

# Sunni Iraqi Women After the ‘Caliphate’: Why Have They Been Ignored?

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**Abstract:** As of March 2019, ISIS lost control of all of the territories it had once occupied. While most of the discussion concerning women in ISIS has focused on whether foreign female fighters who fled ISIS’s last strongholds, Baghouz, should be allowed to come home, little has been written on local Sunni Iraqi women’s lives during and after ISIS, who spent years living under the Islamic State’s self-declared caliphate. As these women are both Muslims and Sunni, many believe that they collaborated with ISIS to repress local people. As a result, they are even less likely to have access to any resources when they end up living in refugee camps. Consequently, this situation raises the issue of why Iraqi Sunni women who have not embraced ISIS’s ideology have been overlooked by scholars and international media. This paper argues that this situation has arisen because these Iraqi Sunni women who have lived under ISIS-controlled territories are consigned to being labeled as either suspected ISIS members by local authorities or infidels by ISIS (i.e. guilty of apostasy, *takfirism*). Therefore, in order not to relegate these women’s current issues, it is imperative to gain a better grasp of how these women can be provided with enough resources so as to help them reintegrate into society as their lives are severely affected after all the atrocities they have endured.

**Keywords:** Iraqi Sunni women, ISIS, Takfirism, jihad, violence against women, gender-based violence.

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## Introduction

Much has been written about the rise and expansion of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), hereafter referred to as ISIS. However, as of 2019, the battle between international and local actors with ISIS has tended to result in ground-based warfare. The US-led Global coalition forces against ISIS, including Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Australia, France, the Netherlands, the UK, and Iranian and Turkish forces, have supported Iraqi and Kurdish troops in fighting against ISIS since 2014. However, the war against ISIS has had serious consequences for local people. According to a report published by Human Rights Watch in 2018, the fighting against ISIS has displaced at least 3.2 million Iraqis, over 1 million of whom have fled to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRG)<sup>1</sup>. Since the rise and

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1 Human Rights Watch, “Iraq: Events of 2017,” 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/iraq>.

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expansion of the so-called Islamic Caliphate, the brutal treatment of women living there has captured the attention of the international media, alongside the women and the girls who have decided to travel to Syria to join ISIS. This paper, however, argues that what these Iraqi Sunni women have been through under ISIS and in post-conflict situations has remained largely ignored by scholars.

ISIS's extremist interpretation of Islam has allowed its fighters to justify their attacks and atrocities against its 'enemies.' Despite the fact that the Arabic word *jihad* does not necessarily imply or justify violence, ISIS fighters have employed the concept "as an ideology, instrument for recruitment, the legitimization of extreme violence, and criteria for the selection of targets."<sup>2</sup> ISIS is already notorious for its barbarity and brutal treatment of women living within its territories. Iraqi Sunni women have been one of the communities whose lives have been severely affected by ISIS as well as in post-conflict contexts. They have not only suffered under ISIS-controlled territories but also in IDP camps or in the construction sites where some are currently living. Further, the literature and mainstream media have paid great attention to those who have willingly perpetrated ISIS's brutal attacks, following self-appointed leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's call for all Muslims around the world to travel to Syria to live under the Islamic Caliphate. While much attention has been paid to these women, we do not know much about the Iraqi Sunni women who have not embraced ISIS's call to action and consequently suffered serious violence and abuse under ISIS. This article argues that scholars and the mainstream media have failed to pay enough attention to ISIS's use of *jihad* and *takfir* against other Sunni Muslims. Indeed, this is because ISIS personnel are exclusively radical Sunni Muslims and these Sunnis who live within its territories are often accused by local authorities of being ISIS members and/or supporting them. As a consequence, they are largely ignored by scholars and the media.

