

Eyewitness Accounts from Recent Defectors from Islamic State: Why They Joined, What They Saw, Why They Quit

by Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla

Abstract

This Research Note reports on preliminary results of the Islamic State Interviews Project, based here on a sample of thirteen Syrian IS defectors who spoke on life inside the “Islamic State”(IS). A fuller and more systematic account will be published in early 2016 in book form. According to what we learned, all IS cadres undergo Shariah training in which they are imbued with a Takfiri ideology that allows them to deem all others, including Muslims, who disagree with IS’ extreme ideology, as apostates who should be killed. Despite this indoctrination, all of our informants (all Syrians) experienced their Shariah trainers as a positive influence since they allowed them to deepen their own religious understanding. In this sense, these disengaged defectors remained radicalized “true believers”. Following compulsory military training courses on weapons, explosives and physical fitness, they were sent to the front. Syrians who join IS are rewarded with salaried jobs which for young men translates into the ability to marry and for young women the money allows them to save their families from literal starvation. Foreign fighters receive additional rewards: wives, sexual slaves, and sometimes homes and cars. Daily life is punctuated by brutal practices – including floggings, torture and beheadings. Defections were the result of exposure to extreme brutality, disgust over the slave trade, observations of deep hypocrisy—a total mismatch between the words and deeds of IS. Charges of corruption and complaints about battlefield decisions that produced unnecessary deaths in their own ranks were also causes of disillusionment . Our informants all had come to hate IS and warn others not to join what they gradually came to see as a totally disappointing, ruthless and un-Islamic organization.

Introduction

The Islamic State (IS) is the most powerful, ruthless, horrific and well-funded terrorist group in recent history. Not only has IS managed to take and control a significant swathe of territory, it has become a de-facto state. Since their 2014 claim of establishing a Caliphate, IS has also unleashed an unprecedented and prolific social media recruiting drive that has enabled them to attract up to 30,000 foreign fighters from more than one hundred countries. A steady stream of fighters continues to enter Syria and Iraq on a daily basis - with some estimates placing their number at over one thousand new recruits per month.[1] In addition, IS has created a “brand” that has been exported to over twenty hotspots around the globe. As IS has arisen - seemingly out of nowhere - to become a powerful foe, the West has struggled to comprehend and understand how to effectively counter it.

While a political solution in the war-torn area of Syria and Iraq is a necessary precondition to the defeat of IS, discrediting the group’s ideology is also essential. Defectors from IS, who alongside the refugees pour out of IS-controlled territory, are among the most powerful first-hand voices to speak out against the group. Indeed, disillusioned cadres of those who can speak from experience and tell their authentic stories about life inside IS may be *the* most influential tool for preventing and dissuading others from joining IS.

This Research Note, based on preliminary findings of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism’s *IS Defectors Interview Project*, reports on findings from thirteen interviews with actual IS defectors currently hiding in Turkey. It throws light, in their own words on their experiences inside IS—including their motivations for joining; their ideological indoctrination, their weapons and military training,

battleground experiences, gender (mis-)treatment, the social everyday life in IS-controlled territory, experiences with slavery and other forms of humiliation and cruelty. The interviews also highlight the factors that ultimately led to disillusionment and defections. These first-hand accounts offer a harrowing ‘inside account’ of how IS actually operates.

ISIS – A Brief Background

The border between Turkey and Syria, winding along Turkey’s southern flank, stretches out over five hundred fifty miles of contiguous territory [2]. On the Turkish side lies the land of Sanliurfa, sharing over one hundred thirty nine miles of border with Syria, one of the oldest settlements in the world, its history going back some 11,000 years. The largest province of southeastern Anatolia and the ninth largest in Turkey, its population numbers some two million people. Yet most important today is that it also shares what has, and continues to be, a highly porous border with Syria to the south—one that has allowed fighters against Bassar Assad’s regime—ranging from the Free Syrian Army, (al-Jaysh -Hurr, FSA), Jabhat al-Nusra (also known as al-Nusra Front, JN), Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and, in recent years, IS cadres, to move freely across it. Indeed “Urfa” (short for: Sanliurfa) has often been referenced by IS cadres as a rest and relaxation point from the battles in Syria and Iraq, as well as a meeting place inside Turkey, for arriving foreign fighters before passing over the border into Syria. This Research Note is a report on our preliminary findings from interviews with former fighters who moved in the opposite direction—actual IS defectors. Yet before we focus on them, here is some necessary background on IS.

The Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (IS) is formerly known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and is also known in Arabic as *ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī ‘l-Irāq wa-sh-Shām*, (i.e. Da’ish or Daesh). IS forces its subjects, i.e. the people under its control, to refer to it as *ad-Dawlah* (the State) and severely punishes people who uses other names, including Daesh or IS. IS arose as a proto-state during the Sunni rebel uprisings in Syria in 2013 but originates in Iraq, building on the legacy of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who, until his death in 2006, was al-Qaida’s emir in Iraq.

ISIS is led by and composed mainly of Arabs from Iraq and Syria, although it has also attracted 25 – 30,000 foreign fighters from around the globe. IS currently controls territory in both Syria and Iraq, about the size of the UK, area that until recently was occupied by up to ten million people. IS controls the Iraqi city of Mosul in Northern Iraq and is headquartered in Raqqa, Syria. Foreign intelligence estimates of the number of fighters in IS vary greatly, ranging from thirty-five thousand to seventy thousand. Fuad Hussein, the chief of staff for Kurdish President Barzani, argues that IS has at least two hundred thousand fighters, citing their ability to rapidly mobilize Arab young men inside their territory into a large field army [3]. Indeed our interviews tend to confirm such a high number.

ISIS claimed a worldwide caliphate on June 29, 2014 with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its caliph. With a highly motivated and ruthless fighting force of tens of thousands, IS follows an apocalyptic vision of the future—its ideologues proclaim that the “end times” are near, and that its fighters are about to be engaged in a final cosmic battle to bring about a new world order. Many of the cadres are willing to die for the cause, believing that becoming Islamic ‘martyrs’ secures them a place in paradise.

Al-Qaeda (central) and Jabhat al-Nusra (the local branch in Syria of al Qaida) both rejected IS’s declaration of a caliphate and heavy fighting between the two factions continues to the present. While Jabhat al-Nusra is one of the leading forces among the Sunni rebels fighting against the Assad regime in Syria, IS has broader aims—to control territory in Syria, attract fighters from around the world, consolidate the self-proclaimed Islamic State and then to launch a full invasion of Iraq and to expand from there. While IS claims to represent

true Islam, its cadres are in fact known for their ideologically twisted interpretation of Islam and ruthless treatment of fellow Muslims as well as subjugation of Christians and Yazidis.

The IS 'caliphate' has captured the imagination of many Muslims worldwide, resulting in a steady flow of some thousand foreign fighters streaming into Syria and Iraq each month from all around the globe, including five thousand or more foreign fighters coming from Muslim diasporas in Western Europe.[4] Women have also gone to join IS—becoming brides of IS fighters, recruitment agents and even Shariah enforcers in the form of morality police (*hisbah*).

ISIS is one of the most well-funded terrorist organization to date and relies on a steady stream of income from illicit trafficking in oil, bank theft, war booty, extortion and “tax collection” from the people inside its borders; kidnapping victims for ransom, female slave trade and from trafficking in stolen antiquities.[5]

As our interviews revealed, defections from IS territory and even from IS itself are not allowed. Those who escape must do so surreptitiously, risking their own lives and often also those of family members they leave behind. Fleeing fighters, and sometimes even ordinary citizens, caught while trying to escape the Islamic State are generally not subjected to a court proceeding. Instead they are brutally executed on the spot. For instance, one informant (Abu Nasir – not his real name) told us, “A European girl wanted to escape. Someone tried to help her to go back to Urfa [Sanliurfa, Turkey], to escape. But they caught him and killed him right there and took the girl back”. Stories of defectors who did not make it across the border to Turkey and were beheaded on the spot were common in the accounts of those we interviewed.

