



International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism



Crowdfunding and Cryptocurrency: Renewed Efforts to Smuggle Foreign Islamic State (IS) Fighters and Their Families from Northeastern Syrian Detention Facilities, Furthering IS's Militant Goals

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A [significant escalation in Islamic State's \(IS\) attacks in Syria](#) during the first half of the year, combined with a recent surge in [prison break](#) attempts by detained IS operatives in Northern Syria allude to the group regaining strength. This was also evidenced by the US backed Kurdish led Syrian Democratic forces' (SDF) recent arrest [of a crucial IS facilitator](#) who aided the escape of foreign IS detainees from a prison facility in Raqqa followed by the recapture of a Libyan and a Russian fighter with other three remaining at large.

This resurgence also coincides with IS and its linked international financial networks [ramping up their crowdfunding efforts](#) to now extricate incarcerated senior IS operatives along with female IS detainees and adolescents out of Syrian internment camps. While the SDF under the amnesty deal has regularly [released hundreds of local Syrian and Iraqi IS fighters](#), IS-linked networks have mainly [focused on spiriting out third country female and male](#) IS detainees. ICSVE's monitoring reveals that since July an English IS-linked supporter group has launched a crowdfunding campaign to raise \$20,000 in bribes for securing the release of a foreign IS detainee. (Figure 1). A message, purportedly written by an IS supporter, circulating on his Telegram channel reads, "Disbelievers are willing to release the brother in exchange for significant bribes," and claims of having already raised the \$11,000 out of the required \$20,000.

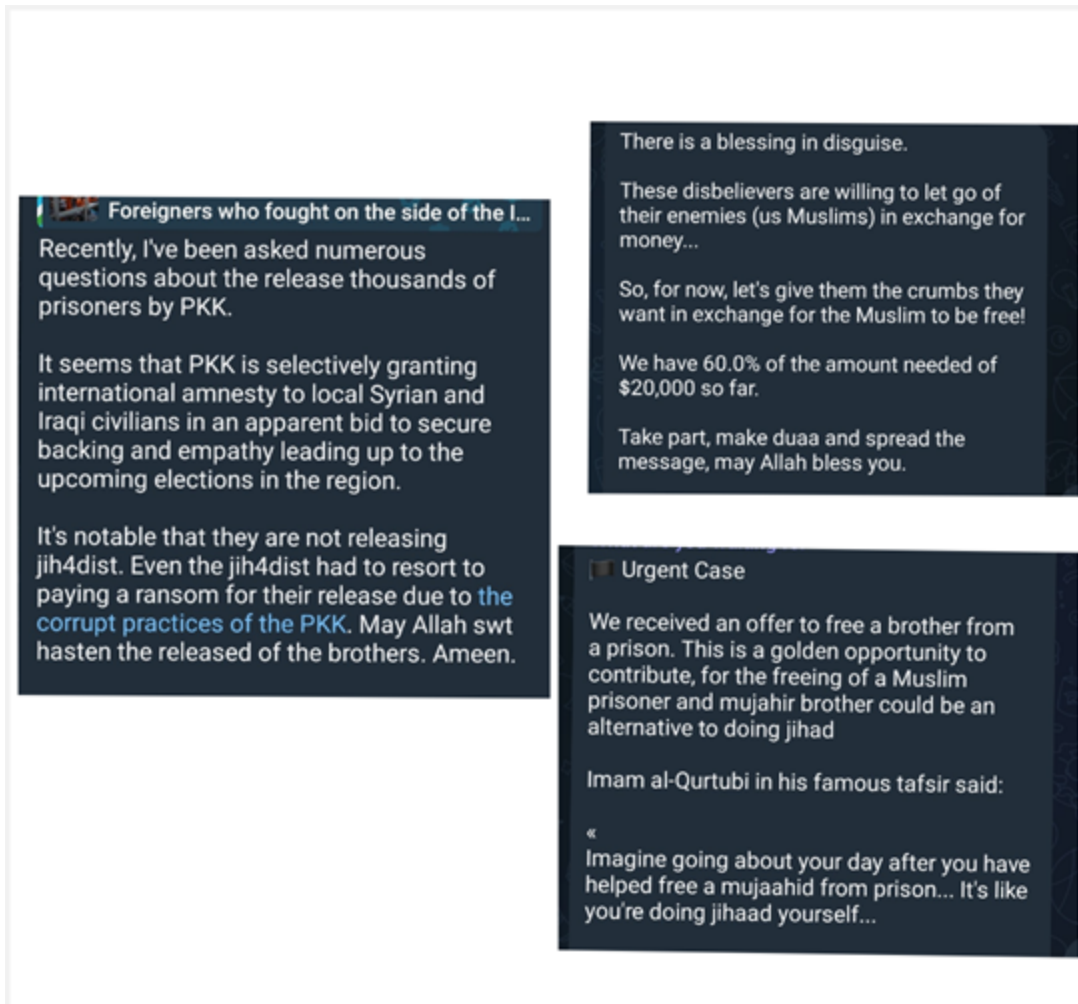


Figure 1

The donations for this crowdfunding campaign were primarily accepted through cryptocurrency transfers, with USDT currency on the Tron block chain [being the most preferred medium followed](#) by Western Union transfers. In August, the Tron wallet used by the IS-linked entity for freeing the IS militant processed nearly \$34,000, through centralized crypto exchanges like Binance, MEXC, Coinex, and Bybit. (See Figure 2)