The first section of this paper is informed by a gendered perspective towards the use of violence against these women so as to frame the research question and its broader significance in terms of the wider literature. This allows us to analyze how feminist researchers deal with women who have experienced violence with the critical discourses that have emerged from the feminist literature. The second section of this paper considers ISIS's use of *jihad* and *takfir* against other Muslims, which enables the group to legitimize their attacks against Sunni Iraqi women. This section also describes these women's lives under ISIS. The third section highlights aspects of these women's lives after they fled. Both sections also include a number of interviews conducted by the author over Skype with two Iraqi Sunni women, who live in construction sites in Iraq after they fled ISIS-controlled territories. The paper also includes two interviews with managers from a local humanitarian organization tasked with helping these Sunni Iraqis to reintegrate into

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2 Theo Brinkel and Soumia Ait-Hida, "Boko Haram and jihad in Nigeria," *Scientia Militaria South African Journal of Military Studies* 40, no.2 (2012):5, <https://doi.org/10.5787/40-2-994>.

society. These were included in the study to illustrate a wider perspective on the lived experiences of these women as these managers have had access to many women. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, their names have been withheld. It is important to note that the researcher acted in compliance with the University of Portsmouth's Ethics Guidelines that include confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent. Before talking to the women and the managers, the researcher ensured they understood their right to refuse to participate, withdraw at any time without reason, and received all the information about this research because the primary consideration is the dignity, rights, and safety of the participants, alongside the confidentiality and security of their personal data. After reading through all the materials, they all agreed to take part in the research via Skype. The fourth section concludes that given the accounts of these women and ISIS' and local authorities' treatment of these Sunni women, it is clear that they are desperately in need of support from international humanitarian organizations and local authorities, despite the fact that their ethnicity as Sunni Muslims prevents them from receiving such support. What we are witnessing is a serious violation of these women's basic human rights, whose lives are severely affected by ISIS while the world discusses what to do with female members of ISIS.

## **Gendering Violence:**

### ***Victimhood and Survivorship***

In discussing the violence against women, it is important to evaluate how the current literature deals with the description of women who have experienced violence. The notion that specific social problems produce victims and victimization only began to be recognized in the 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>3</sup> Women, students, black people, and homosexual people started to challenge existing social hierarchies by highlighting the specific social arrangements that serve to single out particular groups of people as victims. Kelly states that the term 'victim' refers to someone "who has been killed or destroyed or who has suffered a loss."<sup>4</sup> Given the increased interest in women's rights, talking or writing about victims has been an effective way of raising awareness of women's basic rights. Indeed, this is perhaps the reason that 'voice' has been one of the most important metaphors of the second-wave women's movement.<sup>5</sup> According to Lamb, women's personal experiences receive special interest and evoke a "feeling of truth or authenticity."<sup>6</sup> Constructing women as victims, however, encourages others to label women as passive and lacking self-autonomy, which further erodes their ability to gain control over their own lives.<sup>7</sup> In

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3 Joel Best, "Victimisation and the Victim Industry," *Society* 34, no.9 (1997): 9.

4 Liz Kelly, *Surviving Sexual Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 163.

5 Sharon Lamb, "Constructing the Victims: Popular Images and Lasting Labels," in *New Version of Victims: Feminist Struggle with the Concept*, ed. Sharon Lamb (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 127.

6 Lamb, "Constructing the Victims," 128.

7 Best, "Victimisation," 9.

effect, the discourse suggests that whatever harmful events women experience are beyond their control.

Ronsbo and Jensen, in their chapter ‘Histories of Victimhood: Assemblages, Transactions, and Figures’, suggest that there is a need to distinguish between victims and victimhood. While the construction of victims implies experiential suffering, victimhood is a political construction.<sup>8</sup> They suggest that whatever we see in politics, it is almost always linked to the notion of ‘the victim.’<sup>9</sup> They claim that activists, movement leaders, academics, and those who speak on behalf of victims, transform the notion of victims in ways that increase their appeal and influence in the politics and transformations of victimhood. Such that, they suggest focusing on victims in their non-essentialised and ever-changing form, rather than adopting the notion of victimhood in which suffering is entextualised and acted upon.<sup>10</sup>

The transition from victimhood to survivorhood acquired significance in the early 1980s when victim-advocates and professionals contributed to a “therapeutic framing of victimization in which victims are assumed to need to ‘move on’.”<sup>11</sup> This was a decade of significant change for the representations of survivors and their personal stories. Unlike ‘victims,’ the notion of ‘survivors’ focuses on a group’s positive qualities and imparts to them a notion of strength in the sense that victimized women are seen to be proactively making their own autonomous choices and then taking positive actions to improve their lives. In her chapter “Victims or Survivors?: Resistance, Coping and Survival,” Kelly states that without considering women’s victimisation in terms of “the active and positive ways in which women resist, cope and” survive, women are more likely to be presented as “inherently vulnerable to victimisation and inevitable passive victims”.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the discourse about whether abused women should be labeled as victims or survivors, Dunn claims in her article that neither the image of ‘passive victims,’ nor the ‘active survivor’ is sufficient to accurately describe the multifaceted nature of women’s experiences because all these images are simply reductive typifications.<sup>13</sup> As Christie suggests, being a victim is an intangible quality, not an objective, measurable phenomenon and not all those who experience the same externally described events experience them in exactly the same ways; rather, “*It has to do with the participants[sic] definition of the situation*” (emphasis in original)<sup>14</sup>. Casting anyone as a victim or a

