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20160 - בית חולין - 11097000						

Yazidi baby undergoes life-saving heart surgery at Holon hospital

Judy Maltz

About 150 children from Arab countries and the Palestinian territories undergo heart surgery every year at the Wolfson Medical Center in Holon. The logistics of getting them in and out of Israel often present challenges, but rarely does it get this complicated.

That's because 17-month-old Wisam and his father Khairi al-Shingali, members of the Yazidi minority in Iraq, have no home to return to.

Diagnosed with congenital heart disease when he was barely a month old, Wisam was brought to Israel in early June by Save a Child's Heart, an Israeli humanitarian organization that provides free cardiac care to disadvantaged children from the developing world. On Sunday, he underwent a seven-hour long heart operation that his doctors have determined was successful.

But while Wisam's life was being saved, a great tragedy was unfolding back home. Fearing for their lives, his mother, two older sisters and three-month-old



Wisam and his father Khairi al-Shingali.

Save a Child's Heart

twin brothers earlier this month fled their home in Sinjar, a town west of Mosul, after it was captured by Islamic State militants. The Yazidis, who practice their own secret religion and live predominantly in northern Iraq, have been a key target of the Islamic extremists who are determined to cleanse the region

of non-Muslims.

"My wife woke up at 4 in the morning, and together with my brother and his family, she walked for four hours until she reached Syria," recounts Khairi, speaking Arabic through an interpreter. "From there, they were transported back to the Kurdish area of Iraq, where my in-laws live. For days, I

couldn't communicate with her because the Internet was down, but I spoke to her yesterday on the phone, and she told me it was a miracle they survived."

His wife and other family members were joined by thousands of other desperate Sinjar residents in their
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long trek to Kurdish territory in Syria. But tens of thousands of others fled into the surrounding mountains, only to find themselves trapped without food or water or proper medical care. Many have since died of dehydration and heat.

Dressed in a plaid shirt and brown pants, Khairi sits cross-legged on a hospital bed in the children's ward as he waits to be admitted to the intensive care unit where little Wisam is in recovery. If anything lifts his spirits these days, he says, it's knowing that his little boy can now breathe on his own. "Yesterday when I saw him, after they took him off the respirator, he opened his eyes and tried to talk to me," relays Khairi, his eyes sparkling.

It was Wisam's mother who first noticed a problem with the child's breathing soon after he was born. A Kurdish specialist was the one who hooked the family up with Save a Child's Heart, an organization founded in 1995 in partnership with physicians at

Wolfson, which has since treated 3,400 pediatric cardiac patients from 47 different countries. About half its patients come from Arab countries, the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Having spent every hour of the past few days in the hospital, Khairi, 33, has managed to befriend a few other fathers in the same predicament. He chats avidly in Arabic with a man from Syria whose child recently underwent emergency heart surgery. Moving down the corridor, he spots a Kurdish father and son who are watching a clown perform, and after exchanging a few words of greeting with them, proceeds to the intensive care unit.

Lying in his hospital crib wearing just a diaper, little Wisam is hooked up to several monitors, his little body wrapped in tubes. His father bends over to kiss him gently on the head, breaking into tears as he mumbles reassuring words to the little boy. When Wisam begins to whimper, Khairi whips out his smartphone and shows him some cartoons on the screen. It appears to do the trick of distracting his son from his pain.

Stepping out for a ciga-

rette break, Khairi reflects on the situation back home. Although the rest of the world may be shocked by the dire predicament of his fellow Yazidis, Khairi says he definitely is not. "We have been oppressed by the Islamic extremists for years," he says. "Four times already, there have

His father bends over to kiss him gently on the head, breaking into tears as he mumbles reassuring words to the little boy.

been attempts on my life by them. For them, we are considered like the Jews. They think we are devil worshippers."

Considering the other close calls he's experienced, living under rocket fire in Israel this past month, say Khairi, was no big deal. "I come from Iraq, so I know what missiles are and I'm not afraid of them." Even before making this trip to Israel, he was aware of the

wonders of the Iron Dome rocket interceptor system, which strengthened his conviction that there was little to fear.

For the past 10 years, Khairi has worked as a police officer and in 2005, completed a special training course in Jordan. Was he concerned about possible repercussions from his trip to enemy territory? "In the beginning, I was told that if I went to Israel, I might not have a job to come back to," he says. "But now, that's not even an issue, since I don't even have a home to go back to."

Back in the intensive care unit, Khairi is determined to meet the surgeon who operated on his son. A social worker beckons Dr. Lior Sasson, and Khairi throws his arms around the pediatric cardiologist – ironically, of Iraqi descent as well – planting a huge kiss on his cheek. "We're thrilled that he's doing well," says Sasson. "We hope that he can go back to a place that is safe for him and his family."

Khairi requests that they take a photograph together so that he can send it to his wife and family, and the Israeli surgeon is happy to oblige.