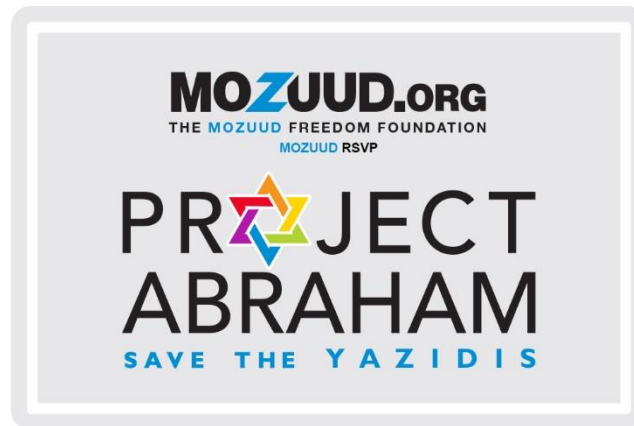


Report on the challenges of the Yazidi Refugees



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Background

This report to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration is based on the experience of volunteers of Project Abraham resettlement groups in the GTA. Our resettlement groups are helping the privately-sponsored and GAR Yezidis in their transition from survivors of ISIS to recovering their lives in Canada.

The daily challenges the Yezidis refugees are facing are not trivial, and without our volunteers to support and guide them, they would be experiencing isolation and confusion. We respect the GOC's intention to provide the best possible aid and help, but the reality is there are gaps that need to be addressed, things that the GOC can do better, and more that must be done to address this genocide.

Refugee challenges

- Many of the traumatized Yazidi refugees come to Canada not knowing that there are Yazidis already established in Canada. They are not informed, and the government does not connect them with the established Canadian Yazidi community, which adds to their trauma, fear, and the feeling of isolation.
- Some Yazidis do not speak Arabic and are met with Arabic speaking government translators in Canada, which adds to their confusion and fear (some Yazidis thought they were back in the hands of ISIS).
- When the Yazidis first arrive at their hotels, they are faced with unfamiliar food and will go for days without eating.
- When it comes to finding housing, it is left up to the refugees to find their own. The housing NGOs just provide apartment listings, and it is then the job of the refugee to follow up on their own. This is without familiarity with Canadian culture, language skills, transportation, etc. Typical families consist of women with children who have lost their husbands.
(Note: We understand that there are legal restrictions for renting apartments. The restriction is 2 people per bedroom. Refugee families are usually larger than this, and larger apartments are beyond reach for them.)
- It takes 3-6 months for child benefit payments to come through, even though the promised time is 11 weeks. Until that happens, the amount of money allocated to families barely covers rent, let alone food and other expenses. Also, landlords who are reluctant to rent to refugees are asking not just first and last month's rent (despite it being illegal), but up to four months rent in advance. Desperate refugees accept this condition because it seems to be the only way to find housing. This leaves the refugees with no money for food, transportation, clothing, and other necessities.
- Case workers who are looking after the refugees can each have more than 70 families in their case load, which leaves traumatized refugees isolated and without the full support they need. Yazidi refugees don't understand what resources are available don't know who to ask. It seems that case workers are not thoroughly interviewing refugees on a regular basis to uncover their needs and provide them with available solutions.
- Culturally refugees from the Middle East have resistance to getting therapy to help them with their trauma. This is problematic since the system currently requires the refugee to inform the case worker that they need help. Since the women survivors of ISIS, and their children, are severely traumatized, there needs to be a better program of support to help them.
- When a refugee family does move into a home, it takes a week or two for the government to provide furniture – including beds. This means that they must sleep and eat on the floor until their furniture arrives.
- It makes sense for the Yazidis to be housed close to the Yazidi community. This is important for their sense of connection, and well-being. The Yazidi community embraces new Yazidi refugees, which goes a long way toward their healing. Yazidis being taken to cities where no established community exists leaves them feeling isolated, without language skills, transportation, and their natural network of support.

