

Parents of Child ISIS Hostage: 'Part of Our Heart Is Missing'

Ayda relives that most horrible moment daily, even though it took place two years ago. During a medical check-up in the north-eastern Iraqi town of Qaraqosh, militants from the Islamic State took interest in her 3-year-old daughter, Christine. Suddenly, they snatched the child out of her arms and gave the crying girl to a bearded fighter.

In July 2014, IS jihadists had overrun Iraq's second city, Mosul, then swept into Qaraqosh in the Nineveh Plains on Aug. 6.

Hundreds of thousands of Christians and other minorities had already fled the northern region. Christine's family, however, stayed behind because the father, Khader, is blind. Other Christians too old or frail to flee also stayed, hoping for a measure of mercy from the invaders—a hope which was misplaced.

On Aug. 22, militants rounded up the Christians, saying they would receive medical check-ups. World Watch Monitor learned how events unfolded for Ayda Abada. Several times, she said, IS fighters pointed at her, with Christine in her lap.

Someone gave an order to take out any gold or valuables. The Christians produced whatever they had brought—money, gold, clothes, ID cards. The IS militants took it all.

As the Christians were bundled into a bus whose windows were smeared with dirt, a jihadi walked up to Ayda. He took her little girl from her arms and just walked away.

Ayda pleaded for her daughter, but the man others called 'emir'—or chief—waved Ayda away with a despising gesture. At

gunpoint, she was forced back onto the bus.

"That was the last time I saw her," recalled the mother.

Sleepless Nights

After her family's two years of sleepless nights, fighting unimaginable fears and endless crying, Christine is still missing. Ayda and her family now live in a portacabin in a camp for displaced people in Erbil.

"Christine is still there," Ayda told an Iraqi contact who visited her recently. "There" means a place so close you can drive there in a matter of hours, but is yet unreachable, "on the other side." "There" means Islamic-State territory.

Christine is always on the minds of Ayda and the other family members. She even featured in a play Qaraqosh residents wrote and performed in Erbil as a cathartic approach to their trauma.

Her parents have stuck a low-resolution photo of her on their cabin's wall. Ayda's son stumbled upon the picture on Facebook, taken during the time she's been away from the family.

When she talks, Ayda's lips force a smile, her eyes betraying a depth of sadness words cannot convey. "We heard that Christine is living with one of the Christian women kidnapped by IS. The woman was forced into a 'marriage' with an IS fighter and somehow managed to take our Christine under her care."

To outsiders this may seem like a spark of hope, but the parents don't show any relief. (Jihadis have already promulgated Sharia decrees, which allow for sex with "infidel" captured women, including minors). The family worries about their daughter.

"She is getting older," Christine's mother says, with a sad

smile, as she looks at her daughter's picture, the most tangible reminder she still has of her.

Recently, the little girl passed another birthday without her parents: she's now 5. "But I don't know how she celebrated it," Ayda says. "Shortly after we found this photo on Facebook, the internet was cut in Mosul. Now we don't have any news."

Growing Older

Ayda's days are filled with uncertainty. "Sometimes, I fear that my Christine grows older without me, that I will never see her again." She looks down to fight a tear.

But Ayda doesn't want to give up hope. She simply won't survive without it.

As long as Christine is in Mosul, she and the rest of the family will not leave Iraq. Ayda will not rest until her little girl is safely back in her arms. "Without her, it's like part of our heart is missing. We are not complete without her."

Despite several territorial losses suffered by IS over the past months, the biggest battle is expected later this year to re-take Mosul, where the IS "caliphate" was declared over two years ago.

The family of Christine only asks for prayer—as with other Iraqi Christians, they try their best to cope with their lingering trauma.

Some news about people who stayed in Mosul and the Nineveh Plains does filter out.

"My father stayed in Qaraqosh," Ayda says. "He was sick, his health was not good at all. So, when everyone fled, he stayed alone in the house. Later I heard that he died three days after IS entered. He was old and sick and had no water or

food. IS buried him.”

Christine’s father has a sister still in Qaraqosh.

“She was 80 years old and didn’t want to leave,” he says. “She refused to flee with us, she wanted to stay in her home in Qaraqosh.” Now he is not sure if she is still alive. On Mosul TV, they reported that an elderly Christian woman from Qaraqosh had died. It might have been my sister, but I’m not sure. I have no way to contact her.”