

# Nurse kidnapped by IS 5 yrs ago may be alive, Red Cross

● Louisa Akavi was snatched along with Syrian drivers Alaa Rajab and Nabil Bakdounes

● New Zealand said it disagreed with making the abduction public

● The New York Times has reported the Red Cross has reason to believe she is alive

Geneva, Switzerland

A New Zealand nurse believed abducted with two drivers by Islamic State militants in Syria in 2013 may still be alive, the International Committee of the Red Cross has revealed for the first time in an appeal for news of her whereabouts.

Louisa Akavi was snatched along with Syrian drivers Alaa Rajab and Nabil Bakdounes while travelling in a Red Cross convoy delivering supplies to Idlib, in the northwest of the country.

Armed men stopped their convoy on October 13, 2013, and abducted seven people, four of whom were released the following day.

The ICRC said it believed they were abducted by the Islamic State group (IS).

"Our latest credible information indicates that Louisa was alive in late 2018," the group said Sunday in a statement from Geneva.

"The ICRC has never been able to learn more details about Alaa and Nabil, and their fate is not known."

New Zealand said it disagreed with making the abduction public but did confirm it had dispatched a special forces unit to Syria to search for Akavi.



(L/R): Syria's Alaa Rajab, New Zealand's Louisa Akavi and Syria's Nabil Bakdounes were kidnapped more than five years ago. (Courtesy of Australian)



New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern fends off questions from the media about New Zealand Red Cross nurse Louisa Akavi named by the New York Times during a post cabinet press conference at Parliament in Wellington

"This has involved members of the NZDF (New Zealand defence force) drawn from the Special Operations Force, and personnel have visited Syria

from time to time as required," New Zealand Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters said Monday.

"This non-combat team was specifically focused on locating Louisa and identifying opportunities to recover her.

"The efforts to locate and recover Louisa are ongoing, and there are a number of operational or intelligence matters the government won't be commenting on," he said.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern expressed disappointment at the information released by the ICRC and refused to answer questions at her weekly press conference on Monday. "It absolutely remains the government's view that it would be preferable if this case was not in the public domain," she said.

## 'Compassionate humanitarian'

Peters said information about the kidnapping had not been previously released for fear that any publicity would place the hostages at greater risk, and New Zealand media outlets which knew Akavi had been taken hostage agreed not to publish



The war in Syria, which began in 2011, has claimed more than 370,000 lives and forced millions of people to flee their homes.

the story.

"In these situations the priority must be the safety of the hostage and we received clear advice that any publicity would place Louisa at even greater risk," Peters said.

"The government is very grateful for the cooperation of media outlets over many years in respecting this advice and undertaking not to publish ...

and we thank them for their principled approach."

ICRC operations director Dominik Stillhart said it was an "extremely difficult time" for the families of the three.

"Louisa is a true and compassionate humanitarian. Alaa and Nabil were committed colleagues and an integral part of our aid deliveries.

"We call on anyone with information to please come forward. If our colleagues are still being held, we call for their immediate and unconditional release."

Akavi had carried out 17 field missions with the ICRC and the New Zealand Red Cross, the statement said. Rajab and Bakdounes were "dedicated husbands and caring fathers", it added.

A spokesman for Akavi's family, Tuaine Robati, said she knew the dangers she faced.

"She's been through tough times in her job before but she's stuck at it because she loves it," he said.

"Louisa is an incredibly experienced nurse and aid worker who knew the risks of her job. Our family misses her very much and is concerned for her safety."

The Kurdish-led SDF, backed by a US-led coalition, captured the last IS bastion in eastern Syria on March 23, and had detained thousands of suspected IS fighters.

But this could make it more difficult to find Akavi.

The New York Times has reported the Red Cross has reason to believe she is alive, because at least two people described seeing her in December at a clinic in Sousa, one of the final villages to be held by IS jihadists.

"We are speaking out today to publicly honour and acknowledge Louisa's, Alaa's, and Nabil's hardship and suffering," the ICRC statement said.

The organisation has 98 foreign workers and 580 Syrians working in the country.

## Finnish election winner Rinne, ex-trade union tough guy



Chairman of the Finnish Social Democratic Party Antti Rinne

Helsinki, Finland

Finland's Antti Rinne, the Social Democrat leader who will now try to form a government after a slim election victory, is a former trade union boss once known as the "labour market gangster" for his fiery negotiating skills.