8 Steffen Jensen and Henrik Ronsbo, “Introduction. Histories of Victimhood: Assemblages, Transactions, and Figures,” in *Histories of Victimhood*, ed. Steffen Jensen and Henrik Ronsbo (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 1.

9 Jensen and Ronsbo, “Introduction,” 3.

10 Jensen and Ronsbo, “Introduction,” 17.

11 Jennifer L. Dunn, “Victims” and “Survivors”: Emerging Vocabularies of Motive for “Battered Women Who Stay,” *Sociological Inquiry* 75, no.1 (2005): 15.

12 Kelly, *Surviving*, 163.

13 Dunn, “Victims,” 24.

14 Nils Christie, “The Ideal Victim,” in *From Crime Policy to Victim Policy*, ed. Ezzat A. Fattah (London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1986), 18.

survivor makes it impossible to understand the complexities of individual's own unique lived experience, and, in the present context, this means understanding these women's individual perspectives on the abuse they have suffered.

### ***Reconceptualizing Violence***

Feminist research shares a common assumption: that women's lives are important.<sup>15</sup> Epistemologically, women's experiences, therefore, represent a key concept for feminist research because "making women's experiences visible allows us to see how gender relations have contributed to the way in which the field of international relations is constructed" and it also provides important insights into many contemporary global problems.<sup>16</sup> The present study seeks to build on these discussions and draws on feminist security-studies literature to develop coherent theoretical frameworks for the analysis of women's personal experiences under ISIS' rule. As such, violence experienced by Sunni Iraqi women can be properly understood from their unique points of view because it allows them to narrate their experiences of the violence they have suffered on their own terms and it may also reveal structural inequalities that may have contributed to women's difficulties in dealing with the violence they have endured in current and post-conflict situations. Therefore, feminist research in political science often employs this methodology; investigating women's own narratives of their experiences by using in-depth interviews, ethnographic work, and life stories<sup>17</sup>.

Moving beyond the narrow focus on the notion that violence is state-dominated, both males and females also experience multiple types of physical and mental violence. A growing body of literature has adopted a range of different approaches to investigate international peace and security and this has led some researchers to take different types of violence into consideration. Specifically, a number of feminist-security scholars have sought to unravel the connections between different levels and types of violence and understand the cultures of violence and rape perpetrated by both state actors and non-state actors.<sup>18</sup>

By the 1970s, feminists had asserted that the sex roles attributed to men and women are highly entrenched and that challenging this complex system of stereotyping (which is supported by a whole range of social institutions and practices) is no easy task. This led to feminist scholars becoming less concerned with gender traits and instead, they

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15 Ann Tickner, "What Is Your Research Program? Some Feminist Answers to International Relations Methodological Questions," *International Studies Quarterly* 49, no.1 (2005): 7; Jan Jindy Pettman, *Worlding Women: A Feminist International Politics* (US: Routledge, 1996), 105.

16 Ann Tickner, *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspective on Achieving Global Security* (US: Columbia University Press, 1992), XI ; Jill Steans, *Gender and International Relations: An Introduction* (UK: Polity Press, 1998), 4.

17 Ariadne Vromen, "Debating Methods: Rediscovering Qualitative Approaches," in *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, eds. David Marsh and Gerry Stoker, 3<sup>rd</sup>. Edition (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 252.

