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Micah Ross 21 March 2024

“Echoes of the Abbasids”: Sexual Slavery and ISIS’s Selective Revisionism of the Imagined Golden Age

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Abstract

"Echoes of the Abbasids": Sexual Slavery and ISIS's Selective Revisionism of the Imagined Golden Age

By Micah Ross

This thesis examines ISIS's purported reverence and "revival" of the Abbasid caliphate, using the institution of sexual slavery as a case study through which to understand the jihadi group's relationship to this period in Islamic history.

Chapter One outlines the terrorist group's conception and veneration of the Abbasids to construct a history of the caliphate in the imagination of ISIS members. To do this, I catalog ISIS's references to the Abbasids based on my close reading of thousands of pages of their English and Arabic-language magazines. Allusions to the Abbasids encapsulate a wide range of topics which my cataloging organizes into five distinct themes.

Chapter Two analyzes the institution of sexual slavery in the Abbasid caliphate. This analysis reveals that the practice was deeply nuanced and diverse. Many enslaved women of the time were famous courtesans, harboring more power than free women, and most Abbasid caliphs were mothered by concubines. These findings reveal the complexities of the historical record which ISIS attempts to "revive."

Chapter Three explores ISIS's implementation of sexual slavery in the modern day. Through UN documents and first-hand testimony, I show how the group's enslavement of Yazidi women had a distinctly cruel character.

Chapter Four synthesizes all evidence introduced throughout the thesis, comparing the Abbasid historical record with ISIS's implementation of sexual slavery law. This chapter discusses the multi-vocal nature of both Abbasid and Islamic precedent, fallacies and synergies in ISIS's "revival" of sexual slavery, potential ulterior motives which may have impacted ISIS's decision-making, and finally, how the evolution of international human rights law complicates this conversation. This discussion fleshes out what it means for ISIS to reference (and "revive") Abbasid policies, underscoring the role of interpretation and oversimplification in this endeavor. This chapter answers the question of "Does ISIS faithfully reproduce Abbasid precedent?" while simultaneously complicating and challenging the premises of that very question. I ultimately argue in favor of adopting the term "selective revisionism" as a more apt characterization of ISIS's relationship to the Abbasid period.

Ultimately, by conducting a comparative analysis of ISIS's "revived" institution of sexual slavery with the historical record of Abbasid history through the particularistic lens of sexual slavery, we can garner valuable insights about ISIS's hidden agenda, desires, and inner workings.

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Acknowledgements

I spent the Summer of 2023 working for Lifting Hands International, an NGO providing psychosocial services and material support to refugees. My time working at the LHI community center, located adjacent to the Serres Refugee Camp in Northern Greece, allowed me to develop close relationships with the Yazidi-majority population which resides in the camp. My thesis is wholly dedicated to the Yazidis I worked with in Serres. Their strength and resilience in the wake of a harrowing genocide is nothing less than inspirational. I deeply hope that the world continues to learn about their story and that they settle comfortably in their new home countries. My thoughts are with them every day.

Thank you to the MESAS department at Emory for providing a deeply enriching 4-year experience for all of its students. Specifically, thank you to Dr. Courtney Freer, Dr. Craig Perry, and Dr. Scott Kugle for serving on my thesis committee and supporting me throughout the concept-development and writing process.

Thank you to Dr. Carrie Wickham for igniting my interest in this topic through her class "Psychology of Terror: ISIS as a Case Study," and her continual support ever since. Dr. Wickham is one of the most passionate and thoughtful people I've met. I am grateful to have had her as a mentor.

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Introduction

Contextualizing ISIS's References to Islamic History

My initial review of ISIS media reveals the jihadi group's strategy of drawing on historical precedent as a means of justifying its modern-day actions as religiously sound. ISIS references the Rashidun period frequently in both their oral and written statements, outnumbering mentions of any other period in Islamic history. This is to be expected. The Rashidun Caliphate is the period in which the first four "rightly guided" caliphs (Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman, and Ali) ruled immediately following the death of the Prophet Muhammad.[1] Sunni Muslims view this period (632 CE to 661 CE) as a paragon which ought to be emulated by future generations.

In addition to frequent references to the Rashidun period, ISIS's communications consistently venerate the Abbasid Caliphate. The first component of this thesis seeks to interrogate this practice: why does ISIS draw so heavily on the Abbasid Caliphate, particularly when no comparable terrorist organizations do so? This question merits a basic historical chronology of Islamic caliphates to understand where the Abbasids are situated in the trajectory of Islamic history.

Caliphal Background:

The Umayyad Caliphate reigned between 661 CE (immediately following the Rashidun period) and 750 CE. The city of Damascus served as its capital. Notable triumphs of the

[1] "Rashidun | History, Caliphs, & Facts | Britannica," https://www.britannica.com/topic/Rashidun.

caliphate include ‘Abd al-Malik’s construction of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, territorial victories in the Iberian Peninsula, and the conversion of many North African Berbers to Islam. The caliphate collapsed in 750 CE after a series of internal rebellions, which made the empire vulnerable to external attacks.[2] The Abbasid family, legitimized through their familial ties to the Prophet Mohammad’s uncle ‘Abbas, ultimately defeated the Umayyads and established a new caliphate.

Although the Umayyad caliphate lost its territory during this defeat, a nephew of the last caliph escaped Abbasid wrath to Andalusia (Southern Spain), where he re-established an offshoot of the Umayyad caliphate. It was followed by a series of smaller empires, including the Almoravids (1062-1147 CE), Almohads (1150-1269 CE), and Nasrids (1232-1492 CE).[3] The Spanish Kingdom’s Reconquista in 1492 marked the end of Muslim rule in Spain.

The Abbasid caliphate, which boasted a sprawling capital in Baghdad, began its rule in 750 CE. The Abbasids’ power was largely usurped by the Buyids in 945 CE, but symbolic caliphs continued to preside over the territory and their authority ebbed and flowed. The Abbasid caliphate formally ended in 1258 CE when its capital of Baghdad was sacked by the Mongols.[4] Despite notionally lasting into the 13th century, the true highpoint of the caliphate occurred during the eighth and ninth centuries, a period now regarded as the Golden Age of Islam. It is this period of the Abbasid caliphate which I focus on in this thesis.

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[2] “Umayyad Dynasty | Achievements, Capital, & Facts | Britannica,” https://www.britannica.com/topic/Umayyad-dynasty-Islamic-history.

[3] “Chronology,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, https://www3.metmuseum.org/learn/educators/curriculum-resources/art-of-the-islamic-world/introduction/chronology.

[4] “Caliphate - Abbasid, Islamic Empire, Sunni | Britannica,” accessed March 20, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/place/Caliphate/The-Abbasid-caliphate.

At the end of the 10th century, the Fatimids gained control of Egypt from the Abbasids. Their caliphate lasted until 1171 CE and was followed by the Ayyubid Dynasty (1171-1250 CE) and Mamluk Sultanate (1250-1517 CE).[5]

The Ottoman Empire took power in 1517 CE and held it until 1921 CE. At its height, the Ottomans held dominion over Egypt, the Levant, and southeastern Europe. Their capital was Istanbul.[6] Although Ottoman leadership was Sunni Muslim, the empire's center of gravity was Turkish, its rulers therefore not Arab. (This fact becomes an important factor in ISIS's rejection of the Ottoman Empire's Islamic character.)

Defining Slavery

This thesis deals with the topic of slavery. To the average reader in the West, this word likely brings to mind the transatlantic slave trade, the brutal kidnapping and selling of slaves from West Africa in the Americas. The institution of slavery in the Islamicate world is distinct from this. Islamic studies scholar Jonathan Brown notes that:

> Within slavery studies, there is a whole debate about whether there actually is one thing transhistorically across history that you can call slavery. You can be talking about slavery in the Ancient Near East and slavery in medieval China and slavery in the Americas in the 19th century. Can you actually have one conversation about slavery or are you talking about different phenomena and sort of imposing some unified term to join them? That's one school of thought. The other school, which is the majority, would say, yes, of course there's something transitory about slavery. But then, you get into the issue of how you define that.[7]

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[5] "Chronology of Islamic Egypt," accessed March 20, 2024, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt/chronology/islamic.html.
[6] "Ottoman Empire | Facts, History, & Map | Britannica," March 8, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/place/Ottoman-Empire.
[7] Jonathan Brown, *Slavery and Islam*, (Oneworld Academic), podcast.

Irrespective of which school of thought is more accurate, it is important to underscore the elusiveness of the term and to establish the importance of distinguishing chattel slavery—as was practiced in the Americas—from slavery in the Abbasid period.

Islam and Slavery

Prevailing scholarly opinion agrees that Islam condoned slavery but maintained what can be called an emancipatory ethic when conceiving of the practice.[8] Islam emerged in a time and place in which slavery was ubiquitous. In particular, the most common source of slaves in the pre-Islamic Middle East came from winning battles and enslaving captured peoples. Children in the pre-Islamic era who were born from enslaved people—even if it was just one parent—were considered to be born as slaves.[9]

Although Islamic law did not ban slavery, it did create new avenues through which slaves could attain freedom, revealing what some scholars argue to be an Islamic imperative for eventual emancipation. This is evidenced in the actions of the Prophet and his companions: The Prophet famously freed and had a close relationship with his slave Zayd,[10] the first *muezzin* (person who gives the call to prayer) was a manumitted slave named Bilal,[11] and Abu Bakr freed many Meccan slaves after gaining some degree of wealth.[12] These anecdotes reveal that the Prophet Mohammad had respect for enslaved people. This emancipatory ethic is also apparent in Islamic scripture. As noted by Bernard K Freamon,

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[8] Bernard K. Freamon, *Possessed by the Right Hand: The Problem of Slavery in Islamic Law and Muslim Cultures* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2019).
[9] Ibid, 85.
[10] Ibid, 90.
[11] Ibid, 95.
[12] Ibid, 95

> The practice of slavery and concern for the welfare of slaves were issues discussed in the Qur'an and were obviously matters of concern for the new Arabian prophet. The message of the Qur'an caused significant changes in his behavior and the behavior of those around him, forming a core for the emergence of a new and revolutionary standard of pious behavior in the Middle East. It was an emancipatory piety. Emancipatory incidents in the early days of Islam, like those involving Bilal, Zayd, and Amr ibn Fuhayrah, provided the building blocks for an emancipatory ethic that colored and sometimes even dominated Islam's theoretical approach to slavery since that time. This emancipatory ethic, while perhaps present in some of the pre-Islamic systems, and given some voice in Jewish and Christian ethics, was certainly not emphasized to the same degree that it was in the new Islamic world view. The text of the Qur'an was not just a document exhorting a generalized religious piety…What emerges from this history is an ideal stressing that an egalitarian emancipatory piety is an important behavioral criterion in the Islamic worldview.[13]

There are several important components of Islamic law's treatment of slavery. To begin, the concept of *umm walad* traces its roots back to the time of the 'Umar's rule (634-644 CE). This phrase, literally translating to "mother of a child," is a designation given to a slave-woman (typically a concubine) who gives birth to her master's child. According to 'Umar, the second Rashidun caliph and companion of the Prophet, the child born from the woman was to be freed and the woman could not be sold after giving birth. Furthermore, she was to be granted freedom upon her master's death.[14] This law created an avenue through which female slaves could achieve their own freedom and also ensured the freedom of their offspring. This was a major departure from pre-Islamic norms which would have held that both the mother and the child should remain slaves.

The Qur'an also mentions the Islamic value of human equality many times. Of course, none of this precludes the Qur'anic verses which condone the taking of slaves as war booty. Such is how ISIS claimed to theologically justify its enslavement of Yazidi women. Nonetheless,

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[13] Freamon, *Possessed by the Right Hand*.
[14] Ibid, 157.

it is important to understand that many scholars maintain that the general paradigm which Islam constructs around slavery is one which has an eye toward an emancipatory future.

Particularizing the Abbasids

Although ISIS's magazines do not singularly reference the Abbasid caliphate at the exclusion of all other periods in Islamic history, it is this period on which I chose to focus my research for the following reasons.

To begin, ISIS treats the Abbasid period with a romantic particularism that is unparalleled in the context of other Salafi-jihadist organizations. This is in part because of one of the main distinctions between Al-Qaeda and ISIS: their strategy for re-establishing an Islamic caliphate.

Whereas ISIS argues that an Islamic caliphate can and should be established in the present moment, Al-Qaeda views this as an eventual, long-term goal and invests its energy into other pursuits in the short-to-medium term.[15] Relatedly, many scholars argue that ISIS has a competitive advantage in recruiting fighters compared to Al-Qaeda because of its appealing call for an immediate, utopian Islamic State.[16]

ISIS's distinct obsession with re-establishing the caliphate naturally leads it to consider questions which Al-Qaeda rarely discusses. One such example pertains to the Abbasid caliphate. Because ISIS views the Abbasid period as the last truly Islamic caliphate, it repeatedly emphasizes its importance and stresses the need to revive its practices. ISIS thus aims to justify its own policies by referencing those of the Abbasids: "It [ISIS propaganda] argued that the

[15] Miron Lakomy, *Islamic State's Online Propaganda: A Comparative Analysis* (Leiden: Routledge, 2021), 27.
[16] Ibid, 2.

statehood of Daesh as well as its political and religious system are a direct emanation of the rules coming from the Golden Age of Islam."[17] This is how ISIS set itself in contrast to other terrorist groups to attain legitimacy; harkening back to a romantic "golden age" is undoubtedly a tempting proposal for potential recruits. Al-Qaeda, on the other hand, simply does not consider these questions because caliphal revival is not one of their immediate objectives.

According to scholar and professor Carrie Wickham,

> The Abbasid caliphate stands out as being mentioned most frequently as the historical template for ISIS, particularly the reign of the 5th caliph, Harun al-Rashid, when the caliphate was at the height of its power and prestige in the world. So ISIS often claims to be restoring the glory days of the Abbasid caliphate that ruled a vast empire from its capital in Baghdad.[18]

Although this encompasses the primary rationale for my decision to focus specifically on ISIS's reference to the Abbasids, there are two secondary reasons which I will briefly outline.

First, most scholars agree that Islamic law was codified during the Abbasid period. As noted by feminist scholar Leila Ahmed, "The texts the men of this period created are regarded as the core prescriptive texts of Islam."[19] This makes it a fascinating period to consider alongside a modern-day jihadi imagination of that very law. In this way, it was under Abbasid dominion in which a "blueprint" for Islamic law (and within it, slavery law) was crafted.

Second, the Abbasid period was when Islamic slavery law was elaborated. Because of this, there exists a great deal of literature from this period which describes enslaved people. Though there is precedent throughout Islamic history for the practice of capturing female slaves

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[17] Lakomy, *Islamic State's Online Propaganda*, 2.

[18] Carrie Wickham, MESAS 270: The Psychology of Terror: ISIS as a Case Study (class lecture, Emory University, Atlanta, GA, October 5, 2021).

[19] Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 83.

as war booty, much of the documentation we have of this comes from the Abbasid era, a period which ISIS references with excitement and consistency.[20] The combination of these factors renders the period a rich one to study.

Because ISIS relies on its references of Abbasid-era norms as ground on which to justify its own policies, it is important to have credible historical sources to use as a sort of control variable through which to understand ISIS's imagination of this history.

I do not intend to argue that the Abbasid caliphate caused, or even exclusively inspired, ISIS to "revive" the institution of sexual enslavement. Rather, ISIS engaged with the blueprint which the Abbasids created. Furthermore, I identify both similarities and fissures between the Abbasid precedent and ISIS's revival of it.

Existing literature:

Existing academic scholarship on this topic addresses aspects of my thesis, but never in tandem with one another. For instance, some existing literature—though surprisingly very little—is dedicated to understanding ISIS's obsession with Abbasid-era caliphal politics.[21] Other scholars have conducted thorough reviews of ISIS literature, particularly those targeting English-speakers.[22] However, my review of existing literature reveals a lack of scholarship which examines how ISIS articulates its interest in the Abbasids through its written communications (namely, its magazines). In other words, it is not difficult for scholars to explain and justify ISIS's interest in the Abbasids retroactively. Yet, in the first chapter of this thesis, I utilize

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[20] Freamon, *Possessed by the Right Hand*, 199.
[21] "Why ISIS Really Wants to Conquer Baghdad," Brookings, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-isis-really-wants-to-conquer-baghdad/.
[22] Lakomy, *Islamic State's Online Propaganda*.

primary-source documents to gain insight into the question of why ISIS specifically venerates the Abbasids, in the jihadi group's own words. This distinction is subtle but important. Although academics can explain ISIS's rhetoric perhaps more candidly than ISIS itself, it is ISIS's self-conception and rhetorical communications which I hope to understand.

My existing literature review found only a few writings dedicated entirely to explaining ISIS's perceived relationship to the Abbasid caliphate. (There are thousands of existing sources which discuss ISIS and include a brief mention of the group's veneration of the Abbasids, but very few explore the issue in more than a few sentences.) The first is by William McCants of the Brookings Institution. Written in 2014, the short article is titled "Why ISIS Really Wants to Conquer Baghdad." It argues that, although ISIS would like to say it is modeling itself on the Abbasid caliphate, this is not possible for two reasons: first, the famous Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid "was not terribly pious" and second, ISIS's obsession with conquering Baghdad is untenable because the city is comprised primarily of Shi`a and "they will not give it up without a fight."[23] Although this article certainly identifies and explores ISIS's references to the Abbasids, it is a very cursory inquiry. The entire article amounts to only 271 words and is supported by little evidence. The second is an opinion piece written by Khaled Diab for *The New York Times* in 2014 which touches on these same themes. He argues that ISIS's goal of restoring an Islamic caliphate is "ahistorical" and provides evidence of secularism in the Abbasid and Rashidun caliphates followed by an explanation of the tension between European powers' carving of the Middle East with Arab nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries. Diab's section on the Abbasids,

[23] "Why ISIS Really Wants to Conquer Baghdad."

amounting to 198 words, argues that the Abbasid caliphate was defined by multiculturalism that exists "in sharp contrast to ISIS' violent puritanism."[24]

It is important to note that the aforementioned articles—the only pieces which discuss the same topic as my thesis—were written in 2014. This is the year that ISIS began to release *Dabiq* and years before it released *Rumiyah,* the two periodicals from which I have read thousands of pages to construct this thesis. I have not found any articles, books, or essays written about this topic since 2014, likely because ISIS has fallen out of the general public's immediate consciousness. In other words, my thesis is based on evidence which was not available to the authors of the only two articles which explicitly discuss my thesis topic. The publication of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* created an entirely new prism through which to understand ISIS's reverence of the Abbasids. Although many scholars have used *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* as the subject of their research in recent years, I have not found a single article, book, or thesis whose primary aim is to examine ISIS's reference to the Abbasid caliphate though ISIS primary sources. The goal of this thesis is to fill that gap in the scholarly literature.

The second part of my thesis investigates how ISIS drew on and manipulated Abbasid history to justify its enslavement of Yazidi women. Once again, there is certainly scholarship about ISIS's capture of the Sinjar region and the Yazidi genocide.[25] My thesis, however, will revisit this recent history through the prism of ISIS's intention to use their treatment of Yazidis as a vehicle to "revitalize" caliphal, and in particular, Abbasid, norms.

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[24] Khaled Diab, "Opinion | The Caliphate Fantasy," *The New York Times*, July 2, 2014, sec. Opinion, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/03/opinion/the-caliphate-fantasy.html.

[25] Vicken Cheterian, "ISIS Genocide against the Yazidis and Mass Violence in the Middle East," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 48, no. 4 (August 8, 2021): 629–41, https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2019.1683718.

A great deal of existing literature pertaining to ISIS's worldview and actions make arguments through a theological framework.[26] For instance, scholars have often compared ISIS's conception of Islam with other interpretations of the Qur'an and Sunnah, arguing that ISIS warps the religious texts to conform to their sadistic dispositions.[27] Little has been written, however, on ISIS's actions through a *historical* framework. Rather than using Islamic theology as a normative point of reference in my arguments, I use Islamic history as the scaffolding for this thesis.

Another feature of this thesis lies in the diversity of sources on which it draws to interrogate the questions at hand. As previously mentioned, few inquiries have been made in general into ISIS's references to the Abbasid period. However, of the handful which have tackled this question, none has drawn on the wide range of primary and secondary sources which I used, including thousands of pages of content from ISIS magazines, scholarly accounts of the Abbasid caliphate, UN reports about ISIS's treatment of Yazidis, personal testimonies of previously-enslaved Yazidi women, an Abbasid-era authoritative legal text about jihad, ISIS's internal rulebook for how soldiers should treat sex slaves, and more. Thus, the introduction of these wide-ranging and rich texts will add nuance to the predominant narrative about ISIS's relationship to the Abbasid caliphate.

A semantic note

Although most readers in the West will recognize the name ISIS, a brief outline of the terrorist group's nomenclatorial evolution and variations is important.

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[26] "The Phony Islam of ISIS: A Response to The Atlantic's ISIS Story - The Atlantic," accessed March 20, 2024, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/02/what-muslims-really-want-isis-atlantic/386156/.
[27] "Open Letter to Dr. Ibrahim Awwad al-Badri, Alias 'Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi'," September 19, 2014, https://rissc.jo/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Letter_to_Baghdadi-EN.pdf.

ISIS began simply as ISI, an acronym for "Islamic State in Iraq."[28] As the name denotes, and as I will outline shortly, this name only lasted for as long as ISIS's territorial dominion was limited to the country of Iraq.

