

ACTIVIST PROFILE

ADIBA QASIM

"I took every single [opportunity] to raise my voice and to do something and be involved with people."



ABOUT ADIBA QASIM

Adiba Qasim is a human rights and refugee activist. She was born in Iraq and spent most of her life in the village of Khanasor in the Sinjar district, a mountainous area in the north. Like most people in this region, Adiba belongs to a religious minority group. Their faith is called "Yazidism".

As a child, Adiba was not allowed to go to school. Before marrying Adiba's father, her mother was married to another man. He died during the war, but his body was never found. Without proof of his death, Adiba's mother was not allowed to get remarried. Without her parents' marriage being officially recognized, neither was Adiba's existence. Because she had no official passport or other identity documents, Adiba was not

allowed to go to school. However, she started to learn how to read and write on her own by sneaking up to the windows of the local school and secretly listening in on the lessons.

In 2003, the body of her mother's first husband was found. Now her parents could be officially recognized as married. It took five more years for Adiba to get her official documents. She still wanted to go to school and later to university. She convinced a member of the ministry of education to let her take the final exams in Mosul (the second largest city in Iraq). Right after she took her exams, the Islamic State occupied Mosul and Adiba never heard back from the school about if she had passed her exams. The Islamic State ("IS" or also called "ISIL" or "ISIS") is an Islamic terrorist organization. They kill people with other beliefs, because they think only Islam is the right belief. On August 3rd, 2014, they started their attack on the Yazidis, Adiba's people. They killed and enslaved thousands of people and children.

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IS has long persecuted the Yazidi people and their faith. Yazidism is a monotheistic religion (meaning they only believe in one God). It is being passed down orally and has no sacred book like the Bible or the Koran. They also believe that a fallen Angel was given the task to fulfil God's duties on Earth. IS wrongly views Yazidis as devil-worshippers, because within Islam and Christianity, the fallen angel is the devil. Because Yazidis have no Koran or Bible (a lack of scripture), IS also does not accept them as "People of the Book".

After the attack, Yazidi men were forced into the military, while women and children were raped, kept as slaves and turned into child soldiers. Adiba, her three siblings, and her parents were able to flee and escape to a refugee camp in Turkey. That day, she lost many friends and family.

After a year in a refugee camp, Adiba sent her siblings to Europe. Two went by boat over the Mediterranean Sea and the other two completed the journey by foot. They all survived the journey and now live in Germany.

But people that were not able to flee were still suffering. Adiba felt guilty for being away from her community and decided to go back to Iraq to give support. By the time she returned, IS had destroyed her village. Adiba used her language skills to work in rehabilitation centres as a translator. Her home town had become a dangerous place. After receiving threats to her life, she decided to flee again. This time, Switzerland became her new shelter (a place of refuge).

She arrived in Switzerland in 2017 and now lives in Geneva. With the support of a special program for refugees called "Horizon Academic", she was able to attend University. She is currently studying International Relations at the University of Geneva. In the future, she wants to use her degree to help her people and other communities who have suffered these horrific fates.

ON ACTIVISM

Adiba first became an activist when she was a refugee in Turkey. The Yazidi genocide garnered global attention and the international media came to the refugee camps to report. Adiba wanted to raise attention for the situation of her people and ask for help from other countries. That is why she told as many journalists as possible about what had happened to her and her people. She even taught herself English in order to better be able to speak to reporters.

Now that she knew English, she started working as a translator for many of the Yazidi refugees, especially children and women. She listened to their stories, made sure their voices were heard, and helped them get the resources they needed. During this period, she documented everything she experienced and through that work, she was able to present a clear image of the devastation that had occurred.

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After coming to Switzerland, Adiba became a Young Leader in Foreign and Security Policy for the “Geneva Centre of Security Policy” or “GCSP”. The GCSP is a Swiss organisation that provides training in education and peace relations to government branches. Together with the GCSP, Adiba continues to raise awareness about the Yazidi genocide.

THE YAZIDI GENOCIDE

“The public statements and conduct of ISIS and its fighters clearly demonstrate that ISIS intended to destroy the Yazidis of Sinjar, composing the majority of the world’s Yazidi population, in whole or in part.”¹ This was the conclusion of a United Nations investigation on what had happened to Adiba’s people.

When two groups are fighting and one of them wants to completely destroy the other group, it is called “genocide”. In this case, two groups do not fight because they have different opinions, but because the fighting parties belong to different groups. In the case of the Yazidi genocide, the Islamic State wanted to completely destroy the Yazidi people because they belong to a different religion.

Another example of genocide is the NAZI’s attempt to destroy all Jews during the Second World War, simply for being of Jewish faith. Genocide also took place in 1994 in Rwanda, when members of the Hutu ethnic majority tried to kill all members of a different ethical minority group.

