

## Islamic State Defector in Syria Talks About Enslaved Yazidi Women

Interview Conducted by Dr. Anne Speckhard

International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE), circa 2015<sup>1</sup>

*In this interview, a Syrian defector from the Islamic State recounts his time as a prison guard with the jihadist group. He describes how the Islamic State imprisoned and raped Yazidi women who had been enslaved during the 2014 Yazidi Genocide. The defector's words provide a glimpse into the utter abuse and trauma to which the Islamic State subjected Yazidi women. This abuse has continued long after 2014. As of 2021, approximately 3,000 Yazidi women and children have remained in Islamic State captivity.*

When they [the Islamic State] first came, things were very good. It really felt like Islam. We started going to the mosque. A sheikh would give lessons on the Qur'an. He was a scholar and would give lessons and advice on Islam and joining *ad-Dawlah*.<sup>2</sup> He said they [the Islamic State] were in the right. There would be no injustice. You [could] gain a salary and live your life.

When they deployed us, they said I was illiterate. So, they made me a guard for the Hisbah.<sup>3</sup> Every day, they would bring about 100 people – these were men. They were brought in for smoking. Or [for] his wife being uncovered. They were imprisoned, whipped, and beaten. After two or three days, they were released.

There were 475 women captives. Yazidis, Iraqis. Some were wives of Iraqi army soldiers. When I walked down the corridor, I was shocked looking at all these women. Some of the Yazidi girls would cry. I would ask why. They said they had been separated from their children, some as young as one and two years old. They would ask, "Is this your Islam?" I just walked away and left to stand at the door.

When the foreign fighters got news that they would get captives, I could hear them cheering in the corridor. So, the prison warden would bring ten foreign fighters at a time because they could not be brought in all at once. We would guard the doors and they would go in and choose a captive woman. Then he would take her by the hand and leave. This went on for three days, each

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<sup>1</sup> I found the original video recording of this interview on LiveLeak, a video sharing site, and transcribed the video after viewing it. Since then, however, I have been unable to find the video online due to the site's closure. The interview's provenance from Dr. Anne Speckhard and the ICSVE around 2015 comes from the following article from the British newspaper *The Times*, which quotes this interview and others conducted by Dr. Speckhard: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/caliphate-is-still-utopian-ideal-for-defectors-who-fled-brutality-c2z0dmh3d>.

<sup>2</sup> In Arabic, *ad-Dawlah* literally means "the State," but in this context it means "the Islamic State."

<sup>3</sup> The Hisbah functioned as the Islamic State's religious police. It enforced adherence to the group's interpretation of Islam among the populations under its control, such as the wearing of the *niqab* and *abaya* for women and the prohibition of cigarettes and alcohol.

taking one by the hand. It was absolute secrecy or they threatened to behead me. The [Yazidi] prisoners were sure that they would be killed. This made convincing them to go with the foreign fighters [to be raped] much easier when compared to the prospect of death. You see her sitting in the corner with her head down, tears in her eyes. She doesn't really sleep properly. She just huddles in the corner.

Before I left, there was an incident. This Sudanese foreign fighter picked a 15-year-old girl. I swear he raped her. She started bleeding badly. An ambulance came to take her. The girl had internal bleeding and died from the injuries. They [the man's superiors] said, "Don't speak of this. Captives are captives. Do as you please with them." That's when I started thinking I should leave. The next week, I requested a three-day break to go home and rest. I felt tired and uncomfortable. I lost my appetite. I thought of them [the enslaved women] as my sisters. My sisters and wife asked me, "What's wrong? Why are you upset?" I told them what happened. They told me, "We have to escape to Turkey as soon as possible." They said, "If something happens to you, then the same thing would happen to us."

Every so often, I dream that they [Islamic State fighters] are pulling my hair by the scalp and about to slit my throat and I startle awake. The nightmares won't go away. It will stay in my mind. I try not to think about it. It'll drive me crazy. I still remember the woman sitting in the corner crying and you can't do anything for her. You can't forget. I advise all Arab men not to come to Syria. Those who wish to come to *ad-Dawlah* should think about the rape and killing of the poor and the oppression. If you think about leaving, they will kill you. Once you get into the sand, it'll turn into quicksand – as soon as you're in it, you drown. It's not an Islamic state. That's what I'd say.