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## Masoud Barzani: The Butcher of Sinjar

While ISIS may have executed the genocide against Iraq's Yazidi population, a US lawsuit reveals that Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani and his untouchable Peshmerga forces played a direct, complicit role in the massacre, driven by their geopolitical interest in conquering Sinjar.



(Photo Credit: The Cradle)

In August 2014, ISIS launched a nightmarish campaign to massacre, enslave, and rape thousands of Yazidis – an ethno-religious minority in the Sinjar region of Iraq – in what is widely acknowledged as a [genocide](#).

But now, a lawsuit currently underway in the US District Court in Washington, DC, makes a shocking claim: [Masoud Barzani](#), the longtime Iraqi Kurdish leader, orchestrated the mass slaughter of Yazidis, using ISIS as a proxy.

The lawsuit was filed on behalf of the Kurdistan Victims Fund, headed by Stephen Studdert, a former senior advisor to US Presidents George HW Bush, Ronald Reagan, and Gerald Ford, and [alleges](#) that Barzani “orchestrated, accommodated, and facilitated” the Yazidi genocide.

### **The genocide was pre-planned**

Multiple Yazidi testimonies affirm Barzani's role, including that of Mirza Ismail, Chairman of the Yazidi Human Rights Organization-International, who tells *The Cradle*:

**The Yazidi genocide was pre-planned. Masoud Barzani planned to annihilate the Yazidis in order to create an Islamic state in Kurdistan.**

Fear among the Yazidis of an ISIS attack on Sinjar had been mounting for months before the genocide in August 2014. Despite vows from Kurdish security forces – the once revered [Peshmerga](#) – to protect the Yazidis until their “last drop of blood,” these troops instead ensured ISIS could carry out their horrific acts.

Under orders from their leadership, the Peshmerga disarmed Yazidis and prevented them from fleeing Sinjar, leaving them defenseless, open targets for the terror rampage to follow. Ten years later, Barzani's role as the orchestrator of the Yazidi genocide is still almost completely unknown, except, notably, among the survivors themselves.

### **Defending Sinjar ‘Until the last drop of blood’**

In January, ISIS began its blitzkrieg to capture territory in eastern Syria and western Iraq. Ismail tells *The Cradle* that after ISIS [murdered](#) Yazidi farmers in the town of Rabiaa in May, “We knew something would happen to us.”

After ISIS [captured Mosul](#), Iraq's second-largest city, in June, with Masoud Barzani's [help](#), the situation only became more dangerous.

Sinjar was suddenly surrounded by ISIS from three sides: from the town of Baaj in the south, from Tel Afar and Mosul in the east, and from Syria to the west. The only way out was to the north, toward the Syrian border crossing, and then to the city of Dohuk in the Iraqi Kurdistan region.

Many Yazidis felt ISIS would attack Sinjar next, but local officials from Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) publicly reassured the Yazidis that the Peshmerga would defend them.

In the *Daily Beast*, journalist Christine Van Den Toorn [reported](#) that Sarbast Baiperi, the head of the KDP's 17th Branch in Sinjar, boasted that “until the last drop of blood we will defend Sinjar.”

### **The Peshmerga disarm and trap Yazidis in Sinjar**

Yet amid the looming ISIS threat, the Peshmerga took pains to prevent Yazidis from fleeing Sinjar.

One Yazidi man stated to *The Cradle* that when he and his family became scared and tried to escape to the Iraqi Kurdish region on 1 August, just two days before the ISIS attack, the Peshmerga blocked them at a checkpoint.

“We received orders from Barzani that none of the residents are allowed to flee,” the Peshmerga told him. “Some who defied the Peshmerga’s orders were even shot at,” he added. He explained further that he had been forced to turn in his weapons to the local Peshmerga base, including all of his ammunition. “We actually trusted that they would protect us,” he said.

Another Yazidi witness from Sinjar reveals to *The Cradle* that Peshmerga forces went from house to house, confiscating weapons from Yazidis, including the heavy weapons Yazidi members of the Iraqi army had brought back to Sinjar with them after the army collapsed in Mosul.

The Peshmerga campaign to confiscate Yazidi weapons was corroborated by US author and Kurdish rights activist Amy Beam. She [reported](#) further that “some Yazidis say that the presence of the Peshmerga was to control them, not to protect them because no Peshmerga bases were established in the neighboring Arab villages.”

Van Den Toorn also [confirmed](#) that Barzani’s KDP tried to prevent Yazidis from fleeing Sinjar. A local KDP official told her that “higher-ups in the party told representatives to keep people calm and that if people in their areas of coverage left, their salaries would be cut.”

### **The Peshmerga betray Yazidis**

Not trusting the Peshmerga, Yazidis, who had served in the Iraqi army demanded the return of their confiscated heavy weapons. Qasim Shesho, a Yazidi Peshmerga commander and KDP member, pleaded with Kurdish superiors for months, even on the night before the ISIS attack – to no avail.

Instead, says Shesho, Saeed Kestayi, commander-in-chief of the Peshmerga in Sinjar, was angered at the request. “We didn’t come here to give our weapons to anyone. We are still alive, and until the last drop of blood in us, no one will enter Sinjar,” he told Shesho.

Then, in a stunning show of betrayal, the 10,000-strong Peshmerga force suddenly [withdrew without warning](#) when ISIS attacked on 3 August, leaving the Yazidis instantly exposed and vulnerable without the means to protect themselves.

The Peshmerga not only failed to warn the Yazidis of the impending ISIS attack but also deceived them by falsely assuring reinforcements were on the way. [Two hundred](#) Yazidi fighters who stayed behind, waiting for the promised help, were overwhelmed and massacred by ISIS.

