

How Nadia Murad became the reluctant champion of Yazidi suffering and resilience

Murad has traveled to more than two dozen countries to tell her story of being an ISIS captive.

by [Kristen Chick](#) in the [October 25, 2017](#) issue



Nadia Murad in January 2017. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Diputació de Barcelona](#).

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) It was perhaps her last chance for escape. Weeks earlier, militants from the self-described Islamic State fighters had murdered Nadia Murad's family and taken her captive. Along with other young Yazidi women, she was transported to Mosul, in northern Iraq. She was beaten and raped, then passed as human bounty among the militants.

Murad, 21 years old at the time, had already attempted escape once, through an open window. She was quickly caught and gang-raped as punishment. Now her latest captor was telling her he was going to take her to Syria and sell her to another fighter. Somehow, she summoned the strength to try fleeing again.

When he left the house unguarded, she put on the garments that covered her face and body and slipped quietly out into the street. Nearby was a mosque where ISIS fighters often went to pray. She instinctively turned her back to it and began walking in the opposite direction. She desperately needed help. But knocking on the wrong door could send her right back to unimaginable suffering. When she came to an area where the houses were dilapidated, she decided to take a chance, reasoning that the militants would have commandeered nicer dwellings. She tapped on a door.

"Out came a family, and they pulled me in," she says. "I told them I am from Sinjar, and what happened to me. They told me ... we don't have any relation to Daesh," the Arabic acronym for ISIS. "So they didn't return me to them."

Instead, they risked their lives to spirit her to safety: the family's eldest son drove her out of ISIS territory as she donned the robes again, posing as his wife.

Today, three years later, Murad has become the international face of Yazidi suffering—and resilience. She has traveled to more than two dozen countries to tell her story. In September 2016, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime appointed her a goodwill ambassador for the dignity of survivors of human trafficking.

"It wasn't something I wanted; it wasn't something I sought out, but it just got bigger and bigger," she said. "And the bigger it gets, the more tired I become."

Murad is now preparing to step back from her public role and focus on her own healing. Some of her goals have been realized, such as recognition by the UN, the United States, and others of the ISIS attacks on Yazidis as genocide.

In August, Iraq agreed to let the UN Security Council appoint independent investigators to collect evidence of ISIS crimes, the first step toward holding the group accountable for its mass executions. But advocates are waiting to see whether the move is followed by action. Meanwhile, thousands of Yazidi women and children remain in ISIS bondage, and thousands of others are still displaced, living in tent cities in northern Iraq, their future in the country uncertain.

Yet, amid all the atrocity and deprivation, one voice keeps tugging at the world's conscience.

Slight and soft-spoken, Murad was an unlikely candidate to become the most internationally recognized advocate for her people. She comes from the dusty village of Kojo, in northern Iraq, and had never left the country before seeking refuge in Germany in 2015.

"She wasn't born to be an activist," says Murad Ismael, executive director of the Yazidi advocacy organization Yazda. "She wasn't born to be a leader, honestly."

In summer 2014, she was preparing to begin her final year of secondary school. University was rarely an option for girls from Kojo, because it meant traveling to Erbil or Mosul. Murad had other plans: she loved to do the hair and makeup of her sisters, nieces, and friends, and wanted to open a salon after graduating. She was close to her large family—two sisters and eight brothers—and after her father's death in 2003, especially to her oldest brother. Like others in the small community, the family grew crops and raised animals and lived in a simple house.

Kojo is in Sinjar, a region in northern Iraq that's home to the majority of the world's Yazidis, who number fewer than a million. The Yazidi faith combines elements of Zoroastrianism, Islam, and Christianity, and members of the tiny minority generally marry only within their own group. ISIS's genocidal campaign against the Yazidis, whom they consider polytheists, is the latest in a long history of persecution.

Murad has recounted, over and over again, the events that followed the militants' arrival in Kojo on August 3, 2014. On August 15, they rounded up the villagers, separating men and women, and took away their cellphones and jewelry. Murad watched from the second story of the village school as the extremists drove the men—including five of her brothers and one half-brother—to the edge of the village and shot them.

The older women, including her mother, were also killed. Murad, her sisters, and her nieces were taken captive, caught up in ISIS's scheme to enslave Yazidi women, indoctrinate the children, and massacre the rest of the population.

These atrocities led President Barack Obama to order U.S. airstrikes in Iraq in order to help rescue tens of thousands of Yazidis stranded on Mt. Sinjar.

