

## Barakat Oral History Interview Transcript

February 3 and 4, 2023

**Seth:** Before the genocide in 2014, where did you grow up and what was your early life like in Iraq?

**Barakat:** I remember back when I was about two or three years old. My memory is very good. I remember when my parents had goats and sheep, and they were also farming. They were farming on other people's land, but they were given half of the profit. They did that for many years.

When I was six or seven years old, I started going to school. In 1993, I graduated from primary school. For the first phase of school, we say "primary school." Then, from that time to 2000, I graduated from high school. When I was studying, I was also working with my family to survive. The conditions that we were living in at that time, especially for Ezidis,<sup>1</sup> were difficult. When you are a minority, you are never able to get your rights completely. We were living in poverty. We were not living in good conditions. We all needed to work together to just survive. Even when you are studying, at the same time, you're supposed to work to help the family.

After I graduated from high school, I quit my schooling and worked 24 hours and seven days a week. My family could not continue to pay for me to continue my studies since our livelihood was very hard. So, I quit school, hung out with my family, and we were all working. At that time, we didn't have the opportunity to do anything else except farming. We farmed for quite a while. For a time, my father had a shop. That time was good, it helped us to go to school, but after my father got old and his partner died, he couldn't own the shop by himself. So, he quit his job, and I had to go to work.

After 2003, my father got sick, and in 2004, we were about to die because there were no jobs and there was no farming. Then, al-Qaeda came into Iraq and made a lot of trouble. When we were farming from 1993 to 2003, we were working in the Rabia area.<sup>2</sup> The Rabia area belongs to Sunni Arab people. After al-Qaeda appeared, many Sunni Arabs joined them, so we could not go and farm in the Rabia area anymore.

It was a tough period for us from 2004 to 2005. My father was sick, and it was a very hard life. I actually cannot describe how tough it was. However, in 2005, my brother graduated from high school. He's younger than me. He was also very good at English, and he started telling me, "Hey, Barakat, what do you think if I become an interpreter? We don't have any other options or

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<sup>1</sup> "Ezidi" is an alternate spelling of the word "Yazidi." It is the closest English spelling to how the word is pronounced in Northern Kurdish: *Êzidî*.

<sup>2</sup> Rabia is a town located in northwestern Iraq that is next to the Syrian border.

any other jobs to do. This is the only opportunity for us.” And I said, “Hey, brother, listen to me, it’s really dangerous.” At that time, the American military base was in the Tal Afar area, which is about a one-hour drive from Sinjar,<sup>3</sup> our area. So, he told me to go there and find a job with the Americans as a translator and interpreter. I told him, “Brother, I wish we could do something like that, but I think it’s dangerous. I don’t want to lose you.” We tried to find other jobs and opportunities, but we could not find them. The only available opportunity was working for the Americans. So, I told my brother, “You can go, but please just be careful.” He went to the English tests given by the Americans and he passed them. He became an interpreter before I went. I think that was at the end of 2005.

My brother worked in that job for two months, and then he talked to me about it. He told me what it was like, how he was comfortable with the Americans, how they were kind to him, and how it was good to support them and destroy al-Qaeda and the terrorists. So, from what I understood, it was good to do that and become an interpreter. On the one hand, it was good to make some cash, and on the other hand, it was good to chase the terrorists and destroy them. The terrorists wanted to kill innocent people. They were not against one group, they were against all of us: against security in the country, against the government, against the Americans, against all of us. We all had the same goal. When I say “we all,” I mean ourselves [the Yazidis], the Americans, the Iraqi government, the Iraqi people... All of the good people were against al-Qaeda. So, I thought about it and chose to work as a translator and interpreter.

I began working as an interpreter in March 2006. I first started with the Military Police (MP). At that time, it was with Titan Company, which was hiring interpreters. I stayed with the MP for several months, and then they moved to Ramadi. Ramadi was very far from our area, and it belonged to Sunni people. Many al-Qaeda terrorists were Sunnis. At that time, I was still young, and here, things are a little bit different than in America. Here, we listen to our parents more than Americans or people in Europe. People in other countries count on themselves and become independent when they turn 18, but here, we sometimes listen to our parents even until we turn 30 years old, or maybe older. So, my mom said, “Please, I’m going to die if you go,” because Ramadi was very far and dangerous. “Please, let your younger brother work. He’s near, and his place is secure and not that dangerous.” She convinced me. I didn’t go with the MP to Ramadi. I stayed home and was obliged to quit my job for about eight to ten months.

