



Torture and trafficking survivors with their Bedouin rescuer in Sinai.

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The Rerouted Trafficking in Eritrean Refugees

Dan Connell

When Sheikh Muhammad ‘Ali Hasan ‘Awad learned that nine kidnapped “Africans”—eight Eritreans and one Ethiopian—were being beaten, raped and starved in a compound in Sheikh Zuwayd, a Sinai village near the Israeli border, he wasted little time. Firing AK-47s in the air, the sheikh and his Bedouin posse burst in to free the victims and threaten their three torturers with death if they did not immediately tell all. The captors’ accounts—and the raid itself—were recorded in high-definition video with an iPad.

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I arrived the next night to find the nine liberated kidnap victims quivering with fear, malnourished and in need of medical attention. One boy had a gaping wound on his shoulder; he had been beaten with the chain used to bind the captives together. One girl’s upper arm bulged where the bone had been broken and left untreated. Several had scarlet welts left on their backs, chests and legs by molten plastic dripped on them as they were forced to phone relatives to plead for ransom money.

But the three men Sheikh Muhammad took prisoner that day were not the kidnapers. They were the last of several trafficking gangs whose lucrative operation stretched from

eastern Sudan across Egypt with local authorities bribed to look the other way. Most victims were snatched by Rashayida Bedouin from the Shagarab refugee camp near Kassala, Sudan, or along Sudan's border with Eritrea, and sold to the Sinai Bedouin.

This highly profitable trade in human flesh, which took off in 2009 and peaked in 2012, enriched a well-established network of smugglers, even as it stirred controversy among the Egyptian Bedouin. The public exposure, coupled with Israel's effort to seal its border to African asylum seekers, put a crimp in the Sinai piece of the operation. But the trafficking, with all its horrors, is far from over. It is just rerouted and, in some respects, more sinister.

How It Worked

The Rashayida, an insular Arab tribe that migrated to the Horn of Africa in the nineteenth century, have for decades lived mainly in eastern Sudan and lowland Eritrea, moving back and forth at will and trading across the Sahel as far west as Niger and Mali. Today, most of this "trade" is smuggling of arms and other contraband. The Rashayida began moving people for a fee in the early 2000s, as thousands of young Eritreans fled repression and open-ended conscription in their troubled homeland. At first, many tried to reach Libya as a way station to Europe. When this route was blocked in 2006, the flow shifted eastward to Egypt and Israel.

Some time in 2008-2009 enterprising smugglers tumbled to the fact that the refugees were willing, under duress, to pay higher rates. Others say the traffickers got to their destinations only to discover that the Eritreans could not or would not pay what they had promised. However the ransoming started, it soon morphed into a full-scale business in which kidnapping took over as the main means of supply and torture became routine.

The Rashayidas' role normally ended at the Suez Canal. There the captives were sold to Sinai Bedouins, who trucked them across the peninsula to torture camps where their final "owners" collected enormous ransoms. In a few years, payouts grew from \$3,000 to more than \$40,000, an astronomical sum for Eritrean families. By 2012, with the Israeli border closed, no Eritreans (or other Africans) were voluntarily "migrating" along this route; all the prisoners were kidnapping victims who were forcibly taken there.

Traffickers like those raided by Sheikh Muhammad maintained lavish compounds where dozens of prisoners were held, often in separate groups, for four, five, even seven months as relatives at home and in Europe, North America, Australia and elsewhere were bled for payments deposited into secret bank accounts or handed over in cash at specified rendezvous, sometimes in Egypt or Sudan, sometimes within Eritrea, and sometimes as far away as Dubai. In 2012 an Israeli film crew caught a transaction taking place in Tel Aviv.¹

Among those I interviewed, nearly all had been held for at least five months and were lucky to be alive. Many had not been so fortunate. Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, which interviewed hundreds of survivors, estimates that as many as 4,000 died between 2008 and 2012. But some 36,000 Eritreans did reach Israel, making them one of the largest non-Arab minorities in the country and setting off an ugly, ultra-nationalist backlash that led to the construction of the nearly impenetrable border fence, the expansion of detention facilities and threats to deport those already there. In July 2013 Israel began "voluntary" deportations of recent arrivals under threat of indefinite incarceration if they refused to go home.² In August, the *Guardian* reported that Israel would soon begin deporting Eritreans and Sudanese—termed "infiltrators," not refugees—to Uganda, which agreed to take them in exchange for money and arms.

