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## Sex Slave Legacy The Children of Islamic State

By Katrin Kuntz and Maria Feck

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At night, when Khaula lies in bed and finally falls asleep, she often dreams of her child. Each time, the same images appear before her: She sees her hands clasped together in front of her chest, forming a hollow. When she lifts her upper hand, a bird is sitting beneath it. She sees its body and its feathers, but the bird doesn't look at her, and there is no song to be heard from its throat. Its tiny head is missing.

"Every time I have this dream, I can't move for a time," says Khaula. After eight months as an Islamic State (IS) captive, she gave birth to a baby girl. The child's father had been her tormentor, an Iraqi IS fighter from Mosul. He had plenty of daughters already and had wanted Khaula, a Yazidi woman kidnapped by IS, to give him a son.

That was 12 months ago. Khaula is now living in Germany, without her child. She's sitting in the side room of a café in the German state of Baden-Württemberg, where she has come to share her story. She's a quiet woman of 23 with black curls and enjoys wearing Kurdish garments.

Khaula shares a dormitory with other women who have been freed. The location must be kept secret, and the name "Khaula" is an alias. With IS sympathizers in Germany as well, the women are endangered here too.

### **Coming To Terms with Deep Trauma**

The state of Baden-Württemberg has taken in around 1,000 women and children from Iraq to help them come to terms with that happened to them. Psychologist and trauma specialist Jan Ilhan Kizilhan, of the Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University in Villingen-Schwenningen, selected those most in need of help in Iraq, where he has traveled a dozen times. In the past, he has worked with rape victims in Rwanda and Bosnia.

"Only the most seriously traumatized women were allowed to come to Germany," Kizilhan says. They include women like a Yazidi whose child was locked in a metal box by an IS fighter and set in the direct sun in front of her until it died. Another woman's infant was beaten to death by an IS man who broke its spine.

In August 2014, Islamic State invaded northern Iraq's Sinjar region, murdering and kidnapping thousands of women and girls who then became sex slaves for its fighters. Hundreds of women who managed to escape their tormenters returned pregnant. The children of IS fighters can be found today in Syria, in Iraq, in Germany -- and possibly even in Turkey, Lebanon and other countries where refugees have sought safe haven. The number is believed to be in the hundreds. In the Kurdish-controlled region of Iraq alone, doctors estimate that figure to be somewhere between 40 and 100 infants. Given the sheer number of women who have been kidnapped in the region, that figure appears to be low.

### **Rape as a Weapon of War**

The use of rape as a weapon of war is a concept as old as war itself, but the organization of the crime under IS has been particularly perfidious. Islamic State forces many of the Yazidi women it kidnaps to use contraception in order to ensure that trade in the woman -- who are often sold as many as five, six or seven times to different fighters -- isn't disrupted by pregnancies.

Freed women as well as doctors and psychologists interviewed by SPIEGEL confirmed that Yazidi women who are taken captive have been provided with contraceptives. Some took the pills, but others secretly spit them out. One woman even reported getting anally raped by fighters in order to prevent a possible pregnancy.

Most of the children of Daesh, as Islamic State is called in Arabic, are no older than one-and-a-half. They are proof of the humiliation which took place, and they represent the further undermining of the foundations of Kurdish society.

Finding Islamic State's children isn't easy, not least because their very survival is a taboo. They also raise a number of questions about the issue of sex slavery in the region. How, for example, are northern Iraqis dealing with these children. What issues do the mothers of these children face when they escape or are liberated? And what does IS do when it finds out a slave is pregnant?

The search for the answers to these questions leads not only to Baden-Württemberg, but also to a doctor in Iraqi Kurdistan. It leads to a judge specializing in adoption law in Dohuk and to the edge of this city, where baby Nura can be found lying in a cradle.

The resulting story is not one of good or bad, black or white. It is the story of a defeated society that, while deeply shaken, is also trying to maintain its dignity. It's a story of coping and also one of astounding, even surprising resilience.

It's a bright, warm day in Baden-Württemberg. Inside the café, Khaula orders an apple spritzer and a schnitzel with beans that she won't eat. She wears heels and a black dress -- she's a refined and petit woman. It takes several hours for Khaula to share her story. She doesn't cry as she tells it; it sounds almost as though she's relating another person's fate. "I am telling it so that my captured family back in Iraq won't be forgotten," she says.

## **The Slave Market**

On August 3, 2014, IS attacked Khaula's village and within a month, 5,000 people from the region had disappeared. Khaula was forced into a bus and taken to a jail full of hundreds of other women and girls. They were then forced to drink water that IS henchmen had spat into right in front of them. As they drank, preparations were made for their sale. Khaula fell into the hands of a tall, 45-year-old IS man wearing a white robe who called himself Abu Omar. He purchased her for 1.5 million Iraqi dinars, or around €1,500, and told her: "You belong to me." He then locked her inside a house in Mosul, Islamic State's stronghold in Iraq.

