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Islamic State: Human Trafficking, the Media and Celebritization of Policy

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The study of terrorist groups and the role they play in human trafficking is a relatively recent addition to the literature. Despite growing anecdotal evidence of such practices by groups including Al Qaida, Boko Haram, and more recently, the Islamic State (I.S) group, empirical research by scholars is extremely limited. Accordingly, this research paper seeks to add to the knowledge that is currently available on the question of: 'what role the Islamic State terrorist group has played in human trafficking, and how has it been portrayed by the media?' An additional area of examination will also focus on how increasing 'celebritization' of human trafficking can lead to misdirected policies. This study will focus specifically on the Yazidi minority population of Nineveh Province located in the North West of Iraq during 2014. Findings from this paper can be employed to inform governments and non-government organizations alike as to media and celebrity bias in the coverage of such events so that resources might be better allocated to identify hidden and overlooked victims, and better assist survivors. Furthermore, the findings will support what little previous scholarly literature there is already available.

This paper will proceed by providing a background into the development of human trafficking, exploitation, and slavery vis-à-vis jihadist terrorist organizations. For the purpose of this research project, human trafficking will be defined as:

... the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.[1]

Additionally, a case study will be undertaken that includes testimonies from Yazidi survivors and literature disseminated by the Islamic State itself. This paper will also explore and discuss the role of the media in gendering and sensationalism in reporting on the trafficking of the Yazidi, and the issues associated with the 'celebritization' of human trafficking. Finally, this research project will conclude that not only has the Islamic State group been involved in slavery, forced labor, trafficking, and exploitation but prima facie, there are also serious allegations of trafficking as a war crime, crimes against humanity, and genocide.

Human trafficking, smuggling and slavery are not new phenomena, indeed many first world states including the United States have had their early economic foundations and prosperity established by such practices.[2] However since the Enlightenment era, there has been a steady progression by European and other Western states from acceptance to abolition to prohibition and criminalization.[3] In recent years, there has been a growing concern regarding the nexus between terrorist organizations and human trafficking. Whilst earlier terrorist groups including Al Qaida have engaged in trafficking, the 2014 kidnapping of nearly 300 school girls in Nigeria by the Boko Haram group elevated the issue to international prominence inspiring the global social media campaign- #BringBackOurGirls.[4] Likewise, the Islamic State terrorist organization (I.S) has been accused of analogous behavior vis-à-vis the Yazidi's and other non-Sunni populations within the territory under its control. However, peer-reviewed scholarly literature specifically examining the link between terrorist organizations and human trafficking is extremely limited.

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Shelley in *The Unholy Trinity: Transnational Crime, Corruption, and Terrorism* 2005, contended that transnational crime “may seek links with terrorists”, and the areas where this was most likely to occur were in conflict zones, and where there was contested governance such as “West Africa and Afghanistan”. [5] However, Picarelli claimed in *The Turbulent Nexus of Transnational Organized Crime and Terrorism : A Theory of Malevolent International Relations* 2006, that the overarching objectives were too different for any sustainable long term relationships between the two. [6] Associations were likely to be of a temporary nature as “terrorists seek to change the system” rather than maintain existing order. [7] O'Brien in *Fluctuations Between Crime and Terror: The Case of Abu Sayyaf's Kidnapping Activities* 2012, provided a case study into the interchangeable nature of criminal/terror activities undertaken by some terrorist organizations [8] Furthermore, Gonzalez in *The Nexus between Human Trafficking and Terrorism/Organized Crime: Combating Human Trafficking by Creating a Cooperative Law Enforcement System* 2013, asserted that as traditional sources of funding for terrorist organizations continue to be disrupted, terrorists were likely to resort to other criminal enterprises including human trafficking to not only fund its activities, but also as a source of recruitment. [9]

