Only the Brave

In 2018 Nadia Murad was awarded the joint Nobel Peace Prize. A Yazidi activist and advocate for survivors of genocide and sexual violence, she is also the founder of Nadia's Initiative.

By Sarah Fones

Photo By Abid Shamdeen

Iraqi activist Nadia Murad was seemingly ubiquitous in April 2019. The Nobel laureate spoke at Harvard, penned an op-ed in *The Washington Post,* was honored at the 10th annual DVF Awards, and appeared alongside her legal counsel, Amal Clooney, at a U.N. National Security Council meeting in the span of just weeks.

The previous month had been markedly more somber. In March, Murad had returned to her hometown of Kocho, a tiny village in the Sinjar Province of northern Iraq. There, she saw the exhumation of bodies from 13 mass graves. The dead are believed to be Yazidis, an ethno-religious minority group to which Murad belongs and whom ISIS considered heretics.

Murad, 26, was kidnapped from her family farm in Kocho and enslaved for three months by ISIS militants in 2014. She endured rape and torture, ultimately escaping after finding a safe haven with a local family. Since then, she has worked tirelessly not only to advocate for survivors of rape and genocide but to help to raise the profile of Yazidis in the international community.

When ISIS overtook Kocho in August 2014, Yazidi men were driven to a field and executed. Separated from their families, young Yazidi women and girls entered a slave market. Murad herself was sold to a judge. She has since spoken out publicly against both Iraqi and Kurdish leaders, who she says failed to protect the Yazidi minority.

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Murad spoke to *Mission* in April through her Nadia's Initiative cofounder, translator, and fiancé, Abid Shamdeen, a fellow Iraqi from Sinjar. "What we're trying to do is urge the international community and international organizations to recognize and protect not only Yazidis but all minorities in Iraq," Murad explains. "This is something that we advocate for constantly with our partners, with the regional government of Kurdistan, and with the Iraqi government as well."

In 2015, Murad gave her first interview to the press from Rwanga, an Iraqi refugee camp. Later that year she was among 1,000 women and children who relocated as refugees to the German state of Baden-Württemberg. Murad spoke for the first time in front of the U.N. Security Council on human trafficking in December 2015. The next year she founded her advocacy organization, Nadia's Initiative, and received both the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize and the Sakharov Prize from the European Parliament. Murad also became the first United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODOC) Goodwill Ambassador for the Dignity of Survivors of Human Trafficking.

Her journey from victim to activist has been documented twice, first as a memoir, *The Last Girl,* and later in the documentary "On Her Shoulders." As readers and viewers learned, Murad's work is never-ending. It's both emotionally draining and mentally taxing—it would be easier to give up and simply try to live peacefully somewhere. But Murad's fighting spirit is indefatigable.

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Right now, Murad's focus is on the missing Yazidis. At least 3,000 were unaccounted for as of May, following the defeat of the ISIS caliphate in Syria by U.S.-backed Kurdish forces. Some had managed to escape, landing at al-Hol, a detention center near the border of Iraq. "It's a whole camp in Syria where they put most of the ISIS families, and among them, there are Yazidi women and children," Murad explains. "But there is no specific team or effort to go and rescue them."

Murad says they've asked everyone they know in the Iraqi government to intervene. They've also made official requests for volunteers to seek out the displaced Yazidis. Still, nothing has happened. Al-Hol currently houses an estimated 72,000 people, including not only women and children but foreigners, former jihadists, and the wives and children of slain jihadists. Murad and Shamdeen attribute the lack of traction in part to logistical hurdles as well as plain indifference. Remaining and returning Yazidis constitute a small population far removed culturally and geographically from the traditional Western centers of power. Their plight is miserable and frighteningly common. Cynics would argue there's no financial or political incentive to intercede on the Yazidis' behalf, hence the lack of interest in taking action.

"It is inconceivable that the conscience of the leaders of 195 countries around the world is not mobilized to liberate these girls," Murad said when accepting her Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo last December. "What if they were a commercial deal, an oil field, or a shipment of weapons? Most certainly, no efforts would be spared to liberate them." Murad used her Nobel Peace Prize money to seed the Sinjar Action Fund, which aims to advance reconstruction efforts in northern Iraq. Rebuilding farms and hospitals destroyed by ISIS remains one of their biggest challenges, she says. A small group of leaders, including the French president, Emmanuel Macron, has repeatedly welcomed meetings with Murad and pledged assistance.

When asked what makes her feel optimistic, Murad answers: "Having world leaders like President Macron committed and wanting to help support our cause, and willing to hear us every time. Not only that, but doing tangible work—for example, helping relocate those women and children," she adds, referring to Macron's pledge to house 100 Yazidi refugees in France this year.

Help from civilians, particularly young people in Europe and the U.S., has also been key. In addition to visiting places such as Harvard and speaking directly via conferences and lectures, Murad amplifies her message on social media, where she has an active presence on Facebook and Twitter. News articles and statements in response to current events are regularly posted to Nadia's Initiative online as well.

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The majority of the people in Oslo the day Murad accepted her prize were probably at least two decades her senior, and while they wield much of the power, it's Millennials and Gen Zers who are taking up the mantle. "The Yazidi cause has mostly been brought up by the younger generation of Yazidis," Shamdeen says. "Nadia and other survivors have come out and spoken. Others have created initiatives to help people in the camps, and those who returned to Sinjar participated actively in the whole process. Our cause has become an international one."

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