After that, I went back to Forward Operating Base (FOB) Sykes, which was the American military base in Tal Afar. I was rehired as an interpreter and worked with the Military Transition Team, or MiTT Team. I worked with them from around 2007 until the end of 2010. Then, the Americans started leaving Iraq. They didn’t need us as interpreters anymore, but they promised

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<sup>3</sup> “Sinjar” refers to the Sinjar District of northern Iraq, which, along with the nearby Sheikhan District, constitutes the historical homeland of the Yazidi people. “Sinjar” also refers to the town of Sinjar, which serves as the district’s capital and was largely destroyed during the 2014 genocide.

that they would give us the opportunity to apply through two programs to get to the US. One was SIV, the other was IOM.<sup>4</sup> They promised that they would give us the opportunity and the priority to take us to America. We put our lives on the line with the Americans.

In Iraq, the majority of the population is Muslim. Not all Muslims are bad, but from my experience, many of them will kill non-Muslims when they are able. This is the reality. I have Muslim friends, and I'm not talking about those guys. The thing that motivates extreme Muslims to kill non-Muslims is their religion and the Qur'an. I have never read the Qur'an, but the people who are reading the Qur'an say that their reasons for killing non-Muslims exist in that book. That is why you cannot trust them. I am among them, but I cannot trust them.

So, the Americans promised that they would help us come to the US, but they did not keep their promises. After 2011, I opened a bookstore. I did this in 2013, and I owned my shop until the Islamic State (IS) attacked in 2014.

On August 3rd, 2014, IS started invading our area of Iraq. Before that time, at the beginning of 2014, they started getting close to Sinjar. The Peshmerga was here [in Sinjar], and the Peshmerga belonged to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).<sup>5</sup> When IS invaded Mosul<sup>6</sup> in June 2014, there were three Iraqi Army divisions there, if I am not mistaken. These divisions did not fight against IS. It was like it was planned by who-knows-who. It was pretty much organized. When IS came to Mosul, I didn't see it in person, but I heard that they came in dozens of vehicles. These included trucks, humvees, and even tanks. If you compare that to three Iraqi Army divisions, that was nothing! But, IS was able to take over Mosul. They took over Zumar later, which is closer to Sinjar. Later, they took over Rabia and Tal Afar. The Peshmerga commander promised the Ezidis that as long as he had a single drop of blood left in his body, he would never let IS hurt them in Sinjar. He promised the Ezidis and made them feel relaxed and protected. I heard that there were around 12,000 Peshmerga here with many kinds of weapons. There were also some Ezidis with them.

At first, I believed that the Peshmerga were strong and they could protect us from IS. This was because after IS invaded Kasik, Zumar, and Mosul, they surrounded Sinjar, but they could not enter the region and attack the Ezidis. But, on August 3rd, 2014, IS started to attack us. When they attacked, the Peshmerga didn't shoot any bullets at them. They did not defend us, they did not protect any Ezidis. Instead, they withdrew. On that day, I remember that I talked about this

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<sup>4</sup> The Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program is a US initiative that awards visas to Iraqi or Afghani nationals who served with the US Armed Forces as interpreters or translators. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is an agency of the United Nations that offers assistance and advice to migrants and governments regarding migration.

<sup>5</sup> The Peshmerga serve as the armed forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which governs the autonomous Kurdistan Region in northern Iraq.

<sup>6</sup> Mosul is the second-largest city in Iraq and the largest city in the north of the country.

with my brother, about how we heard that IS came from the south side of Sinjar, south of the mountain.<sup>7</sup> People from the south side came towards us, towards the north side, where we lived. They talked with us about what was happening on the southern side, and we knew what happened to them.

I had a weapon, a very simple rifle, but my brother did not have one. I told my brother, “We are going to defend ourselves. IS are terrorists.” What we saw on the TV and what the southern Ezidi people told us... My brother knew that, and I repeated it to him. We went to a friend who was in the Peshmerga, and he was selling weapons. So, we bought a weapon for my brother in order to defend ourselves. On the way back home, I saw three humvees belonging to the Peshmerga. I stopped and yelled at one of them, at a person who I believed was an officer. I told him, “Hey sir, where are you going? Why are you guys abandoning innocent people, civilians who don’t have weapons? If you guys abandon these people, what’s going to happen to them?” He felt ashamed and said, “Oh no, man, we’re not going to leave you guys. We are actually getting reinforcements and have some troops at the Bab Shlo Valley, which will block IS from coming to the northern side.” Then, we left those Peshmerga soldiers to drop off our friend, who was also in the Peshmerga, at his headquarters. He really believed that his fellow Peshmerga would defend themselves and protect Ezidis. After we dropped him off, we came back home. A few hours later, we heard that all Peshmerga forces fled and abandoned the Ezidis. Then, we had no choice.