Analysis of the transaction chain reveals that the IS-linked Tron wallet address received \$11,700 in August routed through an intermediary address (TF...) (figure 2.1) that was traced back to the [addresses \(TS...\)sanctioned by Israel's National Bureau for Countering Terror Financing](#) (NBCT) in October last year by [ASO order 53:23](#). This USDT address (TS...) along with many other

addresses were seized by Israel last year as part of the larger crackdown [on Hezbollah’s money laundering](#) network [seizing \\$1.7 M in cryptocurrency](#). (Figure 2.1). The use of multiple intermediaries, potentially involving unregulated or illegal crypto exchanges has been a common strategy employed by illicit actors to bypass regulatory oversight. Illicit proceeds further from the IS-linked Tron address were also routed to well-known decentralized crypto trading platforms such as [Change NOW](#) and [XML Gold](#) (Figure 2.1, 2, 2)

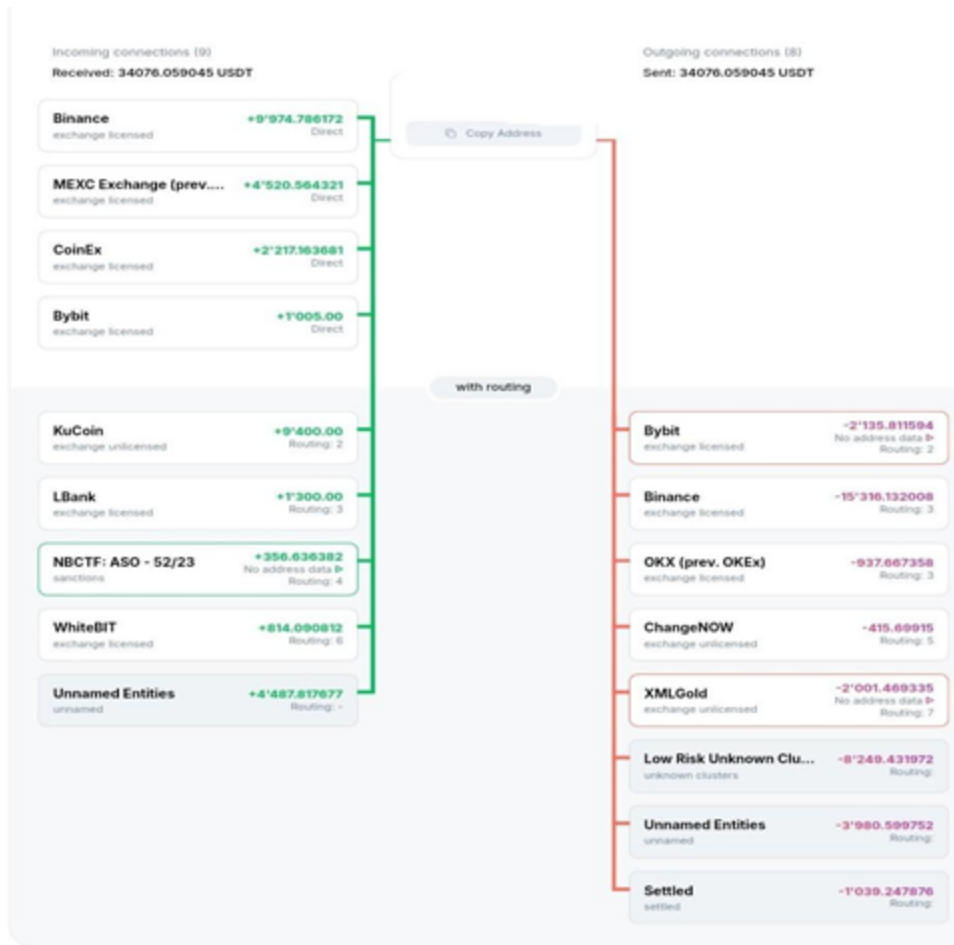
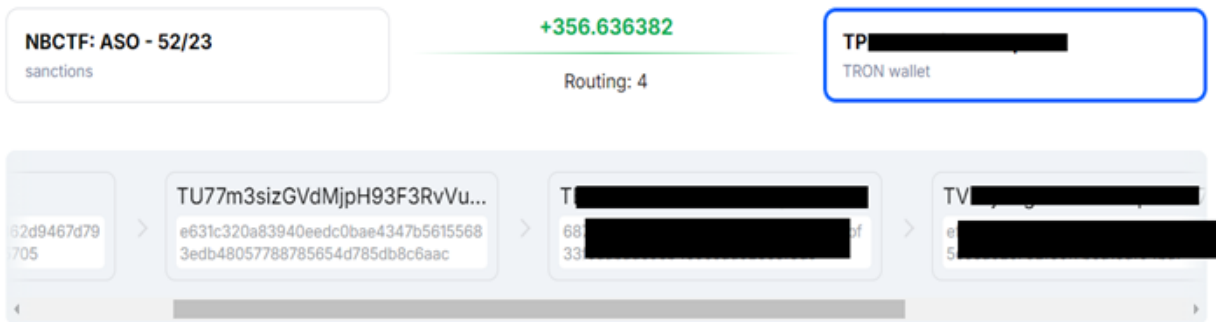