When a crime happens, investigation and punishment by a court should follow. Crimes as grave as genocides can even be brought before an international court. In the case of the NAZI’s and the Rwandan genocide, special courts were established. Now, these crimes can be brought before the “International Criminal Court” that is in The Hague in the Netherlands.

The people that killed the Yazidis are also being brought to trial. But not all have been caught. In 2018, [Nadia Murad](#) (who is a Yazidi) won the Nobel Peace Prize for helping girls that were sexually abused by IS fighters – like she herself was. She works with [Yazda](#), a global Yazidi organization, and international lawyer [Amal Clooney](#) to get IS fighters punished by courts all over the world.



¹ “They came to destroy”: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis, UN Human Rights Council, 15 June 2016
https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf
(last accessed: January 9, 2023)

SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER

BEING A REFUGEE

When people can no longer live freely and safely (for example because of war), they may be forced to flee their country. We call these people “refugees”. When they flee, they leave their homes, jobs, friends and even families, in the hopes of finding a safe place (a “refuge”). Other countries have to take in refugees and ensure their safety. That is a human right.

Before countries let refugees in, they have to check where people have come from and if their stories are true. This process can take a long time and can be very complex. Before governments have completed this check, refugees are not allowed to work. Only children may go to school. They are also not allowed to travel. These factors make this time period even more difficult for refugees.

Adibas’s first request for refugee status in 2017 was rejected. Adiba appealed against her rejection and ultimately won her case. After living in Switzerland for four years, she was finally granted refugee status and received her papers in 2021. Only then could she travel again and see her family in Germany for the first time in years.



INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW WITH ADIBA QASIM

1. WHO INSPIRES YOU THE MOST?

The former director of the GCSP, Christian Dussey. He is now the head of Switzerland's Federal Intelligence Service. When I think of a leader, I think of him. He is the best example of a true leader that I've seen in my life. There are many people that inspire me, but he has been my main role model for leadership over the last four years. He inspires me a lot.

2. WHAT MAKES YOU FEEL POWERFUL?

Where I come from and the pain that I have experienced, the very difficult things that I have been through and [the fact] that I am still here. When I look back at everything and I realize that I have found my way. This makes me feel very powerful and proud. It makes me believe that nothing is impossible in this world, and that I can arrive anywhere I want to go. My past is what makes me feel powerful.

3. WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE THING TO DO IN YOUR FREE TIME?

Sports, running. I just ran my first half-Marathon a few weeks ago in Geneva. I loved it so much. I was inspired by a refugee to try it. The running came from somewhere very deep. I wanted to run after reading the story of Samia Yusuf. This was the first half-marathon that I could run for myself, for her, and for other refugees, but it is something that I will continue to do. Her book is called "The Olympic Dream". Everyone – and especially students – should read it.

But I also do other things. I read, sometimes I just chill because I need to be calm. I listen to music and dance in my room; I love dancing!

4. WHAT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF IN YOUR ACTIVISM?

My voice, the fact that I can speak. My capacity to speak.

5. YOU HAVE BEEN THROUGH SO MUCH ALREADY, WHERE DO YOU FIND THE STRENGTH TO CONTINUE YOUR WORK? IS IT A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY?

I don't think this can be summarized in a few sentences. When I look back – and I am 28 years old now – ever since I can remember, I have been fighting, fighting, fighting. My strength comes from when I was this little girl, dreaming of going to school but not being able to. I was running with the children, going to the school building, and staying by a window, learning through the window because I did not have the right to enter the school. I think my strength comes from there.

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That little girl came from this small community and a difficult, conservative country with very few opportunities for girls. I was always different. And I could not accept it. Ever since I can remember I was like “no, no, this is not right!”. I think all of my strength came from there. From that little girl.

6. DO YOU STILL FEEL THAT INNER CHILD IN YOU?

Yes absolutely. This little girl is always with me. The little girl who wants to move and do something. Now I am giving everything to this little girl that she could not have when she was younger. So I keep that little girl with me and let her experience all those adventures that she has always wanted to experience. She goes everywhere with me.

7. WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT RESILIENCE IN YOUNG PEOPLE THAT YOU MET ON THE JOURNEY?

In the refugee camps and post-ISIS, it was just amazing to see young people’s resilience. Some of those children were kidnapped, some of their parents were killed or were separated from them, and they were alone, but they were still going to school in tents. That was the most powerful thing I have seen. It was powerful, but at the same time it made me sad, because they were not in the right place. Those children needed to be taken care of. But seeing them going to those tents and holding their books was amazing, despite everything that they had been through.

