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Crimes Against Women in the ISIS Caliphate: Systematic Rape as a Weapon of War in the Reconfiguration of Domination

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Extended Abstract

The research article meticulously examines the function, objectives, and institutional mechanisms of systematic sexual violence and enslavement perpetrated by the terrorist organization ISIS (Islamic State) across territories under its control in Iraq and Syria between 2014 and 2019. This period, encompassing the rise, consolidation, and eventual territorial collapse of the self-proclaimed Caliphate, was marked by widespread crimes against humanity. Among these atrocities, systematic rape, sexual slavery, forced marriage, and the enslavement of women and girls—particularly from the Yazidi, Shia, and Christian communities—constituted a central pillar of ISIS's governance and military strategy. Rather than being incidental consequences of armed conflict, these practices were deliberately organized, bureaucratically regulated, and

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ideologically justified, making them an integral component of ISIS's state-building project and its broader strategy of domination over conquered populations.

The central problem motivating this study is the proposition that these grave sexual crimes were not opportunistic acts committed by undisciplined fighters or spontaneous manifestations of wartime violence. Instead, they represented a calculated, institutionalized, and multifunctional policy designed to advance ISIS's political, ideological, military, demographic, and economic objectives. Consequently, the primary research question asks: What strategic objectives did ISIS seek to achieve through the systematic perpetration of rape and sexual enslavement in territories under its control, and how did these practices contribute to the establishment, consolidation, and maintenance of the Caliphate's system of governance and domination?

The article advances the hypothesis that sexual violence functioned as a multidimensional strategic instrument simultaneously employed to: (1) propagate terror and intimidation among local populations; (2) engineer demographic transformation through the control of women's reproductive capacity, thereby facilitating ethnic and religious cleansing; (3) strengthen internal cohesion by providing sexual access as a material and symbolic reward for fighters; and (4) humiliate, fragment, and ultimately destroy the collective social, cultural, and religious identity of targeted minority communities, especially the Yazidis, through the systematic degradation of women. Beyond these functions, sexual slavery also generated financial resources through the commodification and trafficking of enslaved women, further embedding sexual violence within the political economy of the ISIS Caliphate. The systematic character of these crimes is demonstrated by concrete historical evidence, including the assault on Sinjar on 3 August 2014, during which approximately 6,800 Yazidi women and girls were abducted, catalogued, transported, distributed, and traded in organized slave markets operating under standardized pricing mechanisms, illustrating both the bureaucratic sophistication and economic rationality underlying ISIS's system of sexual exploitation.

The research employs an explanatory qualitative methodology based on documentary analysis and qualitative content analysis of authoritative secondary sources. The principal empirical materials consist of reports produced by

the United Nations Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, investigations conducted by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and a broad body of peer-reviewed academic scholarship addressing conflict-related sexual violence, genocide, terrorism, and gendered violence. To demonstrate the institutionalized nature of these crimes, the analysis examines recurring behavioral patterns, including official religious fatwas legitimizing sexual slavery, formal administrative directives issued by senior ISIS authorities, organizational regulations governing the ownership and transfer of captives, and the establishment of regulated slave markets in urban centers such as Mosul and Raqqa. Collectively, these sources reveal a high degree of organizational planning rather than isolated criminal conduct.

The theoretical framework integrates the concepts of Sexual Property, Hegemonic Masculinity, and Sexual Objectification with broader perspectives drawn from structural inequality theory, feminist security studies, genocide studies, and the political economy of armed conflict. This interdisciplinary framework enables the study to situate ISIS's sexual violence within wider historical patterns of patriarchal domination while simultaneously explaining how extremist ideology transformed pre-existing gender hierarchies into an institutionalized system of governance. The article further develops previous scholarship by demonstrating that sexual violence operated not merely as an expression of misogyny but as a strategic mechanism linking ideological control, military coercion, demographic engineering, economic extraction, and symbolic domination.

The findings demonstrate unequivocally that sexual violence occupied a central position within ISIS's overall strategy rather than representing conventional criminality or undisciplined battlefield behavior. First, it functioned as a weapon of terror and social destruction. Sexual assault deliberately targeted women as symbolic bearers of communal honor, enabling ISIS to terrorize entire populations, accelerate forced displacement, and dismantle the social cohesion of conquered communities. The destruction of family structures and communal trust significantly facilitated territorial conquest and long-term political control.

Second, sexual violence served as an instrument of genocide and demo-

graphic engineering. By exercising control over women's reproductive capacity and imposing the ideological identity of ISIS upon future generations through patrilineal descent, the organization sought to eradicate minority identities while permanently transforming the demographic composition of occupied territories. The deliberate targeting of Yazidi women, recognized internationally as constituting genocidal conduct, exemplifies the strategic relationship between sexual violence and ethnic cleansing.

Third, sexual violence reinforced hegemonic masculinity and organizational cohesion. Participation in sexual enslavement symbolized military success, masculine dominance, and ideological commitment. Access to enslaved women functioned as a powerful incentive for recruitment, rewarded battlefield participation, strengthened loyalty to commanders, and fostered solidarity among fighters. Sexual domination therefore became an important mechanism through which ISIS reproduced internal discipline and reinforced collective identity.

Finally, sexual violence became deeply embedded within the political economy of the Caliphate through the commodification of women as transferable property. Female captives were systematically registered, classified, priced, exchanged, inherited, and sold, transforming human bodies into economic assets capable of generating financial revenue while simultaneously reinforcing ideological claims regarding ownership, hierarchy, and domination. This institutionalization of sexual exploitation reflected the practical implementation of the concepts of Sexual Property and Sexual Objectification, whereby women were reduced to movable capital subject to bureaucratic administration and market exchange.

Analytically, these findings indicate that ISIS successfully integrated long-standing gender inequalities, sectarian discrimination, and extremist religious interpretations into a coherent institutional framework capable of simultaneously producing political authority, economic resources, military cohesion, demographic transformation, and ideological legitimacy. Sexual violence thus became a foundational instrument of governance rather than a peripheral consequence of armed conflict.

The research concludes that systematic sexual violence within the ISIS Caliphate constituted a deliberate and highly organized weapon of war employed to consolidate territorial control, ensure ideological reproduction, generate economic

resources, reshape demographic realities, and eliminate the collective identities of targeted minority populations. These crimes were legitimized through extremist jurisprudence, administered through bureaucratic institutions, and implemented according to formal organizational procedures, demonstrating that sexual violence represented an essential component of ISIS's governance model rather than an exceptional or incidental phenomenon. The findings therefore contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between terrorism, gender-based violence, genocide, and institutionalized systems of domination, while emphasizing the necessity of recognizing systematic sexual violence as a core mechanism of political power in extremist organizations.

Key words: ISIS, Violence Against Women, Weapons of War, Crimes Against Humanity.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in conducting this research study.