It's there that he brutally deflowered her, pressing her into the ground, dragging her by the hair into bed, choking her, cursing her and forcing her to listen to the screams of other women who were being tortured in the same house. After four months, he took Khaula along to the home of

his wife, who was pregnant. She was ordered to immediately start helping the wife with the household chores, the washing and the cooking. In a fit of jealousy, the woman struck her with a chair. Khaula then tried to hang herself from a fan.

### **'I Want You To Give Me a Son'**

The man had five daughters together with his first wife. He told Khaula: "I want you to bear me a son." During the several hours she takes to tell her story, Khaula will say at one point of her child: "Its life is meaningless to me." But also: "The child was very beautiful." Officially, IS does not want sex slaves like Khaula to get pregnant.

Islamic State published a pamphlet about how to treat female slaves called "Questions and Answers on Taking Captives and Slaves," which began circulating on the Internet after the attack on Sinjar in 2014. It states that sex with slaves is permitted. The only mention of pregnancies in the pamphlet relates to the women's market value.

It poses the question: "If a female prisoner is impregnated by her owner, can he then sell her?"

The answer: "He cannot sell her if she has become the mother of a child."

In other words, her value falls to zero the moment she gets pregnant. But her status improves: As a mother, she falls into a position somewhere between slave and free woman. She no longer fits into the concept of the slave trade or virgin bazaar IS perpetuates in order to recruit new fighters. There are rules in place from the times of the Prophet Mohammed which are also hinted at in the pamphlet: When a man purchases a sex slave, he has to abstain for a certain amount of time before having sex with her -- a menstrual cycle or two. Such abstinence is known in Islamic law as "Istibra" and is meant to ensure that the slave's stomach is "empty," so that no child sired by another man is foisted on the new owner.

When Khaula realized that she had become pregnant, she went to the fighter's living room, picked up a television and carried it up and down the stairs for hours. Other women stacked stones on top of themselves or jumped from high buildings in order to force a miscarriage. "I tried everything, but I didn't lose the child," says Khaula.

The fighter's wife soon became envious, a fortuitous turn for Khaula. "I don't want to see your belly any longer," she said one morning. She brought Khaula a telephone, which Khaula then used to dial her brother's number in Dohuk. The brother gave her the address of an acquaintance Khaula should go to. She left the house wearing a burqa and accepted the money offered by the wife for her escape. In the taxi, instead of using the word "*shukran*," or thanks in Arabic, she used the Daesh term "*Jazaak Allaahu Khayran*" -- out of fear.

### **An Underground Network**

Her brother's acquaintance established contact with a Yazidi network operating in the IS region - intermediaries who had frequently been able to smuggle women out of captivity and into Kurdish-controlled territory. The network is led by a Dohuk-based man who goes by the name

Abu Shuya. He is constantly juggling three mobile phones and has received multiple death threats from Islamic State.

Khaula waited for 40 days. Abu Shuya then sent a helper who took her to an Arab family located near the front. They only moved forward at night, crawling for as long as five hours over the mountains. The helper had to carry Khaula on the final stretch to the Peshmerga, because only he knew where the mines were located in the stony ground. "I was finally free," Khaula says.

Around 2,000 women are thought to have successfully fled from IS-controlled areas. The United Nations estimates that around 3,500 Yazidi women are still living in slavery there. Other sources place the figure as high as 7,000.

### **Difficult Choices**

Dohuk, a city of half a million located 75 kilometers (46 miles) away from Mosul in northern Iraqi Kurdistan, is where survivors of IS terror go first. It is surrounded by dusty tent cities and okra-colored mountains. This is where the pregnant women arrive and where the abortions of IS babies take place. It is also where surviving babies are put up for adoption.

Khaula was reunited with her brother in a camp in Dohuk. By then, she was in her sixth month of pregnancy. "I was so happy, I didn't know how to hug him," she says. That evening, she put on additional layers of clothing in an attempt to conceal her belly, but everyone still kept staring at her. One evening, her uncle took her aside and said, "Please, no Daesh child."

She made the decision to have an abortion and found a doctor who gave her medication to induce labor. She spent two days in a hotel and then went to the hospital as a normal patient. "The child's father is fighting on the front," she told them. She gave birth to a girl with dark hair and a face like a baby bird. Earlier, she had imagined what it might be like to have a child, its tiny hands and its smell during the first few days of a fresh peach.

Now the baby was lying next to her leg, dead. "The doctors didn't want her to die, but there were problems," she says. Khaula looked at it and briefly touched its foot with the tip of her finger.