8. DO YOU HAVE ANY TIPS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE ON HOW TO STAY STRONG?

Appreciate yourselves. It will help you continue. Self-love is super important, and we do not talk about it enough. It is confidence. We are here, we are healthy, and we can make it. We are human and we have the capacity to do everything we want to do.

This is something I want to emphasise: we are all special. Each one of us has something special and amazing to contribute to the world. We cannot all be the same, and none of us are the same. We are all here for different reasons. I am here because the world needs me. I am different and I can do something that others cannot do. We do not have to be like other people.

9. WHAT WAS THE MOST MEANINGFUL ENCOUNTER IN YOUR LIFE?

I would say the encounter with a friend, a very good friend. His name is David. When I was in a refugee camp in 2015, I was the only one who was speaking to the media and to the journalists that came. They wrote an article in which I was asking for help saying, “We are in a refugee camp, and we need volunteers to come and help us and teach English”. I learned English in the camp as well. So there was this young person who came from the UK. He joined us and taught English at the camp. We became friends, we became a family you know. He was at the camp when people started to cross the sea to go to Europe in 2015. He went back home and collected money from all his friends and family, and he bought life jackets and brought them back for all those people. He is the most selfless person that I have met in my life, and a pure human I would say. He actually just donated a piece of his liver to a one-year-old baby, and I am going to go visit him soon to congratulate him on this humanitarian ac-

tion. We can be humanitarians in so many ways. I do it with my activism, but other people are helping those who are suffering in the hospital. When I asked him why he decided to donate a piece of his liver he said “I love life, I want to live, but the other people also have a right to live. They deserve to live”. He inspires me. I think of him a lot and we still keep in touch.

10. DO YOU FEEL LIKE YOU HAVE BEEN ACCEPTED INTO SWISS SOCIETY?

I left a genocide; I came from a minority and as a journalist and a woman, I went through hard things. Then I arrived here and applied for asylum, and my asylum was rejected. They told me that I did not qualify as a refugee, which was very painful. Imagine going through all those things and then you arrive in what is called “the capital of human rights”, where you think people will understand you. I was naïve and told them the whole reality of what I went through and was rejected. I felt like I was in a place where humanity did not exist. After I was rejected, I thought, “I have lost everything except my dignity” and kept fighting and fighting, until I finally won my case against the governmental wing that had rejected my asylum.

Now I feel like I have absolutely found my place and my home here. There were difficulties along the way, but I still feel like it is an amazing country, and we can make the system better. I do feel accepted now. I am at university for the first time, as a real student. And I have my papers, let me show you [holds up blue passport]. I have never travelled before, only as a refugee to Lebanon and Turkey. Ever since I was a little girl, I had dreamed of the freedom of traveling, and experiencing different places and countries, foods, and smells. I could not travel when I was in Iraq, because it was impossible to get a visa. And when I came here, I again could not move for four years. But now I can travel and go anywhere. Therefore, I now feel accepted. For people reading my story: I want you to know that having these papers is a huge privilege. I want to tell you how lucky you are to have this freedom, that so many other people in the world do not have.

11. WHAT WAS IT LIKE, WAITING TO BE RECOGNIZED AS A REFUGEE?

It was crazy. I had appealed against my first rejection. The genocide was committed on the 3rd of August 2014 and every 3rd of August is hard, you really feel the memory. And then, 3rd of August 2021 my lawyer calls me and says, “Adiba I have a letter for you”. At first, I thought he was just calling to comfort me but then he starts reading the decision about my asylum. It was crazy! I was like, six or seven years before that I had lost everything. I never imagined that I would be celebrating my freedom 7 years later. My papers officially came in December and the first time I travelled was in January 2022 to go and see my family in Germany. I surprised them. I just knocked on their door.

12. WHAT WERE THE FIRST STEPS YOU TOOK TO START YOUR ACTIVISM?

The first steps I took were in the refugee camp in 2014 when I started speaking to the media. I then worked with an organization and learned English to be able to speak directly to the media. After I sent my family to Europe, I went back to Iraq because I was feeling this sense of responsibility because I thought “so many people are killed, my family, my friends, I need to

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go back and do something for the community.” That was a huge decision. I did it and I started [working] with international organizations and the media. I worked and spoke with survivors, child soldiers, and with the military. This is where everything really started.

I have worked a lot in Iraq. Coming here and continuing this work was less difficult. There were many more opportunities, and I took every single one of them to raise my voice, and to do something and be involved with people. I have been speaking a lot. Now I am taking a small break. All those people are telling me that I am inspiring, but I want to be inspired too. So I am going to take some time and be inspired by people. I will continue speaking, writing, and advocating, and I am learning more about it with my studies and my work. I have never stopped since 2014. I have never taken a break because I felt like I had no time. There was so much going on. So many people think that when a refugee arrives in the host country, it is the end of their problems. But I came here and was suffering and was rejected by the authorities. There are still millions of refugees in the world, who are dreaming of being in my place, and they are thinking that this would be the end of their problems. But in reality, it was the beginning of new problems and challenges, of finding my place in Switzerland’s society and being accepted.

