

# The Role of Sexual Offenses in Terrorist Activities

Andrew M. HOLUB, Ph.D.

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**Abstract:** The following is intended as an introduction for students and professionals to consider sexual offending within the context of terrorism. Specifically, sexual offending is reviewed as a means of inducing terror (e.g., rape), and as advantageous for recruiting (e.g., access to sexual slaves) and funding (e.g., prostitution) for terrorist organizations. The present analysis is meant to provide a truncated overview rather than a comprehensive examination. Interested readers are directed to other sources for more detailed coverage of topics such as prostitution and terrorism, rape during warfare, terrorism, evolutionary psychology and evolutionary perspectives on terrorism. A report from the United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate<sup>836</sup> describes more examples of terrorist organizations recruiting and financing in relation to sexual offenses. The main intent of the present review is to encourage and stimulate future scientific research on sexual offenses and terrorist activities, with specific regard for improving counterterrorism policy and programs.

**Keywords:** Sexual offending, sexual exploitation, sexual violence, pornography, prostitution, human trafficking, rape, terrorism, evolutionary psychology

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<sup>836</sup> Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, *Identifying and Exploring the Nexus between Human Trafficking, Terrorism, and Terrorism Financing* (New York: United Nations Security Council, 2019), <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/HT-terrorism-nexus-CTED-report.pdf>.

## Introduction to Sexual Offending and Terrorism

In order to approach sexual offending in the context of terrorism, first it is necessary to establish working definitions for each. As is true of the study of most human behaviours, both terrorism and sexual offending are broad, heterogenous terms, with numerous, sometimes nebulous definitions. Disparity in definitions of terrorism has become exacerbated by an increase in activities inspired by, but not funded, directed, or otherwise associated with terrorist organizations<sup>837</sup> – the problem of the “lone wolf” designation<sup>838</sup>. It has been suggested that criminal codes should avoid a single monolithic, ultimately incomplete definition of terrorism, and instead embrace multiple definitions that are sensitive to variables that may change based on specific circumstances<sup>839</sup>. Casting such a wide net may be possible in law, but science requires precision and agreement in definition. For the purpose of the present analysis, terrorism will be understood as: “deliberate, politically motivated use of force or violence (or the threat of violence) with the intention to influence the public opinion through the means of mass communication”<sup>840</sup>. The aforementioned definition includes the role of the media, which may be particularly relevant for sexual offending in the context of terrorism.

Operationalizing “sexual offending” is similarly difficult. “Sexual offending” has been deliberately selected as the term of reference in the present analysis because of its broadness. The term “sexual offending” is most often used in legal statutes, vis-à-vis other criminal behaviours. Generally speaking, if an offense occurs, there must be a norm, rule, law, or other expectation that has been transgressed. Sexual offending is a violation of an established code of conduct regarding sexual behaviour, typically, but

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<sup>837</sup> Antonia Ward, “How Do You Define Terrorism?” *The National Interest*, May 31, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/how-do-you-define-terrorism-26058?nopaging=1>.

<sup>838</sup> Bart Schuurman et al., “End of the Lone Wolf: The Typology that Should Not Have Been”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, (2019): 771–778.

<sup>839</sup> Alan Greene, “Defining Terrorism: One Size Fits All?” *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (April 2017): 411–440.

<sup>840</sup> Katarzyna Maniszewska, *Pionierzy Terroryzmu Europejskiego: Frakcja Czerwonej Armii* (Kraków: Apeiron, 2014), 12.

not always, codified by law. Although all countries have laws regulating nonconsensual sexual activities, there are often inconsistencies between countries' penal codes. International humanitarian and criminal law (IHL and ICL, respectively) have sought to fill these voids, with debateable success<sup>841</sup>. Numerous international treaties and laws have established conventions regarding violations of human sexual dignity (see International Committee of the Red Cross Customary IHL Database<sup>842</sup>, or United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect<sup>843</sup> for more information), but even within the piecemeal framework of international agreements, incongruencies remain. For the purposes of the present analysis, "sexual offending" will be understood to include a wide array of behaviours such as "rape, sexual mutilation, sexual humiliation, forced prostitution, and forced pregnancy<sup>844</sup>", pornography, forced abortion, and also a broad list of tactics, such as, blackmail, bribery, deceptive recruitment into marriages/sexual relationships, restriction of movement, use of drugs to remove ability to consent, and other forms of aggression, and violence. In summation, any actual or threatened use of coercion, aggression/violence, or manipulation of consent and personal authority regarding behaviours typical of reproduction, mating, courtship, or romantic relationships can be considered sexual offending. Even this very broad definition likely is not adequately inclusive of the range of behaviours that could be considered sexual offending, but it provides a working basis from which to approach this topic within the context of terrorist activities.

