

# The Islamic State's Pattern of Sexual Violence: Ideology and Institutions, Policies and Practices

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## Abstract

The Islamic State (IS), which controlled significant territory in Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2017, engaged in a wide repertoire of violence against civilians living in these areas. Despite extensive media coverage and scholarly attention, the determinants of this pattern of violence remain poorly understood. We argue that, contrary to a widespread assumption that the IS wielded violence indiscriminately, it systematically targeted different social groups with distinct forms of violence, including sexual violence. Our theory focuses on ideology, suggesting it is a necessary element of explanations of patterns of violence on the part of many armed actors. Ideologies, to varying extent, prescribe organizational policies that order or authorize particular forms of violence against specific social groups and institutions that regulate the conditions under which they occur. We find support for our theory in the case of sexual violence by IS by triangulating between several types of qualitative data: official documents; social media data generated by individuals in or near IS-controlled areas; interviews with Syrians and Iraqis who have knowledge of the organization's policies including victims of violence and former IS combatants; and secondary sources including local Arabic-language newspapers. Consistent with our theory, we find that the organization adopted ideologically motivated *policies* that authorized certain forms of sexual violence, including sexual slavery and child marriage. Forms of violence that violated organizational policies but were nonetheless tolerated by many commanders also occurred and we find evidence of two such *practices*: gang rape of Yazidi women and forced marriage of Sunni Muslim women.

**Keywords:** Conflict, Political Violence, Sexual Violence, Islamic State, Iraq, Syria

## Introduction

Heza, a thirty-six-year-old Yazidi woman, was living on Mount Sinjar in northern Iraq when the Islamic State (IS) attacked in August 2014. After executing her husband, IS fighters abducted Heza and her three adolescent children. Heza was taken to a slave market in Syria where she was sold to an IS fighter and then resold eleven times to different “owners” who raped and beat her on a daily basis. Although she had attempted to protect her ten-year-old daughter by first shaving her head (to hide her gender) and then shaving her eyebrows (to make her look ill), the

girl was eventually inducted into the slave trade as well. Her two sons were taken to training camps for conversion to Islam, indoctrination, and conscription as child soldiers.<sup>1</sup>

It is estimated that between 2,000 and 5,500 Yazidis were killed—mostly men and elderly women—and more than 6,000 women and children were abducted in August 2014 in what a United Nations commission later concluded was a genocide (UN OHCHR 2016, 7;

1 Interview with “Heza” in Dohuk, Iraq, January 2016.

UN HRC 2016, 31). Most suffered sexual violence in the form of sexual slavery. Although many escaped or have been bought back by their families—including Heza, for the price of \$25,000—an estimated 3,000 Yazidi women and children were still missing as of May 2019<sup>2</sup>—more than two years after IS lost control of its former de facto capital city of Mosul, Iraq, and the vast majority of the territory it had captured and held in Syria and Iraq since 2014. During its reign over eastern Syria and northern Iraq from 2014 to 2017, IS displayed a wide repertoire of violence, but its deployment of that repertoire was more discriminate in terms of its targeting than that of many other armed organizations.<sup>3</sup> Specific social groups were singled out for targeting with certain forms of violence but not others. For example, IS systematically executed gay men by throwing them from buildings, a punishment purportedly authorized by its interpretation of Islamic law, but did not use this method of execution for any other groups (Tschantret 2018). This pattern of collective targeting extended to sexual violence as well. Although IS enslaved thousands of Yazidis and issued numerous written statements justifying this violence on ideological grounds, the group did not enslave Sunni Muslims.

In contrast, the RUF of Sierra Leone engaged in a wide repertoire of violence against civilians without targeting particular ethnic or other social groups with specific forms of violence.<sup>4</sup> RENAMO in Mozambique also engaged in widespread violence including summary executions and sexual violence against civilians in areas where the population was believed to support the government, but did not wield a fine-grained pattern of violence that matched particular forms of violence to different social groups (Hultman 2007; Weinstein 2006, 232). Neither issued detailed ideological justifications for their deployment of violence, as did IS. To be sure, IS perpetrated massacres targeting thousands of combatants and civilians at a time. However, even those mass killings were, in general, more narrowly targeted than those of

some other organizations. For example, in 2014, IS ambushed an Iraqi air force camp in Tikrit, separated Shia cadets from Sunni cadets—IS considers Shia Muslims to be “apostates” (Islamic State 2017)—and massacred at least 1,700 Shia (UNAMI and OHCHR 2018).

Accounting for IS’s pattern of violence is important for public policy and transitional justice. At the time of writing, the first trial of an IS fighter charged with participating in the genocide against the Yazidi among other crimes against humanity and war crimes was beginning in Germany and similar prosecutions are likely to follow as the Yazidi community continues to demand justice (Kather and Schwarz 2020). Mapping the organization’s pattern of violence, analyzing the justifications for it, and scrutinizing the institutions that generate it may help to facilitate the interpretation of forensic and documentary evidence that is being collected by institutions seeking justice for victims.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, despite extensive media coverage and increasing scholarly attention, the determinants of this pattern of violence remain poorly understood. Few of the extant explanations for patterns of violence in armed conflict can account for the observed pattern of violence by IS, including sexual violence. Neither territorial control nor lootable resources, to take two well-known theories, can explain the organization’s pattern of engaging in specific forms of sexual violence against particular collective identities. The organization did not target Yazidi girls and women for sexual slavery because it deemed them to have engaged in behavior supporting the enemy, or out of a lack of discipline born of opportunistic combatants. Nor do theories of ethnic enmity or difference address why an armed organization would target particular social groups (but not others) with only specific forms of sexual violence.

After defining what we mean by *pattern of violence*, we document IS’s pattern of sexual violence in its core territories of Iraq and Syria from 2014 to 2017, laying out what social groups were targeted with each form of violence (and which were not). We suggest that neither general explanations for patterns of wartime violence nor those specifically for IS adequately account for the observed pattern. We then summarize recent work on sexual

2 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “COI Note on the Situation of Yazidi IDPs in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq,” May 2019, <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5cd156657.pdf>.

3 Throughout this article, we use the term “organization” to refer to armed organizations and the term “group” to refer to particular social groups that are targeted by armed organizations.

4 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone. “Witness to Truth: The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Sierra Leone,” 2004, <http://www.usip.org/publications/truth-commission-sierra-leone>.

5 For example, in 2017, UN Security Council Resolution 2379 established the Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Da’esh/ISIL Crimes (UNITAD) with the mission of “collecting, preserving, and storing evidence in Iraq of acts that may amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide committed by [IS].” S/RES/2379 (2017), [https://undocs.org/S/RES/2379\(2017\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2379(2017)).

violence during war that builds on principal agent analysis to analyze violence that is not authorized or ordered but is nonetheless tolerated by commanders, for example, rape that occurs as a practice rather than a strategy of war. We then advance our theory of how an organization's ideology shapes its patterns of violence by authorizing specific policies and institutions that define particular forms of violence as legitimate against specific social groups. In light of our theory, we analyze IS's ideology and its observable implications. After summarizing our research design and sources, we then assess the extent to which our theory accounts for the observed pattern of sexual violence by IS.

We find, consistent with our theory, that IS developed ideologically motivated organizational *policies* that authorized certain forms of violence, regulated the conditions under which they could occur, and defined the social groups who could legitimately be targeted with each form. We find, again consistent with our theory, that although sexual enslavement of Yazidis was widespread as an official organizational policy, the enslavement of other religious and ethnic groups such as Christians who were not eligible for enslavement according to IS's ideology was relatively rare. We also document the occurrence of two additional forms of sexual violence that were tolerated as unauthorized *practices*: (1) gang rape of Yazidi women within a system of sexual slavery that required exclusive ownership and therefore exclusive sexual access and (2) forced marriage of Sunni Muslim women. In contrast, rape of Sunni Muslim women outside of sexual slavery and forced marriage was sometimes punished by IS in the core territories of Iraq and Syria (and was therefore not a practice).

Our analysis draws on several types of data: official IS documents; social media data generated by individuals in or near IS-controlled areas; interviews with Syrians and Iraqis who have knowledge of the organization's policies, including victims of violence and former IS combatants; and secondary sources including local Arabic-language newspapers.