Interview Protocols and Sample Description (n = 13)

This Research Note is based on our first sampling of defectors who made it across the border. Our interlocutors were all Syrians—twelve men and one woman, ranging in age from fourteen to forty-five. They were all Arabs. Three originated from Tell Abyad, four Raqqa, two from Aleppo, and one each from Tishrin, al-Hasakah, el-Aziziye, and Deir ez-Zor. The men had all undergone Shariah indoctrination and military training with IS and had sworn an oath of allegiance (*bay'ah*) to IS before becoming fighters for the Islamic State. They spent between six and eighteen months as IS fighters and had defected within one year before the interview. Three had been in leadership positions as commanders, one of them as Chief of Security at a base in Raqqa and one of them was the Emir of a town under the control of ISIS before his defection. The rest were ordinary fighters, a prison guard, and the minor, a fourteen year-old child had been groomed to become a suicide bomber.

All of our subjects are now living in the Sanliurfa region of Turkey and all are in hiding, fearing the long arm of IS. They were all married except for the minor, and all of them except for the youngest adult (who had only married the week before the interview) had one or more young children. Our female informant was a mother and was married to a defected IS fighter. She was considered by IS as a member by virtue of her marriage to a fighter. Three of the males were college-educated, one was a law student in his last year, another an Arabic language teacher and the third an Arabic literature teacher. Three were high school graduates. The other adults we interviewed had not finished high school and one even had dropped out of primary school. They were farmers and small business owners. The minor had his middle school education interrupted by the conflict in Syria.

The interviews took place in the autumn of 2015 and are part of an ongoing effort by the researchers to interview IS defectors. They were carried out anonymously, with the first six interviews taking place with only the 'fixer' (i.e. the individual who arranged the interviews) being aware of the true identities of those we

interviewed. Some of them knew the 'fixer' personally because he had been involved in their being smuggled across the border. For these interviews, the 'fixer' also insisted on sending along his own interpreter, known only to himself and the former cadres, to ensure that the interviews and the identities of those interviewed would not be leaked to IS intelligence and also to ensure his life from the hands of IS.

In the second group of seven interviews, we made use of one of the IS defectors as our fixer and interpreter, reducing the number of people involved and increasing anonymity and security for our informants. This change in research protocol was deemed necessary and took place after an active IS cadre—claiming also to be an IS defector—crossed into Turkey and won the trust of two journalist/activists (Ibrahim Abdul Qader and Fares Hamadi) [6] from the group *Raqqā is Silently Being Slaughtered*. Gaining access to their apartment, he murdered and beheaded them in the city of Sanliurfa.

Naturally, everyone who heard about this was terrified by this turn of events. At that point, our subjects were reluctant to participate, but were persuaded to do so after we made improvements in our security protocols to protect their identities. We began bringing them to interview locations alone rather than in groups—even in those cases where they knew each other. We changed the interview locations frequently, in order to protect them once we became aware that even with them living in Turkey, reprisals could occur.

We did not at any point inquire for names, nor record personal details of our interlocutors, in order to keep the interviews truly anonymous. To protect those we interviewed, we asked only about the violent acts of others, but not their own, so as not to involve them in incriminating themselves and to also avoid putting ourselves in a position of responsibility to report a criminal activity. The first six informants agreed to audio and written recording only. The second seven agreed to video recordings, but with their faces covered, and with the understanding that we would alter their voices before making any of these interviews public.

Our informants agreed to cooperate in order to share with the world how IS recruits and operates. They also volunteered to provide brief statements at the end of their interviews, directly addressing anyone considering joining IS in the hope that these would serve in preventing and dissuading others—including foreigners—from joining IS.

Complicating the sampling was the fact that the subjects feared IS intelligence and presence inside Turkey and reprisals from the group against themselves or their family members who were with them, or relatives back in Syria being killed as a result of their defections and participation in our interviews. They also feared Bassar Assad's intelligence and the Syrian regime's presence inside Turkey and possible similar reprisals. Given that there are over four hundred thousand Syrian refugees in Sanliurfa alone and that among them are IS and Syrian regime intelligence members collecting information about these people, alongside the recent murders of the two journalist/activists carried out by IS, these fears are not unfounded.[7]

Lastly they feared prosecution in Turkey for having been part of a terrorist group and were thus reticent to admit to any crimes they had committed while inside IS. Their fears of prosecution by Turkish authorities were heightened in October 2015, just after Ankara suffered a suicide attack (where 132 people died) attributed by Turkish authorities in part to IS. Needless to say, their fears of IS reprisals were greatly heightened by the recent double murders in Urfa, carried out by a claimed IS defector.

In this Research Note, we group some of the statements from the thirteen former IS fighters who granted us interviews in a thematic way under various headings. A more complete account will be provided in the form of a book to be published in early 2016.

ISIS Governance Tactics

A tactic applied by IS, as underscored by our informants, is to quickly gain control of all the economic and social infrastructures in an area—making it difficult to resist—thereby forcing the inhabitants to join in order to survive, even to literally obtain food. IS cadres are also extremely ruthless, immediately demanding that the local population bend to their rules.

“When Daesh took over they said, ‘You are either with us or not. They gave no food, no jobs except to people who joined them, so the people got so hungry. Daesh also began recruiting twelve to seventeen-year-old to become their soldiers. They provided well for them so they can feed their families. The [ISIS] shaikhs also pulled the youth in. When IS came to Raqqa, all the people suddenly don’t have work. Some join immediately for free food.” (Abu Walid).

Takfiri Practices

ISIS cadres claim to be following an authentic early version of Islam—following an extremist interpretation of Wahhabi and Salafi practices, observing what they claim were the original customs followed by the Prophet and his companions. IS cadres engage in *takfiri* (excommunication) practices—that is, they claim the right to label other Muslims, to whom they object, “unbelievers” and exterminate all those who do not adhere to their own extremist ideology. According to our informants, anyone who does not follow their extremist ideology is labeled *murtad* (a Muslim renegade), infidel, or *kafir* (unbelievers)—categories of people that, according to IS, can be killed with impunity.

One of our informants recalls that when IS moved into Raqqa, the local population were told that they needed to follow the “true Islam.” “In November 2013, when IS took Raqqa,” our informant recalls, “they told us, ‘You are not Muslim, you are *kafir* (an unbeliever/rejecter of Islam). You are infidels,” (Abu Walid). As our informants told us, those who have sinned according to IS dogma and agree to live under IS rule are required to go through a process of *tawbah* (repentance), in which they openly have to declare sorrow over past sins and pledge never to repeat them. *Tawbah* takes place in front of a Shariah judge and is to be followed by announcing one’s allegiance to the Caliph. By this process the label of “kafir” can be shed and the person then can live under the rule of IS as a “true Muslim” IS-style.

Morality Rules

Infractions with any hint of sexual impropriety are harshly punished under IS rule. One informant told us: “A man in a small village went to visit his neighbor. He knocked on the door of a woman whose husband was not there. He was caught waiting inside the front yard of the home [inside the outer gate of the yard] when the husband was absent, so he was arrested. He was lashed forty times.” The lashing was so harsh that, “he could not use the toilet and had to stay in bed for twenty days. Afterwards he was forced to take the Shariah course for three weeks. The woman inside the house was lashed forty times as well because she opened the door to the yard for him” (Abu Walid).

Intelligence Gathering and Intimidation Practices

The means by which IS operates include the sending of spies and paying local informants before taking over territory, and then ruthlessly taking control, ruling by violent intimidation techniques—a page taken directly from the standard operating procedures of Saddam Hussein’s police state. This is a result of former

Iraqi Baathists intelligence officers having joined and lent their support and expertise to IS. Already before its establishment as a rogue state, IS had developed a very strong intelligence apparatus. It has now been revealed by Christopher Reuter in documents captured from an Iraqi national spy chief, Haji Bakr, that the security arm of IS was carefully organized, relying upon former Baathist experience with IS organized by and using the same secret intelligence gathering techniques as previously used by the Sadaam Hussein's regime to instill fear in the targeted local populations.

According to documents captured at Haji Bakr's residence, IS' security division employed cadres sent out in advance of invasions to recruit local informants in order to collect and immediately apply intelligence to gain control the moment it decides to advance into new territory. This process includes: identifying the powerful families and individuals in a given area, finding their sources of income, identifying rebel brigades and their leaders by name, and learning about their Shariah violations so that on the basis of these they can be blackmailed if necessary.[8] Our informants provided many examples of how this security apparatus worked.

