

POV

Community
Engagement & Education

DISCUSSION GUIDE

On Her Shoulders

A Film by Alexandria Bombach



www.pbs.org/pov

When Nadia Murad walks into a meeting – whether with a politician, a journalist or a diplomat – there is a sense of tension. Understandably, it seems that for many it's difficult to know what to say, what questions to ask, how to express that they care but at the same time not promise too much. They most likely know of her wrenching story before she starts, yet no matter how much detail she gives, they also know they couldn't possibly, truly understand her experience.

This is a film that explores that space – the distance between the victim and her voice, the fragility of human emotions that both provoke and hinder positive change, and the unbelievable resilience of a woman willing to sacrifice herself to play the media game that is modern advocacy.

The past three years of Nadia's life have been unimaginable. On August 3, 2014, ISIS declared that the Yazidi people of Northern Iraq had long been a shame to their idea of Islam, and set out to commit genocide. An estimated 5,000 people were killed in the weeks that followed, and over 7,000 women and children were captured to become sex slaves and child soldiers. Nadia was captured on the same day that ISIS killed her mother and six brothers. Eighteen members of her family were either killed or enslaved.

As she begins to tell her story, which I heard her recount over and over again, you might think that she would become used to it. But Nadia communicates the weight of her experience in her eyes. At the end of each and every meeting, through the business suits and flurry of handshakes, a long lens captures her sinking back into herself to recover – she is visibly drained.

I followed Nadia and the people working closest with her in the summer of 2016. From refugee camps in Greece to a memorial rally on the anniversary of the genocide in Berlin, to the House of Commons in Ottawa and the United Nations headquarters in New York, Nadia's life is in constant motion. What I saw was an exhausting process, with no real roadmap for success. I started to see her lose faith in outlets that she had entrusted with her story. It seemed the incessant barrage of questions from the media turned to "How did they rape you" more often than "What can be done for the Yazidis?"

The platform of the victim, the survivor, is nothing to be taken lightly. Nadia herself knows that her words have moved people to take action. It is my hope that the intimate access into Nadia's life off the podium will reveal the true struggles that a voiceless community faces in getting the world to act.

Alexandria Bombach

Director, *On Her Shoulders*



Director Alexandria Bombach.

Photo courtesy of Alexandria Bombach



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USING THIS GUIDE

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection, designed for people who want to use *On Her Shoulders* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit amd.org/engage/resources

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Nadia Murad - Yazidi human rights activists working to bring ISIS before the International Criminal Court on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity

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Luis Moreno Ocampo - the former and first prosecutor of the International Criminal Court

Amal Clooney - human rights attorney who represented Nadia Murad

KEY ISSUES

On Her Shoulders offers insight into one Yazidi activist's struggle to navigate the media and international advocacy apparatus while advocating tirelessly for her people. It will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics::

- **Activism**
- **Advocacy**
- **Asylum protection**
- **Conflict related sexual violence**
- **Cultural preservation**
- **Ethics**
- **Gender**
- **Gender-based violence**
- **Genocide**
- **Heroism**
- **Human rights**
- **Human trafficking**
- **International diplomacy**
- **International law**
- **Iraq**
- **ISIS**
- **Islamic State**
- **Journalism**
- **Media**
- **Mental health**
- **Patriarchy**
- **Peace**
- **Refugees**
- **Religious extremism**
- **Savior complex**
- **Storytelling**
- **Syria**
- **Terrorism**
- **Trauma**
- **United Nations**
- **Women's rights**
- **Yazidis**





Photo courtesy of Alexandria Bombach

Yazidis and the Islamic State Genocide

The Yazidis are an ethno-religious group of about one million that has lived primarily in northern Iraq for thousands of years. Most Yazidis speak Kurmanji, a Kurdish dialect, and practice an ancient gnostic faith that incorporates beliefs from Islam, Zoroastrianism and Mithraism.

Prior to 2014, the largest Yazidi community lived in the mountainous Sinjar district in the Ninewah Province of Iraq, where holy sites have held religious significance for generations of Yazidis. Since the 16th century, the community has been persecuted by groups who want to settle Yazidi land and religious fundamentalists who believe that Yazidis are “infidels.” In a 2014 *National Geographic* article, one scholar estimates that the Yazidis have survived “72 previous genocides, or attempts at annihilation.”