18 Pettman, *Worlding*, 106.

started to focus on power relations.<sup>19</sup> Most feminists point to the gendered structural inequalities that manifest themselves across societies and history. For example, some women were excluded from liberal subjectivity because they were assumed to lack the necessary reason and judgment and their bodies were marked as ‘other,’ based on their class, race, and gender (Wilcox, 2015, p.22).<sup>20</sup> In Wilcox’s words, gender is “the source of unequal power relations between men and women and replaces sex with related accounts of socialization and power that impose meanings on the bodies of men and women.”<sup>21</sup>

People-centered approaches are, therefore, able to highlight the gender hierarchies and inequalities that constitute a major source of domination over – and barriers to – the achievement of genuine security.<sup>22</sup> Taking women’s experiences seriously requires rethinking the strain of IR that contextualizes masculinities and femininities as hierarchical power relations. These relations have been associated with discourses of race, nationalism, colonialism, sexuality and class.<sup>23</sup> Such that, feminist international relations scholars sought to make sense of these gendered structures and worked to “denaturalise and dismantle them.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, exploring how adopting a feminist-security perspective helps us think through the relationships between gender identities and power is important. This perspective also helps us to comprehend the ways in which violence is gendered and how violence creates gendered structural inequalities. The next section addresses the ways in which the gender-based violence enacted against Sunni women under ISIS’ rule was justified.

### Treatment of Sunni Iraqis under ISIS

In order to comprehend how Sunni Muslims have been treated, there is a need to better understand ISIS’ position on *jihad* and *takfir*. The concept of *jihad* is important because ISIS believes that they can sweep away everything deemed ‘un-Islamic’ through *jihad*. *Takfirism* is a concept linked to *jihad*. According to ISIS, *takfir* against a specific person or organization is permitted by Sharia law. With regards to describing ISIS as a ‘jihadist group,’ it is important to point out that framing them as a jihadist group would provide them with a sense of legitimacy and offer support to and approval of their atrocities. Applying Bin Ali’s work, the use of the term *jihad* is inaccurate because it does not reflect the characteristics of authentic *jihad* as illustrated in Islamic history.<sup>25</sup> Bin Ali argues that

19 Steans, *Gender*, 12.

20 Lauren B. Wilcox, *Bodies of Violence: Theorising Embodied Subjects in International Relations* (US: Oxford University Press, 2015), 22.

21 Wilcox, *Bodies*, 22.

22 Steans, *Gender*, 126.

23 Wilcox, *Bodies*, 37.

24 Ann Tickner, “You Just Do Not Understand: Troubled Engagements Between Feminists and IR Theorists,” *International Studies Quarterly* 41, no.4 (1997): 624.

25 Mohamed Bin Ali, “Labelling IS Fighters: Khawarij, not Jihadi\_Salafis,” *Nanyang Technological University, Singapore*, April 4, 2018, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/CO18063.pdf>.



a more accurate term is probably *khawarij*, which refers to a group of Muslims in the early days of Islam. They were initially followers of the fourth caliph, Ali bin Abi Talib, but the group later went against Ali, excommunicated him, and killed him as they believed that he did not rule according to Allah's laws. They are, therefore, believed to be the first Muslim group that practiced the ex-communication of believers (*takfir*). Hence, in this article, ISIS will not be referred to as a jihadist group. Nonetheless, there is a need to briefly highlight how they utilized the concept of *jihad* to justify their attacks and strategies. The next section will discuss these two important concepts from two different perspectives; those of mainstream Muslim scholars and ISIS.

### ***The Concept of Jihad***

The doctrine of *jihad* is found in the Qur'an and regularly resurfaces in the Muslim world.<sup>26</sup> *Jihad* means making an effort or endeavoring to accomplish a task. Qazi defines *jihad* as a struggle to attain God's pleasure.<sup>27</sup> There are two kinds of *jihad*: *al-jihad al-asghar* (the lesser *jihad*) and *al-jihad al-akbar* (the greater *jihad*). The greater of these involves fighting against one's own *nafs* (the evil-commanding self) and the lesser involves an effort to improve one's Islamic community and transform it for the benefit of all as far as possible.