13. WHAT COULD SWITZERLAND DO TO BETTER HELP REFUGEES WITHIN THE COUNTRY, BUT ALSO OUTSIDE OF IT?

Before the refugee crisis in Ukraine, I would have maybe said something different. But now I would say that you always speak about educating refugees but never about educating a whole society. Both need education if you want refugees to integrate. You also need to understand why we are here. There are all those stereotypes about refugees and their intentions of coming here, like “They are only coming to make more money”. They view us as uneducated people who need money. But next to me you have lawyers and doctors who are all fleeing from those difficulties in the same way, and no one is happy about it. No one wants to leave everything behind. It is not easy. You leave everything, your culture, your history, your people, your community, and all your values. You do all of this and then you arrive here and are treated badly and as nothing. This is difficult. We would always say that the branches responsible for asylum seekers are not fast enough, that they should be quicker and clearer with their decisions. There are only few refugees that cross more than one border and/or the sea and come to Europe, so Switzerland is not hosting every refugee in the world.

Suddenly, when the Ukrainian war broke out, the community became open to hosting refugees immediately, and the authorities directly sent change and created help for them. They have freedom of movement and were able to attend school and university very quickly, and they can work. We did not have that. It was unequal treatment. In the media, you see people saying: “oh, it is because they are not from Iraq or Afghanistan, and they have blue eyes and are white people” and it hurts so much to hear [that] after going through all of this. And I do think that what Europe has done for Ukrainians shows amazing solidarity, and this is how it should be. But if you have had refugees in your country for ten years already and don’t treat them the same way, leave them in the refugee centres suffering and traumatized and without the right to work, or go to school, or move, this is just horrible. It’s unacceptable. [People] say: “But they are from here, they are from next door.” [Then] I say “What about human rights? We talk about human rights, and this is just not fair, how can you look at someone and treat

them this differently due to the colour of their skin”. It isn’t fair and it hurts as a refugee coming from the middle east. It hurts so much. I think I am a person who is strong and survived all of that, and I am a person who has some capacities. But imagine those poor people in refugee camps who are waiting for their asylum decisions for years. Some of them have been declared to be deported and are waiting in a foyer for that to happen, not knowing when they will be taken somewhere. And I am not saying that it is easier for the Ukrainians, it is difficult for anyone to leave everything behind. But it is so bad. I think the younger generations especially should react and begin to change something. It should not go this way. There will be more refugees coming, climate change refugees too. Countries should change their policies and their ways in order to be better prepared to accept the new refugees that will be coming in the next ten years.

14. HAVE YOU EVER DISCUSSED YOUR EXPERIENCES AND YOUR WORK, ESPECIALLY CONCERNING THE BRAINWASHING OF CHILD SOLDIERS AND SEX SLAVERY WITH YOUNGER KIDS?

I have only ever discussed them with the Robert F. Kennedy Foundation Switzerland. I was a bit worried because I have never spoken to children about my work. I spoke a little about how children are suffering. I was telling them more about my experiences from when I was little and when I was their age. The energy and the reactions were unbelievable! It was one of the most amazing experiences that have happened in my life. They changed me you know. Talking to them and seeing their reactions, it was just indescribable. It was amazing! They were amazing! I cannot describe it. The reaction was strong. Some of them even cried and told me they were touched. They hugged me and were touching my hands. It was just amazing. That day something magical happened. I told them about who I was and about my life and they listened to me, and they asked me so many questions. They were so smart. There was this little girl who said “There is this little girl from Ukraine who is living in our house, how can I deal with that? What can I do for her?”. She was asking for my advice to give to the little girl from Ukraine who was a refugee in her house. It was just amazing. They gave me some snacks and they hugged me. I took the train back and I was just crying the whole way because I was super touched. And on that train coming back to Geneva from Zurich, there was this very little boy, he was maybe 5 or 6 years old. And the whole time he was coming to me and saying, “I want to sit with you, move your bag I want to sit with you”. His mother and sister were sleeping across from me and he was sitting next to me. It turned out they were Ukrainians; they were refugees and just arriving in Geneva as well. And I was like “My God, maybe because he is a refugee, he can feel it in me too?”. And he just sat there, and we ate the snacks the children at the school had given me and I shared the flowers that I got with the whole family. It was an unbelievable and unforgettable experience with the children. I had always spoken to adults, but it was such a new experience for me to talk to children, especially those that are not refugees or from the middle east.