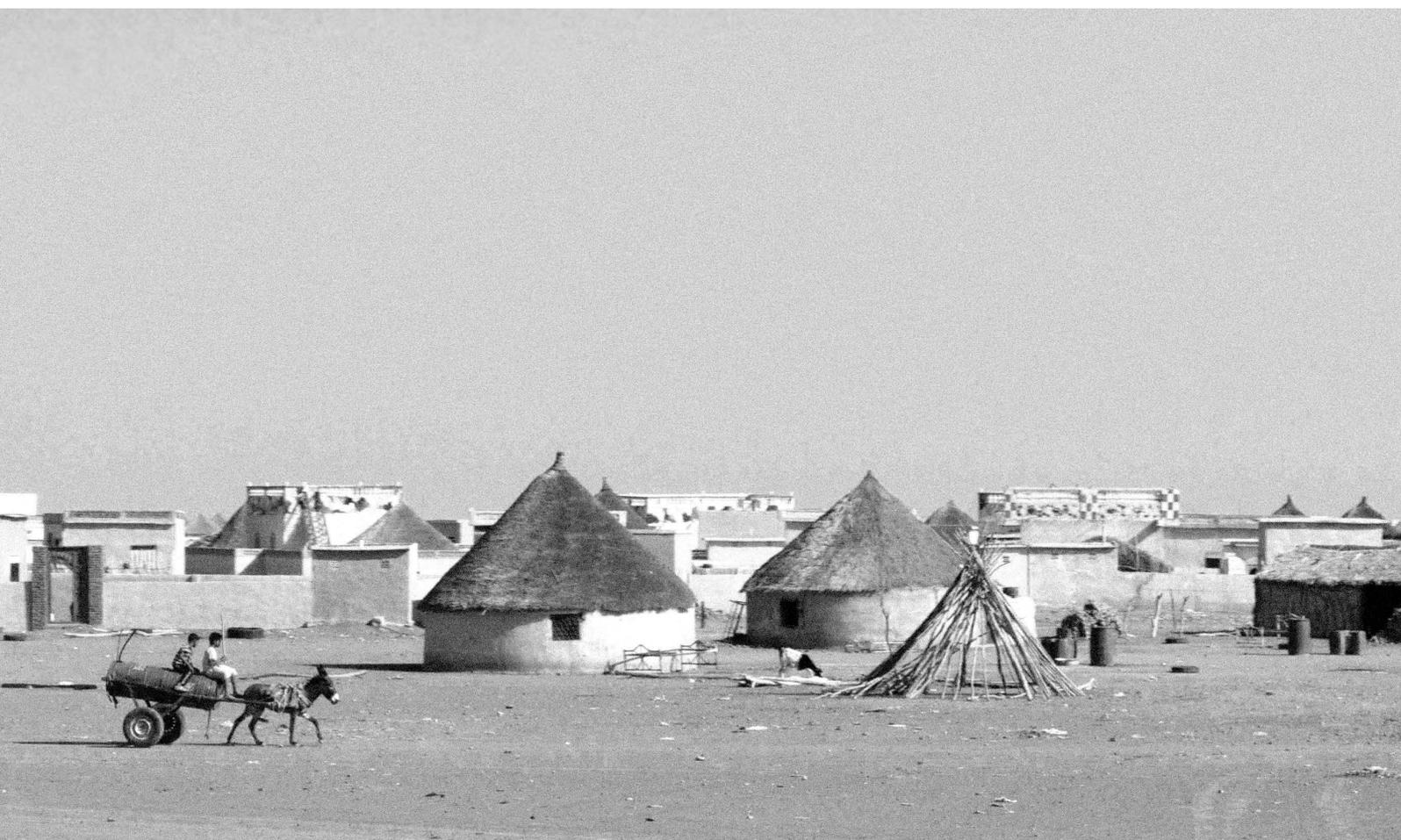
What Has Changed

The good news is that the number of Eritrean and other captives held in Sinai is declining as human rights activists and diaspora-based media raise awareness among Eritreans and as Sudanese authorities interdict the traffickers. Sudan has prosecuted a dozen people in 2013 to date, including a police officer who was given a seven-year jail sentence. Sources in Sinai say the total number held in mid-2013 was 100-150, down from as many as 400 a year earlier. But they also say that, for those remaining, conditions have worsened as their torturers have become more and more desperate for larger payments to make up for the shortfall.

The bad news is that the number of those disappearing in Sudan is not falling as rapidly. In fact, it may be rising, with people vanishing not from Shagarab but from the no-man's land along the frontier. Many Eritreans are being captured before they are officially counted and ransomed from within Sudan rather than transported to Sinai. Human rights activists say the refugees are picked up as they cross the border or deep inside Eritrea and sold to the Rashayida, who are now paying bounties—"finder's fees"—to those who do the snatching.

UN refugee officials say the kidnappings have even included Eritreans seized in the Sudanese capital, Khartoum. In one instance in the spring of 2012, an Eritrean businessman in the town of Kassala flagged down a taxi only to be taken to Rashayida traffickers and threatened with being sent to Sinai unless his family quickly paid a large ransom. For many refugees, this incident underlines the precariousness of their situation even in a country with police on nearly every corner.

On my full-day journey from Khartoum to Kassala, I encountered checkpoints all along the way. I was repeatedly required to leave a photocopy of my travel permit before I could proceed. Shortly after the turnoff to Shagarab, we saw



Mastora, the Rashayida settlement near Kassala, Sudan.

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the beginnings of a periurban pastiche of tents, traditional mud brick houses and colorful multi-story buildings. It ran alongside the road for more than six kilometers, growing denser and denser as we approached Kassala. Known as Mastora, this new Rashayida settlement is populated by families accustomed to migrating with the seasons who are constructing permanent homes for the first time. Among them are thousands who came from Eritrea, leaving few in that country today, according to researchers familiar with the demographic shift.³