One informant, for example, explained how this IS strategy eased their entry into Raqqa: "When Daesh came to Raqqa, Jaysh al-Hur was in power, but Daesh took over for many reasons. First, Daesh sent small groups to establish themselves inside the city. Secondly, they sent suicide bombers of young boys, especially to the gates where Jaysh al-Hur had guards. This was very effective, as everyone feared the suicide bombers and it was very difficult to distinguish if an approaching child was a suicide bomber or not. Being unwilling to shoot a possibly innocent child, the sentries would run away and Daesh could enter. Lastly, Jaysh al-Hur began to realize it was too late to fight against Daesh—because they had established themselves by using cells already inside the city who began to explode things. So Jaysh al-Hur fighters left with hardly any fighting" (Abu Walid).

Talking about his personal experience, he recalled, "When they came to Raqqa they came to me and asked, 'Why you don't come with us? We work together to make an Islamic government. Why you don't you help us?' I answered, 'Inshallah [God willing] after some time,' but he won't hear no. I knew if I said no, they will kill me, so instead I said, 'Inshallah.' Someone from IS comes and takes many photos of me. He writes reports of where I go and stay. They do this every one to three months" (Abu Walid).

Anyone can be subjected to mistreatment under IS. Indeed, the informants stated that if a fighter didn't like a local person they could make a false accusation and order the person into Shariah court, or have them immediately punished, or even killed.

Torture

Having taken another page from Saddam Hussein's manual of techniques of governance, torture is also a central part of the IS repertoire. One informant who had been part of Jabat al-Nusrah but who was hiding that fact recalls being put under interrogation when IS came to his region. "[They] took me by hand in iron cuffs, to torture me. They spread my arms wide and hung me by my forearms and wrists, held by the iron cuffs, from a steel bar. [i.e. he was hung there with his full body weight pulling down on him]. They left me there for around two hours. I had so much pain, and started to cry many times from the pain in my hands and my body. I cried and shouted. They did this again the next day and I cried and shouted again throughout the day and night" (Abu Walid). [This went on for thirteen days.]

Beheadings, crucifixions, torture and executions are such a common occurrence and well publicized in IS territory that everyone knows that life under IS is cheap and that not complying with their rules or wishes can bring a swift, harsh and dire result. Abu Walid recalled that during one of the days of being held and

tortured, “I thought they want to cut my head, because the soldier who cuts throats came toward me. Then, I understood that I will die.” He continued, “The last day they took me again. This time they blindfolded me. They told me, ‘You know where we take you now.’ I answered, ‘No I don’t know!’ They said, ‘Now we take you out to kill you.’” Abu Walid was not killed however but intimidated into handing over his car, rifle and information they wanted from him. He was also coerced into joining IS’ Shariah training class and making his oaths of allegiance to IS.

Induction into IS

The process by which one is inducted into IS varies. However, according to our informants, everyone who joins is required to take a training course in Shariah law. These courses are organized for groups as large as fifty people, bringing together individuals with shared cultures and language (i.e. Syrians go to a different one than Westerners for instance). The Shariah courses vary in content and length, depending on the background and experience of students. Youth, for example, take a short ten-day course. Former fighters take a fifteen-day course. From there, the prospective new IS members are put into military training which varies in length from two to four weeks, and is given in different languages depending on the composition of the group. Upon finishing each training session, the newcomers are invited (in fact heavily pressured) to make *bay’ahs* to IS.

Former Fighters

According to our informants, no one is forced to join IS as armed fighters—membership is voluntary. However, young men are heavily coerced by the circumstances they find themselves in. For instance, those who fought in militias other than IS, despite having a common enemy in the Assad regime, are immediately executed unless they find a way to show repentance. The few that are spared are invited to join the Islamic State but have to demonstrate loyalty and agree to renounce all past ties and swear their repentance for former “misdeeds”. This is done before a Shariah court referred to as *tawbah* after which they are issued a formal, written certificate of repentance.

One informant recalls being caught by IS and interrogated. They did not immediately realize he had been in Jabat al-Nusrah. He stated, “After a few days [following interrogation], they sent again for me [inside the prison] and asked, ‘Why you don’t come join *ad-Dawlah* [the State] with us and come for our training?’ I agreed because I know they will kill me if I don’t”. This young man, Abu Walid, took their Shariah course but did at first not enroll for military training. Instead he protested. “I have my family responsibilities, but I knew that eventually, if I didn’t work with them they would put me in a prison in Raqqa. I was afraid. After two months of them inviting me, I decided to escape. I know the area very well, so I took a motorcycle and came across the border to Turkey.”

Men coming from other militias were either killed or forced to go through a process of “forgiveness” or “repentance” in order to be eligible to join IS. One of them told us, “I was fighting for the Free Syrian Army before IS captured Tell Abyad [the Syrian town just across from the Turkish border city, Akçakale]. When they captured Tell Abyad, I fled to Turkey. [Later], I had people to talk to them and asked forgiveness so that I could go back to my village and family. They said they would forgive on the condition that I fight for them. When I went back, they detained me at the border, blindfolded my eyes and brought me before the Shariah judge for my trial, only then uncovering my eyes. The judge concluded, ‘You helped the infidels and because of this you are considered infidel as well. Now, ask forgiveness from Allah and promise us that you will never draw a weapon to the Muslims and pledge allegiance to the Caliph al-Baghdadi so that we can forgive you. Also, you have to help us whenever we need your assistance.’ I agreed and I was freed. However, this did not

end there. They started to ask me to join the IS ideology classes [Shariah training]. I was forced to attend those classes for three months. This is their ideological preparation stage” (Abu Jamal).

Motivations and the Positive Benefits for Those Joining IS

Control of Resources

Because IS takes control of everything in a community they can be very good at incentivizing membership—particularly with young men who hope to be married. As one informant stated, “The IS guys speak with the youth about what they are doing to build an Islamic state. They tell them, ‘If you want to work we can help you and give you money. You can be married. We are the true Islam. We guarantee you. We are brothers, no problem.’ Like this they win trust and make many people to join them. They join for a loaf of bread.” Because of these factors, it was very easy for IS to recruit the youth inside Raqqa” (Abu Walid).

“If you do not fight for IS, you die from hunger as they would not feed or support you, or let you work. So, eventually, you either fight for them or die,” one informant stated. “I could stand six months before I was out of money and had to join them. If you fight for them, they pay two hundred US dollars per month, and also supply all your needs. So, you do not need to spend any money. Two hundred dollars is a lot more than a high-ranking judge can make in Syria today and equals to over sixty thousand Syrian pounds. When I joined, they told me I need to go to fight in Ramadi for a year and then I will be free to go anywhere in the Caliphate. They also give you a free house, furniture, all your needs in a house—even the money to purchase slave girls” (Abu Jamal).

Cash Rewards

According to our informants, IS is flushed with cash. One defector recalls one of the cadres involved in the oil sales tired of counting cash. He decided to weigh it instead to determine how much money he had taken in. Another showed us pictures on his phone of IS cadres lying around with bundles of cash strewn about. Cash payments were made as a reward to IS fighters for good “work”.

Learning About One’s Religion

Most of the IS defectors expressed gratitude for what they had learned in their Shariah training class—for finally learning more about Islam, after having been largely denied religious education under the Assad regime. “They taught us how to pray and taught us our religion. In Syria, the Sunni part of the country was not taught religion properly. We felt a vacuum filled. We hadn’t learned in school our real history and religion. Daesh filled an emptiness in us. We felt joy from this and anger at Assad” (Abu Walid). He added, “Many people under Assad don’t know how to pray properly. The people are very grateful to learn how to pray correctly.”

Embracing an Islamic Life

Our informants reminded us that as Sunni Arabs they were at first very pleased to be able to embrace a strict version of Islam. While none of them, looking back at their experience under IS, endorsed the violent enforcement techniques of IS, many expressed joy in embracing a strict Islamic course under IS. The minor in our sample said that he was so deeply brainwashed by the IS claims to be in possession of the “true Islam”

that it took him a year after escaping to fully realize that they were misguided. He stated that he was first gratified when “They taught us how to pray, and how to perform zakat. They also stopped people from drinking and using drugs. That was all good.” He went on saying, “I liked the prayer and the fasting and the *zakat* [alms-giving] and the good things, that they didn’t let people drink, or take drugs or commit adultery and do blasphemous things. That made the country better. There were fewer people stealing” (Abu Shujaa).