Figure 2.1

Connection analysis



SENDER	RECIPIENT
TV [REDACTED]	TP [REDACTED]
AMOUNT TRANSFERRED	
11,760 USDT ✓ · 11,766.37 USD	

Figure 2.2 (Crypto wallets redacted)

Alongside broader supporter-based networks, Pro-IS English-speaking women within the Al-Hol camp have been raising smuggling capital to orchestrate their escapes. (Figure 3). They direct supporters to channel transfers mainly through PayPal and Western Union transfers to IS-linked intermediaries based in Istanbul, Turkey. For PayPal transfers, senders are cautioned to avoid referencing the purpose of the transfer or using “suspicious” terms such as “Sadaqah,” (Arabic term for righteously and voluntarily giving charity), “Syria,” or “captives” in order to evade

scrutiny from law enforcement agencies, claiming that prior PayPal accounts linked to the campaign were suspended or blocked with them not being able to withdraw the transferred funds.

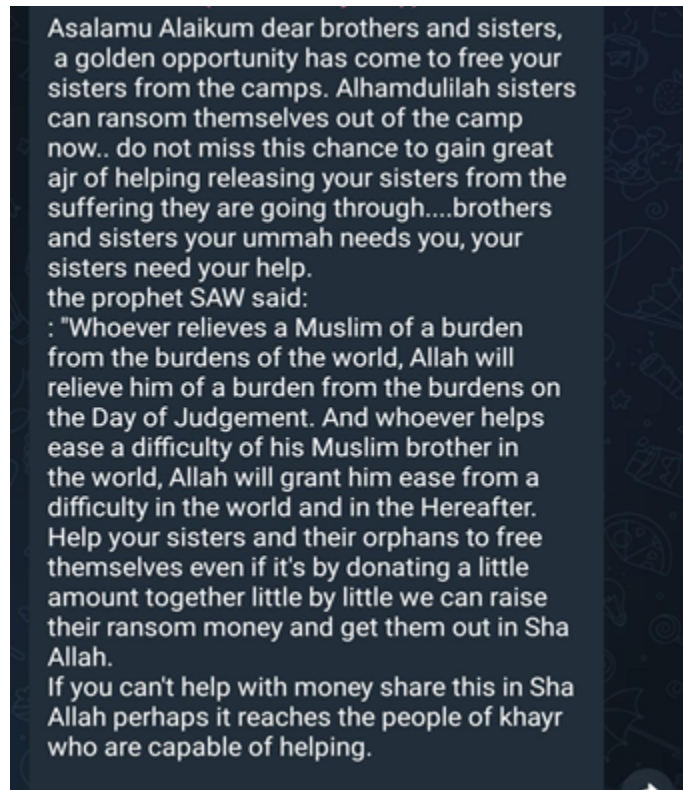


Figure 3.

The crime- terror convergence has long been established for [groups like IS](#), al-Qaeda, etc. This proved no different, as an analysis of the transactions directed to the Bitcoin address used by IS-linked financial network reveals a disconcerting intersection between terrorism financing and global criminal enterprises. A substantial portion of these transfers—amounting to thousands of dollars—originated from entities tied to major decentralized Russian darknet drug markets, including [OMG OMG](#), [Mega Dark net](#), [Solaris](#), and [Kraken Dark net](#). (See Figure 4). These transactions were further compounded by a significant influx of funds from coin mixers, such as Bitcoin [Wasabi Wallet](#), a privacy wallet – used to mix Bitcoin from different sources, and conceal their origin. Moreover, the incoming transfers were not limited to narcotics; they also involved entities engaged in ransomware attacks and hacking. Notably, direct transfers from North Korea's [notorious hacking group Lazarus](#) were identified to the Bitcoin address employed

by this IS linked network (See Figure 4) underscoring how both militant actors and global criminal enterprises are using the same crypto wallet addresses for obfuscating and laundering their illicit proceeds.