These Rashayida are not what they or the UN High Commissioner for Refugees would call “refugees.” They have long lived apart from the states in which they reside, staying out of the wars of others and avoiding political entanglements—Rashayida in Eritrea are, for the most part, exempt from national service—while maintaining a tightly knit society closed to outsiders. Many carry identity papers from both Sudan and Eritrea to facilitate their movement but not to define personal or political allegiance. In effect, they have created a self-contained, largely autonomous community.

We also saw scores of Rashayida in Toyota pickups—the favored mode of transport—hauling plastic barrels of petrol

and large unmarked wooden crates in vehicles most of which lacked license plates. Near Kassala, we passed a rutted dirt road running east toward Eritrea onto which many of the pickups were turning. There was nothing discreet about it; nor was there any sign of the Sudanese government. I was told the Rashayida were heavily armed and that no one—civilian or otherwise—wanted to cross them. As long as they kept to themselves, they had free rein on the frontier and made up a kind of gauntlet that would-be refugees had to run.

The number of Eritreans “officially” coming into Sudan has dropped dramatically, from a high of 2,000 per month in 2011 to 400-500 per month in 2013, though UN refugee officials say the data is incomplete as there are fewer registering. UNHCR country representative Kai Lielsen says there were 72,000 Eritreans in camps in eastern Sudan in 2012, nearly half of them in Shagarab, but this number was only 20-30 percent of those who have crossed into Sudan. “Our estimate is that 70-80 percent do not register and don’t stay,” he says.

UN officials say that 97 percent of those who do register are granted refugee status, though they do not have the right to travel freely within the country. The majority are young

Christian Tigrinya speakers from Eritrea's central highlands. Many see Sudan as a jumping-off point for Europe or North America and fear—wrongly, according to officials—that to register would heighten their profile and make it difficult to continue their journey. Meanwhile, they say, since 2011 there has been a spike in arrivals of unaccompanied minors, some as young as six.

