

RULE OF TERROR

Living Under the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

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The armed group, the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” (also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS) has made calculated use of public brutality and indoctrination to ensure the submission of communities under its control. A terrorist group, as designated by the United Nations Security Council under Resolution 2170, it has become synonymous with extreme violence directed against civilians and captured fighters.

This report is based on first-hand victim and witness accounts describing the impact of ISIS’s rule on their lives. Based on over three hundred interviews with men, women, and children who fled or who are living in ISIS-controlled areas in Syria, we bring to light the voices of Syrians ISIS has sought to silence.

In addition, the report is informed by the publications, photographs, and video footage distributed by the armed group. The material disseminated by ISIS actively promotes their abuses and crimes. This is in marked contrast to the government of the Syrian Arab Republic and other belligerents who conceal evidence of their violations and abuses. While this report addresses ISIS conduct, this should not obscure that other parties to the conflict continue to commit egregious violations against civilians and captured belligerents.

By publicizing its brutality, ISIS seeks to convey its authority over its areas of control, to show its strength to attract recruits, and to threaten any individuals, groups, or states that challenge its ideology. The group has attacked journalists and activists trying to communicate the daily suffering of those living under its yoke. Those still living inside ISIS-controlled areas are often too frightened to speak out, fearing retribution.

▷ *Syrians fleeing Islamic State in Iraq and Syria forces, Akçakale, Turkey, June 14, 2015. Bülent Kiliç/AFP/Getty Images*

The Rise of ISIS in Syria

Initially, ISIS was one faction among hundreds of other armed groups in Syria. In April 2013, it began



to develop into a well-organized, dominant armed force in control of large swaths of populated areas in Syria and Iraq, posing a significant threat to peace and stability in the region.

Its origins lie in the establishment of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) by Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi in 2004. After merging with other Iraqi jihadist groups in 2006, AQI rebranded itself as the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). Although degraded by the 2006–2011 U.S. counterterrorism campaign in Iraq, the group took advantage of the instability in the region to further recruit and mobilize, a process that accelerated with the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. In 2011, ISI members joined local radical militants in Syria as part of the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat Al-Nusra (Nusra Front) armed group to fight against government forces.

Following a split with Jabhat Al-Nusra in April 2013, the newly established ISIS appropriated most of Al-Nusra's capabilities and manpower. Prioritizing the construction of a "state" over fighting the Syrian government, ISIS consolidated its authority by stifling dissent and targeting local community leaders, other armed group commanders, and activists. This triggered mounting resentment, which led to armed confrontations with other major armed groups in early 2014. Following a withdrawal to its strongholds in northeastern Syria, the group consolidated its military control and financial capacity.

ISIS's resources were eventually reinforced significantly by the group's gains in Iraq in July 2014. Since then, the group has steadily expanded its control over natural resources and territory in eastern Syria. Sporadic fighting in the Kurdish regions of northern Syria escalated into a protracted, intense sub-conflict between the Kurdish armed group People's Protection Units (YPG) and ISIS.

The group's ideology and financial capabilities found resonance among socially and economically desperate communities. Locally, it exploited the gradual empowerment of the most radical armed groups and the existing social fragmentations along sectarian and tribal lines to secure a new network of alliances among local and external supporters.

Until the group's successful campaign in Iraq, the threat it posed to regional stability was underestimated by the international community. The failure to find a political solution or any other alternative to stop the violence in Syria and to relieve the population's suffering left a dangerous vacuum that was filled by radicals and their foreign backers.

The external support provided to all belligerents in Syria has contributed to the radicalization of armed groups, ultimately benefitting ISIS. Charity organizations and wealthy individuals funded radical entities willing to promote their ideologies and serve their agendas. Arms and support provided to armed groups deemed as moderate have repeatedly fallen into the hands of more radical actors, including ISIS.

The arrival of large numbers of foreign fighters has contributed to the group's expansion as the most extreme and experienced individuals have joined its ranks.

Until very recently, the international community and neighboring states failed to put in place efficient measures to prevent access to the conflict area.

ISIS functions under responsible command and has a hierarchical structure, including a policy level. The group has established a command and control system under Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, an Iraqi, who holds absolute power and is supported by a number of entities including a military council. ISIS also depends on a network of regional and local emirs and military commanders to enforce tight discipline among its ranks and ensure full control of its territory. In recent months, the group has also relied on its centralized military leadership to coordinate large redeployments of fighters and equipment to different frontlines. Despite the recruitment of thousands of Syrians to its ranks, the ISIS leadership structure is still largely dominated by non-Syrian fighters.

The armed group's military capabilities have grown. It has extensively employed brutal tactics, including the use of explosive weapons, mass civilian casualty attacks through suicide or remote-detonated car bombs, and the execution of fighters captured during military operations. The group has also relied on its increased mobility and firepower capabilities to surprise its opponents and ensure local superiority. Its military strategy also includes the negotiation of local agreements with various groups as part of a divide-and-rule policy.