Attaining Paradise

ISIS promotes the concept of sacrificing oneself and others in suicide missions as a form of “martyrdom” that they claim wins them all the rewards of Paradise. While Islam teaches the concept of forgiveness, belief alone does not guarantee salvation in the afterlife and Islam also promotes the concept of a horrific hell and damnation for anyone whose sins outweigh his or her good deeds on the Day of Judgment. Against this background, anyone who has sinned badly may be attracted to carrying out a “martyrdom” mission in order to gain eternal rewards. Our informants claim that the Shariah trainers are very good at selling the idea of “martyrdom” and that foreign fighters in particular often join IS to clean their slates. “Some people join IS in order to become ‘martyrs’ so that their past sins are forgiven. I spoke to one sheikh. He told me, ‘I am from Saudi Arabia. I was very rich and I had committed most of the sins. I thought that I had to do something big to be forgiven, so I left everything behind to fight here to cleanse my soul.’”

Fear of Worse Alternatives

A feeling of religious and cultural honor and a fear of life under the Assad regime as a worse alternative was also cited as an inducement to join by some of those we interviewed. Fearing that other groups would rape their women if they entered their territory, some of the strict IS practices concerning women were comforting at some level. As one informant answered our question, regarding why he joined IS? “They go talking to the people asking them, ‘How come you are living under Shia rule? This is degradation to live under the Shia.’ They taught us, ‘You consider yourselves as Muslims, but you do not practice and live it, so you are not Muslims. They taught us that all the others are *murtads* [infidels]. It was always, ‘You are either with us or not’, no grey areas. If you are not with them you cannot do business. They tell the guys, ‘If Assad’s army comes and you do not fight with us, they will take your car and rape your women. They will kill the men and rape your women.’ It’s true their soldiers did rape women so everyone is afraid and believes them. An older guy told us, Bassar’s soldiers came to a home, and told the father, ‘Send your daughter with us.’ Then they heard a gunshot. The father killed his own daughter, so they cannot rape her. Everyone knows that Bassar’s soldiers will rape anyone they find” (Abu Walid).

Process of Indoctrination by Charismatic Trainers

The Shariah training that IS provides serves to indoctrinate future cadres. Highly charismatic and knowledgeable IS teachers from Saudi Arabia and Jordan who are well trained in Islamic law, run the courses. Everyone in our sample reported that the trainers were kind, gentle, charismatic and very convincing. Many stated that when they had doubts they always remembered what they had been taught in the Shariah class and how much they liked their trainer; that kept them going—despite serious doubts. Likewise many consulted their former trainers to discuss issues arising from contradictions between what IS said and IS did.

“ISIS preachers are well-educated and impressive. They persuaded me to be a ‘martyr’ in just three gatherings which lasted two hours each,” one informant stated (Abu Jamal – not his real name). It would appear that

in terms of preparations for IS membership, the teachers inducted new IS cadres in ways similar to modern criminal gangs or as child soldiers are incorporated into paramilitary groups. One of those interviewed said that “At the third class, I declared that I was ready to be a suicide bomber as I was really affected by the preaching of the teacher, so that you can understand how well they choose their teachers. There were three hundred students like me. The classes lasted two hours per day. They usually lectured about the political problems Muslims are facing around the world and about how Muslims were assimilated and how their lands and wealth was imperialized. They spoke about how Bassar’s soldiers were raping our sisters and [that] we should be sending birth control pills to our sisters if we chose not to fight Bassar and others. Also of course they included ideological education, (Abu Jamal).

The first thing the Shariah instructors teach in their courses looks similar to first steps in cult practices – emphasizing the rule of “*hear and obey*”. They teach that under any circumstances, without any questioning, IS members must “hear and obey”. This is a must—members are obliged to obey and carry out the orders of all IS sheiks and emirs. This part of the process is presented as essential in ideology and the indoctrination process of “hearing and obeying” is presented as practicing holiness and keeping the order of Islam. Likewise failing to do so is taught to be threatening to authentic spirituality by claiming that not obeying the IS emirs is one of the greatest sins. Of course, added to this teaching are their sharp knives, they use to behead in public anyone who refuses to “hear and obey”.

In content, the IS Shariah training program generally follows the al-Qaida *takfiri* ideologies developed long before IS was created. It relies on the works of Ibn-i Tamiyyah, a thirteenth century scholar who was one of the founders of Salafist Islamic interpretations.[9] According to our informants, the trainers make use of a variety of Tamiyyah’s works, in addition to the book “Kitabu’t-Tevhid” which is presented as the main course book. Titled *The book of the Unity and Unique Oneness of Allah*, it was written by Muhammad-ibn-Abd-al-Wahhab, the eighteenth century Salafist scholar who stood at the cradle of present-day Wahhabism, the Saudi variant of Salafism.

Using these texts, trainers rely on twisted interpretations from the Holy Quran and from more or less well-known Hadiths, thereby making use of the cultural capital of Islam. Invoking in such a way values sacred to all participants, makes it difficult if not downright impossible for those undergoing such training to question what they are being taught by the trainers. The students’ belief in the inviolability of the Holy Quran, coupled with the powerful personalities of the teachers, makes them highly vulnerable to accepting the violent interpretations of Islam without questioning or challenging teachers and texts.

It is worth recalling that most Syrians, even university graduates, were never taught even the very basic features of Islam because the Assad regime controlled the educational systems. Therefore, for many of them, the knowledge they had about Islam before they came under the tutelage of IS was based upon deficient and incomplete narratives. This situation of spiritual emptiness, combined with a hunger to learn more about, and practice “true” Islam considerably eased the task of the IS Sheiks.

ISIS trainers instill in their students the idea that only IS possesses the “true Islam”, with everyone else being an apostate deserving death. “In the ten-day Shariah education course, they teach that all people not in IS are *murtad* [apostates]. All governments who do not support IS are *murtad*. They teach the students how to pray” (Abu Walid).

ISIS ideologues take a decidedly apocalyptic view of the future, teach their cadres that they are engaged in a cosmic battle where normal limits are shed as they are meant to defend and carry out the will of Allah. As one informant tells us, “Once I asked, why we don’t fight against Israel. The sheik told me that we have to first

fight with the hypocrites and pretenders otherwise they will stab us in the back when we fight. He added that the last war will be in Halep Dabiq, once we win over the hypocrites” (Abu Jamal). This references Islamic apocalyptic prophesies of the End Times battle being fought in Dabiq, an area in Syria that IS has been sure to control.[10]

Following the practices of many cults, violent gangs and leaders of child soldiers, IS teachers require their students to carry out a barbaric act of violence against their enemies before graduating to become a fighter. Enemy prisoners are housed near the training sites for that very purpose. As one informant told us, “Graduation only happens when they feel a student is ready. At that point they demand that the student that is going to become a fighter cut off the head of a prisoner—to demonstrate that he is ready” (Abu Jamal).

Military Training, Weapons, & Battle Field Practices

“Everyone who becomes a fighter takes both Shariah and military training. It’s both military and Islamic training” (Abu Walid). These two courses—Shariah and military—are taught separately or combined into one (with the Shariah training happening after nightfall or during breaks in the daytime), depending on practicalities and the need of IS to move cadres forward into the battle space.

Military Training

As with Shariah training, IS cadres are organized and trained in military techniques in groups reflecting members’ nationalities and /or language. The military training can be as short as two weeks or take up to six weeks, depending on momentary needs for combat purposes.

“In military training, they teach them bombing and weapon tactics, fighting like an army and survival training” (Abu Walid). Particularly violence-prone individuals and those with psychopathic traits who take special pleasure in cruelty and infliction of pain are selected from among the trainees to become executioners. Others are chosen for intelligence work; they soon become feared by all the rest. The ‘Cubs of the Caliphate’; child soldiers have their own training camp and include boys as young as ten and eleven years of age. There the child boys receive military training. As many as they can persuade are talked into becoming suicide bombers, tasked with driving explosive-laden vehicles into enemy positions.

Weapons

A typical fighter is, according to our informants, equipped with, “one pistol—a Glock, a Colt, or a Smith and Wesson; one rifle—an M-16, or an AK-47; at least two hand grenades; a backpack with medical supplies, food and water; and at least five hundred bullets” (Abu Walid).

According to Abu Jamal, a former IS commander, “The weapons are coming from everywhere. But mostly we take our weapons from other groups and from the battles we win. We had obtained a lot of Bassar’s army warehouses as well. Bassar left all his weapons, including the tanks, to the PKK and PYD. We also took some of them.”

