

Testimony before United States House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
"The Islamic State's War on Women and Girls"  
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Thank you Chairman Royce and the committee for the opportunity to speak to you today about the catastrophic levels of sexual violence that has occurred in the midst of the civil wars in Syria and Iraq. Please note that my comments here reflect only my own views, not those of Virginia Tech or any other organization. Also, with your permission, I wish to submit an expanded written statement for the record.

I use the word catastrophic deliberately in order to stress to you the magnitude of the crisis today engulfing Iraq and Syria. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has systematically abducted, enslaved, and sexually terrorized thousands – and likely tens of thousands – of women and girls. There are two equally unhelpful tendencies when it comes to understanding sexual violence of this nature. The first is to see ISIS as a unique collection of religiously-crazed thugs and sociopaths. The second is to dismiss sexual violence as a natural and inevitable byproduct of war. Extensive research by Dara Cohen at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and Ragnhild Nordås at the Peace Research Institution, Oslo has found that sexual violence is common in many – but hardly all – civil wars. Rape is particularly prevalent when fighting groups have trouble recruiting combatants or rely on contraband to finance their operations, factors which tend to decrease fighting discipline and worsen treatment of civilians generally. Rape can become part of the operational culture of both rebel and state forces, even if it is not specifically ordered or sanctioned from commanders at the top.

With that in mind, it is important to consider ISIS's sexual violence not just in the context of the war that ISIS is fighting, but also the kind of state that ISIS purports to be building. As Valerie Hudson, a professor at Texas A&M's Bush School of Government and Public Service, and Patricia Ledl, a former advisor to the United Nations and USAID, point out in their most recent book, "a social order based on the subordination of women will always subjugate all but the most powerful men." Several different different forms of sexual violence are noteworthy, creating different kinds of subordination and hierarchy within the Islamic State:

1. First is sexual enslavement. This type of sexual violence has understandably gained the most attention. Sexual enslavement is uniquely reserved for sectarian groups which ISIS considers to be apostate or heretical to Islam. This includes Shi'is of all denomination, Alawis, Yezidis, Shabak, Druze, Baha'is, and Sunni Muslims that differ from ISIS's religious interpretations. The exact status of Christians, Jews and others considered "Peoples of the Book" is unclear. ISIS selectively cites medieval Islamic jurists to justify treating people from these groups as spoils, essentially property. They are raped at will. There is a profit motive to this kind of sexual violence. Captured women are enslaved in

ISIS-run brothels and sold on the street in Mosul, Raqqa, and elsewhere. Sexual enslavement is also part of a process of ethno-sectarian annihilation. Besides immense physical harm, sexual violence induces dishonor and shame among its victims and their families. ISIS's female captives are often considered despoiled and ineligible for marriage, in effect ruining families and preventing whole generations from procreating. There are reports of ISIS forcing captured Yezidi women to describe their victimization to their families by phone. There are also reports of honor-killings and suicide. Perversely, this type of sexual violence yields another strategic benefit for ISIS. Children born from such rape are generally considered by ISIS doctrine to be Sunni Muslim. They therefore augment the demographic base of the Islamic State itself.

2. The second type of sexual violence is forced marriage. Unlike sexual enslavement, marriage entails reciprocal obligations through the dowry and other kinds of exchange. These marriages help knit together the ISIS community through consanguine ties, turning ISIS members into "one of the family," so to speak. ISIS's predecessor, Al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, tried to extort tribal sheikhs in western Iraq to marry their daughters to ISIS fighters in the mid-2000s. Many sheikhs apparently resisted this, a factor which motivated tribes to join the Awakening movement. We, of course, have no idea about the wishes of the women themselves. Today ISIS continues to try to build networks through forced marriage, bearing in mind that ISIS permits polygamy in conformation to Islamic law. ISIS operated marriage bureaus or brokerages to find spouses for their male fighters. Foreign fighters are reputed to offer bridal prices in the tens of thousands of dollars, in effect gaining citizenship in the Islamic State through marriage. The promise of finding an eligible Muslim spouse has been an element in ISIS's effort to attract foreigners, both men and women. For those caught in the war zone, marrying into ISIS may seem a way to ensure protection for themselves and their families.
3. Third, I would be remiss if I did not also mention ISIS's practices of sexual violence against males. ISIS has tortured and killed accused homosexuals in especially gruesome and horrifying ways. There are also sketchy reports that sexual violation is part of ISIS's practices for initiation or induction of adolescent recruits. Just as for women, these acts induce profound shame and stigmatization in the victim. This use of sexual violence appears consistent with other cases of civil wars where sexual violence against child soldiers increases barriers to exit should a recruit try to flee and thus helps to solidify unit cohesion.

ISIS is brazen and systematized in its campaign of sexual violence. Collectively these actions represent crimes against humanity and violations of the laws of war. They are widely and justly reviled in the West and in the Islamic world.

However, ISIS is not the only belligerent in Syrian-Iraqi civil wars to carryout sexual violence. International human rights organizations have documented how Iraqi, Kurdish, and Syrian security forces have used sexual violence, including sexualized torture and rape. Pro-government militia groups, such as the National Defense Battalions in Syria and the Popular Mobilization Units in Iraq, have been implicated in rape and other atrocities against civilians. Recognizing the extent and scope of sexual violence gives a better appreciation for the perception by some in the Sunni communities that ISIS offers them defense against

brutalization. It also reinforces the crucial point that ISIS is not the sole cause for the violence enveloping the region.

What can be done to help the situation? I fear that a military response will likely generate more violence and induce greater population displacement. Displaced populations are the most vulnerable to all kinds of sexual exploitation, including abductions, enslavement, and prostitution. In 2013 alone the United Nations Population Fund had received request for assistance from 38,000 Syrians related to gender-based violence, including rape, domestic violence, and abuse. As the number of refugees and IDPs has ballooned, this number has almost certainly grown as well.

The U.S. has a number of non-military measures that can help alleviating the crisis of sexual violence. The first is to aid Turkey, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, and other regional states to stop the flow of human trafficking in their areas in order to cut off the financial benefits that come from sexual enslavements. Secondly, the U.S. can also put pressure on Syrian and Iraqi authorities to stop using sexual violence themselves. This would help to reassure frightened Sunni communities and keep them from turning to ISIS for protection. Finally and most importantly, the U.S. must support UNHCR and international and local NGOs working directly with the victims of sexual violence in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and elsewhere. The efforts of these agencies will be crucial to assist sexual violence victims reintegrate with their communities and mitigate the stigma attached to victimization.

Thank you.