ISIS fighters claim that *jihad* is an essential vehicle by which religion is defended and maintained.<sup>28</sup> For ISIS, all Muslims are responsible for *jihad*, referred to as *fardh al-ayn* (individual obligation), and, if any part of the Muslim world is threatened, they have an obligation to defend it.<sup>29</sup> According to Anwar al-Awlaki (a member of Al-Qaeda, killed by the US in 2011), *jihad* must be practiced by a child even if their parents refuse, and by a wife even if her husband objects.<sup>30</sup> Under such situations, as Abdullah Azzam, a cornerstone of the contemporary radical group outlines, waging *jihad* against unbelievers is incumbent upon all Muslims as one of the five pillars of the Islamic faith.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the Egyptian Salam Faraj, conceptualized *jihad* as the 'absent obligation', the sixth pillar of Islam, which is not defined in the Qur'an.<sup>32</sup>

The ideas and support of various theologians, who form the core of modern radical ideology, enable groups such as ISIS to justify their actions and help them recruit activists

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26 Oliver Roy, *Jihad and Death: The Global Appeal of Islamic State* (London: C.Hurst & Co., 2017), 1.

27 Farhana Qazi, "The Mujahidaat: Tracing the Early Female Warriors of Islam," in *Women, Gender and Terrorism*, eds. Laura Sjoberg, and Caron E. Gentry (London: the University of Georgia Press, 2009), 14.

28 Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of An Idea* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2016),16.

29 George Joffe, "Global Jihad and Foreign Fighters," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no.5 (2016):801; Nelly Lahoud, 2014, "The neglected sex: The Jihadis' Exclusion of Women from Jihad," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no.5 (2014):781.

30 Roy, *Jihad and Death*, 13.

31 Quintan Wiktorowicz, "The New Global Threat: Transnational Salafis and Jihad," *Middle East Policy* VIII, no.4 (2001):23, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2001.tb00006.x>

32 Roy, *Jihad and Death*,13.

from around the world.<sup>33</sup> Byman goes on to report that the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya and Sayyid Qutb guide these radical groups as they decide whom and what to target.<sup>34</sup> Qutb, for instance, declared in his short book, *Milestones*, that because of the repressive effects of democracy, communism, and various other non-Islamic influences, *ummah* (Islamic community) is nearly extinct.<sup>35</sup> Even in medieval times, radical scholars such as ibn Abd al-karim al Maghili in West Africa discussed *jihad* and viewed it as “the means for opposing unjust rulers, even if violence resulted in killing Muslims.”<sup>36</sup>

Given that they have the support of their own theologians, this paper is guided by the ISIS’ position on *jihad* and *takfir* in order to illuminate how Sunni Iraqis were treated.

### ***ISIS’ Position on Takfirism***

ISIS has been criticized by many mainstream Islamic scholars and even many so-called ISIS scholars for its misinterpretations and misrepresentations of Islamic doctrines.<sup>37</sup> While taking into account the concepts of *jihad*, *hijrah* (migration) to the ‘Caliphate’ and the treatment of non-Muslims and Muslims, this section deals with the issue of *takfir*. It is divided into two parts; the first provides an overview of mainstream Sunni Islam understanding of *takfir* while the second highlights *takfir*’s interpretation by ISIS. *Takfir* is a “theological declaration that a Muslim has become an apostate or a person is an infidel or an act or idea constitutes” disbelief in Islam.<sup>38</sup> It pronounces an action or individual as un-Islamic.<sup>39</sup> Within this line of logic, all non-practicing Muslims are considered to be *kafirs* (infidels, unbelievers).<sup>40</sup> According to Hegghammer and Ali, takfirism is a declaration of a nominal Muslim as an infidel or an apostate who is regarded as having abandoned the core tenets of the faith, in accordance with God’s law (*hakimmiyya*).<sup>41</sup> Declaring someone an apostate or disbeliever is a serious matter in Islam and requires clear and indisputable evidence.<sup>42</sup> Given the way ISIS employs the concept, a range of scholarly legal literature

33 Daniel Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 76.

34 Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State*, 76.

35 Mark Stout, “In Search of Salafi Jihadist Strategic Thought: Mining the Words of the Terrorist” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32, no. 10 (2009): 878.

36 John O. Voll, “Boko Haram: Religion and Violence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” *Religions* 6 no. 4 (2015): 1187, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel6041182>.

37 Muhammad Haniff Hassan and Mustazah Bahari, “An Analysis of Muslim Voices Against IS,” October 1, 2014, <https://counterideology2.wordpress.com/2014/10/01/3086/>.

38 Muhammad Haniff Hassan, “The Danger of Takfir (Excommunication): Exposing IS’ Takfiri Ideology,” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 9, no. 4 (2017): 3.

