Iraq is in the midst of an unprecedented humanitarian emergency. The takeover of almost a third of the country by ISIS has led to the widespread and ongoing displacement of civilians. Today, the number of children, women, and men forced from their homes since the crisis began now exceeds 3.4 million.

In the summer of 2014, ISIS brutally took control of large areas of Iraq and committed unimaginable atrocities against the civilian population, and in particular against the Yezidi community and other religious minority groups. Tens of thousands of civilians were tortured or murdered, while thousands of women and girls were captured and forced into sexual slavery and subjected to institutionalized rape, forced marriage and forced religious conversion.

Thousands still remain in the hands of ISIS, and are being trafficked throughout Iraq, Syria and beyond. Some have managed to escape or have been rescued¹. We know from their accounts that they have endured unimaginable cruelty. Many of the women do not know the status of their husbands and other male members of their family, but are presumed dead. Some women escape with their children, as young as six, who were subjected to sexual and physical abuse. Often, women come back without their adolescent children, who were taken as sex slaves or child soldiers of ISIS.

Yezidis are one of Iraq’s oldest religious groups, which have been marginalized and have suffered religious persecution for centuries. In recent years, as Iraq has been gripped by worsening sectarianism and religious extremism, combined with increased insecurity, the situation for Yezidis has become ever more precarious and they have born the brunt of the cruel violence today. The Yezidis, though poor, have fared far better in the more open, and tolerant society of Kurdistan, and Christians and other minorities that have steadily sought safe haven there for over a decade.

Kurdistan now hosts almost 2,000,000 Syrian refugees and displaced Iraqis and the

¹ Numbers of “returnees” or those that were held captive and subsequently escaped ISIS captivity vary between the government, NGOs, and international organizations, and increase daily, but it is believed to be in the range of 1,300 – 2,500.
numbers grow by the day. With support from the UN and donors, the Kurdistan Regional Government is working to meet the basic needs of food and shelter.

There is a growing mental health crisis in Iraq as a result of atrocities committed during the current conflict. Trauma is widespread, particularly among those who have escaped or been rescued from ISIS captivity. In addition to the typical stress and hardship imposed by conflict, most of Kurdistan’s displaced have been exposed to extreme violence and have watched loved ones viciously slaughtered. There is an urgent need to support the most vulnerable.

While the importance of mental health and psycho-social support is widely recognized by the humanitarian community, a number of challenges impede survivors’ access to appropriate care. The ability of humanitarian actors to provide assistance is challenged by a severe lack of suitably qualified and experienced personnel. The scale of the crisis and the extreme violence perpetrated, including sexual violence, has overwhelmed local capacity to respond. In addition to the limited services available, access to care has been challenging given the dispersed nature of the survivors upon their return. While some survivors reunite with and join their families in camps where services may be available, others go into ad hoc shelters and into the general population, where service delivery is extremely limited. Even where support is available, the stigma associated with accessing mental health services, combined with a lack of freedom of movement of some women, has deterred many from seeking support.

SEED’s Support to Survivors

To address these critical needs, SEED provides integrated, multi-sector support to those displaced by ISIS, with a focus on survivors of sexual violence, to help them recover from trauma, cope with daily challenges, and begin to rebuild their lives. At the SEED Center, we offer comprehensive services to the whole family and community in a safe and supportive place to heal. Individual, family, and group psycho-therapy services promote recovery and the reintegration of survivors into their families and communities. Social work services, including comprehensive case management, ensure that survivors’ broad needs are met and that they are fully supported at all times. Recreational activities help the healing process, providing a much-needed reprieve from the isolation many face, and create a “safe space” for survivors to go without stigma. Social activities such as baking, cooking, knitting, music, exercise, gardening, and art help our participants make new friends and build new support networks. SEED’s Sustainable Livelihoods projects provide both men and women technical skills and access to markets, so that they can generate an
income now during displacement. Life skills classes and education services empower survivors, strengthen their resiliency, and reduce the risk of exploitation and abuse. Integrating psychological and social work support, with a broad range of recreation, training, and educational activities increases access to our Center, reduces stigma, and increases the impact of the psychological services.

While SEED’s main focus is serving women and girls, the full range of services is offered to men and boys who, despite having been victims of extreme violence, including sexual and gender-based violence, are largely neglected. Engaging with men and boys to encourage positive shifts in attitudes and norms is also an effective strategy to reduce violence against women and girls. Our community activities and outreach efforts are designed to build bridges between different ethnic and religious communities.

Underlying all of SEED’s work is an effort to end the cycle of violence in these communities by encouraging tolerance, supporting constructive ways to resolve conflict, and addressing attitudes that foster sexual and gender based violence and stigma of survivors of violence.