

Viewpoints
No. 60

Barbarians: ISIS's Mortal Threat to Women

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This special edition publication looks at the threat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in its treatment of women.

Middle East Program





For this issue of *Viewpoints*, the Middle East Program reached out to a number of its regular contributors and invited them to share with us their thoughts and concerns on the treatment of women and girls by ISIS.

This issue of *Viewpoints* is an open edition and as more comments come in from the region and the United States, we will add them to the publication. We are very pleased to have in addition to our regular contributors two former Iraqi members of parliament, Judge Zakia Hakki and MP Safia Al Souhail contributing to this issue.



Haleh Esfandiari, *Director, Middle East Program, Woodrow Wilson Center*

ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (now calling itself simply the Islamic State, or IS), which now controls a swath of territory that stretches from Diyala in Iraq to Aleppo in Syria, has committed many atrocities; but its treatment of women has been particularly barbaric. The establishment of this new “caliphate” was proclaimed from the pulpit by the ISIS leader, Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, after the capture of Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city. Since then, ISIS imposed a system of justice based on mass executions, beheadings, and forced conversions. A huge exodus from towns that have fallen to ISIS has created a massive refugee problem. Al-Baghdadi’s followers pillage towns, destroying monuments, churches, and Shi’a mosques and shrines – anything that does not fit in with their religious ideology. Shiites, Sunnis, Christians, Yazidis, Kurds, and even Arabs who are not their kind of Arabs have not been spared the ISIS rampage of death and destruction.

Women have been treated with special savagery, based on the narrowest possible interpretation of Islam and Islamic law. Women are regarded both as trophies and as targets for persecution. When the men of ISIS enter towns and villages, they seize women and sell them as slaves, use them as concubines, and force them into marriages with fighters. Women of all ages have been raped; Christian women have been forced to convert. In the city of Mosul, women were ordered to cover completely and to appear only in the company of male relatives. Baghdadi’s followers even toyed with the idea of female genital mutilation (FGM), and for a while there were rumors (later denied) that al-Baghdadi had issued a fatwa requiring FGM for Mosul’s women.

The silence in the Arab world over this inhuman mistreatment of women has been deafening. Where, one asks, are the Arab governments who pride themselves on promoting women’s rights and who boast of the high numbers of women in their schools, institutions of higher education, in government positions, and active in the economy? These governments are signatories to international conventions designed to protect women’s rights and to further women’s participation in their societies. They are signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet they stand silent when Arab women are sold as slaves. Once again, women are becoming the first victims in a conflict and, no doubt, the last to be rehabilitated. All we need is a return to the pre-Islamic period in Arabia when baby girls when unwanted were often buried alive. It is time Arab governments spoke out and took a stand.



Robin Wright, *author and Wilson Center-USIP Distinguished Scholar*

The barbarian thugs in the Islamic State have been ruthless in their treatment of women and girls as they swept across Syria and Iraq. The reports are still second-hand, at best, but the claims of abduction, rape, and virtual slavery are now so uniform in description that there is little question ISIS is violating basic canons of human rights, including the Islamic law it claims to be invoking. The issue is the scope.

After ISIS moved in June, from bases in Syria into Iraq, the United Nations Population Fund warned that about 250,000 Iraqi women and girls, including nearly 60,000 pregnant women, were in need of urgent care. Now that the Islamic State controls roughly one-third of Iraq, the numbers are surely much higher.

The female body has effectively become both a weapon of war and a “reward” of war.

The fear of what ISIS is doing to women has been a key psychological weapon leading thousands of families to flee the north and west of Iraq. Since ISIS has seized territory, women have been subjected to the most rigid interpretation—condemned even by key Saudi clerics—of Islamic law. Anecdotal accounts vary, with some places where women are confined to home and indiscriminate raids by ISIS gangs, forced to wear all enveloping black *niqab* showing only the eyes.

