

Survivors of ISIS Violence Tell Their Stories

The New York Declaration for more humane treatment of refugees, made on Sept. 19 at the 70th U.N. General Assembly, will be welcomed by the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and Syrians, including many Christians, living in displacement camps or with relatives, after fleeing the conflict with so-called Islamic State (ISIS).

Many live in unfamiliar parts of their own country after losing their homes. They don't always feel welcome, but they get by, using skills that helped them earn a good living before the war.

Two Iraqis—Ghazan and Suaad—and Jonas from Syria told World Watch Monitor their stories of escaping the conflict and survival in the camps.

The Baker

Ghazan, 47, a father of three, used to own his own business. In the summer of 2014, he was forced out of his house in Mosul, the city in northern Iraq now controlled by ISIS. He says living in a displacement camp has been hard, but he found a job at a local bakery and this helps provide for his family.

Ghazan, with his head sticking through the shop window waiting for the next customer, is one of the first people you see when you walk down one of Erbil's busy shopping streets. When a customer arrives, he quickly and skillfully fills a clear plastic bag with *samoon*, a traditional Iraqi bread. He looks like he's been doing this his whole life. "Please try some," he says.

Speaking in a backroom at the bakery, Ghazan says this is all new to him. Standing next to a hot oven, he talks about the

humbling experience of working here, earning one-tenth of his former salary. "Back in my own town on the Nineveh Plain, I used to have a successful transport company," he says. "We had a good life until ISIS came and forced us out."

He shrugs his shoulders. He misses his house, the village church and his business. He doesn't know what happened to the first two, but he knows what happened to his company. "I heard that ISIS stole all our cars and are using them in Mosul right now," he says.

Ghazan has a daughter and two sons. The oldest is 21, the youngest nine. "It was hard to see my family displaced. We lost our home, our place to stay," he says.

At first the family stayed with Ghazan's sister, but, because there was no local college for his eldest child, the family continued on to Erbil. The city has been a safe haven to many Christians fleeing ISIS.

They arrived in Erbil with nothing. "The first 15 days were hard," he recalls. "I couldn't find a job, I had no income, and the rent for our apartment was high."

He'd started to visit a church in Erbil, which helped him find a job. When the church asked him to manage a bakery, he accepted immediately.

Wiping the sweat off his face, he says: "Although I don't earn much here and I have to work much longer hours than I did in my last job, I can at least pay rent so my family doesn't have to live in a camp."

Ghazan has barely known peace. During his lifetime his country has engaged in wars against the Kurds, Iran, two Gulf Wars and the current conflict with ISIS. He hopes for a brighter future for his family. "I have lost everything, but I thank God that my family is still with me."

The Farmer

When Jonas lived in Syria he owned a big farm. He too had a good life, but in common with many refugees, lost everything: his property, his job and his friends. He now lives, like more than 1 million other Syrian refugees, in neighboring Lebanon.

Jonas is in his early 50s and had a caretaker to help him run the farm. "One day ISIS came and they wanted all my cows," he says. "I was at the farm with the caretaker. I told them I didn't want them to take my cattle. They started shooting and then my caretaker fell dead on the ground. I was hit in my leg three times."

He lifts his trouser leg to show three round scars.

"They took all my cows and I heard they sold them in Turkey," he says. "Turkey is playing a dirty game in Syria."

He opens Google Maps on his phone to find an old satellite image of his property. Pointing at the map he says: "This was my farm. It is very big. These buildings here were huge." He explains what each of the buildings was for and then tries to indicate the borders of his land. "I had about 2,000 olive trees here too. They're now all gone. ISIS destroyed everything—the house, the buildings, they cut down all the trees. I lost everything there."

He survived the attack, but, knowing ISIS was closing in, decided to move his family to Lebanon, where he found work helping build community centers in the refugee camps. "We're living in a small apartment now and I have some work in construction," he says. "The first year here, I became depressed. But I started to pray more to God and that has helped me. I pray very often but have all these questions about why [attacks by ISIS] happen to Christians."

Jonas is confident that he and his family will be taken care of but, for Syria, he is less hopeful. "Syria is finished.

When the war is over, people will be full of hatred. They don't forget who killed their brother, son or father. They will want to take revenge," he says. "I think there is only a future for the church in Syria when Christians all around the world help. If the Christians really disappear from Syria, it will be a disaster for Christianity all around the world. You know, we Christians love our country, we would love to stay, would love to return, but we need the basic conditions to live there."

The Tailor

Suaad has been a tailor all her life. It's a job she loves.

In 2014, she too was forced to leave her home because of the growing conflict with ISIS. She joined the many displaced people in Iraq. After arriving in Erbil, she found a job managing a small sewing factory on the second floor of a residential flat.

She's currently making children's pyjamas. "Feel how soft the fabric is," she says, as she stands cutting fabrics on a table in the middle of the factory. Behind her is a row of sewing machines used by other displaced people to make robes and pyjamas.

Suaad's eyes light up when she talks about her old job in Mosul, where she'd worked since the 1980s. But there is sadness. "Actually, I haven't experienced much happiness since I became displaced from my town on the Nineveh Plain," she says.

She remembers the good things—how she lived together in peace with her neighbors, whether they were Christian, Yazidi or Muslim. She was born in Mosul and had expected to grow old there, but in 2014 she had to flee from ISIS overnight. "I haven't been able to return since," she says. "I feel heavy inside, not knowing what has happened to my town."

Suaad says she will only be happy again when she can return home.

A widow with no children, Souad has been staying with her brother and his family for two years. She says her brother would never ask his older sister for rent but she saw him struggling financially as the economic crisis in the country got worse. So Souad found work through a church-run project that set up a sewing factory, which meant she could then contribute to the family income.

"The priest asked me to be in charge of the factory, so I took the job," she says. "I would have done it for nothing if necessary, but I am happy that I get paid and I can share it with my [brother's] family."

Suaad makes clothes for those who need them most. If they can afford to buy the clothes, they pay for them; if they can't, they don't have to. "It's what I like most about the job. That I can share with those in a worse position than me," she says. "Sometimes a displaced person asks me to make a dress. I don't charge them. How could I?"

She helps train other displaced women; some are then hired to work in the factory. "In just a few weeks I can teach them the basics of tailoring. They can use these skills to earn money for their families either here in the factory or elsewhere. Either way, it helps them work towards a future," she says.

According to the U.N., one in every 113 people on Earth is a refugee. About one-fifth of Lebanon's population is made up of refugees—at 1.4 million it is only second to Turkey (2 million) in accepting the highest number of refugees from Syria. Syria's own population has undergone "the largest displacement crisis globally," says the U.N.—more than half its pre-war population of 22 million are no longer living in their own homes. About 7.6 million Syrians are internally displaced within the country and 4.4 million are refugees

outside it.

About 3.3 million Iraqis have been displaced within their own country. Many have ended up in Erbil in the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq. Since June 2016, the city has absorbed another 90,000 people seeking refuge from conflict.