ISIS initially relied on military hardware looted from the other Syrian armed belligerents including materiel provided by their external backers. The group significantly boosted its military capabilities after its successful campaign in Iraq. Its financial independence has further allowed the group to acquire military hardware through local markets.

ISIS simultaneously battles Syrian government forces, anti-government armed groups, and Kurdish forces on a number of distinct fronts. Throughout 2015, ISIS captured strategic areas in central Syria, including Tadmur, which includes the ancient ruins of Palmyra, in May 2015, and Al-Qaraytain, in August 2015. These successes allowed access to new resources, including oil fields east of Homs and armament depots near Tadmur.

ISIS was also able to open better lines of communications with its positions in the central and southern governorates. There the group has significantly increased its presence and activities, often by absorbing new loyalties among local militant groups operating far beyond its strongholds.

In April 2015, ISIS attempted to seize the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in the southern suburbs of Damascus, attacked rebels in eastern Aleppo governorate, and expanded in areas in Suweida and Daraa governorates. While these operational gains and losses have led to the deaths of many ISIS fighters, including commanders, more have joined the group, many clandestinely crossing Syrian borders.

Since January 2015, ISIS has suffered a string of losses in northeastern and eastern Syria at the hands of the YPG, which has been supported by the international coalition airstrikes and armed militia including Assyrian and Arab tribal groups. The anti-ISIS international coalition efforts have proved effective only when conducted alongside ground operations by the YPG.

In Al-Raqqah and other areas it controls, ISIS operates a primitive but rigid administrative system that comprises the Al-Hisbah morality police, the general police force, courts, and entities managing recruitment, tribal relations, and education. The group sustains the areas under its control by maintaining some basic services in a highly repressive environment.

On June 29, 2014, ISIS proclaimed itself a caliphate initially based on, but not limited to, territories it controls in Syria and Iraq. Its creation had formed an integral part of the group's rhetorical and military expansionist aims since the outset of its activities. For those inclined to join the movement, the existence of the newly self-proclaimed entity served as an additional motivating factor to join the group. New recruits were not only expected to engage in military activity but also help with building the emerging "state." This declaration demonstrates that the group envisions a long-term plan and has undertaken military operations toward this end.

At the core of ISIS's propaganda strategy is an effective use of modern communications, particularly social media for purposes of recruitment and fundraising. Many new recruits, from the region and beyond, have been influenced by widely disseminated violent images of executions, beheadings, and stonings.

Impact on Civilian Life

I told the guards that my cousin was imprisoned only because he had said something that ISIS considered to be blasphemous. I said this was not correct, and that it should be for God to deliver his own sentence. This made the guards very angry. They pushed me violently, forcing me to the ground and beating me. I was whipped four hundred times and imprisoned for several weeks.

—Interviewee from Aleppo

The ISIS emir answered me in a harsh tone: "Why? Do you have your house here? Do you have your village here? This is not your village and you have no house. I don't want to see you talk about a house here. You don't belong here. By tomorrow not one of you will remain here or come back here."

—Kurdish interviewee forced from his home in northern Aleppo

Civilians, including men, women, and children, and ethnic and religious minorities, who remain in ISIS-controlled areas, live in fear. Victims and witnesses that fled consistently described being subjected to acts that terrorize and aim to silence the population. ISIS has systematically targeted sources of dissent, detaining and threatening activists, non-governmental organization workers, and journalists with death. Most have fled and ceased reporting from ISIS areas.

In areas under the armed group's control, civilians have experienced a relentless assault on their basic freedoms. ISIS enforces its rules summarily, inflicting harsh penalties discriminating against those who transgress or refuse to accept their self-proclaimed rule. ISIS has obstructed the exercise of religious freedoms, the freedom of expression, assembly and association, which are guaranteed by international law. The group has systematically enforced its edicts through its Al-Hisbah morality police to conduct constant surveillance within local communities. Children have been asked to inform on their parents' compliance with ISIS rules. Civilians who fled described a rapid imposition of strict social instructions followed by brutal enforcement. ISIS has attacked social and cultural practices—including weddings, musical events, and traditional ceremonies—deemed incompatible with their self-proclaimed beliefs in both urban and rural areas, demonstrating their intent to eradicate these aspects of Syrian culture.

Many residents of ISIS-held areas complained of the brutality of violent acts perpetrated under the guise of corporal *budud* punishments based on the group's radical interpretation of sharia law, including lashings and amputations, for offenses such as smoking cigarettes or theft. Victims of ISIS punishments described being subjected to a system based on the principle that "you are guilty unless you can prove your innocence." Corporal punishments are imposed during public events in an effort to deter those who may oppose the group's rule and to spread terror among the civilian population.