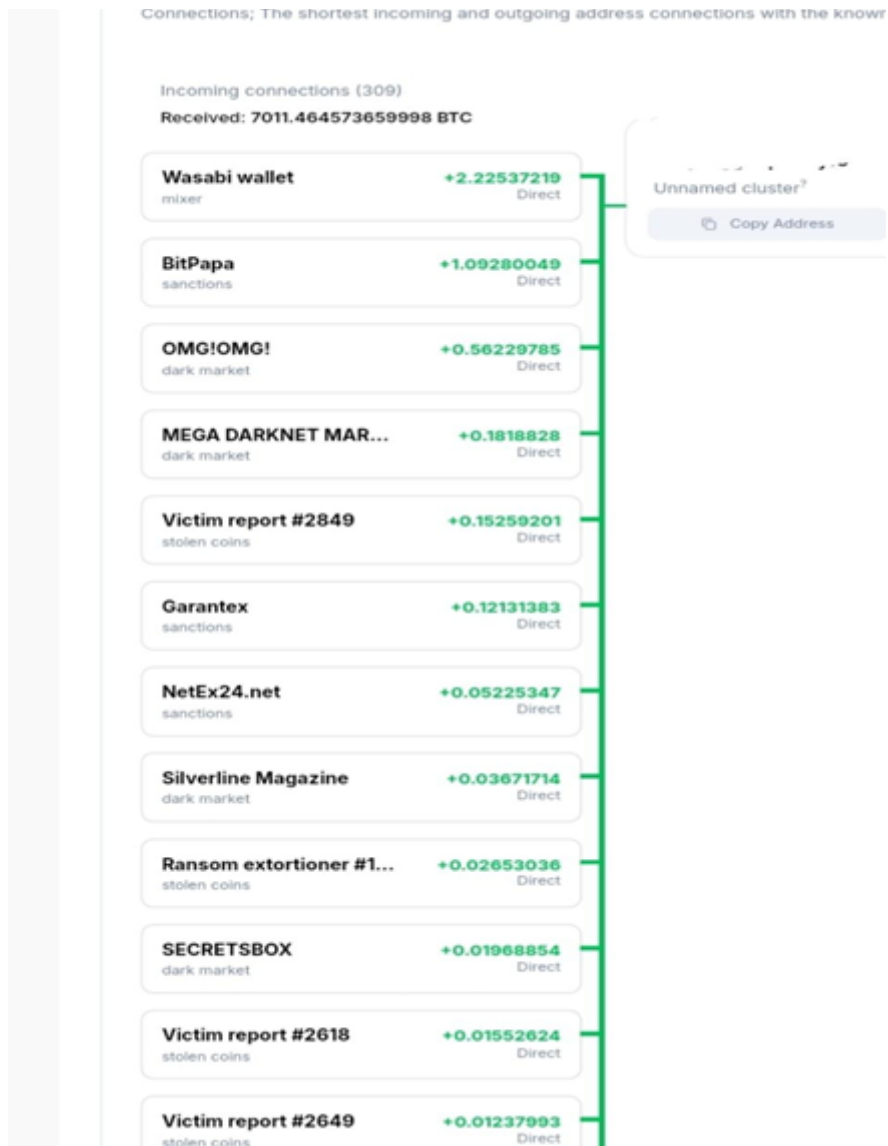


Figure 4. (Crypto Address redacted)

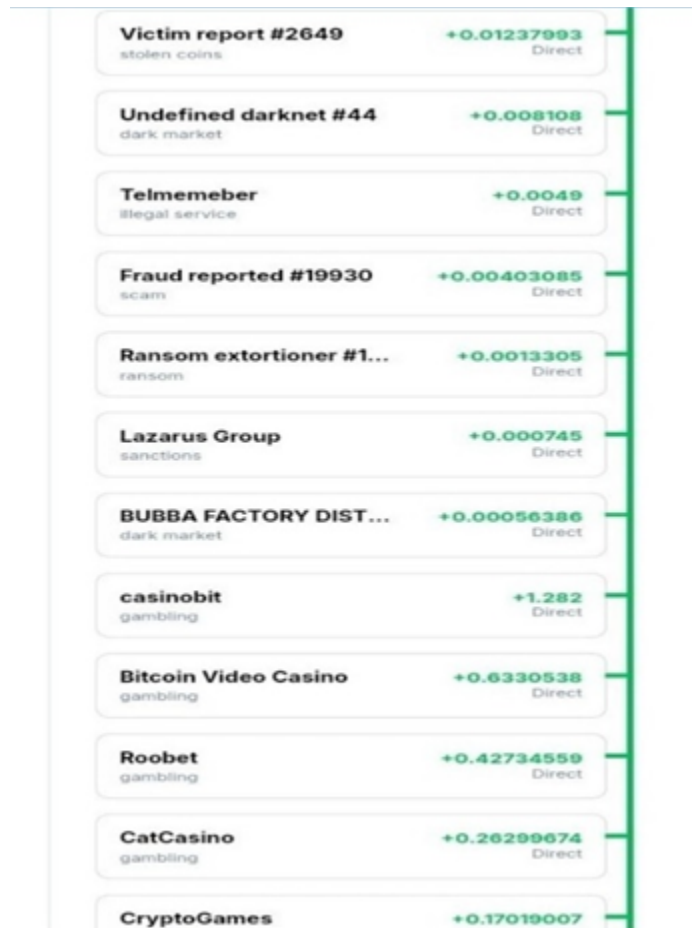


Figure 5.

