

# ISIS' Use of Sexual Violence as a Strategy of Terrorism in Iraq

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## ISIS' Use of Sexual Violence as a Strategy of Terrorism in Iraq

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The sudden advance of the terrorist organisation, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), in 2014 started a violent civil war in Iraq. This conflict led to high instability in the already weakened country, and to this day, nearly two million people remain internally displaced in Iraq (GCT, 2021). The last few decades have been marked by conflict in Iraq with the Gulf War and the US invasion of 2003. This series of conflicts has exposed ethnic minorities and women to higher levels of violence (Dodge et al, 2018 p.18). Since ISIS declared itself as a Caliphate in 2014 and imposed the Sharia law, a widespread rise in human rights abuses has been observed, with a particular focus on sexual violence (Dahham, 2016 p.3). To further its Sunni fundamentalist ideology, ISIS has particularly targeted ethnic and religious minorities, with the characteristic example of the Yazidi community that was particularly devastated by the terrorist organisation (Kaya, 2019 p.10). Sexual violence in conflicts is not a new or unique phenomenon. It is a tactic that has been used for centuries, but the academic literature only started to focus on the issue in the 1990s after the systematic use of sexual violence in the Rwandan genocide (1994), and in the Balkan War (1991-1999) (Skjelsbaek, 2001 p.211). If the definition of sexual violence has evolved throughout time, we will use Wood's definition of sexual violence in conflicts as 'sexual violence by armed organisations during armed conflicts' (Wood, 2014 p.458). It is important to highlight that sexual violence does not only refer to rape. The United Nations' (UN) definition also includes sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, forced sterilisation or any form of sexual violence of comparable gravity (UN General Assembly, 2002 in Dahham 2016, p.5). If these acts are criminalised by international law, the perpetrators are rarely prosecuted for these actions as they are widely underreported and often confounded with more general war crimes (Dahham, 2016 p.5).

This essay will focus on the widespread use of sexual violence in the civil conflict in Iraq, by answering the question of why ISIS used sexual violence as a strategy of terror and destruction in Iraq. This question inscribes itself in a broader academic debate about the impact that sexual violence can have in a conflict, the strategic benefits of using sexual violence for a terrorist group and, finally, on why sexual violence needs to be conceptualised as a strategy of terror and destruction rather than as an isolated act related to the warzone. This essay will argue that sexual violence is strategically used by the terrorist group in a wider strategy of terrorising the population, in order to strengthen its state building strategy by ethnic cleansing of non-Muslim communities. To answer this question, this essay will look at the case study of the Yazidi, a religious community located in the Sinjar. The Yazidi community has been particularly targeted by the use of sexual violence when invaded by ISIS in 2014, and some organisations are now trying to recognise this systematic destruction as a genocide against the Yazidis (Human Rights Council, 2016 p.3). This research will be divided in four parts. We will firstly analyse the literature on sexual violence in conflicts. The second part will address a methodological note about the use of a case study. The third part will discuss the issue of the systematisation of sexual violence in Iraq, from the State to ISIS and will analyse how ISIS mirrored the actions of the Iraqi government regarding the use of sexual violence. Finally, we will focus on the case study of the Yazidis and draw concrete observations on the impact that sexual violence can have when used as a weapon of terror.

### Literature review on sexual violence in conflicts

This first section seeks to analyse the existing literature on the strategies behind the use of sexual violence in conflicts. Skjelbaesk (2001 p.212) argues that the literature is unclear on whether sexual violence is a question of sex

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with violent manifestation or the opposite, violence with sexual manifestation. This field of study is relatively new and there are still many elements related to sexual violence in conflicts to explore. This review will try to fill some gaps by proposing three main explanations to sexual violence in conflicts.

We will first look at the use of sexual violence as a strategy of terror and intimidation. This is particularly linked to terrorist organisations as the use of sexual violence can help a terrorist group to attain one of its five main goals: regime change, territorial change, policy change, social control or status quo maintenance (Kydd & Walter, 2006 p.52). Hardy (2001 p.3) defines an act of sexual violence as a terrorist act when it is used to bring about political objectives and is aimed at a wider audience than the specific victim. Terrorist groups therefore use sexual violence as a means to terrorise and humiliate in order to help them achieve their ideal of creating a new state (Koos 2017 p.1936; Kydd & Walter, 2006 p.52). Sexual violence is an effective strategy of terrorism as 'it erodes the fabric of the community in a way that few weapons can' (UNICEF, 1996 p.1 in Mackenzie, 2010 p.209). If sexual violence is not intuitively perceived as a strategy of terrorism, it is nonetheless advantageous for the groups using it (Hardy, 2001 p.4). Through the known use of sexual brutality, an organisation can be seen as intimidating and have a deterrent effect on the other actors of the conflict that are scared of this reputation (Crawford et al., 2014). If the organisation takes part in human trafficking of sexual slaves it ensures them an increased profit and allow them a more efficient recruitment of new fighters (Paulussen, 2021). Furthermore, the repercussions of sexual violence seem low as sexual-based terrorism is rarely prosecuted, and therefore the likelihood of reprisals or sentencing are extremely rare (Hardy, 2001 p.4). Finally, the use of systematic rape has such a strong impact on not just the women, but on the whole community, that it ensures the terrorist group a tool of domination through the crushing of the society's order (Matusitz, 2017 p.831; Mackenzie, 2010 p.209). The use of sexual violence by terrorist groups appears as a beneficial strategy as it ensures the domination of the population through terror and has a low probability of being prosecuted. However, as Wood (2009 p.134) points out, some terrorist groups do not use sexual violence against civilians and are still successful in attaining their objectives, highlighting that the primary strategic use of sexual violence in a conflict might not be as a weapon of terror.