She then placed a blanket over the dead newborn. Her cousin arrived with the car and together they put the child in a plastic bag and drove outside the city to bury the child at the side of a road. Khaula stayed in the car. Her only thought, she says, was: "I murdered a child."

After the burial, her uncle slaughtered a lamb in atonement. Khaula then went to the white spring in Lalish, a Yazidi sacred site, where she washed herself clean. There, she received a blessing from Baba Sheikh, the Yazidi spiritual leader who has taken hundreds of violated women back into the community since 2014.

### **Finding Homes for the IS Babies**

If Khaula's baby had survived, it likely would have wound up in the care of two men in central Dohuk who are trying to help the IS babies and their mothers. One is Dr. Nezar Ismet Taib, the

director of the health department in Dohuk who also runs a clinic for surviving women. The other is Mohammed Hasan, a civil court judge who handles adoptions of orphans in the region. Hasan helps place surviving IS babies with Kurdish parents who know nothing of the baby's parents. The two attempt to do what they can to make a terrible situation a little more bearable.

It's a mild spring day in March when Dr. Taib receives us in a boxy building in Dohuk. "We're doing what we can, but are also overwhelmed," says Taib, a trained child psychiatrist. He's a quiet man with salt and pepper hair and seems to have endless patience. He works together with three female therapists and a gynecologist. Just before our visit, a woman had come to his office wanting to kill herself.

"Of the more than 700 women who came for treatment last year, 5 percent had gotten pregnant during their captivity," he says. That's 35 women. He attributes the relatively low pregnancy rate to the use of contraceptives. "All those who became pregnant need to be granted the right to a safe abortion," Taib says. Together with his team, he appeared in court to request that a raped woman be allowed to have an abortion after her second month of pregnancy. Later-term abortions are illegal in the autonomous Kurdistan region of Iraq. "We still don't have a solution," Taib says.

### **Anonymous Orphans**

This means that women who arrive in later stages of pregnancy are often forced to carry the babies to term. Taib's team provides them with a slot in the nursery, where the baby can stay until the court finds adoptive parents. There are no orphanages in Iraq, and Yazidi society is conservative. "Foreign blood, meaning a child from a Muslim, would never be accepted," says Taib. The fact that the children are also born out of wedlock makes them "unacceptable" to society, which explains why Dr. Taib registers them with the court as being anonymous orphans.

Mohamed Hasan, a tall man with a sonorous voice, works at the civil court in Dohuk. He brings the children of the IS together with their new parents. Hasan is very hesitant to be interviewed given the taboo nature of what he is dealing with, but in the end, he agrees to a meeting in the sitting room of his home. Hasan loves children, even those born to IS fathers.

"My department accepted 10 babies during the past year," says Hasan. He receives a form from Taib's hospital ward with information about the child and the notation, "parents unknown" -- a specification given in order to protect the identity of the baby and its mother. Internally, of course, workers know when it is an IS baby.

Generally, there are around 20 applicants for each child, says Judge Hasan. "It is very important to have children in Kurdish society. We have plenty of potential adoptive parents who are waiting," he says. The couples must be affluent and able to ensure that the child will inherit at least one-third of their assets if the parents should die. They also have to be married and own a home. "We have to be sure that they can provide a good future for the child," he says.

Hasan puts the names of those couples who meet the criteria into a jar, mixes them well and draws a winner.

## **It's Better If the Child Never Learns the Truth**

Under normal circumstances, adoptive parents would be provided with all information about their child, Hasan says, but he makes an exception for the children of IS fighters because, as he puts it, "Who would take them?" He says it's also better for the child if it never learns the truth.

And what happens if the child looks foreign because its father was a blond-haired IS fighter?

"You get all possible hair colors in Kurdish society," says Hasan. He has a proverb at the ready: "The belly is like a garden -- anything can grow inside of it."

Once an IS child has been adopted, its name is appended to the new parents' marriage certificate. Once its name is listed there, the child is firmly a part of the family. The neighbors don't ask questions. Tribal structures are the framework of Kurdish society. The indignity of being an IS child has been eliminated.

The babies that wind up in the hands of Dr. Taib and Judge Hasan are the lucky ones. Not all women turn to aid organizations, which makes it harder for the two to help more people in need. And some women are so traumatized that they simply aren't capable. They create their own reality and relate an alternative narrative, in which their baby is the product of a loving relationship with their husband amid the terror afflicted by the IS. For some women, that's the only way they are able to cope with the truth.

## **The Struggle of Life with a Daesh Child**

Sajedah, an 18-year-old Yazidi who lives in an unfinished building on the outskirts of Dohuk, is one of them. Her baby Nura is rocking in a cradle next to her. The child is around five months old, sleeps well, is often hungry and is currently a bit cranky because of a cough. Her cap has a teddy bear on it and she is sucking on a pink pacifier. Her brown eyes are alert. The neighbors say they are certain that Nura is a child of Daesh, there's no doubt.