In the conclusion, we suggest that our argument generalizes to other forms of violence by IS and to other armed organizations and outline the research agenda that it suggests, including spatial and temporal variation in patterns of sexual violence.

### The Puzzle: The Pattern of Sexual Violence by the IS in Iraq and Syria (2014–2017)

Many observers of IS's pattern of violence have described it as "indiscriminate." According to one report, "[IS]

is famous for its indiscriminate violence and its truly careless, gratuitous mass-killing of civilians."<sup>6</sup> However, our research indicates that IS's pattern of violence is considerably more complex and nuanced. Although IS published numerous fatwas and other texts justifying its decision to subject Yazidi women to sexual slavery, at the same time, the group prohibited and punished the rape of Sunni women. The organization's intentional targeting of specific sub-populations with specific forms of violence presents a puzzle that is not well explained by existing theories.

By *pattern of violence*, we mean the combination of *repertoire* (the type of violence—killing, forced displacement, rape, etc.), *targeting* (for each element of the repertoire, against what social groups), *frequency* (for each element of the repertoire, the count or fraction of each social group targeted), and *technique* (how the violence was carried out, e.g., executed by automatic weapon? A machete?) in which an armed organization regularly engages (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2017). Our approach is multi-dimensional for several reasons. Non-lethal elements of the repertoire may diverge sharply in terms of targeting and frequency from lethal elements. Differences in repertoire, targeting, and technique may be more easily observed than differences in the frequency of lethal violence. A particular *sub-pattern*—a specific, ongoing combination of a repertoire element, targeted social group, and technique (e.g., large massacres of civilians supposed to support insurgents by paramilitary organizations in Colombia)—may comprise a "signature" of the organization. Moreover, targeting is often based on social identity, so the category of *collective* targeting is needed in addition to *selective* (based on individual behavior) and *indiscriminate*. Leveraging the full variation in patterns across organizations, units, time, and space is essential to the mapping and analysis of violence, which often focuses only on lethal violence or neglects variation across units within the organization.

Sexual violence against civilians took several forms, each targeted against particular social groups: sexual slavery, forced marriage, child marriage, and rape outside of the context of slavery or marriage. As mentioned above, IS sexually enslaved thousands of Yazidi girls and women. IS operated several slave markets in Iraq and Syria, where slaves were auctioned or sold for fixed prices (UN Human Rights Council 2016, 23). A Yazidi woman interviewed for this study reported that after her initial

6 "ISIS gains a powerful foothold in Egypt," *Public Radio International*, November 11, 2014, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-11-11/isis-gains-powerful-foothold-egypt>.

capture in Sinjar, she was resold to eleven different IS fighters.<sup>7</sup> In addition to Yazidis, the following categories of “unbelievers” were eligible for enslavement: Alawites, “unbelievers who have no allegiance pact [with IS],” Shi’a, and other unbelievers who are not “people of the book” [Jews and Christians] (Islamic State 2015g). Although enslavement of Yazidis was widespread, there is considerably less evidence of enslavement of the other groups. The Iraqi government claims that IS also enslaved a smaller but significant number—hundreds—of Shi’ite women belonging to the Turkmens ethnic group.<sup>8</sup> Notably absent is the sexual enslavement of Sunni Muslim and Christian women, who are specifically designated as ineligible for slavery in official IS documents that regulate the institution. A very small number of Christian women were reportedly enslaved, but this phenomenon appears to have been rare and anomalous (Shea 2015).

While Sunni women were not enslaved, they did experience another form of sexual violence: forced marriage. In areas of Iraq and Syria controlled by IS, Sunni women faced intense social and economic pressure to marry IS fighters. According to a Syrian man from IS-controlled Manbij, “Many parents felt that it was important for at least one of their daughters to marry an IS member as a kind of protection bargain.”<sup>9</sup> Another interviewee from Deir Ezzor reported that an IS police officer began harassing a young woman’s family with small fines and other disciplinary measures in order to coerce her into marrying him: “She eventually gave in to end the harassment.”<sup>10</sup> One Syrian woman from Deir Ezzor explained the circumstances of her marriage to an IS fighter: “My family’s situation was very bad with six children and no breadwinner. When the man offered a large dowry that I knew would improve my family’s life, I did not hesitate to marry him” (Ayub 2014). In some cases, coercion escalated to the level of physical threats or violence. For example, an IS fighter forced a Sunni Iraqi woman from a village near Hawija to marry him by threatening to kill her parents (Human Rights Watch 2017).

IS also engaged in sexual violence targeting children, particularly through its policy of child marriage of Sunni girls. Child marriage was already widespread in Syria

and Iraq prior to the arrival of IS and continued in areas controlled by the organization (Revkin 2018), consistent with research on the persistence of patterns of sexual violence over time (Ahram 2015). According to a Syrian woman in Deir Ezzor, “Underage girls are in demand by IS fighters” (Ibrahim and Hernandez 2015). A man from Deir Ezzor reported that his two daughters, age 13 and 15, had been forced to marry IS fighters “against their will” (Yousef 2015). An NGO officer in Lebanon reported working with many underage Syrian refugees who had faced pressure to marry IS fighters, including one fifteen-year-old who had tried to commit suicide to avoid the unwanted marriage.<sup>11</sup>

Rape outside of slavery and marriage appeared to be relatively rare, although cases have been documented. In the Iraqi city of Hawija, a woman was allegedly tortured and raped in front of her children after she refused to marry an IS fighter (Human Rights Watch 2017). In the Iraqi city of Tikrit, an IS commander was accused of raping a young girl.<sup>12</sup> The rapist was punished in the second case (reportedly with ninety-nine lashes) but not in the first.

An organization’s pattern of violence can be represented as a matrix in which the repertoire elements comprise the columns, the targeted social groups the rows, and an estimate of the frequency in the corresponding cell. Table 1 presents a matrix representation of IS’s pattern of violence, with rough estimates of frequencies.

## Literature on Patterns of Violence in Armed Conflict

Theories of wartime violence that emphasize territorial control, strategic incentives for domestic and international support, battlefield dynamics, or economic endowments do not account for IS’s targeting of particular social groups with specific forms of sexual violence. Sthasis Kalyvas (2006) argues that where an armed organization has partial territorial control, it exercises selective violence against civilians thought to support the rival organization; where it has little control, the organization tends to exercise violence indiscriminately; where it has full control, violence should be minimal. Yet in territories it controlled or contested, rather than minimal or selective violence, IS engaged in particular forms of violence based on the *social identity* of targeted persons (e.g., the

7 Interview with “Heza” in Dohuk, Iraq, January 2016.  
 8 “Iraqi official: Over 600 Shia Turkmen women, children under ISIS captivity,” ABLA, September 4, 2016, <http://en.abna24.com/service/middle-east-west-asia/archive/2016/09/04/776710/story.html>.  
 9 Interview with “Mahmoud” in Gaziantep, Turkey, July 2015.  
 10 Interview with “Hala” in Şanlıurfa, Turkey, February 2017.

11 Interview with “Amira” in Saida, Lebanon, March 2017.  
 12 Islamic State, Salah ad-Din Province, Special Security Battalion, March 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160322193846/https://twitter.com/A27660278/status/578830149065420800>.

**Table 1.** The Islamic State's Targeting of Social Groups with Sexual Violence

	Sexual slavery	Sexual torture (beyond rape)	Rape (outside slavery and marriage)	Forced marriage	Child marriage
Sunni Muslims	Prohibited; no known instances	No instances reported in our sources	Occasional but prohibited	More than occasional	Widespread
Shi'ite Muslims	Occasional <sup>13</sup>	No instances reported in our sources	No instances reported in our sources	No instances reported in our sources	No instances reported in our sources
"People of the Book" (Christians, in theory also Jews) <sup>14</sup>	Occasional but prohibited	No instances reported in our sources	No instances reported in our sources	Occasional <sup>15</sup>	No instances reported in our sources
"Polytheists" <sup>16</sup> (primarily Yazidis)	Widespread	Occasional but prohibited	No known instances outside of slavery/marriage	Occasional, after forced conversion <sup>17</sup>	Unknown but possible after forced conversion

Yazidis, an ethno-religious minority) and against individuals for reasons other than support for the rival (stoning as punishment for adultery, for example).<sup>18</sup>

Jessica Stanton (2016) emphasizes strategic incentives to build or preserve both domestic and international support to account for violence and restraint. In the case of IS, her theory suggests IS should engage in restraint in its conflict with the authoritarian regime in Syria and that it should engage in cleansing of Yazidis in areas of its own strength in its conflict with the democratic government of Iraq. Neither was observed. Rather, IS engaged in little restraint in Syria and cleansed Yazidis as part of extending its territory. Nor do battlefield dynamics (Hultman

2007) account for specific forms of violence against distinct categories of civilians and combatants.