39 Freedom C. Onuoha, “Boko Haram’s Recruitment and Radicalisation Methods in Nigeria: An Expose,” *South East Journal of Political Science* 2, no. 1 (n.d.): 185.

40 Syed Saleem Shahzad, “Takfirism: A Messianic Ideology,” *Le Monde Diplomatique*, July, 2007, <http://mondediplo.com/2007/07/03takfirism>; Onuoha, “Boko Haram’s Recruitment,” 185.

41 Thomas Hegghammer, “Jihadi-Salafis or revolutionaries? On Religion and Politics in the Study of Militant Islamism,” in *Global Salafism: Islam’s New Religious Movement*, ed. Royal Meijer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 247; Mah-Rukh Ali, “ISIS and Propaganda: How ISIS Exploits Women,” 2015, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/research/files/Isis%2520and.%2520Propaganda-%2520How%2520Isis%2520Exploits%2520Women.pdf>, 4.

42 Abdul Rahman b. Mualaa Al-Luwaihiq Al-Mutari, *Religious Extremism in the Life of Contemporary*



has investigated a range of perspectives on ISIS' doctrine of *takfir*, including the Amman Message and the Mardin declaration developed by mainstream Muslim scholars to prevent *takfir* from serving as a pretext for revolt and sustaining *fitna* (violent discord) in the Muslim community.<sup>43</sup>

Secondly, ISIS' application of *takfir* is not only criticized by prominent mainstream Muslim scholars, but also by radical Islamist groups such as the leaders of Al-Qaeda. Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarwaqi, the forerunner of ISIS, accused ISIS of using *takfir* to justify the indiscriminate killing of Iraqi civilians.<sup>44</sup> Its own theologian, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi criticize ISIS on the grounds that ISIS misunderstands how to show people the light and misapplies the concept of *takfir*.<sup>45</sup> The concept, he argues, is now misused to delegitimize those who do not adhere to ISIS' perspective on Islam and mobilize and rally against the *kuffar* (infidels).<sup>46</sup> Therefore, the concept of *takfir* has become an essential feature of contemporary radical ISIS fighters' philosophy because *takfir* has become a means of expelling those from the faith who are deemed to be subverting it from within.<sup>47</sup> Wiktorowicz also states that *takfir* represents a "flexible weapon to use against an assortment of individuals, institutions and regimes deemed un-Islamic by the ISIS".<sup>48</sup> *Tawhid wal Jihad*, a web portal associated with Abu Muhammad al Maqdisi, the intellectual father of ISIS, also reveals the principal arguments for the justification of violence in the Muslim world.<sup>49</sup> Such that, for ISIS, the use of *takfir* has become an ideological justification for attacking other Muslims.

### ***Sunni Iraqi Women under ISIS***

ISIS has received considerable attention for its barbarity against the women in its territories. In 2014, the ISIS' treatment of members of the Yazidi community proved how brutal the group was against those who do not embrace their ideology and interpretation of Islam. However, the Yazidi community has not been the only community to have been subjected to systematic violence; ISIS' barbarity has also targeted other smaller ethnic groups and non-Sunni religious sects including Christians, Shiites, Shabaks Kurds, and Alawites.<sup>50</sup> The Sunni population has also been subjected to ISIS' violence within ISIS-held territories.<sup>51</sup> This includes shooting at innocent civilians trying to flee the al-Shifa

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*Muslims*, trans. Jamal Al-Din M. Zarabozo (Denver: Al-Basheer Publications, 2001), 262-3.

43 Hassan, "The Danger of Takfir," 10; Roy, *Jihad and Death*, 12.

44 Hassan, "The Danger of Takfir," 6.

45 Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*, 208.

46 Bader Al-Ibrahim, "ISIS, Wahhabism and Takfir," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 8, no.3 (2015):412.

47 Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism*, 71.

48 Wiktorowicz, "The New Global Threat," 27.

49 Mohammed M. Hafez, "The Alchemy of Martyrdom: Jihadi Salafism and Debates Over Suicide Bombings in the Muslim World," *Asian Journal of Social Sciences* 38, no.3 (2010):366.

50 W. Andrew Terrill, "Understanding the Strengths and Vulnerabilities of ISIS," *Parameters* 44, no.3 (Autumn 2014): 20.

