

Life without hope is no life

Christian refugees in Kirsehir, Turkey

To imagine losing a family member is horrific for any of us. It hurts just to think about it even if there is no current threat or actual risks for it to happen. Even losing something far less important, like for example a job or your home in a fire or in a flood is devastating. Losing something dear to you will hurt, but with time and with the help of family, friends, the community we will be able to create a new existence and go on with our lives and build a future.

On the brink of extinction

We have met and talked to people who have lost all of the above and more. They have lost family members, their homes, their jobs, their friends, their life savings and everything they worked hard to achieve. And they are now facing extinction in the ongoing genocide against all who do not share the same ideological mindset as the most brutal terror organizations, or rather murder cults that the world has witnessed in modern times.

These people had the basic human instinct to survive, so they fled and left everything they held dear behind them. Many of them had nothing but the clothes on their backs. They were just trying to get as far as they could in the hope that they will one day reach a safe haven where they can settle and live without fear for their own and their families' lives.

Some destinations offer hope

Many of these people were exploited and abused along the way, and several of them did not even survive. Those who did survive and reach a destination where they might be able to start over do hope for a brighter future, although they are deeply mourning their losses. When meeting and talking to these refugees one learns to see and understand the power of hope. We have met with many and interviewed them, followed their journeys, documented their stories. While deeply saddened about the past, they are thankful for the present and hopeful for the future.

Trapped in Turkey

There are also those that we keep in contact with, who have not yet reached a safe place where they can start rebuilding their lives and existence. The specific group that this report is referring to is a group of Christian Syriac/Assyrian/Chaldean refugees from the Nineveh Plains.

These people are trapped in an unbearable situation inside the country of Turkey. They have lost all hope of ever being able to feel safe and cannot see an end to the fear that they are constantly living with. When we see the plight of these people and that they have lost all hope, that's when we know the international community has failed.

There are many decisions and declarations agreed upon and signed by leaders all over the world that should be implemented, as well as aid organizations to help these vulnerable people. To be forgotten by the international community, left in a void, is not something any man, woman or child should ever have to experience.

In this report we follow a young man who just started a family, and his journey that led to a dead end in a void that is unknown to all and never spoken of.

Portrait of a family without hope

Yousif Zakko was born in Mousel, Iraq 1981. He is married and has two children, a daughter and a son and will soon have a third child. He left with his family when ISIS entered the Nineveh Plains and started committing unspeakable atrocities against the indigenous people living there.

Yousif Zakkos' parents and entire family had once before been forced, in 2005, to flee from Mousel to Bartela in the Nineveh Plains because of the lack of safety for the Christian population in Iraq after the fall of the former regime. The Nineveh Plains that had once been the home of the indigenous people was supposed to be a secure province for the Syriac/Assyrian/Chaldean people. But it all changed in 2014 when a close relative of Yousif Zakkos was brutally murdered, the only reason being that he was a Christian. Yousif and his family decided to flee again.

The nearest safe country - or so they thought - was Turkey. They left everything behind, his and his wife's careers, their home, their car, their savings. Everything. When asked what the single most important thing that he thought that he lost, Yousif Zakko said, with pain: "My children's future". His pain and concern were visible and he added that with every day that passes, he sees his children growing up and he has no knowledge of their future and if they will ever live without fear or pain. The reason why he chose to leave and become a refugee was to be able to give his children a good and safe future. Now he is stuck in a dead end and can't get out. He can't provide even basic necessities for his family in the place where they are stuck.

Yousif Zakko's destiny is shared by 174 other families consisting of a total of 705 individuals from the Syriac/Assyrian/Chaldean community who are currently seeking refuge in the city of Kirsehir in Turkey. They are all living in difficult circumstances where the chances of getting a job are very slim because of a ban prohibiting refugees from working in Turkey. Some of the families have managed to bring a small amount of money with them but their money is soon finished. Others are working illegally

under horrible circumstances and getting paid very low salaries. There are a many who are completely dependent on the little aid that comes from outside of Turkey.

The circumstances are really awful and there are poor families who rummage through garbage for food since they don't get help from anywhere.

Due to the current situation in Turkey, the refugees cannot practice their Christianity openly but have to do it in secret. The refugee children are not allowed to attend school in Turkey and the families live in constant fear. Most of the families came to Turkey when ISIS took over Mosul but there are a few families that arrived between 2011 and 2013, and there are still a few families arriving to Turkey even today.

When asked if Yousif ever thinks about returning to Iraq he answers that it would be impossible. He continues explaining why there is no place for Christians in Iraq anymore. Because although ISIS may have stopped occupying new territories, it is far from defeated. The ideology lives on in the minds of the people living there. The followers of this ideology are filling their children's minds with ideas of killing, raping and occupying land, and their hearts with hate. He says he could never go back and let his children grow up in a society filled with brainwashed inhabitants, always fearing for their lives that can be taken at any time, for no reason at all. Even though the circumstances that he and his family are currently living under are unbearable, he knows that back in Iraq they would face certain death.

A long dark tunnel

Yousif Zakko and his family are now entering their fourth year in Turkey and are still waiting to be resettled. During these four years they have received refusals from Australia six times. They have registered with the UNHCR, and after waiting for a long time they had an interview in order to be accepted as refugees by the UN. The process to get refugee status took two and a half years. It is common that the process takes this long. There is also a possibility to get resettled through a sponsor application to Canada or to Australia. These applications are quite hard to get. For example the process for Canada is handled by the church but sponsoring churches are required to raise \$ 25,000 US per family, and it takes a long time to go through the resettlement procedure. In 2014 there were about 240 families in Kirsehir; today there are 174 left. Some families took a risk and went back to Iraq, some are now in Canada through church sponsors and others are in Australia. Very few have received help and been resettled by the UN.

The help that is provided on site from different organizations comes through their committees in the town of Kirsehir. But Yousif emphasizes that aid has reached them only a few times during his four years. Often the aid consists of coupons for shopping. They have received boxes of basic food products twice and once they were given clothes for the children and a backpack with toys. Yousif says that he is of course grateful for every single bit of help they get, but at the same time he tells us that he is afraid of the situation that his family is in.

The emotional situation, as he describes it, is unbearable. To constantly worry without feeling any hope that things will get better. The worrying about their health is causing mental damage and illnesses. He explains how several of the refugees have visited the hospital with seemingly simple symptoms but that they have later passed away due to the mental stress adding to the sickness. Mental illness, as Yousif describes it, is particularly common among young men. They are exploited as cheap labor and often work twelve hours a day and get paid for only one hour. That is if the manager is a good person and pays his workers every month, Yousif adds. Saddened by the reality Yousif explains that many fled with only the clothes they were wearing and, in some cases, even were forced to sell those on their way to get here. They have to eat and the desperation and lack of rights makes them an easy target for exploitation.

Desperate plea for help

The final thing that we asked Yousif to do was to speak freely about what is on his mind. And if he has a message that he would like to send to organizations in the international community. Yousif's message was that he is begging for help or at least that someone would come and see how their children are living: with no future, no rights, not being able to practice their religion, no education, no childhood whatsoever.

Yousif repeatedly says that he wants to make people in the outside world aware of him, and how his and other families are stuck in limbo indefinitely. He asks for him and the others not to be forgotten by the international community. Their life is unbearable and they live in constant fear. But to return is not an option nor will it ever be for the Christians. The worst thing is that the way out from where they are at present, is also closed and that there seems to be no hope for them. They are trapped in the void that has been created by others, and not of their own making.

“We have lost the one thing that a human being should never lose, we have lost our hope for survival,” he says sorrowfully.

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