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A New Frontier: Human Trafficking and ISIS's Recruitment of Women from the West

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Human trafficking is an effective tool that serves several purposes for terrorist organizations. It facilitates the recruitment and retention of male foreign fighters and provides a reward mechanism for successful combatants.¹ It also generates revenue and contributes to psychologically crushing “the enemy,” by “decimat[ing] communities.”² Trafficking, as a tactic of warfare, “intimidates populations and reduces resistance just as enslavement and rape of women.”³ While it is well-understood that ISIS’s kidnapping and enslavement of Yazidi women and other female prisoners constitutes human trafficking⁴, less attention has been paid to the prospect that some of ISIS’s female recruits from the West, who average 18 years of age⁵, may also be considered victims of entrapment and trafficking because of the techniques used to lure these young women and how they are exploited upon arrival in ISIS-held territory.⁶

If some recruits fit international or national definitions of trafficked persons, it affects the way that the justice system categorizes their recruiters—who would be criminally liable for human trafficking—and also influences how the law interprets the actions of the trafficked young women when they sit as criminal defendants. Furthermore, if Women from the West joining ISIS are victims of human trafficking, this impacts how the international community should design its counter-terrorism policies and research agenda.

¹ISIS has been exploiting and recruiting women for the purposes of what I call the three R’s: Recruit, Reward and Retain. Male foreign fighters considering joining the Islamic State are also promised a wife and, in some cases, a Yazidi girl. ISIS has also instituted a payment system wherein you are paid a stipend for every child you have in the Islamic State.” Katarina Montgomery, “ISIS Recruits Brides to Solve Middle East ‘Marriage Crisis.’” May 8th, 2015. <http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2015/05/7207/isis-recruits-brides-solve-middle-east-marriage-crisis/> (quoting academic Mia Bloom).

² *Id.*

³ Bobby Ray Stacy, “The Growing Role of Terrorist Groups in Human Trafficking.” Coalition Against Trafficking. Dec. 27, 2014. <https://coalitionagainsttrafficking.wordpress.com/2014/12/27/the-growing-role-of-terrorist-groups-in-human-trafficking/>.

⁴ See, e.g., Ford Sypher, “Rape and Sexual Slavery Inside an ISIS Prison.” The Daily Beast. Aug. 28, 2014. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/08/28/rape-and-sexual-slavery-inside-an-isis-prison.html>; Sarah Pierce, “ISIS Continues to Engage in Sex Trafficking.” Human Trafficking Search. Nov. 10, 2014. <http://humantraffickingsearch.net/wp/isis-continues-to-engage-in-sex-trafficking/>

⁵ These women are, on average, 18 years old. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/10/opinion/bergen-female-jihadists/index.html>.

⁶ While ISIS has managed to recruit women from all over the world through deception and false advertising, this paper focuses on women from Western countries.

Women from the West and ISIS

Over 3,400 foreign fighters from the West have left their homes to join ISIS, the radical Sunni group that controls portions of Iraq and Syria.⁷ It is estimated that approximately 550 of these foreigners are Women from the West.⁸ What lures these young women to join groups like ISIS? Women have long-engaged in extremism, as expert scholar Mia Bloom detailed in her book *Bombshell: The Many Faces of Women Terrorists*.⁹ Unfortunately, as Bloom acknowledged, most research efforts have focused on women as victims, rather than exploring women as perpetrators and agents in these movements, and this has resulted in a knowledge-gap as to *why* women join extremist organizations.¹⁰

Significantly, the ways in which today's young ISIS recruits are lured affects their decision to join. According to Bloom, use of the Internet, social media in particular, to recruit Women from the West and girls is on the rise. The tactics employed mirror those that pedophiles use in online "grooming": "[It] is very similar in terms of platform, process, alienation of parents, [and] creating an environment of secrecy."¹¹ Expert Sara Khan, director of the anti-trafficking NGO Inspire, agrees that ISIS employs a form of grooming to gain the trust of potential recruits: "...[the girls are] befriended online, told they're loved, [and] showered with praise and flattery. These girls, like victims of child sexual exploitation, don't see themselves as victims. They see themselves as girls going to be with men who genuinely love them."¹²