In 2013, ISI entered Syria, which had just devolved into a brutal civil war, and quickly re-branded to ISIS.[29] This second "S" can stand for either "Syria" or "Sham," an Arabic word denoting not only the country of Syria but also the wider Levantine region in which it is situated.

By the summer of 2014, ISIS changed its name once more to simply "The Islamic State," thereby ridding its name of any affiliation with modern nation-states (which they view to be illegitimate by nature).[30] This newer, simpler name also implied that the group was the world's singular Islamic authority. This is certainly reflective of ISIS's self-conception. In its Arabic communications, ISIS simply fashions itself as *al-Dawla al-Islamiyyah,* the Arabic translation of "The Islamic State."

US President Barack Obama is known to have preferred the acronym ISIL over ISIS. This is simply a question of translation. Those who use "ISIS" translate the Arabic *sham* to "Syria," whereas those who use "ISIL" translate *sham* to "Levant."

Finally, *Daesh* is the Arabic acronym for ISIS, standing for *dawla al-Islamiyyah fil-Iraq wal-Sham (*a transliteration of the ISIS acronym in Arabic). *Daesh* has a distinct connotation in Arabic; ISIS itself despises the word because it resembles the Arabic verb "to trample down" (*dahis*) and is sometimes translated as "bigot." ISIS thus regards *Daesh* as pejorative and has long rejected the term.[31]

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[28] Wickham, MESAS 270, September 28, 2021.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] "What Does 'Daesh' Mean and Why Does ISIS Hate It?," NBC News, November 14, 2015, https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/paris-attacks-what-does-daesh-mean-why-does-isis-hate-n463551.

Salafi-Jihadism:

ISIS is, at its core, a Salafi-jihadist organization. In order to understand ISIS, a basic knowledge of Salafism and jihadism are warranted.

Salafism dates back to the 9th century. The movement argues that modern-day Muslims should look to the Prophet Mohammad, his companions, the Qur'an, and the Sunnah for guidance on comportment, to the exclusion of all other methods of theological or rational interpretation. As with all Muslims, they stress the importance of *tawhid*, the oneness of God.[32] As part of their highly textualist religious framework, Salafis are acutely concerned with condemning divergent sects of Islam like the Sufis, whom they believe engage in idolatrous behavior. (Sufis themselves have always maintained their belief in a single God, but Salafis argue that the Sufi custom of visiting the graves of Sufi masters, among other practices, calls into question their purported monotheism.)[33] Since its founding, Salafism has split into a moderate branch and a much smaller, yet far more radical, subgroup.

Moderate Salafis realize their dogma in three distinct ways: propagation (spreading Islam to eliminate infidels), advice (religious scholars advising leaders privately about Islamic legislation), and nonviolent action (protesting against un-Islamic actions through rallies, sermons, etc.)[34]

Radical Salafis comprise a small, radical fringe which imagines an Islamic imperative to use violence as a method to achieve their aim of returning to what they consider a "purer"

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[32] Wickham, MESAS 270, September 2, 2021.
[33] Richard Gauvain, *Salafi Ritual Purity: In the Presence of God* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
[34] Wickham, MESAS 270, September 2, 2021.

practice of Islam. They can be called jihadists, a designation under which ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Taliban unambiguously qualify.

Radical Salafis permit *takfir,* the practice of denouncing another person as an unbeliever, or infidel.[35] This word is composed of the trilateral root k-f-r, from which the word *kāfir,* meaning infidel, is also derived. (Moderate Salafis do not engage in *takfir*; they believe that, since it is almost always impossible to know what sentiments are contained within a person's heart, one can never prove with certainty that another is a *kāfir.*)[36] ISIS believes that it is justified to kill *kufār* (infidels).

The word jihad literally translates to "struggle." Islamic texts delineate a critical distinction between internal jihad (*jihad al-nafs)* and external jihad (*jihad al-sayf)*. The former suggests an inner struggle of self-betterment and discipline. The latter jihad tends to be an armed struggle in pursuit of justice, self-defense, or other causes.[37]

External jihad is a broad category which encapsulates "offensive jihad" and "defensive jihad." Offensive jihad is carried out as a means of promoting the spread of Islam, and thus can only be waged under the leadership of a caliph. Defensive jihad may be waged when an outside force "invades Islam."[38] When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, for instance, Abdullah Azzam declared a defensive jihad against them, inspiring those who we now know as the *mujahideen*. Swaths of Muslims from all over the world flocked to Afghanistan to help fight

[35] Wickham, MESAS 270, September 2, 2021.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Wickham, MESAS 270, September 7, 2021.
[38] Ibid.

against the foreign body invading the country. These men came to be known as "Arab Afghans" and formed the basis for what would later become Al-Qaeda.[39]

Al-Qaeda to AQI to ISI:

Al-Qaeda was formed in 1988 in Afghanistan by Osama bin-Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. It aimed to thwart the Soviet invasion of the country, and emerged from the rubble of Afghanistan as a formal Salafi-jihadist organization.[40] Al-Qaeda had three main goals: to draw on the Muslim masses to force the US and the West out of the Middle East, to destroy Israel, and to restore an Islamic Caliphate (in the long-term).[41] Their base quietly grew over the next decade, propelled by several factors including Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait (and more specifically, the use of American troops stationed in Saudi Arabia to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi forces).[42] Notable Al-Qaeda attacks against US targets during this period include the August 1998 bombing of the US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya[43] and the October 2000 bombing of the USS Cole (a US boat which was making a fuel stop in Yemen).[44] On September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda carried out the devastating 9/11 attack. It was the largest attack on US soil in the country's history, leaving 2,977 people dead and over 6,000 injured.

Before moving forward with this brief historical synopsis, a specific actor must be biographized: Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Zarqawi was born in 1966 in Zarqa, Jordan, a poor town

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[39] Wickham, MESAS 270, September 7, 2021.
[40] "Al-Qaeda International," FBI, https://www.fbi.gov/news/testimony/al-qaeda-international.
[41] Wickham, MESAS 270, September 14, 2021.
[42] Ibid.
[43] "East African Embassy Bombings," Page, Federal Bureau of Investigation, accessed March 20, 2024, https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/east-african-embassy-bombings.
[44] "USS Cole Bombing," Page, Federal Bureau of Investigation, accessed March 20, 2024, https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/uss-cole-bombing.

situated adjacent to a Palestinian refugee camp. He had no money and little education.[45] Among his childhood peers, Zarqawi came to be known as "the Green Man," a nickname derived from the fact that his arms were peppered with tattoos. (He did not grow up particularly religious and in fact was known to be a petty criminal.)[46] Zarqawi came to Afghanistan in 1989, inspired by the "Arab Afghan" movement of men from across the Middle East who came to fight alongside Afghanis against the Soviets. He would eventually become a key leader in the organization which would become ISIS.

In the decade following Zarqawi's arrival in Afghanistan in 1989, he began to grow more infatuated with jihad. In 1994, he was sent to a Jordanian prison after the police discovered that he was hoarding explosives in his home.[47] It was during this stint behind bars that Zarqawi became deeply religious.[48] When he wasn't spending months in solitary confinement, Zarqawi shared a cellblock with inmates who were also flirting with jihad. ISIS lore describes that during his time in prison, Zarqawi used a knife to cut off his tattoos from his own skin, ridding himself of this symbol of *haram*.[49] Regardless of whether the story is true, it certainly symbolizes an ideological and behavioral shift in Zarqawi and the image he wanted to portray to his followers.

In 1999, King Abdullah came to power in Jordan. As per political custom, the change in power led Abdullah to grant general amnesty to lower-level prisoners in Jordan.[50] Abu Mosab al-Zarqawi was freed.

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[45] Mary Anne Weaver, "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi," *The Atlantic*, July 1, 2006, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/07/the-short-violent-life-of-abu-musab-al-zarqawi/304983/.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Wickham, MESAS 270, September 9, 2021.
[50] Weaver, "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi."

Initially, Zarqawi struggled to find purpose outside of prison. He missed the comradery of fellow jihadists in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Jordanian prison. He regularly paid visits to jihadists who were still incarcerated, but he never quite shook some of his religiously inconsistent, arguably heretical, habits. He was seen disappearing for hours into the home of a woman to whom he was not married, yet described himself as a Muslim warrior who would fight Western crusaders on his people's behalf. He showed deep emotional sensitivity and concern for his mother's health, yet simultaneously planned attacks to murder thousands of innocent civilians.[51] These inconsistencies would continue to underpin his tenure as a jihadist.

The same year he was freed, Zarqawi traveled back to Afghanistan to meet with Osama bin-Laden. Although bin-Laden found Zarqawi to be overly-ambitious, aggressive, and arrogant, he granted him a small sum of money to open an Al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan.[52] Zarqawi was charged with finding and training recruits from across the Levant.

At this point, however, Zarqawi had not yet given bin-Laden his *bay'a,* or oath of allegiance. When pressed to do so by bin-Laden, Zarqawi refused. He felt that the ideological divergence between him and the Al-Qaeda leader was too great to pledge his unconditional loyalty.[53]

As the fissure between the two men continued to widen, the US began carrying out airstrikes in Afghanistan as an initial response to the 9/11 attacks. Zarqawi was badly injured in one such strike and chose to leave Afghanistan.[54] The anger and desire for vengeance he felt towards the United States had never been greater.

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[51] Wickham, MESAS 270, September 9, 2021.
[52] Weaver, "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi."
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.

In 2002, Zarqawi settled into a remote mountainous region in Iraq. Despite having run the training center for Al-Qaeda, he had little cache among jihadists. His name was hardly known in Afghanistan and Iraq, much less the United States. That would soon change.

The United States was scheduled to give a speech at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in February 2003 to discuss security threats in the Middle East. President George W. Bush's administration knew they needed to use this meeting to justify, amid ongoing international pressure, their decision to invade Iraq. A member of the administration managed to convince Vice President Dick Cheney that the most effective way to do so would be to find an individual whom they could suggest was serving as an intermediary between Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda. This, they believed, would ostensibly channel the Western world's anger towards Al-Qaeda into support for the US invasion.[55] The man whom they decided to market as this crucial link was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. A previously unknown name would soon become the face of jihadism to the Western world.

There was no shortage of internal outrage and resistance against this decision. CIA intelligence officers warned Cheney that this information was blatantly false.[56] They knew that Zarqawi had neither pledged his *bay'a* to bin-Laden nor had any connection to Saddam Hussein; although he was living in Iraq, he was in the semi-autonomous northern region, hundreds of kilometers from Baghdad and Hussein's residence. But the decision had been made. Secretary of State Colin Powell was given a speech to read at the meeting which pitted Zarqawi as the middle-man between Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda.[57]

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[55] Weaver, "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi."
[56] Nada Bakos, *The Targeter: My Life in CIA, Hunting Terrorists and Challenging the White House* (New York: Little Brown and Company).
[57] Weaver, "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi."

This publicity was the best thing to happen to Zarqawi. Overnight, he gained clout among his fellow jihadis and the necessary platform from which to espouse his ideas. This new following also made him secure enough to challenge bin-Laden.

Simultaneously, US forces began invading Iraq with the goal of overthrowing Saddam Hussein and his Ba'th party. 19 days later, the United States succeeded in their goal of "de-Ba'thification," removing Hussein from power and disbanding the Iraqi army (comprising 250,000 trained Iraqi men).[58] However, the US failed to implement scaffolding in the country to mitigate the instability it had caused. They had not planned for the "day after." Cut off from their income and livelihood, the newly-unemployed men who had previously comprised the Iraqi army quickly grew angry and desperate.

US forces also fired thousands of additional Iraqi workers from their posts who were accused of having been members of Saddam Hussein's party, the Ba'th. In reality, membership in the party was a prerequisite to gaining university entrance and working most jobs and thus did not necessarily denote loyalty to Hussein.[59] Many Sunnis, unemployed and frustrated with the new system and with American intervention, joined Zarqawi's emerging movement.[60]

A power vacuum quickly developed on the governmental level after Hussein's overthrow. Zarqawi leapt at the opportunity to fill it. He began to attack Shi`i targets, sowing mistrust among Sunnis (about one-third of Iraq) and Shi`a (about two-thirds of Iraq) in the country. A staging ground for civil war was soon paved.

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[58] Wickham, MESAS 270, September 9, 2021.
[59] Wickham, MESAS 270, September 14, 2021.
[60] Ibid

Not only did this chaos allow Zarqawi and his cronies to recruit thousands of unemployed Iraqi Sunnis to his ranks (with promises of money, food, and protection), he also saw thousands of foreign fighters coalesce in Iraq, in a similar fashion to the "Arab Afghan" phenomenon in Afghanistan. Between 100 and 150 Muslims arrived in Iraq each month to join the fight.[61]

In October of 2004, Zarqawi re-branded his swelling jihadi movement to Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Terrorist attacks at the hands of AQI abounded, most targeting public areas and Shi`i cultural and religious heritage sites.[62] It was also around this time when Zarqawi began to talk openly about his goal of establishing an Islamic Caliphate in Iraq.

Zarqawi was killed in an airstrike in June of 2006, but the momentum of his movement continued to sweep the country. In October of 2006, the leaders of AQI announced that they were separating from Al-Qaeda and would henceforth be known as The Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). (They would not earn the second "S" in "ISIS" until they entered Syria in 2013.)[63] At this point, the divisions between Al-Qaeda and ISI had become too glaring to overcome. Al-Qaeda lamented ISI's extreme brutality against Shi`a (bin-Laden's own mother was Shi`i),[64] public beheadings, and targeting of civilian populations in Iraq, which are overwhelmingly Muslim. ISI was at once its own entity, completely separate from Al-Qaeda.

Among the various components of ISI's doctrine was their aim of immediately "restoring" an Islamic caliphate. This verbiage led many outsiders to question exactly which period in Islamic history they were aiming to revive. The answer quickly became clear.

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[61] Wickham, MESAS 270, September 14, 2021.
[62] "20 Die as Insurgents in Iraq Target Shiites - The New York Times," accessed March 20, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/17/world/africa/20-die-as-insurgents-in-iraq-target-shiites.html.
[63] Wickham, MESAS 270, September 14, 2021.
[64] Weaver, "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi."

ISI (and later, ISIS) writings reveal, both directly and indirectly, the group's intent to "restore" an Islamic caliphate along the same ideological and physical parameters as the Abbasid caliphate. It is this point which my thesis aims to thoroughly interrogate.

From ISI to ISIS

Two major events took place in 2011 which contributed to ISI's growth. First, US President Barack Obama had long been quietly withdrawing troops from Iraq, but by December of 2011 the vast majority had finally left.[65] This departure left yet another power vacuum which ISI was eager to exploit. Second, 2011 marked the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. The war was catalyzed by the Arab Spring, which empowered civilians in the Arab world to protest against their governments. Bashar al-Assad, president of Syria, encountered these peaceful protests with mass violence, leading to civilian strife. Chaos quickly enveloped the country.

In the summer of 2011, ISI sent a scouting troop on a foray into Syria. By spring of 2013, ISI's then-leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had sent sizable numbers of fighters into the neighboring country.[66] Al-Baghdadi announced in April 2013 that ISI would henceforth be known as ISIS, an acronym for "The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" or al-Sham.[67]

The major Syrian city of Raqqa fell to ISIS in the summer of 2013. (It is worth noting here that Raqqa was briefly the capital of the Abbasid caliphate before it was moved to Baghdad,

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[65] Associated Press, "Barack Obama Announces Total Withdrawal of US Troops from Iraq," *The Guardian*, October 21, 2011, sec. US news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/21/obama-us-troops-withdrawal-iraq.

[66] Wickham, MESAS 270, September 28, 2021.

[67] Haroro Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, *The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 149-160.

under the reign of Harun al-Rashid.)[68] ISIS followed this military acquisition with the immediate imposition of its draconian laws enforcing their version of Islam. A year later, ISIS captured Iraq's second-largest city of Mosul.

On July 4, 2014, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi made a televised public announcement from the Grand Mosque in Mosul.[69] Standing in the pulpit, he proudly pronounced the establishment of *al-Dawla al-Islamiyya,* the Islamic State. This, he claimed, was a revived Islamic caliphate to which all the world's Muslims should give their *bay'a*.

In August of 2014, ISIS captured the Sinjar region and began to carry out a genocide against the Yazidi people.

ISIS and *Kufār*

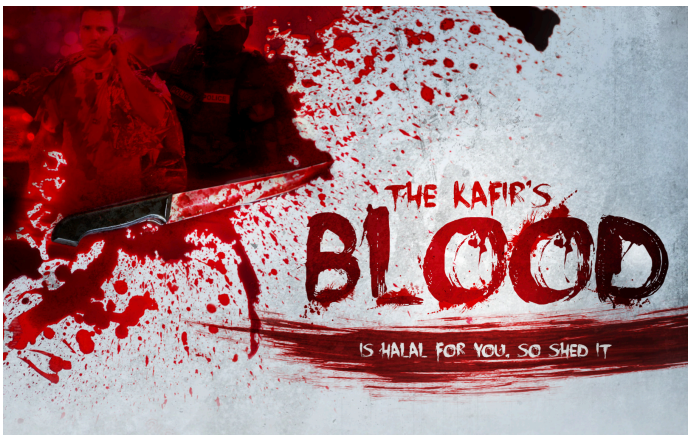
I pulled two quotes from my readings of ISIS's English-language magazines to convey the group's sentiments towards alleged *kufār:*

a. "In reality, there are only two religions. There is the religion of Allah, which is Islam, and then the religion of anything else, which is kufr."[70]
b. "The death of a single Muslim, no matter his role in society, is more grave to the believer than the massacre of every kāfir on earth."[71]

[68] "Raqqa: Syrian Capital of the IS 'Caliphate,'" accessed March 20, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40495039.
[69] Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter, *The ISIS Reader,* 161-176.
[70] *Dabiq*, no. 14 (2015): 8.
[71] Ibid, 4.

The first quote serves as ISIS's definition of *kufr*. This makes clear that all non-Muslims—and Muslims who do not adhere to Islam in a way that ISIS sees fit—fall into this designation of unbeliever, apostate, and heretic.

The second quote reveals ISIS's conviction that *kufār* lack basic humanity and are wholly unworthy of life. This doctrine is made clear in ISIS's treatment of Yazidis.



Excerpt from ISIS's *Rumiyah* magazine, Issue 1

Background on Yazidis

Yazidism emerged in the early 12th century as a syncretistic religion which regards both the Bible and Qur'an as sacred texts.[72] Adherents partake in ritual baptisms, circumcisions, and animal sacrifice.[73] Yazidi religious lore dictates that before humanity existed, God created seven angels, each a reflection of Himself. The chief of the angels, Tawusi Melek, is said to have been sent to earth in the form of a peacock in order to serve as "God's connection to earth and man's link to the heavens."[74] Although outsiders like ISIS argue that the seven angels represent a polytheistic religious ethic, Yazidis consider themselves to be monotheistic.[75]

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[72] Nadia Murad, *The Last Girl* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017), 5.
[73] "Who, What, Why: Who Are the Yazidis?," *BBC News*, August 7, 2014, sec. Magazine Monitor, https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-magazine-monitor-28686607.
[74] Murad, *The Last Girl, 28.*
[75] Ibid*, 5.*

Much like Muslims, Yazidis pray multiple times per day. Although several countries in the Middle East are home to a Yazidi population, a large portion of the world's Yazidis lived in the Sinjar region of northern Iraq prior to August of 2014.[76] Hundreds of Yazidi villages have historically enveloped the 60-mile mountain range of Sinjar, situated next to the Iraqi-Syrian border.[77] Most Iraqi Yazidis speak Kurmanji, a northern dialect of the Kurdish language. Yazidis are indeed ethnically Kurdish.

Before ISIS's August 3, 2014 attack of Mount Sinjar, the region was overwhelmingly composed of Yazidis, interspersed with small numbers of Sunni Muslims.[78] Historically, Muslims and Yazidis coexisted rather peacefully.[79] Though intermarriage was largely nonexistent between the groups (conversion out of the faith is highly taboo and uncommon), many Muslims and Yazidis attended school together, engaged in business partnerships, and had intimate interreligious friendships.[80]

On August 3, 2014, ISIS captured the majority-Yazidi Sinjar region and began to carry out a systematic annihilation of the Yazidi people. The list of genocidal tactics which ISIS employed in this capture is harrowing: murder, rape, child indoctrination, familial separation, and torture. Indeed, nearly all of these methods qualify for the stipulations outlined in the 1948 UN Genocide Convention. The convention notes that:

> Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its

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[76] Murad, *The Last Girl,* 3-14.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid*,* 3-4.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid*,* 29.

> physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.[81]

ISIS regards Yazidis as infidels (*kufār* in Arabic), a label which they believe justifies armed violence against them.[82] Also on ISIS's list of unbelievers are Shi`a Muslims, Sufi Muslims, Christians, Jews, secular Muslims, and other religious minorities.

In June 2014, ISIS captured the major Iraqi city of Mosul, the first of many land seizures in Iraq and Syria which culminated in the infamous August 3 attack in Sinjar: "The day before the attack, the Yazidis of Sinjar…spent their day like any other. Within 24 hours, their lives would become unrecognizable to them. The date of 3 August 2014 would become a dividing line, demarcating when one life ended, and – for those who survived – when another, infinitely more cruel, existence began."[83]

In the early hours of August 3, 2014, ISIS unleashed a systematic assault on Sinjar. Yazidis immediately fled their homes. Most were captured by ISIS while fleeing while the rest took refuge on Mount Sinjar.[84] ISIS promptly surrounded the Yazidis on the mountain, ensuring they would have no access to food, water, and medical support.