There are countless variables that can predict the perpetration of sexual offenses. The present analysis does not claim to provide an exhaustive review of the causes of sexual offending. Indeed, identifying the causes of sexual offenses has been the subject of volumes of research, from numerous

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<sup>841</sup> Keith Suter, "The Successes and Limitations of International Law and the International Court of Justice", *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* 20, (2004): 344–354.

<sup>842</sup> "Rule 93. Rape and Other forms of Sexual Violence", International Committee of the Red Cross, accessed November 23, 2020, [https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1\\_rul\\_rule93](https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/customary-ihl/eng/docs/v1_rul_rule93).

<sup>843</sup> "Definitions: Genocide, Crimes Against Humanity, War Crimes, and Ethnic Cleansing", United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/crimes-against-humanity.shtml>.

<sup>844</sup> United Nations Women's Rights Unit, "Sexual Violence and Armed Conflict: United Nations Response", *Women2000* (April 1998), <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/cover.pdf>.

perspectives and levels of analysis. Similarly, the extent to which sexual offenses are intentionally used by terrorist organizations for the purposes of meeting strategic goals can vary from organization to organization. Although the present analysis focuses on how terrorist organizations can advance their objectives through sexual offending, it must be acknowledged that an individual terrorist may perpetrate sexual offenses for any number of reasons, mirroring the occurrence within the general population. Readers interested in more detailed coverage of sexual offending are directed to a number of more comprehensive resources<sup>845, 846, 847, 848, 849</sup>.

Attempts to estimate the scope of sexual offending by terrorist organizations has proven extremely difficult. Although most nation states and many international agencies have mechanisms for attempting to track and analyze data regarding sexual offenses, the same apparatus does not exist among and within terrorist organizations. As either actual or prospective non-state entities, terrorist organizations attempt to operate outside of (inter)national law, meaning attempts to document the perpetration of sexual offenses by terrorists are almost certainly deficient, likely underreporting the magnitude and regularity of these activities<sup>850</sup>. Therefore, even if the present report were not constrained by space, lack of available data would render any analysis about the extent of sexual offenses by terrorist organizations incomplete.

This analysis is meant to provide a truncated overview rather than a comprehensive examination. Interested readers are directed to other

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<sup>845</sup> Martin L. Lalumière et al., *The Causes of Rape: Understanding Individual Differences in Male Propensity for Sexual Aggression* (Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2005).

<sup>846</sup> Amy D. Lykins, ed., *Encyclopedia of Sexuality and Gender*, (Springer Nature Switzerland AG, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-59531-3>.

<sup>847</sup> William F. McKibbin et al., "Why Do Men Rape? An Evolutionary Psychological Perspective", *Review of General Psychology* 12, (2008): 86–97.

<sup>848</sup> Thornhill and Palmer, *A Natural History of Rape*.

<sup>849</sup> Griet Vandermassen, "Evolution and Rape: A Feminist Darwinian Perspective", *Sex Roles* 64, (2011): 732–747.

<sup>850</sup> Nikita Malik, "Human Trafficking Continues to Be Used by Terrorists: The ICC Must Address It", *Forbes*, June 20, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nikitamalik/2019/06/20/human-trafficking-continues-to-be-used-by-terrorists-the-icc-must-address-it/?sh=352e018d230b>.



sources for more detailed coverage of topics such as prostitution and terrorism<sup>851, 852</sup>, rape during warfare<sup>853, 854, 855</sup>, terrorism<sup>856</sup>, evolutionary psychology<sup>857, 858</sup> and evolutionary perspectives on terrorism<sup>859, 860</sup>.

Finally, it goes without saying that the effects of sexual offenses on victims can be devastating. However, sexual offending can also have ramifications beyond the trauma for individual victims. Sexual offending in the context of terrorist organizations can be considered objectively as a possible means of accomplishing strategic objectives. Adding this superordinate level of analysis to the study of sexual offenses does not ignore the pain and consequences of individual victims, nor the motivations of individual perpetrators; rather it can help provide a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that continue to promote and sustain these behaviours that violate the human dignity of victims (see Conclusions and Future Directions).

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<sup>851</sup> Richard J. DiGiacomo, "Prostitution as a Possible Funding Mechanism for Terrorism" (MA thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2010).