Recruiters lure girls by painting a "distorted view" of life inside the Islamic State, falsely advertising the "joys of sisterhood" and living for a higher purpose; in reality, a "woman's role is circumscribed for childbearing, marriage, cooking and cleaning, and they may not even be able to leave the house."¹³

Recruitment of Women from the West as Human Trafficking

Factors such as the recruitment tactics that terrorist organizations use, as well as the age of potential recruits, are critical components in the analysis of whether a particular set of facts meets the international definition of human trafficking.

⁷ Joshua Berlinger, "The names: Who has been recruited to ISIS from the West." CNN. February 26, 2015 <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/25/world/isis-western-recruits/>

⁸ Carolyn Hoyle, Alexandra Bradford, Ross Frenett, "Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS." Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015. www.strategicdialogue.org/ISDJ2969_Becoming_Mulan_01.15_WEB.PDF.

⁹ Mia Bloom, *Bombshell: The Many Faces of Women Terrorists*. C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd. 2011.

¹⁰ Bloom, 33.

¹¹ Mia Bloom. Lecture. "Women, Peace and Security." INAF 587. Georgetown University. March 2, 2015.

¹² Lizzie Dearden, "Missing Syria girls: Parents must 'keep passports under lock and key' to stop children joining Isis." The Independent. Feb. 23, 2015. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/missing-syria-girls-parents-must-keep-passports-under-lock-and-key-to-stop-children-joining-isis-10065617.html>.

¹³ Katarina Montgomery, "ISIS Recruits Brides to Solve Middle East 'Marriage Crisis.'" May 8th, 2015. <http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2015/05/7207/isis-recruits-brides-solve-middle-east-marriage-crisis/> (The reality for women is closer to the document released by ISIS only in Arabic and intended for women in the Gulf countries, called *Women of the Islamic State: Manifesto and Case Study*).

The United Nations *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially women and children* (“UN Trafficking Protocol”)¹⁴, defines trafficking in persons as the recruitment, or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or fraud, deception, the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability for the purpose of exploitation.¹⁵ Under the Protocol, exploitation includes, “**sexual exploitation, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude.**”¹⁶ If threat, force, coercion, abduction, fraud or deception is used to obtain consent, then the consent of the victim is irrelevant.¹⁷ Furthermore, if a child under the age of 18 is exploited in such a way, the act constitutes trafficking in persons, regardless of whether any coercive or deceptive means have been employed.¹⁸

ISIS has targeted a number of young girls from the West to become jihadi brides—recent examples include British schoolgirls Shamima Begum, 15, Kadiza Sultana, 16, and another 15-year-old schoolmate; and Austrian friends Samra Kesinovic, 16, and Sabina Selimovic.¹⁹ As the trafficking definition states, coercion and/or fraud are not required where a child is involved. Regardless of the age of recruits, deception is also present: ISIS recruits women and girls using fraud and abuse of a position of vulnerability,²⁰ among other means. Recruiters frequently describe the glory and honor of being the wife of a jihadi living in utopia, without mention of the extreme violence perpetrated by ISIS, or the possibility that these girls will contribute to, and find themselves subject to, such violence.²¹

While ISIS’s online recruitment techniques undoubtedly comport with the *means* required by the international Trafficking Protocol, the more complicated question is whether this recruitment is *for the purpose of exploitation*. Under the international definition, exploitation can be sexual in nature, slavery, or practices similar to slavery or servitude. When women and girls join ISIS, they might be forced into a marriage and/or find themselves in situations where an originally agreed-to marriage takes on a nature of domestic servitude or sexual slavery.²² “Exploitation” is present in those circumstances, and the girl or woman could be considered a victim of trafficking in persons under the international definition.

¹⁴ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, Nov. 15, 2000, T.I.A.S. No. 13,127, 2237 U.N.T.S. 319.