One of the most significant genocidal campaigns against the Yazidis began in 2014, when jihadist militants from the Islamic State (ISIS) attacked Yazidi villages in Sinjar. The Yazidis’ land was of strategic importance to ISIS: it contained a route between two of the terrorist

group’s strongholds in Iraq and Syria. Nearly all of Sinjar’s 400,000 Yazidi residents were displaced, fleeing to refugee camps in Iraqi Kurdistan and the Sinjar Mountain, and eventually escaping through a corridor opened to Syria. Thousands of men and boys were massacred, while about 6,800 women and girls were abducted by ISIS and sold into sexual slavery. About 3,000 Yazidis are estimated to still be in captivity. Families and organizations are working to rescue abducted Yazidis; ISIS sometimes returns captives after receiving large ransom payments. With each region of Iraq and Syria re-taken from ISIS, more Yazidis are rescued and move to camps in the Kurdistan Region.

Since 2014 an estimated 3,000 women and girls have escaped or been rescued from ISIS captivity. There was strong media interest in their stories specifically, and many journalists interviewed survivors who lived in camps throughout the Kurdistan Region.

The Yazidi cultural tradition includes a patriarchal code of honor that governs how men and women are expected to behave. According to Yazidi custom, it is forbidden to convert one's faith, marry someone who is not Yazidi or from a different caste, or have intimate relations outside of an approved marriage. In 2007 Yazidi men attacked a 17-year old girl, stoning her to death for having a relationship with a Muslim. When ISIS abducted Yazidi women and girls as part of their genocidal campaign, they intentionally violated this honor code, believing the women would never be accepted back into the community. They were wrong: the Yazidi Spiritual Council issued a decree stating that women and girls would be welcomed back and with honor. This encouraged many to escape from ISIS, and many families to go to great lengths to rescue female relatives at great cost. However, women have had varied experiences as they return to their broken families and communities. Some have been rejected, others welcomed, and still others accepted but facing questions about their honor. Recently women with children born of rape have been forced to choose between their families or their children. All of these issues raise concerns about stigmatization of Yazidi women, even within their own community.

Today, Yazidi refugees are scattered throughout the Middle East, Europe and beyond. Although ISIS was mostly defeated in Sinjar in 2015, Yazidis are reluctant to return to their homes because entire cities are in ruins and many acknowledge that not all of the ISIS militants have been driven out. Violence continues in Sinjar, where the defeat of ISIS created a power vacuum that many military actors are trying to fill, including the Iraqi Security Forces, Iranian-backed popular mobilization units (PMUs) that helped defeat ISIS, Yazidi forces under the auspices of the PMUs, and the Yazidi fighters who are part of the Kurdish People's Protection Units militias. All of these groups are vying for control over different parts of Sinjar, leaving the Yazidi community concerned about their safety. It is also a disputed region that is claimed by both the local Kurdish government and the central Iraqi government based in Baghdad; this ongoing tension prevents investment in and reconstruction of Yazidi villages and towns.

Nadia Murad was born in 1993 in the Yazidi farming village of Kocho, Iraq. When she was 19 years old, the Islamic State ransacked Kocho and murdered hundreds of men, adolescent boys, and older women, including many of her family members. Murad, along with other girls and women from her village, was abducted and held captive; dur-

ing that time she was subjected to beatings and rape. She eventually escaped, first to a refugee camp and later to Germany, where she was granted asylum.

Nadia Murad now travels the world calling attention to the Yazidi genocide and the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. She is the founder of Nadia's Initiative, an organization dedicated to "helping women and children victimized by genocide, mass atrocities and human trafficking to heal and rebuild their lives and communities," according to *Forbes*. In 2018, Nadia Murad was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her outspoken activism. She donated her prize money to Nadia's Initiative to continue supporting victims and survivors of sexual violence.

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Photo courtesy of Alexandria Bombach

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen or pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion:

- **Why do you think the film is titled *On Her Shoulders*?**
- **What did you learn from this film? Did you gain new insight?**
- **Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing or moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?**
- **Did anything in the film surprise you? Was anything familiar?**
- **If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, whom would you ask and what would you want to know?**

Media

Early in the film, Nadia Murad spells out the kinds of questions she wants to be asked. She says, “The things I want to be asked are: What is the fate of those girls? How young are the girls who are going through this pain? What is the situation of the refugees who I visit in the camps? What is the situation of my people in camps in Kurdistan and Sinjar Mountain? What must be done so Yazidis can have their rights? What must be done so a woman will not be a victim of war?” What kinds of questions do you witness the media asking Murad, and what information seems to interest the media? What do you think about these questions? Do you have questions or find there is information the media should also be focused on that was missing? Why, in your view, is Murad not being asked the kinds of questions she would like to be asked?