In contrast, Jeremy Weinstein (2006) analyzes the effects of access to economic endowments on violence, which leads to wider repertoires and targeting, and higher frequency of violence against civilians than those with only social endowments. However, IS does not engage in the indiscriminate violence that his theory predicts given the group's access to lootable resources including banks, oil, and antiquities. Rather, it deployed particular sub-patterns of violence against specific social groups.

In short, these theories based on incentives and resources fail to account for the fine-grained way in which IS targeted specific social groups with particular forms of sexual violence. More generally, overarching strategic goals of military and political domination do not well explain the very specific targeting of particular social groups with particular forms of sexual violence.

Research on the ethnic configuration of power comes closer in its focus on the ethnic identity of victimized groups (Cederman et al. 2010, 2013; Wucherpfennig et al. 2012; Wimmer 2013). In our emphasis on collective targeting, we build on recent work that demonstrates how some armed organizations in civil wars collectively target specific groups of people because of their social, ideological, or political identity (i.e., leftist groups) (Balcells and Steele 2016; Balcells 2017; Steele 2017), but these studies do not explain variation in the different forms of violence that are directed at some social groups but not others.

While interpretations of sexual violence in some settings as genocide help account for the targeting of Yazidi girls and women with sexual violence (and men with lethal violence), they do not account for the way in

- 13 The Iraqi government claims that IS has enslaved Shi'ite women belonging to the Turkmen ethnic group. "Iraqi official: Over 600 Shia Turkmen women, children under ISIS captivity," ABLA, September 4, 2016, <http://en.abna24.com/service/middle-east-west-asia/archive/2016/09/04/776710/story.html>.
- 14 IS refers to adherents of the two other Abrahamic religions (Christianity and Judaism) as *Ahl al-Kitāb* ("People of the Book").
- 15 Kayla Mueller, an American aid worker, was reportedly forced to marry IS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Callimachi 2015).
- 16 Although IS regards Yazidis as polytheists, Yazidis do not consider themselves to be apostates.
- 17 Yazidi slaves who convert to Islam can lawfully marry their owners. Some Yazidi women have converted and married IS fighters under conditions of duress to avoid slavery (Sly 2014).
- 18 Kalyvas (2012) later recognized that his emphasis on territorial control is but one mechanism driving violence against civilians in civil war.

which IS strongly regulated its exercise with detailed policies and rules. Similarly, other theories of ethnic enmity and politically or ideologically motivated targeting fail to account for the wielding of specific repertoires of violence against particular social groups—and its formal regulation.

### IS-Specific Explanations for the Group's Pattern of Violence

Moreover, IS-specific explanations for its pattern of violence do not adequately capture the above variation. First, it has been suggested that IS engaged in shocking and spectacular forms of violence to attract media attention, establish credibility, and differentiate its “brand” in a competitive field of rival armed groups (Watts 2016). Related arguments are that IS's pattern of violence reflected its efforts to “outbid” competitors for support of the local population, based on the theory that “violence demonstrates greater credibility” (Conrad and Greene 2015), and that armed groups or political factions such as IS have incentives to adopt extreme ideologies to gain a competitive advantage over more moderate groups (Walter 2017, 21; Tabaar 2019).

These suggestions may help to explain why IS produced elaborate magazines and videos to showcase its violence, but it does not explain why IS selectively targeted certain sub-populations but not others with particular repertoire elements. As for the “outbidding” hypothesis, while it is true that IS succeeded in obtaining some support and cooperation from local populations, it is not at all clear that civilians supported IS because they were impressed by its ability to wield violence. More plausible explanations for civilian support include IS's provision of services (Martínez and Eng 2017), its claim to be creating a utopian Islamic society (Winter 2018; Revkin and Ahrām 2020), and its initial and ultimately unfulfilled promises to eradicate state corruption and reverse the political and economic marginalization of Sunnis in Iraq and Syria (Revkin 2020b).

A second explanation related to the first and one that is specific to sexual violence is that IS used rape and sexual slavery to attract opportunistic recruits who then engaged in rape (Montgomery and Bloom 2015). One Yazidi woman said of the local Iraqi and Syrian fighters who abused her, “They did not attack us because of their ideology, but to simply have the opportunity to rape us” (Tezcür 2017). While it is true that some IS recruits appeared to be motivated by material incentives, such as salaries, housing, and sexual access to women, there is little empirical evidence to support the claim that IS has

instituted sexual violence for the primary purpose of attracting new members. A content analysis of 892 IS propaganda publications generated in 2015, at the height of IS's territorial expansion and recruitment, found more than 50 percent of the group's propaganda was focused on “utopian” descriptions of life in the caliphate including economic growth, governance, and nature, while 40 percent of propaganda described warfare (Winter 2018, 111). To our knowledge, there was only one reference to sexual slavery in IS's English language propaganda in 2014 (excluding fatwas directed at the group's own members), the previously mentioned article justifying the enslavement of the Yazidis (Islamic State 2014c), and one in 2015 that argued that sexual slavery is a religiously legitimate institution unlike rape or prostitution (Islamic State 2015b, 44). Given this evidence, it appears that sexual violence was not a significant theme in IS's outward-facing propaganda. Furthermore, if the recruitment explanation were correct, IS would not have legislated policies that regulated and limited the conditions under which sexual violence may occur. Instead, IS would have allowed a significantly broader sub-pattern of sexual violence, including perhaps all forms of sexual violence at all times, targeting all persons.

A third explanation, specific to sexual violence, is that IS's pattern of sexual violence was influenced by long histories of state-perpetrated sexual violence in Iraq and Syria, where “neo-patriarchal” Ba'athist governments have “used sexual violence to sustain ethno-sectarian hierarchies” (Ahrām 2015, 59). Although there is some evidence that IS has imitated torture techniques developed by the Syrian government (Spencer 2014), this historical argument does not explain why IS's pattern of violence diverges in important ways from those of the Syrian and Iraqi governments, neither of which engages in sexual slavery of particular ethnic groups (or other types of violence perpetrated by IS including stoning of adulterers and the immolation of enemy combatants deemed to be “apostates”).

A fourth explanation is that the demography of IS recruits played a role in the group's pattern of violence. Some scholars have argued that the group deliberately recruited individuals with a propensity for violence or crime (Basra et al. 2016; Corner and Gill 2017). While this theory might explain individual acts of sexual violence, it cannot explain why the organization—as a matter of policy—selectively authorizes sexual violence against some but not all social groups.

Thus, these theories of violence, either general or specific to IS, do not adequately account for the observed pattern of sexual violence.

## Practices versus Policies of Violence

Before presenting our theory, which emphasizes ideology as one determinant of patterns of violence, we note that many of the theories briefly summarized above presume that organizations are unitary actors, and therefore do not assess whether and how they manage the principal-agent challenges involved in wielding violence (Gates 2002). Recent literature on wartime violence focuses on the extent to which the armed organization succeeds in addressing those challenges through institutions of discipline and of socialization—ranging from the enforcement of minimal obedience to commanders to the internalization of the organization's norms and rules concerning violence (Wood 2009, 2018; Hoover Green, 2011, 2016, 2018; Manekin 2013; Wood and Toppelberg 2017, Parkinson 2016, 2021).

In the absence of strong institutions of discipline and socialization, combatants may engage in unordered and/or unauthorized violence, which may be tolerated by commanders. In particular, recent research on wartime rape increasingly questions the claim that rape, when frequent, is a strategy of war (Agirre Aranburu 2010; Wood 2010; Cohen 2013, 2016; Baaz and Stern 2013). Rather, rape of civilians can be frequent without having been purposefully adopted as a strategy, that is, without having been ordered, authorized, or institutionalized. In such cases, rather than a strategy of war, rape is a *practice* that is (1) tolerated by commanders and (2) driven by private preferences (opportunism) and/or small-unit social dynamics such as a desire to conform or to avoid ostracization (Wood 2012, 2014, 2018). Such preferences and dynamics may reflect either the societal gender norms with which recruits entered the organization, or new norms inculcated by horizontal socialization by peers or vertical socialization by superiors.