Some of our informants also claimed that IS receives, unlike any other groups in Syria or Iraq, new weapons arriving in wooden cases with nylon armor covers and slings. Abu Jamal claimed that he had seen unopened AK-47 cases full of brand new rifles, BKC (Bixi) machine guns, a variety of mortars, and even anti-tank and air missiles as IS cadres were unpacking and assembling the shipments, adding he did not know where they originated from.

Battlefield Practices

Local fighters who have families or wives live at home, except when engaged in fighting. They see their families frequently, according to those we talked to. Fighters leave the battlefield and go home every ten days to visit their families, we were told. “During the battle days he follows the orders of the leader. After fighting for ten days approximately he returns home for a week of rest with his family” (Abu Walid).

“The Daesh leaders are foreigners (non Syrian), [while] the soldiers are locals for the most part. There is no difference in how soldiers are treated between locals and foreigners. [But, the] Syrians do not like the foreign commanders” (Walid).

Nevertheless there is much loyalty to each other. “ISIS members support each other to death. The others are not like that” Abu Jamal stated. Likewise the fighters are not afraid of dying and in fact embrace “martyrdom” on the battlefield. As to IS’ military tactics, Abu Jamal told us “The strategy of IS before a battle is watching the group being targeted. “They would kill the top commander in an ambush before they attack in battle, so that the army or the group they are attacking would be without an experienced commander.” Executions are carried out on the battlefield. Unlike other IS operations that are based on Shariah practices, with investigations and with judges passing the final verdict, fighters bypass this. “Because they say they are at war, they do not need a trial—so they execute [their prisoners] instantly without waiting and consulting anyone” (Abu Jamal).

“During the Battle at the Al-Tabqa air base, the top commanders fled with a helicopter at night and afterwards. IS captured and killed almost seven hundred soldiers there. Almost all were killed via beheading,” an informant reported, showing us the videos of the beheadings he had still stored on his phone. “Two hundred fifty of them were taken to the cities to be executed in front of the people to spread fear, the rest were executed on the scene of the battle—during and afterward. The human blood from the executions ran like a river” (Abu Jamal).

ISIS cadres’ reputation for brutal executions, use of suicide bombers and fierce tactics have made many enemies cringe and withdraw in the face of IS fighters. “Thirty IS fighters won over four hundred Free Syrian Army fighters very easily in taking over the border gate across Akçakale,” Abu Jamal told us. Perhaps because there are few if any alternatives, after prison breaks, “Prisoners who were released by IS mostly join the group” (Abu Jamal).

Battlefield Administration of Psychopharmaca

Two of our informants discussed how drugs were used to motivate cadres. The child soldier who had served in a ‘Cubs of the Caliphate’ unit (Abu Shujaa) told us that children would be given drugs before they mounted their bomb-laden vehicles to conduct suicide attacks. Abu Said who had been an IS commander confirmed this.

Abu Said also detailed the battlefield use of a drug that appears to match the description of the amphetamine Captagon.[11] “When we were fighting against nizam in Ras al-Ayn, there were loud sounds of explosions all around me and I was very scared. There was this guy from IS, he looked at me and realized that I was scared. Asked if I was afraid, I said, ‘Yes I am really scared. He gave me a tablet. It was very bitter and brown in color. I swallowed it. In thirty minutes, I became a different man—as if I am a hero. I went into the battle very bravely to the very fronts alone. My friends told me to come back, but instead, I went forward, and said, ‘No, I want to die!’ I became so brave. I did not sleep afterward for three days. It gave me so much power. I felt as if I am indestructible and unbeatable. I went back home on the fourth day without sleeping—after having taken

this tablet. I sat together with my family. Then I laid down for three to four minutes and I felt like I had not slept for years. At that moment, I could not move my arm and could not speak. I realized that it was because of the drug, so I did not take it again. They told me that I would not become addicted if I kept using this drug, but I didn't. Many of the IS members use this drug. There are different varieties of it, some yellowish, some light brown."

Foreign Fighters

ISIS currently attracts about one thousand new foreign fighters per month and already has a foreign fighter force estimated at twenty to thirty thousand—including some five thousand from Western Europe. Many of our informants had contacts with, and knowledge about, these foreign fighters. Abu Jamal, a former regional commander of IS, estimated that there are ten thousand IS fighters in Syria and twenty-five thousand in Iraq, with sixty percent of the fighters consisting of Iraqis and Syrians and the other forty percent being made up of foreign fighters.

The foreign fighters were seen as "true believers" by our informants who witness their dedication since they had given up everything to come and join IS. Abu Jamal recalls meeting one and hearing his story, "Once I took a French IS member to our truck while he was fleeing from the Kobani battle. The French IS fighter called the Arab IS fighters hypocrites and told me that they would not pray. 'They are after money, not jihad,' he said. He told me his story. After he converted to Islam, he flew with his wife and two children, to Istanbul as a tourist. From Istanbul he came to the border where he was instructed to meet his handler. The handler took him to a border village where they passed the border with the assistance of a smuggler. After their arrival and settling in, he was given Shariah courses for two months. His passport and phone were taken and destroyed. There was no Internet—it was not allowed. After Shariah training, he received military training for around a month and became a fighter" (Abu Jamal).

"The foreigners' camp is located at the Tabqa Dam, which is around twenty-five miles away from Raqqa," according to Abu Jamal. "ISIS has the control of this dam. All the foreigners arriving in Syria are transferred to the camp there. Based on the language of the foreigner fighter, IS sends sheikhs to their camp. After the ideological training, the trainees are then sent to military camp training for two months. The military camps training names are al-Hasakah Osama bin Laden Camp, al-Raqqa Zarqawi Camp, al-Raqqa 17th Battalion Camp and, for the boys between eight to seventeen, al-Shabaab Caliph Camp. The boys stay at this camp for three months for indoctrination. They mostly become preachers for IS. However, they also receive military training. In order to graduate from this camp, you have to cut the throat of a prisoner. The IS prisoners are kept in the Tabqa Dam area for this purpose" (Abu Jamal).

Many nationalities are represented among the foreign fighters. "I have seen people from the USA, the UK, Germany, France, Russia, Chechnya, China, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Palestine [limited numbers]), Lebanon, China, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan," Abu Jamal stated. He recalled that they were suspicious of the Russians. "We would consider them as agents because they were blonde, real Russian-blooded people and we would not trust them as they would mostly claim that they had been in the Russian Army and then converted to Islam and retired from their posts and came to fight for IS. They were also mostly military strategists and were making the plans for assaults and battles. They were effective on making strategic military decisions in IS." Some of our informants wondered whether these Russians were plants (i.e. spies or agents), coordinating things with Assad's forces.

Chechens and Kazaks are the battle-hardened fighters and thus form the elite special forces of IS, leading the regular cadres into battle. The two groups do not mix in battle. Many stories were told about Chechens executing prisoners in a very ruthless and brutal manner—seemingly numb to any feelings of horror.

One Serbian foreign fighter was pointed out by some of our informants as a particularly psychopathic executioner and more Serbians were seen as wanting to fulfill that role.

Regarding the Chinese foreign fighters, Abu Jamal recalls, “There is [a] Chinese village of IS fighters who speak fluent Qur’anic Arabic. There are around five hundred of them with their families. They are settled in a big village. I do not know how but they speak very fluent Arabic [*Arabiyah al-fuṣḥā*, according to him, which means, the most eloquent and Qur’anic Arabic language] as they are genuine Chinese people.” When asked if they could be Uyghur Turks, he said, “No, they are genuine Chinese people, I know Uyghurs”.

Each nationality has its particular reputation. Abu Jamal recalls that “the worst of IS are the Saudi fighters. They are very brutal and violent. Once during a campaign, there was a group of one hundred Saudi fighters. An American F-16 bombed them and around fifty died. They called for help, but were told to wait, and not to leave the stronghold. They however abandoned it. When their commander learned it he ordered that ten men be sent back to the IS command center. They were killed immediately as they had not listened to orders. The other forty Saudis, with their commanders, fled and joined al-Nusra.” Saudis and Jordanians tended to be well represented among the Shariah educators and judges. “The first judge of IS is from Saudi Arabia” (Abu Walid).

One informant told us a story that many of the others also referred to, “The foreign fighters are corrupt minded. For instance, one Tunisian guy wanted his two wives to be in bed with him together. His wives took him to court over this. He was sentenced and put in a truck for twenty days and paraded around.”