Ahram in *Sexual Violence and the Making of ISIS*, 2015, suggested “ISIS's sexual violence emulates practices that have been endemic for decades in Iraq and Syria.” [10] Furthermore, these activities are employed as a tactic to subdue those whom the Islamic State group view as enemies. [11] However, O'Mochain, in *Sexual Violence in Conflict: Forgotten Victims in Secondary Source Literature* 2015, challenged the notion that women have been the sole victims of sexual violence perpetrated by the Islamic State. [12] Finally, Buffon and Allison in *Gendering Victimhood: Western Media and the Sinjar Genocide* 2016, contended that the saturation and the manner of coverage by the media of the Yazidi women's plight, gendered victimhood in trafficking and resulted in the overlooking of other victims including men, the elderly, and children. [13]

The methodology employed in this research project is qualitative in nature. It seeks to explore the relationship between the Islamic State group and the Yazidi minority by way of a case study and testimony made directly by both I.S and Yazidi survivors. Additionally, it examines how the media and celebrities have represented the victims. This was achieved by undertaking a Google key word search using the terms “yazidi”, “islamic state”, and “human trafficking”, and their equivalent synonyms. Google was selected as it is one the most popular and commonly used search engines. As mentioned above, there were significant challenges faced as scholarly literature is limited, and many of the media reports were simply restatements of previous media reporting.

Case Study: The Yazidis and Islamic State Terrorist Group

In early 2012, a group of Salafist insurgents and remnants from Al Qaeda in Iraq that would later become known as the Islamic State (I.S), increased military attacks on Iraqi security forces and made substantial territorial gains in Iraq in Anbar province. [14] Additionally, the group claimed territory in Syria and by mid-2014 they also extended their control to include Fallujah and Mosul. They had defeated state security forces in both Iraq and Syria, assorted rebel groups in Syria, local militias and tribes in Iraq, and Kurdish Peshmerga forces. [15] Furthermore, on 29th June 2014, the group declared an Islamic Caliphate over its territory and named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as Emir. [16]

According to testimony from survivors, on 3rd August 2014 I.S took control of the predominantly Yazidi town of Sinjar and its surrounds in Nineveh Province in the North West of Iraq. [17] Whilst exact numbers are unknown, Amnesty International estimated that hundreds- possibly thousands of Yazidis mainly women and children were abducted, while hundreds of men were murdered. [18] Survivor Nadia Murad Basee Taha aged 19 at the time she was taken by I.S, in testimony to the U.S Senate in 2016 put the number of those murdered in two weeks at 3000 men, women and children. Taha additionally testified that more than 3000 women and girls, and 1600 children were taken into captivity by the Islamic State group. [19] Furthermore, Taha also testified “that women, and girls as young as 8 were forced to be sex slaves.” [20]

The Amnesty International report stated: “that the younger women and girls, some as young as 12 ...[were] sold, given as gifts or forced to marry I.S fighters and supporters.” [21] Several survivors confirmed to Amnesty International that some of the foreign fighters had registered them as wives with the *Sharia* court. The girls said that they had not been abused and that the fighters spent most of their time fighting at the front. Another survivor who was

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13, recounted that although she and her younger sister had been held captive, they too were not abused in any way and their captor had 'saved' them. She told Amnesty International that:

He took me to his home and I slept in a room with his older wife while he slept in another room with his younger wife. The older wife was very nice to me. He said that he had bought me because he felt sorry for me and wanted to send me and my little sister back to my family and indeed he did so.[22]

However, overall the testimonies collected by Amnesty International and other NGO's paint a bleak picture for most of the women and girls who spent time in I.S captivity.[23] Many of those who spoke with Amnesty International had escaped after periods of confinement ranging from a few weeks to several months.[24] Interviews conducted with survivors by main stream media tell similar experiences of abuse, forced conversion to Islam, threats of and actual violence, rape and gang rape, and self – harm.[25] It is estimated that although approximately 300 women and children have escaped, the majority of the Yazidi's taken by I.S remain in captivity.[26] The latest figures that were released in March 2017 “revealed that 2915 Yazidis were rescued from Islamic State captivity, including nearly 1500 children, while more than 3500 were still in the extremist group's hold, including more than 1700 women.”[27] Unfortunately, there was no mention of the methodology employed or by whom this latest data was collected by.