Photo courtesy of Alexandria Bombach

One journalist says to Murad, “I am sorry to make you go back to this terrible, terrible time.” How does this comment make you feel? Do you think the role of journalists is to ask subjects to recount their trauma? Why or why not? What do you see as the purpose of asking detailed questions about rape and other forms of trauma? How much detail about rape and other trauma do you think is important to be shared for the public interest? Why or why not?

Over the course of the film, Murad completes many interviews. How do you feel these kinds of questions could impact Nadia and other survivors like her?

Do you see a difference in the way journalists report on rape in the US, for example as part of the #MeToo movement, and in conflict zones like Iraq?

Why do you think Murad continues to participate in interviews and diplomatic ceremonies, even when she seems exhausted? How do these interviews help people think differently about the plight of the Yazidi people? Does anything change as a result of her telling her story?

Do you feel like the reporters captured in the film are giving Nadia Murad a voice? If so, how do you see

her ability to shape and articulate her message publicly? Do you feel like they are limiting the impact of her advocacy? In what ways? What could the media be doing differently to support Murad’s work?

Despite the large amount of coverage Murad’s story receives from the media and the international political community, “Years have passed and people still don’t know anything about us,” says a refugee Yazidi woman in the Serres camp in Greece. Why do you think this woman feels that people don’t know anything about the Yazidis?

What should be the result of sharing one’s story through the media? With diplomatic and political leaders? How does story-sharing connect to collective action and social or political change?

How do you think the media should be engaging with Nadia Murad? Who do you see as in control of the narrative?



Photo courtesy of Alexandria Bombach

Nadia Murad's Identity, Agency and Voice

What did you learn from the film about Nadia Murad and the representation of her identity? How would she like to be represented?

While Nadia Murad is labeled as both a refugee and an activist, she explains, "I wish people knew me as an excellent seamstress, as an excellent athlete, as an excellent student, as an excellent makeup artist, as an excellent farmer. I don't want people to know me as a victim of ISIS terrorism." Yet this is not the image of her we see projected to the world. Why does the identity she describes in that quote remain in the background?

In what ways does how others view us impact how we view ourselves? Do you feel impacted by how your classmates, peers, friends or society see you? How might you feel if the way they see you is not how you view yourself?

Do you think Murad feels she is in control of her identity? Why or why not?

Murad Ismael explains that Nadia Murad has received threats from ISIS militants who are upset that she is speaking out against them. Why do you think she continues to raise her voice despite these dangers?

Murad reflects on her identity and explains, "They say I'm an activist, but inside no matter what the world gives me, I still see myself as that worthless person, that person who was enslaved for no reason. I'll see myself as a person of worth on the day when terrorists are brought to justice." How does Murad's understanding of who she is differ from how the world seems to see her? What would need to change to make her feel differently? What does her self-perception suggest to you in terms of her ongoing trauma as a survivor?



Photo courtesy of Alexandria Bombach

Heroism-Labeling and the Savior Complex

What do you feel when Nadia Murad is named UNODC Goodwill Ambassador for the Dignity of Survivors of Human Trafficking? This feels like an important event in the film. What did you notice about Murad's reactions?

What do you think is the purpose of the commendations and awards Murad receives? Are there any downsides to these commendations and awards? What do you notice about Murad's reactions to these designations and the reactions from those administering these awards? Is there a difference? What might this difference suggest? Do you think the international community is giving Murad awards and titles so its members can feel that they are taking action? Is this action a meaningful action to you? Is it to Murad?

What do you think Murad's awards mean to the organizations that grant them? What do you think they mean to Nadia Murad herself, or to the Yazidi people?

Michelle Rempel, a conservative Canadian Parliament member, is emotional after Murad's testimony before the Canadian House of Commons. After explaining what

she will do to try to help Yazidis and move Murad's agenda forward, she tells Murad, "My mom watched you. She's like, 'You tell her she can come live with me. You tell her she's my daughter.'" How do you feel about this exchange? What do you think Rempel's intention was? How do you think this exchange made Murad feel? How do you think this exchange made Rempel feel about herself or her family? When Murad said they were looking for protection for their people in safe places like Canada, Rempel responded by saying that the system is very bureaucratic and takes a long time. How do you see this impacting Murad?

Privilege and Prejudice

While waiting outside of the Canadian House of Commons, Nadia Murad and Murad Ismael watch the exercises of the Canadian soldiers and feel a sense of cultural alienation. She remarks on the difference between Iraqi, Kurdish and Yazidi soldiers and the Canadian soldiers. She explains how Iraqi,

Kurdish and Yazidi soldiers are getting “killed in the heat... being torn to pieces every day.. Instead, she notices that “people here just get to watch theirs.” Ismael responds, “Those areas are like hell for no reason.” What do you think Murad and Ismael feel watching the Canadian soldiers? How do you feel about the differences between the experiences of the soldiers in each of these regions? Are there reasons for these differences that run deeper than the current state of affairs?