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[81] "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide," The United Nations, January 12, 1951, https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf.

[82] *Dabiq*, no. 14 (2015): 4.

[83] "'They Came to Destroy': ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis," Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, United Nations, June 15, 2016, https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf.

[84] Benjamin Isakhan and Sofya Shahab, "The Islamic State's Destruction of Yezidi Heritage: Responses, Resilience and Reconstruction after Genocide," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 20, no. 1 (February 1, 2020): 3–25, https://doi.org/10.1177/1469605319884137.

On August 7, 2014, the United States, Iraq, United Kingdom, France, and Australia airdropped basic provisions to Yazidis on Sinjar, though ISIS shot at many of the planes. Hundreds of Yazidis ultimately died on Mount Sinjar. Eventually, the Syrian Kurdish military (YPG) aided the besieged Yazidis in fleeing to Syria. Back on the ground, ISIS successfully seized nearly every Yazidi village within three days of the initial attack.[85]

Immediately after capturing the Sinjar region, ISIS gave every man (and boy older than twelve) an ultimatum: convert to Islam or be killed.[86] Those who converted were held at centers in Tel Afar, Mosul, or Baaj, in which they were "forced to pray, grow their beards and hair, and follow other religious dicta as interpreted and promulgated by the terrorist group."[87] ISIS knew this would violate the cardinal sin in Yazidism, conversion.

ISIS immediately executed Yazidi men found with weapons either by gunshot or throat-slitting. A 16-year-old Yazidi girl who was later sold into sexual slavery recalls these killings: "After we were captured, ISIS forced us to watch them beheading some of our Yazidi men. They made the men kneel in a line in the street, with their hands tied behind their backs. The ISIS fighters took knives and cut their throats."[88] This practice of forcing women to watch their male relatives be murdered was not uncommon for ISIS. Rather than dispose of the dead bodies, ISIS left them to rot on the roadside.

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[85] Isakhan and Shahab, "The Islamic State's Destruction of Yezidi Heritage."
[86] Ibid.
[87] "'They Came to Destroy,'" Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, United Nations.
[88] Ibid.

There is one documented instance in which ISIS engaged in the mass-murder of women. On August 16, 2014, ISIS shot hundreds of women older than 60 in an area east of Sinjar, burying them in a mass grave at the Solagh Technical Institute.[89]

ISIS went to great lengths to detach male Yazidi children from their religious heritage. The latter part of Article 2 in the UN Genocide Convention forbids the forcible transfer of children, a stipulation which ISIS decidedly violated in its indoctrination of Yazidi boys. In Sinjar, ISIS separated Yazidi boys older than seven from their families and forced them to attend ISIS training camps.[90] At these camps, the boys were forbidden from talking about their families and religion. After months of training, the boys were forced to fight on behalf of ISIS. Details of these training centers are grueling:

> The boys are registered and given Islamic names. From then on, the boys are only called by their new names, and are treated as ISIS recruits…The boys' daily programme consists of sessions in Quranic recitation as well as military exercises, including being taught to use AK47s, hand grenades, and Rocket Propelled Grenades. The boys are forced to watch ISIS-made propaganda videos of armed battles, beheadings, and suicide missions. ISIS instructors also hold sessions for the boys on "Jihad" and the importance of participating in ISIS's war against "the unbelievers". If the boys fail to memorize Quranic verses or perform poorly in training sessions, they are beaten… it aims at destroying their religious identity as Yazidis and recasting them as followers of Islam as interpreted by ISIS. In this way, Yazidi boys are transferred out of their own community, and through indoctrination and violence, into ISIS.[91]

Methodology:

I conducted a content analysis of all of ISIS's written material in English and Arabic which I was able to acquire. ISIS's production of written propaganda reached its height between

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[89] "'Nothing Left in The World Except These Bones': Yazidis Search For Mothers' Remains," WUNC, December 2, 2020, https://www.wunc.org/2020-12-02/nothing-left-in-the-world-except-these-bones-yazidis-search-for-mothers-remains.

[90] "'They Came to Destroy,'" Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, United Nations.

[91] Ibid.

2014 and 2017. Much of this content is today inaccessible on internet platforms. However, I was able to gain access to the original documents which shaped this thesis through the website Jihadology, a "clearinghouse for jihadi primary source material" run by scholar Aaron Zelin.[92] There are four main components which comprise my content analysis of these sources.

First, I read all of the 15 issues of ISIS's English-language magazine titled *Dabiq,* which was published between July 2014 and July 2016. The average length of each *Dabiq* issue is 62.8 pages.

ISIS's other English-language periodical is called *Rumiyah,* and was published for only one year between September of 2016 and 2017. There are 13 issues of *Rumiyah,* the average length amounting to 45.38 pages. I read every issue.

After reading the entirety of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah,* I catalogued all of the magazines' references to the Abbasid caliphate by theme, ultimately identifying five primary topics which each of the 41 total references fits into: a) references to scholars from the Abbasid period (46.2 percent of total references), references to the Abbasid period as Islamically pure in contrast to today (15.3 percent of total references), references to ISIS's "revival" of the Abbasid caliphate (15.3 percent of total references), references to specific Abbasid policies to justify ISIS policies (13 percent of total references), and references to Islamic law as a corpus which was codified during the Abbasid period (10.2 percent of total references). I then analyzed several excerpts from each of the five sections, as will be seen in Chapter One.

Finally, I also used ISIS's Arabic-language newsletter for my research, called *al-Naba.* There are 423 issues of *al-Naba.* I searched all of them for key words related to the Abbasid

[92] Aaron Y. Zelin. Jihadology, https://jihadology.net/.

caliphate and the Yazidis. In Chapter One I also analyze several translated excerpts from *al-Naba.*

In addition to this content analysis of primary sources, I read many secondary sources pertaining to ISIS propaganda, slavery in Islamic theory, the Abbasid Caliphate, the Yazidi genocide, and more.

The combination of the primary and secondary sources which I read as part of my research led me to choose the topic that I did.

Summary of Thesis:

Chapter One outlines ISIS's diverse references to the Abbasid caliphate, primarily through their written propaganda materials in English and Arabic. To do this, I will draw on their two English-language periodicals, *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah,* their Arabic-language newsletter, *al-Naba*, and several secondary sources. The content analysis in this chapter proves that ISIS not only consistently referenced but also venerated the Abbasid caliphate in its writings, a crucial premise upon which the rest of the thesis will stand. I organize the dozens of references by cataloging them into five thematic categories.

Chapter Two explores the various types of female sexual enslavement in the Abbasid Caliphate. I will use the institution of sexual slavery as a case study through which to understand an aspect of Abbasid society (which will be contrasted alongside ISIS's implementation of this practice in Chapter Three). I chose to focus on sexual slavery as a lens for several reasons. First, the scope of an undergraduate thesis demands a significant narrowing in topic matter. Second, there is a well-documented historical record for the institution of sexual slavery during the Abbasid period (significantly more so than the documentation of the practice in the Rashidun, for

instance). Third, I had to choose a particularity which could be contrasted with ISIS's actions in the modern day. ISIS's sexual enslavement of Yazidi women is thoroughly documented, owing to the brave testimonies of Yazidi women who survived. This is perhaps one of the most evidenced aspects of ISIS's caliphal rule given that much of their internal operations and dynamics were kept secretive. In short, the institution of sexual slavery is the practice which the historical record can best speak to, both during the Abbasid caliphate and ISIS's period of territorial domination.

In Chapter Three, I examine how ISIS put into practice its "revival" of sexual slavery by outlining their enslavement of Yazidi women between 2014 and 2017. To do this, I draw on a slew of sources including UN reports, secondary academic sources, ISIS's internal memos, and testimonies of Yazidi women.

Finally, Chapter Four synthesizes all of the evidence presented thus far into a conversation, discussing the multi-vocal nature of history, fallacies in ISIS's imagination of Abbasid precedent, potential ulterior motives for ISIS's "revival," and how modern human rights sensibilities complicate this conversation. Finally, I suggest that the term "selective revisionism" is a more apt characterization of ISIS's relationship to the Abbasid period than "revival," allowing scholars to more objectively capture the nuanced nature of ISIS's purported association with this era.

I conclude the thesis by arguing that Islamic history, particularly of the Abbasids, is deeply important and relevant in the modern day despite ISIS's rapid territorial decline in recent years. I reiterate that although much scholarship is devoted to understanding how religious extremists manipulate theology, much less is dedicated to understanding how they manipulate history. ISIS's novel approach to doing just this served as a helpful recruitment tool, functioning

as yet another incentive for prospective fighters who were entranced by the prospect of revitalizing a romantic lost past.

Chapter One: The Imagined Golden Age through ISIS's Own Words

The era roughly between the 8th and 10th centuries is widely regarded as the Golden Age of Islam, a period of impressive military conquest and one in which science and culture flourished under Islamic rule. This period is epitomized by the reign of Harun al-Rashid, caliph of the Abbasid empire from 786 to 809 CE. It is a time in Islamic history which many recall with a romantic eye, though of course no historical period is truly idyllic.

It should thus be unsurprising, albeit certainly noteworthy, that this is a period which ISIS not only venerates but furthermore seeks to "restore." This chapter is titled "The Imagined Golden Age" because this period, largely synonymous with the period of Abbasid dominion, has taken on a life of its own in the hearts and minds of ISIS's leaders, members, and sympathizers. The rhetorical power of invoking this period has led the terrorist group to imagine this history not with an eye towards historical accuracy but rather as the genesis of a teleological decline in Islamic societies, culminating in the modern day. For ISIS, there is much to gain from imbuing this history with an air of perfection so as to situate it as a paragon which ought to be emulated. By conducting a content analysis and subsequently cataloging of thousands of pages of ISIS primary sources, I use this chapter to identify distinct themes in ISIS's historical understanding of this period. In Chapters Two and Three, I build on these findings to explore ISIS's "revival" of sexual enslavement as a case study for understanding the tools which the jihadi group employs to construct their own interpretation of Islamic history.

Theory Behind ISIS Propaganda

Although this chapter focuses on ISIS's written propaganda, particularly those published in English and Arabic, a brief explanation of ISIS's entire media oeuvre is merited.

The importance which ISIS placed on its media cannot be understated; it recruited semi-professionals to do the job and paid them far more than fighters.[93]

An analysis of ISIS's self-made films reveals an unparalleled skillfulness compared to comparable terrorist organizations, including "aerial shots, crowd shots, ambient light, depth of field, various camera angles (including the first person perspective), special effects, electronically augmented sound, compilations, slow motion and adjustment of the range of colours."[94] This stands in stark contrast to older generations of terrorist leadership such as Al-Qaeda's Osama Bin Laden, whose interminable theological pontifications comprised the entirety of Al-Qaeda's audio publication. One can imagine that this medium is not particularly compelling for young recruits.

ISIS, on the other hand, sought to make its content relatable. They posted photos of their soldiers eating Nutella, filmed videos of toddlers executing prisoners, and crafted clever slogans such as "Call of Jihad" (based on the popular violent video game "Call of Duty").[95] In a similarly perplexing vain, there was a

Photo posted by an ISIS member depicting a cat holding a gun.
Source: https://english.alarabiya.net/variety/2014/06/22/ISIS-fighters-big-on-cats

[93] Lakomy, *Islamic State's Online Propaganda,* 28.
[94] Ibid, 21.
[95] Ibid, 23.

period in which fighters posted photos on social media with cats to show a "softer" side of the movement.[96]

In addition to producing tens of thousands of pages of original text, ISIS also occasionally re-published classic Salafi texts. They added a "publishers note" to the front of these publications which explained how readers should interpret the text. One such text is called "Clarifying Matters of Methodology." The publisher's note states, "unlike many who do not live up to that honored phrase and principle of Alhl us-Sunnah wal-Jama'ah, the Islamic State are followers and not innovators, and this book will testify to that."[97] The phrasing "followers and not innovators" seems to reference ISIS's practice of blindly paying heed to historical precedents, stripping themselves of any analytical power to interpret Islam. This concept in Arabic is called *bida'*, literally translating to "innovation." The term has a negative connotation in Islam, as it is regarded as implying that an individual regards the Qur'an and Sunnah as insufficient.

Ultimately, ISIS's online presence, at least during the pinnacle of its physical caliphate in Iraq and Syria, was significant. Its "digital jihad"[98] was marked by semi-professional forays into the creation and dissemination of videos, photos, books, magazines, fatwas, newsletters, social media posts, and audio messages.

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[96] "Cat Got Your Gun? Iraq, Syria Jihadist Pictures Go Viral," Al Arabiya English, June 22, 2014, https://english.alarabiya.net/variety/2014/06/22/ISIS-fighters-big-on-cats.
[97] Lakomy, *Islamic State's Online Propaganda,* 59.
[98] Ibid.

Non-Primary Source References to the Abbasids

In addition to ISIS's explicit references to the Abbasid caliphate in their own magazines, which will be explored in this chapter, there are components of the organization which implicitly indicate a reverence for the Abbasid caliphate.

The clearest example of this phenomenon is found in the names of the first two leaders of ISIS's caliphate. Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was the leader of the Islamic State in Iraq (when it was still ISI) between 2006 and 2010. After his death in 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became caliph until he was also killed in a US raid in 2019. As their names suggest, both individuals share the same *nisbah*, an Arabic adjectival surname which serves to denote a person's origin, lineage, or any affiliation thereof. Neither leader was born with the *nisbah* of "al-Baghdadi;" rather, they both adopted it as a *nomme de guerre* as a means of paying homage to the Abbasid caliphate, whose capital was famously in Baghdad. The city of Baghdad took on an elevated role in the hearts and minds of ISIS soldiers, and from its inception the jihadi group dreamed of conquering the city. In 2007, an ISIS spokesman pronounced, "Know that the Baghdad of al-Rashid is the home of the caliphate that our ancestors built… It will not appear by our hands but by our carcasses and skulls. We will once again plant the flag of monotheism, the flag of the Islamic State, in it."[99] This quote not only reveals ISIS's perceived ancestral connection to Baghdad, but also its intention of reclaiming the city as a nod to the Abbasid caliphate.

[99] "Why ISIS Really Wants to Conquer Baghdad."

Primary Source Background

I have constructed this chapter based on my analysis of three different ISIS magazines, two in English and one in Arabic. Between Summer 2014 and 2016, ISIS regularly published an English-language newsletter called *Dabiq*. I read all of its 15 issues, amounting to over 930 pages of content. Although few members of its writing staff are named, it is clear that the authors have at least some knowledge of Jewish and Christian texts.[100]

The name *Dabiq* likely comes from ISIS's interpretation of Islamic end-times theology:

> According to Islamic eschatology, Dabiq – a small town in northern Syria – should be the place of the prophesied battle between true Muslims and Christians ("crusaders") that will precede the Apocalypse. On the one hand, it suggested that this terrorist organisation is the embodiment of true Islam, representing Muslims during the approaching "Hour." As a consequence, it indirectly supported the legitimacy of the self-proclaimed "Caliphate." On the other hand, the adoption of such a title was also a manifestation of its ambitions to defeat all enemies of Islam. This intent was emphasised in the quotation of az-Zarqawi, which was included in the table of contents of all the editions of *Dabiq*: "The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify – by Allah's permission – until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq.[101]

Prior to publishing *Dabiq*, ISIS had already released issues of an Arabic-language newsletter called *al-Naba* (meaning "the news"). This naturally precluded the non-Arabic speaking world from consuming ISIS propaganda, and thus warranted an English-language periodical. On a symbolic level, its success in producing high-quality content with an international reach allowed ISIS to establish itself as a legitimate caliphate for all the world's Muslims. Thus, *Dabiq* served a dual role of spreading ISIS rhetoric and also reifying its very existence.

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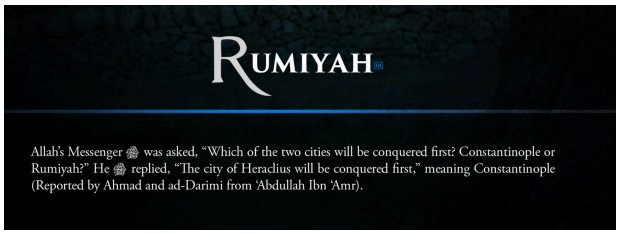
[100] Lakomy, *Islamic State's Online Propaganda,* 55.
[101] Lakomy, *Islamic State's Online Propaganda,* 56.

Between September 2016 and 2017, ISIS released another English-language periodical called *Rumiyah.* I read each of its 13 issues, amounting to over 580 pages. *Rumiyah* is Arabic for Rome, a city which has long played a role in Islamic eschatology. Several hadith reports prophesize the conquest of Constantinople, the once-capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. It is said that the Muslims' conquest of the city, and the subsequent fall of Rome, will catalyze the period of End Times and the Day of Judgement.[102] Some scholars have theorized that ISIS re-branded to *Rumiyah* as a means of symbolically shifting its focus from a local war of territorial acquisition to one with an international character. There is no better way to convey one's internationalization than to invoke Rome, a city regarded as a focal point for Christianity, and to imply intent to conquer it.[103]



Hadith report written on the last page of every issue of ISIS's *Rumiyah* magazine
Source: Rumiyah Issue 3

The fundamental difference between *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* lies in their linguistic breadth. During the period of *Dabiq*'s publication between 2014 and 2016, ISIS also published a French-language magazine called *Istok*, a Russian-language magazine called *Furat Press*, and a Turkish-language magazine called *Konstantiniyye*, among others. All of these were replaced in 2016 by *Rumiyah*, which ISIS released monthly in eight different languages.[104]

It should be noted that ISIS lost control of Dabiq, Syria only six weeks after the group first released *Rumiyah*. It is possible that the group sensed this imminent territorial loss and

[102] "Surah Ar-Rum - 1-60," Quran.com, accessed March 20, 2024, https://quran.com/ar-rum.
[103] Lakomy, *Islamic State's Online Propaganda.*
[104] Ibid.

rebranded in its anticipation. Even six weeks before they lost *Dabiq*, many high-level ISIS members, particularly those who worked in its media arm, had been killed.

Rumiyah also differed from *Dabiq* with respect to its content. In addition to being, on average, significantly shorter per issue than *Dabiq*, *Rumiyah* also focused more on religion and military engagements than its predecessor. *Dabiq*, on the other hand, contained more articles pertaining to politics.[105]

In my close reading of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, I have noted all instances in which ISIS makes reference to the Abbasid caliphate, both directly and indirectly. I have then parsed through all of the references to catalog them thematically.

Finally, ISIS's Arabic-language newsletter is called *al-Naba*. It was first published in 2014 and contains 423 issues, amounting to thousands of pages of content. ISIS continues to publish issues of *al-Naba* up until the time of this writing (March 2024).

When examining *al-Naba*, I searched for eight key words in each issue. Five of them were iterations of "The Abbasid caliphate," two of them were derivations of "Yazidi," and the final one was "Harun al-Rashid" (the famous Abbasid caliph who ruled between 786 and 809 CE, arguably at the high point of Abbasid power).

Cataloging Themes in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*

After thoroughly analyzing both of ISIS's English-language newsletters, I identified five distinct categories which the terrorist group used to reference the Abbasid caliphate. There are 41 total references, in both magazines combined, which refer to this period. It should be noted here

[105] Ibid, 76.

that the nature of a singular reference ranges from one sentence to an entire multi-page article. I have not discriminated by length between what counted as a single reference, as long as the reference maintained focus on a singular topic and was laid out contiguously. Below are the categories:

a. References to scholars from the Abbasid period (46.2 percent of total references)
b. References to the Abbasid period as Islamically pure in contrast to today (15.3 percent of total references)
c. References to ISIS's "revival" of the Abbasid caliphate (15.3 percent of total references)
d. References to specific Abbasid policies to justify ISIS policies (13 percent of total references)
e. Referring to Islamic law as a corpus which was codified during the Abbasid period (10.2 percent of total references)

There are two notes here which merit clarification. First, I have not included references to sexual slavery as a distinct category. Rather, references to this topic are interspersed throughout the various categories. Second, I have not included any of the magazines' references to hadith compiled by al-Bukhari in my notes or numbers. Muhammad al-Bukhari was a famous compiler of hadith in the 9th century Abbasid caliphate. His book, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, continues to be one of the most trusted collections of hadith. *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* reference al-Bukhari's hadith dozens, if not hundreds, of times. However, I have chosen to exclude these references from my counting and cataloging for two reasons. First, there were so many references to his hadith that it would have diluted my cataloging to such an extent that all other categories would have comprised a practically insignificant percent of total references. Second, although al-Bukhari lived during the Abbasid caliphate, his legacy and impact transcends the period in which he lived. It would be

disingenuous to claim that ISIS's references to al-Bukhari were solely rooted in a veneration of the Abbasid period.

With these two caveats justified, I will now provide specific examples and insights into each of the five categories mentioned.

