

## ISIS Prisons: Where Labor Demand Meets Labor Supply

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ARMED GROUPS RELY ON VARIOUS TYPES OF LABOR RESOURCES.<sup>1</sup> Among these laborers are people who are dedicated to the goals of the group, people who are only interested in immediate profit, and people who don't want anything to do with the work or the war, but have no choice—those who are forced to labor. Forced labor is the least preferable source of labor for any armed group, but as ISIS recently started losing its war in Iraq and its financial resources, it was faced with fewer labor supply options and greater demand for labor. Prisoners, ISIS found, were a good way to meet the demand, and the group now uses prisoners for both intellectual work in the chemical labs and hard labor in its sophisticated tunnel system.

### Sophisticated Engineering

In July 2016, ISIS began construction of a pipeline from Iraq's Qayyarah oil fields to the Tigris River. The plan was to mix crude oil into the water and let it flow downstream, where it would accumulate around a temporary plastic bridge built by the Iraqi Army. The oil would then be set on fire, effectively melting the bridge and putting it out of service. Fortunately, coalition airstrikes thwarted the would-be disaster, but the existence of the plan shines light on a disturbing fact. This pipeline was not the brainchild of uneducated terrorists. It took knowledge and skill. It took expertise.

The pipeline is just one example of the more complicated tactics emerging from the ISIS corner in recent times. The group has also managed to produce chlorine gas, which it used extensively against Kurdish and Iraqi forces; successfully operate oil refineries; and construct a deep underground tunnel network with its own airflow system. These activities prompt the question: how are ISIS guerilla fighters developing and executing such sophisticated operations?

A survey of ISIS member profiles, including its leadership, reveals that few, if any, ISIS personnel are even remotely capable of designing or implementing such projects.<sup>2</sup> They have neither the education nor the necessary experience in the necessary fields.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, very few of the former Baath Party members who joined ISIS would do this kind of work because they are more concerned with getting promotions than advancing science. Could the engineers and scientists ISIS is using be from among the foreign fighters who have joined the cause? Probably not. Many of these fighters lack even a secondary school diploma and are more interested in having four wives than in developing military stratagems. The planners behind these complex operations are also unlikely to come from among the locals who joined for money and power because if they had those kinds of skills, employment by ISIS would not be their only way to earn money.

It's not that ISIS hasn't tried to recruit from among the educated and professional classes. In 2014, the group was producing highly professional advertisements to recruit doctors and spreading the word through their social media networks that they wanted

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*All photos this article courtesy of Vera Mironova.*

to hire engineers at a good salary.<sup>4</sup> But that strategy didn't seem to work. For most skilled professionals, working for ISIS isn't on their list of career objectives.

## Professional Prisoners

So how is ISIS getting the people it needs? It is acquiring them by making them prisoners, a practice that is widespread in ISIS-controlled parts of Iraq.<sup>5</sup>

There are three types of ISIS prisoners. First are members of ISIS who have violated its rules, for example, getting caught smoking or not showing up for mandatory prayer. Although these kinds of offenders are usually sentenced to public lashing (for propaganda purposes), prison is also a viable option. Second are those whom ISIS considers dangerous or who are accused of cooperating with the enemy. These people are usually sentenced to death. The third category of prisoners consists of those whose only crime is being good at what they do. These are the "on-demand" prisoners, skilled professionals and laborers ISIS extorts for its own purposes. And every ISIS official, even at the lowest rank, has the authority to conduct arrests.

Engineers of various kinds are in high demand. Petroleum-sector engineers are sent to work in oil refineries, mechanical engineers are made to assemble car bombs, and military engineers are typically used to train ISIS members. As soon as ISIS entered the Iraqi city of Mosul in mid-2014, it was in desperate need of oil tanker trucks and drivers.<sup>6</sup> At the time, ISIS had the money to pay tanker drivers—and coalition airstrikes were not as intense—so the group was able to hire the people it needed. After a year, however, the tanker drivers' pay decreased because ISIS lost control of several oil fields in Salahadin and south of Kirkuk. Oil tankers also became direct targets for US-led coalition warplanes. Lack of payment and increased risk made drivers avoid working in ISIS-held territories in Iraq. In response, ISIS simply forced tanker operators who owned their trucks to work by putting them in jail on fake charges. ISIS negotiated with the imprisoned owner-operators: they could drive their own tankers for ISIS for a specified amount of time in exchange for their freedom.