Many of our informants stated that Westerners who joined were already heavily indoctrinated in Salafi doctrine before arriving to IS. Unlike the Syrians, the Western cadres were, and generally remained throughout their time with IS, “true believers”. “They usually recruit from the West over the Internet,” Abu Jamal told us.

Western foreign fighters are kept separate from the ordinary Syrian fighters and given that they do not have a common language they cannot get to know each other well. However, our informants noted that Western recruits were obviously privileged in many ways above the regular Syrian cadres—often receiving homes, wives, female slaves and cars.

Porous Turkish Border

Turkey’s border with Syria runs as far as the Tigris. That the Turkish government illicitly if not openly supported the rebel movement in Syria is well known. Only recently has Turkey begun to control movement of IS cadres across its southern borders, following pressure from Western powers. Turkey is a member of both NATO and the OSCE and as such, its border forms an outer border of these two organizations. Likewise because of the highly porous boundary for people smuggling between Turkey and the Greek islands as well as between Syria and Turkey, Turkey has become a buffer zone for illegal migration into Europe. And as we saw in the November 13, 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, Turkey has become important for controlling European IS fighters from moving freely back and forth between IS held territory and European capitals.

Along the southern border of Turkey, four cities—Sanliurfa, Gaziantep, Kilis, and Hatay—share this frontier. These towns have deep historical ties with Syria, and there are interactions with a spectrum of radical groups

in Syria, including IS. The remaining border that southeastern Turkey shares with Syria faces down the cities of Mardin, Sirnak, Diyarbakir, and Hakkari. But this stretch is controlled by militants from the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD).

The population of these four cities (i.e. Sanliurfa, Gaziantep, Kilis, and Hatay) is a blend of Kurdish and Arabic elements with local Turkmen populations inherited from the time when the Ottoman Empire ruled the entire region from Istanbul across Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, and along the southern shore of the Mediterranean. Today, many Arabs and Kurds have relatives and family members across the border in Syria, and even today intermarriage across the border is still a common practice. So the historic and ongoing interaction of Arabs and Kurds across this often violent frontier stems not only from activities such as smuggling or illicit trafficking in drugs or refugees, but are also based on family ties, which may also be used to facilitate illegal activities along these routes. Lately, stretches of this border have also become a facilitator for the objectives of IS as well.

The financing that IS enjoys primarily from its sale of oil but also other "goods" means that the group is flush with cash which allows IS to pay smugglers and bribe border guards to gain easy entry into Turkey and to operate from there. "ISIS members have a lot of money, so they can rent a house in Turkey for operational purposes including to collect intelligence and use it for a maximum of ten days and then re-rent it again" (Abu Jamal).

"The smugglers do this for money. It usually costs two hundred US dollars per person to cross, depends on the situation. There is a coffee shop close to the border in Akçakale, anyone who wants to pass the border goes there to meet with the smugglers. You can see the PKK and IS members sitting there together. But for IS, the smugglers have to inform the IS handlers when they are assisting them passing the border from the other side. In the Akçakale at the Tell Abyad border gate, there is a middleman called the alligator. He handles everything in the name of IS. He is a very scary man. He works with the IS intelligence" (Abu Jamal).

With concerns that foreign fighters were using Turkey as route to slip into Syria and that extremist groups such as IS were using Turkey as a supply source and transit route, Turkish officials have in the past months cracked down on what previously was a relatively open border. The border has now been fortified with two hundred miles of trenches, fifty-five miles of barbed-wire fence. Armed Turkish troops who have been accused of shooting and killing at least thirty-one civilians who tried crossing into the country. 12 However, most of the fences or trenches have not arrived to Sanliurfa or mainly IS controlled parts of the border, making it quite possible for the IS members to still cross those sections of the frontier, although not as easily as during past years and until mid-2015.

Some of the cities in Northern Syria actually border twin cities in Turkey. For instance the Syrian city of Tel Abyad is directly across from the Turkish border city of Akçakale. Essentially the two run into each other. The division between them is a two-meter cyclone metal fence that smugglers can cut through or put blankets over the top late at night and thereby help people cross.

According to our informants, IS cadres still manage to penetrate the border. "Passing through the [Turkish] border is as easy as eating cheese," one informant told us (Abu Jamal). IS illicit movement across the Turkish border is not limited to their cadres. According to Jamal, IS moved components for weapons from Turkey across the Akçakale border gate into Syria. "They acquired long, strong pipes along with a lot of fertilizer. The pipes and fertilizer along with LPG [liquid petroleum gas] tanks were used to make a kind of rocket in Raqqa. These rockets are named hell-fire balls and are more powerful than other rockets. We produced and

used thousands of them. I know that the total is over eight thousand, as we had that many LPG tanks when we acquired the LPG tank factory. I do not know how they brought more tanks after that” (Abu Jamal).

Refugee Camp Involvement

Turkey currently has nearly two million Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR.[13] However the actual number of Syrian refugees in Turkey, according to many NGO’s, may be closer to three million as most of the Syrians entered Turkey illegally through borders that were open up until mid-2015.[14] Today, one can see Syrian panhandlers and beggars all around the country at any given time, especially in large cities like Istanbul, Ankara or Izmir but also in smaller cities in the West and central parts of Turkey.

Along the southern border of Turkey, a network of twenty-seven officially run refugee camps have been opened for Syrians and their population is growing rapidly according to the Deputy Prime Minister of Turkey.[15] There are five in Sanliurfa alone with around 150,000 refugees living in them. Some 25,000 Kurds also live in the Suruc refugee camp, almost all from Kobani. Another 30,000 refugees in the Akçakale refugee camp are mostly populated by Arabs, as the camp authorities carefully separate the two nationalities to avoid conflicts. As many as ten members of a family may live in a sixteen square meter tent, where meals, free medical service and medicine distribution, but also schooling are provided. Yet these camps may be serving more than one purpose.

Abu Jamal estimated that Akçakale Refugee Camp had approximately thirty thousand refugees, mostly Arabs. He said that in the Kobani battle it was found that many of the killed IS members were actually carrying Akçakale Camp ID’s on their body. He went on to state that there are around twenty quarters in the Akçakale Camp with each having it’s own mosque with its own Arabic imam or some other unofficial preacher. Jamal stated that some of them recruit for IS inside the camp. As a result young boys leave the camps to join IS. “These sheikhs preach that jihad is *fard ayn* [a mandatory individual responsibility] for every Syrian man according to Islam, as Syria is in war,” Abu Jamal declared. Likewise he insisted when we interviewed him that the IS recruiters pressure and threaten men to join without the camp authorities knowing they are doing so. “They ensure you that if you die in battle, that they will take care of your family. If you do not want to join IS then you have to flee the camp. They will not let you alone.”

Beyond their function of providing refuge for the people fleeing the violent battleground of Syria, the camps sadly, are also home to a contagious despair that can infect young boys in particular, those who prefer action to languishing unemployed, often fatherless, constantly looking back to Syria, while feeling devalued in a camp. Our informants told us several stories of young boys being talked into joining IS and then running away from their families. They all ended up dying- carrying out suicide missions. According to official Turkish policy, Syrians can remain in the camps as long as they do not cause trouble inside Turkey.

Including the camp population, over 467,000 Syrian refugees live in Sanliurfa according to records of the Turkish Ministry of the Interior [16]. Generally, those who are living outside of the camps are the more affluent ones as they have managed to flee with some resources or have relatives abroad, allowing them to rent houses and open businesses. In short, there is an already established population of Syrians in Sanliurfa, accounting now for a fifth of the population. This allows Syrian terrorists and criminals to blend in easily and to operate freely.

Humanitarian Aid

ISIS, like many other terrorist groups has figured out how to take advantage of humanitarian aid. One informant told us, “The humanitarian aid passing from Suruc to Kobanî to aid the Kurdish people was mostly being sold to IS fighters, around two thousand truckloads. There are very few [civilian] people living in Kobanî, as the people of Kobanî did not go back. So, all those trucks loads of relief were mostly passed to IS. There were even explosives hid under the cement bags sent there,” (Abu Jamal).

Female Involvement

The Hisbah

According to information gained from our interviews, female members of IS do not become fighters. They can, however, join the *hisbah* (morality police), and many are quite brutal in this role. The female brigade of women in the *hisbah* was formed by IS in Raqqa after inhabitants there got fed up with male morality police beating and mistreating their women. At that time women were recruited into the *hisbah* to discipline and enforce morality rules for other women. This brigade is named al Ketibet-el Khansaa. There is also a foreigners’ *hisbah* formed of Western women. The Western group members carry AK-47s and they move around freely without taking orders from anyone and they have more power and authority than the regular women’s *hisbah*.