It's Not Over Until It's Over

Sheikh Muhammad says he came across his first Eritrean torture victim in Sinai in 2009, finding him on the side of the road, ill and hungry. "I took him food, drink and clothes," says the sheikh. "I told people the story. Later, I brought an African to the mosque to tell his story, and people were crying. They could not believe this was happening. We said we must stop this."

"Since then," he adds, "we have caught and released maybe 500 people from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan."

The shaky video on the sheikh's iPad shows three men cowering against a waist-high white wall with hands over their heads to fend off blows from short-handled whips. One of the "liberators" stands to the side holding his AK-47 in his left hand as he whacks a torturer with a hardwood pole and shouts at him to start talking. The nine kidnap victims—four women and five men, all but one from Eritrea—sit in a corner, still linked together by a heavy chain and leg irons. A brief close-up shows they are frightened and unsure what is happening.

As we crouch in a circle on the carpeted living room floor, Sheikh Muhammad taps through one segment after another, commenting on some, fast-forwarding through others. One room is lined with assault rifles they confiscated. Another holds the torturers, again being whipped. "We tell them, 'You must tell us the story from the beginning to the end,'" says the sheikh.

The tale, when it spills out, is a familiar one: The three men paid intermediaries for the captives who were brought to their compound. There had been 21 "Africans" to start with, but the others were either released or traded to other traffickers. The three claim they are small fry. They may well be telling the truth.

Outside, the former captives, now unchained, can be seen sitting on a ceramic terrace sharing a meal of *kisra* (a thin flatbread) and *bamya* (okra stew). I see the first smiles among them. One emaciated youth is calling his family in Eritrea to say the police have come and they are free, not yet comprehending who his rescuers are. But the main point is communicated: They are alive.

Late that night, we make our way to the shelter where the freed captives are recuperating. I am accompanying Alganesh Fessaha, an Eritrean "angel of mercy" who works with Gandhi, a Milan-based NGO that helps trafficking victims with recovery, UN registration and travel to safer havens. She is

gathering information to get them out of Sinai, where they are still at risk.

The two older women—Segan, 32, and Almaz, who says she is "over 60"—were kidnapped from Shagarab. Both endured sexual abuse at the hands of their captors three days earlier. Almaz was held for five months, Segen for seven. The men range in age from 13 to 21. Tesfalem, who was 16 when he fled the southern Eritrean town of Senafe, says he spent four years in Ethiopia's Mai Aini refugee camp before paying smugglers \$500 to get to Sudan. They took him to Shagarab, where he was sold by another Eritrean to Rashayida, then resold to Sinai Bedouins and held for six months while repeatedly being beaten during calls to relatives to send more money. Rashayida grabbed Daniel, 21, from a village near Hagaz on the slopes of western Eritrea, while he was tending the family flock. Sheti, the sole Ethiopian, was kidnapped in eastern Sudan while looking for work.

The next day we meet three more trafficking victims, released hours earlier after Sheikh Muhammad phoned their captors to demand they let them go or face the consequences. Ahmed, an Eritrean from the Gash-Barka lowlands, says he was captured inside Eritrea. The other two, a brother and sister from Adua, Ethiopia, say a cousin sold them to traffickers in the border town of Humera.

All the former captives describe similar operations in which traffickers move groups of 20-25 people at a time, often in convoys carrying small arms and other illicit goods. They travel mostly at night, stopping at remote desert camps during the day. Once at the edge of the Sinai, they sell the refugees as a group to the men who run the torture compounds.

One compound is barely a kilometer away, according to my host, who points to a fancy multi-story mansion built with ransom money. High above it is a small dirigible equipped with video cameras that monitor the area 24 hours per day. A few hundred meters away, on the other side of the border, is a red light atop an Israeli observation tower. We are some 15-20 kilometers south of Rafah in a largely unpoliced no-man's land.

Early the next morning we set out for al-'Arish, where we had stashed the car we came in. Our Bedouin driver races along less traveled, mostly unmarked roads, one eye on the rear view mirror. Two AK-47s, locked and loaded, are under the seat.