The cool air sinks from the mountains down into the impoverished neighborhood, where the streets are rutted and the buildings mere skeletons of stone. The family has gathered around the cradle -- the grandmother, grandfather, aunts, uncles and Sajedah, who is pale beneath the fluorescent lighting. She wears a skirt and a scarf, loosely flung around her head. She smiles shyly, before her face then becomes a mask again. Then the smile returns. It all happens so quickly that it's as if there's no boundary between inside and outside. No defenses.

Sajedah sits a few meters away from the cradle. It's only after a half an hour that she says: "The child in the cradle is my child." She's been living in freedom for six months now. She had Nura after 14 months in captivity. In her ninth-month of pregnancy, she managed to escape her last owner in the city of Tall Afar. With the help of an intermediary with the Kurdish network inside the IS-held area, she was able to wedge herself into the inside of a water tanker that drove her out of hell.

She is deeply traumatized and you can sense it in each of her movements, her looks, her voice and her facial expressions.

It's not possible to verify her story. It's likely Sajedah would break down if she had to acknowledge that her baby is the child of an IS fighter. She gushes about her husband Misban, who disappeared during the war with IS. He's her hero and she even tattooed his name onto her arm using a needle and a paste made of grass. Yet even evoking Misban hasn't been sufficient to protect her from the accusations of her neighbors.

When Islamic State attacked her village, Tall Asser, in August 2014, Sajedah was inside Misban's house and the two were kidnapped together. It was midnight and the fighters brought them to different collection points. Men and women were separated, but then Sajedah was returned to her husband. Some former IS prisoners have reported that this was standard practice for IS. The fighters transported the couple from place to place: Misban had to work loading trucks while Sajedah stayed in the house.

"It continued like that for a year," Sajedah says. "It was during this time that we conceived the child."

After several families managed to escape, IS fighters separated the couple. After nine months of imprisonment, Sajedah was sold for the first time. "I was already pregnant at the time," she says, "in the fourth month."

She says the first fighter who bought her had an ultrasound performed, after which he returned her as though she were a defective product. The second fighter struck her brutally in the stomach in the hope she would have a miscarriage. The third kept her for five days. The fourth was an old man who also had an ultrasound done and saw that the child was going to be a girl. She says he told her, "I will kill it and then sell you again." At that point, there were only 10 days left to go until birth.

When the fourth man went away on a trip, Sajedah used his computer to log into Facebook, which she used to contact the network that ultimately freed and rescued her. After she was liberated, she fasted for six days in gratitude to God. Nura was born in a Dohuk hospital. She says everything went so quickly that she can no longer remember the first days after her release.

"I'm certain that Nura is my husband's child," she says quietly. "The problem is that nobody besides my parents believes me."

### **'It Would Be Better If You Killed Your Daesh Baby'**

A few days before she gave birth, a few neighbors stopped by her house. They went into her living room and said, "Your baby is from Daesh. Why didn't you have an abortion?"

At the market, someone told her sister, "It would be better if you killed your Daesh baby." When Sajedah heard about it, she ran with Nura to the shower. She wanted to strangle her with a scarf and then kill herself, but her mother ran in behind her.



Sajedah is now trying to ignore what the neighbors are saying. She takes Nura out of the cradle, pulls her pants down and shows a bruise on her buttocks. She says an IS man hit her so hard that it also injured Nura, adding that the spot had been black at birth. In medical terms, the story she tells is far-fetched. It's hardly conceivable that a bruise would still be visible after such a long period of time.

Then she adds: "I too hit Nura when she screams. Then I quickly give her to my mother." She says that every time the child is sad, she also feels sad and angry.

Sajedah is making considerable effort to be a mother to Nura. She smiles at her, even if it's forced. She rocks her cradle, but then sits down far away from it. Sajedah's father launches into a discussion about identification papers for Nura, which the family hasn't been able to obtain because Misban is officially unknown as a husband and there is no marriage certificate. The conversation prompts Sajedah to leap up and rampage through the room like a wounded animal. She hardly goes to the door anymore. Sajedah has gone from one prison to the next with her baby.

A few weeks ago, an NGO invited her to Erbil to take a language class. For 10 days, she learned English vocabulary together with other women who had managed to survive Islamic State terror. They washed each other's feet, watched videos on their mobile phones, took walks along the streets and drank pomegranate juice -- just as they had done in earlier times. Sajedah felt happy, free. Her baby Nura remained back at home in the cradle.

Sajedah is a proud woman who once dreamed of becoming a lawyer. She can still remember all the injustices inflicted on her and her friends at her school as a child. But as she got back on the bus in Erbil to head back home, she had only one thought: That she would very much like to be a mother to Nura. But she knows it's going to be difficult.