Illicit money is allegedly being used not just for bribes to facilitate the release of IS prisoners in Syria, but also funneled to the IS militants on the battlefield in Syria. In August, an IS linked financial facilitator initiated a crowdfunding campaign, seeking \$5,000 for IS operatives in Syria, under the guise of an “agricultural investment scheme” for local farmers. The circulated message on Telegram read: “We are seeking investors to assist our hard-working entrepreneurs in acquiring tools for their diligent efforts in this blessed land of Sham. The investment goal is \$4,000.” (See Figure 6). The pro-IS channel referred to the eternal rewards of investment and circulated cryptic imagery to subtly imply that illicit funds were not intended for supporting agricultural activities but to the procurement of weapons for IS fighters. In one notable post, grenades were concealed among a basket of fruits, accompanied by the provocative question, ‘Which one is your favorite fruit?’ (Figure 7.)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

We are searching for investors interested in an awesome trade. It's a trade with 100% profit and 0% losses. Who wouldn't invest in a trade like this?

We are currently located in the land of ash-Sham, where our hardworking and zealous workers are planting the seeds, and are in need bit of financial aid for tools and their needs, in order to reap the fruits of their work. Our aim is to collect funds of 4000-5000\$ for our workers, but even greater investments are always accepted!

Don't think it as an investment in the fruits of this season only, but consider it as an investment in the eternal fruits. This opportunity doesn't come often, so take this opportunity to participate in the most awesome trade of your life! ✨🌿

The season is long and just about to begin, so get your share of the fruits and invest in this trade now! ✨🌿

For those who are interested, contact us

Figure 6.



Figure 7.

The use of centralized cryptocurrency exchanges has become a critical component in the facilitation of illicit transactions for this crowdfunding campaign as evidenced by nearly \$120,000 being funneled to the IS-linked Tron wallet address between August and September. Key exchanges include KuCoin, MEXC, OKX, Binance, Bing X, and Bitget, highlighting the significant role of centralized [crypto exchanges in laundering illicit funds for terror groups.](#) (Figure 8). In March 2024, U.S. federal prosecutors charged crypto trading platform KuCoin with [violations of anti-money laundering laws](#), for running an unlicensed money transmitting business and its failure to file required customer identity verifications and Suspicious Activity Reports (SARs). [Illicit actors are increasingly turning to DeFi finance](#) for moving funds across borders with minimal detection. Within this context transfers to IS- linked Tron addresses were also routed through decentralized trading platforms like [Change NOW](#) and sent to centralized exchanges including Turkey-based exchange [Paribu](#). (Figure 8)

