



Islamic State: Systematic enslavement as a tactic of war

Rights Lab briefing on the findings of an academic article by Nadia Al-Dayel, Andrew Mumford, and Kevin Balesⁱ, 2020.

Systematic enslavement of captured civilians was used by the Islamic State to serve its tactical and strategic goals. Through the innovative 'Division and Regulation of Enslavement Framework' (DREF), this research maps Islamic State's methodical, gender-based approach to the classification, processing and use of slaves. In order to prevent the emergence of similar atrocities, counter-terrorism strategies must include a counter-slavery component.

Key research findings

Between 2014 and 2017, the so-called Islamic State institutionally enslaved civilians as a strategic tactic in its military operations and in its "state" building, and attempted to publicly legitimize slavery and sexual violence on religious grounds. The group in particular targeted the ethnic Yazidi population of northern Iraq, a religious minority group, and methodically discriminated among captives based on religion, gender, and age; executing most non-Muslim men and enslaving non-Muslim women and children.

Using multiple data sources the process by which civilians were categorized and processed to strengthen Islamic States' human and economic resources has been mapped through the 'Division and Regulation of Enslavement Framework' (DREF), which shows Islamic State's institution of slavery to have both domestic and international aspects.

Why is this important?

Islamic State's operation is among the most egregious examples of institutional enslavement observed since the adoption of the 1926 Slavery Convention. Existing literature on the Islamic State and its use of enslavement has either focused on either one demographic (e.g. the children in its promotional materials) or the morality of enslavement, however the authors highlight the importance of studying the tactical characteristics and prerequisites of Islamic State's use of slavery.

Through the DREF framework we can begin to understand how slavery became one of the Islamic State's most fundamental socio-economic components within its larger strategy of military expansion and establishment of political order. Further research also indicates that branches of this terrorist organisation in at least one other country performed a similar slavery process as seen in the DREF to captured civilians.ⁱⁱ

By understanding how Islamic State established and regulated its enslavement activities and the conditions that allowed it to operate, **we can better prevent future atrocities, and better recognise and halt similar activities of future non-state actors.**

Modern slavery is a national security issue because of the ways it can directly fund terror operations. Counter-slavery measures must therefore be fully embedded in counter-terrorism discourse, strategy, and policy execution.

Recommendations for security policy-makers

- Ensure counter-terrorism strategies include a counter-slavery component.
- Ensure military personnel and counter-terrorism practitioners are trained on the nexus between terrorism and modern slavery, and are alert to transnational terrorist operations replicating and financially benefiting from a slavery structure across their occupied territories.

Recommendations for terrorism scholars

- Undertake research to identify the planning, establishment and regulation of slavery by terrorist groups beyond Islamic State.

Research overview

Following Islamic State's first attack on Mosul in 2014, the UN dispatched a fact-finding mission into the captured territoryⁱⁱⁱ. Using the resulting reports^{iv} alongside survivor testimonies and leaked, declassified ISIS documents, the authors have, for the first time, detailed how slavery became a key socioeconomic component in Islamic State's overall strategy.

Attempted legitimization of slavery

Islamic State attempted to religiously legitimize their use of slavery. Through the selective citation of Qu'ranic verse, slavery was openly framed by Islamic State not merely as acceptable but as a positive good, with the pretexts that the families of defeated enemy combatants were not left to die, and enslaved peoples could be brought into Islam.

Establishment and forms of modern slavery

Islamic State targeted non-Muslims, and especially Yazidis, a vulnerable minority group, who fell within the religiously-derived categorisation of *mushrik* i.e. fully outside religious protections.

Most male adults and adolescents were publicly executed, while a minority were "converted" at gunpoint and forced to perform hard labour and observe Islamic rituals^v. Most women and teenage girls were enslaved for systematic sexual exploitation in households; as gifts given to and among militants; and in "rest houses" for militants. Others were sold at internal markets and online auctions to generate income. Islamic State used sexual violence to "cleanse" non-Muslim ethnic groups through forced "marriages" and impregnation^{vi}. Slaves were trafficked across the Iraq/Syria border, sometimes more than once; the border was considered erased by the creation of the Caliphate

Using the indicators specified in the 1926 UN Slavery Convention, it is clear that the Islamic State established a form of bureaucratic regulation of slavery which met not some, but all, of the legal sub-categories of enslavement.