<sup>852</sup> Nikita Malik, "Trafficking Terror: How Modern Slavery and Sexual Violence Fund Terrorism", London: The Henry Jackson Society, 2017. <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/HJS-Trafficking-Terror-Report-web.pdf>.

<sup>853</sup> Dara Kay Cohen, *Rape during Civil War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).

<sup>854</sup> Randy Thornhill and Craig T. Palmer, *A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

<sup>855</sup> Malcolm Potts and Thomas Hayden, *Sex and War: How Biology Explains Warfare and Terrorism and Offers a Path to a Safer World* (Dallas: BenBella Books, 2008).

<sup>856</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism: Revised and Expanded Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

<sup>857</sup> Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, "From Evolution to Adaptations to Behavior: Toward an Integrated Evolutionary Psychology", In *Biological Perspectives on Motivated Activities*, ed. Roderick Wong (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1995) 10–74.

<sup>858</sup> David M. Buss, *Evolutionary Psychology: The New Science of the Mind, 6th Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>859</sup> Max Taylor, Jason Roach, and Ken Pease, eds., *Evolutionary Psychology and Terrorism*. (New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>860</sup> James R. Liddle, Lance S. Bush, and Todd K. Shackelford, "An Introduction to Evolutionary Psychology and Its Application to Suicide Terrorism", *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression* 3, (2011): 176–197.

## Sexual Offending as a Weapon of Terror

Armed conflict is considered one of the most reliable contexts predicting the perpetration of rape<sup>861</sup>. Warfare is accompanied by sufficiently low risks for perpetrators, anonymity and/or impunity from repercussions, and high vulnerability of victims – all conditions that favor rape perpetration<sup>862</sup>. Terrorists often consider themselves “at war” with a larger power<sup>863</sup>, such as a nation state, and so it follows that insofar as sexual offense are characteristic of periods of war, they also may become characteristic of terrorist activity (although it should be noted that how terrorists regard themselves is different from how governments regard terrorist activity, as crime and/or act of war<sup>864</sup>). Terrorist organizations are rarely in a position to make use of widespread sexual offending such as during war. However, some recent examples of terrorist organizations successfully engaging in open conflict demonstrate how sexual offenses may be incorporated into strategies to induce terror under certain conducive circumstances.

The atrocities of the so-called Islamic State (ISIL; the present analysis will follow the naming convention of the United States Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism<sup>865</sup> here and throughout, while acknowledging that there is considerable controversy regarding the naming of Islamic State<sup>866, 867</sup>) in Iraq and Syria, beginning in 2013, brought international attention to the use of sexual offenses by terrorists. ISIL has employed sexual offenses

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<sup>861</sup> Thornhill and Palmer, *A Natural History of Rape*.

<sup>862</sup> Jonathan Gottschall, “Explaining Wartime Rape”, *The Journal of Sex Research* 41, (May 2004), 129–136.

<sup>863</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 21–24.

<sup>864</sup> Andrew Majoran, “The Illusion of War: Is Terrorism A Criminal Act or an Act of War?” *The Mackenzie Institute*, August 1, 2014, <https://mackenzieinstitute.com/2014/08/the-illusion-of-war-is-terrorism-a-criminal-act-or-an-act-of-war/>.

<sup>865</sup> “Foreign Terrorist Organizations”, U.S. Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism, accessed November 19, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>.

<sup>866</sup> Taylor Wofford, “ISIL, ISIS or IS? The Etymology of the Islamic State”, *Newsweek*, September 16, 2014, <https://www.newsweek.com/etymology-islamic-state-270752>.

<sup>867</sup> George Petras, “‘Daesh,’ Other Islamic State Names Explained”, *USA Today*, November, 17, 2015, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/11/17/islamic-state-names/75889934/>.

widely, sometimes to directly intimidate groups that it considers a threat to its ideology<sup>868</sup>. Although morally objectionable, the integration of sexual offending into ISIL's strategy of inducing fear can be considered successful. Many refugees from the ISIL conflict reported fear of rape as one of the motivations for fleeing the group<sup>869</sup>. Media coverage of the sexual offenses of ISIL has been widespread. In addition, ISIL has been prolific in its use of social media, even advertising its sexual offenses via the internet<sup>870</sup>. Broadcasting its crimes, including sexual offenses, has been key to its ability to spread terror and remove local resistance through intimidation.