But minority women have reportedly suffered the most. In mid-August, the Organization of Women’s Freedom in Iraq charged that women in minority groups, particularly Christians and Yazidis, have been brutalized under the ISIS banner of *jihad al-nikah*, roughly translated as “sex in the name of the struggle.” Unknown numbers of women of all sects have been paired up with militant fighters.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, executive director of UN Women, issued a blanket condemnation of ISIS tactics last month. “UN Women is outraged by the deliberate targeting of women and girls in Iraq and reports of kidnapping, rape and forced marriage by militants of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and other armed groups,” she said. “Since the recent outbreak of violence, an estimated 1.2 million Iraqis have fled their homes amidst indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas. In such circumstances, women and girls are especially vulnerable to violence and exploitation.”

Tragically, there are also reports of women who have committed suicide because of the humiliation or loss of honor after being raped. And unfortunately, there is no indication that ISIS will be defeated or the tragedy will end soon.



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Safia Al Souhail, *Iraqi politician and former Member of Iraqi Parliament, 2005-2014*

In Iraq and Syria the terrorist organization of ISIS, which became known after the takeover of Mosul on June 10 as the Islamic State (IS), is now controlling an area in these two countries that is bigger than Jordan. Within the territory under their control they introduced a series of degrading, cruel and inhuman practices such as: the genital mutilation of girls and women, and the sexual jihad (*jihad al-nikah*), which includes encouraging girls and women from the Arab world, Europe, America, China, and elsewhere to join the ISIS terrorists. They have created the al-Khansaa Brigade composed mainly of girls between the ages of 18 and 25. There are also male members of families within ISIS who force their sisters and daughters to marry ISIS fighters to gain the trust of the high-ranking members of the organization and to get promoted in the ranks within the group.

There are women in the region and the diaspora who are in charge of recruiting women to join this terrorist group. In addition, ISIS has imposed the chaperon (mahram) on women. A new dress code is introduced, which is similar to Afghan and Pakistani dresses and women have to wrap themselves from head to toe in a black garment. The worst is the kidnapping of hundreds of Yazidi, Christian, Shabak, Turkoman, and Kurdish women. We have witnessed scores of cases of rape and also selling of women as slaves in a market in Mosul for the price of 100,000 Iraqi dinars (about 80USD). Women and girls whose husbands and fathers were killed are offered to the terrorist fighters both in Iraq and Syria.

ISIS jihadists are terrorizing people under their control and beyond through beheadings, of which they post pictures and videos. They are efficiently using social media for their propaganda purposes to frighten the population before their arrival to any area. Their takeover in Mosul and important parts of Salahaddin, Al Anbar, and Diyala provinces, including Hawija in Kirkuk, led to the displacement of 1.5 million people. The drama of a quarter million of Yazidis, and earlier the tragic situation of the Christian community, the Turkmen of Tal Afar, and the Shabak community shocked Iraqis and the international community. Many of these internally displaced persons (IDPs) are women in a very vulnerable situation both physically and psychologically. The non-Muslim minorities, both Yazidis and Christians, were asked to convert; those who refused were killed. Christians are forced to pay religious taxes, but Yazidis and Shi'a Turkmen are either killed or sold as slaves. Currently, about 20,000 Shi'a Turkmen in the Amirli district of Salahaddin province are facing a horrendous massacre by ISIS because the population is encircled by ISIS terrorists.

The humanitarian situation is catastrophic for women and IDPs. These populations lost overnight everything. They were looted— even wedding rings, jewelry, mobile phones, medications, and other belongings are taken from them.

Once again radical barbarian forces distorting the image of Islam and in the name of Islam are committing the most atrocious crimes against humanity, tantamount to genocide. The international community needs to support Iraq and Kurdistan militarily and to support IDPs and their needs through an international donor conference. Thankfully there has been an international response, but unfortunately not yet to the level of the needs and challenges. These

terrorists need to be criminalized, and this case needs to be referred through Article 19 of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to the UN Security Council and to the Hague Tribunal in the Hague.

ISIS is a threat to all religions and humanity. These fascist practices prove once again the enormous need to separate state from religion in the Middle East in order to not allow psychopaths to interpret religion as they wish for their own interests.