¹⁵ Trafficking Protocol, Art. 3(a) (emphasis added).

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *See id.* at Art. 3(b)

¹⁸ *See id.* at Art. 3(c)-(d).

¹⁹ Kathianne Boniello, “Why are girls flock to ISIS?” *New York Post*. Feb. 22, 2015, <http://nypost.com/2015/02/22/why-are-girls-flocking-to-isis/>.

²⁰ The women and girls targeted are often psychologically vulnerable; some may feel marginalized within their own communities because of prevailing anti-Muslim sentiment. “Examining the Rise of ISIS.” *PBS Frontline*. Nov. 12, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/iraq-war-on-terror/rise-of-isis/how-isis-uses-sexual-predators-techniques-to-lure-western-women-podcast/> (“Bloom said ISIS appeals to young people who feel hopeless and want a sense of meaning.”).

²¹ *Id.*

²² *See* Harriet Sherwood et al., “Schoolgirl Jihadis: the female Islamists leaving home to join ISIS fighters.” *The Guardian*. Sept. 29, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/29/schoolgirl-jihadis-female-islamists-leaving-home-join-isis-iraq-syria> (Germany’s Institute for Terrorism Research and Security Policy has also noted that in some cases “women had been raped, abused, sold into slavery or forced to marry.”); *see also* Katherine Brown, “Why are Western

Unfortunately, it is not entirely clear what happens to individual girls when they arrive in ISIS-held territory, and very few people have been able to leave and report back.²³ However, Tareena Shakil, who escaped from Syria, claimed that ISIS attempted to force her into marriage, and when she refused, her would-be husband attacked her.²⁴ Bloom has also documented several historic examples of what happens to women who join terrorist organizations, which could shed light on the fate that awaits women who join ISIS:

“Another recruit reported that she was given in marriage to a jihadi who told her that as she was his gift, he could give her to his friends and colleagues. After she was passed around, and had fainted, she woke up in a strange safe house with several other women being trained for a jihadi mission. One girl refused and the instructors reported that she had been eviscerated and chopped up into several pieces.”²⁵

Dr. Phyllis Chesler, professor emerita of psychology and women's studies at the College of Staten Island, agrees that the women and girls of ISIS “may find [themselves] passed from one Holy Warrior to the other with absolutely no say in the matter,” and also added the realities of wife-beating, domestic violence, honor killings, stonings, beheadings, female genital mutilation, and a life of being pregnant all the time and giving birth under primitive conditions, are conveniently glossed over in ISIS recruitment propaganda.²⁶ ISIS also does not mention its systematic campaign of sexual slavery and mass rape of enemy women, which it frequently employs as a tool of torture.²⁷

Recommendations

The UN Trafficking Protocol is intended “to punish the traffickers and to protect the victims of such trafficking, including by protecting their internationally recognized human rights.”²⁸ While the international community has come a long way since the adoption of that UN Protocol in the past 15 years, new human trafficking issues, particularly trafficking

women joining the Islamic State?”, BBC News. Oct. 6, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-29507410> (“Women recruited by the Islamic State... are being used to solve the fighters’ “marriage crisis” and are largely confined to domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning and childrearing.”).

²³ Katarina Montgomery, “ISIS Recruits Brides to Solve Middle East 'Marriage Crisis.” May 8th, 2015.

<http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2015/05/7207/isis-recruits-brides-solve-middle-east-marriage-crisis/> (“Over a month ago, the Islamic State killed 162 foreign fighters because they wanted to leave and go home.”).

²⁴ Sara C. Nelson and Jessica Elgot, “British Mother Tareena Shakil Who Joined IS Scaled Barbed Wire Fence To Flee Fate As A Jihadi Bride.” Huffington Post. Jan. 19, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/01/16/british-mother-tareena-shakil-who-joined-is-scaled-barbed-wire-fence-flee-fatejihadi-bride_n_6486224.html

²⁵ Bloom, 60.

