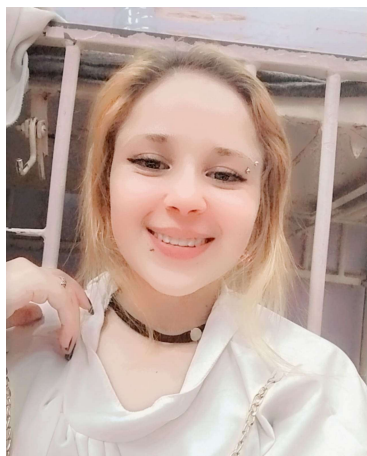


## A Yazidi Woman Is Liberated From Slavery in Gaza

**Fawzia Sido's decadelong captivity illustrates the connections between ISIS, Hamas and other jihadists.**



Fawzia Sido Photo: Courtesy of Sido Family

By Jonathan Spyer

Oct. 4, 2024 4:07 pm ET

I got an unexpected message from a longtime friend and colleague from my days reporting on the ISIS war in Syria and Iraq. My friend, Alan Duncan, is a Scottish documentary filmmaker and a former infantry soldier. I met him when he was a volunteer fighter with the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga and I was a front-line correspondent. This July, he invited me to meet him in a quiet cafe in Tel Aviv, where he told me an astounding story.

A young Yazidi woman who had been kidnapped by Islamic State—better known as ISIS during its rampage across northern Iraq's Nineveh Plains in 2014—was now a captive in Gaza. Her family was trying to free her, and Alan wanted me to spread the word to the right people in Israel.

The young woman's harrowing story illustrates the grim realities of life for many in the Middle East over the past decade. It also demonstrates the extent to which the burgeoning of Islamist and jihadist centers of government in the region has devastated innocent people.

In 2014 Fawzia Sido, then 11, was among the thousands of Yazidis captured in northern Iraq's Sinjar region. She was separated from her family and enslaved. During the period in which ISIS maintained its caliphate in parts of Iraq and Syria, the organization forced Ms. Sido to marry a jihadist from Gaza. Repeatedly raped by this man, who was in his 20s, she bore two children, a boy and a girl.

Ms. Sido's husband was killed when Islamic State made its last stand in the Euphrates River Valley in 2019. She and her children joined the exodus of ISIS families to the huge detention camp at al-Hol in northern Syria, maintained by the U.S.-aligned Syrian Democratic Forces. More than 40,000 Islamic State-linked people, including wives and children of ISIS jihadists, are held at the camp.

The Syrian Democratic Forces control the perimeter at al-Hol. But within the tent encampments, Islamic State still rules using terror. It maintains its own education system. It also runs its own courts, which pass sentences including the death penalty, and its enforcers carry out the decisions of the court, I was told by a senior security officer at the camp when I visited in March. Escapes from al-Hol organized by jihadists are frequent. Islamic State members took Ms. Sido and her children from the camp in one such escape. The small family found its way to the Turkish-supported Islamist enclave in Syria's northern Idlib province.

From there, an Islamic State-associated network smuggled Ms. Sido and her children over the border into Turkey, where they met with members of her husband's family from Gaza. The networks provided her with a

fake Egyptian passport so that she could be flown into Egypt. From there, she and her children were smuggled into the Gaza Strip, where her husband's family held her until she was rescued on Sept. 30.

Ms. Sido is now free. Credit for her rescue goes in large part to Steve Maman, a Canadian Jewish businessman who worked with Ms. Sido's family to liberate her. The U.S. government appears to have played a significant role in the rescue process, which was carried out on the ground in Gaza by Israeli security forces. Ms. Sido has now reunited with her family in Sinjar, Iraq, where she was captured and enslaved a decade ago.

Ms. Sido's story shows that, contrary to popular claims, there isn't a gaping distinction between Islamic State and other Sunni Islamist jihadist groups. Though she was captured by Islamic State, the enclave in Idlib where she was held is controlled by Hayat Tahrir al Sham, a group that is a descendant of al Qaeda. The HTS enclave is able to continue because of an undeclared guarantee provided for it by Turkish military positions around it.

From Idlib, she was taken to Turkey, all the while within networks of Sunni political Islam. From there she was sent to Egypt, and then on to Hamas's domain in Gaza. At no point did she encounter a system to which she could appeal for help. In Islamic State's caliphate, the Hayat Tahrir al Sham enclave and Hamas-controlled Gaza, the authorities would have sided with her captors and returned her to them. In Turkey and Egypt, it appears that the Islamist nexus holding her was untroubled by the authorities.

Enclaves under de facto Islamist control exist across the Middle East. The states that underwrite their continued existence are Iran and Turkey. How many more like Ms. Sido are out there, robbed of their freedom, taken from their families, without rights or recourse to the law? The U.S. State Department recorded last year that some 2,644 of the Yazidis captured in 2014 are still missing. Of these, 1,300 were children at the time of their capture.

Ms. Sido's experience also illuminates a broader point at the heart of Middle East conflicts. In the fight between the Islamist systems advancing across the region and those fighting to turn them back, there are two major camps: the one that enslaved her and the one that freed her. The camp that freed her—of which Israel is a part and which is led by the U.S.—is far from perfect, continues to make errors and has far to go. Yet, in this instance, it did what was right.

Ms. Sido, by the way, wants to study medicine. I hope that she does so and that she and her family have many happy years together.

*Mr. Spyer is director of research at the Middle East Forum and director of the Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis. He is author of "Days of the Fall: A Reporter's Journey in the Syria and Iraq Wars."*