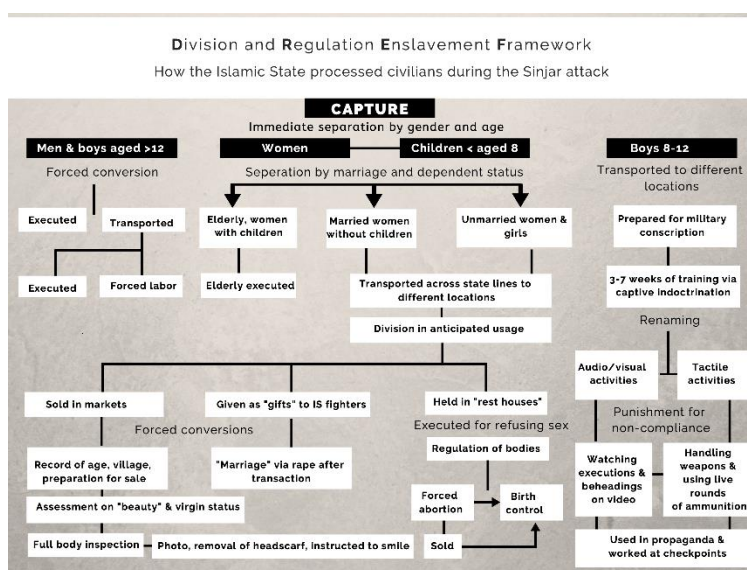
Regulation of slavery

Islamic State military offensives entailed highly planned and coordinated efforts to take slaves, with logistics and bureaucracy in place to transport slaves to secondary holding sites, register them, and divert them to "rest houses", slave markets, indoctrination camps, or the front, based on religion, age, gender, and perceived desirability. It first took control of large cities and repurposed urban infrastructure into political and religious offices and holding areas for captives. Internal documents, including women notarized bills of slave sale, have been recovered, allowing analysis of how enslavement became a source of income and military growth for Islamic State^{vii}.

Implications of DREF

The 'Division and Regulation Framework' (DREF)^{viii} below visually depicts how Islamic State systematically regulated slavery in its territory.

Rather than just condemning slavery, the international community needs to better understand slavery as a tactic that strengthens terrorist and insurgent groups. Only by doing so, and including a counter-slavery component in counter-terrorism strategies, will we be able to prevent similar crimes against humanity.



ⁱ 'Not yet dead: the establishment and regulation of slavery by the Islamic State' by Nadia Al-Dayel, Andrew Mumford, and Kevin Bales, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1711590>

ⁱⁱ Within 2015-2016, ISIS in Libya kidnapped 540 refugees and migrants in six separate attacks, some on human smuggling routes. The experiences of the men and women parallel the Yazidi experiences mapped in the DREF framework, starting with gender separation. See Nadia Al-Dayel, Aaron Anfinson, and Graeme Anfinson, "Detained: corruption and enslavement in Libya after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi", *forthcoming*.

ⁱⁱⁱ United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council to General Assembly*, 3 September 2014. A/HRC/RES/S-22/1

^{iv} UN 2014, 2015, 2016 available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/regularsessions/session28/pages/listreports.aspx>

^v The Cairo Review of Global Affairs. (2016) *The Yazidi Genocide: Essay by United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*. [Online]. Available: <https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/the-yazidi-genocide/>. [20 March 2019].

^{vi} Ahram, A. (2015) Sexual Violence and the Making of ISIS. *Survival*. 57 (3). p. 57-78

^{vii} Malik, N (2017) Trafficking Terror: How Modern Slavery and Sexual Violence Fund Terrorism. *The Henry Jackson Society*. Available: <http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/HJS-Trafficking-Terror-Report-web.pdf>.

^{viii} <https://icct.nl/publication/isis-and-their-use-of-slavery/>