

Keynote Address by Salem Daoud

Yezidi Mir of the United States and Canada¹

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In this speech, which was delivered at the Beyond Genocide Campaign Gala in Foster City, California, Yazidi religious leader Mir Salem Daoud describes the suffering that his people have endured in Iraq since the Islamic State jihadist group's genocide against them in 2014. He also details important aspects of Yazidi history and religion, urging people around the world to raise awareness about and stand up for his people.

Peace be upon you, ladies and gentlemen. In my name, Salem Daoud, and in the name of all Yezidis in Arizona, thank you for inviting my wife Adiba and me and our son Sam and our friend Saeed Bakr to travel from Arizona to be with you for this celebration. I serve as the Mir for Yezidis in the United States and Canada. We also have a Yezidi Council and I and the other members of our Council work together to teach about the Yezidi religion and the Yezidi people. Two of our Council members are here with me tonight, Omar Hussein and Tom Weber, and they join me in thanking you for inviting us.

I want to begin by saying thank you for giving me the opportunity to stand before you and convey the sufferings of my Yezidi people, who are now experiencing their 74th genocide. Our people have experienced these 74 attempts at our annihilation at the hands of our neighbors and those in neighboring countries, including Turkish, Arab, and Kurdish leaders during the Ottoman Empire and after the Ottoman Empire, and now at the hands of ISIS.² Our persecutors have tortured and murdered our people or tortured and forced them to convert to Islam. We, the Yezidis who are here tonight and the Yezidis who live in many parts of the world, are the grandchildren of those who have survived these past abominations and we are trying to survive the present abomination.

The Yezidi calendar is in the year 6767, so we count our history for almost 7,000 years. That makes our religion one of the oldest religions in the world. We believe that the Yezidi religion was the first religion to believe in God and the Seven Angels.³ We believe that Towoos Melek⁴ is

¹ "Yezidi" is an alternate spelling of the word "Yazidi" that is closer to the word's pronunciation in Northern Kurdish: Êzîdî. Additionally, the title of Mir denotes religious leadership over a community of Yazidis. As of 2017, Mir Salem Daoud was the religious leader of all Yazidi communities in the United States and Canada.

² "ISIS," or the "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria," is the more popular name of the Islamic State (IS) jihadist group. The organization changed its name from ISIS to IS after it declared a "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria in June 2014.

³ God in Yazidism is monotheistic and is an omnipotent, omnipresent force. However, He is not active in earthly affairs. He created the Seven Angels to manage His affairs on Earth and interact with humanity.

⁴ "Towoos Melek" is an alternative spelling of "Tawusi Melek," who is the leader of God's Seven Angels and is a manifestation of the Divine. Veneration for Tawusi Melek is at the center of the Yazidi religion.

the King of the Angels. Towoos Melek is also known as the Peacock Angel and that is why there are peacock feathers on some of your tables.

We also believe that God and the Angels brought into existence the elements of nature, such as the Sun, Air, Water, and Fire, without which no human being can live. Yezidis believe in the power of nature that is created by God. We also believe that the Yezidi religion is for those who are born as Yezidis. We are not a missionary religion. We do not allow conversion of non-Yezidis to the Yezidi faith. Instead, we believe that in order to be a Yezidi, your mother and father must be Yezidi. However, because of all of the persecution against our people that led to forced conversions, we do allow those who were forced to convert out of the Yezidi religion to come back. I am the Mir, and Omar and Tom and Hussein and Khoudeida and I are part of the Yezidi Council here in North America, but the head religious leader of all the Yezidis is called Babshek,⁵ and he lives in Iraq near our homeland to which we are not yet allowed to return.

The Yezidi religion allows Yezidis to be nationalistic and part of our own Yezidi nation. We have a Yezidi flag and our flag is on the wall in this room and there are small Yezidi flags on some of your tables. The Yezidi religion teaches us to pray for everyone and also for ourselves and our own people. Our religion also teaches us to live in peace. Our religion allows us to fight to defend ourselves, but [it] does not allow aggression. For this reason, our Yezidi people have not conquered other people, even though we ourselves have been conquered, re-conquered, and persecuted over and over for the past 700 years continuing until now.

We are not looking to conquer anyone. We are not looking to convert anyone to our religion or our way of life. We are looking to live in peace with our neighbors and we are looking for the over 450,000 Yezidis living in displaced persons camps in Iraq and Kurdistan to be allowed to return to their land, rebuild their homes and schools, and return to work in the Province of Sinjar in northern Iraq, which is our homeland.

Those who persecute the Yezidis are not forward-looking people. They are looking backward and are trying to take the world back to the Stone Age. We do not support that and we do not think it is helpful or useful for the world. We are living in the 21st century of technology and knowledge. I say enough to those who want to destroy us and take the world back to the Stone Age. Do not destroy us. Let us live our lives and practice our religion.

I want to thank all those who have helped to raise awareness about the Yezidis so you know about us and so you can help us. We thank all those who extend their cooperation to the Yezidi migrants risking their lives to try to migrate to freedom. We thank all those who try to help the 450,000 Yezidis living in displaced persons camps in Kurdistan and Iraq. Some live in large

⁵ “Babshek” is an alternative spelling of “Baba Sheikh,” who resides in northern Iraq and serves as the religious leader for all Yazidis.

United Nations tents with more than 100 Yezidis in one tent. Some don't even have a tent and they live instead in unfinished construction sites. Our Yezidi people who are living in the camps are without adequate water, electricity, or food. They live on the mercy of charities because they are not allowed to return to their land, rebuild their homes, and return to work. A tent in the camps might be full of people sleeping at night, and during the day, the same tent becomes the school where Yezidi adults try to teach Yezidi children with the meager resources they have for reading and writing.

Thousands of Yezidi women and girls have been freed from brutal, horrific sexual slavery from which they will never completely recover, but thousands of our Yezidi women and girls have not yet been freed and they are still in sexual slavery. All sexual slaves must be freed. All former slaves who are living in displaced persons camps must have a home and a chance to begin their lives again. The families of our slaves and former slaves also need homes, jobs, and schooling. You know: they need the basics.

Thousands of Yezidi boys and teenagers have been forced to serve as soldiers fighting against good people, including our own Yezidi people. These forced soldiers are beaten, brutalized, and brainwashed. Some have been freed, but thousands of Yezidi boys remain forced to be soldiers. All forced soldiers must be freed and all former forced soldiers must have a home and a new life and their families must also have homes and new lives. Our people cannot continue to live for another three years in displaced persons camps. They need to be able to return to their land now or in the very near future.

We are not asking for much. We are not asking to have our own country, but we do wish to have our own province where our people can live and be safe. We do not want to be forced to convert to Islam or any other religion. I mention Islam because all 74 attempts to annihilate our people and force us to leave our religion have been at the hands of Muslims. We also do not want to be forced to pretend that we are Kurds or Arabs or something else other than who we are. We are not looking to force anyone to be like us. We just want to live our lives in peace.

Wherever you live and whoever you are, I wish you a good life. Please help my people to also live a good life by believing in us and standing up for us. Talk about Yezidis, tell people who we are, that we are peaceful, and that we want to provide a good life and opportunities for our children and grandchildren just like everyone else.

Thank you all very much.