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Kahina Bouagache, *women's rights activist, and corporate and international lawyer, Algeria*

DAASH, ISIS, ISIL, or IS... ISIS has different names but is spreading the same ideology throughout the Middle East, Gulf states, and North Africa, with a vision to reach the sub-Saharan region.

With the spread of violence, the disappearance of religious minorities under threat of ethnic cleansing, forced conversions, executions, rapes, kidnappings, and the enslavement and selling of women, ISIS operations are expanding significantly. ISIS militants treat Christians and members of Islamic sects dating back to early Christianity and Islam as heretics and apostates; their churches, shrines, and sacred sites are destroyed, and their young women are captured and sold into slavery as wives or prostitutes for ISIS fighters. These women find themselves between two fires: they are threatened by ISIS when they do not comply, or if returned to their families and communities, they are threatened with honor killings.

In the meantime, Arab countries and NGOs in the region are not standing up and denouncing these events or even the killing, as if nothing is happening. It is impressive to see how the dominance of Wahhabism and other strict interpretations of Islamic governance have encouraged popular support for these terrorist organizations. Despite their terrifying actions, we witness no public rallies or outcries anywhere in the Arab world to protest against ISIS. Are Arab countries scared to be treated as Islamophobic or apostates themselves if they were to stand against this violence? Why should they react less when minorities and women are the ones being directly targeted?

Many countries in the region, in fact, created and/or protected this situation. These extremist groups have been funded by a number of different governments. For example, Damascus allows ISIS to move oil through Syrian government-controlled territory for sale abroad. Other governments provide tacit assistance, and some citizens donate in a private capacity to such organizations.

These groups are well-rooted in the region, thanks to the implicit acceptance of extremism within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Its societies and its educational systems are heavily influenced by extremist political and religious views, the Muslim Brotherhood, and other Islamist activist groups in the region.

Arab states gave these extremist groups a safe haven and allowed them to shape curricula, textbooks, educational standards, moral values, and public standards of behavior. In many

MENA countries, particularly in the Gulf, the government dominates and defines political thinking; creates the national narrative; and manipulates the press, the private sector, and mosques.

Now that Arab states lost control over the created monsters, they are stepping back, trying to protect their own borders or waiting to see what the United States can do to assist them.

While witnessing these atrocities taking place in neighboring countries, I understand that behind the silent attitude that governments in the region adopt toward this phenomenon, they implicitly agree and support the ideology and the crimes perpetuated by these groups. Therefore, should we consider these governments guilty of criminal negligence?



Hanin Ghaddar, *former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center; and Managing Editor, NOW News, Lebanon*

When the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was born, secular activists, intellectuals, and Western journalists treated this movement as an imposed and foreign group that grew and flourished on political conflict and sectarian rhetoric. However, the organization's attitudes toward women are not unfamiliar in our communities. It is a manifestation – and an exaggeration – of prejudices, regulations, and religious laws that have discriminated against women for a very long time.

When ISIS carried out the stoning of women in Syria for having sex outside of marriage, it was perceived with significant rejection and anger by the larger communities, but women have always been punished by their societies to certain degrees. Sexually free women and women who are disobedient to their fathers and husbands have always been disciplined and isolated by their communities. Personal freedoms and sexual rights have never been respected by other groups, parties, or leaders in our region.

We are in this sense all responsible for ISIS and its actions against women. We have allowed our societies, laws, and constitutions to treat women as second-class citizens and accepted the fact that women's rights and freedoms are not a priority. Therefore, when ISIS commits a cruel act of punishment against women or forces them to behave in a certain manner, our societies only reject the savagery and the magnification of the behavior, not the act of punishment itself.

ISIS' barbaric behavior such as stoning, crucifying, and beheading is not common. But their attitude toward women comes from a very common and overall disregard for women as free individuals. ISIS fighters were born in our societies, studied at our schools, prayed at our mosques, and listened to the same rhetoric with which we have been raised. Their prejudices are born from ours, only exaggerated. So the only way to fight ISIS is to start with ourselves, our values and our standards. If we do not want ISIS to prevail, we should start treating women as individuals, not as followers, and certainly not as possessions.