51 Counter Extremism Project, "ISIS's Persecution of Religions," May, 2017, [https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/ISIS%27s%20Persecution%20of%20Religions\\_053017.pdf](https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/ISIS%27s%20Persecution%20of%20Religions_053017.pdf).

neighborhood in western Mosul in 2017, according to the United Nations Human Rights Office.<sup>52</sup> There is no information about the total number of people who lost their lives while fleeing since ISIS seized territories in Iraq and Syria.

The Human Rights Watch also documented that ISIS fighters are “arbitrarily detaining, ill-treating, torturing, and forcibly marrying Sunni Arab women and girls” in areas under its control.<sup>53</sup> Even though such gender-based violence against Sunni Iraqi women committed by ISIS has been documented before, these cases represent the first ones the Human Rights Watch has been able to document in the region in 2017. Since then, this has been the only document published regarding the violence committed against Sunni Iraqi women under ISIS. International media and Western governments have also been overly focused on women as perpetrators in the form of ISIS women. Therefore, it is essential to bring Sunni Iraqi women’s voices to the fore as non-ISIS Sunnis. Such that, their stories and experiences can be properly understood in post-conflict situations. The next section details the primary data gathered.

A 26 year-old Sunni woman interviewed in July 2018 by the author said that before ISIS, they were working as farmers, however, when ISIS came, the fighters confiscated everything from them, even their animals. Later on, they destroyed their home as punishment and killed her father and her brother. In this attack, she also lost one of her eyes. She also showed the author a picture of herself after the attack. During the interview, even though she was interviewed indoors she wore sunglasses and it was clear that she did not want others to see how her face looks because of the violence she suffered. When asked about her life under ISIS, she recounted the extreme brutality they suffered under ISIS. ISIS members would “beat people and attack the houses,” she said. Even though she is a Muslim woman wearing a hijab, ISIS forced her to wear a full-face veil called a *niqab*, revealing just the eyes. She recounted one of her household chores; baking over a wood-fired oven was very difficult while wearing a full-face *niqab*. However, because she needed to seek treatment for her eyes, ISIS allowed her to go to a hospital and this is how she managed to flee ISIS-territories.

Another woman, a 52-year old widow with five children, stated that a female ISIS member, also one of her relatives, forced her to marry an ISIS fighter because she was a widow and needed treatment for her children who had chronic illnesses. While she was recounting her story of escape from the area under ISIS, her eyes filled with tears. She said that “I did not think of myself, but my children. Even though I wanted to commit suicide”. The efforts these women made to escape shows how desperate they were. It is

52 United Nations Human Rights, “Mosul: UN Receives Reports of Mass Killings of Fleeing Civilians by ISIL,” June 8, 2017, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21701&LangID=E>.

53 Human Rights Watch, “Iraq: Sunni Women Tell of ISIS Detention, Torture: Describe Forced Marriage, Rape,” February 20, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/20/iraq-sunni-women-tell-isis-detention-torture>.

unimaginable that under such a brutal and influential radical group, she managed to flee carrying her sick daughter on her back, even though she were stopped on her way by ISIS and questioned.

### **Lives of Sunni Iraqi Women after ISIS**

The challenges these women have faced also manifested themselves after they fled ISIS' influence. Those living in refugee camps in northern Iraq were already worried that they could never go home, citing fears of violent retribution by the militias or the neighbors that the so-called Islamic State had displaced, according to an article in the *Washington Post*.<sup>54</sup> The reason for this desire for retribution is that these women are the subjects of hatred by Iraqi society who accuse them of being 'ISIS families.' In May 2019, Iraqi officials also stated that they intended to create a new detention camp for those who were captured from the last stronghold, Baghouz, liberated by the Kurdish forces. Humanitarian groups have raised concerns that moving all the detainees to a single massive facility could lead to them becoming radicalized and prevent them from reintegrating into Iraqi society.<sup>55</sup> The accounts of a number of women also reflect the conditions of the camps in the region. Two of the women stated that their daughters have been subjected to sexual violence by militiamen and camp guards as if committing sexual violence is legitimate when the victims are believed to be members of ISIS families.<sup>56</sup>

