

Human Trafficking as a Strategic Instrument of War, Genocide, and Terror

Human trafficking is widely recognized as a severe human rights violation. Increasingly, international security research shows that trafficking is also used strategically in conflicts to **destabilize societies, terrorize populations, and fund armed groups**. ([news.trust.org](https://www.news.trust.org))

The international community has formally acknowledged this connection. **United Nations Security Council Resolution 2331** condemned trafficking in conflict zones and warned that terrorist groups use trafficking to fund operations and recruit fighters. ([Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Nations_Security_Council_Resolution_2331))

Key Strategic Uses of Human Trafficking

1. Human Trafficking as a Weapon of War

In modern conflicts, trafficking and sexual slavery are sometimes used deliberately to weaken enemies and control populations.

How it functions as a weapon of war

- Systematic rape and sexual slavery used to terrorize communities
- Kidnapping civilians to destabilize societies
- Forced labor to support military logistics
- Enslavement used to reward or recruit fighters

Armed groups across many conflicts have used sexual violence as a strategic tactic to **spread fear and control territory**. ([The Law Institute](https://www.thelawinstitute.com))

Examples documented in international reports include:

- ISIS enslaving thousands of Yazidi women and girls
- Boko Haram abducting women and girls in Nigeria
- Sexual violence used systematically in conflicts such as the Democratic Republic of Congo ([The Law Institute](https://www.thelawinstitute.com))

Source:

UNODC – Violence and trafficking used as a weapon of war

<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/frontpage/2024/June/how-violence-against-women-and-girls--including-human-trafficking--is-used-as-a-weapon-of-war.html>

2. Human Trafficking as a Tool of Genocide

Trafficking can become genocidal when it is used to **destroy or dismantle an ethnic, religious, or national group**.

This can occur through:

- Forced displacement
- Systematic sexual violence
- Forced assimilation of children
- Economic destruction of communities

Genocide research organizations explain that genocide involves acts committed with the intent to destroy a group in whole or in part.

Source:

Genocide Watch – What is Genocide

<https://www.genocidewatch.com/what-is-genocide>

Research papers and international law analyses discuss how trafficking and sexual slavery may contribute to genocidal campaigns when used to dismantle targeted populations.

Sources:

JSTOR research article

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3663256>

Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law

<https://scholarship.law.vanderbilt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1045&context=vjtl>

University of Denver thesis on trafficking and genocide

https://digitalcommons.du.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?params=/context/undergraduate_theses/article/1044/&path_info=Bryant_Final_Thesis.pdf

3. Human Trafficking as a Catalyst for Civil War

Trafficking networks often flourish in unstable environments and can deepen armed conflict.

Ways trafficking fuels civil conflict include:

- Profits funding militias and warlords
- Smuggling networks overlapping with weapons and narcotics routes
- Forced labor sustaining war economies
- Displacement creating vulnerable populations for exploitation

Conflict conditions allow traffickers to operate with greater impunity due to weakened law enforcement and governance. (news.trust.org)

Sources

Seton Hall University research paper

https://scholarship.shu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1638&context=student_scholarship

4. Human Trafficking as a Funding Mechanism for Terrorism

Human trafficking has become one of the most profitable criminal industries globally.

Terrorist organizations use trafficking for:

- Sexual slavery markets
- Forced labor
- Kidnapping and ransom
- Recruitment of child soldiers
- Extortion of migrants

These activities generate revenue while also serving as psychological warfare against civilian populations.

Source:

Henry Jackson Society – *Trafficking and Terrorist Networks*

<https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/HJS-Trafficking-Terror-Report-web.pdf>

5. Trafficking of Cultural Property and Antiquities

In some conflicts, trafficking extends beyond people to include **looting and smuggling cultural artifacts**, which can also finance armed groups.

ISIS and similar groups have profited from the trafficking of antiquities taken from historic sites in Syria and Iraq.

Source:

Antiquities Coalition Report

<https://theantiquitiescoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/IS-and-Cultural-Genocide-Antiquities-Trafficking-in-the-Terrorist-State.pdf>

Why Conflict Zones Increase Trafficking

War and displacement significantly increase vulnerability to trafficking.

Key drivers include:

- Collapse of law enforcement
- Refugee crises
- Economic desperation
- Family separation
- Criminal infiltration of migration routes

Modern slavery researchers note that war can both **create trafficking opportunities and increase the number of vulnerable victims**. ([Walk Free](#))

Key Conclusion

Human trafficking is no longer viewed solely as organized crime. In many conflicts it functions as:

- **A weapon of war**
- **A tool of genocide**
- **A catalyst for civil war**
- **A financial engine for terrorism**

Understanding this strategic dimension is essential for policymakers, humanitarian organizations, and communities seeking to prevent exploitation and protect vulnerable populations.

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