



## **Iraqi doctor provides care and comfort to Yazidi survivors**

*Gynaecologist Nagham Hasan has spent years providing medical and emotional care to former ISIS captives, and pledges to continue “for the long haul” despite often harrowing work.*

By Cathy Otten in Duhok, Iraq

4 October 2022

Four women sit huddled together around gynaecologist Nagham Hasan in a one-room cabin in the Rwanga camp for displaced people in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Dr. Nagham, wearing a white coat, reassures each patient separately. She leans in closer, holding Leila’s hand, and then turns slightly to check another woman’s pulse. Her brow is furrowed with concentration yet her touch is assured.

It is September, eight years after these women were forced into slavery by ISIS militants. Outside, the heat of summer is intense. When the generator shuts off, the only sound is that of the women’s hushed voices. They speak quickly and urgently, with a rare sense of hope afforded by the doctor’s visit. Four years since they escaped captivity, life remains precarious.

“Thank you, doctor, for what you have done for us. You were the first one who came to comfort us, counsel us and lead us. Without you, we wouldn’t be ourselves,” says Nergiz, 42, who was taken captive in 2014. Like all survivors in this story, due to stigma and risks of reprisals including from her own community, she has chosen to use a pseudonym.

“We were all captives. Each one of us spent more than four years in the hands of ISIS,” says Nergiz, pointing to the group of women around her. The Yazidi religious minority were singled out and subjected to a devastating, genocidal campaign in 2014 because of their religious beliefs.

In August 2014, ISIS fighters captured Sinjar in north-western Iraq, executing thousands of Yazidi men, women and children, while abducting more than 6,000 Yazidis and subjecting women and girls to the most horrific of atrocities, in particular sexual violence and enslavement. Sinjar was liberated a year later, but some 3,000 Yazidis are still missing, and over 200,000 remain displaced.

Dr. Nagham, 45, turns to Nergiz and addresses her softly: “I am always here to support you. If I can’t support you it’s because it is not in my power. My aim is to take you through the trauma you experienced.” She wraps a blood pressure monitor around Nergiz’s upper arm, tightens it and waits.

As a child in the town of Bashiqa, northern Iraq, Dr. Nagham, who is also Yazidi, noticed the injustice and abuse women faced in the wider society and decided she wanted to help. She trained as a doctor in Mosul and began her medical profession with a dream to treat women who were unable to conceive. But after 2014, her career took a different path.

“I saw the catastrophe that happened to the Yazidi women – the way they were subjected to verbal abuse and rape,” says Dr. Nagham. When everyone else was fleeing, she chose to act and headed toward the camps to treat the survivors. The former captives needed treatment for

infections and injuries caused by torture and widespread sexual violence as well as their poor living conditions.

Soon after, she established an NGO, called Hope Makers, to treat survivors while working as the director of Sheikhan General Hospital. As well as lending her medical expertise, she provides comfort to survivors with personal support.

Sometimes, however, Dr. Nagham is at a loss for words when trying to comfort her patients, especially when treating girls as young as eight: “This really affected me, and shocked my humanity because how do you comfort a child who is so young and was raped by a 60-year-old man several times?”

When grief and worry overcome her, Dr. Nagham goes to her mother, Suham, for guidance. She tells her that she must keep going; that the survivors need her. Her daughter has always been like this, says Suham, smiling; as a child, Dr. Nagham acted like a mother to her younger siblings.

Despite having the opportunity to leave Iraq, Dr. Nagham decided “categorically” to stay: “I am here for the long haul,” she says. “I have a message; I have a cause. I think [the survivors] still need help so I don’t want to give up on them. Being a Yazidi woman and having the same faith as the survivors really helped me when talking to them and understanding their needs.”

For her outstanding service and commitment to her community and displaced people in Iraq, Dr. Nagham has been chosen as the regional winner for the Middle East and North Africa of the 2022 UNHCR Nansen Refugee Award, a prestigious annual prize that honours those who have gone to extraordinary lengths to help forcibly displaced or stateless people.

Displaced Yazidis still live in extreme poverty in camps, informal displacement sites or urban areas, while other families are still searching for missing loved ones. Many Yazidis still cannot return home to Sinjar because of the lack of public services such as health and education, the destruction of their homes, continued security challenges and a lack of access to justice. ‘And some Yazidi women, those raising children born during their ordeals, face complications reintegrating into their communities.

Dr. Nagham has so far treated 1,200 survivors. Her NGO, Hope Makers, now has 50 staff members, and two clinics in Sinjar offering counselling, psychiatry and community outreach for survivors returning home. Some of her former patients have even gone on to become advocates for peace and human rights in their own [right](#), which she says is a source of great pride and happiness.

Back in Rwanga camp, Leila, 42, sits to Dr. Nagham’s left. She was forced into slavery for four years and was tortured repeatedly. ISIS executed her husband and three older sons, she says. “I have lost so much – so many people ... I do not have the courage to speak of the atrocities I witnessed.”

Dr. Nagham begins to cry. Leila says that her experience in captivity has taken its toll on her body and mind, and that survivors like her feel that the world has forgotten their plight and moved on. That is why the continued care and attention offered by Dr. Nagham means so much. “From the minute we arrived home we benefited from the doctor’s support, and she is still helping us,” says Leila. “She is always there for us.”

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