ISIL is not the only terrorist organization to have prominently spread terror through sexual offenses. For many people outside of west Africa, the first introduction to Boko Haram<sup>871</sup> (see above note for naming conventions) came with the organization's abduction of over 200 school-aged girls in April 2014 in Chibok, Nigeria<sup>872</sup>. The ensuing widespread coverage in major Western media outlets unleashed a torrent of passionate, albeit faddish and impotent, social media condemnation against this attack<sup>873</sup>. However heinous that attack was, it is only a fraction of Boko Haram's sexual offenses. Boko Haram terrorists have extensively used the threat of forced marriage, sexual slavery, and rape to punish or prevent through terror, behaviours prohibited by its ideology (such as participating in non-Islamic education), according to witnesses and survivors<sup>874</sup>. In addition, Boko Haram terrorists have pursued sexual offenses for the purpose of impregnating

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<sup>868</sup> Malik, "Trafficking Terror", 17–18.

<sup>869</sup> The Associated Press, "Iraqis Fleeing ISIS Militants Reveal Fears of Rape, Kidnapping", *NBC News*, June, 13, 2014, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/iraq-turmoil/iraqis-fleeing-isis-militants-reveal-fears-rape-kidnapping-n130281>.

<sup>870</sup> Rukmini Callimachi, "ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape", *New York Times*, August 13, 2015, [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html?\\_r=2](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html?_r=2).

<sup>871</sup> "Foreign Terrorist Organizations", Bureau of Counterterrorism, <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>.

<sup>872</sup> Aminu Abubakar, "As Many as 200 Girls Abducted by Boko Haram, Nigerian Officials Say", *CNN*, April 16, 2014, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/04/15/world/africa/nigeria-girls-abducted/index.html>.

<sup>873</sup> Maeve Shearlaw, "Did the #bringbackourgirls Campaign Make a Difference in Nigeria?" *The Guardian*, April 14, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/14/nigeria-bringbackour-girls-campaign-one-year-on>.

<sup>874</sup> Charlotte Alter, "Girls Who Escaped Boko Haram Tell of Horrors in Captivity", *Time*, October 27, 2014, <https://time.com/3540263/girls-boko-haram-escape/>.

women in order to breed a new generation of terrorists<sup>875</sup>. To this end, the terrorist organization is using sexual offenses not only to spread fear, but also for a strategic aim – increasing manpower and ensuring the continuity of the group across generations through its members’ pursuit of a facultative mating strategy<sup>876</sup>.

ISIL and Boko Haram are only two examples of how sexual offenses can become part of terrorist activities to spread terror. The conditions in which these groups have operated feature relatively weak or ineffective legal and security structures from the state, meaning the members of these organizations have been able to sexually offend at a far wider scale than is possible for many other terrorist organizations. This conclusion does not imply that other terrorists have not, do not, and will not commit sexual offenses to further their strategic goals; only that ISIL and Boko Haram have been able to perpetrate such offenses with uncommonly high frequency relative to other terrorists. Because of the scale of perpetration, sexual offenses have reasonably instilled fear of these organizations.

## Sexual Offending as a Recruiting Tool

Although there are noted instances of women engaging in terrorist activity and even founding terrorist organizations (e.g., the Weatherman and the May 19th Communist Organization in the United States<sup>877</sup>, Gudrun Enslin and the Red Army Faction in Germany,<sup>878</sup> and female Islamist suicide bombers<sup>879</sup>), most terrorists are men<sup>880</sup>. This effect follows the larger pattern of aggression in humans – men are primarily the perpetrators (and

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<sup>875</sup> Malik, “Trafficking in Terror”, 31–32.

<sup>876</sup> William F. McKibbin et al., “Why Do Men Rape? An Evolutionary Psychological Perspective”, 90.

<sup>877</sup> William Rosenau, “The Dark History of America’s First Female Terrorist Group”, *Politico*, May 3, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/05/03/us-history-first-women-terrorist-group-191037>.

<sup>878</sup> Maniszewska, *Pionierzy Terroryzmu Europejskiego*, 34.

<sup>879</sup> Elizabeth Nolen, “Female Suicide Bombers: Coerced or Committed?” *Global Security Studies* 7, (Spring 2016): 30–40.