The concept of "*practice*" contrasts crucially with "*policy*," by which we mean "purposefully adopted by an organization for group objectives" (Wood 2012, 2018). For example, an organization might adopt a policy of rape as a military strategy as part of ethnic cleansing or of genocide. It is important to note that some organizations adopt a form of sexual violence as organizational policy, not as a military strategy, but to manage the sexual and reproductive lives of their members. For example, Japanese forces during World War II adopted forced prostitution of the so-called "comfort women." Importantly, a policy need not be ordered and often is not: Japanese soldiers were authorized but not ordered to use those sexual services.

These distinctions raise questions that motivate our theory: What determines an organization's policies of violence and institutions to implement those policies?

Do other forms of violence occur as unauthorized practices?

## Our Theory

In contrast with the above explanations, our theory builds on recent works that emphasize the role of ideology to account for patterns of violence, from genocide to restraint, (Straus, 2012, 2015; Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014). By *ideology*, we mean "a more or less systematic set of ideas that includes the identification of a referent group (a class, ethnic, or other social group), an enunciation of the grievances or challenges that the group confronts, the identification of objectives on behalf of that group (political change—or defense against its threat), and a (perhaps vaguely defined) program of action" (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014, 215). We do not claim that ideology is the only determinant of patterns of violence, but that it is necessary element of an adequate account.

When a group's ideology licenses sustained violence on behalf of the organization's objectives, that violence must be justified and motivated (at least implicitly). These justifications are often part of the formal statement of an organization's *policies*. For example, the organization's ideology may define the referent group as one with sharply defined boundaries, with little tolerance for ambiguity and an insistence on the purity of group identity. It may construct its grievances and challenges as an existential threat, or its own emergence as an existential opportunity. If that threat is posed by particular "others," the ideology may prescribe or at least justify violence against them.

In particular, an organization's ideology may mandate, order, or authorize certain sub-patterns of violence—specific forms against particular social groups—and the conditions under which they are legitimate, as well as an overarching strategy to reach its objectives. The ideology may also prescribe policies and institutions essential to the realization of those objectives, including to what extent and how to produce, control, and regulate the wielding of violence. Maoist ideology, for example, identifies workers and peasants as the referent group, social revolution as the objective, "prolonged popular war" as the overarching strategy, and a set of specific institutions to implement that strategy. The ideology may include a specific blueprint for institutions responsible for discipline and also for the socialization of recruits (including the content of their curricula) to dampen principal-agent problems. Together these policies and institutions shape the extent to which unauthorized violence occurs as a practice

(Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014). In some cases, a group's ideology may also contribute to the likelihood of unauthorized practices despite their formal prohibition, as when an ideology of ethnic nationalism leads commanders and combatants to ignore the suffering inflicted on a despised ethnic other, despite formal prohibition of violence against *any* civilians.

To be sure, the degree to which ideology prescribes specific sub-patterns of violence and particular institutions varies across armed organizations, and organizations vary in their effectiveness in implementing their ideological programs.

Focusing now on specifically *sexual* violence, if an organization's ideology authorizes sexual violence, we expect that the group will adopt policies that officially permit and regulate sexual violence in ways that are consistent with the group's ideology. Evidence of policies that authorize and regulate violence should be present in official documents produced by the organization and in interviews with individuals from areas where it engages in sexual violence. If our theory is correct, armed organizations should adopt violence-regulating policies *ex ante*, prior to the perpetration of violence and with the intent of regulating violence, rather than as an *ex post* justification for violence that they are already perpetrating for reasons unrelated to ideology.

Second, we expect to find evidence that an organization with strong institutions punishes sexual violence that is specifically prohibited as contrary to its ideology in areas where it governs unchallenged.

### IS Ideology and Its Observable Implications

Our argument is that ideology is necessary to account for patterns of violence by IS, but not that it is the only relevant factor. Strategic and material incentives also play a role, as does the emergence of violence as a practice where institutions are weak. Below, we discuss the implications of our theory for the case of IS.

Like other "Salafi-jihadist" organizations (Maher 2016), IS aspires to recreate the earliest Islamic society and seeks to achieve this objective through violence (March and Revkin 2015). The *referent group* for IS is Sunni Muslims; the organization's *grievances* stem from the colonial occupation of Muslim lands by Western powers and more recent interventions; its *objectives* can be summarized as the establishment of a *shari'a*-based system of governance based on the earliest "caliphate"; and a *program of action* that centers around the use of violence to establish the aforementioned objectives.

Three aspects of IS's ideology have important observable implications for its use of violence, including sexual violence. First, IS purports to be recreating the

"caliphate," a model of statecraft first envisioned by the Prophet in the seventh century and implemented by his successors, the first four caliphs (Bunzel 2015). In its efforts to recreate the earliest Islamic society, IS advocates a literal reading of the Quran and other foundational texts of Islam (the *sunnah* and *hadith*) that have transcribed the sayings and practices of the Prophet (Revkin 2016). However, since these texts require interpretation by jurists for contemporary application, there is an abundance of scholarly commentary on their meaning and IS rejects more moderate interpretations in favor of the most extreme.

Given IS's Salafi-jihadist ideology, we expect the organization to attempt to recreate the same institutions and policies that were present during the earliest caliphate including not only those that regulate social and economic life, such as the mandatory charitable system known as *zakāt*, but also those that regulate violence, including sexual violence. Those forms of violence that IS has adopted as *organizational policies* should be heavily shaped and constrained by its ideology, which requires strict fidelity to its interpretation of the revelations and practices of the Prophet as documented in the Quran and other foundational texts of Islam. These texts authorize violence against some religious groups but not others. In general, medieval jurists interpreted Islamic law to permit the enslavement of non-Muslim prisoners of war excluding "people of the book" known as *dhimmi*—Jews and Christians—who were tolerated as religious minorities conditional on their payment of a special tax and compliance with certain restrictions (Ze'evi 2009; Revkin 2020a). Under this system, a slave master was the legal owner of a slave's labor and was "entitled to his or her sexual submission" (Ze'evi 2009; see also Brown 2019). Therefore, we expect IS to engage in sexual slavery as an authorized policy and to narrowly target the policy of slavery against groups defined as eligible for enslavement by its ideology.

A second element that has implications for IS's pattern of sexual violence is the concept of the "caliphate," which Salafi-jihadists interpret as theocratic and authoritarian model of governance based on divine sovereignty in which the rights to dissent or rebel are very limited (Revkin and Ahrām 2020, 15). To promote obedience, we expect IS to establish norm-diffusing institutions such as media outlets, schools, and offices for the dissemination of official legal opinions (fatwas) that encourage members and civilians to internalize the organization's belief system and comply with its policies, including policies regulating sexual violence.

Third, IS like other Salafi-jihadist groups interprets Islamic law as requiring a highly patriarchal society in which men are responsible for warfare and women play

a supporting role as wives and mothers and are expected to marry early (Lahoud 2017). Salafi-jihadist groups also interpret the Quran as requiring a “guardianship” system in which every Muslim woman is required to have a male guardian (*mahram*) with the authority to make decisions on her behalf and who is required to accompany her at all times when traveling outside of the home (Lahoud 2017, 61). Since Salafi-jihadist interpretations of Islamic law authorize child marriage of girls as young as six years old (Ali 2010), we expect IS to engage in child marriage of Sunni girls.

Fourth, although Salafi-jihadists interpret Islamic law as requiring a patriarchal society in which women are subordinate to men, women are still guaranteed some important rights and protections including a requirement that marriage be consensual. However, given the guardianship system described above, consent could be obtained from women through their proxy male representatives (Ali 2010, 31). Given the requirement of consensual marriage in Islamic law, which IS claims is the basis for its ideology, we expect the group to require consent in some form (at a minimum, by proxy of male guardians) and to prohibit forced marriage. However, we also expect the extreme patriarchal nature of IS’s ideology to undermine enforcement of that prohibition and thus that forced marriage will occur as a practice.

