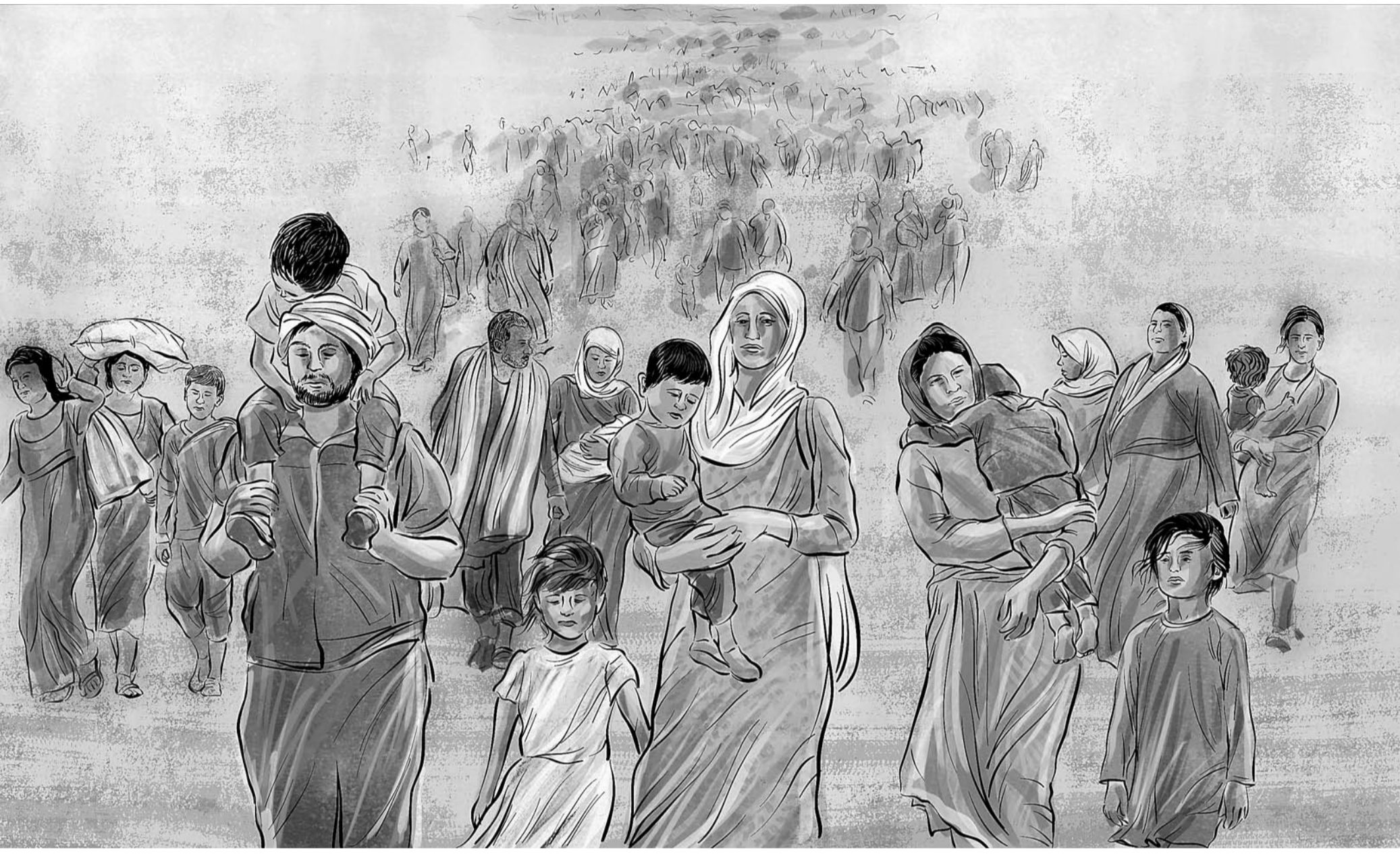


'ISIS has called the Yazidi infidels and targeted their people for death and destruction.'

ISSUES &



CHLOE CUSHMAN / NATIONAL POST

GEOFFREY CLARFIELD

THE YAZIDIS, ALONE

A Canadian anthropologist tells the story of a brave young man working to save his people from ISIS

The Yazidi are an indigenous Iraqi community of just under one million people who have lived in northern Iraq for thousands of years. They are Kurdish- and Arabic-speaking monotheists who trace their descent from Adam. Because their priests and holy men have never publicly disclosed their secret, sacred texts (just like the Druze sect of the Mountains of Syria, Lebanon and in Israel — where their religion is respected and where the Druze have full rights as citizens), neighbouring Muslims have called them devil worshippers and infidels, worthy of death by holy war or “jihad.”