Aged 56, the silver-haired and serious-looking Rinne is no stranger to the top of government, having become finance minister in 2014 when he deposed the then leader of his party, Jutta Urpilainen, in a bitterly fought leadership contest.

Rinne had strongly opposed Urpilainen's decision to support the spending cuts put forward by the then government coalition's largest partner, the centre-right National Coalition Party.

After scraping victory in the 2019 election by the narrowest of margins, Rinne now faces the prospect of having to share a platform with the National Coalition once again, although this time as the senior partner.

Ideological clashes over the need for more austerity -- to which Rinne is vehemently opposed -- may well surface again. Having won the leadership of his party in 2014, Rinne continued to block any government attempts at austerity, although he led the Social Democrats to a disappointing defeat in the 2015 general elections when the party was relegated to fourth place behind the populist, then-euro-sceptic Finns Party.

# White House denies Trump inciting violence against lawmaker

Washington, United States

The top Democrat in the US Congress ordered a safety review for a Muslim lawmaker and her family Sunday after accusing President Donald Trump of putting her in danger by tweeting a video of her spliced with footage of the 9/11 attacks.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi took time out from an official trip to issue a strong statement urging Trump to remove the clip featuring Minnesota congresswoman Ilhan Omar.

"Following the president's tweet, I spoke with the sergeant-at-arms to ensure that Capitol Police are conducting a security assessment to safeguard Congresswoman Omar, her family and her staff," she said.

"The president's words weigh a ton, and his hateful and inflammatory rhetoric creates real danger. President Trump must take down his disrespectful and dangerous video."

Trump's spokeswoman Sarah

Sanders, meanwhile, defended the president Sunday against accusations that he was inciting violence toward Omar.

Omar has been at the center of an escalating row after a clip emerged of her characterizing the deadliest attack on US soil as "some people did something."

On Friday, Trump tweeted a video that juxtaposed the snippet -- which Omar's fellow Democrats say was taken out of context -- with images of the hijacked planes used in the attacks crashing into the World Trade Center's twin towers that once dominated New York's skyline. Menacing music accompanies Omar's words.

The clip, which had been viewed more than 9.4 million times as of Sunday afternoon, ends with the words: "SEPTEMBER 11 2001 WE REMEMBER."

Omar said in a statement posted on Twitter Sunday that many of the increased threats she had received were "directly refer-



Representative Ilhan Omar (D-MN) walks from the House Chamber after a House vote on a resolution to condemn anti-Semitism and other forms of hatred and bigotry, at the US Capitol in Washington, DC

encing or replying to the President's video."

"Violent crimes and other acts of hate by right-wing extremists and white nationalists are on the rise in this country and around the world," she said. "We can no longer ignore that they are being encouraged by the occupant of the highest office in the land."

"We are all Americans. This is

endangering lives. It has to stop."

Prominent Democrats including Beto O'Rourke, Kamala Harris and Omar's fellow first-time Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez were quick to rush to Omar's defense, accusing the president and other Republicans of deliberately de-contextualizing her remarks and endangering her life.

Sanders, however, defended Trump, telling ABC television's "This Week" that "the president is wishing no ill will and certainly not violence towards anyone."

But, she added: "It's absolutely abhorrent the comments she continues to make and has made and (Democrats) look the other way. "I find her comments to be absolutely disgraceful and unbecoming of a member of Congress and I think that it's a good thing that the president is calling her out for those comments, and the big question is why aren't Democrats doing it as well."

## 'Unwavering love for America'

The controversy arose after Omar delivered a 20-minute address to the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) shortly after the New Zealand mosque attacks in March.

"For far too long, we have lived with the discomfort of being a second-class citizen and, frankly, I'm tired of it, and every single

Muslim in this country should be tired of it," she said.

"CAIR was founded after 9/11," she added, "because they recognized that some people did something and that all of us were starting to lose access to our civil liberties."

The civil rights group was in fact founded in 1994 but grew significantly after 2001.

The speech did not initially receive significant attention until the snippet in question was highlighted weeks later by controversial Australian personality Mohammad Tawhidi who refers to himself as the "Imam of Peace."

Omar mounted a trenchant fightback, tweeting Saturday: "No one person -- no matter how corrupt, inept, or vicious -- can threaten my unwavering love for America."

"I stand undeterred to continue fighting for equal opportunity in our pursuit of happiness for all Americans."