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Joint NGO Statement: Humanitarian and Security Implications of the COVID-19 crisis in northern Iraq

An impending humanitarian and security disaster looms large in Iraq. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates an ongoing crisis that affects displaced communities across the country, including the survivors of atrocities perpetrated by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). These already traumatized communities now face restrictions of movement that will exacerbate underlying psychological distress that may lead to **increased suicide rates**. Furthermore, Iraq's recent economic collapse aggravates social instability and causes a security vacuum, which in turn **heightens the risk of further ISIS attacks and sows the seeds for future atrocities**. The Government of Iraq and the United Nations (UN), including the World Health Organization (WHO), can take simple and effective action now by following the steps outlined below:

The public health system in Sinjar and the wider Nineveh Governorate was decimated by ISIS during its brutal occupation and genocidal campaign in Iraq, beginning in 2014. According to the UN, 1.8 million people remain displaced, living in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps across Iraq due to persistent insecurity and a lack of reconstruction work. Globally promoted hand-washing practices are simply insufficient to arrest the spread of a respiratory disease like COVID-19 in such conditions, while social distancing will prove impossible in high-density camps where scores of families live in direct proximity to each other. At present, it is impossible to apprehend the extent of the spread of the virus because no testing for the disease is taking place in the camps, while restrictions of movement impede the work of humanitarian actors who provide basic essentials such as food, water and medicine. Many Yazidis (Ezidis/Yezidis) want to return to Sinjar, but security, reconstruction and basic services are still lacking to allow a dignified return. There are currently only two hospitals and just one ventilator to assist the current population of around 160,000 people in the region. **The WHO must undertake an urgent assessment mission to Sinjar, Tel Afar and the Nineveh Plain, and provide testing capacities for all IDP camps.**

Another alarming corollary of the COVID-19 pandemic in Iraq is the psychological impact on at-risk communities, including Yazidis, Turkmen and Christians, such as Assyrians. Prior to the outbreak, Médecins Sans Frontières reported on a debilitating mental health crisis among Yazidis in Iraq, including a rising number of suicides. The entire Yazidi population is experiencing mental trauma caused by the acts of genocide, and some are displaying severe psychological difficulties. Among those at heightened risk are the women and girls who experienced systemic sexual violence, and the boys who were forcibly recruited by ISIS. No effective trauma treatment is currently being provided to children that were held in captivity or were born out of war. COVID-19 has also resulted in the suspension of the limited psychosocial therapy support that was being provided. Mental health professionals have identified hundreds of civilians at high risk for suicide, and two suicides by self-immolation have already been reported. Many more attempted suicides continue to go unreported due to stigma. **The WHO must immediately address this acute mental health crisis and implement enhanced suicide prevention awareness campaigns.**

COVID-19 and the precipitous drop in oil prices have caused the Iraqi economy to collapse, leaving a dangerous security vacuum for ISIS to exploit. Indeed, the resultant political turmoil and social strife recall the very

conditions that earlier incarnations of ISIS and its supporters capitalized on during its initial surge almost a decade ago. According to International Crisis Group, ISIS in its weekly newsletter *Al-Naba* called on its fighters to attack and weaken its enemies while they are distracted by the pandemic. COVID-19 has also hastened the departure of some coalition forces from Iraq, weakening counter-terrorism operations, while some ISIS detainees have recently escaped prison in Syria. There is an urgent need for reform in the civilian security sector, in order to integrate regional militias into a unified Federal Police that upholds the rule of law and protects all citizens, regardless of religion or clan affiliation. **To counteract the continued ISIS threat, the Government of Iraq must work with the United Nations and expedite efforts to bring ISIS fighters to justice for the genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes and to incorporate the aforementioned international crimes into its penal code.**

COVID-19 is a pandemic the likes of which we have not seen before. Survivors of genocide and other mass atrocity crimes are now waiting for this silent death to pass through the camps and their homes, unable to fight back. There is a significant attendant threat to global security if ISIS uses this opportunity to regroup and return, but it does not have to be this way. Iraqi authorities and the United Nations must act now by means of:

- **An urgent WHO assessment mission to Sinjar, Tel Afar and the Nineveh Plain in addition to the provision of testing for COVID-19 in all IDP camps.**
- **A WHO mental health crisis plan, including suicide prevention awareness campaigns.**
- **Expediting efforts to bring ISIS fighters to justice for the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes and to incorporate the aforementioned international crimes into its penal code.**
- **The UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights should, where present, monitor and report on the impact of measures taken by the authority to stem COVID-19 on human rights.**

Signatories:

1. Aegis Trust (Rwanda/United Kingdom)
2. Air Bridge Iraq - Luftbrücke Irak (Germany)
3. Asia-Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (Australia)
4. Assyrian Policy Institute (United States of America)
5. Center for Justice and Accountability (United States of America)
6. Central Council of Yazidi in Germany - Zentralrats der Êzîden in Deutschland (Germany)
7. Free Yezidi Foundation (The Netherlands)
8. Genocide Alert (Germany)
9. International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect (United States of America)
10. International Council for Diplomacy and Dialogue (France)
11. Iraqi Christian Relief Council (United States of America)
12. Jiyan Foundation for Human Rights (Iraq)
13. Minority Rights Group International (United Kingdom)
14. Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies (Canada)
15. Nadia's Initiative (United States of America)
16. Nobody's Listening (United Kingdom)
17. Religious Freedom Institute (United States of America)
18. Sanabel Al-Mostaqbal Organization for Civil Society Development (Iraq)
19. Society for Threatened Peoples - Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker-International (Germany)
20. Trauma Treatment International (United Kingdom)
21. Turkmen Rescue Foundation (Iraq)
22. Voice of Ezidis (France)
23. Women's Refugee Commission (United States of America)
24. World Federalist Movement - Institute for Global Policy (United States of America)
25. Yazda (United States of America)

Enquiries:

Saad Babir: media@yazda.org +1(402) 484-1852