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) have announced that the Yazidi are infidels and have targeted their people and villages for death and destruction. With their abundant and up-to-date American weaponry, recently looted from the Iraqi army, ISIS terrorists usually surround a Yazidi village and then violently threaten the villagers with conversion to Islam at gunpoint, often beating and humiliating elderly men and women at forced public meetings, echoing the Nazi tactics of occupied Europe during the Second World War.

If the villagers show hesitation, they then slaughter the men and sell the women in local slave markets. In the process, the women are usually gang raped, physically abused and often threatened with death. Only then do some of their captors contact their families offering their freedom for outrageous ransom payments. Throughout the cycle is repeated. ISIS has killed thousands of Yazidis and raped and enslaved many, many more. They will not stop until all Yazidi men are dead and their women and children violated and enslaved. Canada has now officially joined the war against ISIS. ISIS must be defeated, soon.

Yazidi refugees who have come to our democratic shores are usually traumatized people without wealth and power. At best, they have made the case for their communities' protection to our political leaders here in Canada and the United States, hoping that their appalling suffering will perhaps motivate our governments to do something to help, for humanitarian reasons. In this light, the Yazidis are seen as unfortunate and innocent victims of a conflict that is not of their making. They are treated as victims. This does them a great disservice.

The truth is, North America, Europe and the rest of the free world, who are again at war in Iraq with ISIS, owe the Yazidis, for without them and the many other Muslim Kurds and Arabs that have worked with them, the coalition of the willing would not have won the second Gulf War. They were essential partners.

Alex is not his real name. But he is a Yazidi who now lives somewhere in the United States, where we first met

and worked together on a research project about Iraq. His story is typical of the scores of Yazidi men and women who have risked their own and their family's lives, to act as on-site translators from Arabic and Kurdish into English and back again, for the coalition forces who, during the second Gulf War, did not have the immediate, on the ground linguistic and cross-cultural expertise that is essential for winning hearts and minds in war zones like northern Iraq (Kurdistan). This is because during the last 30 years, most North American academic, anthropological and linguistic experts for these areas have declared that America's interest in the Middle East is “imperialist.” Thus, during and after the second Gulf war, the Yazidi, and the moderate Kurds and the Arab Muslims who worked with them, have provided this essential linguistic service.

Alex tells me, “In 2003, during the second Gulf War, coalition forces visited our village in northern Iraq. Soon after, my brother volunteered to work for them as a Kurdish and Arabic translator, as they slowly consolidated their authority over northern Iraq, protecting the autonomous regional Kurdish government of a federated Iraq that was established after the first Gulf War.

“My brother was the first man from my village to take on such work. He was scared, but he was and is a brave man. For the next two years, I heard stories from him and other Yazidis in the area that he, and a growing number of Yazidi translators, had won the trust of the coalition officers in the north. I decided to join up.

“My mom was worried sick for my safety. We knew that hostile local Muslims, who told people not to help the Americans and their allies, regularly threatened Yazidi translators. By then, I wanted to do something to make the situation better. I also wanted to try and change false Muslim stereotypes about the Yazidi, that we were evil devil worshippers and infidels, uninterested in the greater good.

I presented myself at the appropriate military base, passed my translator's test, was interviewed and got the job. I started work the next day. I knew very well that the Iraqi Islamists hated the coalition and threatened anyone with death for co-operating with them. They would call us ‘spies’ and ‘traitors.’ Later on during my service, my family received a written death threat demanding that I quit. I discussed it with my brothers and we

ignored it. We were dedicated to making things better. We put our faith in the coalition forces and in particular, in the United States of America.

“I started work in February 2005, a day after I passed my test and interview. If people think that a translator sits on the base and interviews local people, while surrounded by heavy guns and barbed-wire fences, they are in for a surprise. Most of a translator's work is carried out on the ground, among the people, in farms, villages, towns and on patrol. It is as dangerous as being an active infantryman. In some ways, it is more dangerous, for you go on patrol without the same long-term training that they have received as professional soldiers.

“On my first day of work, I was assigned to join combat soldiers who

“Many young men and women have recently joined the Yazidi self-defence force. They have only a few thousand rifles, and even fewer bullets

were rooting out armed terrorists in a nearby town. They provided me with a complete military uniform and told me that we were going on a walking patrol. This was to protect me from snipers who, if they saw a local civilian with the soldiers, would shoot me first, as a kind of message to the local people. I was told that the terrorists had decided to target translators so they could disrupt coalition communications with local townspeople and villagers.

