

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.

SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER

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.

SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER

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.



© Drawings by Laura Lembo
lolo.portfolio

Copyright © Robert F. Kennedy Foundation Switzerland. All rights reserved
Copyright drawings © Laura Lembo. Instagram: lolo.portfolio