IS families in the camps, a result of the sale of Yazidis under the caliphate. Complicating the search will be that many of the children may have never learned to identify as Yazidis, or to speak Kurmanji, the language of the community. Women and older children may have started to identify with their captors, as well, confounding search efforts.

And though the community will recognize the children of Yazidi survivors as Yazidis, they will still face legal difficulties in Iraq, said Eido Baba Sheikh. Under the country's family laws, a child is registered under the nationality and religion of their father, and it is unclear whether Iraq will allow Yazidi survivors to register their children as Iraqi Yazidis when there are questions about the children's patrimony.

Also on Thursday, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani of Iraq's autonomous Kurdish regional government asked for continued U.S. support to allow Iraqis displaced by the war with IS to return to their homes, according to a State Department statement on a call between Barzani and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence.

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- AP