“The soldier in charge was an American sergeant. Out of consideration, he asked me to stay in the middle of the team when we were walking in the city, so that I would blend in with the other soldiers. When we left our Humvees, we were immediately ordered to run as fast as we could, towards a stone wall. Once we had reached that landmark, we began to walk. Whenever we came to intersections or open areas, we ran to avoid sniper fire.

“The sun had come up, it was easy to see and we had all worked up a sweat. Each minute felt like an hour. We carefully climbed up onto a stone rooftop and suddenly it felt very cold.

A moment later, we came under fire from snipers. I have never been so focused in all my life.

“I watched in awe as my comrades returned fire, carefully, mindfully and aggressively. They were in the moment, in the flow, as I have later learned to say from my study of the English language. Once in a while, one of them would laugh. I later learned the English expression, ‘laughing in the face of death.’ I then understand what it meant.

“Their good humour and focus calmed me down as I watched them return fire for some hours. As we headed back to the camp, I began to understand, as a young man in my twenties, what a local show of military force really meant. These were brave and patriotic Americans.

“On one occasion, we were guarding a section of the Iraqi border with Syria. As our patrol approached the border area, all of a sudden, we caught sight of a group of five men, all of whom were carrying AK-47s. My officers thought they might be smugglers. The officer yelled at them and told them to immediately raise their hands or we would shoot them.

“As they came into view, I immediately realized that they were rather undisciplined border police and were on our side. They are not smugglers,’ I yelled out. Our soldiers held their fire. Hours later, I realized that I had probably saved these young men's lives by knowing how to spot the difference between ill-disciplined, poorly uniformed troops and the kind of renegade soldiers who go into armed smuggling.

“My most dangerous mission at first looked simple. I was working with a team from the coalition forces. We were on a joint patrol with members of the newly constituted Iraqi Army. Together, we were tasked with finding places for new Iraqi army bases. As our patrol left a dirt road and approached the highway, a bomb exploded, 20 feet away from me. Stones and metal fragments went flying everywhere and the air was filled with dust. One fragment wounded me. Had I not been wearing my helmet, I may not have survived. My commanding officer was quite shaken. We pulled back immediately.

“I did a lot of translation for and with the Iraqi Army and among Kurdish and Arab tribal leaders. As I proved myself as a translator in the field, I was sometimes asked to stay on base and translate documents. All the while, I worked at better understanding

American English. This included all of the military acronyms, which are not part of normal English, but essential to American military life. I watched a lot of American films and TV shows.

“I worked as a translator for the coalition for just under five years, day in and day out. I was loyal, trustworthy and hard working. I put great hope in the fact that the Kurdish government and their peshmerga militias were attempting to create a place where Yazidi and Iraq's Christian minorities can, like them, live in freedom and security. During my time as a translator, I observed that the Yazidi were essential partners of the coalition forces in northern Iraq. I do know that over the last 10 years, many of our Yazidi translators were targeted and killed by radical Islamists in Iraq. It is a tough job and not for the faint-hearted.

“When I finally reached America and became an American citizen, I realized that I now had the right to lobby for the rights of the Yazidi, and all of Iraq's threatened minorities who are now being slaughtered by ISIS. I am now a resident of the U.S., but I feel that my life's work has just begun. There is so much suffering there.”

Alex is visiting Iraq. Last week, he sent me a telephone number where I could contact him. During our phone call, we caught up on each other's news. He told me, “You know Geoffrey, you were born and raised in North America. America is a seductive place. The cities gleam, people get on with their lives, Americans take freedom for granted, and it is easy to forget where you come from. I cannot do that. I am haunted by the recent slaughter and the ongoing enslavement of the Yazidi. I will not be quiet until someone defeats ISIS. I will not and cannot forget my people until they are as free as I, in Iraq or America.”

Since last summer's slaughter and siege of the Yazidi in Sinjar and on the Nineveh plains by ISIS, these peace-loving people have finally taken up arms against their oppressors. Many young men and women have recently joined the Yazidi self-defence force. With a few thousand Kalashnikovs and even fewer bullets, they stand ready to fight ISIS on the front lines of a war that our country has officially joined.

Canada is now sending in its jets against ISIS in Iraq. Ordinary Canadians must demand that Prime Minister Harper and President Obama do something to protect and defend the Yazidi. The new coalition forces must do everything they can to defend them on the ground and help them to return to their ancestral homes, now occupied by ISIS fighters. At the same time, those in the displacement camps in Iraq need our immediate humanitarian assistance. We must help the Yazidi in every way possible. We owe it to them. They have always been our allies.

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