In the Petra camp, a young Yazidi refugee man exclaims, “We escaped from the Arab world because there was a genocide happening. We came here to Europe and it’s like another genocide is happening.” What do you think he means when he says “another genocide is happening”? How do you think the world should be treating Yazidi refugees and victims of violence? More than once Murad and other Yazidis said they wanted protection outside of Iraq only to be met with explanations about how the refugee and asylum system are backlogged and bureaucratic with millions of refugees worldwide in need of protection. Should there be a system to fast track Yazidi cases in need of protection? Why or why not?

Cultural Preservation

Luis Moreno Ocampo is very adamant that the Yazidi people must return to their homeland and believes this is a critical part of maintaining their culture. Why is place an important part of cultural identity? How did you feel about the way Ocampo communicated his views? Do you think there was any disconnect between what he thought was important and Murad and Ismael’s priorities? Are his recommendations realistic given the current situation in Iraq and Sinjar?

Murad Ismael explains that as he looks to a future after ISIS’s reign, he knows Yazidi culture will change. He explains that “it will be a culture without men. It will be a culture of widows and orphans, of people dressed in black. That’s what Kocho will look like in the future.” How do you think these changes will impact Yazidi culture in the future?

Yazidi refugees have been forced to leave home and relocate to many different countries. Says one refugee Yazidi man, “If five go here and two go there we will lose each other. We will become extinct.” What do you think is the effect of separating members of minority communities when they resettle? What is the value of keeping these communi-

ties united so they are resettled together? The movie portrays the Yazidi community as united and on the same page. Do you think this is likely? What else would you want to know about Yazidi community relations after the genocide?

The Role of the Viewer

When you were watching the film, what was your reaction to Nadia Murad and to the Yazidi people? Did your reaction change over the course of the film?

Murad shares her traumatic story over and over in the film. What are a few different ways people react to her story? Why do you think the media and political leaders repeatedly ask Murad to talk about traumatic rape? Why do these stories continue to be interesting to the public? Do you think the public would still be interested in stories like Murad’s if she didn’t tell the details of rape? What does this public viewer interest in stories of violence against women say about the status of women in our society and globally? It is said that “sex sells”. Do you think “rape sells” as well and what does that say about media consumers? Who do you think is driving these narratives – the media, viewer, both? And in what ways? Do you think viewers have the ability to influence the media narrative? How so?

In the film people take actions like giving Nadia Murad medals and awards, bringing her to meet high-profile diplomats, taking her on exclusive tours and sometimes advancing her cause. What kinds of actions does Murad want? Do we have a responsibility to act after we have witnessed her story? How?

The media and diplomatic bodies portray Nadia Murad in a way that differs from how she sees herself. Were you influenced by how Murad’s identity was broadcast? For example, diplomatic agencies tend to portray her as a hero, which is often in contrast to how Nadia sees herself. Do you see her as a hero? Why or why not?

What are two words you would use to describe Nadia? Do you think she would use these words to describe herself? Why might there be a difference between how you view Nadia and how she views herself?



Photo courtesy of Alexandria Bombach

Media Ethics

Do you think there should be ethical standards for how the media gathers and reports on stories of trauma including sexual violence?

Did the media in the film act in ways that you found to be unethical? If so, what are some examples?

What recommendations would you have for the media when engaging with people who have suffered traumatic events?

Can you identify any potential risks to other survivors like Nadia from their own community that could be linked to media reporting? What about relatives of survivors who are still in captivity?

In what ways do you think the media narrative about Murad and others like her might impact her specifically? What about other survivors and Yazidi women collectively?

Are you aware of any guidelines that exist to help journalists, photographers and editors know how to gather and report on stories of sexual violence?

What are the limitations of these guidelines?

What recommendations do you have to improve ethical reporting of sexual violence and other trauma, particularly in the context of war?

Additional media literacy questions are available at:
www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php

Closing Questions

At the end of your discussion, to help people synthesize what they've experienced and move the focus from dialogue to action steps, you may want to choose one of these questions:

- What did you learn from this film that you wish everyone knew? What would change if everyone knew it?
- If you could require one person (or one group) to view this film, who would it be? What would you hope their main takeaway would be?
- Fill in the blank: The story of Nadia Murad is important because _____.
- Complete this sentence: I am inspired by this film (or discussion) to _____.
- Additional media literacy questions are available on the AmDoc website.