Humanitarian actors supporting the population's access to food have been unable to reach some six hundred thousand people in ISIS-controlled Dayr Al-Zawr and Al-Raqqah governorates since May and July 2014, respectively. In Al-Hasakah governorate, ISIS obstructed the importation of medicine by doctors and medical personnel. One interviewee said that, in April 2014, "once ISIS took over, people who left ISIS areas to get medicine risked being arrested by ISIS." Doctors and nurses described fleeing due to the restrictions on their professional activities imposed by ISIS. By preventing the supply of humanitarian aid, the group reinforces the dependence of civilians on the services it controls.

The group deploys its fighters and materiel in close proximity to civilian areas. Since the start of the international coalition's aerial attacks on ISIS (Operation Inherent

Resolve), civilians living in Manbij in Aleppo governorate described how ISIS fighters began to position themselves in civilian houses and farms. Airstrikes on ISIS positions have led to some civilian casualties. In one instance, a civilian whose relatives were killed in a coalition airstrike was forced to flee because he complained to ISIS about its presence near his home.

Where ISIS has occupied areas with diverse ethnic and religious communities, minorities have been forced either to assimilate or flee. The armed group has undertaken a policy of imposing discriminatory sanctions such as taxes or forced conversion—on the basis of ethnic or religious identity—destroying religious sites and systematically expelling minority communities. Evidence shows a manifest pattern of violent acts directed against certain groups with the intent to curtail and control their presence within ISIS areas.

Between September and October 2013, ISIS fighters attacked three Christian churches in Al-Raqqah governorate, destroying the Greek Catholic church, occupying Al-Shuhada Armenian Orthodox church in Al-Raqqah city, and burning an Armenian church in Tel Abyad. As ISIS spread throughout eastern Syria, Christians and their places of worship continued to be attacked. In September 2014, ISIS fighters destroyed an Armenian church in Dayr Al-Zawr.

On February 23, 2014, ISIS published a statement addressing Christians that had fled Al-Raqqah establishing conversion to Islam and the payment of a *jizya* tax as conditions for their return. The forced conversion of several Assyrian Christians has been documented.

Father Dall'Oglio, an Italian Jesuit priest and a peace activist who had been exiled from Syria in 2012 after criticizing the government, was abducted in Al-Raqqah city by ISIS on July 29, 2013. His fate and whereabouts remain unknown.

ISIS began to forcibly displace Kurdish civilians from towns in Al-Raqqah governorate in July 2013. After demanding that all Kurds leave Tel Abyad or else be killed, thousands of civilians, including Turkmen and Arab families, fled on July 21. Its fighters systematically looted and destroyed the property of Kurds, and in some cases, resettled displaced Arab Sunni families from the Qalamoun area (Rif Damascus), Dayr Al-Zawr, and Al-Raqqah in abandoned Kurdish homes. A similar pattern was documented in Tel Arab and Tel Hassel in July 2013. As ISIS consolidated its authority in Al-Raqqah, Kurdish civilians were forcibly displaced from Tel Akhdar and Ayn Al-Arab (better known by its Kurdish name, Kobane) in northern Aleppo governorate in March and September 2014, respectively. As a direct consequence of ISIS conduct, which runs contrary to international humanitarian law and amounts to the war crime of displacing civilians, the demographics of northeastern Syria have been altered.

Perpetrated as a widespread and systematic attack against the Kurdish civilian population, these acts amount to the crime against humanity of forcible displacement. According to former residents, attacks on Shiite *busaynias* and homes in Al-Raqqah caused mass displacement, while others converted “to survive.” The complete destruction of the Uwais Al-Qarni Shiite Mosque and the desecration of seventh-century tombs on May 31, 2014 in Al-Raqqah were carried out as part of an assault against Shiites in the area. Sunni mosques constructed around tombs or shrines of religious figures have been considered idolatrous and also destroyed by ISIS.

ISIS carries out large-scale victimization through the systematic imposition of harsh restrictions on basic rights and freedoms indicating an underlying policy. The brutal nature and overall scale of abuses is intended to reinforce the group’s absolute monopoly on political and social life to enforce compliance and conformity among communities under their control. Imposition of severe measures disguised as religious edicts has formed part of the attack against the civilian population, in addition to the perpetration of armed violence against civilians, mistreatment of persons taking no active part in hostilities, and violence against identified communities.

In attacking churches, historic monuments, and buildings dedicated to religion and culture, which did not contain any military objectives, ISIS violated its obligations under customary international humanitarian law. Targeted as such, ISIS has perpetrated the war crime of attacking protected objects. These crimes were committed as part of ISIS’s attack on the civilian population in Al-Raqqah, Dayr Al-Zawr, and Aleppo governorates, deliberately inflicting terror. The result of these attacks has been the expulsion of large segments of these communities and the subjugation of those who remained.