Our theory predicts that in addition to the policies and institutions discussed above, individual IS members will also engage in unauthorized violence in the form of *practices* where its institutions are weak. Combatants who have not been sufficiently trained or socialized may be unaware of the group’s official policies regulating violence and might employ violence for personal gain or to settle scores.<sup>19</sup> Or individual IS members might intentionally disobey rules of which they are aware because they believe that they would not be caught or punished or that the rules are unfair. Combatants who observe their peers engaging in prohibited behavior may feel social pressure to join in the practice, or, if they observe peers breaking the rules with impunity, they may feel emboldened to follow suit. Another driver of unauthorized practices is non-enforcement of policies by commanders who may be unaware of rule violations or aware but too busy with

other priorities to punish them, or who are themselves ignorant of the rules.

We expect such practices to be more frequent in IS’s non-contiguous provinces (outside of its core territory in Iraq and Syria) including Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Libya where preexisting organizations with distinct organizational cultures and norms pledged allegiance to IS, and within core territory as its institutions weakened as IS rapidly lost territory in 2016–2017 as the allied offensive intensified. We discuss tentative evidence of such spatial and temporal variation in unauthorized practices in section 5 in the online appendix. Beyond the case of IS, we expect the predictions of our theory to generalize to other Salafi-jihadist groups and potentially to other ideologically motivated armed groups.

We argue below that our theory of policies and practices better explains IS’s pattern of sexual violence than alternative explanations.

## Evaluating Our Theory

Before assessing the extent to which available evidence confirms our theory’s observable implications, we summarize our empirical approach.

## Methods and Data

Collecting data on patterns of violence in active conflicts is challenging for several reasons. First, fieldwork in these areas is often impossible. As a result, researchers are reliant on data collected by parties to the conflict, humanitarian organizations, or news reports (but journalists face the same access challenges as researchers). Social media data from Twitter and Facebook users on the ground in conflict areas are a possible source of data but have several limitations. Social media users are not representative of the general population, internet access may be disrupted by conflict dynamics, and even people with internet access may hesitate to post on social media if they fear retaliation by the government or armed groups. While all types of violence are difficult to document, it is particularly challenging to collect accurate and comprehensive data on sexual violence due to its systematic underreporting, in part due to fear of stigmatization or retaliation on the part of victims or their families.

To document IS’s pattern of sexual violence and assess our theory, we draw on several sources of qualitative data collected during fieldwork in Iraq, Lebanon, and Turkey discussed below and in greater detail in section 2 in the online appendix: official IS documents, interviews with Syrians and Iraqis who had knowledge of IS’s pattern of violence, Twitter posts, local Arabic-language

19 Previous research has found that most foreign IS recruits in Syria had very little knowledge of Islamic law (only 5 percent had “advanced” knowledge while 70 percent admitted having only “basic” knowledge) and therefore probably also had only a superficial understanding of IS’s ideology prior to recruitment, suggesting that there was a significant need for indoctrination of new recruits (Dodwell et al. 2016, 18).

newspapers, and reports by international and human rights organizations. We limit the scope of our data collection and analysis to the historical period during which the group controlled substantial territory in Iraq and Syria (2014–2017).

IS's bureaucracy generated a vast number of documents including: (1) several different forms of propaganda directed at both international and local audiences; (2) rules, religious edicts, and codes of conduct aimed at regulating the behavior of its own personnel and the civilians they governed; (3) IS court verdicts and other rule-enforcing decisions; and (4) transactional documents such as receipts and contracts. Some of these documents (particularly propaganda) were widely circulated by IS members or supporters over social media and messaging applications, while other documents not intended for public distribution were smuggled out of IS-controlled territory by civilians or combatants, either as hard copies or photographs of the originals. Given the reluctance of both victims and perpetrators to discuss violence in many settings, these documents are a vital complement to interview data (section 2 in the online appendix).

A second source of data is semi-structured interviews with Syrians and Iraqis selected for their knowledge of or personal experience with IS. The article cites interviews with twenty Syrians and Iraqis—drawn from a larger set of more than 300 interviews with civilians and combatants from IS-controlled areas conducted by one of the authors—including two Yazidis,<sup>20</sup> five civilians who have witnessed or experienced sexual violence perpetrated by IS, eleven former IS combatants and employees with knowledge of sexual violence policies including a physician at a hospital in Mosul who supervised the treatment of Yazidi women, and two senior Iraqi military officials (table A1 in section 2 in the online appendix). These individuals were identified through snowball sampling over the course of four research trips to southern Turkey, two research trips to Iraq, and one research trip to Lebanon between July 2015 and April 2017.<sup>21</sup> Snow-

ball sampling is often the only way to access clandestine populations, including members of armed organizations, who tend to be distrustful of outsiders as a result of the illicit nature of their activities (Cohen and Arieli 2011). In Iraq, it was possible to conduct interviews in areas recently liberated from IS in Mosul and nearby towns. In Turkey, fieldwork was conducted in the southeastern cities of Gaziantep and Şanlıurfa, which are close to the Syrian border and therefore ideal locations in which to meet civilians and combatants from IS-controlled areas.

In addition to interviews, we also draw on Twitter posts written by individuals claiming to be in or near IS-controlled areas describing patterns of sexual violence, local norms, and institutions.<sup>22</sup> Given the inaccessibility of these areas to researchers, such data provide rare insights into events and experiences that would otherwise be invisible. Twitter posts were collected by manually searching the Twitter application program interface (API) for combinations of relevant Arabic search terms listed in table A2 in section 2 in the online appendix. Although machine learning methods are increasingly used to automate the collection of large numbers of Twitter posts, we did not attempt to collect the complete universe of relevant Twitter posts or a representative sample due to the previously mentioned reporting biases that are inherent in data on sexual violence. Instead, we opted for a manual approach to collect a small number of relevant Twitter posts (of which ten are cited in this article) as part of our effort to cross-check between and corroborate other qualitative evidence from interviews and IS documents. Finally, the article draws on secondary source material including local Arabic-language newspapers and reporting by human rights and international organizations.

### Evidence in Support of Our Theory

Below, we present evidence that IS's ideology was an important factor in the development of organizational policies that authorized and regulated violence. In general, IS claimed that all of its actions—including violence—were authorized by *shari'a*. This concern for legality is illustrated by the following passage from an official IS publication stating that the organization's personnel are forbidden from harming other Muslims without a legal

views were conducted anonymously and all subjects are referred to by pseudonyms.

22 Only around 0.85 percent of Tweets are self-geotagged by the authors (Sloan and Morgan 2015). We infer the location of the Tweets cited in this article by the authors' self-reported locations in Iraq or Syria or other contextual information, but we acknowledge that we cannot externally verify the locations of non-geotagged Tweets.

20 After these two interviews, we decided not to pursue additional interviews with Yazidis for ethical reasons. In one recent study, many Yazidi women expressed concerns about the harmful consequences of interviews by journalists and researchers including the risk of re-traumatization (as a result of being asked to retell horrific stories) and the potential for additional violence (such as honor killings) that might result from disclosure of identifying information (Foster and Minwalla 2018).

21 This field research was covered by [redacted for blinding] University IRB Protocols #1506016040 and #2000020198. For ethical and security reasons, inter-

basis for doing so: “Beware of shedding blood unjustly . . . By Allah, no case is reported to us involving the bloodshed of an innocent [Sunni Muslim] that isn’t backed up by clear evidence of what he did to deserve his blood being shed” (Islamic State 2015e, 14).

IS developed institutions to develop policies and rules regulating violence and to disseminate these rules to its members and civilians living under its control. Arguably, the most important of IS’s ideology-promoting institutions was the Division of Research and Fatwas (Bunzel 2017). This body, which had been formed by 2014, was comprised of religious scholars who were tasked with issuing official opinions (*fatwas*) on legal questions that confronted the group. *Fatwas* were issued on numerous social, economic, and military questions including whether currency acquired in the course of battle could be kept by fighters as war booty (Revkin 2016, 20) and the rules governing ransom of prisoners of war (Revkin 2016, 22) as well as slavery, discussed below. Other institutions supported the dissemination and enforcement of IS’s official ideology as articulated by the Department of Research and Fatwas. These included the deployment of jurists known as *shari’is* in combat units in its core territories in Iraq and Syria to advise military commanders on the legality of operations (e.g., determinations of whether or not other Muslim armed organizations can be targeted according to the principle of takfir and to ensure that fighters were complying with the IS’s code of conduct (Martin 2014) as well as the dissemination of IS’s ideology through mosques, billboards, public screenings of propaganda videos, social media, and schools (Revkin 2018).