Zakia Hakki, Iraqi politician; former Member of Iraqi Parliament (2005-2010) and Constitutional Drafting Committee; and first woman judge elected in Iraq

The recent crisis in Iraq has made headlines around the world, but there is a group of voices that remain unheard: those of Iraqi women. Women and girls of different religions are in danger because of the extreme violence committed by the Al-Qaeda offshoot known as ISIS, which invaded Iraq following the fall of Saddam Hussein 11 years ago.

Since ISIS began its campaign in the western Iraqi provinces of Mosul and Al Anbar, they have greatly expanded their territory. Iraqi people, especially women in these areas, live in fear, traumatized by the extreme horrors they face every day. Recently, more than 500 Yazidi girls were abducted from their village and vanished with no trace as to where they have been taken or what horrors have befallen them.

It is not difficult to speculate on the fate of these girls, because ISIS has provided us with plenty of examples based on their treatment of women in the past. Since their invasion of Al Anbar, many Iraqi women have become the victims of rape. The pain from these experiences alone is enough to bear, but there are far-reaching consequences because these victims may become pregnant with illegitimate children or exposed to HIV. These women will be ostracized by their societies and could face death at the hands of one of their own male family members who will murder them under the banner of honor killings in order to avenge the perceived loss of their morality. A family's honor is linked to women's purity and chastity, so even though the woman is a helpless victim she will be blamed for bringing shame onto herself, her family, and her tribe.

These women, some as young as 14 years old, have very few options. They have no support and are destitute, living in miserable conditions, many with illegitimate children to care for. This makes them easy targets for recruitment by ISIS, which promises them money, security, and a chance to gain eternity in paradise by becoming a suicide bomber. In this way, the victims come full circle, becoming perpetrators of violence themselves, seeking revenge for the injustices that left them in an impossible situation. These incidents, as documented by the Iraqi Interior Ministry, are increasing at an alarming rate.

Every day more women become victims of violence committed by ISIS. We must realize the grave situation of these victims and take all possible actions to protect and preserve these women's human rights. Unfortunately, the actual number of victims remains unknown because many rapes go unreported as the victim fears for her life should her family find out.

An international body of Middle Eastern countries needs to be formed to combat this problem and help victims of rape or *jihad al-nikah* (sexual jihad). The United Nations should support this proposal by passing a resolution ensuring peace and security for these women and creating a special legislative body to concentrate on this situation in countries across the Middle East.





Yasmine ElSayed Hani, former Visiting Arab Journalist, Woodrow Wilson Center, and World Editor, AlAkhbar daily newspaper, Cairo

Sitting at my desk, following the wire news on developments in Iraq and other hot spots in the world, is my daily task. As a journalist, the complicated situation in Iraq could still be understood and analyzed. “Da’esh” (ISIS) is, however, our daily puzzle. Having publicly opposed the leadership of Al-Qaeda, “Da’esh” has risen above the level of one of the most known terrorist organizations in the world.

The mass killings and deportations, especially of minorities, in northern Iraq are said to affect women more than others because they are typically the most vulnerable members of society. Such brutality was reflected in three photos wired about this. Three females of different generations, among the displaced Yazidi community, revealed the whole story of suffering that has transcended the present, the past, and the future.

The first photo was of an old woman sitting on a donkey with one hand on the animal’s body and the other protecting a young boy, likely her grandchild. The woman, almost in her 60s, was looking to the sands of the desert, heartbroken. As the donkey was advancing in the desert, she was getting farther from her past life, leaving behind her memories and the place where she lived most of her life and raised her family. She was looking to the past as she was forced to move unfairly to the future.

The second photo was of a mother holding her child, only two years old, and sitting down in the sand and resting from the long way she had walked with dozens of others in the desert. The mother was crying as she held her sleeping baby and an empty feeding bottle. Her tears were perhaps reflecting her grievous present. She seemed to be thinking of nothing more than her baby and her dream of finding safety as soon as possible.