After the Rwandan genocide and the Balkan War in the 1990s, more scholars have considered that sexual violence could be an important tool in the ethnic cleansing of a population (Wood, 2009 p.132). Farwell (2004 p.395) defines sexual violence as a strategy for 'infiltrating or destroying ethnic boundaries and attacking the honour of the community and the purity of its lineage'. Matusitz (2017 p.835) argues that to erase the identity of a community, rape is an effective strategy as the rape of an individual implies that the whole community becomes a victim of these acts, and that its identity is threatened. By controlling the life-giving capacities of a woman, the perpetrators of these violent acts can easily influence the next generations of a community (Skjelsbaek, 2001 p.219). Multiple strategies have been used for this purpose, such as the deliberate spreading of sexual diseases like HIV in communities (Koos, 2017 p.1937), the creation of rape camps to install a systematisation of forced impregnation of ethnic or religious minorities (Skjelsbaek, 2001 p.220) or the forced sterilisation of women to control the community's birth rate (Dahham, 2016 p.5). Bernard (1994 p.39) adds that sexual violence facilitates ethnic cleansing by inflicting a blow against the collective enemy by striking at a group with a high symbolic value and destroying the community's social order. It also creates an incentive to flee, weakening the community by dislocating it in different places (p.35). Finally, Koos (2017 p.1936) argues that sexual violence is worsened by ethnic and religious cleavages and that in these situations, a rise of brutality can be observed, often linked to an absence of the rule of law. Sexual violence in a context of ethnic cleansing is linked to an increase of gang rapes, of sexual torture and of punishment for being part of a certain community. The literature on sexual violence in the context of ethnic cleansing does not seem to address why the perpetrators of these acts would prefer a certain strategy of sexual violence such as forced impregnation rather than forced sterilisation. A more thorough analysis on the choices of strategies of control over the reproduction of a community would give insight on how to prevent this from happening.

A third argument expressed in the literature is the one of the hyper-masculinisation of conflicts. Matusitz (2017 p.837) argues that, during conflicts, masculinity is closely linked to militarised aggression, and therefore men are under pressure to demonstrate their masculinity by taking part in violence and terrorist acts, including sexual violence. In other words, during a conflict, rape is a sexual manifestation of manhood. Skjelsbaek (2001 p.217) explains that during conflicts, soldiers believe that they have the right to destroy and violate the enemy, and this rage is often focused on women who belong to other men. Ahram (2015 p.58) adds that during a conflict, women become

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sacrosanct, and violating their sanctity emasculates and disempowers the enemy. Sexual violence causes wounded masculinity in times of hyper-masculinisation (Matusitz, 2017 p.837). Ahram (2015, p.58) also mentions sexual violence against men, a subject less discussed in the literature, as the ultimate act of de-masculinisation. Crawford et al. (2014) argue that war rape is largely associated with the group's internal practices rather than strategic imperatives. Koos (2017 p.1940) illustrates this idea by explaining that collective rape can be used as a cohesion technique between soldiers by creating a bond between perpetrators. Rape can be a ritual of initiation or a symbol of allegiance to the cause (Matusitz, 2017 p.839). Card (1996 p.7) adds that, for instance, forcing a soldier to rape a neighbour, can be used as a way to destroy former bonds of friendship between community members. Finally, rape is seen as a way of enjoying the spoils of war, by allowing soldiers to benefit from private pleasure through the capture of the enemy's women (Koos, 2017 p.1939). Sexual violence in conflicts answers to different strategies, however, the literature does not account for clear evidence of the systematic use of sexual violence as a strategy. Through the combination of the different strategic aims explaining the use of sexual violence, this literature review gives a more comprehensive analysis, taking into account both individual and organisational objectives of sexual violence. It is a difficult phenomenon to study as collecting data on the intentions of the perpetrators of sexual violence is often impossible, or biased. A more thorough analysis of sexual violence focused on conflicts not only in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century could allow for a better understanding of the intentions of the soldiers on an individual level rather than on a collective level.