<sup>880</sup> Jessica Trisko Darden, *Tackling Terrorists’ Exploitation of Youth*, American Enterprise Institute, 2019, 6. <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Tackling-Terrorists-Exploitation-of-Youth.pdf>.

targets) of aggression<sup>881, 882, 883</sup>. The same pattern of behaviour is true of organized aggression. The formation of coalitions for warfare has been an exclusively male-initiated endeavor across human history<sup>884</sup>. In fact, in no culture have women been observed regularly forming coalitions designed to attack and kill conspecifics (see Buss, 2019 for a review<sup>885</sup>). These sex differences are the result of selection pressures that have favored the evolution of aggression as a solution to adaptive problems faced more often by males than by females. Indeed, men appear to be designed for intra-sexual competition, including the use of aggression<sup>886</sup>. Throughout human evolutionary history, coalitional warfare has been a route for victors to gain resources, including and especially mates (see Savage and Palmer, 2016<sup>887</sup> for a review), which would have been a more salient problem for ancestral men compared to ancestral women. To that end, insofar as any armed conflict – be it a formal war between nation states, a turf war between rival street gangs, or terrorism – is predominantly the enterprise of men, it can be considered the result of an evolutionary history that has selected a propensity for aggression in men as a means of solving problems related to survival and reproduction<sup>888, 889, 890</sup>. Therefore, it is not surprising that

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<sup>881</sup> John Archer, "Sex Differences in Aggression in Real-World Settings: A Meta-Analytic Review", *Review of General Psychology* 8, (2004): 291–322.

<sup>882</sup> Martin Daly and Margot Wilson, *Homicide* (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine, 1988), 149.

<sup>883</sup> Janet Hyde, "Gender Differences in Aggression", in *The Psychology of Gender: Advances through Meta-analysis*, eds. J.S. Hyde & M.C. Linn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 67–101.

<sup>884</sup> Melissa M. McDonald, Carlos D. Navarrete, and Mark Van Vugt, "Evolution and the Psychology of Intergroup Conflict: The Male Warrior Hypothesis". *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 367, (2012): 671–673.

<sup>885</sup> Buss, *Evolutionary Psychology*, 289–297.

<sup>886</sup> McDonald, Navarrete, and Van Vugt, "Evolution and the Psychology of Intergroup Conflict", 670–679.

<sup>887</sup> Chet R. Savage and Craig T. Palmer, "Sexual Access as a Benefit of War", in *Encyclopedia of Evolutionary Psychological Science*, ed. Todd K. Shackelford and Viviana A. Weekes-Shackelford (Springer, Cham, 2016).

<sup>888</sup> John Archer, "Does Sexual Selection Explain Human Sex Differences in Aggression?" *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 32, (2009): 249–311.

<sup>889</sup> McDonald, Navarrete, and Van Vugt "Evolution and the Psychology of Intergroup Conflict", 670–679.

<sup>890</sup> Robert L. Trivers, "Parental Investment and Sexual Selection", in *Sexual Selection and the Descent of Man 1871–1971*, ed. Bernard Campbell (Chicago: Adaline, 1972), 136–179.

sexual access, including through offending, can entice individuals (men) to join terrorist organizations.

ISIL again demonstrates a powerful example of how sexual offenses can impact recruitment to terrorist organizations. Women and girls captured by ISIL in Iraq and Syria were<sup>891</sup> often subject to rape and sexual slavery at the hands of their captors. The genocide of the ethno-religious minority Yazidi community in Iraq highlights the frequency of sexual offending by ISIL terrorists<sup>892</sup> and its effectiveness for drawing individuals into the group. Western media outlets have reported innumerable accounts of forced marriages, including the outright purchase of captured women and girls by ISIL terrorists as “spoils of war”<sup>893</sup>. These captives became a powerful currency for the terrorists, and a means of drawing the attention of perspective members. Although demographic data are incomplete, the average age of ISIL terrorists between 2013–2014 (around the height of the organization’s influence) was estimated to be about 26 years<sup>894</sup>. Male intrasexual competition (including for resources and mates) is most intense during teenage years and through young adulthood<sup>895</sup>, so it is not surprising that ISIL’s promise of wives could appeal to some young men (although other motivations are not discounted). It has also been suggested that men with a history of sexual violence may be differentially drawn to joining terrorist organizations<sup>896</sup>, although the idea of past sexual offending as a predictor of terrorist activities needs further empiri-

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<sup>891</sup> ISIL will be referenced in the past tense here in recognition of the decline and hopeful dissolution of the group. However, at the time of writing, ISIL is still an active terrorist organization.

<sup>892</sup> Samar El-Masri, “Prosecuting ISIS for the sexual slavery of the Yazidi women and girls”, *The International Journal of Human Rights* 22, (2018): 1047–1066.