Category A: References to scholars from the Abbasid period

As previously noted, this category decidedly represents the plurality of ISIS's references to the Abbasid caliphate, amounting to 46.2 percent of total references. Most of these references are quotations of Abbasid thinkers whom ISIS portrays (through highly selective excerpts) as soliloquizing about the evils of apostasy and the imperative of waging jihad against unbelievers. Below I include two such examples followed by a brief explanation of each.

a. "Ibn Qudamah mentioned the harbi (the kafir who is not under a covenant) and said, 'Shedding his blood is permissible without exception, just like swine' (Al-Mughni). He also said, 'The kuffar asliyyin [those kuffar who are not murtaddin] shall have no protection in their own lands' (Al-Mughni)."[106]

This passage references Ibn Qudamah and his famous legal compendium titled "Al-Mughni." Qudamah was an Abbasid jurist who lived during the 12th century. In this passage, he employs several technical terms including *kāfir,* meaning infidel, and *murtaddin,* meaning apostates who have abandoned Islam. When he refers to a *harbi* as a *kāfir* who is "not under covenant," Qudamah is alluding to people living under the caliphate who do not hold *dhimmi* status. (*Dhimmi* refers to societal position of Jews, Christians, and members of some other religious

[106] *Rumiyah*, no. 1 (2015): 36.

groups, who live under Muslim rule. Historically, Islamic caliphates granted such groups protections and rights in exchange for paying a tax called *jizya* and accepting certain restrictions, though the specific parameters of this arrangement varied widely depending on time and place.) This necessarily implies that those who are *dhimmis,* namely Christians and Jews, are to be protected. Of course, ISIS does not care to flesh out this distinction and can safely assume that the vast majority of its readership will fail to discern from this quote the imperative of protecting *dhimmis*. This interpretive selectivity is misleading to an uninformed reader. Indeed, based on the thorough account of medieval scholar and historian al-Tabari, whose *Book of Jihad* summarizes Abbasid norms towards rulings on the topic, there is no documentation which would suggest that the Abbasid caliphate systematically engaged in the murder of non-Muslims on a large scale. According to al-Tabari, the medieval Muslim jurist Al-Awza'i said of "enemy people,"

> If Muslims conclude a peace treaty with the enemy people (ahi al-harb) in which they agree to pay Muslims a designated amount [of money] every year so that the Muslims will not enter their country, there is no harm in concluding such a treaty with them. The Messenger of God concluded a peace treaty with the polytheists on the day of Hudaybiya without paying to him a tribute (kharaj). And the Messenger of God said, 'The Byzantines will make with you a secure peace.' Thus, the Messenger of God did not find fault with [peace agreements].[107]

Although al-Tabari follows this quote by outlining a scholarly disagreement about whether time limitations and other caveats apply to this ruling, it is nonetheless clear that Abbasid-era legal norms certainly did not condone violence against non-Muslims in the absolutist way that ISIS would like to imply.

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[107] Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Book of Jihad*, trans. Yasir S. Ibrahim (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007), 79.

ISIS's rhetoric in these excerpts reveals one of the ways in which it re-imagines history. Although Qudamah did serve as a jurist, his ruling on a singular case is not necessarily representative of typical Abbasid procedure. Although it would be convenient for ISIS to imply that Qudamah's position as a jurist imbues this quote with legal authority, that would ignore the multi-vocal nature of Abbasid cultural and legal norms.

Part of ISIS's success in its purported historical "revival" also comes from its tactfulness in emphasizing, and de-emphasizing, certain aspects of Abbasid caliphal norms. ISIS preserves a kernel of truth in their invocation of the Qudamah quote but then hyper-emphasizes the permissibility of murdering non-Muslims without also giving equal treatment to the ruling's implied protection of *dhimmis*.

> b. "Abū Hurayrah (radiyallāhu 'anh) said that Allah's Messenger (sallallāhu 'alayhi wa sallam) said, "Allah marvels at a people who enter Jannah [Heaven] in chains" [Reported by al-Bukhārī].
> Ibnul-Jawzī (rahimahullāh) said, "This means that they were captured and enchained. Once they realized the truth of Islam they entered it voluntarily, and thus they entered Jannah. So the coercion into captivity and chains was the first cause. It is as if he referred to coercion (into slavery) with the word chains. And because this was behind them entering Jannah, he regarded it as the cause" [Fath al-Bārī – Ibn Hajar]."[108]

This quote is an excerpt from a long article entitled "Slave-girls or Prostitutes?" which appears in the 9th issue of *Dabiq*. The quote opens with a hadith report by Abu Hurayrah which implies that many people eventually came to embrace Islam. Ibn ul-Jawzi, a prominent Abbasid scholar from 12th century Baghdad, elaborates on this in his commentary. He clarifies that, although many slaves were initially coerced into captivity, they embraced Islam voluntarily upon learning of its truth. Thus, he situates the initial coercion as "the cause" of enslaved people's eventual

[108] *Dabiq*, no. 9 (2015): 42.

redemption. This conclusion seems to imply that these individuals came to appreciate the positive consequences of their enslavement. It is no surprise that ISIS is eager to share this quotation as perpetrators of a slave trade themselves. The obvious problem with this line of reasoning is that it assumes a knowledge of the inner sentiments of the enslaved based on the perspective of the enslavers. (Chapter Three of this thesis attempts to mitigate this disconnect by incorporating perspectives of previously enslaved Yazidi women into the narrative.)

Ibn ul-Jawzi translation of the Arabic word *'abd* as "slave" in this passage is questionable, particularly given that the hadith report he is analyzing seems to translate *'abd* as "people." In early Islam, the word *'abd* was used to refer to all people. There were other words which were reserved in legal discourse to talk specifically about slaves. ISIS's choice to translate the hadith report in this way certainty satisfies its own agenda and further proves that the jihadi group's reading and portrayal of Islamic texts is highly selective and disregards nuance.

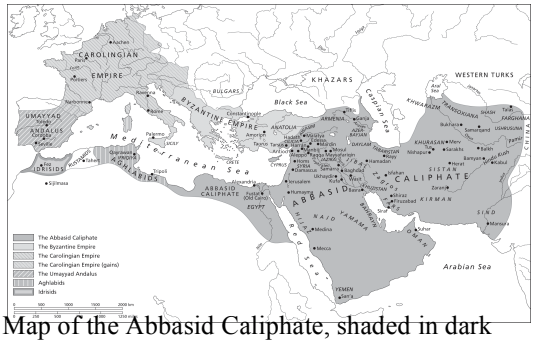
Category B: Referring to the Abbasid period as Islamically pure in contrast to today

As previously noted, this category comprises 15.3 percent of total references to the Abbasid caliphate. By making references to the Abbasids which imply a decline in religious purity, ISIS is engaging in a fallacy known to historians as chronological primitivism.

Philosophers Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas coined the phrase "chronological primitivism" to refer to the human tendency to be discontent with modernity. This sentiment is particularly present in the Islamicate world because of the widely accepted notion that authentic Islamic society only existed in the 7th century during the time of the Prophet Mohammad. Although ISIS certainly references this period as a pinnacle of Islamic history, the group's publications also refer to the Abbasids with a similarly reverential tone. This differentiates them

from other groups, both mainstream and jihadi. Those who engage in chronological primitivism often hyper-fixate on what they consider to be the positive aspects of past societies, and underrepresent the less romantic. Below I list four examples of ISIS's employment of chronological primitivism towards the Abbasid caliphate.

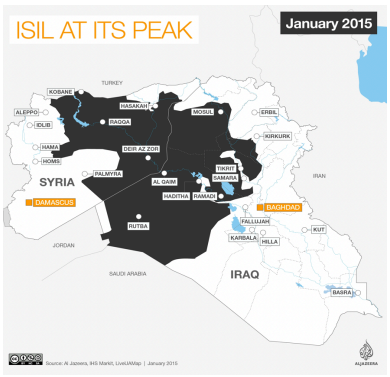
a. Ibn Hajar says: "They agreed that the last of the atbā'ut-tābi'īn (the second generation following the Prophet's generation) whose words were held in regard, were those who lived up to approximately 220 Hijrī. It was at this time that many innovations began to appear, the Mu'tazilah began to speak openly, the philosophers began to rear their heads, and the people of knowledge were tried with the issue of the creation of the Qur'ān. The situation changed drastically and has continued to degenerate even until now, and the statement of the Prophet, 'Then lies will spread,' became very apparent, to the extent that these lies encompassed statements, actions and beliefs. And we seek Allah's help. [Fathul-Bārī, 6:7].[109]



Map of the Abbasid Caliphate, shaded in dark grey.
Source:https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/abbasid-caliphate/maps/7855D28B067514DAB0740344B

ISIS's alleged aspirational map. Its source is disputed.
Source: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35695648

In this passage, Ibn Hajar book-ends the era of the "atbā'ut-tābi'īn" as 220 Hijri, or 835 CE in the Gregorian calendar. Although he does not explicitly mention the Abbasid caliphate, this date coincides almost exactly with the beginning of the Abbasid's decline following a period of immense success and territorial domination. Harun al-Rashid, widely considered to be among the greatest of the Abbasid caliphs, served as caliph



Map of ISIS at the height of its territorial domination.
Source:
https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/3/23/taste-of-victory-for-sdf-but-isil-threat-remains

[109] *Dabiq*, no. 2 (2014): 11.

between 786 and 809 CE. His reign marked the height of the caliphate's wealth, cultural advancements, and territorial latitude. It was also under his reign that the House of Wisdom, or *Bayt al-Hikmah,* was created. This was a hub of scholarship and innovation in which the brightest minds in the caliphate, a milieu of Muslims, Jews and Christians, gathered. Following Harun al-Rashid's rule, his two sons served as caliphs between 809 to 813 CE and 813 to 833 CE, respectively. The caliphate remained in a state of relative prosperity under both sons. However, the reign of his son Al-Ma'mun, from 813 to 833 CE, marked the last time the caliphate was truly united under a central authority. After the end of his rule, the caliphate existed for several more centuries but underwent a long period of decline that ultimately lead to its collapse in the 1200s. With this particular historical period outlined, it becomes clear that ISIS marks the end of its imagined age of pure Islam as the beginning of the Abbasid caliphate's decline. The decline of the Abbasid caliphate is contrasted in this passage with a perceived "degeneration" in Islamic values.

b. After the fall of the Khilāfah hundreds of years ago, the Sharī'ah was no longer applied in its completeness. Aspects of kufr crept into Muslim lands by way of Sūfī and Rāfidī infiltration. Grave-worship became widespread and the authority of Allah was challenged by Turkish, Persian, and even Arab kings. People like the Sūfīs Ibn 'Arabī, who pantheistically claimed that Allah is everything and that everything is Allah, and Ibn Sab'īn, who criticized Allah's Messenger for saying, "There is no prophet after me" [Reported by al-Bukhārī and Muslim from Abū Hurayrah], were left untouched by the rulers of Muslim lands, while genuine scholars of Islam – like Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Burhān – were imprisoned for defending the religion. Even later, those who called for a full return to Islamic rule and a pure creed were labeled "Khawārij" and fought by so-called "Muslim" leaders. The penalty for apostasy was thus left unapplied in many cases, until the revival of the Khilāfah by the grace of Allah, then through the efforts of the Islamic State.[110]

[110] *Dabiq*, no. 14 (2015): 12.

First, let us briefly define some terms introduced in this quotation. ISIS's invocation of "Sūfī and Rāfidī infiltration" refers to Muslim Sufi mystics and Shi`a, both of which are sects of Islam that ISIS rejects as un-Islamic. *Khawarij* is the plural of *Khariji*, meaning "outsider" in Arabic, and refers to those who denounced Muslims through *takfir*. It also refers to a group that rebelled against an Umayyad caliph. *Rāfidi*, meaning rejectionist, is a pejorative term for Shi`a Muslims.

This passage does several things which elevate the Abbasid period from others. The first sentence subliminally implies that the Abbasids were the last legitimate Islamic caliphate. It also seems to argue that Shariah law was appropriately practiced throughout the caliphate, and that the caliphate's fall by definition marked the point at which "the Sharī'ah was no longer applied in its completeness." This equates the existence of the Abbasid caliphate with Islamic purity, and the dissolution of the caliphate as a crisis for Sharia, thus situating the two as inextricably related, at least until ISIS's "revival" of the caliphate.

Finally, this passage seeks to denigrate later periods in Islamic history by suggesting that the caliphates which came after the Abbasids lauded heretics and imprisoned true Muslims. Both Ibn Arabi and Ibn Sub`īn, Muslims who are referenced here as pantheistic, lived in the Almohad caliphate in Andalusia. Ibn Taymiyyah, who espoused a proto-Salafi worldview, lived in the Mamluk Sultanate.

c. O soldiers of Allah, know that both we and you are honored with the establishment and defense of the Islamic State in the land of the two rivers, but know also that it is not the state of Hārūn ar-Rashīd whereby we address the clouds in the sky as he used to do [informing them that wherever they poured their rain it would pour upon Muslims' lands due to the expansiveness of the Khilāfah]. Rather, it is the State of the vulnerable. We fear the enemy's attack and we terrorize them, just as the Sahābah in the first Islamic State of al-Madīnah would never leave their weapons due to fear.[111]

[111] *Dabiq*, no. 6 (2014): 9.

This passage is perhaps one of the most important excerpts I gleaned in my content analysis of ISIS magazines.

For context, it is easily discerned that ISIS is referring to the Abbasid caliphate in this passage based on the invocation of Harun al-Rashid, the famous Abbasid caliph who, like ISIS, initially established the capital of his caliphate in Raqqa. In this passage, the ISIS authors differentiate themselves from the Abbasid caliphate in their admiration of the latter's territorial wealth. This stands in stark contrast to the small land mass in parts of Iraq and Syria which ISIS held during the height of its rule. In a rare admission of this reality, ISIS uses this passage to draw a parallel between its own rule, that of Harun al-Rashid's, and even that of the Prophet's companions. In this conception of history, ISIS constructs its imagined history of legitimate Islamic caliphates through these three periods: fear during the time of the companions, confidence during the Abbasid caliphate, and vulnerability under the Islamic State. This timeline implies that the pinnacle of success in the entire trajectory of Islamic history is under Harun al-Rashid's Abbasid caliphate. If nothing else, this passage speaks worlds to the role that the Abbasid caliphate plays in the hearts and minds of ISIS members and leaders.

Category C: References to ISIS's "revival" of the Abbasid caliphate

This section marks 15.3 percent of total references to the Abbasid caliphate in ISIS's English-language magazines. ISIS situates itself as the "revived" caliphate several times throughout its various magazine issues. It implies, both explicitly and implicitly, that it is the Abbasid caliphate which it is hoping to "revive," given that it believes this was the last truly Islamic caliphate. Most of these mentions are fairly repetitive in content and structure. Below I

list three. The first is representative of the bulk of ISIS's references in this category, and the last two are examples of ISIS's revival rhetoric in the context of sexual enslavement.

a. "From the greatest of blessings granted to the Muslim Ummah in general and to the mujāhidīn in particular is the revival of the Khilāfah, the Muslim body which had been absent for several centuries since the collapse of the 'Abbāsī Khilāfah."[112]

ISIS makes fairly explicit in this passage that it intends to "revive" the Abbasid caliphate (transliterated from the Arabic as the 'Abbāsī Khilāfah). This of course implies a belief that there has been no legitimate Islamic caliphate since its fall.

The next passages come from an article ISIS published in the fourth issue of *Dabiq* called "The Revival of Slavery." Below I include two excerpts from this article.

b. Finally, a number of contemporary scholars have mentioned that the desertion of slavery had led to an increase in fāhishah (adultery, fornication, etc.), because the shar'ī alternative to marriage is not available, so a man who cannot afford marriage to a free woman finds himself surrounded by temptation towards sin. In addition, many Muslim families who have hired maids to work at their homes, face the fitnah of prohibited khalwah (seclusion) and resultant zinā occurring between the man and the maid, whereas if she were his concubine, this relationship would be legal. This again is from the consequences of abandoning jihād and chasing after the dunyā, wallāhul-musta'ān.[113]

c. "May Allah bless this Islamic State with the revival of further aspects of the religion occurring at its hands."[114]

To begin, the nomenclature of the article's title is in itself quite telling. By using the phrase "the revival of slavery," ISIS positions slavery as an inherently Islamic practice which has been abandoned in an increasingly un-Islamic world and thus begs revival. There is much to be said about the former premise, namely, that slavery is Islamically sound. I have expanded on this

[112] *Dabiq*, no. 12 (2015), 29.
[113] *Dabiq*, no. 4 (2014): 17.
[114] Ibid.

question and made the case for Islam's "emancipatory ethic" toward slavery in the section titled "Islam and Slavery" in the thesis' introduction.

Quote b seems to suggest that slavery is a necessary condition for domestic propriety in Islamic households. In doing so, ISIS argues that, ever since the fall of the Abbasid caliphate, there has been a rise in extralegal sexual encounters. The solution to this problem lies in quote c; by "reviving" this policy as part of their larger caliphal "revival" scheme, ISIS aims to create additional legal venues through which men can pleasure themselves within the confines of its perception of Islamic law.

Category D: Referencing specific policies during the Abbasid period to justify their own

This category comprises 13 percent of total references to the Abbasid period. It represents all the instances in which ISIS magazines outline laws or policies promulgated by the Abbasid caliphate. Most of these reflect a brutal policy of retribution against perceived unbelievers, or *kufar,* though there are also unrelated topics such as discussions of the imperative to make *du'a* (worship) and the importance of marrying widows.

I have chosen three examples to analyze here, grouping the first two together. Both refer to the famous Sufi mystic Mansur al-Hallaj, who engaged in deeply immersive worship and in one such state of spiritual levity said the words "*ana al-Haq,*" meaning "I am truth." Al-Muqtadir, the Abbasid caliph at the time, interpreted this as a claim of al-Haq's own divinity. From an Islamic theological perspective, this is a grave accusation. Al-Muqtar ultimately executed al-Hallaj on account of heresy in 922 CE. Below, ISIS articulates a veneration for the Abbasid caliph's response to the purported apostasy:

a. The death penalty for apostates did not end with the khulafā' from the Sahābah. Consider al-Husayn Ibn Mansūr, famously known as al-Hallāj, who adopted extreme deviations that led him to proclaim his own divinity. In 309AH, the 'Abbāsī Khalīfah al-Muqtadir ordered him arrested, imprisoned, beaten, tortured, dismembered, and beheaded. His body was burned to ash, which was then cast into the river Dijlah, and his head was posted on Baghdad Bridge for all to see.[115]

b. And throughout history, there are many cases of takfir being pronounced on deviant zanadiqah and heads of extreme bid'ah as well as killing and crucifying them, like the executions of al-Ja'd Ibn Dirham, al-Jahm Ibn Safwan, and al-Husayn Ibn Mansur al-Hallaj. The methodology of later, great imams in their dealings with the heads of deviation and extreme heresy was like that of their predecessors.[116]

Interestingly, although these quotes are fairly similar, they were published eight months apart from one another. The first quote comes from Issue 14 of *Dabiq*, which was published in April 2016. The second comes from Issue 3 of *Rumiyah*, which was published in December 2016. ISIS's sustained effort to reference this historical event demonstrates its importance in its psyche.

c. "Likewise, Amirul-Muminin Harun ar-Rashid said, 'It has reached me that Bishr al-Marisi claims the Quran to be created. I swear to Allah that if He puts him within my reach, I will kill him in a manner by which I have never killed anyone before" ('Abdullah Ibn Ahmad: As-Sunnah).[117]

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[115] *Dabiq*, no. 14 (2015): 11.
[116] *Rumiyah*, no. 3 (2016): 30.
[117] Ibid.

Whether this quote is correctly attributed to Harun al-Rashid is irrelevant. What is important is that it represents ISIS's imagination of him and the draconian nature of Abbasid rule. What ISIS finds distinctive about the Abbasid era is not the cultural or social innovations associated with it, but rather the military exploits which come with presiding over a vast caliphate. ISIS uses its references to al-Rashid and other Abbasid figures to construct a partial picture of the Abbasid caliphate; regardless of whether this reflects the historical record, it is this picture which ISIS will aim to emulate.

Category E: Referring to Islamic law as a corpus which was codified during the Abbasid period

There is general scholarly consensus that Islamic law was largely codified during the era of the Abbasid caliphate. Not only were most foundational Islamic texts written in the Abbasid period, the four major Sunni legal schools—Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali—also developed in the ninth and tenth centuries. By the turn of the twelfth century, nearly all Muslims identified with a particular school of thought. This category seeks to understand the extent to which ISIS acknowledges this reality. It comprises the smallest number of total references to the Abbasids, only 10.2 percent. Many of these are invocations of Shafi'i, an Islamic scholar and jurist who became the father of the Shafi'i legal school. These quotes emphasize the importance of strict adherence to Islamic law. I do not include any here as they provide little opportunity for interpretation or analysis and thus do not add anything to this section's endeavor of critically analyzing ISIS constructions.

Cataloging Themes in *al-Naba*

Unlike *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, *al-Naba* had a relatively internal target audience, satisfying the goal of "conveying official communiqués of the Islamic State to its followers and members."[118] As a result, much of the argumentative rhetoric which is found in *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* is not present in *al-Naba*. Indeed, *al-Naba* has significantly fewer references to the Abbasids because ISIS did not have to legitimize its existence to the *al-Naba* readership by grounding itself in Islamic caliphal history. This premise was already largely accepted by its internal devotees.

Al-Naba also differed from its English-language counterparts in terms of content and argumentative style. It contained more violent imagery than *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* and employed much simpler prose.