Attacks on the Civilian Population

Both victims’ hands were tied to each side of the improvised cross. I went to read the placards. On the first one it read, “This is the fate of those who fight against us.” I realized that my 7-year-old son was next to me, still holding my hand and watching this horrifying scene. He later asked me, “Why were they there? Why was their blood on the heads and bodies?” I had to lie to him and say they were waiting for ambulances to come and rescue them.

—Witness to the displayed bodies of ISIS victims, Dayr Al-Zawr

ISIS declared through mosques that *hudud*, in this case for looting, would be implemented against someone in [a public square]. At the designated time on the following day, a man was brought to the square, blindfolded. A member of

ISIS read the group's judgment. Two people held the victim tight while a third man stretched his arm over a large wooden board. A fourth man cut off the victim's hand. It took a long time. One of the people who was standing next to me vomited and passed out due to the horrific scene.

—Witness to an amputation in Al-Raqqa

ISIS has beheaded, shot, and stoned men, women, and children in public spaces in towns and villages across northeastern Syria. ISIS employs the practice of *takfir*, declaring someone to be a heretic, in order to justify attacks on any individual or group it perceives to be a challenge to its dominance. Many of those executed were accused of being affiliated with other armed groups or collaborating with the government. In public declarations made before the executions, ISIS has designated such people as *kufar* or infidels.

The mutilated bodies of male victims are often placed on display, a warning to the local population of the consequences of failure to submit to the armed group's authority. One man, a witness to the killing of a 16-year-old boy in Al-Ashara (Dayr Al-Zawr governorate), said the boy's body was hung on a cross in a public square "for people to see what it looks like to be punished by ISIS."

Executions have been recorded in Aleppo, Al-Raqqa, Idlib, Al-Hasakah, and Dayr Al-Zawr governorates. They follow a consistent pattern. ISIS, often through the Al-Hisbah morality police, informs residents of the time and place of the execution and urges them to attend. Those found on the streets nearby are taken by force to witness the killings. Before executions, ISIS fighters announce the victims' "crimes." Following the killings, the corpses are placed on public display, often on crosses, for up to three days, serving as a warning to local residents. Witnesses saw scenes of still-bleeding bodies hanging from crosses and of heads placed on spikes along park railings.

Interviewees have remarked that executions have become common and that there are "always" heads and bodies on display in the squares and roundabouts of the larger towns. The growing desensitization underpins the trauma of the civilian population.

ISIS also carries out amputations and lashings in public spaces in its areas of control. Men have had their hands amputated for allegedly committing theft. The group has also amputated the fingers of men caught smoking. Men have been lashed for being in the company of women who ISIS considers to be "improperly" dressed, for smoking, not attending Friday prayers, trading during prayer times, and for having tattoos.

ISIS regards the Yazidi Kurdish community as infidels and their religious practices "deviant." On May 29, 2014, ISIS attacked Al-Talilyah (Al-Hasakah governorate), which used to contain a Yazidi Kurdish community. The village had been taken over by internally displaced persons, most of whom were women and children, from

Al-Safira (Aleppo governorate). ISIS fighters—mainly foreign fighters who did not speak Arabic and so could not understand the protestations of those they were killing—believed their victims to be Yazidi Kurds. The executions halted only when an Iraqi fighter arrived and translated to the other ISIS fighters that the civilians were Sunni Arabs.

ISIS has set up detention centers in former government prisons, military bases, hospitals, schools, and in private houses. Former detainees described being beaten, whipped, electrocuted, and suspended by their arms from walls or the ceiling. Witnesses to public executions remarked that the victims often bore signs of prior beatings. Detainees are held in dirty and overcrowded cells. Many spent long periods of time in handcuffs. Detainees interviewed stated that neither they nor their cellmates received medical treatment. One detainee recalled a Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighter being left in his cell beaten, with his hands cuffed behind his back and an open fracture on his leg.

ISIS has sought to control the flow of information in the areas it holds. Scores of Syrian journalists and human rights activists have been abducted, disappeared, tortured, and executed. Their targeting largely failed to attract widespread media attention. As early as June 2013, ISIS began to abduct and torture Syrian journalists in Aleppo and Al-Raqqah governorates. Former prisoners stated that the most brutal treatment inside ISIS detention centers was meted out to those suspected of being part of other armed groups, local media workers, and fixers working with international journalists.

One journalist, abducted in June 2013, was beaten in the ISIS detention center in Jarablus (Aleppo governorate) and accused of being a spy. Another Syrian journalist, held in an ISIS detention center in Al-Raqqah governorate in January 2014, was beaten and, upon release, was threatened with death if he photographed or filmed any of the armed group's activities, with one fighter telling him, "We will make sure you will never again be able to do anything on top of the earth."