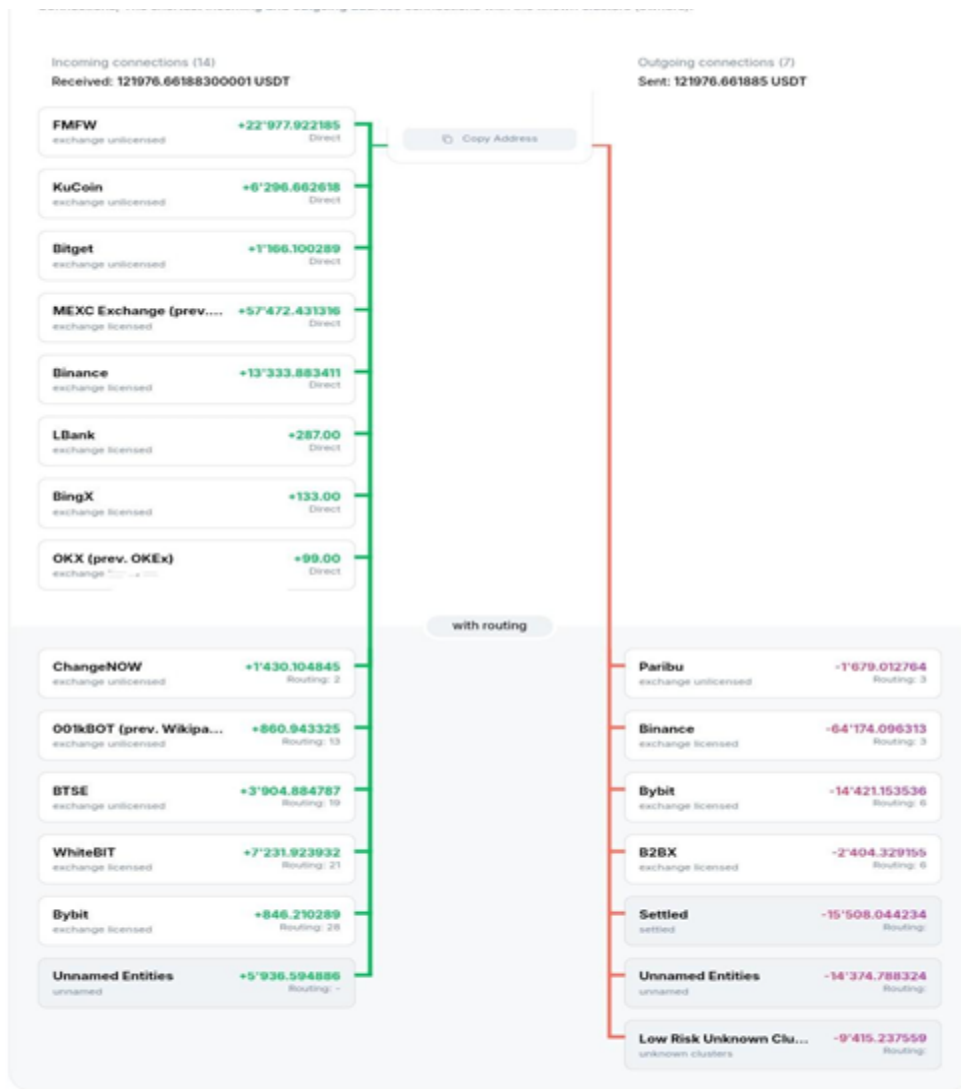


Figure 8.

In addition to these supporter based networks, the Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) Tajik network had continued to exploit its supporter base by running a crowdfunding campaign to financially aid the families of Tajik IS fighters held in the Syrian camps. However, as [reported by ICSVE and other media outlets the money](#) intended for the detainees was sent to the crypto address used by of the perpetrators of the deadly Moscow concert hall attack. Now in the discussions room of Russian IS women detainees on Telegram, a donation plea purportedly from the ISKP's Uzbek and Russian networks has surfaced, seeking funds to smuggle out four

Russian women into Turkey. (See Figure 9.) The plea, “from brothers in Khurasan,” claimed that the Russian women who were “waiting at the border” were in need of money to facilitate their smuggling into Turkey to “reunite with their families.” The Tron wallet address provided for donations received \$2000 August, primarily through Binance and other exchanges. Additionally, ISKP’s Tajik and Uzbek networks on Telegram have, for over a year, been encouraging supporters to send donations in USDT (TRC20) tokens with [untraceable privacy coins like Monero](#) being the first choice for accepting donations.

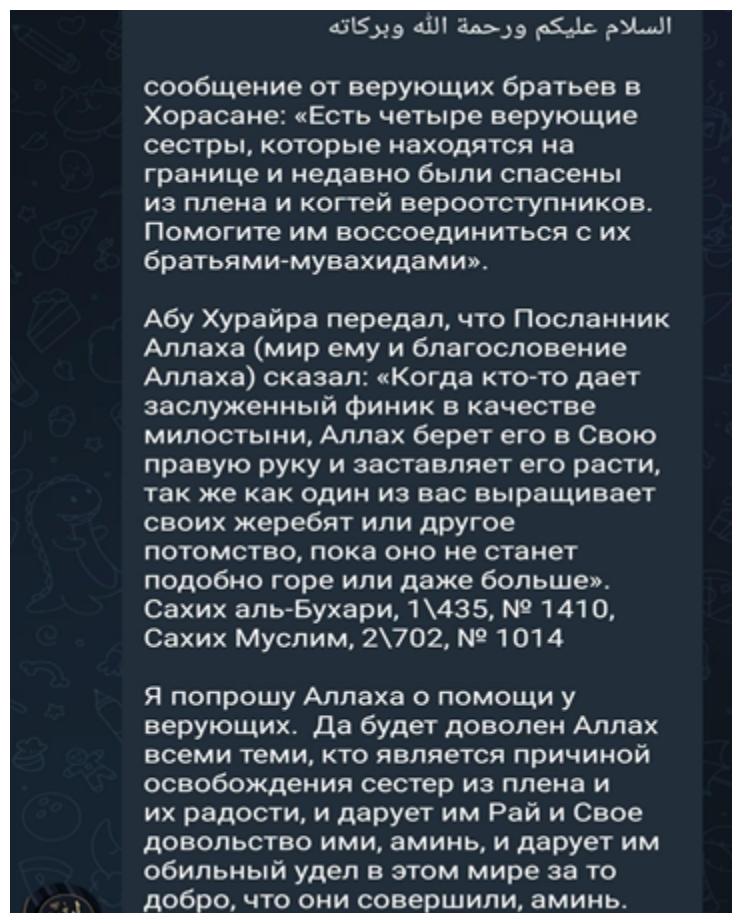



Figure 9.

 Assalamu alaykum wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuhu

SubhanAllah that's so ironic... All the places where the coalition with the Kurds fought hard on dawla al Islamiya, the Kurds are suffering a lot of human losses.

May Allah give victory to His Party,
May He preserve our Emir and his Soldiers,
and may He help them with His Soldiers!

اللهم صلى وسلم على نبينا محمد

 Ассалам Алейкум ва рахматуллахи ва баракатуху

Субханаллах, это так иронично... во всех местах, где коалиция с курдами ожесточенно сражалась на Даула аль-Исламия, курды несут много человеческих жертв.

да принесет Аллах победу своей партии,
да сохранит он нашего Эмира и его солдат
и да поможет им своими солдатами !

اللهم صلى وسلم على نبينا محمد



Figure 10.