Because of its distinctive tone and target audience, I use different themes to catalog *al-Naba*. This decision also came out of a necessity because *al-Naba* has far fewer references to the Abbasids than *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*. Because of this, I broadened my key search terms to encompass anything related to the Abbasids or Yazidis. I found two total references to the Abbasids and eight to the Yazidis. These excerpts offered far less opportunity for analysis than *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*. Below I list two examples for context:

a. "By preserving the Imamate, the community of Muslims is preserved, and by degrading it, the group is weakened until its entity ceases to exist if it does not have a Muslim imam left to unite it, as happened to the Muslims since the princes gained power over the caliphs at the end of the Abbasid era."[119]

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[118] Lakomy, *Islamic State's Online Propaganda,* 104.
[119] *Al-Naba*, no. 205 (2020): 3.

b. Although the Mujahideen have put in the effort to stop and minimize this road (culture, tradition) of pure disbelief (The Yazidis), punishing them for their indulgence in shirk (idolatry), reaffirming victory for us, and healing the chests of Muslims (worldwide), they [Yazidis] continue to nevertheless grow in number, only by the will of Allah–a blessing they themselves dismiss. Allah sent these polytheist idolaters (Yazidis) as a mockery and a test, evident in their actions and annoyance towards the Muslims. They [Yazidis] continue to indulge in their idolatry, and they serve as protectors, protecting those from among them who bear the Christian cross or have become atheists entirely… And Allah has sent his devout servants, those who firmly believe in his oneness, from among the Yazidis, for these servants believed in Allah and in return he believes them. Allah has supported them in their enforcement of his will for several years. They killed their men, insulted their women and young children, spoiled their homes and wealth. God has also allowed for some of their sons to be raised in devout houses that believed in his [Allah] oneness, and allowed for them to be in the front lines with the Mujahideen. From this, their sons were able to learn the religion [Islam], and disbelieve in the religion of their forefathers [Yazidis], and thus, freeing themselves from their ancestors' actions and beliefs. For there is no doubt that the opening [conquering] of Sinjar is a story that will enrich [could also mean, a story many will sing but by that he would mean "read" or "remember"] the many.[120]

In a manner consistent with the aforementioned claim that the writing in *al-Naba* is less cerebral than *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*, both of these quotes make explicit claims that require little analysis. What can be garnered from them is a confirmation of ISIS's references to the Abbasid period and justification of their enslavement of Yazidi women.

Summary of Chapter One

In summary, this chapter uses ISIS's own words to prove that the terrorist group consistently makes references to the Abbasid caliphate. In substantiating this premise, I have also created a framework of five themes which can be used to categorize these references.

My analysis from this chapter creates a staging ground for the rest of the thesis. In Chapter Two, I use sexual slavery as a case study through which to examine the historical record

[120] *Al-Naba*, no. 125 (2018): 3.

of the Abbasid period. Chapter Three brings together my findings from Chapters One and Two to compare the institution of sexual slavery in the Abbasid caliphate to ISIS's practical "revival" of this practice.

Chapter Two: Sexual Slavery in the Abbasid Caliphate

This chapter uses the institution of sexual slavery in the Abbasid caliphate as a case study through which to understand how ISIS re-imagined, and ultimately "revived," this history. By analyzing the historical record about this topic, we can understand the manner in which ISIS engaged in this historical "revival."

Abbasid Historical Context

The Abbasid caliphate was culturally distinct from the society that ISIS sought to establish. During his reign as caliph, Harun al-Rashid (r. 786-809 CE) sparked an intellectual flowering which contributed to his caliphate's distinction as one of the most advanced civilizations in the world of that time.[121] One of the cornerstones of Abbasid success lay in their promotion of religious tolerance. Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and people of other faiths formed a necessary part of the fabric of this era, which came to be known as the Golden Age of Islam.[122] This isn't to say that non-Muslims consistently fared well throughout the period, as individual caliphs each crafted distinct policies towards religious minorities, but rather to highlight this state of affairs as a general trend.

The Golden Age of Islam saw the translation of works by classical Greek philosophers (such as Aristotle, Socrates and Plato) into Arabic, the discovery of algebraic mathematical

[121] Wickham, MESAS 270, October 5, 2021.
[122] Ibid.

methods ("algebra" comes from the Arabic *al-jabr* and algorithm from *al-Khwarizmi*), and the widespread emergence of mystical theology, such as Sufism.[123]

This era is perhaps best symbolized by the *Bayt al-Hikma*, Arabic for "House of Wisdom." The House of Wisdom in the Abbasid capital of Baghdad served as a library and translation center for works of philosophy and science. It is credited with contributing to Arabic's rise as the lingua franca of scholarship. Indeed, many scholars argue that if not for the translation of these works into Arabic during this period, some of them may have been lost to Western civilization today.[124]

Another cultural output from this period is in the realm of literature. Much of the poetry written during the Abbasid caliphate speaks of love, wine, and sex. Sufi poetry emerging from this era is particularly erotic. Scholars have surmised that Baghdad boasted a high literacy rate based on findings that there were streets in the city occupied exclusively by booksellers.[125] Because Abbasid territory spanned many parts of the Silk Road, people in the caliphate learned how to make paper from Chinese traders. This partnership was critical; while paper in Europe was made from vellum and only available to the very wealthy, the Middle East was saturated with this precious resource.[126]

Finally, although official caliphal policies and norms certainly differed among various leaders, it is clear that the Abbasids were a caliphate largely founded on critical discourse and debate.

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[123] Ibid.
[124] Wickham, MESAS 270, October 5, 2021.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid.

The degree of detail present in this examination is relevant to the extent that it can be contrasted with ISIS's conception of Abbasid society. As has by now been firmly established, ISIS truly venerated the Abbasid caliphate. But, this chapter will argue that their reverence for this period is highly discriminatory. As noted by Carrie Wickham:

> ISIS's conception of the Abbasid caliphate solely has to do with the caliphate's triumphant victories over the infidels, particularly over the Eastern Orthodox kingdom of Byzantium, which they sometimes refer to as Rum. But even here, their conception of the heyday of Islamic power is highly distortionary – Harun al-Rashid formed a diplomatic alliance with Charlemagne against mutual empires, the Umayyad Caliphate of Spain and Christian kingdom of Byzantium, showing pragmatism and willingness to make alliances with non-Muslims. Many of the conditions that contributed to the greatness, power, and prestige of the Abbasid empire are ignored or rejected by ISIS, including an openness to learning from other religious and cultures, a culture of critical inquiry, and a willingness on behalf of its leaders to make alliances with non-Muslim governments to protect the empire's interests. When ISIS says it wants to restore the caliphate of old, it resonates, but the type of society it wants to create is very different from the culture of the Golden Age of Islam. Instead, ISIS wants to remake the world in its own image.[127]

William McCants of the Brookings Institute echoes this sentiment:

> The Islamic State's plan to revive the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad has two problems. The first is ideological: Harun al-Rashid was not terribly pious—he enjoyed poetry about wine and young boys—and his court valued unfettered intellectual debate and pagan Greek learning, which are anathema to ultraconservative Salafis like those running the Islamic State. But it is al-Rashid's power the jihadists remember, not his impieties.[128]

This argument is highly compelling and lays bare many of the contradictions present in ISIS's treatment of the Abbasid period. In this chapter, however, I will use one specific historical institution as a case study through which to understand ISIS's conception of Abbasid history: sexual enslavement.

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[127] Wickham, MESAS 270, October 5, 2021.
[128] "Why ISIS Really Wants to Conquer Baghdad."

Justifying Sexual Slavery as a Lens

This chapter provides context about the institution of sexual slavery in the Abbasid caliphate. In Chapter Three, I will contrast this history with ISIS's modern attempt to "revive" this very practice. I chose to utilize sexual slavery as a lens through which to compare Abbasid precedent with ISIS's modern "revival" for several reasons.

From a practical point of view, an undergraduate thesis does not have the bandwidth to contrast two eras, one of them spanning hundreds of years, in their entireties. In order to decide which component of Abbasid and ISIS society to juxtapose, I had to identify an institution which was well-documented during both periods. Sexual enslavement decidedly fulfills this requirement.

The Abbasids left a thorough historical record of the different types of sexual slaves which existed in the caliphate, where they were sourced from, and how they fit into the fabric of Abbasid society. This documentation is far stronger than that which exists from the Rashidun period, based on my research of existing literature. Finally, sexual enslavement of Yazidi women at the hands of ISIS is also well-documented. Whereas many aspects of ISIS's caliphal workings are still unknown, the testimonies of Yazidi women have contributed to thorough documentation of ISIS's implementation of sexual slavery law.

In short, sexual slavery law is well-documented in both the Abbasid and ISIS cases, and thus it provides a rich framework through which to understand ISIS's "revival" of the Abbasid caliphate writ large.

Female Sexual Slaves in the Abbasid Caliphate

According to Islamic law, women can be enslaved for sexual means under three different conditions: when they are lawfully obtained as "war booty" after an Islamic army's victory, when they are born to parents who are both enslaved, or when they are legally purchased (after being sold by her family out of a financial necessity).[129]

Though most Islamic empires condoned sexual slavery, the practice is particularly well-documented by the Abbasid caliphate. During this era, female slaves assumed distinct roles: some served as concubines, catering to the sexual desires of their male owners and bearing offspring destined to become future caliphs, while others held the title of *qiyān*, serving as courtesans who provided artistic entertainment in public settings.

The caliphate frequently engaged in highly successful conquests and expansions, which offered abundant opportunities to acquire "war booty." In accordance with Islamic law, non-Muslim women in territories conquered by an Islamic caliphate could be seized as war captives.[130] This ensured a relatively steady source of female slaves, both concubines and *qiyān,* to be traded across the Abbasid caliphate.

Qiyān (the plural of *qayna*) were enslaved women owned by male patrons. Although they had a singular owner, they often provided "artistic graces, literary sparring, flirtations and sexual favors" for the general public.[131] That said, a *qayna*'s comportment was entirely determined by the will of her master. Some spent the vast majority of their time providing public-facing entertainment, while others functioned much like concubines. Indeed, the line distinguishing

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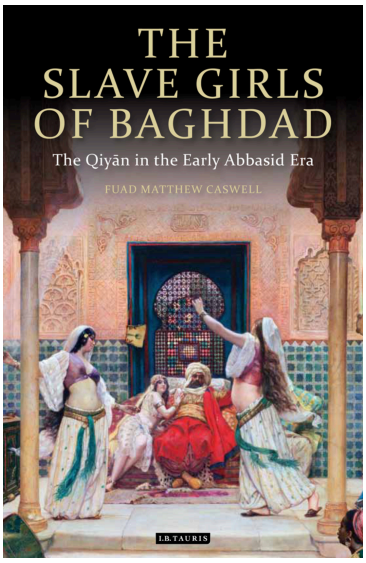
[129] Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad,* 12.
[130] Patricia Crone, *God's Rule: Government and Islam* (Columbia University Press, 2005), 371.
[131] Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad,* 1.

qiyān from concubines is decidedly blurry; these quasi-courtesans existed in the liminal space between celebrity entertainers and sexual slaves.



The book cover of "The Slave Girls of Baghdad" reveals an orientalized depiction of *qiyān*.
Source: "The Slave Girls of Baghdad"

The institution of *qiyān* exerted important cultural, economic, and social influences on Abbasid society. First, *qiyān* contributed to, if not defined, the flourishing culture of art, poetry, and song in the caliphate. One of the most romanticized aspects of Islam's "golden age" under Abbasid dominion was its explosion of the arts. As singers, poets, and dancers, *qiyān* contributed enormously to this atmosphere. Additionally, *qiyān* enhanced the status of their masters by personally generating prestige and conferring it upon their owners. Thus, in some ways the institution of sexual enslavement reified existing social orders, providing an internal structure to the caliphate. Finally, the Abbasid economy expanded as the increasing prevalence of *qiyān* led to the emergence of a market for their buying, selling, and even "repurposing." Today, the orientalist re-imagination of *qiyān* has situated them as "singing slave-girls," depicting them half-nude and dancing sensually as wealthy Abbasid men observe. Though this portrayal certainly draws on some historical accuracies, it perhaps overly-romanticizes the practice.

One of the most famous *qiyān* is named 'Arib. Born around 797 CE and captured as a young child, 'Arib managed to accumulate enough wealth and power during her years as a *qayna* to eventually purchase her own freedom. To be sure, 'Arib's story is exceptional in her colossal success and ability to live as a free woman eventually. Nonetheless, it does provide important insight into the life of a well-respected *qayna.* Her story, along with those of 37 other exalted

qiyān, is etched for posterity into a biographical account written by 13th-century historian Ibn al-Sa'i. His book, "Consorts of the Caliphs: Women and the Court of Baghdad," quotes one of 'Arib's contemporaries as saying of her, "I never saw a more beautiful or refined woman than ʿArib, nor one who sang, played music, wrote poetry, or played chess so well. She possessed every quality of elegance and skill one could wish for in a woman."[132]

Paradoxically, *qiyān* generally held more power than most free women in the Abbasid caliphate. This reality certainly complicates the modern reader's assumptions about enslavement in the Abbasid context. Historian Leila Ahmed notes that free Abbasid women, known as *harā'ir (hurra* in the singular), "were conspicuous for their absence from all arenas of the community's central affairs. In the records relating to this period they are not to be found, as they were in the previous era, either on battlefield or in mosques…Henceforth, [free] women of the elite and bourgeois classes would live out their lives in seclusion."[133]

Harā'ir were required to veil, cover their faces, and wear large cloaks, while *qiyān* dressed in expensive adornments. Unlike *harā'ir, qiyān* were permitted to interact extensively with non-male relatives.[134] Because most *qiyān* were imported from various extra-caliphal regions, many had traveled significantly more than the average person in the medieval period. However, a *hurra*'s freedom of movement was extremely limited, most of them never walking beyond the neighborhood surrounding their husband's home.[135] Whereas *qiyān* trained for years to achieve some degree of fluency in culture and Qur'an (often including lessons in reading), free

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[132] Ibn al-Sa'i, Julia Bray, and Marina Warner, *Consorts of the Caliphs: Women and the Court of Baghdad*, ed. Shawkat M. Toorawa (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 27.
[133] Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 79.
[134] Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad,* 2.
[135] Ibid*,* 6.

Abbasid women were generally illiterate.

Concubinage in the Abbasid caliphate is fairly fixed in its definition and expression, though documentation of Abbasid concubines pales to that of *qiyān*. While owning *qiyān* was a luxury reserved only for the upper echelons of Abbasid society, owning a concubine was relatively unexceptional.[136] Concubines were cheaper, used exclusively for sex and domestic labor, and were not expected to harbor artistic talent.[137] Thus, most were confined to the private sphere. Outside of providing sex and housekeeping, one of the key markers of concubines during this era was their function as reproductive vessels. In previous eras, alliances were sealed through marriages between members of distinct tribes. Abbasid caliphs, however, largely distanced themselves from this practice, instead opting to procreate with concubines. Nabia Abbott, a scholar of Islam, explains this shift: "Acquiring a wife was a much more serious undertaking than stocking up on concubines who could be discarded, given away, or even killed without any questions raised. A wife had her legal rights… [This lead] to fewer and fewer royal marriages. With few exceptions the royal concubine reigned almost supreme in the caliphal palace."[138]

Although the justification for this shift is perhaps disconcerting to modern readers, it did provide substantive benefits for concubines. Not only does Islamic law dictate that the child of an enslaved woman and free man will be born free, it also requires that the enslaved woman be freed upon giving birth. This stipulation is called *umm walad*, meaning "mother of a child."[139]

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[136] Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 85.
[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid, 83.
[139] Freamon, *Possessed by the Right Hand*, 76-77.

The manner in which men related to enslaved women in the Abbasid caliphate also has a noteworthy ethnic element. Ibn Butlan, a Baghdadi doctor, authored a document which describes an Abbasid market which auctioned slave-girls. Ibn Butlan's writings reveal sweeping ethnic prejudices which provide a modern reader with insight into the different regions from which many enslaved Abbasid women hailed. This includes Indians, "Those of Medina," Meccans, Yeminis, Abyssinians, Nubians, Byzantines, Armenians, and more.[140] Ibn Butlan describes the Indian slaves as having "good figure, swarthy complexion, great beauty, clear yellowish skin, sweet breath, delicacy but tending to early ageing, faithfulness and amiability."[141] His generalizations of the Zanj reveal a harsher picture: "Many faults: the blacker the uglier, the sharper the teeth, and the less desirable."[142] This document reveals the expansiveness of Abbasid conquests and the impact that this had on racial and ethnic prejudices in the caliphate.

The diverse structure of female sexual slavery in the Abbasid caliphate complicates modern understandings of enslavement. For instance, in many ways the *qiyān* resembled contemporary celebrities in their role as public-facing entertainers, boasting a myriad of artistic talents. Additionally, the institution of *umm walad* forged a path to freedom for hundreds of women and even established a norm of concubines mothering future caliphs. (34 of the 37 Abbasid caliphs were born to mothers who were concubines.)[143] This is not to deny the fundamental reality that these women were enslaved, or the moral implications that accompany that designation, but rather to underscore that sexual enslavement in the Abbasid caliphate was

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[140] Fuad Matthew Caswell, *The Slave Girls of Baghdad: The Qiyan in the Early Abbasid Era* (London: Tauris, 2011), 15-16.
[141] *The Slave Girls of Baghdad*.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Freamon, *Possessed by the Right Hand*, 297.

far more complex than simply kidnapping and raping women.

This distinction becomes important when considering ISIS's attempt to "revive" the practice of sexual slavery. Although this argument will be fleshed out in greater detail in Chapter Three, it is worth briefly outlining this premise now. ISIS's references, as established in Chapter One, make clear its intent to "revive" a caliphate which emulates, or at least somewhat resembles, the Abbasid caliphate. However, Chapter Three will show that the jihadi group's method of capturing and enslaving Yazidi women completely collapsed the diverse and idiosyncratic institution practiced by the Abbasids. Chapter Four, then, will assert that any alleged "revival" predicated on the Abbasid precedent is fundamentally disingenuous.

Summary of Chapter Two

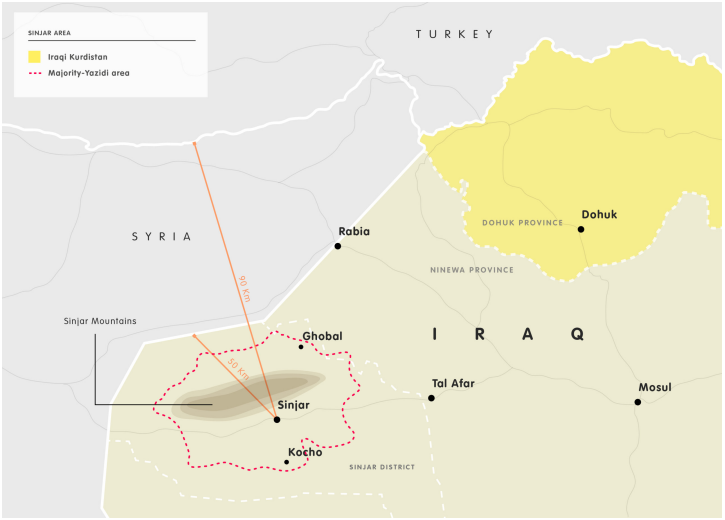
This chapter has provided historical context for the practice of sexual slavery in the Abbasid caliphate with an eye toward appreciating the complexity of the practice. It argues that the institution of sexual slavery was extremely multifaceted, and ultimately it lays the groundwork for the upcoming argument that ISIS collapsed and grossly simplified the practice until it became a shell of itself.

Chapter Three: ISIS's Sexual Enslavement of Yazidi Women

The goal of this chapter is to interrogate ISIS's "revival" of slavery as it was put into practice using Yazidi women. I hope to understand what *actually* happened when ISIS implemented this policy and furthermore, to incorporate the perspectives of Yazidi women who survived ISIS captivity. The degree of detail in the following section is distressing but nonetheless necessary to understand ISIS's draconian implementation of sexual slavery law. It will also provide necessary context for Chapter Four's comparative analysis of Abbasid-era sexual slavery and ISIS's enslavement of Yazidis.