“The *hisbah* are like Shariah police. They steer people to mosques at prayer times” (Abu Jamal). “The *al-Khansaa* women [female morality police] go three at a time with a driver. They go into the market and into the village. They arrest and fine women who are out without niqaab and take some women even into the prison. [Niqaab is the Arabic style black dress now required for women under the control of IS where all parts of the body with the exception of the eyes are covered.] If there is a woman with no niqaab and no socks, or if a colorful garment under the niqaab is showing, they take her to court and she receives a sentence from ten to forty lashes” (Abu Walid). Most persons who fail to follow the strict rules of IS are punished in public, as an example to others. While males are lashed with their skin exposed, females are lashed through their clothing.

Marriage

ISIS uses the promise of marriage and female slaves as incentive for young men to join their ranks. One of our informants pointed out that marriage is a powerful inducement for some foreign fighters coming from poor regions of, for example Tunisia, a country that has had an inordinate number of foreign fighters joining IS. “The prospect of marriage also attracts youth. Turkish youth who are poor sometimes go to IS just to marry. They tell us, ‘I go there fight for them and get married’” (Abu Walid).

When IS controls all the jobs and resources in an area, the local Syrian young men can also be induced into joining IS simply by gaining the promise of marriage. Thus a very real reward of becoming an IS fighter is not only the imagined pleasure of the *houris* (virgins) in paradise if they are ‘martyred’ but the very real reward of ‘sex now’ with the wife he will be able to marry only if he has a salary—something IS membership makes possible. When an unmarried man takes his oath of allegiance to IS he is given a generous salary and a one-time marriage allowance. Foreign fighters who marry, or who are already married, are also provided with living quarters and in some cases a car, in addition to a fighter’s salary.

One informant told us how IS spoke in the first days of their arrival to the people in areas they conquered; ‘All people come with us. We can give you a gun for fighting. Some people don’t have a wife—they can come with us. We will give you money, so you can marry. We will give you about two thousand dollars, so you can marry and a salary every month of two to three hundred US dollars per month. You need not be afraid. You are guaranteed if you die, we will take care of your family with money and food.’ They tell their recruits, ‘Come take our ten days Shariah course. After you can be in IS. You can have money, a gun, a car, after. Now you will be important’” (Abu Walid).

Our informants stated that Syrian women generally did not want to marry IS fighters but would when they believed that doing so would rescue their families from starvation. In this way Syrian women are enticed to marry local IS fighters by the money involved—to save their families.

Local women are also preyed upon by unscrupulous IS cadres who see them on the street and finding out where they live, go to put pressure upon their fathers to give them in marriage. One father was pressured in this manner and resisted it by quickly enlisting a cousin to marry his daughter—thereby taking her off the marriage market.[17]

Young women who come from abroad are expected to marry the IS cadres in a short span of time. These women are housed in a special “sisters house” and watched over by the *hisbah* until their marriages are arranged. According to one informant, “The *hisbah* has a hotel for the women who come as marriage partners, for the brides” (Abu Nasir).

Likewise there is, “a special marriage bureau that gives an order yes or no about marrying. A German for instance comes and says, ‘I want to get married.’ He goes first to the bureau to get permission. The women who come go to the *Hizbah al-Khansaa* and writes her name that she wants a husband. Then it is arranged between them. When they come to the marriage bureau it takes time. The young man is studied for four to six months by the bureau. They also make a study about the girl before they marry” (Abu Nasir). “There is a marriage bureau – services where they register the young women who come and match them with suitable IS cadres” (Abu Walid).

“There are many women coming from Tunis, Algeria etc. and they also want to marry. The *Hisbah al-Khansaa* arranges it. Many of the foreign girls don’t want to marry a Syrian fighter. They usually want to marry from their own group. For instance, the Europeans want to marry Europeans” (Abu Nasir).

Russia has been heavily involved in putting out pro-Assad and anti-rebel propaganda. One of their propaganda themes involved the spread of information about the supposed practice of “*jihad al-nikah*”, a practice which would be a total anathema to any Sunni Muslim, of a Sunni girl voluntarily offering herself to rebel fighters to be “married” repeatedly in a *muta* marriage (Shia temporary marriage)—essentially to serve as a prostitute. Our informants had also heard this piece of propaganda. They emphatically assured us that it is false before we even had a chance to ask about it. “We heard about *jihad al-nikah* – Muslim girls coming and giving their body as prostitutes for the mujahideen. It is absolutely not true’ (Abu Nisar).

In the case of widows of IS fighters up for remarriage, our informants stated that IS does not follow the normal Shariah practice of *iddah*—having the widow wait for a period of four months and ten days to ensure that she was not pregnant by her former husband. Instead IS widows are expected to remarry quickly, a practices that serve the needs of IS cadres who are often single and sexually motivated. When a fighter is killed in battle “his wife would wait for forty days and then get married to another fighter” (Abu Jamal).

It's unclear how the women themselves feel about these practices. However, a Western woman writing under the pseudonym of Umm Layth, advises IS women to know their rights concerning widowhood—suggesting perhaps that rights that are not well known or if understood, are violated.[18]

One informant explains how the IS widows are cared for in the event of widowhood. “Under IS, women are kept very secluded. She can only see her husband or her brother. If her husband is killed as one of their fighters, a woman from IS comes to her after three days. For a widow they come bringing two hundred US dollars and they check on her regularly—to bring her money and ask whatever she needs” (Abu Walid).

One of our informants who had fought with Jabat al-Nusrah but was hiding that fact recalls that his wife was pressured the entire time he was held in interrogation (two weeks) and that IS cadres tried to get her to believe he was dead and to agree to marry them. “During this time while I was in prison, everyday they tell my wife I died” (Abu Walid).

Like the foreign fighters, IS women from the West are particularly privileged in IS and often live in nice homes and are given cars. They also are allowed more freedom.[19] A large group of western girls are, according to one of our informants, gathered each day in a big house in Raqqa, where they simply work on the Internet trying to recruit others. With their privileged lifestyles, these Western women seemed happy to the Syrian cadres who viewed them from afar. “Some Western women are very happy. They go and wander around outside with their weapons. After their husbands die, they remarry” (Nisar).

Female Slaves

ISIS has the practice of taking females captive—particularly the Yazidi women—and then selling or granting them as sexual slaves to IS cadres. IS ideologues argue that Islam allows for taking and distributing slaves as war booty, although many scholars would dispute this.[20]

While the press has reported on the practice of taking Yazidi women captive, our informants—one of them heavily involved—told us that it is not only Yazidi women who are preyed upon but also the Sunni and Shia wives of defeated enemy soldiers from the Iraqi army, the Free Syrian Army and from the Syrian regime forces.

“There are special places in Raqqa where they sell slaves,” one informant told us. “It is in the center of the city. It is only for Daesh. It's in the building that was previously the government palace—the governor's compound. Daesh took it over. There they have the *hisbah al khansaa*. They [female morality police] are in charge of everything about the slaves” (Abu Nasir).

The female slaves, known as “sabiyya”, are allowed only to the IS cadres. “Only a fighter can buy a slave woman. He needs documents from the emir or the governor of IS in that region granting permission to him to buy a slave and only after getting this permission he can go to *hisbah* and the slave market to buy slaves. They are sold by dollars. The minimum price is one thousand USD and the maximum is three thousand dollars. The slave girls can be sold *between* fighters, but only to the *mujahideen*, and there are rules, like you cannot take a mother and daughter slaves sexually at once, as you can only be with one of them [following Islamic incest rules]” (Abu Nasir).

Slaves are also given to the IS cadres as rewards—especially to the Westerners who do not have local wives. They reside with the fighter like a wife until he discards her, giving or selling her to another fighter. There are many rules governing the slave trade and how slaves ought to conduct themselves. For instance, “If the man wants to marry the slave he can. She can come in the presence of other men to serve *chai* [tea], coffee. She

does not require a *marham* [male chaperone]. And the slave women have different rules in terms of covering themselves... When you have one, it's like your wife. Although unlike wives, there is no limitation on the number you can have. If you are with her and have a child with her, and she becomes a Muslim, she can become your wife" (Abu Nasir). "The sheik had two slave girls," one informant noted, indicating how higher social status conferred more rewards (Abu Jamal).