The third photo was of a young girl, maybe six years old, walking along with her family members of different generations. Dressed warmly though the air was hot, the girl was holding a big bottle of water with one hand and a bag that seemed heavy with the other. Her walk appeared to be difficult as her legs were digging into the sand. She was looking ahead and not down toward the sand; perhaps all she was thinking about was the end of that journey, when she would put down the heavy things she was carrying and return to play again with other children. Not knowing what was going on, she might have thought the future would be better.

These photos represent the suffering that may not be reflected in the news. The old woman was looking at her past with heartbreak. The mother was scared for her present situation and crying for her baby, while the young girl was waiting for the future to come to her rescue. I feel ashamed that this is happening in our modern world, not to mention that it is happening falsely under the name of Islam. The three females in the photos are but a small percentage of those who suffer as you read these lines.





Kendra Heideman, *program associate, Middle East Program, Woodrow Wilson Center*

Violence against women throughout the world is so pervasive that it is often not perceived as news. When violence is carried out in such an extreme and systematic way, however, as has been the case with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in recent months, people take notice.

ISIS—the Sunni jihadist Al-Qaeda offshoot—is accumulating territory, arms, and troops across Syria and Iraq in an effort to establish an Islamic caliphate. In the process, the group has been responsible for committing a number of egregious acts that target minorities and women in particular. ISIS has expelled and murdered religious and ethnic minorities, kidnapped hundreds of women and forced (or sold) them into slavery or marriage, and stoned women accused of adultery, among other shocking exploits.

Although ISIS claims it is not forcing female genital mutilation on Iraqi women and girls, [as some reports initially indicated](#), the organization is forcing other restrictions on women according to the group’s narrow interpretation of shari’a law. ISIS uses its all-female [al-Khansaa Brigade](#) to enforce veiling and other shari’a-influenced practices on women in conquered areas.

Despite their known anti-woman ideology, ISIS has managed to recruit women to join their cause. And it is not just these female brigade members who are supporting ISIS; other women from the region and abroad are signing up at so-called [“marriage bureaus”](#) to marry jihadist fighters. These women may join the ISIS movement for the same reasons that individuals join any movement—for a sense of security, purpose, community, or religion; for financial motives; or perhaps for the sake of adventure or lack of other options—although it is difficult to know definitively.

Organizations, with noble or ignoble purposes alike, often use women in recruiting efforts as a way to normalize and legitimize their behavior. With women participating in and condoning ISIS’s actions, the group may appear less threatening or destructive to some, which only increases their ability to be threatening and destructive throughout the region.



Moushira Khattab, *Chair of Women in Foreign Policy Group, Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs; former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center; former Minister of Family and Population, Egypt; and former Egyptian Ambassador to South Africa and to the Czech and Slovak Republics*

ISIS is one of many spinoffs of the same political faction that uses Islam to achieve its political objectives. They are no different from the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafist groups, the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, or Boko Haram to mention but a few.

In their quest for power, these groups use women as a distraction to disguise their lack of vision or strategy that would offer their constituency freedom or welfare. In the absence of a political or socio-economic platform, they exploit people’s deep-rooted piety and thrive on the illiteracy

and marginalization of a good segment of their followers. ISIS is following in the footsteps of the Salafists whose leader Yasser Burhami defended marriage for girls as young as six years old, the Taliban who shot Malala Yousafzai to stop her advocacy for girls' education, and Boko Haram who kidnapped hundreds of schoolgirls as the world watched indifferently. They also follow in the footsteps of the Muslim Brotherhood whose presidential candidate Mohamed Morsi lured Egyptian supporters not only with free cooking oil and rice, but also more generously with free female genital mutilation, getting away with a practice that is criminalized by law.

These groups continue to stir up controversy across the world with their sinister novelties. As long as governments continue to relinquish their responsibility to protect citizens from such human rights violations, these atrocities will continue and more victims will suffer.