ISIS's Enslavement of Yazidi Women

On August 3, 2014, ISIS captured the Sinjar region in northern Iraq. As is shown in the map, Sinjar and the surrounding region was heavily populated with Yazidis. After killing most Yazidi men and dragging away young boys to militant training centers, ISIS began its systematic enslavement of Yazidi women.[144] Initially, most of these women and girls were transferred over the Iraqi border into Syria where they were sold in ISIS-run slave



Map of Sinjar region in northern Iraq
Source: European Council on Foreign Relations-
https://ecfr.eu/publication/when_the_weapons_fall_silent_reconciliation_in_sinjar_after_isis/

[144] "'They Came to Destroy,'" Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, United Nations.

markets. Most were sold for the equivalent of $200-$1500, though the exact price depended on factors such as age, marital (and thus virginity) status, and perceived attractiveness.[145] One woman who was sold at one such slave market in Raqqah said that she was forced to stand on a raised platform from which people could purchase her: "If we refused, the fighters would beat us with wooden sticks… They would tell us to take off our headscarves. They wanted to see our hair. Sometimes they would tell us to open our mouths so the men could check our teeth."[146] Another woman remembered that "men would come and select women and girls. Women would lie and say we were older. Girls would say they were younger. We tried to make ourselves less appealing. We would scratch ourselves and rub dirt on our faces."[147] Others resorted to suicide, often by slitting their wrists or using their headscarves to hang themselves.[148]

Because unmarried women were significantly more desirable from the perspective of potential buyers (spending only a few days in holding on average before being sold, compared to several months for married women), unmarried women quickly learned to feign marital status by making nieces or siblings act as their children.[149] In some cases, however, even this did not work. In one holding site for Yazidi women, ISIS members brought a gynecologist to examine women and confirm they were not lying.[150]

In order to inform its soldiers of the guidelines for enslavement, ISIS disseminated a pamphlet in 2014 titled "Questions and Answers about Captives and Slaves." Below are several excerpts which highlight the institutional standards of treatment:

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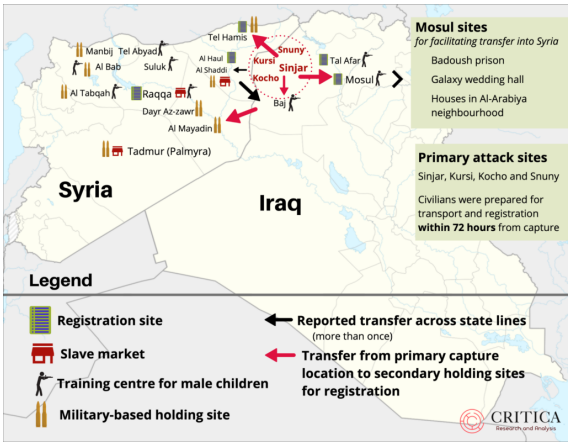
[145] "'They Came to Destroy,'" Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, United Nations.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Ibid.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid.

- "Is it permitted to have intercourse with a female slave who has not reached the age of puberty? It is permitted to have intercourse with a female slave who has not reached the age of puberty, if she is capable of [being subjected to] intercourse. But if she is not capable of [being subjected to] intercourse, then he must content himself with taking sexual pleasure in her without intercourse."[151]
- "Is it permitted to beat a female slave? It is permitted to beat a female slave to discipline her, but he may not break her bones, or administer it in great rage or in order to torture her. Moreover, he may not beat her face."[152]
- "What is the penalty in this world for a runaway slave? There is no fixed penalty in God's legislation. However, she may be punished with a discretionary penalty (*ta'azir*) that deters her likes [from escaping]."[153]

These regulations largely speak for themselves in giving readers a sense of how enslaved Yazidi women were treated. The first excerpt listed here, pertaining to a young girl's "readiness" for intercourse, is confirmed by a Yazidi woman's testimonial in a UN report after escaping captivity: "In 2015, a Libyan ISIS fighter bought a Yazidi woman and her young children, the oldest of whom was a 7-year old girl, and held them in a house in Dayr Az-Zayr governorate. After loaning the mother to be raped by another ISIS fighter for one night,



Map of ISIS's Sinjar offensive
Source- https://www.icct.nl/publication/isis-and-their-use-slavery

[151] Rudolph Peters, "Jihad After 9/11," in *Jihad: A History in Documents* (San Francisco: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2016), 213.
[152] Ibid, 214.
[153] Ibid.

the Libyan fighter took the 7-year old girl into a room, locking it behind him. He told her mother, who was screaming at the door, that he wanted to check whether the 7-year old 'was ready to be married.'"[154]

Apportionment of enslaved women was purportedly derived from the Islamic norm of providing four-fifths of total shares to soldiers: "ISIS made eighty percent of the women and girls available to its fighters for individual purchase, the apportioning being drawn directly from religious interpretation… The remaining twenty percent are held as collective property of ISIS and were distributed in groups to military bases throughout Iraq and Syria."[155]

Even during their time in holding prior to being sold, life for Yazidi women in ISIS captivity was bleak and abusive. Many were forcibly transferred between prisons, schools, and homes where they lived in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions.[156] Some report being forced to laugh while ISIS soldiers took photos of them.[157] Others had to resort to drinking toilet water and eating food infested with insects.[158] Soldiers would sometimes hand-select women whom they brought to private rooms to rape.[159]

In order to maximize the productivity of slave markets, ISIS appointed a committee to oversee the selling of slaves. This committee quickly determined that they could increase their profits by expanding the market to encrypted online forums. Men from a wide range of countries, including Tunisia, Sudan, Syria, Turkey, Morocco, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Kazakhstan,

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[154] "'They Came to Destroy,'" Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, United Nations.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Ibid.

Belgium, Iraq, Uzbekistan, Libya, and Australia, quickly lined up to purchase Yazidi women as slaves.[160]

Once purchased, most women were raped daily. Many sustained serious injuries during these violent encounters, though none could access medical care.[161]

One Islamic ruling which ISIS did follow is the imperative to keep children under the age of puberty with their mothers during enslavement. However, they negated any comfort which women could derive from this by using it as a tool for blackmail: many women who were held with their children reported that if they resisted rape, their captors would threaten to beat or sell their children.[162] One woman reported that after attempting to escape captivity, her owner killed her children as retribution.[163]

Finally, there are some indications that ISIS soldiers specifically had the Abbasid caliphate in mind as they carried out their "revived" sexual enslavement of women. A 20-year old Yazidi girl who escaped from ISIS captivity reported that "We were 21 girls in one room, two of them were very young, 10–12 years. One day we were given clothes that looked like dance costumes and were told to bathe and wear those clothes. Jilan killed herself in the bathroom. She cut her wrists and hanged herself. She was very beautiful. I think she knew that she was going to be taken away by a man and that is why she killed herself."[164] Author and scholar Bernard K Freamon argues that "The captors' demand that the girls don 'dance costumes' prior to sexual activity is reminiscent of the accounts of war captive 'dancing girls'

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[160] "'They Came to Destroy,'" Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, United Nations.
[161] Ibid.
[162] Ibid.
[163] Ibid.
[164] Freamon, *Possessed by the Right Hand*, 472.

enslaved…for the sexual enjoyment of captors in the Abbasid Caliphate."[165]

Summary of Chapter Three

This chapter draws on UN reports, secondary academic sources, ISIS's internal memos, and testimonies of Yazidi women to construct a picture of how the terrorist group put into practice its policy of sexual enslavement.

[165] Freamon, *Possessed by the Right Hand*, 472.

Chapter Four: Discussing ISIS's "Selective Revisionism"

Throughout the four chapters of this thesis, I have drawn on various pieces of evidence to construct a picture of a) ISIS's imagination of the Abbasid caliphate through its English and Arabic-language magazines (*Dabiq*, *Rumiyah*, and *al-Naba*), b) the historical record of female sexual slavery in the Abbasid caliphate through secondary scholarly sources, and c) ISIS's enslavement of Yazidi women through UN reports and personal testimonies of survivors. In doing so, I have used sexual slavery as a case study through which to understand ISIS's tactics for "reviving" and reimagining the caliphate. This chapter synthesizes each of the previous chapters' contents, ultimately complicating the question about the extent to which ISIS's "revival" of sexual slavery is grounded in Abbasid precedent.

Comparing al-Tabari's *Book of Jihad* with ISIS's Pamphlet on Sex Slaves

In this section, I have constructed a comparative analysis between an Abbasid-era document which discusses legal norms pertaining to jihad (including sexual slavery) and a 2014 ISIS pamphlet which was distributed to soldiers to provide guidelines for owning Yazidi sex slaves.

The Abbasid text utilized in this section is authored by the famous historian Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari. Among al-Tabari's various contributions to the corpus of well-respected Abbasid legal texts is his *Book of Jihad* (*Kitab al-Jihad*). In it, he compiles various questions and hypotheticals about the best way to carry out *jihad* (defined much more loosely by the Abbasids than by ISIS) and provides answers based on the wisdom of famous Muslim jurists as well as the perspectives of the Shafi'i, Maliki, and Hanafi schools of jurisprudence. The

modern introduction to the book reminds readers that "the classical tradition of religious thought throughout the Middle Ages and the pre-modern period clearly depicts *jihad* as an armed struggle against disbelievers for the sake of God…One should not, of course, distort the reality of a religious tradition by reinterpreting it in light of modern ideas and claim that such modernist interpretation was the norm across different historical periods."[166]

The questions treated in this book encompass a wide range of topics including laws about making peace agreements, killing disbelievers, initiating duels, making a "pledge of security," burying dead non-Muslims, administering Islamic law in enemy territory, distinguishing wages between horsemen and foot soldiers, and finally, the treatment of female war booty.[167] It is this last section which I consider alongside the ISIS document.

It is important to note that al-Tabari's commentary on regulations regarding female war booty is not a paragon of Abbasid law. Although al-Tabari was certainty a prominent scholar (and one whom ISIS references in their magazines),[168] his legal opinions cannot be assumed to epitomize Abbasid precedent. Indeed, even the phrase "Abbasid precedent" presupposes a monolithic character to this era's legal norms. This premise is a gross oversimplification of an empire which not only encompassed a vast geographic region (making it practically impossible to implement and enforce laws consistently from far-off Baghdad), but also was overseen by 37 caliphs, each with a distinct legal ethos. Despite this complexity, I nonetheless utilize the al-Tabari document as a proxy for Abbasid norms, following ISIS's approach. ISIS, in claiming to "revive" the Abbasid caliphate, relies on the presupposition that texts like al-Tabari's are wholly

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[166] Al-Tabari, *Book of Jihad*, 2.
[167] Ibid.
[168] *Dabiq*, no. 14 (2015): 18.

representative of Abbasid-era legal norms. Therefore, although I acknowledge the fallacy of this premise, I still employ the al-Tabari document for comparative purposes (which requires me to operate under ISIS's assumption that the document is a paragon of this period), in order to construct an analysis that is compatible with ISIS's ideological framework. In essence, I work backwards from ISIS's over-simplified premises to draw comparisons which ISIS implicitly condones throughout its literature. This should justify my use of al-Tabari's *Book of Jihad* as a means of interrogating Abbasid-era norms.

Given this caveat, I will engage in a cautious comparison of the al-Tabari document alongside the ISIS one, putting both forth as another framework to think about ISIS's legal calculus. This comparison will provide examples of instances in which ISIS's laws echo those of al-Tabari, while the subsequent section complicates these apparent similarities, serving as a culminating discussion of the various topics which have been discussed throughout Chapters One through Four. It is important to present both parts as a counterbalance to one another in order to underscore that the question of whether ISIS reproduces Abbasid standards can be understood in profoundly different ways and that ultimately, there is no one answer.

In the fall of 2014, ISIS's Fatwa Department released a pamphlet for soldiers entitled "Questions and Answers about Captive and Slaves." It is formatted as a question and answer, with simple questions followed by a response of several sentences. This generally emulates the format of the al-Tabari document, which is written in paragraphs but reads as a back-and-forth between a questioner and answerer. The major difference between the two documents is in the degree of nuance with which they consider the topics at hand. A close reading of both reveals that al-Tabari took for granted many of the premises which ISIS makes explicit. This is discussed in greater length in the next section which outlines ISIS's fallacies.

Below are several excerpts from both sources, presented in parallel:

Defining booty:

a. Al-Tabari: "They [Muslim jurists] agreed unanimously that if women and children are captured and taken to the Territory of Islam, they should be [considered] booty."[169]
b. ISIS: "What are captives (saby)? Captives are the women of the enemy, captured by the Muslims…It is permitted to have sexual intercourse with a captured woman."[170]

Keeping children with mothers:

a. al-Tabari: "It was narrated to me from Mu'awiya from Abii Ishaq that he said: "I asked al-Awza'I saying: 'Children among the captives are acquired with their fathers and mothers."[171]
b. ISIS: "Is it permitted to separate a mother and her children by selling or purchasing them? It is not permitted to separate a mother and her young children who have not reached puberty by selling, purchasing, or donating them. However, it is possible to separate them if the children are older and have reached puberty."[172]

Two men sharing a woman:

a. al-Tabari: "It is not right that two people have intercourse with one [woman]."[173]

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[169] Al-Tabari, *Book of Jihad*, 287.
[170] "Jihad After 9/11," 211-212.
[171] Al-Tabari, *Book of Jihad*, 313.
[172] "Jihad After 9/11," 212.
[173] Al-Tabari, *Book of Jihad*, 367.

b. ISIS: "If two or more men together purchase a captured woman, is she then lawful [to have intercourse] to each of them? Intercourse with a captured woman is only lawful for a man who fully and exclusively owns her. As for a man whose ownership of her is restricted because she is held in joint ownership, he cannot lawfully have intercourse with her until he has purchased the shares of the others in her or they hand her over to him as a gift."[174]

Buying oneself out of slavery:

a. al-Tabari: "Al-Shafi'i said: "If one of the enemy commits an act of cruelty in the Territory of War against his slave with whom he has written an agreement of manumission and his slave whom he had [already] manumitted by invalidating the written agreement and returned the manumitted slave to slavery, he is not permitted to sell them in the Territory of Islam, and his written agreement with his slave is valid and the manumitted slave is considered free."[175]

    i. This is a more complex scenario about a person who has already agreed to free his slave but then tries to invalidate that written agreement. The ruling states that the original agreement of manumission nevertheless remains valid. A footnote to this quote reveals one of the premises which underlies this hypothetical, although it is not explicitly stated: "According to the agreement called mukataba, the slave would pay his master a certain amount of money

[174] "Jihad After 9/11," 213.
[175] Al-Tabari, *Book of Jihad*, 154.

in installments over a period of time so as to buy his freedom."[176]

b. ISIS: "Is it permitted that a slave woman buys herself from her owner? Yes, that is permitted and that transaction is called *mukataba.*"[177]

No intercourse if woman is pregnant:

a. al-Tabari: "If a man buys his concubine from the polytheists after they acquired her, I prefer if he not have intercourse with her until he makes sure she is not pregnant, as he should not have intercourse with her if she got married with an illegal marriage or had intercourse until he makes sure that she is not pregnant, and she [already] became [in the ownership] of the one who had permitted [himself] to have intercourse with her."[178]

   - The compiler of the book adds a footnote to this, saying, "Al-Shafi'i is using analogy to show that in all of the cases where a man enters into a marriage contract with a slave or free woman, he has to make sure first that she is not pregnant from her previous husband, whether this previous husband was a Muslim or a non-Muslim living in enemy territory."[179]

b. ISIS: "Can one have intercourse with captured women immediately after having taken possession? If she is a virgin, then one may have intercourse with her immediately after taking possession. However, if she has been married, then it is

[176] Al-Tabari, *Book of Jihad*, 384.
[177] "Jihad After 9/11," 216.
[178] Al-Tabari, *Book of Jihad*, 369.
[179] Ibid, 388.

required to examine whether or not she is pregnant"[180]

The five examples above represent a sampling of the types of historical, and theological, precedents in which ISIS appears to parallel al-Tabari's model. Of course, official policies may not accurately reflect an individual soldier's application of such regulations. Nonetheless, identifying similarities in ISIS policies compared with those of a well-respected historian from the Abbasid era is still valuable, lest readers inaccurately assume that ISIS's precepts emerged out of thin air just because the jihadi group commits fallacies in its historical "revival" (as will be explored in the following section).

Pivoting to Discussion: Synthesizing Takeaways

This discussion will serve as a synthesis of all evidence which has been introduced thus far. It will cover the following topics: the multi-vocal nature of Abbasid-era policies, fallacies in ISIS's conception of the Abbasids, a comparison of treatment of slaves in the Abbasid and ISIS cases, an analysis of the self-serving nature of ISIS's "revival" of slavery, a comparison between the questions posed in this thesis and the now-ubiquitous debate of "Is ISIS Islamic?," and a discussion of how medieval practices (like sexual slavery) can be put in conversation with modern human rights sensibilities. Lastly, I will coin the term "selective revisionism" as a more accurate means of characterizing ISIS's relationship with the Abbasid caliphate.

A. Rejecting the Premise that Abbasid Precedent is Monolithic

[180] "Jihad After 9/11," 212.

As has been established, the Abbasid caliphate had a sprawling geographic reach, spanning across North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, and more. However, this territorial domination also contributed to the weakening of centralized state power.[181] Indeed, it quickly became unfeasible for the entire territory to be governed from the caliphal palace in Baghdad. Thus, although united symbolically, the Abbasid caliphate came to have several discrete centers of power. This quasi-federalist model meant that, even though the entire caliphate was ruled by a single leader, each region had distinct methods of understanding and enforcing law.[182] Because of this, it is dishonest to conclude that ISIS did, or did not, faithfully reproduce Abbasid precedent when this "precedent" is multilayered and varied.

Nonetheless, even if there is no single "Abbasid precedent," I hope this thesis has provided readers with a general sense of how the institution of sex slavery functioned in the Abbasid context. On the one hand, it is clear (based on an interrogation into ISIS's implementation of sexual slavery law) that ISIS's "revival" of this practice departs fairly significantly from Abbasid-era customs. On the other hand, there are semblances of mutual correspondence between both, as can be seen above through the comparison with al-Tabari. This shows that there are kernels of Abbasid precedent which are present in ISIS's modern realization of the policy.

B. Fallacies in ISIS's Imagination of Abbasid Precedent

This section will identify the various fallacies in ISIS's historical "revival," and subsequent execution, of Abbasid-era norms. After explaining each one through a piece of evidence I have introduced in Chapters One through Four, I note how each distinct fallacy was employed in their "revival" of sexual slavery.

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[181] Hugh Kennedy, "Central Government and Provincial Élites in the Early 'Abbāsid Caliphate," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 44, no. 1 (1981): 26–38.
[182] Ibid.

Although the notion that there are fallacies within ISIS's interpretation of Abbasid precedent may suggest that "Abbasid precedent" is a tangible concept, the previous section serves to disentangle these two concepts from one another. This section is intended to highlight the fact that ISIS committed logical fallacies in its references to the Abbasid period; I hope to highlight these without implying that it is possible to "revive" Abbasid norms in their entirety when such "norms" were in constant flux and cannot be singularly pinned down. Nonetheless, although it is perhaps impossible to engage in *accurate* historical "revival" of an age which saw diverse norms, leaders and policies, it is certainly possible to do so *inaccurately* by committing basic logical fallacies. Below I outline those of ISIS which I have identified in my research.

The first fallacy is appealing to authority. As noted in Chapter One, a whopping 46.2 percent of ISIS's total references to the Abbasid caliphate in its English-language magazines come in the form of referencing scholars from the Abbasid period. Of the 18 references to thinkers from the Abbasid era, 11 are jurists (61 percent). ISIS continues this pattern in its 2014 pamphlet about the treatment of slave women, where many of its responses quote jurists as though Islamic jurisprudence is not multi-vocal and an act of interpretation.

The second fallacy involves making assumptions about an individual's inner feelings towards Islam; even ISIS's notion that it has the authority to declare whether someone is a *kāfir* is predicated on the assumption that it can determine the nature of someone's feelings toward their faith. This is a premise which moderate Salafis reject and why they refrain from engaging in *takfiri* politics. In Chapter One I quoted an excerpt from *Dabiq* in which ISIS invokes a hadith report about slaves who "enter Jannah in chains," implying that slaves came to voluntarily embrace Islam. Although this may have been true for some enslaved people, it requires a great deal of hubris on ISIS's part to assume that individuals enslaved by Muslims made this decision

without undergoing coercion or at least considering the ulterior benefits of doing so. Finally, the commonly-cited fact that ISIS's victims are majority-Muslim[183] further supports the argument that ISIS takes liberties in deciding who is and isn't a true Muslim; one can imagine that it requires significantly more mental gymnastics on ISIS's part, and a violation of Occam's Razor, to declare a Sunni Muslim a *kāfir* compared to a non-Muslim, and yet this seems to comprise the majority of ISIS's *takfiri* declarations. This of course relates to the case study of sexual slavery because ISIS justified its enslavement of Yazidi women through *takfir*.

Finally, the largest and most significant fallacy which the jihadi group commits is its cherry-picking and oversimplification of practices from the Abbasid period. As has been briefly noted in several parts of this thesis, ISIS maintains an impressive degree of cognitive dissonance toward the progressive reality of the Abbasid era. The ubiquity of wine, sexual poetry, religious coexistence, and critical discourse in this period is difficult to deny, and yet ISIS manages to willfully ignore such practices and instead to hyper-fixate on the caliphate's power, prestige, and territorial control. To ISIS, the "golden age" is a product of these conditions, not the intellectual explosion which many mainstream scholars understand it to represent. Despite the fact that there were Abbasid rulers who supported views that would be antithetical to a Salafi worldview, ISIS simply chooses to not concern itself with such matters.

ISIS's tendency to oversimplify Abbasid precepts may in part explain how they arrived at their idiosyncratic interpretation of sexual slavery laws. The entire purpose of Chapter Two's interrogation of sexual slavery in the Abbasid era was to establish the complexities and diversity of the practice. By explaining the institution of *umm walad* and the reality that *qiyān* often held

[183] "Majority of ISIS Victims Are Muslim | CNN," https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2016/07/14/isis-victims-muslims-clarissa-ward-explainer-orig-sfc.cnn.

more power than free women, I complicate—though certainly do not intend to justify or excuse—the institution of sexual slavery in the Abbasid era in the mind of the reader. Now that this history, as well as ISIS's implementation of this practice, have been outlined, I can synthesize both realities. In doing so, I argue that ISIS collapsed the diverse and nuanced Abbasid practice of sexual slavery into its most brutal, primal, and crude form. ISIS ignores the multitude of roles which enslaved Abbasid women held other than having their bodies used for sex. Potential reasons for this will be briefly explored in the next section.