Several local and international humanitarian organizations are providing support to those affected by ISIS' brutality. One of them is the National Institute for Human Rights, a local humanitarian organization in Kirkuk. The author interviewed its communication officer and the chairman of the administrative board. When asked about their work in the center, they stated that since 2014, they have been working with Sunni Iraqis and Turkmens to relieve their struggle in the region because the rampant brutality and humiliation to which these people have been subjected. The organization works with Sunnis from Iraq, as most of the Syrian IDPs have fled to the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

The women interviewed reported that although they do not live under ISIS' influence any longer, they remain under pressure and threat. Living at half-completed buildings, suffering from unsanitary conditions and health problems, and trying to provide for their children and for themselves, leave these families in an extremely difficult situation and they are desperately seeking any help they can. Even worse, ISIS still threatens them with immediate execution whenever they find them, as one Sunni Iraqi woman stated in her

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54 Louisa Loveluck and Mustafa Salim, "Iraq is Pushing to Build an Isolation Camp for 30,000 Iraqis Who Lived Under ISIS in Syria," *Washington Post*, May 2, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iraq-is-pushing-to-build-an-isolation-camp-for-30000-iraqis-who-lived-under-isis-in-syria/2019/05/02/f714763a-561b-11e9-aa83-504f086bf5d6\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.f2c2185320d6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iraq-is-pushing-to-build-an-isolation-camp-for-30000-iraqis-who-lived-under-isis-in-syria/2019/05/02/f714763a-561b-11e9-aa83-504f086bf5d6_story.html?utm_term=.f2c2185320d6).

55 Karzan Sulaivany, "Baghdad Plans Detention Camp for 30,000 Iraqis Who Lived under ISIS in Syria," *Kurdistan 24*, May 2, 2019, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/a88920c0-b692-4f82-9e31-8a80eeb1724e>.

56 Sulaivany, "Baghdad Plans Detention Camp."

interview. She recounted one of her relatives who is an ISIS fighter. She said that he called her and told that they would find her and do bad things to her. She is now concerned that ISIS men are around as civilians.

## Conclusion

The so-called Islamic State has attracted significant attention from the media and Western governments due to their brutal treatment of non-Muslims, the punishment of opponents, and transgression of ingrained gender roles via welcoming women into their ranks. With the collapse of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the accounts of humiliation, abuse, rape, and violence have been filtering through as women speak out about their personal experiences which humanitarian organizations then document. While people from all different religious groups in ISIS-controlled territories have been severely affected, little is known about the lives of Iraqi Sunni women who lived under ISIS. Due to their ethnicity, they are believed to be ISIS families by the local authorities after they were captured from the ISIS's final bastion, Baghouz, and taken to IDP camps. Therefore, these refugees are even less likely to receive the support they could need and the attention they deserve from academia and international media.

ISIS's strict position on *jihad* and *takfir*, which are serious matters in Islam, have enabled the group to justify treating non-Muslims and opponents with abject brutality. These women endured extreme violence at the hands of ISIS because they did not abide by ISIS's rules and did not live according to ISIS' strict interpretation of Islam. Given the accounts of the managers and the two women interviewed, it seems important to document the challenges these women are facing in their current lives. Alongside these challenges, attention should also be paid to the question of why Iraqi Sunni women (and men) who did not embrace ISIS' ideology have been largely ignored by academics and the mainstream media. It is important to deal with the issue of how these people's ethnicity is understood in relation to the violence taking place in the region because it influences the way we understand these people and the challenges they face. Given that every woman has different experiences of violence and narrates their own unique experiences in different ways, women's own experiences of gender injustice and the difficulties they face in dealing with such violence should also be taken into account in combatting ISIS and ending the violence against these women.

This situation requires the current Iraqi government and international and local humanitarian organizations to find ways to reassure Iraqi Sunni women (alongside people from other sects) that they will not be victimized because of their sect affiliation following ISIS' rule. Based on the needs of the communities, providing psychological support and mental health care is challenging but extremely important. During the interviews, it was also clear that by narrating their experiences, the women felt that it was important for their voices to be heard and be able to receive support. As little is known about the level

of violence against Iraqi Sunni women, one of the women stated that she had wanted to participate in the interview because she wished to speak out about what happened to her. It is hoped that this study will enrich the current understanding of the violence perpetrated against these women by ISIS to develop effective strategies to help not only Sunni Iraqis but all communities affected by this brutal, unjustifiable violence and provide them with the opportunities they need to begin to rebuild their lives.



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