

**UNITAD-NGO Dialogue Forum: Third Thematic Roundtable**  
*“Psychosocial Support: Engaging Survivors in Accountability Efforts”*  
18 November 2021

**Meeting Summary**

*Background / Purpose of Meeting*

The United Nations Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for ISIL/Da'esh Crimes (UNITAD) Special Adviser and Head of the Investigative Team, Mr. Christian Ritscher, convened the third thematic roundtable of the UNITAD-NGO Dialogue Forum on 18 November 2021. The objective of this third thematic roundtable meeting was to discuss ways in which UNITAD can work better with NGOs to provide psychosocial support to survivors of Da'esh crimes, while also strengthening the capacity of mental health treatment providers. A trauma-informed approach is central to the support which UNITAD provides to NGOs, ensuring an awareness of the impact of trauma and the implementation of strategies to minimize re-traumatization.

The UNITAD-NGO Dialogue Forum provides a platform for sustained collaboration and exchange of information between UNITAD and Iraqi and international NGOs, to achieve the common objective of holding members of ISIL accountable for crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide committed in Iraq.

*Special Adviser and Head of UNITAD: Opening Statement*

More than 40 NGO participants attended the thematic roundtable virtual meeting, with Special Adviser Ritscher and members of the Investigative Team. In his introductory remarks, the Special Adviser emphasized that psychosocial support is one key area of cooperation between UNITAD and the NGO community. He noted the importance of working with NGOs in order to fulfil our common goal of holding ISIL members accountable for their international crimes, and to serve justice to the victims and survivors from all affected communities. He mentioned that during his time as a Federal Public Prosecutor and the Head of the German War Crimes Unit S4, he saw first-hand how this partnership helped prosecute ISIL members. He also noted that UNITAD's Witness Protection and Support Unit (WPSU) actively seeks to extend its network of local service providers, and ultimately facilitates and increases access to community-based psychosocial support for the witnesses engaged with UNITAD from different communities across Iraq.

*Panel Discussion: Good Practices in Providing Psychosocial Support to Engage Survivors in Accountability Efforts*

This was followed by a moderated panel discussion highlighting good collaborative practices between UNITAD and NGOs in the area of psychosocial support. The panel discussion was commenced through a presentation by Dr. Nenna Ndukwe, UNITAD's Lead Clinical Psychologist. Dr. Ndukwe holds a Doctorate in clinical psychology and Master of Science in forensic and legal psychology. In her 20 years of professional experience, she has worked in the U.K, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Iraq. Her main areas of expertise include assessment and treatment of mental health disorders in children and adults, psychological interventions for survivors of traumatic life events, forensic psychology risk assessment, facilitation of interventions targeting recidivism and sexual violence.

She explained that as part of UNITAD's mandate and using a trauma-informed approach, UNITAD's mental health experts actively contribute to building capacities at the national level, especially strengthening the technical capacity among specialist and non-specialist staff in both national authorities and NGOs providing psychosocial support to survivors and witnesses. A lot of the witnesses that engage in UNITAD's investigative purposes have seen the gravest atrocities and exposed to traumatic events. Those survivors struggle with mild, moderate or severe mental health related concerns and disorders.

Psychosocial support is provided to vulnerable individuals prior, during and after interviews. A psychological vulnerability assessment is undertaken which provides an opportunity to meet with the witness and to evaluate their psychosocial situation and mental health profile with a view to understanding their ability to proceed with the investigative interview. This assessment helps the team to identify their strengths as well as ascertain the need for any special assistance measures, which include the presence of an accompanied person during the interview for emotional support, or having the interview put on pause until the witness is ready to continue. Another recommendation could be the need to refer the witness for specialist intervention. UNITAD's priority is to minimize potential re-traumatization. A key component of the aforementioned assessment is psycho-education where the witness is prepared for any adverse emotional effects that can arise from sharing their stories, particularly in cases where there is a trauma history. The process of psycho-education enables the provision of information to normalize such experiences and the introduction of coping strategies which aim to minimize re-traumatization.

To date UNITAD's psychology team's engagement with NGOs has been positive. A mapping has been undertaken to identify service providers who can support survivors with long-term support for anxiety and depression. UNITAD has delivered capacity building training for mental health partners and has been privileged to support survivor networks. It is important to note that UNITAD is unable to meet the tremendous needs of the affected community given limited resources, which is why it is crucial to work alongside government partners and existing mental health and psychosocial support providers.