Lastly, the argument that ISIS over-simplifies Abbasid precepts is even implicitly substantiated by the al-Tabari text. Whereas al-Tabari was writing for a well-informed Muslim audience, ISIS needed to explain basic foundations of Islamic law in order to cater to the needs of its base. (This underscores one of the main arguments made by ISIS's detractors to assert that the organization is not Islamic. They hold that the fact that ISIS cannot assume basic knowledge of Islamic law among its fighters implies that those in its ranks are not joining out of a theological imperative but for other reasons. These "other reasons" vary widely and are the subject of many other academic papers.) Often, the al-Tabari text elaborates on a singular question for multiple pages in which the jurist answers the question and then the questioner adds another caveat to complicate it (ie: "but what if she doesn't have an eye?"). While ISIS articulates shari'a in its most basic form, al-Tabari's book assumes most of this knowledge and instead focuses on all the exceptions and caveats to the rule. Because ISIS is catering to a less-informed audience, it never even attempts to address caveats to its guidelines. ISIS's simplistic prose is also a reflection of its Salafi roots; Salafi politics tend to reject *qiyās* (literally translated, "analogy"), Islamic jurist's critical engagement with Islamic laws and texts in order to construct nuanced legal rulings.

In short, the major difference between the two texts is in format and depth. Al-Tabari's book is formatted casuistically, that is, it employs conditional statements with several sub-clauses and caveats. On the other hand, ISIS uses the more unsophisticated format of question-and-answer, in which most of the answers respond to the questions at their most basic level without addressing caveats or potential interpretive divisions. Thus, the comparison to al-Tabari reveals that the jihadi group's "revival" of sexual slavery eliminates nuance, caveats, and conditions, only rendering it relevant to the extent that it outlines the most unsophisticated core component of each law.

C. Comparing the Treatment of Sex Slaves by the Abbasids and ISIS

This section argues that because ISIS collapsed a once-nuanced practice into one concerned solely with sex and violence, the treatment of sex slaves in the Abbasid caliphate was more humane during that period than under ISIS.

As was outlined in Chapter Two, the major categories of sexual slaves in the Abbasid era were concubines and *qiyān*. *Qiyān* were skilled courtesans who provided artistic entertainment for wealthy men, while concubines were generally confined to the private, domestic sector. The plight of concubines and *qiyān* can be juxtaposed to Chapter Three's investigation of ISIS's treatment of Yazidi women as part of their aim to "revive" the Abbasid-era institution of sexual enslavement.

It is vital to acknowledge that, although modern scholarship can provide insight into the practice of Abbasid-era sexual slavery, there is no autobiographical account of an Abbasid concubine that I have been able to acquire. Thus, although there is much to be intuited from third-party accounts of the practice, this thesis is unable to state what occurred in the minds of enslaved women in this era. The same is not true, however, of ISIS's victims. Many Yazidi

women have been impressively prolific following their escape from ISIS enslavement. Among them is Nadia Murad, a 31-year old Yazidi women whose powerful book and activism led her to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2018. Because of the testimonies of Yazidi women, we have a uniquely horrifying degree of insight into the mental and physical trauma which ISIS inflicted on the women it sexually enslaved. Thus we can argue, probably fairly, that ISIS went above and beyond the Abbasid precedent in its infliction of violence and pain on Yazidi women, but is also important to acknowledge that ultimately we do not know what life was like for an Abbasid concubine.

To be sure, this brief foray into comparative analysis does not aim to romanticize the predicament of enslaved Abbasid women. Regardless of context, slavery is a gross violation of an individual's autonomy and freedom. This is even true in the Abbasid context, where *qiyān* often held more power and social capital than free women.

That being said, the degree of dehumanization which ISIS harbored towards Yazidis (essentially viewing them as unworthy of life because they were *kufār*) diverges greatly from conceptions of slaves in Abbasid times. Abbasid *qiyān* were decidedly lauded, commanding power and admiration for their talents. Even concubines played a role in the domestic sphere, were almost exclusively the mothers of Abbasid caliphs, and had a pathway to emancipation. Finally, as noted in Chapter Two, it is important to note that Abbasid concubines and *qiyān* came from dozens of regions outside of the caliphate. The practice did not aim to target one particular ethnic group out of spite, but rather was applied toward all captured women. ISIS, on the other hand, deliberately targeted Yazidi women in their project to turn women into sex slaves. This could be for several reasons, including the fact that there was a large Yazidi community in a region which ISIS managed to capture, or because Yazidism emerged after Islam (which makes

subscription to the religion marginally more heretical than a faith like Judaism or Christianity).[184] Regardless of the reason, this likely lead ISIS soldiers to employ distinctively brutal tactics in their execution of sexual enslavement law. Furthermore, it is the deliberate and targeted nature of ISIS's treatment of Yazidi people which lead the UNHRC to declare it a genocide.

Thus, even when considered alongside the plight of enslaved Abbasid women, it is nonetheless clear that the institution which ISIS "revived" is not a replica of the nuanced practice of Abbasid times. Indeed, the fact that they targeted a specific religious group to enslave is a departure from earlier practice.

D. Using Historical Precedent to Justify the Practice Ex Post Facto

In this section, I argue that regardless of whether ISIS was attempting to "revive" this Abbasid practice in good faith, it is crucial to acknowledge that the group had a systematic incentive to do so. For recruits, many (though not all) of whom were young, lonely, and jobless men, unlimited access to female bodies as vessels with which to have sex was unsurprisingly an immense source of appeal.[185] The decision to "revive" sexual slavery is indisputably self-serving.

As Section C outlined, ISIS took what had previously been a nuanced practice and collapsed it into an exclusively predatory and violent one. Indeed, the method in which it revived this institution seems to take the Abbasid practice to its most heartless and illogical extreme. However, by extrapolating a kernel of truth from Abbasid practice, ISIS maintains plausible deniability against the claim that it is perverting this practice, and yet, its purported aim to "revive" historical precedent simply does not constitute the whole story. ISIS soldiers' treatment of Yazidi women, amounting to rape and other draconian forms of abuse, reveal their hunger to

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[184] "Surah Al-Baqarah - 62," Quran.com, https://quran.com/al-baqarah/62.
[185] Wickham, MESAS 270, October 19, 2021.

manifest power and ultimate male supremacy. Thus, the claim that such practices are justified by Islamic and Abbasid precedent seems to be an ex post facto guise for a much deeper ulterior motive.

E. Situating "Abbasid Precedent" Discussion within the Larger Debate of "Is ISIS Islamic?"

This thesis has primarily sought to interrogate ISIS's references to, and attempt to "revive," historical precedents from the Abbasid caliphate using the institution of sexual slavery as a case study. This topic diverges from a parallel question which has found its way into mainstream discussions about the jihadi group, that is, "Is ISIS Islamic?"

Journalist Graeme Wood argued in a 2015 article in *The Atlantic* that "The reality is that the Islamic State is Islamic. *Very* Islamic… the religion preached by its ardent followers derives from coherent and even learned interpretations of Islam."[186] In the piece, Wood interviews Bernard Haykel, a scholar of Islam who argues that Muslims who view ISIS to be antithetical to Islam were "embarrassed and politically correct, with a cotton-candy view of their own religion… [Islam is] what Muslims do and how they interpret their texts."[187] Many other scholars have countered this claim. Author Mehdi Hassan wrote a piece in opposition to Wood's article. In it, he asks forensic psychiatrist and former CIA Officer Marc Sageman whether religion is a "useful analytical prism through which to view the rise of ISIS," to which Sageman responds, "Religion has a role but it is a role of justification. It's not why they do this [or] why young people go there."[188] Hassan also notes that a previously classified M15 document on

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[186] Weaver, "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi."
[187] Ibid.
[188] Mehdi Hasan, "How Islamic Is the Islamic State? Not at All.," *The New Republic*, March 12, 2015, https://newrepublic.com/article/121286/how-islamic-islamic-state.

radicalization found that "Far from being religious zealots, a large number of those involved in terrorism do not practise their faith regularly. Many lack religious literacy and could . . . be regarded as religious novices."[189]

It is not my intention to impose my own opinion onto this debate, as that is not the topic of this thesis. Nonetheless, I do think a basic understanding of this ongoing debate has relevance to this thesis's treatment of ISIS's relationship to Abbasid precedent. As Graeme Wood argued in a parallel context, there is truth to the premise that ISIS heavily referenced Abbasid precedent and that there is overlap in ISIS's and the Abbasid's manifestation of this practice. On the other hand, Marc Sageman's claim, via Mehdi Hassan's article, that "religion has a role but it is a role of justification," also very much holds true. ISIS seems to lean on the Abbasid caliphate as an explanatory defense for its actions, while wholly ignoring the reality that "reviving" the practice of sexual slavery provides a huge benefit to it. Thus, ISIS's relationship to the Abbasids seems to have resonance with both of these opposing frameworks.

ISIS can, and does, draw on Islamic texts to argue that its actions are Islamically sound. On the other hand, other Muslim scholars can do the same to argue that many of ISIS's methods are *not* grounded in Islam. In 2014, hundreds of Muslim scholars and leaders from around the world published what came to be known as the "Open Letter to al-Baghdadi," the then-leader of ISIS. In 40 pages, the authors engage in a tit-for-tat refutation of ISIS's policies, arguing that many of them violate Islamic law. This powerful letter speaks to the multi-vocal nature of Islam and complicates ISIS's conviction that there is only one true way to interpret and manifest the religion. Interestingly, there are several points in the letter which are relevant to the question of

[189] Ibid.

ISIS's Islamic legitimacy in its actions towards Yazidis. Though this is somewhat orthogonal to this thesis, I list several below for reference:

- "It is forbidden in Islam to oversimplify *Shari'ah* matters and ignore established Islamic sciences."
- "It is forbidden in Islam to ignore the reality of contemporary times when deriving legal rulings."
- "It is forbidden in Islam to kill the innocent."
- "Jihad in Islam is defensive war. It is not permissible without the right cause, the right purpose and without the right rules of conduct."
- "It is forbidden in Islam to declare people non-Muslim unless he (or she) openly declares disbelief."
- "It is forbidden in Islam to harm or mistreat—in anyway—Christians or any 'People of the Scripture'."
- "It is obligatory to consider Yazidis as People of the Scripture."
- "The re-introduction of slavery is forbidden in Islam. It was abolished by universal consensus."
- "It is forbidden in Islam to deny women their rights."
- "It is forbidden in Islam to deny children their rights."
- "It is forbidden in Islam to torture people."[190]

Finally, it is important to note that there is a long and dark history of religious figures using

[190] "Open Letter to Dr. Ibrahim Awwad al-Badri, Alias 'Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi'." September 19, 2014. https://rissc.jo/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Letter_to_Baghdadi-EN.pdf.

theology to justify cruel actions. Religious scripture is, almost by-definition, so rich and nuanced that it can be interpreted in a multitude of ways. Most modern-day Christians, for instance, would reject the premise that the Spanish Inquisition was justified based on the religious imperative to quash religious deviance. Religion always has been, and probably always will be, used to justify violence. However, it is important to differentiate when groups use violence to justify their actions ex post facto, versus when religion is the main driver that determines a group's actions.

F. Putting this into Conversation with Modern Human Rights Sensibilities

It is important to acknowledge that although Abbasid treatment of enslaved people was not as devoid of basic human dignity as that of ISIS, it was slavery, nonetheless. The public outrage at ISIS's treatment of Yazidi women which has emerged in the wake of the 2014 genocide is undoubtedly a product of our modern human rights sensibilities, as well as the documentation available to us in the twenty-first century through social media and 24-hour news cycles. As the "Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi" briefly notes, the advent of international human rights law in the 20th century has inspired an international reformation with respect to ancient and medieval religious practices of slavery. The vast majority of the world's Muslims have come to this consensus, and 193 member states of the United Nations have ratified at least part of the organization's "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." Of course, the declaration is non-binding and the world has seen no end to atrocities since its signing. However, the declaration is nonetheless symbolic of a collective understanding that practices like slavery have no place in the modern world.

G. Coining "Selective Revisionism"

Throughout my references in this thesis to ISIS's purported "revival" of Abbasid precedent, I have taken great care to consistently put the word "revival" in quotation marks. I have done this not only out of a skepticism that it is possible to "revive" history, but also to acknowledge that despite what ISIS would like to claim, its alleged "revival" of this period is in many ways unfaithful to the historical precedent.

Historical "revival" implies that modern entities can accurately re-create eras and institutions from throughout history, no matter how much time has lapsed since their existence. I reject this premise. I believe that this notion presupposes unchanging external conditions and actors in the world, which is anathema to the reality of change. Furthermore, one of the reasons for ISIS's labeling of the Abbasid caliphate as Islamically pure is due to its temporal proximity to the Prophet Mohammad. This is one of the key draws of the Abbasid period, and yet one which is impossible to recreate in the modern day.

Nonetheless, ISIS did not construct its policies out of thin air; there is truth to the jihadi group's claim that it upholds some Abbasid-era norms.

With all of this in mind, I propose a new term which can be used to more accurately characterize the practice which ISIS engages in vis-à-vis the Abbasid caliphate (though the term can be used with respect to any historical period). This term needs to encompass two realities: a) that ISIS *is* drawing on historical precedents to construct its policies but b) that it nonetheless does so through cherry-picking and in some cases, manipulating, that very precedent.

I put forth the phrase "selective revisionism" as a new way of encompassing this highly nuanced phenomenon. The word "selective" reveals that ISIS cherry-picks, and subsequently oversimplifies, aspects of Abbasid precedent. The word "revisionism" acknowledges that what

ISIS did was not an exact "revival" but rather a revised way of upholding Abbasid practice. "Revisionism" also implies that the jihadi group distorted the historical narrative in order to satisfy its own institutional agenda.

Selective revisionism notably excludes any mention of "revival." Indeed, this omission intentionally serves to reject the premise that history can be revived. I will provide two arguments to support this claim. First, as I have mentioned throughout this chapter, there is no such thing as a monolithic historical precedent. Thus, any attempt at historical "revival" inherently necessitates selectivity depending on which aspect of the historical precedent one aims to "revive." Second, the Abbasid caliphate was a historical phenomenon which occurred in a very particular time, place, and international context. The notion that ISIS can "copy and paste" this period in medieval history and transpose it into the modern era is simply a denial of all the particularities of the time which contributed to the caliphate's idiosyncrasies. In other words, historical revival is not possible.

By continuing to reproduce ISIS's own semantics in the way it talks about its relationship to the Abbasid caliphate, we are giving the jihadi group the power to shape the way we think. The phrase "revival" implies that ISIS's policies are inherently legitimate and acceptable because they draw on a respected period in Islamic history. This premise is dangerous not only because it negatively impacts the way the West conceives of Islamic history, but also because it is a profoundly effective recruitment strategy for ISIS.

In short, I believe that adopting the phrase "selective revisionism" as a means of characterizing ISIS's relationship to the Abbasid caliphate will allow scholars to address the topic in a more precise way. Rather than using semantics (like the word "revival") coined by

ISIS, which have incorrect and potentially harmful implications, selective revisionism provides a novel and more accurate way to characterize ISIS's actions.

In Conclusion

In Chapter Four's discussion, I have shown how ISIS collapsed a once-diverse practice into one with the singular and narrow purpose of inflicting violence on women and attracting male fighters to join their ranks. (Although identifying ISIS's ulterior motives for selectively re-imagining and collapsing Abbasid-era norms is not one of the primary objectives of this thesis, I have argued that it would not be unreasonable to assume that unlimited access to sex slaves was an effective incentive to draw in prospective recruits.)

The discussion which put this thesis topic in conversation with the question of "Is ISIS Islamic?" has also given rise to important questions. That scholars can answer this question in such diverging ways shows the diversity in religious interpretive frameworks. The discussion challenges ISIS's claim to be the only correct framing. On paper, the practice ISIS attempted to "revive" seems to be condoned by Islamic scripture. However, ISIS's method of carrying out this practice, namely through the torture and rape of women and minors, seems to simultaneously contradict the humanistic tendencies of the Qur'an. Thus, even if it was modeled on a perceived historical precedent, it was executed in a manner that seems to surpass the purview of what Islam condones.

An interesting, albeit anachronistic, thought experiment to ponder in light of this discussion is to consider what Abbasid leadership would think about ISIS's "revival" of medieval practices in their name. Certainly, aspects of ISIS's implementation would be antithetical to the somewhat-progressive Harun al-Rashid, the famous Abbasid caliph whom ISIS references more

than any other. The exercise is counterfactual but brings up interesting questions about the jihadi group's methods.

Chapter Four's discussion is not conventionally satisfying: I do not use the evidence presented in this thesis to extrapolate the exact conditions under which ISIS faithfully, and unfaithfully, reproduces Abbasid precedent. However, I believe that there is something far more important and meaningful which can be found in the liminal space between this binary. By exploring the complexity of ISIS's attempt to revive an era which encompasses an explosion of diverse ideas, practices and laws, I have found that the entire premise on which this goal is situated is a false one. The Abbasid caliphate is not monolithic in the same way that Islam is not monolithic. Religion, much like historical analysis, is an act of interpretation. ISIS latched onto certain attributes of the Abbasid caliphate which resonated with the group's ethos, in the same way that progressive scholars may hyper-fixate on other aspects of this period. Thus, any attempt to use historical precedent to justify the enactment of a policy in the modern day is by definition an *ex post facto* construction, whether the enactor of the policy realizes it or not. ISIS's "revival" of sexual slavery law is inextricably linked to its vested interest in constructing incentives for men, specifically those with little knowledge of Islam or Islamic history, to join the movement. This is evidenced by their draconian and simplistic implementation of the once-nuanced practice.

This brings us back to the initial question of whether ISIS "faithfully reproduced" Abbasid precedent. The comparison of a 2014 ISIS pamphlet with al-Tabari's 9th century "Book of Jihad," among other evidence presented thus far, demonstrates that the terrorist group *did* draw on aspects of Abbasid precedent to construct its "revived" institution. However, the comparative analysis between the treatment of enslaved Abbasid and Yazidi women (Chapters Two and Three) reveals that ISIS went far beyond the purview of the Abbasid model. In the last section of

this chapter, I have coined the term “selective revisionism” as a way to encapsulate these seemingly-conflicting realities. This thesis has revealed that scholars need a way to accurately characterize ISIS’s treatment of the Abbasid period, lest they submit to ISIS’s own semantic constructions.

Conclusion

Contribution to Existing Literature

As mentioned in the introduction, there have been thorough scholarly inquiries into discrete components of this thesis: ISIS's propaganda magazines, sexual slavery in the Abbasid caliphate, and the plight of Yazidi women under ISIS enslavement. Each of these areas of knowledge informs my thesis, but what I have written addresses a gap in the academic literature which encompasses several interrelated questions: how and why did ISIS reference the Abbasid period? To what extent is their "revival" of this historical precedent accurate? And lastly, to what extent are the answers to these questions complicated by modern human rights sensibilities, theological debates about ISIS's "Islamic-ness," the reality that history is not monolithic? In other words, though I found a small handful of existing literature which attempts to explain *why* ISIS venerates the Abbasids (often through the medium of short-form articles written prior to ISIS's actual caliphal "revival"), my thesis adds detailed context to this question and subsequently asks (and aims to answer) natural follow-up questions which arise from this initial premise.

Furthermore, while there are a small number of articles which ask "why the Abbasids?" most answer the question through scholarly rationalization. When I approach this question in Chapter One, I answer it solely through primary source documents, namely, ISIS's own words. This provides unique insight which allows readers to conceptualize how ISIS constructed an imagined version of this period.

Additionally, very little has been written on this topic since 2014, when the jihadi group's purported establishment of an Islamic caliphate shook the world and inspired a slew of

explanatory articles for public consumption. Few writings considered these same questions in the years following, presumably as a result of social numbness to the shocking headlines and waning public interest. ISIS, though no longer controlling large swaths of land in Iraq and Syria, remains a very real threat. The continued study of its ideology and propaganda can inform policy and academic work moving forward.

Much existing literature has contrasted ISIS's professed use of Islamic law with the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. This tests ISIS's actions against its own claims of faithful textualism, using theology as a normative framework. My thesis, on the other hand, analyzes ISIS's implementation of its caliphate (more specifically, sexual slavery law) against the Abbasid period which it purportedly reveres and aims to revive. Thus, I redefine the prevailing normative framework from a theological one to a historical one. This fills a gap in ISIS literature and can inform further work on the organization.

Lastly, in Chapter Four I coin the term "selective revisionism" to encapsulate the complex reality of how, and why, ISIS venerates Abbasid historical precedent. Until today, the little existing literature which *does* address this relationship either outwardly rejects ISIS's premise of "reviving" the Abbasid caliphate (which neglects the reality that there are kernels of Abbasid precedent in ISIS policy), or blindly upholds ISIS's semantics of having "revived" the Abbasid caliphate (which does not account for the selectivity and distortions that underpin ISIS's relationship to Abbasid law). I acknowledge the merits and downfalls of both these positions and have coined a term which pays homage to the liminal space between this binary. I believe this has the potential to greatly benefit future literature on ISIS's relationship to Islamic history.

Why This Matters and Recommendations for Further Study

This thesis is important from a practical, theoretical, and academic perspective.

