The Preteen Sex Slaves of the Islamic State

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<http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/13/the-preteen-sex-slaves-of-the-islamic-state-yazidi/?utm_source=Sailthru&amp;utm_medium=email&amp;utm_term=%2AMideast%20Brief&amp;utm_campaign=New%20Campaign&wp_login_redirect=0>

For the young victims of the jihadist group’s systematic campaign of rape and imprisonment, the ordeal is far from over.

The nightmare of 12-year-old “Jalila” began when Islamic State fighters abducted her, along with her family, in northern Iraq. They separated her from her family and imprisoned her in a house in northeastern Syria with other abducted Yazidi women and girls. Then the jihadi fighters came, one after another, to inspect them. One singled Jalila out, took her home, and proceeded to rape her for three days. Six other Islamic State fighters eventually took possession of Jalila during her captivity, she told me recently — three of them raped her.

This was not an isolated act. When the Islamic State attacked towns in northwestern Iraq in August and abducted thousands of fleeing Yazidis, its forces systematically separated young women and girls from their families and other captives. They then moved the women and girls from place to place inside Iraq and Syria, raping and beating many of them, and forcing them into sexual slavery.

Jalila eventually escaped, but her ordeal is far from over. When I visited Iraq in January and February to interview Yazidi women and girls about their experiences, I found that many of them desperately need psychological counseling and other medical care, which is often unavailable or inaccessible.

“I can’t sleep at night because I remember how they were raping me,” Jalila told me in the northern Iraqi city of Dohuk. “I want to do something to forget about my psychological problems. I want to leave Iraq until things get better; I don’t want to be captured again.”

As an investigator of human rights violations, I have documented many atrocious acts of sectarian violence and wanton bloodshed over the last decade. But the Islamic State’s targeting of Yazidi women and girls is unique in its ferociousness. This apparently systematic abuse constitutes war crimes, and may well amount to crimes against humanity.

Islamic State leaders have attempted to use religion to legitimize the enslavement and rape of Yazidi women. In [a document](http://www.memrijttm.org/islamic-state-isis-releases-pamphlet-on-female-slaves.html) apparently issued by its Research and Fatwa Department, the group puts forward its extreme interpretation of Islamic law, saying it permits sex with non-Muslim “slaves” — including young girls who have yet to reach puberty — as long as they are “fit” for intercourse. The same document refers to female slaves as property, thus sanctioning their sale and disciplinary beating.

Former captives told me that Islamic State fighters had sold girls and women to one another for as much as $2,000.

Overwhelmed Kurdish officials and community groups have made valiant efforts to provide health services to the Yazidi women and girls, but major gaps in the available programs remain. Some women received treatment immediately after returning, while others were only able to obtain essential medical care weeks after escaping from captivity. Some women who received treatment and tests for pregnancy and infections were neither aware of the purpose of those tests nor informed of the results.

Some women became pregnant. Their access to reproductive health services — including safe abortion — is crucial, but it is provided inconsistently. International organizations and nongovernmental groups have told me that there is not only a lack of psychosocial support, but also reluctance by the women and girls to accept such help. Even when help was available, therapists and organizations were often not adequately trained or equipped to assess the psychological needs of former captives.

The Kurdistan Regional Government — with assistance from Iraq’s central government, the United Nations, and international donors — should ensure these women and girls have access to necessary medical and psychosocial services, including trauma support and ongoing counseling. This should include immediate treatment for injuries sustained during attacks, access to emergency contraception and safe and legal abortion services where medically appropriate, preventive measures and treatment for sexually transmitted infections, prenatal and maternal health services, financial assistance, education, and employment-skills training to help reintegrate them into the broader community.

However the conflict against the Islamic State plays out, the needs of the survivors and their communities should be addressed. While, in many ways, Jalila is lucky to have escaped captivity, her family is still missing and she is ensnared by her harrowing past. By ensuring that girls like Jalila receive the psychological help that they need, the world can rehabilitate former captives, restore broken communities, and prevent the Islamic State’s misogynist cruelties from ruining lives forever.