Most crimes against women go unpunished and never make it to the justice system. There are always those who are ready with fictitious religious justifications to defend these heinous crimes. We should not fall into the trap of isolating each case. These crimes are all part of a master plan to degrade and demean women. What the protagonists of these policies do not realize is that women are an integral part of society and that their fall will ultimately lead to the demise of their society as a whole. Humanity must ensure that such groups will never be able to find followers and that this is the only weapon that will make it wither away.

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Fatima Sbaity Kassem, *former Director, UN-ESCWA Centre for Women; and author, researcher, and consultant on women and gender issues in Arab countries, Lebanon*

As Albert Einstein once wrote, "The world will not be destroyed by those who do evil, but by those who watch them without doing anything."

With little interference, ISIS has evicted minorities from their homes – the Christians of Mosul, the Yazidis of Iraq, and others in Syria – all in the name of Islam. Yet, Islam is innocent of these atrocities committed in its name!

ISIS seems to have forgotten that "there is no compulsion in Islam," but tolerance and "freedom of worship and practice." Unless their Islam differs from that of the Prophet Muhammad!

The differential impact of armed conflict on women, but also on children and the elderly, is well documented. Women bear the brunt of wars, particularly when conflict-bearing religious cleavages emerge and when religion, *per se*, is inimical to women and is at the heart of conflict.

As ISIS curtails women's rights to mobility, health, education, and work, it threatens to roll back much of women's hard-acquired rights *tabula rasa* the progress toward equality achieved over decades of activism.

From a technical standpoint, recent events impact compliance with and implementation of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), UN

Security Council Resolution 1325, the Millennium Development Goals, and 12 critical areas of concern adopted in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action.

Concretely, ISIS is forcing women into traditional, domestic roles. It imposes *hijab*, *niqab*, and *jilbab* on women irrespective of their religious conviction and choice. The group has willed that girls be married even before they reach puberty and is mercilessly flogging and stoning women to death for alleged adultery. ISIS has also trafficked Christian women to comfort jihadists.

Immediate collective action is necessary. National and world leaders, regional and international organizations, civil society, and women's movements should forge alliances with enlightened religious leaders to raise awareness and thwart the rise of ISIS.

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Tara Sonenshine, *Distinguished Fellow, George Washington University and a champion for women; former Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs*

August 19 was World Humanitarian Day – a time to recognize those who face danger and adversity in zones of conflict. The day was designated by the General Assembly to coincide with the anniversary of the 2003 bombing of the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad, Iraq. Ironically, almost a dozen years later, Iraq is back in a state of conflict with aid workers and U.S. forces struggling to protect citizens in harm's way – especially women citizens. ISIS – the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria – has unleashed a reign of terror, forcing many Iraqis to flee their homes and risk their lives on Mt. Sinjar or remain in Mosul and face uncertain consequences.

Often during conflict, women are disproportionately affected, particularly in the Middle East. In the case of ISIS, many of the women fleeing to the mountains are Yazidi women whose only crime is their faith. While their husbands are left behind to face the wrath of extremist militant ISIS forces, these women struggle to meet basic needs for food, water, and health care along with fear and terror.

If ISIS is allowed to remain in control of swaths of Iraqi territory, women will contend with discrimination and degradation by a form of Islam that leaves little respect for females.

This situation has led to yet another refugee crisis in a world where 50 million people – more than any time since WWII – are displaced or seeking asylum or living in temporary shelters. Life as a refugee is dismal with lack of health care and sanitation and shortages of clean water. In some cases, rape becomes a weapon of war disproportionately impacting women and girls in Syria and Iraq as well as the discrimination and absence of education.

In the case of Iraq, there is another sad irony. Many Iraqi women watched their husbands and sons disappear during wartime beginning in 2003 and continuing for many years. The Iraqi widows now face new threats from ISIS and a crumbling political situation in the country.

Let's rally support for the women and girls of Iraq and Syria and ensure their protection.

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The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.

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