



The Girl Who Escaped ISIS: This Is My Story

By Farida Khalaf, Andrea C. Hoffmann

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“As gripping as it is appalling...a compelling testament to the suffering of ordinary people caught up in violence far beyond their control—and to the particularly terrible price it exacts from women.” —*The Guardian*

A young Yazidi woman was living a normal, sheltered life in northern Iraq during the summer of 2014 when her entire world was upended: her village was attacked by ISIS. All of the men in her town were killed and the women were taken into slavery.

This is Farida Khalaf’s story.

In unprecedented detail, Farida describes her world as it was—at nineteen, she was living at home with her brothers and parents, finishing her schooling and looking forward to becoming a math teacher—and the hell it became. Held in a slave market in Syria and sold into the homes of several ISIS soldiers, she stubbornly attempts resistance at every turn. Farida is ultimately brought to an ISIS training camp in the middle of the desert, where she plots an against-all-odds escape for herself and five other girls.

A riveting firsthand account of life in captivity and a courageous flight to freedom, this astonishing memoir is also Farida’s way of bearing witness, and of ensuring that ISIS does not succeed in crushing her spirit. Her bravery, resilience, and hope in the face of unimaginable violence will fascinate and inspire.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Farida Khalaf’s story is harrowing but crucial—especially when it comes to understanding what ISIS actually is and does.” (*Glamour*)

"The subject matter is difficult, but [Farida Khalaf’s] courage and resilience is powerful." (*Bustle*)

"The book comes at a critical moment as ISIS tightens its hold on the estimated 3,000 Yazidi women and children still in its grasp... Even in hiding, Khalaf demonstrates her incredible courage. The courage it took to survive and, now, to tell her powerful story." (*New York Daily News*)

“An incredible account of what global jihad looks like from the inside. A brutal, vital memoir that gives human voice to what we increasingly regard as policy.” (*New York Post*)

“Farida recounts the horrors she and the other young women endured in captivity. Her story highlights the suffering caused by the Islamic State’s flawed interpretation of the Koran and the group’s brutal intolerance of peaceful religions.” (*Washington Post*)

“Farida’s story cuts through the statistics and the geopolitics to tell of a single life changed forever by a war ... It is a story of loss of innocence but also discovery of an amazing inner strength that drives Farida to survive the nightmare and to bear witness to what happened.” (*New York Journal of Books*)

“*The Girl Who Escaped ISIS* is [Farida Khalaf’s] incredible account of captivity and describes how she defied the odds and escaped a life of torture, in order to share her story with the world,” (*Book Reporter*)

“As gripping as it is appalling... a compelling testament to the suffering of ordinary people caught up in violence far beyond their control—and to the particularly terrible price it exacts from women.” (*The Guardian (UK)*)

"A mesmerizing study of human cruelty and a brave depiction of the monsters that arise when reason sleeps." (*The Sunday Times (UK)*)

"Shattering, brave, angering account." (*The Bookseller (UK)*)

"A powerful description of a world ripped apart." (*The New Statesman (UK)*)

"A vital read." (*Hot Press (UK)*)

“A shattering, brave, enraging book but also a stirring story of survival.” (*Sunday Express (UK)*)

“How much can a single person endure? Traumatized, uprooted, abused—Farida continues to deal with the consequences of the ISIS terror. Nevertheless, the memoir of the young Yazidi woman is full of hope. She is a very strong individual, she has the heart of a lioness, and luckily, her faith is strong enough to help her endure all crises. An amazing story, that hurts – and that encourages everyone never to keep quiet or to give in.” (Frank Heinrich, Speaker of the Committee on Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid of the German

Parliament)

"A stunning, heart wrenching narrative by a teenage Yazidi girl who is uprooted from her village in northern Iraq, only to be kidnapped and sold as a sex slave by ISIS. Farida fights back and is horribly beaten by ISIS for her resistance and her leadership role as she attempts to save other girls from the terrible fate that awaits them. Once Farida escapes it takes even more courage for her to recite her story to German journalist Andrea Hoffman. Everyone should read this in order to get to the heart of the tragedy of the Arab world and the distortion of Islam being perpetrated by ISIS. Beautifully written in the voice of a teenage girl, this book gives more of an understanding of what is happening than political treatises." (Ahmed Rashid, #1 New York Times bestselling author of Taliban)

About the Author

Farida Khalaf is from the Yazidi community of the small village of Kocho, Iraq. Farida was nineteen years old and preparing for her last year in school when ISIS descended upon her village, and she was sold into slavery. After making a daring escape, she reunited with her mother and her brothers in an Iraqi refugee camp and was granted asylum in Germany in 2015.