Once in our own vehicle, we stop twice to visit prisons where released or escaped victims are housed, five to nine in a cell with little more than a straw mat and a bucket for a latrine. Alganesh is gathering biographical data to facilitate their release, too. At Bir al-'Abd, there are 17; at Roumana, close to the canal, there are 10. Among them are 13 Eritreans, nine Ethiopians and five Sudanese from Darfur. Nearly all the Eritreans were kidnapped from Shagarab, but a few were taken near the border. Several of the Ethiopians and all of the Darfuris claim they are migrant workers, captured in

eastern Sudan. All say that Rashayida took them to Sinai to be sold and ransomed.

What Needs to Be Done

Only radical political change inside Eritrea will stem the flood of people leaving the country, the source of trafficking victims, but there are numerous interventions that could save hundreds already taken and protect many more. The first step is to build awareness of the problem among Eritreans—inside the country, in the camps and in the diaspora. The sad, unavoidable fact is that the higher the ransoms paid, the higher the ransoms asked and the more kidnapping there is. Demand drives supply, much as it did in the slaving and buyback operations in Sudan. Reining in the ransom payments, as agonizingly difficult as that may be, is an essential part of the solution. So is taking greater precautions in crossing the border, moving about in Sudan and contracting with smugglers. The diaspora-based alternative media has done a great deal to educate the population; it needs more support.

Disrupting the trafficking itself is crucial, as is providing better security to refugees across the region. In Sudan, enhancing security starts at the border with proper registration, continues with safe transport and extends to improved conditions inside the camps. The onus here is on Sudanese authorities, not the UNHCR, though UN registration at the earliest possible moment would go a long way toward protecting vulnerable arrivals. Simple measures like providing firewood would minimize the need for women to leave the camps and expose themselves to danger. It would also help to increase the number of border posts and mandate the military to receive incoming refugees and transport them to reception centers, as Ethiopia does. The provinces of Kassala and Red Sea have both outlawed trafficking, but the ban should be national law.

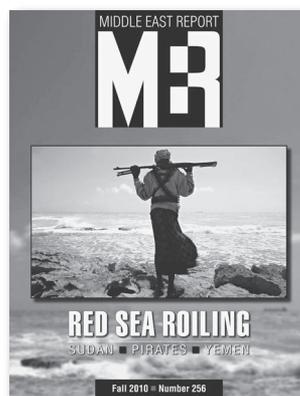
The torture compounds in Sinai must be shut down and similar facilities in eastern Sudan quashed before their rise spins out of control. If Egyptian forces cannot do the job in Sinai—or if they exacerbate tensions there with heavy-handed anti-Islamist repression without dismantling the torture camps—the international community needs to step in. The Multinational Force established under the 1979 treaty between Egypt and Israel offers a wedge. In Sudan, the only options are domestic military and security services. Both Khartoum and the Kassala provincial government have been reluctant to challenge the Rashayida over this or any other breach of the law. But continued inaction not only imperils the refugees, it also boosts a long-term security threat to Sudan as Rashayida traffickers fill a war chest with rising ransoms.

To end the Sinai operation—one that has generated vast wealth for otherwise marginalized Bedouin communities—there must be credible alternatives for ensuring the

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locals' social and economic wellbeing. The same applies to the Rashayida in Sudan, who, like their Sinai cousins, have little direct stake in the country in which they reside. Local authorities and aid agencies need to work together to isolate traffickers without alienating the rest of the population. There is an obvious danger in both countries that well-funded criminal operations run largely by *salafis* could turn the suppression of trafficking into a political issue.

Egypt and Israel must also be pressed to recognize and register refugees. The self-serving fiction that they are dealing with “economic migrants” needs to be aggressively challenged. The asylum seekers are fleeing a shattered economy and prolonged conscription—what many see as dead-end stints of drudgery—as well as the daily terrors of despotism. These reasons for flight may blur the line between the categories of migrant and refugee, but that does not cancel out the fact that nearly all the Eritreans fear persecution if they are forced to go home. Both host countries need to halt the practice of sending refugees back to Eritrea, as Israel is doing under the pretense that such coerced returns are “voluntary.”