The Islamic State group rather than denying these practices, has justified this behavior in its online English magazine *Dabiq*. Referring to Islamic theological texts and interpretations by religious scholars within the group, I.S considers its actions not only as permissible but also demanded as a condition of *al-Malhamah al-Kubra* – “the greatest battle before the Hour” – and as *Allah's* will. The group stated:

Upon conquering the region of Sinjar in Wilāyat Ninawā, the Islamic State faced a population of Yazidis, a pagan minority existent for ages in regions of Iraq and Shām. Their continual existence to this day is a matter that Muslims should question as they will be asked about it on Judgment Day, considering that Allah had revealed Āyat as-Sayf (the verse of the sword) over 1400 years ago. He ta'ālā said, {And when the sacred months have passed, then kill the mushrikīn wherever you find them, and capture them, and besiege them, and sit in wait for them at every place of ambush. But if they should repent, establish prayer, and give zakah, let them [go] on their way. Indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.} [At-Tawbah: 5] [28]

Whilst some maintain these interpretations to be a distortion, Ali asserted that slavery did in fact have a place in Islamic scriptures as was the case with the histories of many other religions and cultural practices prior to modernity[29] Furthermore, Saudi Arabia maintained slavery practices until as recently as 1962 when it was made illegal.[30] This of course has not stopped trafficking, exploitation, abuse and forced labor of some foreign workers including domestic help within the region. Nor are the practices of trafficking, abuse and exploitation confined solely to the Middle East- it is a global phenomenon that also afflicts many other states including the West.[31] It appears that if one accepts the statement by the Islamic State group itself, their actions towards the Yazidi were not only driven by financial motivation, but also as an act of ethnic cleansing and ideology, rationalized by their interpretation of Koranic verse. Whilst Ahram suggested “ISIS's sexual violence emulates practices that have been endemic for decades in Iraq and Syria.”, none the less it is critical to take into account the Islamic State's own views on the matter.[32]

Findings and Discussion

Instances of slavery, forced labor and sexual violence in areas of armed conflict have occurred throughout history and it may be argued that the Islamic State practices can also be explained as a 'strategy of war'. Notable examples include the 'Rape of Nanjing' by the Japanese military in 1937 and the use of 'Comfort Women' – Korean, and women of other nationalities- in the Asia-Pacific theater of operations during World War Two. More recently, incidents were documented during the Bosnian War in the early to mid-1990s, and the conflict between the Tutsis and Hutus in Rwanda in 1994.[33] Furthermore, the International Criminal Court consider these practices as “crimes against humanity”.[34] Gjini asserted that human trafficking can be used for genocidal purposes and that “many instances” of human and sex trafficking have been labeled as acts of genocide.[35] Article 2 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide defines genocide to include:

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any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; [and] forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.[36]

In June of 2016 the United Nations Independent Commission of Inquiry published a report that concluded that the Islamic State Group “had committed a crime of genocide as well as multiple crimes against humanity and war crimes against the Yazidis”[37] Whilst the United Nations itself has not taken any action to date, German Special Prosecutors have identified and subsequently a warrant has been issued by the German Supreme Court in December 2016, for the arrest for an Islamic State ‘commander’.[38] Moreover, other members of the group are currently the subject of on-going investigations.