Andrea C. Hoffmann is an author and a journalist. She specializes in the Middle East and the situation of women in Muslim countries. She lives in Berlin, Germany.

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The Girl Who Escaped ISIS

{ One }

Our World As It Once Was

We lived in Kocho, a village on the plain to the south of Mount Sinjar in northern Iraq. It had 1,700 inhabitants. In spring the countryside is ablaze with all the colors of the rainbow. Around the village the many trees and plants come into bloom, as well as grasses on which the shepherds drive their goats. In summer the heat dries everything out and the plants wither. Because of this the villagers had created a few ponds around Kocho, from which we irrigated our fields. Every day we had to water our garden too, which was surrounded by a high wall. This was one of my chores. Mornings and evenings I would take the long hose, turn on the tap on the terrace, and spray all our plants.

We had a very beautiful garden in which mulberry, almond, and apricot trees grew. And in their shade the vegetables that my mother planted thrived too: zucchinis, leeks, eggplants, potatoes, onions, salad, and heads of cabbage. Around the terrace a variety of roses flowered, giving off a beguiling aroma, especially in the evenings. In the hot season my mother, my younger brothers, Serhad, Shivan, Keniwar, and I would spend almost our entire time in this little paradise. My father and my elder brother, Delan, enjoyed the peace and fresh air here too, when they weren't working.

The house itself was on one floor and had five rooms: a kitchen, a living room, my parents' bedroom, a bedroom for my four brothers—and one for me. As the sole daughter of the family I was entitled to my own little realm. Despite this I often regretted having no sisters, with whom I would have gladly shared my room. I was, however, allowed to invite friends back as often as I liked. My friend Evin and my cousin Nura were regular visitors to our house. Nura and I were in the same class. By now, I was eighteen and in my final year of school, and eager to consider what life might have in store for me next. Evin, on the other hand, was a few

years older than us and had already finished school. We envied all the free time she had; we frequently had to spend long afternoons doing our homework, while she helped her female relatives with odd chores around the house, and looked forward to being married off to some cousin. Her greatest dream was to become a housewife with lots of children. With her calm, even temper, Evin was like an elder sister to Nura and me.

Of my brothers I liked Delan the best. We hung around together and shared many interests. In the afternoons we loved playing soccer in the garden. My big brother also secretly taught me how to drive in the mountains, since unfortunately, Dad had only taught him and our younger brother Serhad. He didn't think it was a skill women needed. In any case it was unusual for people in our village to have driving lessons or take the test.

Our house was supposed to have two floors. Well, that's what my father's original plan had been when he built it with my uncle. But the money he'd set aside soon ran out. With a soldier's salary and a bit extra from farming, he didn't have that much leeway. What's more, Dad was insistent that all his children should go to school. In short, there was always something more important to shell out for than a second story. And over time we got used to the metal rods and wires sticking up out of the roof. Lots of houses in Kocho looked like this. The rods were a sign that another floor could be built on top at any time. And in summer, when it was too hot to sleep in the house, we would go up to the roof with our mats to enjoy the fresh night air up there.

Taking a pragmatic view of the situation, my mother tied lines between the rods and started hanging her washing up on the roof. This came as a great relief to Delan and me, who'd often been hauled over the coals when our dirty soccer ball missed the goal and landed in some clean sheets that were drying in the garden.

For some time now, however, a concrete mixer and sacks of cement had stood among the rods. Delan had bought these out of his pay as a builder. The reason was that my brother wanted to marry. And for this, of course, he needed an apartment he could move into with his wife.

He also needed a wife. On one of our jaunts to the mountains he'd admitted to me that the girl he'd originally been in love with had been forced to turn him down. Unfortunately her parents had already promised her to another man and there was nothing to be done about it. Now Delan was trying to court Zevin, a cousin of ours whom I was very fond of.