At this point, the best hope for those who are released or escape inside Sinai is to secure papers and be deported to Ethiopia. With few exceptions, they will not be given refugee status in Egypt, so the choice is stark. The Ethiopian embassy will pay for its citizens to go home. Charities like Gandhi have to cover the costs for Eritreans, who will be sent to refugee camps where at least they will be safe and provided for. These organizations need support.

Action is also needed at regional and international levels. At a minimum, more coordination and information sharing should be fostered among countries directly involved, starting with a conference, as the UNHCR has proposed. The trafficking in Eritreans is a major international criminal enterprise and ought to be addressed accordingly, drawing in Interpol as well as other intelligence outfits, not only to break up the network but also to trace the money. Traffickers use the same cell phones for months at a time—tracking their calls up the chain would not be difficult.

One obstacle is that US law defines “trafficking” narrowly as moving people into forced labor or prostitution. It does not qualify to be sold and resold, raped and tortured, by captors looking to extort a tidy sum. For the United States to help, it must apply existing law with sensitivity to this human catastrophe or rewrite the law to cover its nuances. The State Department is amassing information that can be shared and translated into law. Congressional hearings and executive action to put the issue before the public would be useful steps toward this end.

In a 2012 CNN documentary, Sheikh Muhammad predicted that he and his supporters would halt the trafficking in northern Sinai within six months.⁴ He was overly optimistic. A human rights activist who visited the area in July reports that another 60 Eritreans were recently taken there, indicating

that the operation is far from over. Meanwhile, the trafficking contained entirely within Sudan appears to be gaining steam. The time for action has long since passed. ■

Endnotes

1 The footage was shown by the program Uvda on June 12, 2012: http://www.mako.co.il/tv-ilana_dayan/english/Article-11ff6c0odcf6b31006.htm.

2 *Haaretz*, July 29, 2013.

3 Rachel Humphries, “Refugees and the Rashaida: Human Smuggling and Trafficking from Eritrea to Sudan and Egypt,” UNHCR Research Paper 254 (March 2013).

4 The program, “Stand in the Sinai,” aired on September 26, 2012: <http://thecnnfreedomproject.blogs.cnn.com/2012/09/26/stand-in-the-sinai-now-online>.

Letter

In her article, “A Makeover: Baghdad, the 2013 Arab Capital of Culture” (*MER* 266), Nada Shabout gives a description of arts and culture initiatives being developed in three Iraqi “zones.” There are a few discrepancies regarding the non-profit Sada (Echo) for contemporary Iraqi art. First, the organization is described as being based in Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan. Sada has never been based in Erbil nor have we done specific work in this city. There is no connection between Iraqi Kurdistan and Sada as an organization, other than Sada’s broader mission to work in the Iraqi arts sphere as a whole. Our education programs work directly with emerging artists in Baghdad, through initiatives including online workshops in the city that have been taking place since 2011. In the summer of 2012, we held a one-week intensive program wherein 14 artists from Baghdad came to Suleimaniya for the program. This program was not “forced” to move because of events in Baghdad, but was always planned to take place in Suleimaniya because of the difficulty of obtaining visas for visiting artists to go to Baghdad as well as security issues, which, unfortunately, were problematic well before Sada’s founding. In 2013 our week-long intensive program took place in Beirut, and eight students from Baghdad came to Beirut in May to participate. Second, Skype did not recently emerge as a means of communicating with students, but has been used by Sada since we began programming in 2011 to circumvent the difficulty of entering Baghdad and address the isolation of Iraqi artists with regard to education and exploration of artistic practices. We developed the program, which has completed its second year, using Skype and our network of international artists to bring lectures and workshops directly to students assembled in Baghdad. Finally, the organization was not started by “young diaspora women,” but is a non-profit I founded in 2010 and continue to direct with the invaluable support of an advisory board and part-time staff comprised of artists, educators and invested cultural stakeholders, living both inside and outside Iraq.

Rijin Sahakian
Beirut