UNITAD has provided a range of psychosocial training sessions for survivor networks which are relevant to the type of challenges survivors are facing such as managing the after effect of traumatic experiences. The survivor network training topics include understanding trauma and how it affects individuals and communities, and how to manage symptoms. UNITAD has also partnered with Stanford University, who has provided a session on psychoactive medication for survivors on the pros and cons of psychiatric medication. The importance of group support has also been discussed. Capacity building training for NGOs include suicide prevention and awareness, self-care for vicarious trauma and basic counseling skills.

UNITAD would like to enhance its partnerships to strengthen ongoing psychosocial capacity building efforts including identifying gaps and areas for prioritization so that all communities are being reached across the country and working with NGO partners and academic institutions to invest in improving the long-term mental health situation in Iraq. UNITAD is also working closely with Iraq's Department of Health to continue conversations on how to expand the network of service providers for the benefit of survivors and contributing to improving the skill set of treatment providers. UNITAD is keen to learn more about how the psychology team can work better with NGOs to provide psychosocial support to survivors of Da'esh crimes and the best approach to ensure inclusivity and fill the gaps in meeting all survivor communities across the country.

The second panelist to speak, as a representative of Iraqi NGOs, was Dr. Bayan Kader Rasul, who is the mental health and psychosocial support technical manager of EMMA Organization for Human Development. EMMA was co-founded by Dr. Rasul in 2013 to respond to the needs of women and girls. She is a woman health expert and a consultant for Gender Affairs in UNAMI. In addition, she is a trainer for psycho-social services, supervising on job training for Mental Health and (S)GBV Counsellors. Since 2014 she established a trauma healing program for the rehabilitation and reintegration of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence Yazidi survivors of ISIS atrocities in Duhok. She is a fully registered psychiatrist in the Netherlands, graduating from Utrecht University and Mosul University.

In her remarks, Dr. Rasul provided an overview of the mental health situation of survivors of Da'esh crimes and how health staff react to trauma related issues. She noted that long standing conflict in Iraq has affected most of the population in Iraq and traumatized all ethno-religious communities in Iraq and Kurdistan region. Mental health facilities throughout Iraq, including in Kurdistan are not in good condition with a shortage of trained mental health care professionals. The main component of Iraq's mental health system was reliance on institutionalized care for those suffering from chronic psychiatric disorders, and treatment largely depends on medicine without psychotherapeutic counselling and other alternative therapies. The overwhelming need for psychosocial care has often led to mental health crises, which are rarely resolved and lead to increased suicides.

Dr. Rasul discussed EMMA Organization's rehabilitation program for victims of ISIS which includes an individual plan for every survivor, the provision of a safe place for survivors to receive psychosocial, legal and medical support in addition to vocational training. She also provided recommendations on how to address the situation, including training social workers and psychologists to improve counseling and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for survivors, as well as enhancing alertness to possible adverse effects and unintended consequences of psychosocial programmes. She also highlighted the importance of managing stigma so that individuals can access psychosocial support. Finally, she emphasized the importance of transitional justice mechanisms for improving the mental health of survivors of Da'esh crimes.

The third panelist to speak was Prof. Dr. Jan Ilhan Kizilhan, Dean at the Institute of Psychotherapy and Psychotraumatology at University of Duhok and Director of the Institute for Transcultural Health Science, State University Baden-Württemberg. Dr. Kizilhan is a psychologist, author and publisher, with research interests in psychotraumatology, sexual violation, trauma, terror and war, transcultural psychiatry, psychotherapy, clinical psychology and psychotherapy, migration research and socialization-war research. He is the chief psychologist of the Special Quota Project for Vulnerable Women and Children in Northern Iraq, funded by the State Government of Baden-Württemberg.

Dr. Kizilhan introduced the work of the Institute of Psychotherapy and Psychotraumatology, which works with survivors in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. This work focuses on individual, collective and transgenerational trauma. Many of the victims of sexual and gender-based violence develop post-traumatic disorders (PTSD) as well as other conditions such as anxiety and depression. The trauma inflicted by Da'esh crimes caused a considerable psychosocial breakdown in Iraq. 55% of the population living in Da'esh occupied areas suffered from depression and 63% from PTSD. Recent studies also identified that shame was the cause of the high rate of fainting by survivors.