There is no doubt that the treatment of the Yazidi women and girls was, and for those still under Islamic State control continues to be, a horrific ordeal. However, the media focus on women as being those deserving of the international community’s attention has privileged these women as being ‘in need of rescuing’ over others. Even with this focus on women, not all women have been represented equally. The media has selectively focused on young, single, and attractive females, vulnerable and separated from their families to the exclusion of married women, mothers, widows, and older women despite enduring similar experiences. The key words “yazidi”, “islamic state” and “human trafficking”, and the corresponding synonyms were employed in a Google search with 42 000 results. From a sample of two hundred, one hundred and forty were media articles with accounts about and / or from women including Nadia Murad, Lamiya Aji Bashar, Jinan, and others who fit the media’s narrative of what a ‘victim’ looks like.[39]

Buffon and Allison contended the selective representation is a continuation of Said’s concept of *Orientalism* in that the media narrative portrays young Yazidi women as needing to be saved by Westerners.[40] Moreover it perpetuates the notion of gendered ‘victimhood’ and stereo types. Furthermore, Buffon and Allison asserted that the “hyper-visibility” of the injuries to the Yazidi women, the attention and sensationalism of stories that have sexual narratives and overtones, and the “Western media focus on women’s bodies moves attention away from the very real suffering of Yazidi men...the collective nature of the catastrophe, which includes the experiences of men, women, and children.”[41] Despite accounts by witnesses and some male Yazidi survivors of I.S vis-a-vis violence, forced conversions and labor, the spotlight has been firmly placed upon the younger women. As a result, others including men and male children who have been forcibly recruited to fight, used as human shields, and provide labor for the Islamic State group, have been overlooked by the media, policy makers and non-government organizations, including international institutions such as the United Nations.[42]

Additionally, there has also been increase in the practice of ‘celebritization’ i.e. celebrities actively raising awareness and lobbying against human trafficking. Haynes maintained that not only do the media and the public enter into the “celebrity-as -rescuer- of victim ideal”, some celebrities portray themselves as “anti-trafficking activists” with special knowledge.[43] However, whilst it can bring positive attention via raising awareness about trafficking and other issues, it can be problematic in that the celebrities can become involved and drawn into making “policy recommendations”[44] Haynes stated:

The primary drawbacks to celebrity activism in the arena of human trafficking are (1) the superficial or uninformed trafficking narratives that celebrities often present and (2) celebrities’ lack of accountability for the solutions they propose to ameliorate trafficking, policies that may have adverse unintended consequences if implemented.[45]

An example of this lack of accountability was demonstrated when actor Ashton Kutcher incorrectly cited statistics and offered an over-simplistic solution from a “report that had been debunked by no less than twenty-seven scholars”, vis-à-vis sex trafficking, prostitution, and underage prostitution. [46] When challenged instead of correcting the record, Kutcher doubled down and accused the *Village Voice* of “having a financial interest in trafficking.”[47] More recently, Kutcher testified before the U.S Senate Committee on Foreign Relations that his organization Thorn has “saved more than 6000 U.S sex trafficking victims, including 2000 minors, in the past 12 months.”[48] Not only is this claim dubious because it cites figures that are substantially higher than all law enforcement cases opened for the

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same period, Kutcher and his organization repeatedly failed to disclose the methodology employed for how their data was collected, other than to say that it was obtained via a “cloud-based data-collection and analysis tool.”[49] It reinforces the old adage of never letting the facts get in the way of a good story.

Additionally, Kutcher’s claims also manifest a representation of the ‘white knight syndrome’ where it’s typically a male who is the rescuer of helpless and vulnerable women and children. It infantilizes women and assumes that they have no autonomy or agency over decision making with regards to their own bodies. Whilst not presuming to suggest that in the case of the Yazidi victims of the Islamic State that the Yazidi were not coerced or threatened, not all others who celebrities claim are victims of human trafficking, are in fact lacking autonomy and agency. There are many men and women who freely choose to engage in one form of sex work or another, purely for economic reasons.[50]

Disturbingly, politicians and policy makers themselves are looking to these celebrities as being experts and for policy solutions. When Ricky Martin testified before the House Committee on International Relations, he spoke candidly and acknowledged that he didn’t have all the solutions, however Rep. Watson replied to Martin: “We understand our role as policymakers; you are the briefer. You brief us on your experiences around the world, and that gives us further indication of the kinds of policies we need to adopt here.” [51] As Haynes asserted even when celebrities are prepared to acknowledge the limits of their expertise, not only do politicians reinforce their suitability to offer opinions on policy but also “abdicate their electoral role- and -democratic accountability-to celebrities.”[52]

