

Former teacher charged with aiding ISIS

BY RACHEL WEINER

A former teacher from Kansas became a rare female combat leader in the Islamic State, teaching other women and children to use guns and bombs, federal prosecutors said in a case unsealed Friday night.

Allison Fluke-Ekren, 42, was charged with material support for terrorism in 2019 but was only brought to the Eastern District of Virginia on Friday evening after a recent arrest in Syria.

She led an Islamic State military battalion, tried to plan a terrorist attack on an American college campus and taught and translated extremist doctrine, prosecutors say.

Women make up only about 10 percent of those charged by the United States with supporting the Islamic State, and no previous case has involved someone accused of holding such a powerful position in the group. Experts have debated how large a role women played in armed conflict on behalf of the Islamic State. Although the group enforced strict gender codes, violence by women was never banned. When its territory in Iraq and Syria came under attack 2016 and 2017, leaders explicitly encouraged women to take up arms.

Fluke-Ekren was a key part of that effort, prosecutors contend.

“Fluke-Ekren translated her extremist beliefs into action by serving as the appointed leader and organizer of an Islamic State military battalion, directly training women and children in the use of AK-47 assault rifles, grenades, and suicide belts to support the Islamic State’s murderous aims,” wrote First Assistant U.S. Attorney Raj Parekh in a detention memo.

According to the court record, Fluke-Ekren left the United

States in 2008 for Egypt; she migrated to Libya in 2011 and then Syria a year later, where she hoped to join a violent Islamist movement. Authorities say her husband traveled with her and became a sniper trainer for the Islamic State; he later died in an airstrike and is not named in court records.

In 2014, he designed a plan to plant explosives at a U.S. college in retaliation for an airstrike, an alleged witness told authorities. The plan was approved by Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, according to prosecutors, but never came to fruition after Fluke-Ekren became pregnant.

She also allegedly hosted new Islamic State recruits; witnesses told authorities they were struck by how many assault rifles were in her home. According to the criminal complaint, one saw her child holding a machine gun when he was 5 or 6 years old.

After the husband she traveled with died, Fluke-Ekren married a drone expert, who also died. Her next husband was a prominent military leader responsible for the defense of Raqqa, prosecutors said. It was after their marriage, according to the government, that the city’s Islamic State-appointed leader approved the creation of a female military battalion and made Fluke-Ekren its leader. She is accused of helping the women prepare for a coming siege of Raqqa by Kurdish forces in 2017 with training in martial arts, driving cars armed with explosive devices, and packing “go bags” of rifles and other weapons. Witnesses describe her as fluent in Arabic, English, Spanish and Turkish.

In 2018, according to prosecutors, she sought to evade capture by U.S. authorities by arranging for a message to be sent to her family in the United States claim-

ing she was dead. At the same time she said she intended to die as a martyr for the Islamic State, prosecutors said.

Devorah Margolin, who studies the role of women in violent Islamic movements at George Washington University, said the case is unique. She is only the third American woman who has been repatriated to be charged with joining the Islamic State, and none of the others are described as having such a prominent role.

Under the Islamic State, “the ideal space for women is in the private sphere, in the home,” she said. But exceptions were made, particularly for foreign women married to high-ranking fighters.

“A lot of these women are just as bloodthirsty and lustful for this violence and adventure as the men,” Margolin said. Under Islamic State doctrine, “when lands are under attack it becomes an individual duty for all to participate, including women.”

The prosecution’s witnesses against Fluke-Ekren included a paid foreign government source, detainees in prison camps for Islamic State members and a person convicted in the United States, according to the court record. Thousands of women from the Islamic State were held in a detention camp in Northeast Syria, where some were killed by the most radical detainees for failing to adhere to the rules of the Islamic State.

Fluke-Ekren is set to appear in federal court in Alexandria on Monday, when she will be appointed an attorney. Family members could not immediately be reached for comment Saturday.

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