²⁶ Dr. Phyllis Chesler, “Western Sex Slaves for ISIS: The Twisted Psychology of Jihad Brides.” Breitbart. August 13, 2014. <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2014/08/13/western-sex-slaves-for-isis-the-twisted-psychology-of-jihad-brides/> (Dr. Phyllis Chesler is a writer, psychotherapist, and professor emerita of psychology and women's studies).

²⁷ See, e.g., Ivan Watson, “Treated like cattle: Yazidi women sold, raped, enslaved by ISIS.” CNN. Oct. 30, 2014. <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/30/world/meast/isis-female-slaves/>.

²⁸ UN Trafficking Protocol, *preamble*.

by terrorist organizations²⁹, are on the rise and must be diligently confronted.³⁰ If some of ISIS's recruits fit the international or national definitions of trafficked persons, it affects the way that the justice system categorizes their recruiters, who can then be prosecuted for trafficking crimes, influences how the law interprets the actions of the trafficked girls and women when they sit as criminal defendants, and even impacts how the international community approaches its counter-terrorism work. States should consider adopting the following actions in their response to ISIS's recruitment of Western women and girls:

- ❖ ***States should increase efforts to understand what propels young women from the West to join extremist movements.*** The international community must seek to address the root of the problem, which will ultimately make women and girls less susceptible to recruiters' tactics. Under the UN Trafficking Protocol, State Parties have agreed to "undertake measures such as *research, information and mass media campaigns* and social and economic initiatives to prevent and combat trafficking in persons."³¹ Researching *how* and *why* Women from the West are becoming radicalized and leaving their homes to join extremist movements is critical to defeating ISIS.
- ❖ ***Delete ISIS's social media accounts that prey on young women and girls.*** ISIS uses social media outlets, such as Twitter and Facebook, to spread propaganda and develop relationships with young women and girls around the world. Twitter is reported to have recently shut down approximately 10,000 ISIS-linked accounts.³² This wave of suspensions resulted from pressure that Twitter "has allowed the Islamic State to exploit the social network to spread propaganda, glorify violence and seek recruits."³³ In addition to these shutdowns, anonymous hackers have deleted over 1,500 Twitter and Facebook accounts of ISIS sympathizers.³⁴ Corporate executives and

²⁹ As Bobby Ray Stacy, current chief administrator for the International Coalition Against Human Trafficking, noted, "Human trafficking plays a growing role in the operation of 21st-century terrorist organizations." Bobby Ray Stacy, "The Growing Role of Terrorist Groups in Human Trafficking." Coalition Against Trafficking. Dec. 27, 2014. <https://coalitionagainstrafficking.wordpress.com/2014/12/27/the-growing-role-of-terrorist-groups-in-human-trafficking/>.

³⁰ "Terrorism's nexus to trafficking is not new – the so-called language schools that sex traffickers used as visa mills were the institutes that provided visa paperwork to the 9/11 hijackers – but the connection between terrorism and trafficking has been brought to the fore by ISIL and Boko Haram. These groups have proudly professed practicing slavery, justifying their actions with a perverse interpretation of Islam." Fragile States, Vulnerable People: The Human Trafficking Dimension." Center for Strategic and International Studies. January 13, 2015 (Statement by Sarah Sewall, Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, U.S. State Department). Available at: <http://www.state.gov/j/remarks/235934.htm>.

³¹ UN Trafficking Protocol, Art. 9(2) (emphasis added).

³² Rick Gladstone, "Twitter Says It Suspended 10,000 ISIS-Linked Accounts in One Day." New York Times. Apr. 9, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/10/world/middleeast/twitter-says-it-suspended-10000-isis-linked-accounts-in-one-day.html?_r=0 (Twitter's violations department suspended approximately 10,000 accounts on April 2, 2015); see also Polly Mosendz, "Twitter Shuts Down 2,000 ISIS-Linked Accounts." Newsweek. Mar. 3, 2015. <http://www.newsweek.com/twitter-shuts-down-2000-isis-linked-accounts-310969>

³³ *Id.* ("User-generated policy violation reports," rather than government, was responsible for this wave of shut-downs).