In October and November 2013, journalists working for international television channels were killed in Aleppo city. Since that time, media workers have disappeared in ISIS-controlled areas; their fate and whereabouts remain unknown. On or about August 19 and September 2, 2014, ISIS executed two American journalists. On September 13, 2014, the group executed a British aid worker. All three had been abducted and detained in Syria. The group filmed the executions, attempting to impact international policy and the anticipated aerial attacks on their positions.

Journalists and activists working to document the violations and abuses suffered by their local communities under ISIS have been denied their special protection under international humanitarian law and have been disappeared, detained, tortured, and killed.

As an organized armed group exercising effective control over territory, ISIS has an obligation to ensure humane treatment. By regularly using violence to life, torture, mutilation, and cruel treatment, ISIS is violating binding international humanitarian law. Its commanders can be held individually responsible for the ensuing war crimes.

Subjecting persons to mutilation, by permanently disfiguring or disabling them through the removal of appendages, amounts to the war crime of mutilation, cruel treatment, and torture. Displays of dead, mutilated bodies are deliberate acts intended to humiliate and degrade the victims and their families, amounting to the war crime of outrages upon personal dignity.

By orchestrating systematic harm against a civilian population, ISIS has demonstrated its capacity and intent to willfully apply measures of intimidation and terror, such as violence to life, and inhuman treatment inflicting great suffering and injury to bodily integrity.

ISIS has committed torture and murder as part of an attack on a civilian population in Aleppo, Al-Raqqah, Dayr Al-Zawr, and Al-Hasakah governorates, amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity. The war crime of murder has been committed in Idlib governorate. The group has further committed the crime against humanity of enforced disappearance in Al-Raqqah and Aleppo governorates.

Violations Against Women

A 19-year-old university student committed suicide because her parents forced her to marry a man from members of ISIS. Many families marry their daughters (including those under 18) to ISIS members because of their fears to be arrested or killed.

—Interviewee from Al-Raqqah

After capture, the Yazidi women and children were then divided according to the sharia amongst the fighters ... who participated in the Sinjar operations, after one-fifth of the slaves were transferred to the IS's authority to be divided as *khums* [spoils of war].

—*Dabiq* (ISIS publication)

In ISIS-controlled areas of Syria, women and girls have largely been confined to their houses, excised from public life. ISIS regulations dictate what women must wear, with whom they may socialize, and where they may work. Women and girls over the age of 10 must be fully covered when venturing outdoors. One woman, who had fled from the ISIS stronghold of Manbij (Aleppo governorate), described her clothing being checked

at multiple checkpoints as she moved about the town. She explained, “You can hardly see your way. . . . I fell many times. It is hard to breathe. You are walking in the street but it feels like a prison cell.” Women and girls are not permitted to be in the company of men outside of their immediate family. For women whose male relatives are dead, missing, or fighting, the simple act of going to purchase food has become a hazardous undertaking.

ISIS rules exacerbate the subordinate role of women in society, reinforcing patriarchal attitudes. Failure to abide by these rules is punishable by lashing. Punishments may be carried out by the Al-Hisbah morality police but increasingly they are the responsibility of the all-female brigade, Al-Khansaa, which assists in monitoring adherence to dress codes and enforcing punishments.

These enforcement brigades act in violation of international humanitarian law and perpetrate the war crimes of outrages upon personal dignity, torture, and cruel treatment against women. The psychological and physical harm caused by ISIS’s treatment of women, the onerous instructions imposed on their dress code, and restrictions on their freedom of movement demonstrate discriminatory treatment on the basis of gender.

Unmarried women—whom ISIS considers to be females over the age of puberty—pose a particular threat to the armed group’s enforced social order. Parents of unmarried women and girls are terrified of their daughters being forced to marry ISIS fighters and as a result, early marriage is on the rise. Their fears are not unfounded. There are distressing accounts of fighters taking girls as young as 13 away from their families, resulting in violations of international humanitarian law and acts that amount to war crimes of cruel treatment, sexual violence, and rape.

ISIS has executed women, as well as men, for unapproved contact with the opposite sex resulting in charges of adultery. In Al-Raqqah governorate, ISIS executed eight women on these grounds on three separate occasions in June and July 2014. Most were stoned to death, ostensibly for adultery. Others interviewed indicated that the women had been discovered helping fighters from other armed groups. According to footage released by ISIS, the women were made to stand, while veiled with their hands bound to their sides, in a shallow grave, while men hurled large rocks at their heads until they collapsed and eventually died from their injuries. Stonings, perpetrated by ISIS and allied clans, have recently been documented in Dayr Al-Zawr and Hama governorates. In August 2014, ISIS detained and beheaded a female dentist in Al-Mayadin (Dayr Al-Zawr governorate) who had continued to treat patients of both sexes. These killings violate binding international humanitarian law and amount to the war crimes of torture, cruel treatment, outrages upon personal dignity, murder, and sentencing and execution without due process. The killings and acts of sexual violence, perpetrated by ISIS as part of its attack on the civilian population, constitute the crimes against humanity of murder, torture, rape, and sexual violence.