A potential counterargument to our theory is that armed organizations adopt ideology instrumentally to justify violence that they are already perpetrating for strategic or opportunistic reasons. Consistent with our theory, we find many examples of ex ante policy enactment and rulemaking that appeared to be intended to regulate violence. For example, when IS captured new territory, the group would generally publish a written code of crimes and corresponding punishments in order to inform the population of the new rules governing their community and promote deterrence (Revkin 2016, 17). IS also claimed in an October 2014 publication, three months after the attack on Mount Sinjar, to have asked its scholars to research the legal status of the Yazidi community “prior to the taking of Sinjar . . . to determine if they should be treated as an originally mushrik<sup>23</sup>

group or one that originated as Muslims and then apostasized” and its scholars concluded that the Yazidi are a mushrik group and therefore eligible for enslavement (Islamic State 2014c, 14–15). Given evidence that IS dedicated substantial time and resources to informing the public about its rules and policies, we believe it is unlikely that ideology was merely a post hoc justification. Rather, we conclude that ideology was a causal factor that shaped IS’s particular pattern of sexual violence. Below, we describe the policies that IS implemented to regulate sexual violence and the ideological origins of these policies, and then assess observed practices of sexual violence.

### Sexual Slavery of Yazidi Women: A Policy

IS claimed that the enslavement (including sexual slavery and domestic servitude) of certain classes of people was authorized by its interpretation of *shari’a* as follows. According to an official justification of this policy, slavery is permissible because it was among the institutions present during the first caliphate and therefore “a firmly established aspect of the Shariah” (Islamic State 2014c, 17). Importantly, IS never used the term “rape” to describe its sexual violence and official publications insisted that slavery (“*saby*” in Arabic) was religiously legitimate in contrast with prohibited acts of “fornication” or “rape” (Islamic State 2015b, 44–49).

IS’s system of sexual slavery is regulated by rules that define the classes of people who can be enslaved, the conditions under which they can be bought, sold, and released, and limits on sexual access and violence. According to an IS fatwa, the following categories of “unbelievers” are eligible for enslavement: Alawites, “unbelievers who have no allegiance pact [with IS],” Yazidis, Shi’a, and other unbelievers who are not “people of the book” [Jews and Christians] (Islamic State 2015g). We found no evidence of sexual slavery of Sunni Muslim women but, as discussed at pages 7–8, there is some evidence of the enslavement of small numbers of Christians and Turkmens. IS publications refer to the possibility of enslaving both men and women (Islamic State 2014a), but, in practice, IS enslaved primarily women. However, the UN Commission of Inquiry found evidence of enslavement of some Yazidi men and boys (those who were not summarily executed) during the attack on Mount Sinjar in the form of forced labor but not sexual slavery. Yazidi men and boys were forced to convert to Islam and performed forced labor including construction, digging trenches, and cleaning streets (UN Human Rights Council 2016, 9).

23 In Islamic theology, a “mushrik” is one who commits the sin of “shirk,” which is the deification or worship of anyone or anything other than Allah (God) (Maher 2016).

The slave trade was regulated through the administration of several official slave markets in Iraq and Syria, where slaves were sometimes sold for fixed prices and in other cases were auctioned (Al-Dayel et al. 2020). In order to attend slave markets, IS fighters or members must “register their names with the administrative official of the battalion” (Islamic State 2015i). After the first sale, a slave can be resold an unlimited number of times, subject to certain limitations. If a slave is impregnated by her owner, “he cannot sell her and she is released after his death” (Islamic State 2015a). Another constraint is that an owner “should not sell her to an individual whom he knows will treat her badly or do unto her what God has forbidden” (Islamic State 2015a). Finally, IS permitted slaves to “buy” their own freedom by entering into a “contract of manumission” (Islamic State 2014a). Owners may also emancipate their slaves, but only when authorized by a court (Islamic State 2015h). If emancipated slaves convert to Islam, they become eligible for marriage to Muslim men (Islamic State 2015b, 46).

While IS authorizes non-consensual sexual intercourse with slaves (the definition of rape, although IS does not refer to it as such), official policies do set limits on violence. As a policy, IS prohibits torture in the context of sexual slavery, although corporal punishments are permissible for disciplinary purposes: “It is permissible to beat the female slave as a form of disciplinary beating, but it is forbidden to beat for the purpose of achieving gratification or for torture” (Islamic State 2014a). According to IS’s published policies, men are only permitted to engage in sexual relations with slaves of whom they are the exclusive owners” (Islamic State 2014a). Concerning the treatment of child slaves, the rules allow for sexual intercourse with a pre-pubescent slave only “if she is fit for intercourse,” although without defining the precise meaning of that phrase (Islamic State 2014a). All of these rules and regulations are derived from IS’s interpretation of Islam, consistent with our theoretical expectations.

Despite IS’s efforts to regulate the slave trade through the policies described above, violations of these policies do occur. For example, cases of torture have been documented (Human Rights Watch 2015) as well as gang rape, a *practice* that we discuss below.

Consistent with our theory, IS did punish members who violated its rules in some cases. In the Syrian city of al-Tabqa, IS reportedly detained one of its own security officials “on charges of selling a Yazidi slave back to her family” (presumably for personal enrichment), in violation of the requirement that all “emancipations” be offi-

cially authorized by courts.<sup>24</sup> In Mosul, IS executed one of its fighters for “attempting to smuggle a Yazidi girl,” again apparently in violation of the official rules regulating emancipation.<sup>25</sup>

### Child Marriage of Sunni Girls: A Policy

In contrast with the systematic and widespread enslavement of Yazidi women, IS did not enslave Sunni Muslim women, consistent with the organization’s official rules and policies regulating the institution of slavery. However, IS did adopt a policy that authorized and regulated sexual violence against Sunni women and girls: child marriage. One official publication states that “it is considered legitimate for a girl to be married at the age of nine” (Islamic State 2015c, 30), significantly below the minimum marital age of 18 that is recommended by the United Nations and adopted by most countries.<sup>26</sup> IS courts issued marriage contracts to formalize child marriage. These documents often included the signatures, fingerprints, photographs of the parties, the amount of the dowry paid by the bride’s male guardian,<sup>27</sup> and sometimes proof of vaccinations (Mohammed 2016). In at least some cases, IS members asked for the consent of the parents of prospective brides.<sup>28</sup> One contract for

24 @ajilnewsalassd, tanzim da'ish ya'ataqilu 'ahad 'anasir jihazihi al-'amni fi madinah #al-tabqa fi rif #al-raqqah bi-tuhmah bay'a sabiyah 'izidiyah 'ila 'ahl'ha (“Daesh [IS] has detained one of its officials in the intelligence apparatus in the city of #al-Tabqa in the suburbs of #Raqqqa on charges of selling a Yazidi slave to her family”). Tweet, August 17, 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160323003824/https://twitter.com/ajilnewsalassd/status/633295352766984192>.

25 @soundandpic, tanzim #da'ish yu'adimu 'ahad 'anasirhi bi-tuhmah muhawalah tahrib fatah 'izidiyah (“Daesh [IS] has executed one of its fighters on charges of trying to smuggle a Yazidi girl”). Tweet, September 3, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170817014133/https://twitter.com/soundandpic/status/772096270030802944>.

26 United Nations Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, “General Recommendation No. 21,” para. 36 (1994).

27 Photograph of an IS marriage contract from Aleppo, Twitter, <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/BnNsmhfCIAEJT0.png>.

28 “Syrian Girls Forced to Marry ISIS Fighters—Al-Monitor: The Pulse of the Middle East,” *Al-Monitor*, accessed October 17, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/05/syria-girls-marriage-isis-raqqqa.html>.

the marriage of a thirteen-year-old girl in Mosul shows the signature and fingerprints of the girl as well as her guardian, suggesting that consent of girls and their fathers (or other male guardians) was required (Islamic State 2016b). However, it is important to note that international standards caution that children under the age of 18 may be incapable of giving informed consent.