In terms of practical contributions, Chapter One's cataloging of ISIS's references to the Abbasids provides a new thematic paradigm through which we can understand ISIS's constructed imagination of the Abbasid caliphate. This is important not only to enrich scholarly understanding of what ISIS wants, but also from a national security perspective, insofar as any information about the precedent which ISIS aims to "revive" can reveal information about the rationale behind their current undertakings and a blueprint for their future ones. Operating under this framework, if one hopes to develop counter-radicalization initiatives aimed at potential ISIS recruits, understanding how ISIS successfully constructs an image of a utopic, romantic "golden age" which they allege to have revived is certainly helpful in deciding how to frame alternative narratives. In the future, I believe that studies similar to this one, which interrogate ISIS's agenda and strategies behind its propagandistic constructions, have the potential to improve counterterrorism strategies.

Furthermore, my coining of the phrase "selective revisionism" can be instructive in fashioning alternative narratives which undermine ISIS's claim of reviving the golden age. By replacing ISIS's claim of having "revived" the Abbasid caliphate with the more astute phrase of selective revisionism, we can lay bare the fallacious tactics which ISIS uses to manipulate potential recruits.

This thesis also makes several theoretical contributions to the field. Before the advent of modern human rights law, history saw the use and abuse of women as slaves for millennia. Indeed, slavery was a common practice in the ancient and medieval world. Many early Jews, Christians, and Muslims are known to have owned slaves, and these faiths' religious texts have

certainly been used to justify the practice of slavery. And yet, in the millennia-long history of slavery in the Middle East, there have emerged very few accounts from the perspectives of enslaved people themselves. Nearly all of the existing documentation about slavery comes from the perspective of slave-owners. This is in part because throughout most of history, enslaved people had low literacy rates and were systematically disempowered. Furthermore, there was likely little public interest in learning about the perspectives of these individuals. Whatever the reasons may be for this gaping lack of documentation (with several exceptions, to be sure), the scarcity of these perspectives further underscores the importance of Yazidi women's voices. Their harrowing testimonies provide a necessary narrative, one which I emphasized in Chapter Three. As of this writing, we are approaching the 10-year mark since the start of the Yazidi genocide (August 3, 2024). And yet, much of the world still does not know about the plight of the Yazidis. This is particularly true outside of the Middle East and Europe (as Germany and several other EU countries have ongoing fast-track immigration programs for Yazidis since the genocide). In short, I believe that the best way to continue to reap the theoretical contributions of this thesis (namely, the introduction of previously-enslaved people's perspectives into the historical narrative) is to amplify Yazidi voices.

From an academic perspective, this thesis provides a blueprint which can be used to continue interrogating ISIS's practices using history as a normative framework. In other words, future academic works which seek to contrast ISIS's actions (whether it be pertaining to the indoctrination of children, the role of women in ISIS's caliphate, social enforcement tactics, law and punishment, etc.) with the historical record (during the time of the Prophet, the Rashidun period, the Abbasid caliphate, etc.) may find it helpful to draw on this thesis for scaffolding. For this thesis, I chose the Abbasid caliphate as the historical period and sexual slavery as the case

study, but any number of other historical periods and case studies can be imposed into this structure.

Yazidis Today

Some enslaved Yazidi women were killed by their ISIS captors, whether as a result of abuse or as retribution for attempting to escape. According to Nadia Murad's nonprofit organization, 2,800 of the nearly 6,000 Yazidi women who were enslaved by ISIS are still missing to this day.[191] Nonetheless, the majority of Yazidi women who underwent ISIS enslavement have been rescued. Of these, many escaped captivity, while others were sold by ISIS soldiers back to their families for an exceptionally high sum. A UN report notes that,

> As the *sabaya* are "spoils of war" ISIS does not permit the reselling of Yazidis to non-ISIS members. Such sale is punishable by death. In effect this is meant to prevent Yazidis being sold back to their families. The financial incentives for an individual fighter to break this rule, however, are tremendous. Whereas Yazidi women and children are sold between fighters for between USD 200 and USD 1,500, they are generally sold back to their families for between USD 10,000 and 40,000. Many of the families of the Yazidi women and girls who were sold back are now heavily in debt and worry not only about making payments, but also about how they will be able to afford to buy back any other relatives that fighter-owners wish to sell in the future. Some are still making payments to ISIS fighters, who regularly call to threaten them.[192]

Independent of this financial burden, many women suffer from intense post-traumatic stress. The same UN report emphasizes high rates of suicidal thoughts among these women, many of them struggling with quotidian tasks like eating and sleeping.[193] In addition to bearing their own personal traumas, many are still missing sons, daughters, husbands, brothers, and sisters whose fates are unknown. One woman held for 17 months is quoted as saying, "I wish I was dead. I

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[191] "The Genocide," Nadia's Initiative, accessed March 20, 2024, https://www.nadiasinitiative.org/the-genocide.
[192] "'They Came to Destroy,'" Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, United Nations.
[193] Ibid.

wish the ground would open and kill me and my children."[194] To be clear, ISIS's rape of Yazidi women was not confined to adults. A doctor who treated Yazidis who had escaped captivity reported that "almost every girl she had treated between the ages of nine and 17 had been the victim of rape or other forms of sexual violence."[195]

Immediately following the genocide, the previously Yazidi-majority region of Sinjar contained not one free Yazidi, a once 400,000-person community.[196] The region remained devoid of its beating heart for years. With the threat of an ISIS resurgence and now-shattered relations with their Muslim neighbors, many Yazidis report they no longer feel safe living in the Middle East.[197] Many hope to emigrate abroad, though few have the financial means. Independent of these financial struggles, women in Iraq are required to provide signed permission from a male relative in order to leave the country.[198] Some Yazidi women, however, no longer have living male relatives.

Several EU countries, particularly Germany, expanded opportunities for Yazidi refugees to seek asylum in the wake of the genocide. More than 200,000 Yazidis currently reside in Germany, comprising the largest Yazidi community in the diaspora.[199] However, even once they arrive in Germany, they are still not guaranteed citizenship and many live in constant fear of

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[194] "'They Came to Destroy,'" Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, United Nations.
[195] "Iraq: Yezidi Child Survivors of 'Islamic State' Facing Unprecedented Health Crisis."
[196] ""'They Came to Destroy,'" Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, United Nations.
[197] Ibid.
[198] Rothna Begum, "Trapped," *Human Rights Watch*, July 18, 2023, https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/07/18/trapped/how-male-guardianship-policies-restrict-womens-travel-and-mobility-middle.
[199] "Germany: Thuringia Introduces Ban on Deportation for Yazidis," InfoMigrants, January 5, 2024, https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/54328/germany-thuringia-introduces-ban-on-deportation-for-yazidis.

being deported. In 2017, Germany accepted 91.8 percent of Yazidi asylum applications. By 2022, however, that number had shrunk to 48.6 percent.[200]

Yazidi clergy have publicly announced that rescued Yazidi women are to be welcomed back home and should not be condemned for the sexual acts imposed upon them.[201] This allows such women to be eligible for marriage within the faith. The importance of this decision cannot be understated—Yazidi culture is quite socially conservative.

There is one aspect of the violence done unto women by ISIS, however, which the Yazidi community does not accept. Given that many Yazidi women were raped repeatedly in captivity for extended periods of time, some ultimately became impregnated by ISIS fighters. Despite my thorough research into this topic in hopes of uncovering the fate of these children, there is very little available information. Below is an excerpt from an Amnesty International report about this predicament:

> As in so many conflicts, these children born of sexual violence have become the subject of intense controversy and debate, stigmatized and largely denied a place within their mother's community. These women have therefore been forced into either keeping their children but giving up their families and community, or giving up their children but reuniting with their families and community. Yezidi women have responded to this dilemma in different ways. Some willingly separate from their children, feeling, like some members of their community, that the children are a reminder of the atrocities they and their families suffered at the hands of IS. Others agree to separate from their children, only to regret their decision later. Some wish to stay with their children, but as a result of pressure, coercion, or misleading information from members of their family and community, leave them behind… According to humanitarian workers and other experts interviewed for this report, very few, if any, Yezidi women with children born of sexual violence have opted to remain with their children and live in exile elsewhere in Iraq, as they are unable to overcome the significant and often unsurmountable socio-economic and cultural barriers to living without the support of their families and community. Yezidi women with children born of sexual violence…often find it impossible to know what happens to the children after they have been left behind. According to activists, humanitarian workers and other experts, these children have usually been left with camp

[200] "Germany: Thuringia Introduces Ban on Deportation for Yazidis."
[201] "'They Came to Destroy,'" Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, United Nations.

> authorities, local organizations, orphanages, the Yezidi woman's IS captors or adoptive families. Due to the ad-hoc and informal nature of the way many children are left behind, they are at serious risk of neglect, as well as being trafficked or subjected to other serious human rights abuses. The precise number of children born of sexual violence to Yezidi women since 2014 is unknown, but most experts believe that there are at least several hundred, and possibly more.[202]

One orphanage located in northeastern Syria run by an organization called the Woman's Committee houses 49 of these children, though this number has not been updated since 2020.[203] Most of the women who left their children at the orphanage were told that they would be able to maintain in constant communication. A month later, the orphanage cut all contact with the children's mothers. Indeed, all of the women interviewed in the Amnesty International Report were completely cut off from information about their children.[204]

On April 24, 2019, the Yazidi Supreme Spiritual Council issued a statement that they would "accept all survivors of IS crimes," acknowledging that "what they went through to have been against their will."[205] Although this statement was lauded by survivors, it immediately catalyzed backlash among some socially conservative contingents within the community. Three days later, on April 27, 2019, the Spiritual Council released a "clarification" in which they made clear that "the decision to accept survivors and their children did not at all mean children born of rape."[206]

Many NGOs which do advocacy work for the Yazidi community have avoided taking up this issue, understanding the gravity of the matter in Yazidi society. Even European governments, several of which have been relatively helpful in accepting Yazidi refugees, "see

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[202] "Iraq: Yezidi Child Survivors of 'Islamic State' Facing Unprecedented Health Crisis."
[203] Ibid.
[204] Ibid.
[205] Ibid.
[206] Ibid.

these children as a huge risk. Everyone thinks that these children will be so isolated and abandoned at some point in their lives that they will go back to IS."[207] Multiple sources report that European governments have explicitly denied asylum to children born of rape for fear that they would one day attempt to reconnect with their fathers and therefore pose a national security risk.[208]

I close this section on Yazidis with the testimony of Hanan, a 24-year old survivor of ISIS enslavement. Hanan gave birth to a daughter while in captivity.

> We wanted to stay there, under any circumstances, with the children. But in the end, we made a deal with our family members that if we left [the children] there, we would go back. My uncle was promising on his honour and dignity that whenever I wanted, I would visit my daughter. I went to the orphanage to leave [my daughter] there. When I left her, I was shouting at them: 'Don't give my daughter to anyone. I will come back every week, every month - this is temporary!' When I saw my uncle, his first words were: 'Forget your daughter.' [My family members] were telling me, 'forget about her, and all of your life before now. You must get married.' I was saying, 'No, she is my flesh and blood, she is a part of me. I didn't sleep day and night to care for her. I was covering her from the bombs. I cannot forget her. She is my daughter.' That was the biggest shock I've ever had. After everything that happened to us under IS, this happened to us by our own people. The other mothers [in the same situation] and I always say we wish we were still with IS but with our children. We wish we were in Baghouz with our children, it would be better than here. Especially now, with all the tricks of my family, I would rather be there. All of my family members are against me. They don't let me think about her or talk about her. They tell me to forget her. It's been more than a year. I left her and I never saw her again. We were in touch with the orphanage in the beginning. Then they blocked us, all of us. She is growing, and she needs a mother. I know she is very sad, I can feel it. In the last picture, I saw her eyes, and they looked so sad. Before she was always smiling. All of us are so tired. We don't sleep. We [mothers] call each other very late at night, and we cry for each other. We wish we were dead or anywhere else, not slowly dying every day as we are now. My daughter was always smiling. She took care of me. I was always thinking about my parents, and she would say 'Mom, please don't cry.' Whenever I was crying, she would tell me to keep my cries inside my heart, and this kept me stronger. She was amazing. She didn't even know her father, so I was her father and her mother at the same time. She is like a piece of my heart. The only thing I want is my daughter. That's all I want. Whenever I check the internet, I look at little girls' clothing. I want to buy all of the clothes for my daughter. I want to go anywhere safe, with no threats to me or my

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[207] "Iraq: Yezidi Child Survivors of 'Islamic State' Facing Unprecedented Health Crisis."
[208] Ibid.

> daughter. I don't mind if I am in a tent or in a desert. It's not important where I am - Europe, Iraq, wherever. I've never thought about anything else except my reunion with my daughter. It is very hard to not talk about it. It is a pain in my heart. I am always upset, especially when I see cartoons, or see kids playing. I've gotten no support at all. My feeling is the same feeling as all the other mothers [in the same situation]. We have all thought about killing ourselves, or tried to do it. We are so exhausted by this situation. We cannot stand it anymore. Our children are a part of us. We are human, we have our rights, and we want our children to be with us. We want to touch them. I need my daughter.[209]

ISIS Today

By 2017, ISIS had lost much of the territory which comprised its alleged caliphate during its height. In June of that year, the jihadi group lost control of Mosul, the result of an eight-month-long military campaign fought by Iraqi and Kurdish ground troops and supported by US airstrikes.[210] In October ISIS lost its capital of Raqqa, another important stronghold.[211] By December of 2017, ISIS had lost 95 percent of the territory that it had once controlled.[212] By this time, three years, three months, and 18 days from its initial establishment, the caliphate, at least in its physical form, had formally collapsed.

ISIS magazine provides instructions for best ways to carry out a knife attack
Source: *Dabiq*

The loss of a physical caliphate has had four major implications for ISIS. The first has to do with branding and recruitment. For years, ISIS could differentiate itself as superior from other jihadi groups because it existed in physicality, allowing

[209] "Iraq: Yezidi Child Survivors of 'Islamic State' Facing Unprecedented Health Crisis."
[210] "Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State | Wilson Center," accessed March 20, 2024, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state.
[211] Ibid.
[212] Ibid.

it to boast that it had finally restored an Islamic caliphate. This utopic propaganda device no longer attracts as many large swaths of intrigued foreign recruits as it once did.[213] Second, this loss was a blow to ISIS's narrative of triumphalism, namely, that its expansion and success was a product of God's divine will.[214] The third component is funding. Most of ISIS's financial income came from collecting taxes from those living in its territory, selling crude oil sourced from its territory on the black market, selling women as sex slaves, kidnapping for ransom, and raiding Iraqi army bases for money and weapons, and stealing.[215] In short, all of these income-generating activities required control of territory. Thus, ISIS has grown increasingly cash-strapped since 2017. Fourth, and finally, the campaign against ISIS resulted in a loss of critical personnel. Particularly during the final year of fighting, several of ISIS's top leaders were killed, not to mention tens of thousands of its fighters.[216]

Despite its present predicament of fragmentation and decentralization, ISIS ideology still survives today. ISIS has returned to its roots as a jihadist insurgency, establishing small bases outside of effective state control or embedding themselves in civilian populations.[217] Today, ISIS cells can be found in sparse desert areas on the Iraqi-Syrian border, in the mountains of northern Iraq, or in local cells such as in Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula.[218] (Afghanistan in particular is now home to a trinity of

Photo from ISIS magazine depicting a young child holding a gun
Source: *Dabiq* Issue 10

[213] Wickham, MESAS 270, December 7, 2021.
[214] Ibid.
[215] Wickham, MESAS 270, November 9, 2021.
[216] Wickham, MESAS 270, December 7, 2021.
[217] Ibid.
[218] Ibid.

jihadi groups, with a Taliban government and strong Al-Qaeda and ISIS strongholds in the country.)[219] They wage targeted attacks on *mukhtars* (local tribal leaders), police stations, and other people or institutions representing security or statehood. They hope to create an environment of instability in the places where they operate in order to undermine the authority of local leaders. They also still engage in one-off suicide bombings, kidnappings, and attacks on Kurdish, Arab and US troops when they can.[220] Any attack perpetrated by ISIS allows it to gain more international relevance and compete with its jihadi counterparts for recruits, such as Al-Qaeda.

Tens of thousands of children, primarily Muslims, were subjected to ISIS indoctrination and training camps. These children grew up trusting ISIS figures, participating in ISIS's violent activities, and ultimately subscribing to the worldview of ISIS. For many, this was all they knew. Following the collapse of the caliphate, the international community was forced to wrestle with questions about what to do with these children. Could they be rehabilitated into a non-extremist way of life, or were they ticking time-bombs who would later facilitate an ISIS comeback? Some of these children have returned with their parents to their home countries, though countries which find out about their terrorist involvements will often not permit their reentry. Those who cannot return are living in detention centers in Iraq and Syria, which are better described as open-air prisons.[221] Those running these camps, whether they be Iraqi government officials or Kurdish militias, have felt so personally victimized by ISIS that they tend to view the inhabitants of such camps as enemy combatants rather than civilians in need of rehabilitation.[222] Other

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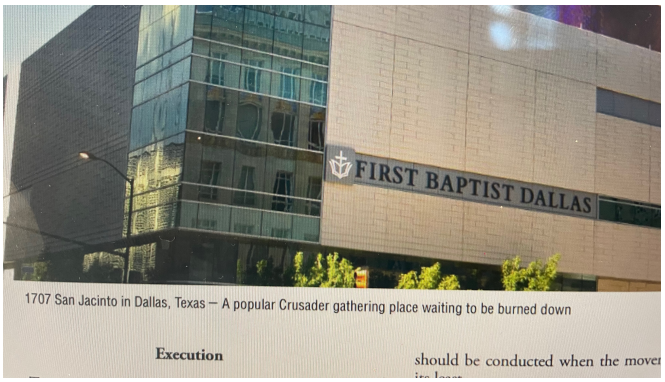
[219] Wickham, MESAS 270, December 7, 2021.
[220] Ibid.
[221] "ISIS Is a Problem of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," United States Institute of Peace, accessed March 20, 2024, https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/07/isis-problem-yesterday-today-and-tomorrow.
[222] Ibid.

detention centers, such as Al-Hawl detention camp in Northeast Syria, have so little authoritative presence that ISIS-affiliated individuals residing in them effectively have control. Many in the intelligence community refer to such camps as "ISIS University:" strict adherence to ISIS policies are enforced in the camp by its own residents, and dissidents can be subjected to violence if they refuse to comply.[223]

Other previously-indoctrinated ISIS children, along with their parents, are residing in refugee camps in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Jordan, where they have embedded themselves among civilian populations, many of which ISIS targeted.[224] The living conditions in these camps are suboptimal, to say the least. Food shortages, overcrowding, and limited health and education services define life in these camps.[225]



ISIS magazine encourages followers to carry out an attack on a specific church in Texas
Source: *Rumiyah*

The poor conditions under which previously-affiliated ISIS children and adults are living is one of many reasons for international concern of an ISIS resurgence. An unclassified report called the "Annual Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community" from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, written in February 2023, notes that "Even following the loss of several key ISIS leaders in 2022, ISIS's insurgency in Iraq and Syria will persist as the group seeks to rebuild capabilities and replenish its ranks…ISIS's ideology and propaganda almost certainly will continue to inspire attacks in the West, including in the United States."[226]

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[223] "ISIS Is a Problem of Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow."
[224] Wickham, MESAS 270, December 7, 2021.
[225] Ibid.
[226] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community" (government report, February 6, 2023), 32.

Considerable research has shown the effects of such poor prison conditions on radicalization; for instance, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi himself was the product of prison radicalization.[227]

Summary of Thesis

In this thesis, I have conducted a thorough interrogation of ISIS's references to, and attempted "revival" of, Abbasid caliphal practices. By cataloging references to this period into five discrete themes based on my close reading of thousands of pages of ISIS magazines, I have created a framework through which to understand how and why ISIS draws on this period. After establishing this larger context for ISIS's reverence of the Abbasids, I have employed sexual slavery as a case study in order to particularize this history through the lens of a singular institution. In so doing, I have outlined the practice of sexual slavery in the Abbasid period, revealing the nuanced, and at times paradoxical, nature of this institution. Thus, when contrasted alongside the historical record of ISIS's implementation of sexual slavery law, it becomes clear that ISIS's "revival" of this practice is not a faithful reproduction of the Abbasid historical precedent.

I argue that this unfaithfulness has two dimensions. The first is one of collapse and oversimplification; ISIS collapsed a complex and diverse practice (in which many enslaved women were used for much more than sex and even held social power) into one which was distilled into a distinctly violent and primal justification for rape. The second dimension is one of metastasis; once distilled into an act of sexual intimidation, ISIS created a monstrous, metastasized institution out of this interpretation of sexual slavery law, predicated on a small

[227] "How the Islamic State Evolved in an American Prison - The Washington Post," accessed March 20, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/11/04/how-an-american-prison-helped-ignite-the-islamic-state/.

kernel of Islamic history and law. Given this paradoxical relationship which ISIS fashions for itself with the Abbasids, I put forth the term "selective revisionism" as a means of characterizing that which ISIS claims is a "revival" of Abbasid precedent. I argue that this terminology is not only more accurate in describing the nature of ISIS's association with the Abbasids, but that it also can mitigate the potentially dangerous consequences of allowing ISIS to brand itself as a direct "revival" of the Abbasid caliphate.

Throughout this thesis, I have also discussed the complexity of using history as a normative framework, given its multi-vocal nature. That such precedents occurred in the distant past also gives rise to questions about incentives for "reviving" abandoned practices and how the advent of modern norms of conduct can impact attempts to "revive" historical practices. I address each of these questions while simultaneously challenging their premises.

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