He highlighted how COVID-19 has exacerbated the mental health situation, leading to an increase in suicidal thoughts in IDP camps by 20% and suicide rates across Iraq and Kurdistan region.

Another recent study showed that suicidality and psychological stress is higher in Yazidi IDP camps compared to non-Yazidi IDP camps. It is also important to note that there is a higher rate of suicide thoughts amongst the general population due to a range of issues including loss of important people, physical violations, and unemployment. Since the beginning of the year, 11 young Yazidi women have committed suicide in the IDP camps. Dr. Kizilhan emphasized the importance of a national mental health campaign to address stigma, prejudice and separation between refugees and non-refugees as well as across all ethno-religious communities. The issue of child soldiers and children born of rape must also be comprehensively addressed to prevent aggression and sense of injustice into adulthood. This is important in preventing future radicalization and perpetuating cycles of violence.

Dr. Kizilhan stressed the importance of justice and accountability for improving psychosocial wellbeing and the reconstruction of society. This is also necessary for overcoming historical and transgenerational trauma caused by the chronic feeling of injustice and persecution of non-Muslim communities. The flight of Yazidis leaving Iraq is a component of the genocide caused by the psychological destruction of the community.

In closing, Dr. Kizilhan highlighted the work of his institute in developing the long-term capacity of local providers according to international standards. While in the short-term he noted the importance of NGOs in providing psychosocial support to survivors. He urged UNITAD to provide expert assistance to survivors before, during and after interviews as well as any necessary long-term treatment. He also identified the legal and medical challenges facing Iraqi mental health providers, including licenses to provide medicine.

#### *Plenary Discussions*

During the plenary segment of the roundtable, NGOs provided comments and recommendations on how UNITAD can enhance its engagement with NGOs and its work on issues related to its mandate. UNITAD team members provided the following remarks in response:

- 1) Lack of education and technical qualifications of existing mental health providers to work with survivors, particularly children, and the need for increased capacity building trainings:*

Dr. Ndukwe stressed, from a professional and ethical point of view, the importance of engaging clinical work only when the provider has the required training to do so. She advised any organization with such issues to ensure that staff are adequately trained to be able to deal with all the technical issues that are presented so that there is no harm done to beneficiaries.

- 2) The need for a national policy to address mental health crisis and suicide prevention as well as the use of virtual programmes to strengthen capacity of mental health providers:*

Dr. Rasul further emphasized the importance of national and regional strategies to ensure adherence to the “do no harm” policy.

- 3) Efforts to address the mental health needs of former-child soldiers:*

Dr. Kizilhan highlighted that many NGOs are doing important work but often these are only short-term projects due to resource issues. To improve the trust and confidence of the children requires a 3-year engagement on a daily basis. Dr. Rasul also highlighted the mental health difficulties faced by the mothers of the former-child soldiers and the need for increased support for them too.

4) *The need for a Victims Protection Unit to enable victims to have an active role in future Iraqi trials based on the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia model:*

UNITAD has a specific Witness Protection and Support Unit which houses UNITAD psychology team. One key part of that is providing assistance to vulnerable witnesses as well as strengthening the Iraqi judicial system for capacity building.

5) *Implementation of Yazidi Survivors' Law for psychosocial rehabilitation of survivors:*

Dr. Rasul recalled the importance of the Government of Iraq working with NGOs to ensure effective implementation of the Yazidi Survivors' Law as it relates to mental health and psychosocial support services. She also noted the importance of implementing the Yazidi Survivors Law to support with healing processes.

*Closing Remarks of the Special Adviser and Head of UNITAD*

In his closing remarks, the Special Adviser expressed his thanks to the panelists and the insightful recommendations put forward by NGO representatives. He noted that the Witness Protection and Support Unit will follow up on the implementation of relevant recommendations, and other ideas raised during the discussion. He also urged NGOs to contact the focal points of the UNITAD-NGO Dialogue Forum to respond to any questions or concerns from NGO partners.

He will provide a comprehensive update on the work of UNITAD at the next Biannual Plenary Roundtable of the Forum, which will take place in January 2022.