<sup>893</sup> Annabell Van den Berghe, “Humiliation replaces fear for the women kidnapped by Isis”, *The Guardian*, October, 19, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/19/isis-forced-marriage-syria-iraq-women-kidnapped>.

<sup>894</sup> Jack Moore, “New Analysis Shows ISIS Fighters Originate From 70 Countries”, *Newsweek*, April 20, 2016, <https://www.newsweek.com/new-analysis-shows-isis-fighters-originate-70-countries-449968>.

<sup>895</sup> Margo Wilson and Martin Daly, “Competitiveness, Risk Taking, and Violence: The Young Male Syndrome”, *Ethology and Sociobiology* 6, 59–73.

<sup>896</sup> Izzy Ferris, “Men with Histories of Sexual Violence are ‘More Likely to Be Terrorists’ so Police Should Monitor Them, Top Lawyer Claims”, *Daily Mail*, May 26, 2019, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-7073493/Men-histories-sexual-violence-likely-terrorists-lawyer-claims.html>.

cal research (see Conclusions and Further Directions). However, at least some captured ISIL terrorists have admitted their willing participation in countless rapes<sup>897</sup>.

Forced marriages and sexual slavery of captured women and girls are not the only means by which ISIL was able to capitalize on sexual opportunities as a recruiting tool. It is estimated that thousands of women from outside of Iraq and Syria immigrated to areas under ISIL control to join the organization<sup>898</sup>. Although many of these women voluntarily married and bore children of ISIL terrorists, some may still be considered victims of sexual exploitation because of deceptive tactics used to lure them, and coercion and aggression used to entrap them in their marriages<sup>899</sup>. Entrapping willing women into involvement with the organization provides “rewards” for current members, but also an additional source of opportunity to recruit other members. The promise of reproductive opportunities is a powerful motivator for men to join armed coalitions. Where terrorist organizations can make believable promises of access to mates, they can increase their ability to recruit new members. One such avenue to make these promises credible is by sexual offending.

## Financing Terrorism

Like many illicit activities, sexual offending can carry economic benefits for terrorist organizations. The clearest example of financial gain through sexual offending is the trafficking in persons for prostitution and other sex work. Human trafficking (the present analysis will use the terms “human trafficking” and “trafficking in persons” interchangeably, following

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<sup>897</sup> Michael Georgy, “Captive Islamic State Militant Says Mass Rapes Were ‘Normal’,” *Reuters*, February 17, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-mosul-prisoners-idUSKBN15W1N0>.

<sup>898</sup> Joana Cook and Gina Vale, *From Daesh to ‘Diaspora’: Tracing the Women and Minors of Islamic State* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation 2018) 3. [https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Women-in-ISIS-report\\_20180719\\_web.pdf](https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Women-in-ISIS-report_20180719_web.pdf).

<sup>899</sup> Ashley Binetti, “A New Frontier: Human Trafficking and ISIS’s Recruitment of Women from the West”, Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security: 2015. <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Human-Trafficking-and-ISISs-Recruitment-of-Women-from-the-West.pdf>.



the definition of U.S. Department of State<sup>900</sup>) is a lucrative and growing criminal business venture<sup>901</sup>, and this financial potential is not without notice by terrorists. “For profit” criminal organizations have established a model for how to monetize sexual offending<sup>902</sup>, and the distinction between (non-terrorist) criminal organizations and (criminal) terrorist organizations is becoming increasingly blurred when it comes to profiting from human trafficking<sup>903</sup>. It is possible that shared business interests may be producing closer ties and even formal cooperation between terrorist groups and criminal networks<sup>904</sup>. Prostitution provides a relatively easy and steady flow of money after initial investments are made<sup>905</sup>. Because it is illegal in the vast majority of jurisdictions, prostitution is often controlled by parties who attempt to operate beyond state regulation and oversight. As such, the proceeds from this contraband economy are also unregulated, and can be channelled into other illegal activities, such as terrorism. Human trafficking for prostitution and other sex work can be conducted at a variety of levels, from small local groups, to transnational organizations,<sup>906</sup> meaning even terrorist organizations with modest global footprint can profit from it.

Financial opportunities from sexual offenses are not limited to prostitution. Although some terrorist organizations may have theoretical objections to its consumption, pornography carries tremendous financial potential. Profiting from pornography would mirror other underground enterprises already used by some terrorist organizations, such as narcotics

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<sup>900</sup> “Human Trafficking”, U.S. Department of State, accessed November 22, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/policy-issues/human-trafficking/>.