Murad's escape came weeks later, and she arrived in the refugee camp in Iraqi Kurdistan, where her surviving family members were staying, in early September 2014. A year later, she flew to Germany as part of a special program launched by the German state of Baden-Württemberg to offer refuge to survivors of ISIS violence, nearly all of them Yazidi women and children.

Murad's life these days is a long way from the horrors of the past, though she says they are always with her. Her days are filled with speeches and engagements. In the past few months alone, she has met the prime minister of Norway and the foreign ministers of Spain and Austria, spoken at the opening session of a counterterrorism conference organized by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and traveled to Rome to meet the pope.

Murad is a tiny woman, often dwarfed by the public figures she encounters. In these meetings she appears reticent, but in private she is warm and confident. She speaks in soft, even tones and does not hesitate to clarify when she has been misunderstood.

On this morning she has a photo shoot for the German edition of her forthcoming memoir, *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity, and My Fight Against the Islamic State*. Murad pulls up a photo of her with her niece Kathreen. The daughter of her eldest brother, Kathreen was like a sister to her growing up. In the photo, Murad wears a bright pink dress, hoop earrings, and heavy makeup. They're both smiling—something Murad seldom does in public now. Last year Kathreen was killed by an improvised explosive device as she escaped from ISIS captivity. Another devastating blow came in July when Murad's niece Nisreen, also a captive, was killed in the battle for Mosul.

In Germany, where she lives near the southern city of Stuttgart, Murad leads a quiet life when she's not pressing the Yazidi cause. She stays with her older sister, and their conversations often drift back to when they will be able to go home. She likes to take long walks outdoors and listen to music.

“Whenever I get a call from the camps in Iraq that someone has been liberated, that so-and-so’s daughter was liberated, I feel overwhelming joy again,” she says. “Whenever Daesh loses territory, of course this brings me happiness. Other than that, there’s no reason to be happy.”

Murad stepped into the limelight unwittingly. In December 2015, leaders of Yazda, the Yazidi advocacy organization, learned that the UN Security Council wanted to invite a Yazidi survivor to speak during its first session on human trafficking.

It was an opportunity for the community to underline the plight of its people to diplomats from the most powerful nations in the world. Several people immediately suggested Murad, impressed by her courage and the powerful way she had already shared her story in smaller settings.

Murad had never heard of the Security Council. She assumed that the event would resemble the interviews with journalists she had done before, so she said yes. No one, least of all her, expected the appearance would catapult her to fame.

“This could have been just another meeting that nobody listened to,” said Ismael, director of Yazda. “And we honestly . . . thought that’s what would happen.”

It turned out to be much more. Murad sat at the end of the Council’s horseshoe-shaped table and spoke in a steady voice that was quiet but firm. “I’m here to tell you my story,” she said, leaning toward the microphone. She did so unflinchingly, and then implored the Council to recognize the attack on Yazidis as genocide, rescue those still in captivity, and bring ISIS fighters to justice.

When she stopped speaking, the normally staid chamber erupted in applause. Soon after, the interview requests and then the invitations to address parliaments and meet world leaders started rolling in.

When she gives speeches, Murad, in addition to highlighting the mass slaughter of Yazidis, is careful to nearly always include other beleaguered Iraqi minorities, including Christians, in her appeals for help. She also asks Muslims to work against extremism in Islam.

She’s driven by a clear sense of duty to fulfill her role as witness and activist to what’s happened to the Yazidis. When an audience member at the Hamburg event praised her for her strength, she objected. “We became victims, later emigrants,

later refugees, and ... I came to tell all the world what had happened not because I am strong but only because we have nothing to lose," she said. "I am afraid that Yazidis and Yazidism will vanish and will not be able to resist the extremists."

Her presence is powerful partly because of the direct way she relates the horror she suffered. She uses the word *rape* instead of euphemisms. Often, when she tells her story, she speaks in an even tone, without visible traces of distress. She makes clear that many Yazidi women have suffered far worse than she.

"Of course I'm not comfortable when I talk about these things," she says. "I'm not happy to speak every day in front of cameras and journalists asking me, How were you raped? Rape—in the Middle East it's shameful to talk about this. I think about it at night, what I said and how it made me feel."

And what makes her accounts so powerful—the direct telling of her trauma—has kept her from healing, because she constantly relives the horror.

