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U.N. Security Council Holds First Session on Human Trafficking

By [Sharon Samuel](#)

Last Wednesday the United States hosted the first ever U.N. Security Council session on human trafficking in armed conflict. Nick Grono, head of the Freedom Fund—a private donor fund dedicated to ending modern slavery—and Nadia Murad Basee, a [Yazidi](#) woman who was abducted by ISIS from her village in Kuchu, Iraq on August 3, 2014, introduced the session.

Basee described in vivid detail the systematized way ISIS fighters separated men, women and children, killed most of the men, and seized women and children as “spoils of war” to be sold or gifted to ISIS militants. She saw six of her brothers murdered, while members of her minority faith were told to either convert to Islam, or be killed.

After several months in captivity, Basee escaped and received asylum in Germany. Following her harrowing account of repeated rape, humiliation, and torture, Basee implored the Security Council to prioritize rescuing the roughly 3400 Yazidi victims still enslaved, to “open their societies” to refugees fleeing war, and ultimately to eradicate ISIS and other terrorist groups.

Basee proclaimed that ISIS’s plundering of the Yazidi people is genocide. Nick Grono also reminded the Security Council that human trafficking, which includes rape, enslavement, forced prostitution and forced pregnancy, is a crime against humanity—a widespread and systematic attack on civilian populations. Calling out ISIS’s actions as genocide and crimes against humanity brings them under the umbrella of universal jurisdiction and the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court.

Although slavery is illegal everywhere, Security Council members noted that traffickers not only operate with relative impunity, but armed groups are also beginning to challenge the taboo associated with slavery. Nick Grono described the bravado with which ISIS [called for a revival of slavery](#), provided its members with “[guidebooks](#)” on keeping slaves, openly engaged in [slave trading](#) in the marketplace, and [recommended rape as a religious practice](#), a war tactic, and a means of populating the caliphate.

In her statement on behalf of the United States, Samantha Power called it “a bit baffling” that the Security Council had never before held a thematic discussion on trafficking in persons, while trafficking in arms, drugs and antiquities have been frequently addressed in the past. Power called on member states “to reinforce their political commitment to and improve their implementation of applicable legal obligations to criminalize, prevent, and otherwise combat trafficking in persons, and to strengthen the efforts to detect and disrupt trafficking in persons,

including implementing robust victim identification mechanisms and providing access to protection and assistance for identified victims, particularly in relation to conflict.”

Power spoke on slavery’s unique incarnation as a weapon of war, where victims can be forced to provide sexual services to soldiers, perform hard labor on behalf of occupying forces, and carry out acts of terror, sometimes against their own communities. And though trafficking victims may be forced to commit crimes for their traffickers, they should still be viewed as victims, not criminals.

Power and other speakers cautioned against looking at boys forced to become child soldiers, or women, like Nadia, forced to participate in military activities as part of their enslavement, or the many victims like them, and “seeing only the crime, and not the force, fraud and coercion” behind their actions. As one Representative stated, “it can be more dangerous to be a woman in armed conflict, than it is to be a soldier.”

Sexual slavery and exploitation of women is a widespread practice by militant groups, but the Security Council also addressed other forms of trafficking, including child soldiery and forced labor in global supply chains. Member states were encouraged to address human trafficking of all types in their own countries. Increasing domestic prosecutions of sex and labor trafficking and identifying victims will allow member states to pinpoint and address the root causes of trafficking in each country, as well as the high-risk populations and industries where trafficking is most prevalent.

All council members committed to organizing regionally, training U.N. peacekeepers on trafficking detection, and providing stronger leadership on the international level. Several representatives called for greater compassion and willingness to accept refugees like Nadia Basee. Although Basee eventually escaped to Germany, where she currently has access to medical care and other services, dozens of Yazidis have drowned in attempts to reach Europe.

“Immigrants fleeing war are not the cause of terrorism,” stated the representative of Venezuela. “They are the consequence of terrorism.”