<sup>901</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2018* (Vienna: United Nations, 2018), [https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2018/GLOTIP\\_2018\\_BOOK\\_web\\_small.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2018/GLOTIP_2018_BOOK_web_small.pdf).

<sup>902</sup> Steward Harrison Oppong, “Human Trafficking through Organized Crime”, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 2, (October 2012): 37–43.

<sup>903</sup> Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, *Identifying and Exploring the Nexus between Human Trafficking, Terrorism, and Terrorism Financing*.

<sup>904</sup> Nikita Malik, “Trafficking Terror”, 46–47.

<sup>905</sup> DiGiacomo, “Prostitution as a Possible Funding Mechanism for Terrorism”, 22, 39.

<sup>906</sup> Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, *Identifying and Exploring the Nexus between Human Trafficking, Terrorism, and Terrorism Financing*.



trafficking<sup>907</sup>, counterfeiting and pirating, and extortion and kidnaping<sup>908</sup>. Revenues from the pornography industry are notoriously difficult to estimate, in part because some of the largest producers are privately held companies which do not release their financial information. However, it has been estimated that the pornography industry generates tens of billions of U.S. dollars annually in the United States alone<sup>909</sup>. To the author's knowledge, no open-source data yet link terrorist organizations to the sale or distribution of pornography, but with such high economic stakes, it seems likely that terrorist organizations may attempt to branch into this industry, if they have not already. Pornography can be a legitimate business venture, but it can also be used in concert with other sexual offenses, such as human trafficking. Individuals who are trafficked for prostitution could be trafficked similarly to create sellable pornographic content, making pornography an additive source of income. Children may be especially vulnerable for pornographic exploitation, because child pornography caters to a niche demographic with no legal business competition. Further, some terrorist organizations may not even have theoretical objections to such content, as demonstrated by ISIL posting recommendations condoning the rape of prepubescent captives via Twitter<sup>910</sup>. Terrorist organizations have already demonstrated a willingness to compromise or morph their own ideological beliefs for profit (such as the Taliban's trade in opium and heroin<sup>911</sup>), so it would be unreasonable to rule out the possibility of involvement in the sale and distribution of pornography. Further, many terrorist organizations have demonstrated a keen use of the internet for propaganda and financing<sup>912</sup>, so they have the technical capacity to engage in

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<sup>907</sup> Colin P. Clarke, "Drugs & Thugs: Funding Terrorism through Narcotics Trafficking", *Journal of Strategic Security* 9, (Fall 2016): 1–15.

<sup>908</sup> Michael Freeman, "The Sources of Terrorist Financing: Theory and Typology", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, (2011): 461–475.

<sup>909</sup> Ross Benes, "Porn Could Have a Bigger Economic Influence on the US than Netflix", *YahooFinance*, June 20, 2018, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/porn-could-bigger-economic-influence-121524565.html>.

<sup>910</sup> Callimachi, "ISIS Enshrines a Theology of Rape".

<sup>911</sup> David Mansfield, "Denying Revenue or Wasting Money? Assessing the Impact of the Air Campaign Against 'Drugs Labs' in Afghanistan", London: London School of Economics and Political Science, April 2019, 6–8. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/united-states/Assets/Documents/mansfield-april-update.pdf>.

<sup>912</sup> Michael Jacobson, "Terrorist Financing and the Internet", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, (2010): 353–363.

the trade of internet pornography. Profit from pornography need not be limited to sales. Documentation of sexually explicit content (either consensual or nonconsensual), such as videos, can be leveraged for blackmail or extortion, a term called “sextortion”<sup>913</sup>. For instance, a terrorist could create or otherwise obtain (such as through hacking) a sexually explicit video of an individual and threaten to distribute it online if he does not receive a monetary payment. The use of sexploitation for profit is growing among individual and organized criminals<sup>914</sup>, and is a relatively gainful enterprise. Because of the ease of production and distribution, and the potential profitability, it will be prudent for scientists and security professionals to monitor the use of pornography among other sexual offenses for fundraising by terrorists in the future.