"I'll pray that her parents accept you," I promised him solemnly. For us a marriage between cousins is regarded as a highly desirable union, as it is assumed that living together with relatives offers a harmonious life.

The neighboring villages were mainly populated by Muslim Arabs. They were different from us in every way, not just because of their religion. They had other customs and traditions as well. We spoke Kurdish, they spoke Arabic. And as we Yazidis only marry within our own religious group, we had no relatives in these villages either. We did, however, maintain friendly and—more importantly—commercial relations with the Muslims. Muslim traders would often come to Kocho to sell their fruit or candy. Of course the children were delighted to welcome these salesmen, and the adults were very pleased with their wares too.

Every boy in our village, moreover, had a Muslim "godfather"—the man who holds the little baby in his arms during the circumcision ceremony. Usually the entire village comes to watch this ritual. When my youngest brother, Keniwar, was circumcised, for example, a Muslim friend of my father's held him. Through this he became Keniwar's "uncle," his protector. Even if there were no blood connections between the families, the Muslim godfather would undertake an obligation to help the boy, and later the man, whenever he needed his support. At the same time, this act strengthened the bonds between the Yazidi and Muslim families.

But in spite of such alliances, we Yazidis had an extremely dubious reputation among Muslims. And we knew it too, for they didn't try particularly hard to conceal what they thought of us. When they visited the village they refused to eat our food, afraid it might be "unclean." We place great emphasis on hospitality, so we regarded this as an affront. As a child I couldn't understand why they thought of us in this way.

But the elders in the village explained that it had always been thus.

"Our history is one of persecution and suffering," my grandfather told me. My father's father lived next door to us, as is usual in our culture. He was a dignified old gentleman with a white mustache and he habitually wore the traditional white robes, which for us indicate spiritual purity. "They've all persecuted us: the Muslim Kurds, the Iranian shah's governors, and the Ottoman sultans. They massacred and butchered us on seventy-two occasions. How many times have they stolen our women, driven us from our homeland, forced us with raised swords to renounce our religion?"

Granddad stroked my head with his large, coarse hand while I listened to these gruesome stories from the past. "Beware these people, my little one," he said, "for they call us Ibadat al-Shaytan: those who worship the lord of hell."

Now I got a real fright. "But why?"

"Because somebody concocted this lie a long, long time ago," he replied. Granddad looked at me. Like his hair, his eyes appeared to be covered in a gray veil. It seemed as if he were weighing up whether I was old enough to understand things. "It's a complicated story. You'll find out soon enough."



THE RELIGIOUS RITUALS in our village were inseparable from the cycles of nature. Every morning before it got light I'd climb up to the roof with my parents and siblings to greet the first rays of the sun. Sometimes, when it was cold, we'd stay in the house and stand in the spot where it first shone in. We would turn our heads to the sun and open out our palms, similar to how Muslims and Christians do when they pray. Then we'd put our hands together and say, "Amen, amen, amen. May our religion be blessed. God will help our religion to survive." We Yazidis do not pray to the sun, however. In our prayers we always address God. We only venerate the sun in the same way that we venerate the moon and Venus, because divine energy flows through them. Several times during the day and once at night we worship God in the face of these heavenly bodies.

Light, particularly sunlight, is very important in our faith. After all, everything in the world depends on the sun, doesn't it? Could a plant flourish without its light? Could we cultivate our fields? Could we harvest and satisfy our hunger with the yield? No! This is why the sun is sacred to us; its light is our place of worship and our most important connection to God.

The various seasons are also linked to religious festivals in our culture. In Kocho the ritual cycle began with our New Year's festival Sere Sal, which we would celebrate on the first Wednesday in April—"Red Wednesday." On this day we would decorate our house with flowers and paint eggs in bright colors, which we believe stand for the rebirth of all life and the beginning of the world. As a child I always had to go hunting for them in the garden. Later my mother and other women from the village would offer these same eggs to our ancestors at the cemetery as a feast.

We celebrated Cle Havine, the "Forty Days of Summer," and Cle Zivistane, the "Forty Days of Winter."

Both festivals came with elaborate religious ceremonies, ending with a three-day fast.

The most important event of the year, however, was the pilgrimage to Lalish. In autumn, when the intense heat of the summer had abated and the weather was pleasantly mild again, the whole village would make its way to this mystical place, a wonderful green valley irrigated by two springs that we hold to be sacred. It is about 150 kilometers northeast of Kocho, in the mountains between Dohuk and Mosul.