I am a man, but I cry when I remember all of the tragedies that happened on that day. My children were about to have breakfast, but they cried and could not eat because of the screaming, shooting, bombing, and everything in the town. My family came back home and we discussed the situation between ourselves: me and my three brothers, my uncle, and my cousins. We debated about either escaping to Mount Sinjar or Kurdistan. We eventually decided to go to the mountain, because we thought that if we tried to escape through the Rabia area where Sunni people were living, many of them probably would have joined IS and would try to kill us. We thought about going to the mountain, but we knew that if we went there, we would be traveling on some of the hottest days of the summer. We knew that the children would die from thirst and hunger. While we were debating whether to go to Mount Sinjar or Kurdistan, one of our cousins was taking a family to the mountain. He told us that it was better to go to Kurdistan because it was possible that we could survive there, whereas there would be no food or water on the mountain. He said, “Many of you guys will die if you go to the mountain.” So, we took his advice and chose to go to Kurdistan through Rabia and Syria. We heard some shooting, but we did not get hurt. There was dust, the traffic was very, very crowded. There were a lot of cars and trucks packed together, and Peshmerga soldiers were also running with us on the same street.

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<sup>7</sup> Here, “the mountain” refers to Mount Sinjar, which refers to the highest point of the Sinjar Mountains. The Sinjar Mountains border the town of the same name and are religiously significant to Yazidis. They have served as a refuge for Yazidis fleeing persecution in the past and the present.

It was very hard. I remember that my truck broke down in the middle of my journey to Rabia. My brothers and cousins stopped near me and talked about it. They asked me, “How can we help you fix your truck?” I knew that it was not easy to fix my truck in a few minutes, or even one hour. It was going to take us time, and that time was very precious to us. I told them, “No, we’re not going to fix my truck. It’s hard to fix it, I know it’s not going to be possible to fix it in one hour, and waiting for one hour may cost us our lives.” So, we actually moved to their trucks. Then, we drove. We lost my brother and my wife, who was in his car. We lost contact with them because the phone signals were busy. The phone networks and signals were very busy, so you could not reach people easily. We lost each other, we could not see each other, and we could not reach them on the phone. It was very, very hard. I also remember that my niece was a little baby, and she was crying for water. There was some water in the car that we gave her, but she was screaming and crying very loudly. She was refusing that water because it was very hot. She was saying, “This water is hot, I cannot drink it!”, but we did not have any more water.

We didn’t have enough time to gather all of our belongings before we escaped IS, so we left a lot of things at home. We left some of our money and our identification documents. I also left my truck behind. The road that we escaped on normally takes you from my home to Kurdistan. The journey usually takes two to three hours. But, on the day that IS attacked, the journey took us 12 hours. If I said everything in detail, believe me, I would not be finished.

After we escaped, we went to Duhok.<sup>8</sup> The first night, after we crossed the bridge between Kurdistan and the Arab areas, we felt safer. We spent that night on the side of the street. The next day, we headed up to Duhok Province. There was a family friend of my cousin there, and we went to his ice cream factory. He gave us two rooms for around 40 people, and we spent a month there. I remember that his brother told my cousin and my brother, “Why did you guys refuse to convert to Islam?” His older brother yelled at him, saying, “They are escaping from murder! How dare you say that to them!” The younger brother responded, “I know, but the Prophet Muhammad and the Qur’an teach us to tell the nonbelievers to convert to Islam two times. If they refuse, you can leave them. If they refuse, they will be killed.” Believe me, if that younger brother was not afraid and had a bullet, he would probably kill us.

We stayed in the ice cream factory for a month, and sometime later, because they were Muslims and were exposing their hatred towards us, we felt that it was better to go somewhere else. We went to an Ezidi village named Bebani, where we found Ezidi friends. We chose [to live in] an unfinished building there. We were five families: my brothers, myself, and my brother-in-law. We spent our displacement there for about five to six years. One of my older brothers is still there, but my other three brothers, my brother-in-law, and I decided to return to Sinjar. We’ve been living in Sinjar for two years now.

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<sup>8</sup> Duhok is a major city in northern Iraq and serves as the capital of Duhok Province in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Even after all of these tragedies, some of which I can't remember, some of which I don't want to talk about, the political parties are not allowing us to live peacefully on our land in Sinjar. As Ezidis, we do not know who is behind these political things. Apparently, there are big plans and projects from international organizations and countries on our land, as well as the things we are seeing now between the local political parties.

**Seth:** I know that you are a musician, and I've seen some of your music online. It's very powerful, especially your song dedicated to the Ezidi children who were abducted by IS. When did you become a musician and when did you decide to write that song?