Apart from the English speaking supporter networks, pro-IS Russian networks resurfaced in July to solicit donations worth \$2500- \$3000 (Figure.12) for each adolescent for smuggling them out of the Al-Hol followed by either being repatriated or joining the terror group. This comes at a time when the women in the discussion channels are infuriatingly complaining about camp authorities' undertaking heightened security and surveillance measures separating boys as young as 12 from IS women and placing them into ["de-radicalization centers"](#). This is a move that has escalated over the past years as the Kurdish authorities became aware of [IS women using young boys as "studs"](#) to impregnate them four at a time, (i.e. taking four temporary wives), training them to be guards and soldiers, ideologically indoctrinating them and generally encouraging them to enact violence against those who are no longer IS supporters. Pro-IS Russian entities have been securing international wire transfers through IS-linked financial intermediaries in Russia, Uzbekistan, and even in Europe including Austria, Ukraine while making claims of having raised \$45, 0000 (see Figure 11) last year to help 10 teenage boys escape. The majority of funds ostensibly coming from inside Russia have been facilitated through Russian digital payment applications like [QIWI wallets](#) and [Yandex Money](#). Senior [US officials](#) have also warned that every month a dozen of 10- to 15-year-old boys are smuggled out of Al-Hol to IS training camps in Syria.

With the permission of Allah, He is Holy and Great, we continue to provide for our children/teenagers.

Many people know that our sisters with children are in the camps, and children over 10-12 years old are taken to prisons, separated from the mothers and relatives. Think and imagine the state of children and mothers...

Up to today we have collected about 54-55000\$ and Praise be to Allah, He is Holy and Great, they left the camp. Now we urgently need to add the amount for several teenagers....

When opening a collection, first of all, we hope for Allah's blessing from Him, and then for your support and help.

The amount (per person) is constantly changing, but if you consider that it is for freedom... the one who is deprived of it (freedom) knows that it is priceless...

Figure 11.

is about \$2900, many thanks to Allah and then, may Allah reward everyone who did not pass by and does not pass by with good. Our collection is not closed and you must understand that there are still quite a few teenagers there who need to be pulled out. These 3 years of collection, for these teenagers, were not in vain and in vain, many thanks to Allah that they managed to get out and get to the right place. I am very happy for them, at least someone will be free) not everyone has this opportunity.... May Allah free all the captive Muslims and make them happy as much as these teenagers and even more. You simply cannot imagine what a reward you will receive for the release

Figure 12.

IS-linked entities have also laundered most of their funds via international wire transfers for over a year through what appears to be a shell company, "Aqua Creative Global." Ostensibly

fraudulently registered as a private limited e-commerce site in Hong Kong, the company's website lists an expired license and a fake office address. The shell company seems to be a part of a complex money laundering scheme and appears to have been channeling funds for IS and other criminal entities through its bank account with [Banking Circle SA' in Copenhagen Denmark, an established European commercial institution](#), headquartered in Luxembourg.

The findings of this study are consistent with the [UNSC's July monitoring report on IS and Al-Qaeda](#), which highlights that, while hawala transfers remain the primary method for moving illicit funds, IS has increasingly turned to cryptocurrency exchanges, e-wallets, and stable coins like Tether for fundraising and transferring money and they are also making use of [EU based banking system](#) allowing anyone to trace them. Prepaid cards and local digital money transfer apps are also frequently used, with [decentralized crypto platforms and services gradually](#) being adopted to further obscure the movement of illicit funds. IS and its financial transnational networks are gradually prioritizing and investing in raising capital for extracting adolescents and high-risk foreign IS detainees owing to the significant operational and propaganda value they have to offer. Many of these detainees are believed to have been freed by paying [bribes of \\$3000 to \\$10,000 to prison guards](#) and to the [SDF administration](#) or [Turkish-backed rebels](#) in charge of handling these detention facilities in their areas of control. However, the price for securing the release of foreign fighters is ostensibly much higher ranging from \$15,000 to \$25,000, as documented above. One Turkish journalist even posed as an seventy year old man from Europe willing to pay to smuggle the IS wife he married over the internet out of the [camps into Turkey](#) and further into Europe.

The smuggling of battle-hardened, radicalized foreign fighters and IS women with newly formed international networks out of Syrian prisons pose a grave threat that extends beyond Syria's borders. There are rising fears that their undetected [return to their home countries](#) facilitated by [expansive human smuggling networks](#) stretching from Asia to Europe could trigger ["blowback" attacks](#), significantly escalating the risk of domestic terrorism. Many former IS women are now disillusioned and wish to leave, seeing Turkey as a safer option than enduring assaults from IS women in the camps. In contrast, others remain committed believers, expecting the Caliphate to re-emerge. For IS however the foremost priority, above revenge for destroying their territorial Caliphate, remains to recover its lost personnel through successful prison breaks like that of the [2022 January attack on the Al-Sina prison](#) adhering to its "breaking the walls" campaign of coordinated attacks on Iraqi prisons in 2013 freeing scores of its fighters and enabling it to assemble a serious fighting force. In addition to smuggling schemes aimed at extracting loyalist detainees, the recent surge in [self-organized prison breaks](#) by IS prison inmates—further underscores the escalating security threat posed by the group as well as the

hopelessness and frustration of those imprisoned for years without charges or hopes of facing justice at home. Indeed disillusioned male ISIS fighters told the second author that the longer they were refused repatriation and the chance to face justice at home, the more it caused them to wonder if they had been wrong to turn their backs on the terror organization and if they could ever fit back into Western society, even while being willing to confess and serve prison time at home.