³⁴ Heather Saul, "Operation Isis: Anonymous takes down Twitter and Facebook accounts associated with extremist group." The Independent. Feb. 10, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/operation-isis-anonymous-vows-to-take-down-accounts-and-associated-with-extremist-group-10035199.html> ("ISIS, we will hunt you, take down your sites, accounts, emails and expose you.").

hackers are not the only people with the power to act: Everyone on Twitter and Facebook can, and should, report such accounts for user violations.

- ❖ ***Produce effective counter-messaging.*** ISIS recruiters describe an idyllic existence where “[ISIS] pays for our houses, we get money monthly, food aid, travelling aid, soldiers protecting our borders, everything...[W]ith every child we get extra money, No kafir [disbeliever] country does!”³⁵ ISIS also uses the prospect of adventure and romance to lure women as well.³⁶ Additionally, there is a distinct difference between what ISIS says to women from the West, in English, versus what they say to women in Arabic. Governments will more effectively dissuade girls from joining ISIS by producing counter-messaging—through art, culture, dialogue and other non-violent, communication-based approaches—that exposes the truth of what awaits them in Syria, rather than hoping that legal repercussions will deter them.³⁷
- ❖ ***States must investigate if women and girls who join ISIS are victims of human trafficking.*** There are two primary reasons to analyze whether or not an ISIS recruit is a victim of human trafficking. First, it would mean that ISIS could potentially be prosecuted under State or international law for the crime of human trafficking. Secondly, it could affect the criminal liability of the human trafficking victim when she sits as a criminal defendant. For example, “Human trafficking victims may be coerced into the commission of crimes,” which may “negate the requisite criminal intent...justify absolving the offender in whole or in part from the consequences of the behavior; [or] affect the presence of an essential element of the crime as defined by [] law.”³⁸ If a girl is lured under false pretenses and is exploited by ISIS, States should consider whether it is sound policy to label her a “terrorist,” when she would be considered a victim of human trafficking under the international definition.
- ❖ ***Implement a policy that encourages women and girls to return home.*** Women and girls who become disillusioned after they are greeted with the reality of life in the “Islamic State” often find themselves trapped. Even if they are able to escape, “[their home]

³⁵ Lee Ferran and Randy Kreider, "Selling the 'Fantasy': Why Young Western Women Would Join ISIS." ABC News. Feb. 20, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/young-women-join-isis/story?id=29112401> (“Twitter accounts supposedly belonging to women living under ISIS rule describe their day-to-day lives in a positive light and beckon other Western women to join.”).

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ On January 23, 2015, Shannon Maureen Conley became the first woman in America to be sentenced for conspiracy to support ISIS. Conley was found in violation of Title 18 of the United States Code Section 2339B, “Providing and Attempting to Provide Material Support or Resources to a Designated Foreign Terrorist Organization.” Conley’s four-year sentence is meant to deter others from following in her footsteps; however, it is unclear if this measure will have its intended effect. After all, Conley herself was warned several times by the FBI that her actions would have legal repercussions, and she proceeded nevertheless. Michael Martinez, Ana Cabrera and Sara Weisfeldt, “Colorado woman gets 4 years for wanting to join ISIS.” CNN. Jan. 24, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/23/us/colorado-woman-isis-sentencing/>

³⁸ “Human Trafficking Victims as Criminal Defendants.” Human Trafficking and the State Courts Collaborative. Nov. 2013. Available at: http://www.htcourts.org/wp-content/uploads/HT_Victims_asCriminalDefendants_v01.pdf?InformationCard=HT-Victims-as-Criminal-Defendants

government policies at the moment are not encouraging return.”³⁹ Many countries cancel passports, remove one’s nationality or criminalize those who leave for Syria. Under these circumstances, not only will girls be unable to return, but parents will hesitate to report their missing daughters fearing the repercussions – and girls who might have been apprehended before crossing the border could go missing forever.⁴⁰ Importantly, “In terms of U.S., Canadian or European policy, in cases where a girl hasn’t gone to Syria yet or is trying to get out of Syria and isn’t culpable of a crime, we have to understand that she might be a good vehicle to deliver [a] counter-narrative message”⁴¹ and successfully dissuade others from attempting to join ISIS. Additionally, State Parties should create rehabilitation programs for these women and girls who return to reintegrate them into their communities.⁴²