Our response to the refugee challenges

Project Abraham volunteers are seeing the issues and problems that the Yazidi GARs are facing, and are working to fill these gaps. For example, we work with the Yazidi community to provide

- air mattresses and blankets for the Yazidis until their furniture arrives
- food until their family payments kick in
- clothes, household goods, kitchenware, linens, towels, etc.
- transportation to their appointments and community events
- translators (not all Yazidis speak Arabic)
- conversational ESL to the Yazidi community, which includes those Yazidi that cannot attend regular ESL classes
- opportunities for Yazidis to integrate into Canadian culture
- guidance on available resources through Resettlement Agencies
- emergency support

The Mozuud RSVP's Project Abraham has been the primary responder in the GTA helping the Yazidi community by setting up volunteer resettlement groups to support each newly-arrived Yazidi family.

The response from the Yazidi community has been one of extreme gratitude. Without the dedication of our volunteers, the Canadian experience of the Yazidi victims of ISIS would have been one of isolation, fear, and extreme hardship.

We also work directly in partnership with community organizations that provide refugee services, and encourage the Yazidis refugees to make use of all available resources. We work in partnership with ORAT on family reunification, with COSTI, and with the Richmond Hill Welcome Centre. We continue to seek out other service organizations with whom to partner to ensure that Yazidi refugees are being given full support.

While the Liberal MPs and MPPs who we have spoken to have praised us for our work, we need a more active commitment from the government to help us ensure the Yazidis who have been brought to Canada are given the best opportunity to heal, and integrate into Canadian society. Grassroot organizations like Mozuud have the will to help, but we can only do so much without the GOC's support. Words of appreciation are not enough. We must work together to make this initiative a success so that the Yazidi victims of ISIS are enabled to become productive and successful members of Canadian society.

We also need to continue both the family reunification program, and to increase the number of Yazidi GARs. The humanitarian crisis is not yet over for the Yazidis and the Canadian Yazidi community is desperate. They are suffering an existential crisis, yet there is no concerted international effort to help them. We must stay compassionate and resolute on this. It is the right thing to do.

Recommendations to the GOC

Project Abraham is a resource that the government can partner with to efficiently help the Yazidis resettle in the GTA. Through our now extensive experience, we are filling a gap in the GAR program. Yet, we find ourselves outside looking in, helping to mend the cracks rather than preventing them. We are not being utilized by the government when we, although stretched, have volunteer manpower and can rally the support of the established Yezidi community.

Through the experience of the last two years, we have become experts in the field on supporting the Yezidi community in the GTA. It would be advantageous for the government to make use of us.

Our recommendations are to:

1. Have Kurmanji translators meet newly-arrived Yezidi GARs at the airport and be available throughout their process at the hotel.
2. Provide more sensitivity to dietary needs while in they are still in the hotel.
3. Inform newly-arrived Yezidi refugees that a Yezidi community exists within the city and help them to connect with that community immediately.
4. Develop a better system of communication between case workers and refugees so that all challenges the refugees are experiencing can be discovered and resolved.
5. Remedy the current inaccuracies in the application process faced by widowed Yezidi women whose child benefit payments are held up by a mistaken need for information on a spouse's earnings. Find ways to expedite the processing of child benefit payments for applicants.
6. Provide adequate amounts of funding to be able to provide the trauma counselling and health services required by this high-need community.
7. Extend the One-Year Window of Opportunity Provision for victims of genocide to include family members who are discovered to be alive after the refugee families have emigrated to Canada. In addition, for the special needs of this community whose numbers have been decimated by this latest genocide, extend this provision to siblings and parents.
8. Create special partnerships and provide funding for staff for grass-roots Resettlement undertakings like Project Abraham and Operation Ezra who are working directly with the Yezidi community to help them resettle, heal, and integrate fully into Canadian society as a way of enhancing the services that the government is already providing.
9. Bring at least another 5,000 Yezidis to Canada under the GAR program and remove caps for the Yezidi PSR program.
10. Prioritize genocide as a criterion for selecting refugees to resettle in Canada and, therefore, work outside of the UNHCR who has stated it does not use genocide as a criterion, directly contravening the UN mandate (1948 **Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide**).

Who we are

Project Abraham is an initiative of Mozuud RSVP (Resettlement and Support for Victims of Persecution). Project Abraham originated over two years ago when Mirza Ismail of Yezidi Human Rights Organization - International desperately reached out for help to find sponsors for family reunification.

We now have grown to over 150 volunteers, and have raised over \$100,000. Project Abraham has sponsored four families through the government family reunification program, and is also providing volunteer resettlement groups to assist the GARs arriving in the GTA.

Our office is in Markham, Ontario.

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