During its early August 2014 attack on Sinjar in northern Iraq, ISIS abducted hundreds of Yazidi women and girls. Some abductees have been taken into Syria and sold as “war booty” in markets in locations across Al-Raqqah. Regarded as chattels, these women and girls are imprisoned in houses and are being held in sexual slavery. As of mid-2015, ISIS held over one thousand Yazidi women and girls in sexual slavery. Sold and re-sold, girls as young as age 9 are subjected to repeated rapes and beatings.

While some women appear to have been sold to individual men living in Al-Raqqah, others are held in ISIS rest houses in urban areas in the governorate. Those held by ISIS are suffering rapes by multiple fighters returning from the battlefield. The systematic sexual violence and enslavement—perpetrated by ISIS and by the men who have bought them at public auction—is continuing.

ISIS has publicized its own intentions regarding these violations, stating, “After capture, the Yazidi women and children were then divided according to the sharia amongst the fighters ... who participated in the Sinjar operations, after one-fifth of the slaves were transferred to the IS’s authority to be divided as *khums* [spoils of war].” The group, in its magazine, welcomes the enslavement of the Yazidi women, declaring one of the signs of the *hour* [apocalypse] to be when “the slave girl gives birth to her master.” In sexually enslaving Yazidi women and girls and forcing them to bear the children of ISIS fighters, the armed group views the offspring as belonging to the father, superior to the mother, and prevents another generation of Yazidis from being born.

ISIS attacks on Yazidi women and girls now being held inside Syria are violations of international humanitarian law and amount to the war crime of sexual slavery, sexual violence, rape, and forced pregnancy.

The enslavement of Yazidi women was undertaken as part of ISIS’s attack on civilian communities considered to be infidels. Their treatment in unlawful confinement and stated motivation behind their capture and enslavement demonstrate the intent of ISIS to forcibly impregnate and thereby affect the ethnic and religious composition of the group. Undertaken as part of a widespread and systematic attack, these acts amount to the crimes against humanity of enslavement, rape, and sexual violence. The nature of attacks on the Yazidis, taken together with ISIS’s public statements over social media, suggests a denial of this religious group’s right to exist.

Violations Against Children

I saw at least ten armed ISIS members aged 13–14 years old. These boys served as guards at ISIS headquarters and at checkpoints. They were armed with Kalashnikovs and grenades.

—Interviewee from Al-Hasakah

People who were caught eating during the fast of Ramadan were lashed in the streets. An ISIS member approached a 14-year-old boy after seeing him drinking water, then dragged him to the middle of the crowd in the street, announced his “crime” and lashed him seventy-nine times.

—Interviewee from Al-Raqqa

Children have been the victims, perpetrators, and witnesses of ISIS executions. Boys under the age of 18 have been executed—either beheaded or shot—for alleged affiliation with other armed groups. ISIS fighters under 18 years of age are said to have performed the role of executioner. A 16-year-old fighter reportedly cut the throats of two soldiers, captured from Tabqa airbase in late August 2014, in Slouk in Al-Raqqa governorate. Children are often present in the crowds at the executions and cannot avoid seeing the publicly displayed corpses in the days that follow. One father from Dayr Al-Zawr stated that the first time he saw the body of a man hanging from a cross in Al-Mayadin in late July 2014, he stood for several minutes, transfixed by the horror of the scene, before realizing that his 7-year-old son was with him, also looking at the body. That night, his son was not able to sleep and woke up repeatedly in panic. His father described feeling immense guilt for exposing his son to such cruelty.

The public execution of 15-year-old Mohammed Qatta, a coffee seller in Aleppo, on June 9, 2013 was an early demonstration of the brutal way in which ISIS punishes and uses terror to ensure discipline among children, in particular boys. Collected information reveals that ISIS prioritizes children as a vehicle for ensuring long-term loyalty, adherence to their ideology, and a cadre of devoted fighters that will see violence as a way of life. The formation of new “cub” training camps has been documented.

Education is employed as a tool of indoctrination, designed to foster a new generation of supporters. In many areas, the school curriculum has been amended to reflect ideological priorities and weapons training. It has established training camps across areas under its control. Since September 2013, Al-Bouhtri School in Al-Bab (Aleppo governorate) has been used as an ISIS recruitment and military training facility for boys under the age of 18. The sharia youth camp near Tabqa (Al-Raqqa governorate) reportedly trains over three hundred fifty boys between the ages of 5 and 16 years for combat roles. The armed group also deliberately aims propaganda at children. In Al-Raqqa city, children are gathered for screenings of videos depicting mass executions of government soldiers, desensitizing them to extreme violence. By using, conscripting, and enlisting children for active combat roles, the group is perpetrating abuses and war crimes on a massive scale in a systematic and organized manner.