IS and its financial supporter networks on Telegram and other social media platforms have largely evaded rigorous crackdowns, significantly enhancing their fundraising capabilities to support the escape of detainees. The widespread adoption of cryptocurrencies, such as Bitcoin, USDT TRC20 tokens on the Tron block chain and Monero facilitates fund transfers with heightened anonymity and undermines traditional financial regulations. This situation presents considerable challenges for regulatory bodies and security agencies. Likewise, as the security situation in north eastern Syria remains tenuous it behooves all of our countries to rethink refusals to [repatriate](#). As documented, children growing up in the north-eastern Syrian camps are purportedly being smuggled out to the battlefield by IS with scores of radical foreign IS fighters and women dedicated to rebuilding the Caliphate. We must take responsible actions to facilitate the repatriation of IS fighters and their families to their home countries, where they can face justice. This requires a coordinated international response to dismantle [IS and its affiliates' extensive financial infrastructure](#), including the associated financial networks and supporter groups that aid in escaping the detained IS loyalists. If left unchecked, these financial networks will enable IS to further strengthen its ranks by freeing experienced detained members, contributing to its further resurgence.

Mona Thakkar is a research fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Violent Extremism, where she focuses on monitoring militant jihadist groups and their financial networks. Follow Mona on X: @ t16_mona

Anne Speckhard, Ph.D., is Director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) and served for over 2 decades as Adjunct Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Georgetown University School of Medicine and also served as an Affiliate in the Center for Security Studies, Georgetown University.

She has interviewed over 800 terrorists, violent extremists, their family members and supporters around the world, including in Western Europe, the Balkans, Central Asia, the Former Soviet Union and the Middle East. Over the past five years, she has conducted in-depth psychological interviews with 273 ISIS defectors, returnees and prisoners, as well as 16 al

Shabaab cadres (as well as family members and ideologues,) studying their trajectories into and out of terrorism, and their experiences inside ISIS and al Shabaab.

Speckhard developed the ICSVE *Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter Narrative Project* from these interviews, which includes over 250 short counter narrative videos that mimic ISIS recruitment videos but contain actual terrorists strongly denouncing ISIS as un-Islamic, corrupt and brutal. These videos have been utilized in over 200 Facebook and Instagram campaigns globally. Beginning in 2020, she launched the ICSVE *Escape Hate Counter Narrative Project*, interviewing dozens of white supremacists and members of hate groups, developing counternarratives from their interviews, and creating anti-recruitment videos. She has also conducted rare interviews with five Antifa activists (Antifa protestors rarely grant interviews.)

Dr. Speckhard is also an expert in rehabilitation and repatriation of terrorists and their families. In 2007, she designed the psychological and Islamic aspects of the Detainee Rehabilitation Program in Iraq to be applied to 20,000+ detainees and 800 juveniles. This work led to consulting with foreign governments on issues of terrorist prevention, interventions and repatriation; and the rehabilitation and reintegration of ISIS foreign fighters, wives and children. She has worked with NATO, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), UN Women, United Nations Countering Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (UNCTED), United Nations Office of Drug and Crime (UNODC), the EU Commission and EU Parliament, and to the U.S. Senate & House, Departments of State, Defense, Justice, Homeland Security, Health & Human Services, and the FBI.

Today Dr. Speckhard actively trains key stakeholders in law enforcement, intelligence, elite hostage negotiation teams, educators, and other professionals in countering violent extremism, locally and internationally. Her focus is on the psychology of terrorism, the effective use of counter-narrative messaging materials produced by ICSVE, as well as studying the use of children as violent actors by groups such as ISIS. Her consultations and trainings include U.S., Canadian, German, British, Dutch, Austrian, Swiss, Belgian, Danish, Iraqi, Syrian, Jordanian and Thai national police and security officials, among others.

Dr. Speckhard is the author of five books: *Homegrown Hate*, *Talking to Terrorists*, *Bride of ISIS*, *Undercover Jihadi*, and *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate*. She has appeared on CNN, BBC, NPR, Fox News, MSNBC, CTV, CBC, and in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *London Times*, *TIME Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *Daily Beast* and more. She regularly writes a column for *Homeland Security Today*. Her research has been published in *Global Security: Health, Science and Policy*, *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, *Journal of African Security*, *Journal of Strategic Security*, the *Journal of Human Security*, *Bidhaan: An International Journal of Somali Studies*, *Journal for Deradicalization*, *Perspectives on Terrorism* and the *International Studies Journal*. Her academic publications are found at <https://georgetown.academia.edu/AnneSpeckhard> and www.icsve.org.

ICSVE's Breaking the ISIS Brand and Escape Hate Counternarrative videos and training seminars can be watched on [ICSVE's YouTube channel](#).

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