

Yazidi families reclaim girls seized by Islamic State—for a price

by [Jane Arraf](#)

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Suzanne twists the heart-shaped pink plastic ring on her finger as she talks about the women and children who beat her for trying to escape the self-described Islamic State.

The Yazidi 14-year-old, now living with an uncle's family near Zakho, is one of an estimated 5,000 girls and women from the ancient minority taken captive by IS to be sold or given to fighters as slaves—and one of an increasing number who have recently escaped or been bought back by their families.

Activists believe almost 150 girls and women have returned to the Kurdish-controlled territories in the last several weeks. Some see it as a sign of an overstretched IS that no longer has the resources in Iraq or Syria to hold large numbers of captives.

The women's capture and harsh treatment had raised fears they would not be accepted by their families if they managed to return, and has created challenges for the secretive, ancient religion and deeply conservative society, where some women have been killed to maintain a family sense of honor for even the appearance of impropriety.

But the sheer numbers of women seized from a small community that does not accept converts has helped prompt a religious decree that the women need to be brought back and re-integrated. In most cases, it seems to have worked.

Like other girls interviewed by the *Monitor*, Suzanne and her sisters and mother were separated by IS from their male relatives after gunmen took control of villages near Sinjar mountain over two days in August. She and her sisters were first taken to Mosul and then to the IS stronghold of Raqqa, Syria. After U.S.-led airstrikes in Raqqa, their captors moved them to the outskirts of Aleppo, where she escaped, only to be handed back to IS by a Syrian family she had asked for help.

“They beat me with a plastic hose and a cable,” said Suzanne, whose parents and two sisters are still missing. “They were saying ‘it is useless for for you to try to escape’ . . . They hit me everywhere, my hands, my legs, my back. Everyone took a turn—even the children from the village and the wives.”

The children encouraged to hit her were as young as five, she said.

When the Aleppo prison she was held in was bombed, she and a friend managed to escape. They made their way to the Kurdish region of Syria and then to Turkey, where she was picked up by relatives.

Ending up in an isolated farmhouse

Sabreen is 15. When Kurdish forces protecting Yazidi towns retreated in early August, IS fighters took her to a school in Tel Afar near the Syrian border with several hundred other women. There, IS took all children between the ages of five and 10 from their mothers. When the women screamed and tried to take back their children, the gunmen fired in the air and said they would kill them if they didn’t stay back, she said.

Sabreen also ended up in Syria, in an isolated farmhouse near Raqqa.

“Lots of men used to come and look around and when they would see a girl they liked they would say ‘I want to buy that one,’” she said. “There was an emir who was taking money for the girls—\$1,000 to \$1,500.”

Sabreen said she escaped from her Palestinian and then Saudi "owners" and is now living with an uncle’s family near Dohuk.

The uncle, Hamid, said he was sending his sons to retrieve another distant relative who is believed to be the only surviving member of her family. He raised \$5,000—a year’s income for many families here—to buy her back from Tel Afar through a middleman.

“Suddenly you get a phone call out of the blue saying ‘We have your daughter.’ They don’t tell you their names or anything like that,” Hamid said. “Or ‘We have your girl. We want this amount of money.’”

“If you can find someone you can trust, that man goes and says, ‘I want this girl to marry,’ and he pays it straight to IS,” he said. “You can’t say ‘I want to buy three

girls back’—they won’t give them to you like that.”

Hamid and others said most families with missing wives and daughters were trying to raise money to buy back them back. He said they paid \$10,000 for the first girl rescued in the family but that price has now dropped.

“People were willing to pay any amount of money,” Hamid said. “But now in my own family, we have about 30 girls missing. If you have to pay \$5,000 for each one of them ... you will not be able to buy all of them back.”

While IS has murdered members of all religious groups during its takeover of northern Iraq and systematically stolen cash and property, it has meted out special punishment to the Yazidis, whom it considers pagans.

Suzanne, Sabreen, and other abducted girls and women say they were told they were infidels and allowed to be bought, sold, or given to fighters. The issue is not spoken of even by Yazidi women, but many of the girls and women who were sold or given away were believed to have been raped.

A Christian woman who was told her family had to convert to Islam said she and her children were held in a house in Mosul with dozens of Yazidi girls.

“At two in the morning we heard the girls screaming,” said the woman, who asked that her name not be used. “The gunmen were raping the girls. You could tell they were being raped and they were hurting them. They said, ‘these ones don’t have religion.’”

Initial reports of some girls and women killing themselves after escaping from IS to avoid shaming their families have been impossible to corroborate. While such cases may exist, the religious ruling by Yazidi elders as women started to return appears to have protected those who have escaped.

“We would never allow anything to happen to them,” said one Yazidi man in Zakho, who is still trying to find his missing mother and sisters. “If anything, they are more deserving of our respect because of all they have endured for our religion.”