Taking Action

If the group is having trouble generating their own ideas, these suggestions can help get things started:

- **Call your representative and express your opinion about the resettlement of refugees and asylum seekers and improving conditions in refugee camps and reparations for the Yazidi people. Learn about related initiatives through a study commissioned by the United States Institute of Peace.**
- **Learn more about Yazidi culture and history through books, films and other media.**
- **Learn about the destruction of sites of Yazidi cultural heritage through the Forensic Architecture project, in collaboration with Yazda.**
- **Look for opportunities to spend time with Yazidis who may have relocated to your community. Learn about their history and culture directly from them through community convenings and events. Consider mentoring child refugees in English or other subjects.**
- **Stand up against religious persecution in your own community when you encounter it. Report acts of violence against minority religious groups and minority groups more broadly.**
- **Host teach-ins to discuss religious and cultural tolerance in your own community.**
- **Organize story-listening trainings to help people learn how to engage in trauma-informed story-listening and how to integrate listening into action.**
- **Volunteer with organizations support Yazidis and other refugees who have been persecuted.**
- **If you don't have time to volunteer but you can donate, research organizations or ways to directly support individuals who have faced persecution. Make sure you have vetted these organizations before you donate.**
- **Monitor and call out unethical reporting in social media. Educate yourself and others about ethical reporting and balancing the needs of trauma survivors against the public right/interest to know of atrocities.**



Photo courtesy of Alexandria Bombach

Yazda, a global Yazidi organization, works to prevent future genocides against the Yazidi community and to assist them in recovery from the 2014 genocide.

Free Yazidi Foundation, a nonprofit, protects and support the most vulnerable members of the Yazidi community, with an emphasis on working with women and children.

Nadia's Initiative advocates for victims of sexual violence and works to rebuild communities in crisis. It includes initiatives such as the Sinjar Action Fund, which is rebuilding Sinjar, and Survivors Action Response, which develops support programs for survivors of sexual violence.

One Free World International is a human rights organization helping persecuted religious minorities and victims of human rights violations, including freeing women from enslavement by the Islamic State.

“Has Anyone Here Been Raped by ISIS?” – article by human rights lawyer Sherizaan Minwalla about the media’s prurient interest in reporting the explicit details of sexual violence.

“Voices of Yazidi women: Perceptions of journalistic practices in the reporting on ISIS sexual violence” – scholarly article by Sherizaan Minwall and Johanna E. Foster that explores Yazidi women’s perceptions of the nature and impact of media reporting on women and girls who survived ISIS abductions.

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HOW TO BUY THE FILM

To order ***On Her Shoulders***, go to www.onhershouldersfilm.com



Produced by American Documentary, Inc., POV is public television's premier showcase for nonfiction films. Since 1988, POV has been the home for the world's boldest contemporary filmmakers, celebrating intriguing personal stories that spark conversation and inspire action. Always an innovator, POV discovers fresh new voices and creates interactive experiences that shine a light on social issues and elevate the art of storytelling. With our documentary broadcasts, original online programming and dynamic community engagement campaigns, we are committed to supporting films that capture the imagination and present diverse perspectives.

POV films have won 37 Emmy® Awards, 21 George Foster Peabody Awards, 12 Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Awards, three Academy Awards®, and the first-ever George Polk Documentary Film Award. The POV series has been honored with a Special News & Documentary Emmy Award for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking, three IDA Awards for Best Curated Series and the National Association of Latino Independent Producers (NALIP) Award for Corporate Commitment to Diversity. Learn more at www.pbs.org/pov.

POV Spark (www.pbs.org/pov)

Since 1994, POV Digital has driven new storytelling initiatives and interactive production for POV. The department has continually experimented with web-based documentaries, producing PBS' first program website and the first Snapchat-native documentary. It has won major awards for its work, including a Webby Award and over 19 nominations. Now with a singular focus on incubating and distributing interactive productions, POV Spark continues to explore the future of independent non-fiction media through its co-productions, acquisitions and POV Labs, where media makers and technologists collaborate to reinvent storytelling forms.

POV Engage (www.pbs.org/pov/engage)

The POV Engage team works with educators, community organizations and PBS stations to present more than 800 free screenings every year. In addition, we distribute free discussion guides and standards-aligned lesson plans for each of our films. With our community partners, we inspire dialogue around the most important social issues of our time.

American Documentary, Inc. (www.amdoc.org)

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia arts organization dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation. AmDoc is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization.

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