Following the abduction of 153 Kurdish boys, aged between 14 and 16, on May 29, 2014, the group detained them in a school in Manbij (Aleppo governorate), screened videos of beheadings and attacks, and subjected the boys to daily instruction on militant ideology for a five-month period. Those who disagreed were punished with severe beatings. Upon their release, they were told they had completed their religious training. Parents of the boys described fearing that their sons were deliberately groomed to inject ISIS's worldview into their Kurdish communities.

ISIS has instrumentalized and abused children on a systematic scale. The deliberate nature of violations against children is apparent. By exploiting schools to indoctrinate children, the armed group fails in its obligations to ensure education and the protection of children from the dangers arising in war. In training and using children for combat roles, ISIS has violated international humanitarian law and perpetrated war crimes on a mass scale.

Violations Committed During ISIS Military Assaults

The exhibition of heads (of the captured soldiers) by ISIS took place in the center of the town. It seems that they were killed just a short time earlier, as the signs of blood were still apparent.

—Interviewee from Al-Raqqah

The senior judge came and said, “We do this in front of your eyes, so you can go back and tell your children and your neighbors that this is how *kufar* end up, this is what they will eventually face.”

—Witness to an execution of a Kurdish fighter in Al-Raqqah

By mid-2014, ISIS had besieged the 17th Division's base in Al-Raqqah city and the Tabqa airbase, two of the last Syrian army positions in Al-Raqqah governorate. When the 17th Division base fell on July 25, 2014, the armed group committed large-scale violations of binding international humanitarian law and the war crime of murder and mutilation, killing the soldiers captured inside and later beheading many of their corpses. Residents of Al-Raqqah city and Slouk described that, in the days that followed the attack, ISIS displayed the bodies and heads in the town squares. Videos, some recorded by the group, showed children looking at the mutilated corpses.

By August 23, 2014, the group had launched its final assault on Tabqa airbase. As it became apparent that the base would fall to ISIS, some soldiers fled across the desert. While a few made it to the safety of army positions many miles away, others were captured and killed. Two soldiers, captured outside the base, were brought to Slouk and

executed in a public square between August 28–30. ISIS read the judgment, declaring that the soldiers, who were Sunni, were traitors and *kufar* before cutting their throats. Two more captured soldiers were executed publicly in Tabqa in late August 2014.

After killing the soldiers captured near the base, ISIS mutilated their bodies. The group placed the decapitated heads of some of the soldiers on public display in squares and on roundabouts in Tabqa and Al-Raqqah cities, terrorizing the local population. Other soldiers, injured during the attack on the base and weakened from lack of water, died in the desert.

More than two hundred men, most captured still inside the Tabqa airbase, were stripped to their underwear and forced to walk into the desert. A video of this forced march was recorded and later distributed by ISIS. A later video showed hundreds of bodies lying dead in the sand, bearing gunshot wounds to the head.

In mid-July 2014, ISIS fighters seized the Shaar gas field in eastern Homs, allegedly killing three hundred fifty people in close quarters after capturing the area. Among those killed were technicians and other staff working at the gas fields and their family members, including children. The body of a doctor who was killed in the attack was found on July 27 in his medical clinic, with his hands tied and shot at close range. Civilian residents of nearby villages, such as Al-Mahfoura, were also killed in the attack.

Al-Raqqah, Dayr Al-Zawr, and Al-Hasakah governorates, with dominant tribal communities, have posed a particular challenge to ISIS rule. The massacre of the Al-Sheitat tribe in Dayr Al-Zawr in August 2014 was perpetrated in a struggle for control of oil resources near the town of Mohassan. One survivor described seeing “many heads hanging on walls while I and my family escaped.” Individuals living nearby reported seeing freshly dug mass graves. Published video indicates that ISIS fighters conducted a mass execution of fighting-age male members of the Al-Sheitat tribe. On November 6, 2014, it was reported that the ISIS commander, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, issued a statement, granting members of the Al-Sheitat tribe permission to return to their homes, upon the condition that they do not assemble, surrender all weapons, and inform on all “apostates” to ISIS. All “traitors” would be killed.

In 2014, ISIS besieged the predominantly Kurdish region of Kobane, cutting off supplies of food and electricity into the area. The group had launched several attacks, which had been successfully repelled by the YPG, Kurdish forces fighting inside Syria. On September 15, 2014, buoyed by its recent successes in Syria and Iraq, ISIS launched a multi-front attack on the Kobane region with heavy weapons, artillery, tanks, and thousands of fighters.