In the village of Sour Awa, the Peshmerga not only withdrew but killed three Yazidi members of the Peshmerga, Eiad Naiv Murad, Youssef Jabal, and Ali Jabal, who demanded their Kurdish commander leave them weapons so they could defend the village. Of the incident, Iraq expert Joel Wing [writes](#):

**When Yazidi Peshmerga saw their unit packing up to leave, they told their commanders they were staying to defend their villages and asked for weapons. This led to an argument, and three Yazidi Peshmerga were killed ... The Kurdish decision allowed ISIS to surround the southern villages and later take the rest of the district as they overwhelmed the lightly-armed villagers.**

Speaking to *The Cradle*, a relative of one of the three Yazidi men killed by the Peshmerga – who wishes to remain anonymous like most of the Yazidi civilians who spoke to this media outlet – says that before the fight broke out, the Peshmerga commander said he had orders from the top brass not to give any weapons to Yazidis.

### **Blocking escape routes**

In another instance, Peshmerga fighters actively prevented Yazidis from escaping to the safety of Sinjar Mountain, allowing ISIS militants to capture over 1,000 of them.

Salwa Khalaf Rasho, a 16-year-old Yazidi girl, gave [testimony](#) to the UK Parliament that when she and her family tried to flee to the mountain, “a checkpoint of Peshmerga stopped us and blocked our way.”

When they found another, longer way to flee toward the mountain, “a convoy of Peshmerga together with its commander, Sarbast Baiperi, and his soldiers pointed their guns at us and threatened us.” They told Salwa and her family, “Clear out of the way so the Peshmerga convoy can flee first and reach the mountain.”

Salwa says that after the Peshmerga convoy left, “one car broke down and blocked the road. Therefore, the cars were stuck in a traffic jam. We waited. During this time, ISIS terrorists reached us and surrounded us.”

Salwa was enslaved and raped for eight months by an ISIS commander before she managed to escape.

A [video](#) of the incident shows the vehicle blocking the road to the mountain was not civilian but a Peshmerga military vehicle. Ismail confirms that the Peshmerga purposely trapped Yazidis by blocking the road:

**The Peshmerga put the vehicle on the road and said it was broken. Then they told the people they must go back. ISIS was behind them and captured many people. My family was there, but they were able to escape. A couple of my cousins were there.**

### **Kurds in the ranks of ISIS**

Contrary to popular belief, Kurdish members also filled the ranks of ISIS during the attack on Sinjar. As one Yazidi from Sinjar discloses to *The Cradle*:

**The most dangerous people for Yazidis are Kurds. Kurds were living in Sinjar, too, not just Arabs. Kurdish ISIS members killed many Yazidis in August 2014, not just Arabs, especially in the center of Sinjar City.**

A Yazidi man from the village of Karzark [stated](#) that when ISIS attacked early on 3 August, two of his Kurdish neighbors drove from house to house in a pick-up truck with ISIS militants, searching houses and finding Yazidis to kill.

“The only thing we want is to get our revenge on those Kurdish traitors who betrayed and tortured us,” he says.

A Yazidi man from Sinjar tells *The Cradle*, “Only later did we find out” that Muslims from three local Kurdish tribes had “joined the ISIS militia and paved the way for it.”

“Many Peshmerga also sympathized with ISIS,” he adds.

One Yazidi woman interviewed by *The Cradle* says that she actually witnessed some Kurdish Peshmerga joining ISIS while she and her brother were escaping on foot toward the mountain:

**Behind a larger hill, we saw three Peshmerga vehicles. We could see how the Peshmerga took off their uniforms and put on the black clothing of Daesh [ISIS]. I was shocked. I don’t know how many Peshmerga there were. But there were a lot.**

Adding credence to this claim, a Yazidi activist who has amassed testimonies of genocide survivors informs *The Cradle*:

**I have over 500 testimonies, and all say the same thing. The Kurdish Peshmerga betrayed us. Many of them saw how the Peshmerga joined ISIS, and many of them said the first shot was fired by the Peshmerga. The first killing was started by the Peshmerga.**

### **Barzani harbors ISIS leaders**

After the slaughter, some Kurdish ISIS members found refuge in Barzani’s Kurdistan region. Prominent Kurdish activist Qadir Nadir [revealed](#) that ISIS leaders lived in Erbil under Barzani’s protection, enjoying secure apartments and salaries. One such leader, [Salah Mustafa Qarbash](#), was later discovered living in Erbil and supporting Barzani’s political initiatives.

Qarbash was recognizable to Yazidis due to a TV [interview](#) he gave during the August 2014 attack in which he justified taking Yazidi women as sex slaves and called on Yazidis to convert to Islam or be killed.

In 2017, Qarbash [appeared](#) on a KDP-funded TV station in Erbil. He spoke in support of Barzani's upcoming referendum for Kurdish independence, describing it as a step toward establishing an Islamic state.

**What was Barzani's goal?**

Both before and during the August 2014 genocide, Masoud Barzani's powerful Peshmerga trapped, disarmed, deceived, and abandoned Yazidis.

The Peshmerga's betrayal of Yazidis ensured that ISIS would be able to slaughter and enslave thousands of men, women, and children while forcing hundreds of thousands more to flee Sinjar.

But why did Barzani – who is heavily supported by the United States – use the Peshmerga to perpetrate the genocide of Yazidis in partnership with ISIS? A Yazidi lawyer speaking with *The Cradle* stated Barzani's motivations clearly:

**The Kurdish Muslims are not indigenous to Sinjar, but they want to take it. They are taking over land and then building mosques, killing some people, controlling the land, and trying to convert people to Islam by force.**

Yazidi survivors of the genocide will have no justice until its orchestrators – Masoud Barzani, and top KDP officials and Peshmerga commanders – are held accountable.

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