"Every day I feel like it's the day I was freed from Daesh, every time I speak about my story I feel like it's the day I was liberated," she said. "Nothing has changed in my life. I know I came here as a witness, and I should tell what I've seen so far and what I lived through, but I know that there is a limit to that. There's a time where I should stop and take care of myself."

In June, Murad was in Hamburg to speak at the opening of "Days of Exile," a weeks-long program of discussions and events. The hall was tightly packed. Many were from Germany's large Yazidi community, and their respect and admiration for Murad was evident during the question-and-answer session afterward.

Ameena Saeed Hasan, a Yazidi and a former member of Iraq's parliament who has worked to free Yazidi captives, says Murad is seen as a hero among Yazidis, particularly survivors. She recalls how Murad was unsure of her place when she met her a few months after her escape. "She asked me—I will never forget that—she asked me, 'I am still Yazidi?' "

Murad was fearful, Hasan said, because her captors had forced her to profess conversion to Islam. An added trauma for many survivors was being raped by Muslims when their Yazidi faith decrees that they marry only other Yazidis. "I told her, yes, because in your heart you are Yazidi, and what happened to you, you didn't do that by yourself, they forced you to do that," Hasan said.

While Murad is widely admired by others in her community, her prominence has also made her a target for those seeking endorsements for their political positions. Yazidis in Iraq are stuck in the middle of a political conflict between Kurdish factions. Sinjar itself is claimed by both the semiautonomous Kurdish region and the state of Iraq.

Untangling how to deliver Murad's message without taking a stance—she has remained staunchly nonpolitical—is difficult, said Ismael, who helps her write speeches: “We had to create like a wall around Nadia just to protect her, because as soon as she became that figure, there were all these political things. Some people wanted her to attack all Muslims, some people wanted her to attack the Kurds, to say this and that.”

Critics faulted her after it became apparent that she had misstated the length of her captivity during the 2015 speech before the Security Council. She said she had been held for three months, even though it was a few weeks. Some claimed she exaggerated her ordeal. Murad and Ismael said it was an honest mistake—she hadn't kept track of the time. They corrected the record as soon as they realized it.

“On this issue, I faced a lot of hostility, from many politicians and political parties. I told them, ‘Go, bring Hajji Salman,’” Murad said, referring to one of her captors. “‘He’ll tell you the story.’”

For all the difficulties Murad has faced in her work, writing her book was the most taxing, she said. She spent about six months working with a ghostwriter and translator to tell her story. “Halfway through writing this I regretted starting it, because it was very consuming emotionally,” she said. “I mentioned all the details of my story, memories from childhood, my family, people that I know, all the Yazidis, the victims, I told everything. It’s all written in this book. I did it for my sake, and for the people of Sinjar.”

Murad plans to use proceeds from the book, published this month, to establish a more formal initiative supporting survivors and continuing to call for accountability for ISIS crimes.

In May, Iraqi forces recaptured Kojo from ISIS. Within a day of learning the news, Murad boarded a plane to Iraq, against the advice of German officials. But she would not be stopped.

“I have been waiting for this moment for a long time, so I was determined,” she said.

A video published by Kurdish news website Rudaw shows Murad entering her home for the first time since 2014. Murad sinks to the ground as she passes through the doorway. The roof of the house is gone, and the inside is ransacked. Murad rises and leans against the wall as she lets out piercing wails. Her brother kneels on the ground, his face in his hands. They are surrounded by cameras, their grief on display for the world.

Today, most Yazidi villages, like Kojo, remain empty. ISIS has lost much of its territory in Iraq, yet few Yazidis have been able to return to live in the liberated areas, prevented not only by the security situation but by political conflict. It will take more than just running water and rebuilt homes to allow people to return, says Murad: They need reason to believe they will live in safety. Murad and many Yazidis have long asked for international protection, to no avail.

At the very least, she said, Yazidis and other minorities must be given a degree of self-rule to govern their own areas. On her trip to see Kojo, she stayed a week with her family in a camp for those who have been displaced. “Everyone was saying either we get protection and we get our rights back, or we will become refugees and immigrate to Europe,” she said.

Murad is unsure of her future. She plans to step back from her public role at the end of this year, though she will continue her work through the organization she’s setting up to help survivors. She is reluctant to speculate about life beyond activism—she struggles to think of her own future while her people are still enslaved, while her mother and brothers have not yet been buried.

She loves Germany, but doesn’t see herself building a life there. Maybe, she said, she will open a salon one day, in Kojo.

A version of this article, which was edited on October 6, appears in the October 25 print edition under the title “People: Nadia Murad.”