Between September 15 and October 5, ISIS advanced quickly through the countryside, amidst heavy clashes with the YPG. By the first week of October, the group

entered the city, seizing some of its outer neighborhoods. As ISIS moved toward Kobane, more than two hundred thousand persons were displaced as they fled ISIS attacks. Most of those interviewed stated that they feared executions, rape, and abductions that ISIS reportedly committed against the Yazidi Kurds in Sinjar, Iraq, during the ISIS attack there in September 2014. Close to four hundred villages were emptied. Some of those who did not flee—who were too old, too infirm, or who had remained to protect their property—were executed by ISIS. Others were taken by force to Tel Abyad in Al-Raqqah governorate where they were detained and beaten. On release, they were forced to leave the area. Houses in rural Kobane were systematically looted by ISIS fighters, with goods and livestock transported to markets in Al-Raqqah governorate.

ISIS has executed Kurdish fighters captured during its attack. In mid-September 2014 in Tel Abyad, ISIS executed a female Kurdish fighter before a group of detained civilians from Kobane. Before cutting her throat, a fighter told the crowd, “She has fought us for three months with the *kufar*, and now we will behead her in front of you, and then, when you leave, you will tell your children, and neighbors, that this is the end and the fate of *kufar*.”

In one of its largest attacks to date, the group infiltrated Kobane city on June 2015 and killed more than two hundred fifty civilians in forty-eight hours. Also in June 2015, ISIS executed men in the Roman amphitheater of Palmyra accused of fighting or collaborating with government forces or armed groups.

In carrying out mass killings of captured fighters and civilians following military assaults, ISIS members have perpetrated egregious violations of binding international humanitarian law and the war crime of murder on a massive scale.

Criminal Responsibility

The testimonies collected reveal that ISIS seeks to subjugate civilians under its control and dominate every aspect of their lives through terror, indoctrination, and the provision of services to those who obey. ISIS has sought to entrench its militant extremist ideology by indoctrinating children and suppressing freedom of expression. Surveillance, coercion, fear, and punishment are used to inhibit any dissent. Discrimination on the basis of gender is used to implement rigid social norms.

As an armed group bound by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and customary international law, ISIS has violated its obligations toward civilians and persons *hors de combat*, amounting to war crimes. In areas where ISIS has established effective control, ISIS has systematically denied basic human rights and freedoms and in the context of its attack against the civilian population, has perpetrated crimes against humanity.

Since its establishment, ISIS has acted toward a common purpose. The level of organization, character of its ranks and membership, and long-term vision indicate a cohesive and coordinated group. The military operations carried out by ISIS have been motivated by the group's desire to seize natural resources in northeastern Syria and to subdue the civilian population living in areas under its control.

ISIS functions under responsible command and has a hierarchical structure including a policy level. The group has demonstrated its capacity to impose a policy on its members and ensure the coordinated implementation of decisions made by its leadership. With the capacity and means to attack the civilian population on a large scale, ISIS has carried out mass victimization against civilians, including segments of the population on the basis of gender, religion, and ethnicity. According to the evidence collected, there are reasonable grounds to believe that ISIS has carried out attacks in accordance with an organizational policy.

ISIS has perpetrated murder and other inhumane acts, enslavement, rape, sexual slavery and violence, forcible displacement, enforced disappearance, and torture. These acts have been committed as part of a widespread and systematic attack against the civilian population in Aleppo, Al-Raqqah, Al-Hasakah, and Dayr Al-Zawr governorates. This attack has emerged from April 2013 to the present day and is manifested through the coordinated campaign of spreading terror among the civilian population. The terror inflicted on the civilian population is clearly evidenced by witness and victim accounts. The abuses and crimes committed led to the intended submission of the civilian population. This terror was inflicted through a systematic imposition of restrictions on basic rights and freedoms and through the widespread commission of international humanitarian law violations and war crimes, including sentencing and executions without due process, killing, mutilation, rape, sexual violence, forced pregnancy, torture, cruel treatment, the use and recruitment of children, and outrages upon personal dignity.

The abuses, violations, and crimes committed by ISIS against Syrians have been deliberate and calculated. The commanders of ISIS have endorsed and directed harm against the civilian population under their control. The commanders of ISIS have acted willfully, perpetrating these war crimes and crimes against humanity with clear intent of attacking persons with awareness of their civilian or *hors de combat* status. They are individually criminally responsible for these crimes.

This essay is adapted from Rule of Terror: Living Under ISIS in Syria, a Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, originally issued on November 14, 2014. The commissioners are Karen Koning AbuZayd, Carla Del Ponte, Vitit Muntarbhorn, and Paulo Pinheiro (chairman).