

Kidnapped Christian Doctor in Iraq Freed in Critical Condition

✖ Islamic kidnappers in Kirkuk last week dumped a Christian doctor in critical condition in front of a mosque after 29 days of torture and threats to him and his family.

Thanks to his 23-year-old daughter's negotiations with the terrorists, 55-year-old Sameer Gorgees Youssif was freed but with wounds, hematomas and bruises covering his body; throughout his captivity, he lay bound and gagged.

He was abducted at around 8:15 p.m. on Aug. 18 as he was walking home from his pediatric clinic in a relatively "safe" district of Kirkuk in northern Iraq, sources told Compass.

The kidnappers, presumably insurgents, beat him and stuffed him in the trunk of a car amid an electrical blackout in the neighborhood. As they sped off, the abductors killed one of the doctor's neighbors, identified only as Askar, with a single gunshot to his heart. He died immediately.

Sources said Askar, a Christian man in his fifties, heard the doctor yelling for help and, thinking it was one of his sons, ran to the car to stop it as it sped away.

Youssif, a father of two, is the fourth Christian doctor confirmed to be kidnapped in Kirkuk in the last two years; kidnapping of Christians in general and holding them for ransom is a regular occurrence in Iraq.

"This is a daily activity," said an anonymous Iraqi Christian of the abductions taking place in Iraq. "They do it all the time. I don't know what kind of government we have. They are not providing protection, and they are even afraid of

insurgents.”

Hikmat Saeed, a Christian who was kidnapped in late August, was released on Sept. 11, and Salem Barjo, another Christian taken in August, was found dead on Sept. 3, according to Middle East Concern. Both men were abducted in Mosul.

Ransom Demands

The doctor’s family did not report the incident to the police, fearing negative repercussions in the event that officers were also involved in the crime.

The kidnappers called Youssif’s wife a few days later, demanded half a million dollars in ransom and threatened to kill him if they did not receive the money.

When asked where she would find such a huge amount, insurgents reportedly responded, “You are a woman; you can go and beg at the mosques or churches,” said an anonymous Christian Iraqi source from Erbil.

After twice speaking to the kidnappers, Youssif’s wife was said to begin experiencing numbness on her right side due to the stress. She was unable to resume negotiations, and her 23-year-old daughter started bargaining for her father’s life.

“I was the one talking to them and negotiating with them,” she said. “It’s all in God’s hands. He gave me the power to talk to them. I was begging them, saying, ‘Don’t do anything to him.’”

The doctor’s daughter, who requested her name be withheld, said that for two weeks the kidnappers insisted on \$500,000, and then dropped the amount to \$300,000.

“I said, ‘We don’t have that, have mercy on us,’” she said.

The terrorists found phone numbers of friends on the doctor’s mobile phone and called them, instructing them to tell his

family that if they did not produce the money they would kill the doctor. In the end, the kidnappers lowered the amount to \$100,000.

“They were threatening us all the time, and we were living in hell,” his daughter said. “We just stayed and prayed and fasted and closed the doors and locked them. We were afraid that maybe they would come here and kill all of us. God was our only hope.”

The family said they were able to collect the money through the generosity of friends; they are not sure how they will be able to pay it back.

Beyond Recognition

The doctor, who was tortured and starved beyond recognition, was dumped in front of a Kirkuk mosque on Sept. 16 hours after his father-in-law delivered the ransom money in an undisclosed location in Mosul. Family friends told Compass there was a police car stationed near the insurgents at the time of the ransom payment. Insurgents arrived armed in two cars.

“There is corruption,” said an anonymous source located in Erbil. “It’s normal here, in Mosul or Baghdad it is normal. People are kidnapped by [people in] police cars.”

Relatives who went to collect Youssif rushed him to the hospital.

Sources said the doctor had been bound, gagged and blindfolded and lay on his right side for 29 days developing severe pressure ulcers on his right thigh and arm and a deep wound on his right shoulder. He had a deep wound in the back of his neck and a hematoma on his left arm.

There were open wounds around his mouth and wrists where he was tightly bound the entire time he was held hostage, sources said. His left eye was infected. His forehead and nose were

bashed repeatedly, and the rest of his body, especially the upper trunk, was covered in bruises.

"When I saw him, I couldn't stand it – he wasn't the man I knew," said his daughter. "He looked like an old man, he had a beard, and he was so thin he looked anorexic."

Relatives said he was afraid to speak about his experience because the terrorists threatened to kill him and his family. When he could speak, he asked his family how many days he had been gone.

"He said he kept praying, saying, 'I know God won't leave me alone,'" said his daughter. "He kept saying Psalm 23. He loves that, it's his favorite psalm."

Youssif's pastor told Compass that there is no protection for the Christian communities in Iraq, and in Kirkuk only Christian rather than Muslim doctors have been kidnapped.

"There is no Muslim doctor who has been kidnapped in Kirkuk," he said. "This shows that so far only the Christian doctors are kidnapped, I think, because there is no one protecting them and we have no militia. It is very easy for the criminals to kidnap Christian doctors."

The pastor identified the other Christian doctors kidnapped in the last two years as Sargon Yowash, also from his parish, Reath Ramo and a third he could only identify as Dr. George.

Youssif's daughter said she is convinced her father was kidnapped because he is a Christian and a doctor.

"Christians have no protection, that's why we're persecuted here," she said. "We are weak here, that's why they take advantage of us."

The doctor was still in the hospital at press time, but his condition was improving, according to his family.