However, just as not all sex workers are trafficking victims- not all celebrities are unqualified or misinformed. Amal Clooney nee Alamuddin, has recently announced that she will be representing Nadia Murad and other Yazidi.[53] Although seen by some as a celebrity by virtue of her marriage to actor George Clooney, Alamuddin-Clooney is a prominent Barrister-at-Law, specializing in international law and human rights in both the United States and the United Kingdom since 2000 and 2010 respectively. Additionally, Alamuddin-Clooney has worked at The Hague in the Office of the Prosecutor at the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.[54] Furthermore, her clients including Murad have taken a proactive stance in publicly speaking about the Yazidi’s experiences themselves, rather than letting the media and others tell their stories for them.[55] Even though Alamuddin-Clooney has been extremely successful in her career as a legal advocate, that does not automatically grant her expertise status in trafficking policy making, however arguably her credentials within this field are some-what more credible than several other celebrities currently advocating anti-trafficking campaigns. Moreover, Alamuddin-Clooney has been able to generate considerable media and public awareness as to the lack of international institutional redress for the Yazidis.[56]

Conclusion

It is clear from this research that the Yazidi minority of Iraq have been the victims of human trafficking by the Islamic State terrorist organization for financial gain, but even more significantly because of ideology. The Islamic State have interpreted religious texts to provide validation for their actions which include trafficking, slavery, exploitation and forced labor. Additionally, it can also be argued that they have employed human trafficking not only as a strategy of war, but also to facilitate ethnic cleansing and other crimes against humanity including genocide. Whilst history is replete with episodes of violence in conflict towards civilians, it is particularly disturbing that the Islamic State has sought to re-normalize slavery as a societal and cultural practice, not only within the population in the territory under its control, but to expand that to include foreign fighters, and supporters of the group elsewhere.

Whilst much of the reporting has focused on the plight of the Yazidi women, specifically, young unmarried women, this has led to a bias and gendering of who the victims actually are. There is no doubt the ordeal suffered by these women was horrific but the media, policy makers, non-government organizations, and institutions decision to focus on women as ‘the victims’, overlooks the suffering endured by Yazidis who don’t fit the public narrative, including: men, the elderly, widows, married women, and children both male and female. Consequently, policy decision makers, and NGO’s have centered attention and resource allocation to this one ‘hyper-visible’ group-women. This is a continuation of gendering and privileging of women as victims over all others to the detriment of those who don’t fit this narrow stereo-type. Additionally, it marginalizes the non-stereo typical victim even further.

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Furthermore, the expanding celebritization of human trafficking has become a double edge sword. Whilst celebrities may bring public awareness to a specific cause, they are not held accountable for the accuracy of their representations. Moreover, policy makers who bestow upon them the label of 'experts' are increasingly looking towards these celebrities to provide direction if not actual policy itself which further disenfranchises and silences the voices of the actual victims. However, it should be noted that those who do have actual expertise such as Amal Clooney, have encouraged the victims to tell their own stories to power, but have also advocated for the Islamic State group to be held accountable for their acts. Prior to Clooney's legal representation of the Yazidi people, not one government had issued any form of legal indictment against I.S in regard to human trafficking, slavery, exploitation or forced labor. However continued advocacy and lobbying by Clooney has led to not only the first summons to be issued by special prosecutors in Germany for a member of the Islamic State group to answer charges relating to trafficking, but also the more serious allegations of crimes against humanity and other war crimes. One can only hope that this is the first of many such warrants, particularly with regard to foreign fighters who are now returning to their own countries. However, with the continued public attention fueled by the media and policy makers focus on single, young, attractive women and the sensationalism of sexually deviant practices by the Islamic State, many other victims including non-Yazidi, will not only go without justice but equally as important, the resources and programs necessary for their ongoing recovery and rehabilitation from their ordeal.

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