Once this problem was solved, ISIS needed construction equipment, so it arrested the owner of a construction company in Mosul on nonsense charges. After keeping him in jail for several days and torturing him, ISIS freed him in exchange for the use of his company's machines, shovels, and excavators. It was a hostage-deal situation. The contractor was allowed to live with his family in Mosul, but his company was used by ISIS militants. ISIS gave him a little money to maintain the machines and pay his machinery operators.<sup>7</sup>

Military engineers are especially helpful because of their expertise in sophisticated weaponry, but they are relegated to the training camps because they cannot be trusted on the front lines. That may have something to do with the way they were recruited. In an interview, one man described his family's situation.

My dad was a brigade leader in the Iraqi Army's 5th division. ISIS arrested him without any reason in early 2015, in front of our house. After several days, a local ISIS leader informed us that my dad had been sentenced to death. Two months later, we found out that my dad was still alive but had to train ISIS militants on using some advanced weapons. He has to do whatever ISIS wants from him.

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In return, ISIS lets him and his family stay alive. If he declines to cooperate, ISIS would kill him and us.<sup>8</sup>

Another group of sought-after professionals for ISIS is scientists, with chemical engineers and physicists in particular demand. Those in Iraq are mostly professors from Mosul University, which lies in ISIS-controlled territory. The scientists and their laboratories at the university have been forcefully commissioned to develop more deadly chemical weapons for ISIS. Although these workers are more privileged than other prisoners and are allowed to spend their nights at home, they are under constant surveillance. They cannot escape, nor can they refuse to work for ISIS. According to one eyewitness, several chemical scientists in Mosul University who refused to work were killed on the spot in the laboratory, to serve as an example.

Medical doctors have also recently joined the ranks of professional prisoners. Because ISIS casualties are increasing, so is the demand for doctors. Although most doctors have never refused treatment to ISIS militants at the civilian hospitals, since the beginning of the campaign to retake Mosul in October 2016, many have been forced to work exclusively for the group on the front line.<sup>9</sup> If ISIS asks a doctor to relocate to a field hospital and he refuses, he is arrested, sent to prison, and forcefully transferred to the field hospital. There he is treated well, but his movement and freedom are still restricted, and like the engineers, his family is kept under threat.

### A Choice of Deaths

ISIS is also increasingly relying on prisoners to man its frontline positions. With the Iraqi Army and US-led coalition forces advancing and gaining more territory, ISIS is taking more and more casualties on its front lines, particularly in and around the contested city of Mosul. This is making it harder and harder for ISIS not only to entice fighters to volunteer for frontline combat, but even to make fighters follow orders to relocate to such places. For instance, around 2 August 2016, a firefight broke out among ISIS militants in a crowded Mosul market over occupation of the Bab al-Tub administrative office in central Mosul. Both groups wanted to stay in that peaceful neighborhood rather than go to the front line.

Similarly, ISIS was previously able to rely on volunteers to conduct suicide missions, but those fighters are for one-time use, and now the group seems to be running out of them. To both solve this problem and man the most dangerous frontline positions, ISIS must compel people against their will, including ISIS militants who were sentenced to death, perhaps for spying or from *takfiri*—a practice of excommunication by which one Muslim declares another Muslim to be a *kafir*, a non-believer. ISIS leaders regularly accuse members who do not agree with the leadership of being *kafir*.<sup>10</sup> Such prisoners are often given the option of either being executed immediately or being sent to whichever is the most dangerous frontline at the time—a choice that most likely also means a quick death. In this way, ISIS not only mans the most undesirable positions, but it also eliminates people who disagree with group policies and who could potentially destabilize the group. “Definitely this front line is where ISIS punishes its militants by forcing them to stay. I heard that they sent punished militants from Syria to here,” noted Dlshad Mala, a Peshmerga battalion leader in the south of Kirkuk.<sup>11</sup>

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An ISIS training camp and living base in a Mosul neighborhood



Before ISIS took it, it was a very fancy private house.



Dining hall in the training camp



Documents and even a cell phone were left.