❖ *Encourage families to engage in productive dialogue with their children.* In anticipation of joining ISIS, French schoolgirl Nora el-Bathy began wearing a *hijab* (full veil), which she had not donned prior, and frequently vocalized her desire to help the wounded in Syria to her friends and family. Days before she disappeared, she had asked her parents for her passport.⁴³ Nora’s new behavior, the content of her repeated remarks, and her ultimate request for her passport were all signals that could have alerted her family and friends to her plan. Parents and community members must be vigilant to successfully counter the influence of ruthless recruiters.⁴⁴ As one jihadi bride’s father warned, “If our daughter, who had all the chances and freedom in life, could become a bedroom radical then it’s possible for this to happen to any family.”⁴⁵

³⁹ Kathianne Boniello, "Why are girls flock to ISIS?" New York Post. Feb. 22, 2015, <http://nypost.com/2015/02/22/why-are-girls-flocking-to-isis/> (quoting law professor Jayne Huckerby, head of Duke University’s International Human Rights Clinic).

⁴⁰ Katarina Montgomery, "ISIS Recruits Brides to Solve Middle East 'Marriage Crisis.'" May 8th, 2015. <http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2015/05/7207/isis-recruits-brides-solve-middle-east-marriage-crisis/>.

⁴¹ *Id.* (quoting Mia Bloom) (“Tareena Shakil is a very good example of someone who joined the Islamic State and said that the experience on the ground was very different from what she was promised. She is said to have regretted her decision to go to Syria after she was forced to become a jihadist bride and she said that ISIS “lied to her” about the reality on the ground”).

⁴² Katarina Montgomery, "ISIS Recruits Brides to Solve Middle East 'Marriage Crisis.'" May 8th, 2015. <http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2015/05/7207/isis-recruits-brides-solve-middle-east-marriage-crisis/>. This comports with international obligations under the UN Trafficking Protocol, in which State Parties have agreed to implement, “measures to provide for the physical, psychological and social recovery of victims of trafficking in persons...” UN Trafficking Protocol, Art. 6(3).

⁴³ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/29/schoolgirl-jihadis-female-islamists-leaving-home-join-isis-iraq-syria>

⁴⁴ Edit Schlaffer, a social scientist in Vienna, has been an outspoken advocate for the potential of mothers to counter violent extremism. See, e.g. Abigail Pesta, "The girls of jihad and the secret weapon one woman is using to turn them back." Women in The World. NY Times. Apr. 20, 2015. <http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2015/04/20/the-girls-of-jihad-and-the-secret-weapon-one-woman-is-using-to-turn-them-back/>

⁴⁵ Harriet Sherwood, Sandra Laville, et. al., "Schoolgirl jihadis: the female Islamists leaving home to join Isis fighters." The Guardian. Sept. 29, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/29/schoolgirl-jihadis-female-islamists-leaving-home-join-isis-iraq-syria> (“Aqsa Mahmood – also known as Umm Layth – left Glasgow for Syria last November and has married an Isis fighter. She is a prolific social-media user and writes a blog in which she advises other young women about the best way to travel to Syria and marry a fighter.”).

Conclusion

A nuanced understand of ISIS's recruitment tactics, which may fit the international definition of human trafficking, affects how the international community must address this issue – including the strategies employed to combat recruitment, the content of the counter-terrorism policy and research agenda, and how to rehabilitate girls who are, in fact, victims of human trafficking. Under the UN Trafficking Protocol, States have promised to protect women and girls from becoming victims of trafficking, punish traffickers, and rehabilitate survivors. Honoring this commitment, the international community should not vilify young women and girls as “terrorists” before running this critical assessment.