Given that IS's minimum age for marriage is extremely low (nine years), it is unsurprising that compliance with this policy appeared to be widespread in Iraq and Syria, with no known cases of girls younger than nine years old marrying IS members. In practice, cases of marriage under the age of 15 were rare, although some were documented including that of the thirteen-year-old girl in Mosul. An NGO officer in Lebanon was familiar with cases in which girls as young as 14 had married IS members.<sup>29</sup> In the Syrian city of ad-Dana, the parents of a thirteen-year-old girl allegedly agreed to marry her to an IS fighter in exchange for \$20,000.<sup>30</sup>

### Gang Rape of Yazidis: A Practice

We now discuss sexual violence that was not organizational policy. As noted above, IS's official policies regulating sexual slavery only permitted men to engage in sexual relations with slaves of whom they were the exclusive owners. If two or more men purchased a slave together, none were allowed to have sexual intercourse with her "because it is forbidden to have intercourse with a female slave if the master does not own her exclusively" (Islamic State 2014a). For the same reason, "a man may not have intercourse with the female slave of his wife, because the slave is owned by someone else" (Islamic State 2014a). These conditions imply a prohibition on gang rape of the same Yazidi woman by multiple perpetrators, unless she were immediately sold from one to another.

Despite the official prohibition on gang rape, however, many cases of this unauthorized practice have been documented; indeed, one Yazidi woman described it as "common" (Loveluck 2019). An engineer previously employed by IS at one of its oil fields in the Syrian province of Deir Ezzor reported that IS members there had established a

"brothel where you could pay \$50 to have fun with any of the Yazidi women"<sup>31</sup> in violation of the requirement of exclusive ownership. In another case documented in the Syrian province of Aleppo, a Yazidi woman reported that her owner threatened that "if I did not let him do this thing to me that he would bring four or five men and they would all take turns raping me" (UN Human Rights Council 2016, 14). The fact that IS appeared to tolerate and did not punish—to our knowledge—instances of gang rape of Yazidi women indicates that this pattern was a practice.

### Forced Marriage of Sunni Women: A Practice

Another form of sexual violence that was not authorized by IS but nonetheless occurred as a practice is that of forced marriage of Sunni women.<sup>32</sup> Although gender inequality is central to IS's extremely patriarchal ideology, the organization's official policies nonetheless provided some rights and protections to Sunni women. IS claimed that Sunni Muslim women had legal rights that were enforceable in courts,<sup>33</sup> including the right to work<sup>34</sup> and to education.<sup>35</sup> Some Sunni women were also elevated within the organization as scholars and propagandists and others served in IS's female police force known as the "al-khansa brigade," which was necessitated by a system of strict gender segregation that prevents male IS members from searching women at checkpoints or interrogating them. Female suicide bombers have been mentioned in IS propaganda and in news reports (al-Tamimi 2016, 2017), indicating that combat roles were in some cases open to women.

Importantly, IS does not officially permit "forced marriage" of Sunni Muslim women, and many of its publications and institutional procedures concerning marriage strongly imply a prohibition on forced marriage (although we are not aware of any texts containing an explicit prohibition on "forced marriage" in those

29 Interview with "Amira" in Saida, Lebanon, March 2017.  
 30 @KareemLailah, muqatil fi al-dawlah al-'islamiyah fi al-'ir'aq wa-al-sham fi al-'imarah al-'islamiyah fi balda al-dana tazawaja fatah suriyah 'amriha 13 sanah muqabil 20 alf dular li-ahl'ha ("A fighter in the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, in the "Islamic Emirate in the town of Dana" married a 13-year-old Syrian girl in exchange for paying \$20,000 to her family"). Tweet, September 20, 2013, 11:44 AM, <https://web.archive.org/save/https://twitter.com/KareemLailah/status/380975849367150592>.

31 Interview with "Fares" in Sanliurfa, Turkey, September 2016.  
 32 The abuse of Sunni girls through IS's official policy of child marriage, discussed earlier is a form of forced marriage because children lack the ability to consent.  
 33 "Women now go to courts and openly talk of their issues. They find that they are listened to and their issues are dealt with" (Islamic State 2015c, 30).  
 34 "Women [may] offer their wares in markets, organize their work and the state maintains her right to buy and to sell" (Islamic State 2015c, 31).  
 35 "[A woman] cannot fulfil this role if she is illiterate and ignorant, though. Hence, Islam does not ordain the forbidding of education or the blocking of culture from women" (Islamic State 2015c, 18).

words). Evidence of a prohibition on forced marriage can be found in IS marriage contracts, which usually bear the signature of the wife, implying that her formal consent—even if coerced—is a necessary condition for marriage (Kurdistan 24, 2016). One marriage contract form from Iraq's Ninewa province even refers explicitly to the requirement of consent by both the husband and wife as follows: “[The first party] acknowledges explicitly that he consents to marry [the second party] . . . and the second party acknowledges explicitly that she consents to marry [the first party] with the consent of her guardian” (Rudaw 2016). Evidence from interviews also suggests that mutual consent was a requirement for marriage. For example, a French woman who traveled to Syria with the intent of marrying an IS fighter described the following matchmaking process: “You meet, you talk for 15–20 minutes, and then it’s a yes or no. If they both agree then they get married” (Walsh et al. 2017).

Additional evidence of an implied prohibition on forced marriage can be found in the following excerpt from an official treatise on the role of women: “[The husband and wife] are to give and take in kind and live amicably ‘And live with them in kindness’ (Quran 4:19), and not by coercion or force, but by goodness and virtue” (Islamic State 2015c, 18). Women had the right to refuse marriage, according to an Iraqi hospital employee whose marriage was officiated by an IS court in Mosul. He said, “During IS’ rule, the judges would question the bride to make sure that she really wanted to marry the man, in order to protect her.”<sup>36</sup> Women also had the right to initiate divorce,<sup>37</sup> and one IS marriage contract signed by both the husband and wife suggests that women had the right to stipulate conditions for marriage—in this case, the right to carry out a suicide bombing (Saul 2015).

Although official IS texts indicate that IS did not authorize forced marriage and implicitly prohibited it, Sunni women living in IS-controlled areas nonetheless faced intense social and economic pressure to marry IS fighters that often amounted to outright coercion. Official publications encouraged widows of IS fighters to remarry, even if they would have preferred not to out of loyalty to their former husbands, because “a woman is always in need of a husband who will look after her and tend to her affairs” (Islamic State 2016a, 32–33). According to one interviewee, IS enlisted a local Syrian woman to conduct a “survey” of households to identify good can-

didates for marriage to fighters.<sup>38</sup> In another case from Deir Ezzor, an Iraqi “emir” (high-ranking IS official) paid a young woman 5 million Syrian pounds (approximately \$23,326) to break her pre-existing engagement to another man.<sup>39</sup>

Occasionally, this pressure and coercion rose to the level of physical force as discussed above. In the Iraqi city of Hawija, a Sunni woman reported that an IS fighter forced her to marry him by threatening to kill her parents (Human Rights Watch 2017). In another case, also from Hawija, IS fighters arrested a twenty-six-year-old woman whose husband had fled several weeks earlier and ordered her to remarry the local IS leader. When the woman refused, the fighters “blindfolded her, beat her with plastic cables, suspended her by her arms, and one of them raped her in front of her children” (Human Rights Watch 2017).

We have not to date found any record of IS punishing its members or residents under its rule for forcing women to marry and so conclude (tentatively) that it was an unauthorized practice against Sunni women, consistent with our theoretical expectation.

### Rape Outside the Context of Sexual Slavery and Forced Marriage: Neither a Policy Nor a Practice

As discussed above, IS prohibits rape of civilians and combatants outside of the context of sexual slavery and child marriage. In other statements, IS has made clear that it regards rape outside of those contexts—of civilians as well as enemy combatants—as a crime. A treatise on the rules governing treatment of prisoners issued by a pro-IS media outlet states that even if captured enemy combatants have raped or sexually assaulted Muslim men and women, jihadists are prohibited by Islamic laws of war from raping or assaulting them in retaliation (al-Battar 2014). Nonetheless, rape outside of slavery and child marriage did occur and was sometimes punished when the perpetrators were caught.