The Long Arm of IS

All of our informants feared discovery by active IS cadres and feared that IS could reach them inside Turkey and kill them for defecting—a fear greatly heightened after the double murder in Urfa, mentioned earlier.

Many had experiences of IS knowing about them inside Turkey. For instance Jamal reports, "ISIS has strong intel in Turkey as well. They knew whom I befriended while I was here in Akçakale."

One subject reports that he only goes out to work in the field early and returns home after dark so that nobody sees him out. In this way he tries to ensure that he is not going to be caught by IS, and thereby ensure his own and his family's safety. He also does not allow his child to play outside alone, fearing kidnap.

Disillusionment with IS

While most of our informants bought into the IS ideology either before or during their Shariah training and while they first had hopes that IS would bring about good for them, they became disillusioned when witnessing the mismatch between the words and deeds of IS. "In 2014, I realized that Daesh were liars. For instance, there was an IS guy who raped a woman, but got away with it" (Abu Walid).

Many were confused about how IS could sell oil to enemies such as the Assad regime, or why battles seemed to end suddenly with IS probably having made a behind the scenes deal with the other side. One former IS cadre reported about the confusion and disillusionment of his friend, Abdullah. "Once he told me, 'I captured the Mursitpinar Border Gate several times [between Syrian Kobani and Turkish Suruc]; however, each time I was ordered to withdraw.' He started to question IS in his mind, but not openly, otherwise they would kill him. Before he tried to flee, however, he was killed in an F-16 raid" (Abu Jamal).

One informant stated, "what I don't like if someone did something wrong they tried to water board him, that I didn't like." He went on to add, "What I don't like is that if they don't like someone they just behead him. Or if a woman is not wearing hijab they bring someone to flog her, or if someone doesn't believe they cut his ear" (Abu Shujaa).

All of our informants were tired of hypocrisy in IS noting that some were rapists, others themselves smoked, while punishing ordinary citizens for smoking, etc. "I have seen IS members go to pray without ablution" (Abu Jamal). Our informants found the IS cadres practice of quickly remarrying widows rather than allowing them to observe the normal Islamic interval before being re-married [*iddah*] both disgusting and wrong.

All our informants also grew disgusted by the constant stream of executions and the cruel pleasure that some IS cadres appeared to have when beheading and killing others. "There is a well by the name of Hute. There they cover the eyes of the prisoners and tell them, 'You are free now, just walk now, but don't open your eyes.' They walk and fall into the well. It smells horrible because of all the corpses inside the well. I know that over three hundred people were thrown into that well."

Our informants hoped that they could get rid of the Assad regime but now see all the death and destruction that came with IS. One informant noted that, “when you go around the country, you do not see youth in the villages. They are either fighting for IS, dead, or fled so as not to have to fight for IS.”

According to our informants, it is not only the defectors, but also ordinary Syrians as well who are disillusioned with the false claims and unfulfilled promises of IS. “Everybody in Syria doesn’t like IS now. When a fighter goes out to battle they say they hope he doesn’t come back” (Abu Walid).

One informant told us about how people began to understand that IS would not serve their needs, “But after some time, in 2014, people feel that IS is not good, but bad. Why? Because what they promised to the people, they did not keep. Where is this freedom they promised us?” (Abu Walid).

Our informants felt that many locals joined IS partly out of a hope in the proclaimed IS Caliphate and out of respect for their fighting power – they hoped that IS would help them achieve real freedom, but that as time wore on most joined IS out of desperation and hunger. One of those we interviewed stated that “now people join only for food” and that most have grown disillusioned with IS. “The few people who join now do so only because they need to eat. They are the ones who don’t have work. The rest try to escape to Turkey or Lebanon, or go by sea” (Abu Walid).

Defecting from IS

“If someone is caught fleeing from IS, he is killed immediately”, Abu Jamal stated. He mentioned the case of a fifteen-year-old Turkish fighter who wanted to quit serving IS. “He met with his father at the border gate in Akçakale. His father did not want to let him return [to the fighters] but the boy said through tears to his father, ‘They will kill me here right now, if I do not return with them now.’ Suddenly there were fifteen fighters who emerged out of the shadows around the young man to ensure that he wasn’t going to return home with his father.”

Most of our informants escaped IS by paying smugglers to get them across the Turkish border. Choice of one’s smuggler is of paramount importance as “all the smugglers are forced and paid to inform about IS members who are fleeing. The only way to ensure safe passage is to bribe the smuggler in high amounts, or he will inform IS and you will be killed instantly. Also there are several checkpoints. If you are caught by IS at the checkpoints, you also are immediately killed” (Abu Jamal).

Various authors have written about the importance of distinguishing between deradicalization and disengagement.[21] In the case of the defectors who spoke to us, all of them deradicalized, in the sense that they became totally and completely disaffected with IS and its extremist ideology. However, this process was not always completed at the moment they decided to leave IS behind–disengaging from the group. Abu Shujaa, for instance, told us that he continued to be a “true believer” in the Islamic State and its apocalyptic vision for more than one year, despite having decided to escape from the ruthless terrorist regime which had fed him with End Times visions

Scott Atran writes about the confused state of “true believers” and their difficulty of leaving a group once one has bought into their version of sacred values which are not open to negotiation.[22] Indeed all of our informants felt that IS had deepened their understanding of Islam and they were grateful for having learned how to pray properly and were given a chance to learn more about Islam. For them giving up IS did not mean giving up their newfound deeper understanding of Islam and its practices. In fact, those things were sacred and non-negotiable for them. However, the deep hypocrisy of the IS cadres and their violent and brutal

treatment of women, civilians and of other IS members convinced them that while they would not abandon their newly learned Islamic beliefs, they could walk away from IS.

In a study of open source reports of fifty-eight IS defectors, Peter Neumann, director of the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) in London, teased out four themes among the reasons they gave for defecting.[23] One was the extent of fighting with other Sunni rebel groups and that “toppling the Assad regime didn’t seem to be a priority”. Our informants echoed the latter part of this concern. Neumann also referred to “the leadership’s obsession with ‘spies’ and ‘traitors’ as being a negative for them. This was true in our sample as well. A second theme was one of disillusionment and outrage with the group’s brutality, especially toward civilians. Our sample concurred on this as well, although our subjects—unlike Neumann’s media-based cases, showed compassion for the suffering of Yazidis and other minorities targeted by IS. The third narrative noted by Neumann was corruption in the group and special privileges granted to foreign fighters. Our sample also complained about corrupt and evil practices by IS members and noted that the foreign fighters were indeed privileged although the latter did not seem to cause them much concern. A fourth narrative identified by Neumann was that life under the Islamic State was harsh and disappointing. Our subjects were indeed disappointed that life in Syria did not improve and freedoms they had been willing to fight for did not materialize under IS.

Warnings to those Westerners Who Might be Attracted to IS

All of our informants felt very strongly that IS is an evil organization, one that others should not join. All of them were more than happy to make a strong statement to their own people—fellow Syrians—and to potential foreign fighters from the West, warning them about the evils of IS and telling them that under no circumstances should they join IS. They made statements such as “ISIS is not helping the Syrian people”, “Don’t come here, you won’t be able to leave,” “They are brutal, horrible rapists,” “This is not the true Islam and not the Islamic State,” “Don’t be fooled, they are liars.”

Referring to Islamic scriptures about a renegade tribe in the times of the Prophet that also practiced *takfir* [excommunication], Abu Walid stated, “They are the Khawarij tribe. I believed when they came to Raqqa that they are not good. They kill anybody from us, just like the Khawarij did. They existed during those times the same [in the times of the Prophet Mohammad]—with black clothes and black flags. Our scriptures warn us, ‘When you see them don’t follow them.’”

About the Authors: Anne Speckhard, Ph.D. is Director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) and also serves as Adjunct Associate Professor in the Department of Psychiatry, Georgetown University Medical School. She can be reached at at < Aspeckhard@AnneSpeckhard.com >.

Ahmet S. Yayla, Ph.D. is Professor and Chair of the Department of Sociology, Harran University, Osmanbey, Sanliurfa, Turkey. He is currently on leave as a Research Fellow at the ICSVE in Washington, D.C. and can be reached at < ahmetsyayla@gmail.com >.

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Notes

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