

Three years a sex slave: Christian tells of suffering under Isis

Jihadists are in retreat but **Richard Spencer** in Arbil finds a network of rescuers is buying back victims' freedom

For days she did not know that she was free from the Isis man who owned and regularly abused her, or from his wife, who insulted her, or from the shelling and fighting that engulfed the town where she had been held captive.

Rita Habib, a Christian woman kidnapped three years earlier in northern Iraq, thought she had merely been sold again. She had already been bought by four different men.

The man who had paid for her this time, and his friend who had done the same for a Yazidi woman held captive alongside her, had said nothing to them. They wore keffiyehs wrapped round their heads and faces so they could not be identified, and made sure the women stayed indoors.

Eventually the Yazidi woman plucked up the courage to ask: "Who are you? What do you want from us? When are you going to sell us?" One of them replied: "We are not Isis. We have been paid to bring you home. We are trying to find a way to save you."

The complexities of the Syrian civil war have delayed the final defeat of Islamic State. The Assad regime has focused on the battle in Ghouta and the western-backed Kurdish forces suspended operations in eastern Syria to defend the city of Afrin against Turkey. A war that looked all but over last autumn, when Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria fell to western-aligned forces, lingers on. So too does the captivity of the people Isis kidnapped as they swept through northern Iraq in 2014, some 3,000 of them Yazidi women, but some Christian and maybe others too.

A number of westerners, including John Cantlie, a British journalist, remain unaccounted for.

The underground movement to extricate these captives continues to operate, bringing tales of extraordinary bravery. The two men who rescued Ms Habib remain unidentified, but they are known to have masqueraded as jihadists to "buy" Isis's victims. They are shielded by a trail of equally anonymous intermediaries.

A support group for Iraq's Christians paid \$29,000 to bring Ms Habib back. They had been alerted when her father, who was seized with her in Qaraqosh, northern

treme. An only child who lived alone with her widowed father, she had gone to Turkey to try to register them both for asylum, fearful of the march of Isis across Iraq in 2014. On August 6 she returned with her approvals, just as Isis approached Qaraqosh. To reach her father, who is partially sighted, she had to pass streams of refugees flooding in the opposite direction. She walked into the storm. That night the peshmerga fighters protecting the town withdrew, and when she woke in the morning she peeped out of the window to see Isis's black flags in the streets.

Men were shouting. She tried to lock the door against them but it was no good. An announcement broadcast over the loudspeakers of the nearby mosque said that anyone who did not gather in the square would be killed.

There they were separated into older people, young men, and young women and children. She and her small group were driven to Mosul, where they were told they would be used for prisoner exchanges. It was a lie.

They were informed that the protection that the Isis theology said was due to Christians, fellow "people of the book", did not apply. "You are spoils of war, you and the Yazidis alike," she was told.

At around this time Isis published a "fatwa" outlining their justifications for taking women and slaves, and it acted, hardly surprisingly, as encouragement to their followers. The first man to buy her was an Iraqi from Mosul, who held her for 18 months. Next came two Saudi Arabians in Raqqa. Finally, there was a Syrian.

All were married with children, and all treated her the same. "We were raped and tortured," she said. She cleaned and kept house, and was otherwise locked in her room. "The wife would just shout, *abed!* [slave] or *kafir!* to summon me," she said.

Ms Habib is 30 but looks 15 years older. She seems always on the verge of tears. After her rescue she spent four months in a women's refuge, set up to treat the hundreds who have endured similar torment, both physical and psychological. Last week she was reunited at last with her father in Arbil, Iraqi Kurdistan. Before the

cameras they embraced, both weeping. But afterwards both still had a defeated look. "He has changed under Isis," Ms Habib said. "He seems tired." She spoke for many others too.

Shlama Foundation, the organisation that paid for Ms Habib's escape, is funded by the Assyrian and Chaldean diaspora, especially in the US, where a large community has grown larger as thousands