That rape outside of slavery and child marriage is not a policy is clear from the fact that IS punished its occurrence in some settings. Specifically, IS has punished its own officials and combatants for the rape of Muslim civilians, including with corporal punishments and prison sentences that range in severity. In Tikrit, an IS emir was sentenced to ninety-nine lashes for raping a young girl in March 2015.<sup>40</sup> In Raqqa, another IS

38 Interview with “Dalia” in Sanliurfa, Turkey, February 2017.

39 Interview with “Hala” in Sanliurfa, Turkey, February 2017.

40 @A27660278, Da’ish yaghtasib fatah fi tikrit wa yahkum ‘alayhi al-qadi al-shar’i bi-al-ta’azir bi 99 jaldah (“A

36 Interview with “Ahmed” in Mosul, Iraq, April 2017.

37 “Hakim” and “Abbas,” interviewed in Gaziantep, Turkey, July 2015, reported that IS courts in the Syrian cities of Raqqa and al-Tabqa had special divisions responsible for cases brought by women.

military official was detained for a week on rape charges, although he was eventually released for lack of evidence.<sup>41</sup> In Deir Ezzor, IS sentenced one of its Tunisian foreign fighters to death by stoning for raping a female Internally Displaced Person (IDP) (*Syrian Network for Human Rights*, 2014). In another case in Deir Ezzor, a particular Iraqi commander was known for luring children into a headquarters building by offering them money, weapons, and driving lessons, where he would rape them and threaten retaliation if they reported the abuse. After civilians complained, the commander was detained for two weeks and then transferred to the front lines in Iraq as punishment (*Sound and Picture* 2015).

IS also punished Sunni Muslim civilians for raping other Sunni Muslim civilians. In al-Furat province, an IS court sentenced three men to death for burglarizing a home, raping the female homeowner, and threatening to kill her son in December 2014.<sup>42</sup> In another case from the Syrian region of al-Ghouta, IS sentenced a man to death by decapitation for the crime of raping a woman and then allowed (or perhaps ordered) her adolescent son to conduct the execution.<sup>43</sup> An interviewee from the Syrian city of al-Tabqa reported that a man had been stoned to death by IS for raping a woman there.<sup>44</sup> However, in some cases, rape goes unpunished, for example, in the

Daesh [IS] emir raped a girl in Tikrit and was sentenced by the sharia judge to a punishment of 99 lashes”). Tweet. March 20, 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20181130012759/https://twitter.com/A27660278/status/578830149065420800>.

- 41 @ahmadking2014, Da'ish ya'ataqilu 'amir mu'askarat al-tadrih bi-al-rif li-mudah 'usbu'a bi-qaddiyah 'ightisab 'imra'ah wa min thumma yafrij 'anhu bi-hujjah 'adam thubut al-tuhmah (“Daesh [IS] detained the emir of military training in the eastern countryside [of Raqqa] for a week on charges of raping a woman but then released him due to lack of evidence for the accusation”). Tweet. August 27, 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170811184848/https://twitter.com/ahmadking2014/status/637000304505036800>.
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- 43 @aber\_sabeel2, 'ahad atfal al-ghuta yanfudhu hukm allah 'ala mughtasib walidatihu b'ada 'an qabdatuhu al-dawlah al-islamiah (“A child of al-Ghouta implements the ruling of God on his mother's rapist after he was arrested by [IS]”). Tweet. November 23, 2013, [https://web.archive.org/web/20170802215137/https://twitter.com/aber\\_sabeel2/status/405783917623783424](https://web.archive.org/web/20170802215137/https://twitter.com/aber_sabeel2/status/405783917623783424).
- 44 Interview with “Abbas” in Gaziantep, Turkey, July 2015.

Syrian city of Abu Kamal, where an IS fighter reportedly raped a twelve-year-old girl “and the organization did not do anything about it.”<sup>45</sup>

We cannot assess with confidence the extent to which rape outside the context of sexual slavery and forced marriage occurred. Cases of punishment may have been over-reported (relative to unpunished cases) if punishment was rare, often public, and therefore newsworthy. Or it is possible that civilians under-reported cases in which rape was punished (particularly when the perpetrators are IS fighters) because they did not want to be perceived as sympathetic to the organization and evidence of accountability would make it difficult to characterize IS as a completely lawless organization. Despite the limitations of our data, the fact that rape was sometimes punished strongly suggests that it was neither a policy nor a practice.

## Conclusion

We have argued that our ideology-based explanation accounts for aspects of IS's pattern of sexual violence better than alternatives. Consistent with our theory, the organization adopted ideologically motivated policies that authorized certain forms of sexual violence, including sexual slavery and child marriage, defining who could be targeted, and regulating the conditions under which such violence could be perpetrated. We found, again consistent with our theory, that although sexual enslavement of Yazidis was widespread as an official organizational policy, the enslavement of other religious and ethnic groups such as Christians and Turkmen who were not eligible for enslavement according to IS's ideology was quite rare. We find no evidence that IS engaged sexual slavery of Sunni Muslims, who were not among the groups deemed eligible for enslavement in IS's ideology. Consistent with our theory, we trace the origin of the organization's policies—and the socializing and disciplinary institutions that enforced and encouraged compliance with those policies—to its ideology, which defines as legitimate certain forms of violence against particular social groups, and prohibits other sub-patterns of sexual violence. However, in addition to finding that ideology is an important driver and

- 45 @hamoudehher2000, Tamma 'ightisab fatah la yatajawaz 'amriha 16 sanah min sukan harah al-jami'iyat min qibal 'ahad 'anasir #da'ish wa-al-tanzim lam yahtam li-'amriha (“A girl not older than 16 from the al-Jamiyat neighborhood was raped by an IS member and the organization did not do anything about it”). Tweet. August 18, 2015, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170821015457/https://twitter.com/maherlord2007/status/633731551881261056>.

constraint on patterns of violence through its articulation in official *policies*, we also documented the occurrence of two additional forms of sexual violence that were tolerated as unauthorized *practices* in IS's core territory in Iraq and Syria: (1) gang rape of Yazidi women within a system of sexual slavery that required exclusive ownership and (2) forced marriage of Sunni Muslim women.

Although beyond the scope of this article, we suggest in section 4 in the online appendix that our theory may generalize to other forms of violence perpetrated by IS. As noted earlier in this article, IS singled particular social groups for targeting with particular forms of violence but not others, including killing adulterers by stoning, homosexuals by throwing them from buildings, and "apostate" enemy combatants by fire (Islamic State 2014b). All of these forms of violence can be traced to IS's ideology and are not well accounted for by alternative explanations.

Furthermore, our theory may help to explain spatial and temporal variation in patterns of violence. Drawing on preliminary evidence, we suggest in section 5 in the online appendix that IS may have engaged in unauthorized sexual violence practices more frequently in the organization's non-contiguous provinces including Nigeria and Afghanistan, where pre-existing armed organizations with their own internal norms joined IS and sometimes disagreed with its policies, and also in its core territories as the military campaign against the organization intensified and warfare took priority over ideological indoctrination and the enforcement of internal discipline. By 2016, IS had significantly abbreviated the length of ideological training courses for new recruits (Revkin and Mhidi 2016) and by 2017 was described as being in a state of "theological turmoil" due to infighting among different scholars (Bunzel 2017). Future research should explore the relationship between variation in ideology across space and time and variation in patterns of violence.

Another research agenda that follows from our argument is to explore whether it accounts for patterns of violence by other Salafi-jihadist organizations. If our more general argument holds, the variation in ideology across Salafi-jihadist organizations should account for variation across those organizations in the forms of sexual and other violence adopted as policy. Other Salafi-jihadist groups, including al-Qaeda,<sup>46</sup> al-Shabaab,<sup>47</sup> and

Boko Haram (which pledged allegiance to IS in 2015),<sup>48</sup> have been accused of slavery in different forms and to varying extents, but these patterns of sexual violence have not been well documented, and it is particularly challenging to distinguish between forced marriage and slavery in some cases.

Finally, the overarching research agenda implied by our argument is to assess the extent to which ideology accounts for variation across organizations (states as well as non-state organizations) in their socializing and disciplinary institutions that promote compliance with policies, on the one hand, or practices that violate the organization's official policies, on the other—and thereby for variation in their patterns of violence.

It is our hope that our mapping of IS's pattern of sexual violence, analysis of the organization's justifications for it, and scrutiny of the institutions that generate and regulate it may all help to enforce accountability for its violence. Understanding IS's pattern of violence and the policies that enabled it will also inform efforts by policymakers and practitioners to develop evidence-based strategies to prevent the group's resurgence in the form of an "IS 2.0."

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