## A Street to Prison to Tunnels Pipeline

In addition to highly-educated professionals and disposable fighters, strong young men capable of performing hard labor in Iraq’s notoriously hot weather are also in demand. Since ISIS has come under constant attack by the US-led coalition, it has been forced to take defensive positions. Its fighters have started digging tunnels on the front lines to hide from airstrikes and move between positions unnoticed by drones. In addition to engineering experts, the tunnels require unskilled manpower in large quantities, especially because ISIS kills, on the spot, anyone who is not doing his job well: Peshmerga personnel reported finding mass graves near major tunnels.<sup>12</sup> And when ISIS runs low on manpower, no problem. If there is a demand from headquarters, there will be a supply from the prison system.

At first, ISIS was using the “human resources” it already had in its prisons, even bringing condemned convicts overnight from as far away as Fallujah to the Mosul front lines.<sup>13</sup> Many of these prisoners were made to dig tunnels as punishment for violations inside the prison. One person imprisoned in an ISIS jail recalls his cellmate’s punishment of digging five meters of a tunnel without rest for insulting a guard. Peshmerga Colonel Said Omer added, “As far as we know ... a rotation for prisoner groups on the digging site is a week. ISIS brought them to work in the tunnels for a week and then took them back to their jails.”<sup>14</sup> But the prisons’ existing labor supply was eventually depleted. To meet the constantly rising demand for labor, ISIS increased its supply of prisoners by modifying its imprisonment rules. And where could they find young, physically fit males for such a purpose? The enemy armed forces.

When ISIS first took control in parts of Iraq, it asked captured members of the Iraqi military and police force to sign a *tawba* (declaration of repentance) saying, “I withdraw from the sin of joining army/police forces. I stop working for them and declare my regret to God.” Anyone who signed was then released. Officers usually signed, but soldiers were not sure if they had to, and many did not. When the demand for labor arose, ISIS went back to its lists and arrested everyone who had not signed a *tawba*. They even arrested some who had. This allowed ISIS to continue tunnel construction without delays.<sup>15</sup>

ISIS has also used prison laborers to clean up the destruction caused by coalition bombings. Near Qayyarah, a small town south of Mosul, some oil fields were targeted many times by coalition warplanes. During the night, ISIS brought prisoners in to clean up the mess that the day’s airstrike had caused, according to an employee of Iraq’s state-owned North Oil Company (NOC) who works in the Qayyarah fields and still lives in the area:

ISIS used to bring the prisoner-laborers during the nights, but more than four times I encountered them while working in the fields. I saw the workers during daytime, as they could not finish their task on time and stayed in the fields until late morning. There were some ISIS militants guarding the workers, who are more than 100 laborers. I was not allowed to interact with them. We just assumed that they were prison-laborers.<sup>16</sup>

After each airstrike, ISIS launched a huge cleanup effort because it desperately needed the oil and its revenue. The majority of NOC workers fled to Baghdad

and Kurdistan, so ISIS had to fill this gap with prison labor. A local who still lives in the area reported that

the prison laborers used to work definitely like robots. They were very calm, sad, and slowly functioning. They had no normal chat and interaction while working, as any normal labor force would. Some of them could not do their jobs well and had physical disabilities. They looked like ill and wounded people.<sup>17</sup>

### The Prisoner to Housemaid Pipeline

For domestic help, ISIS targets women traveling through ISIS-controlled territories. These may be Syrian refugees from Damascus or women from Daraa fleeing to Turkey through Palmyra or Basra. A woman is first stopped “for an investigation,” and if she is traveling alone—which is an ISIS violation—she is arrested and forced to work in an ISIS member’s home. Although she may be working in the house of one of the fighters instead of being thrown into prison, the work is still hard, the door is still closed from the outside, and she is not allowed to go out. The only thing that can save a woman from such forced labor is agreeing to marry one of the fighters.<sup>18</sup>

### Conclusion

By such widespread use of forced—essentially slave—labor, ISIS joins the ranks of regimes like Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia, among many others, which found themselves unable to meet constantly increasing labor demands for wartime, industrialization, and agriculture. The key differences between ISIS and those regimes are that, first, ISIS is controlling a much smaller territory, and as a result, the available forced labor is not sufficient for its needs; and second, because of the conditions in Iraq before ISIS’s rise, there is a big difference in the quality of those labor resources. Both Germany during the Third Reich and the USSR under Stalin had highly developed scientific research sectors and some of the world’s best-known academics in war-applicable fields such as chemistry and physics, and particularly in engineering. In Iraq, by contrast, academia and scientific research were destroyed by previous wars, while everyone who was internationally competitive either left the country or was killed.<sup>19</sup> (This could help explain why ISIS uses chlorine gas, a type of chemical weapon that originated back in WWI.) Dr. Mohammed Wajih, a former agriculture professor who worked at Mosul University for 20 years, explains:

The academic community and scientific research at Mosul University are not developed. Labs and scientific instruments in the university are too old, dating back to 1980, when the Iraq-Iran war started, and Iraq stopped investing in the universities. Lack of any interaction between the academic community, industrial projects, and businesspeople left professors with little scientific knowledge. It was also forbidden to teach theoretical materials related to anything that could be used in wars. And there are very few facilities that could be used to produce materials needed for war and weaponry.<sup>20</sup>

Understanding the complicated human resources problems of ISIS and other insurgency groups helps their opponents develop better tactics for fighting them. If we know that we are fighting people who do not want to fight us in the first



ISIS base – entrance to the tunnels



Sleeping space



ISIS drones



ISIS IEDs

place, such as the forced labor pool that ISIS is now sending to the front lines, then instead of trying to defeat them, we need to help these men and women pass intelligence to us, defect to our side, or even sabotage the terrorist group from inside. By lumping all ISIS fighters and workers under the heading of “violent extremist,” we may be killing people who can help us. ❖

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## NOTES

- 1 This article is based on Vera Mironova's experiences during six months of fieldwork on the Mosul and Kirkuk front lines in Iraq, while embedded with the Kurdish Peshmerga and Iraqi Special Operations Forces.
- 2 This information was gathered from open internet sources by the authors.
- 3 Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, *The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail* (West Point, N.Y.: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2016): <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-caliphates-global-workforce-an-inside-look-at-the-islamic-states-foreign-fighter-paper-trail>. According to ISIS's internal recruitment records, a plurality of foreign fighters indicated education at the high school level, and a very small number had prior military experience.
- 4 A. Agron, “Wanted: Western Professionals to Join the Islamic State (ISIS),” *MEMRI*, Inquiry & Analysis Series No. 1159, 15 May 2015.
- 5 Interview with an escaped ISIS prisoner, Erbil, Iraq, August 2016; interview with Said Omer, Peshmerga officer on Khazr front line (about 20 kilometers east of Mosul, Iraq), August 2016.
- 6 In August 2014, ISIS controlled six major oil fields in Iraq: Alace and Alam in Salahadin Province; and Qayyarah, Humam Alil, Kask, and AinZala in Nainewa Province.
- 7 Interview with a relative of the business owner, Kirkuk, Iraq, August 2016.
- 8 Phone interview, Mosul, Iraq, August 2016.
- 9 In addition to numerous neighborhood clinics and hospitals, there are five major hospitals in Mosul (Salam, Batul, Khansa and Mosul, and a children's hospital), in addition to numerous local neighborhood clinics and hospitals.
- 10 It was reported that a Tajik foreign fighter who disagreed with the group's use of religion for their own purposes and who started conducting his own religion classes and lectures for ISIS members was accused of being a *kafir*. Ekaterina Sergatskoga, “The Story of an Ex-ISIS Militant Living in Ukraine” [in Ukrainian], Hromadske, 3 August 2016: <http://hromadske.ua/posts/rozpovid-eks-boiovyka-islamskoi-derzhavy-iakyi-zhyve-v-ukraini>
- 11 Interview with Dlshad Mala (a Peshmerga battalion leader), Kirkuk, Iraq, August 2016.
- 12 Interview with Colonel Said Omer (Zeravani Peshmerga forces), east of Mosul, Iraq, August 2016.
- 13 The author goes into more detail about the human resource problems faced by terrorist organizations in her CTAP interview with Michael Freeman in this issue.
- 14 Interview with Colonel Said Omer (Zeravani Peshmerga forces), east of Mosul, Iraq, August 2016.
- 15 Phone interview with a civilian in ISIS-controlled Mosul, Iraq, August 2016.
- 16 Phone interview with a civilian who works in Qayyarah Refinery in Iraq, August 2016.
- 17 Phone interview with a civilian who works in Qayyarah Refinery in Iraq, August 2016.
- 18 Phone interview with a Syrian refugee in France, August 2016.
- 19 Don Peck, “The Long Tradition of Killing Middle Eastern Nuclear Scientists,” *Atlantic*, 12 January 2012: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/01/the-long-tradition-of-killing-middle-eastern-nuclear-scientists/251338/>
- 20 Phone interview with Dr. Mohammed Wajih in Turkey, August 2016.