## Conclusion and Future Directions

There can be no doubt that committing sexual offenses has the potential to advance the strategic interests of terrorist organizations. Sexual offenses may be implemented to spread terror alongside other forms of aggression and violence. Terrorists may also use sexual offenses to recruit new members and finance their operations. It is becoming ever apparent that terrorists have the potential to become among the most widespread and organized perpetrators of sexual offenses. Because sexual offenses can cause grave harm to victims, as well as great benefits to terrorists, policy makers and security officials will need to continue global efforts to combat sexual offending in all forms. In order for preventative policies to be enacted and executed, officials must be armed with valid and reliable empirical data. Policies are only as effective as the research upon which they are built. Similarly, tactics and procedures to enact policies should be informed and improved by empirical research. As such, the burden falls to scientists to continue to collect new data, and synthesize existing data on the topics of sexual offending and terrorism, and to package and publish

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<sup>913</sup> Roberta Liggett O’Malley and Karen M. Holt, “Cyber Sextortion: An Exploratory Analysis of Different Perpetrators Engaging in a Similar Crime”, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* online first, (2020): 1–26, <https://doi-org.huariu.kl.oakland.edu/10.1177/0886260520909186>.

<sup>914</sup> Roberta Liggett, “Exploring Online Sextortion”, *Family & Intimate Partner Violent Quarterly* 11, (2019): 45–56.

these results into workable, consumable scientific theories that can influence tangible efforts to prevent these violations of human rights.

The role of the internet as a medium for criminal and terrorist activities bears particular attention with regard to sexual offending. Internet platforms allow terrorists to efficiently and quickly propagate news and threats of sexual crimes in order to intimate adversaries. Such broadcasting can also be an effective means of reaching and radicalizing new recruits to their causes, especially when sexual opportunities are being advertised as a reward to young men for joining. The internet has also created a new marketplace where both real and cryptocurrency can be easily collected in payment for sexual offenses, such as the purchase of persons. Therefore, researchers investigating terrorism and media<sup>915</sup> will need to consider sexual offending as a major terrorist activity that is easily facilitated by the use of information technologies such as the internet.

Although the present analysis has focused primarily on the macroscopic level of sexual offending by terrorist organizations, it is important to recognize that such organizations are made up of individual terrorists. Studying terrorist organizations is complementary to studying predictors of individual perpetration of sexual offenses, by terrorists and non-terrorists alike. Just as specific risk factors for joining terrorist organizations are being investigated<sup>916, 917</sup>, so too must scientists examine how these factors may interact with the perpetration of sexual offenses. One such important research question is the extent to which men with a history or propensity for sexual offending may or may not be particularly susceptible to radicalization or joining terrorist organizations. This question intersects with the larger body of research on variables that predict sexual offending in general<sup>918</sup>. Although there have been many programs that have reduced sexual

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<sup>915</sup> Maura Conway, "Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Progressing Research", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, (2017): 77–98.

<sup>916</sup> Arie W. Kruglanski and Shira Fishman, "Terrorism between Syndrome and Tool", *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 15, (2006): 45–48.

<sup>917</sup> Randy Borum, "Assessing Risk for Terrorism Involvement", *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* 2, (2015): 63–87.

<sup>918</sup> Martin L. Lalumière et al., *The Causes of Rape*.

offending, it remains disturbingly recurrent, thus suggesting that efforts to reduce sexual offending are based on an inadequate understanding of the component phenomena. Research on sexual offending must integrate variables at every level of analysis of proximate causes (including individual differences, groups, and larger social structures<sup>919, 920</sup>) as well as ultimate causes (derived from Tinbergen's [1963] famous four questions<sup>921</sup>). To prevent sexual offending by individual terrorists and organizations, a comprehensive scientific theory is needed. Such a theory must coalesce research on individual differences (e.g., genetics, neurological function and structure, psychological mechanisms), social and cultural mechanisms (e.g., situations likely to produce sexual offenses, group pressure, cultural expectations of permissible sexual activity), and explanations about human evolved psychology (e.g., men's disposition towards aggression, rape as an adaptation), as well as collect new data on these variables in order to understand sexual offending. Only once this scientific theory is adequately supported by empirical data will efforts to combat sexual offending have acceptably high efficacy. Doing so will be an enormous undertaking requiring unprecedented interdisciplinary collaboration, but because the consequences so high, this effort is more than justifiable, it is obligatory.

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<sup>919</sup> Willem Doise and Joaquim Pires Valentin, "Levels of Analysis in Social Psychology", in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, ed. James D. Wright (Oxford: Elsevier, 2015), 899–903. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.24032-4>.

<sup>920</sup> Neil M. Malamuth and Eldad Z. Malamuth, "Integrating Multiple Levels of Scientific Analysis and the Confluence Model of Sexual Coercers". *Jurimetrics* 39, (1999): 157–179.

<sup>921</sup> Niko Tinbergen, "On Aims and Methods of Ethology", *Zeitschrift für Tierpsychologie* 20, (1963): 410–433.