**Barakat:** I am from a family of musicians.<sup>9</sup> My father and his father sang Ezidi historical songs, we call them "folklore songs." Many of these songs are about the Ezidis' history because whenever we wrote down our history in books, our enemies would attack us and burn those books. So, we could not depend on the books. We always preserved our songs and our histories in our minds, and I am one of the people who does this today. After the genocide, I wrote several songs about it, but one of them was the song that I dedicated to the kidnapped Ezidi girls and children, to the Ezidi men and women who suffered and died, and to those who are still in captivity. That was a stronger, more powerful song than others that I've written.

**Seth:** I've heard that IS' genocide was the 74th genocide against the Ezidi people. How long have Ezidis been persecuted for their religion? Why do people not allow you to practice your religion?

**Barakat:** From my experience, fundamentalist Muslims don't let other people live peacefully if they don't believe in Muhammad. As Ezidis, we believe in our own religion and in God, but we are not Muslims. We are persecuted just because we are not Muslims. We are among Muslims, and we are a minority. For all these reasons, we have experienced genocide. Muslims have been the only group that has committed genocide against us.

**Seth:** From your experience, what are the most important aspects of your Ezidi identity?

**Barakat:** This is a good question, and it's also easy to answer. If I ask you, "Why are your parents your parents? Why not somebody else?" You understand my question, right? I was born as an Ezidi, so let me live like anybody else. If you don't want to help me, don't help me, but don't hate me, don't attack me, don't hurt me. Humans are humans. God created everything on Earth in its own quality. Not everything is the same. Everybody is different, but we are also all

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<sup>9</sup> Here, Barakat is referring to his membership in the *qewels*, a caste of musicians and singers who pass down sacred Yazidi hymns, songs, and histories from father to son.

human, so we should treat each other like humans. It doesn't matter to me whether you are Jewish or Christian or Muslim or whoever, I'm not going to hurt you. That's all.

**Seth:** Compared to before the genocide, what has life been like today for Ezidis in Iraq and Kurdistan?

**Barakat:** Life is even harder than before. We feel that there's no future for Ezidis. Ezidis have never felt safe and secure, and there is no support from either the Kurdish government or the Iraqi government. However, we can gratefully say that Europe, America, and some other countries have helped Ezidis through their NGOs, their governments, and their people. So far, I think that 12 to 13 countries from Europe and America have recognized the 2014 Ezidi genocide. If you look at Iraq, it has still not recognized the Ezidi genocide as a genocide. Why? And I don't think any other Arab countries have recognized it as genocide. I'm not sure, but I don't think so.

**Seth:** What can non-Ezidis do to best help Ezidi people in Iraq and Kurdistan?

**Barakat:** There are many ways that the Americans can help us. We can actually blame America more than Europe, because many Ezidis joined the American army against the terrorists after 2003, including myself and my brother. We put ourselves in danger together with the Americans, side by side, and we were very loyal to them. We were just like brothers. I was singing for them and translated for them. We were just like a family. So, we can actually demand help from Americans as our brothers, even before we demand help from European countries.

In terms of what we demand from America, Australia, Canada, and Europe, these powerful countries, I think it's not easy. Maybe somebody tells you that it's easy to help Ezidis because they're just in a little spot in Iraq, but it's not like that. Politically, it's hard, I know, I understand that. If you look at where Ezidis are on a map, there are Muslims who surround us who don't want Christians or Ezidis on their land. But some are our friends and they are powerful, so they can do something for Ezidis. The first thing [we need], and the most important thing, is protection and security. [These people and countries] can help and protect us. But, they should not tell Iraq or Kurdistan to support us, because they already betrayed us during the genocide. We don't trust them. Even their promises, we don't trust their promises, because they never kept their promises. But, as for America and Europe, we actually begged them to come and help us, because we really need them as Ezidis. The first thing we need is protection, and the other steps can follow that. We need protection from Muslims, because we know that whenever they find the chance... I'm not talking about good Muslims. There are some good Muslims. I'm talking about the Muslims who follow extremist imams, mullahs, religious people, and the Qur'an. These things that justify violence against us exist in the Qur'an, as I've heard. So, protection is the priority, and we can demand other things once that is achieved.

**Seth:** Thank you so much for sharing your story with me. It means a lot, it really does.

**Barakat:** You're very welcome, brother, and I greatly appreciate anyone who feels compassion for us and understands the things that we're going through. I am ready to share my story and experiences, as well as anything that is in the interest of human beings. I will die someday, but I want to put some goodness into the world before I die. That is my goal.