For me, Lalish represents something like a second home, a spiritual one, as from the cradle my parents took me on the annual journey to the valley. Even as a baby I bathed in the waters of the white spring. Lalish is a divine place for us.

Like all the men in the village, for this solemn occasion my father would swap his blue army uniform, which he loved wearing, for a white robe and a white scarf on his head, which he tied in the Arab style with a black headband. My mother would also wrap a white scarf around her head. Unlike Muslim women, Yazidis are not obliged to veil themselves. So the other girls and I would go without covering our heads, and our clothes for the pilgrimage would be relatively modern. We wore the same pants, skirts, and blouses we went to school in. But we would always make sure that at least one item of clothing was white.

“This is the most important difference between us and all the other peoples of the world,” my father explained. They are children of Adam and Eve. We, on the other hand, are the people “created by God.”

Each year, when we turned into the valley, my father would order us to take off our shoes and continue barefoot. Nobody was to dirty the sacred earth with the soles of their shoes. “Do not forget that no less a being than Sheikh Adi walked upon this ground!” he reminded us.

We worship Sheikh Adi, a preacher who lived in Lalish many centuries ago, as the reincarnation of the Peacock Angel. His grave, as well as those of other reincarnations of angels, is in the sanctuary that lies at one of the valley’s gently sloping hillsides. You can see from afar the sand-colored complex with the pointed towers of the holy graves.

Every year there is a heavenly gathering in this shrine. In September, under the leadership of the Peacock, there is a meeting of the Seven Angels who control destiny on earth. They discuss the events of the coming year and make important decisions about the future of humanity. In earthly Lalish we wanted to accompany the angels as they held their discussions and beg for leniency. During the autumn gathering Melek Taus would reveal himself to them and disclose his will. (Melek Taus, the chief of the angels, sometimes takes the form of a peacock and hence is known as the Peacock Angel.)

We would seek out a spot near the shrine and unload our bundles. The guesthouses were reserved for very important people and members of our priestly caste. Normal people like us set up camp outside. We would bring a large covering that my brothers tied to four wooden posts. This served as both a sunshade and protection against the rain. We also stored our crockery, blankets, and food beneath this improvised tent roof. We tied a goat, which we’d brought along for food, to a nearby tree.

I loved our time in Lalish. For us young people this autumn week chiefly meant vacation and a great deal of fun. It was like a massive camping trip with all your friends and relatives.

I’d spend the days with my family, each of which had a schedule. On the first, we would wander to the Silat Bridge at the lower end of the valley. It marks the crossing point between Lalish’s earthly and heavenly realms. We’d wash our hands three times in the water under the bridge and three times we’d cross the bridge

with torches in our hands, saying, “The Silat Bridge, on one side is Hell, on the other Paradise.” Then we’d go to the upper part of the valley and sing hymns. We repeated this procedure for three days.

The bull sacrifice on the fifth day was one of the high points. The deafening salvos that announced its death made all the men hurry to the sanctuary. My father and brothers didn’t want to miss the spectacle either. We women were less keen, however. “I only have to smell all that blood to be sick,” my mother confided in me.

What I loved most of all about Lalish were the evenings, when there was traditional dancing. Seven men, swathed entirely in white clothes, ceremoniously danced twice around the sun symbol to the music of the Qewels, the holy singers who preserve our religious knowledge. They followed a fakir, a holy ascetic, who wore a dark fur and a pointed black hat, like the one it is said that Melek Taus himself used to wear. I found this ritual, which lasted all evening, both mysterious and fascinating.

I’d often slip away with Nura and Evin to meet our friends under the cover of darkness. Sometimes we got to meet children from other villages this way too. The adults frowned upon this, because they were afraid of illicit friendships between the members of the two sexes. But in the overall chaos and euphoria of the pilgrimage they couldn’t prevent contact altogether.

These encounters were invariably harmless in the end. After all, my friends and I had been brought up strictly according to our community’s code of honor, in which a bride’s virginity plays an extremely important role. For us, premarital relationships were out of the question. So it never got any further than us teasing the boys of our own age or at most exchanging stolen glances.

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