## Methodological note

The second part of this essay will aim to explain the choice of using a case study to answer our research question. Sekaran and Bougie (2013 p.98) define a case study as 'a research strategy that involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context'. Following this definition, our case study on the Yazidi community to illustrate the use of sexual violence by ISIS in Iraq as a weapon of terror inscribes itself perfectly in our research method. By analysing the example of the impact of widespread and systematic use of sexual violence against the Yazidis, we provide concrete evidence to our hypothesis that ISIS uses sexual violence as a weapon of terrorism and mass destruction. The choice of the Yazidi community is relevant as it is the community that has been most destroyed by ISIS, and Yazidis women and girls were the most targeted by sexual slavery and trafficking (Kaya, 2019 p.10). Answering to George and Bennett's (2005 p.51) doubts regarding the dangers of subjective biases in case selections, this essay argues that thorough research was made on the subject before selecting the Yazidi community as a case study, and that this choice does not reflect the 'easy choice' that would best apply to our hypothesis, as it rather represents the most complete and complex example present in Iraq, as sexual violence was used by ISIS as a strategy of terror as well as a strategy of ethnic cleansing.

## Sexual violence in Iraq, from the State to ISIS

This third section will aim to identify the impact that previous conflicts and use of violence in Iraq by the state has had on the systematic use of sexual violence as a strategy of terrorism by ISIS. It will also identify how ISIS uses sexual violence to assert dominance over ethnic and religious minorities. This essay will argue that Iraq cultivated a breeding ground for sexual violence from which ISIS took score, as it was already a very common practice used by the Iraqi government and security services. For example, Saddam Hussein already used sexual violence as a way to sustain ethno-sectarian hierarchies in Iraq (Ahram, 2015 p.59). Sexual enslavement, a widespread practice used by ISIS, was a technique well-used by the Iraqi regime in the 1980s at the time of the ethnic cleansing of Iraqi Kurdistan (Ahram, 2019 p.187). Some scholars have argued that sexual violence in conflicts is more widespread in countries with higher levels of institutionalised gender discrimination (Kaya, 2019 p.9). Cohen adds to that idea that insurgent perpetrated acts of mass rape are more likely in a context of state collapse, as exemplified in Iraq (Cohen, 2013 p.476). Building on these two assumptions, we will try to show that the Iraqi state facilitated the use of sexual violence by ISIS.

Mackenzie highlights the importance of accounting of accounting wartime rape not only as a tool of war but also as a side effect of a patriarchal society (Mackenzie, 2010 p.208). After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the state failed to provide security, and this failure has particularly exposed women to domestic violence, and violence by public authorities against women (O'Driscoll, 2018 p.15). The increase of sectarian violence in Iraq in the last three

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decades has also facilitated the use of killings, rape and the kidnapping of women to settle scores between communities (Kaya, 2019 p.13). The Iraqi state has been noted for its failure to achieve and implement justice, and in the cases of sexual violence, the state often punishes the victim rather than the perpetrator (Dahham, 2016 p.11; Kaya, 2019 p.13). This is further illustrated in the reduction of sentences in the Iraqi penal code for honour killings (UNAMI, 2013 p.2). The state has done very little to combat human trafficking and mass rape, leaving the victims with no institutions to rely on (Kaya, 2019 p.13). A lack of legislation and institutions legitimises the use of gendered violence in Iraq. This account of the acceptance of gender-based violence in Iraq due to the failure of the state to protect women highlights the context in which ISIS asserted its dominance in 2014 after the invasion of Mosul. Drawing on the norms that were already in place in Iraq, ISIS created a gendered socio-economic structure based on the already existing Iraqi norms of gender discrimination and violence (Kaya, 2019 p.12.; Ahram, 2015 p.58).

Ahram (2019 p.181) argues that sexual violence was used by ISIS as a state building strategy in Iraq. The organisation decided to mirror the state it was trying to supplant by creating institutions that drew on the existing norms of Iraq. An interesting correlation can be made between the fact that many ISIS leaders were once prisoners in the infamous Abu Ghraib prison, controlled by the US Army. This prison was known for its systematic use of sexual torture against the suspected terrorists (Ahram, 2015 p.63). Sexual violence is a key aspect of the process of competitive state building as it both tears down and reinforces forms of domination inherited from the old state (Ahram, 2019 p.185). ISIS resembles a state on many aspects as there is a tax system, their own legal institutions, the export of petrol and an education system in place. Therefore, the use of sexual violence was another way of asserting this new state by building new familial ties (Ahram 2015 p.59; Ahram 2019 p.185). ISIS therefore seems to have based its strategic use of sexual violence on the existing norms prevailing in Iraq and on the failure of the state to protect its citizens from sexual violence. However, ISIS also developed its own specificities in regard to the use of sexual violence, that we will try to identify.

ISIS has resorted to many strategies to further its ideology, with a particular focus on developing a systematic strategic use of sexual violence. Firstly, it is important to notice that if ISIS has strict regulations on sexual activity outside of marriage, the organisation has morally justified the use of sexual violence against non-believers if they refuse to convert to Islam (Kaya, 2019 p.7; Ahram, 2019 p.187). Through this justification, ISIS' fighters cannot be considered as 'sinners' if they engage in sexual violence, as women are deemed spoils of war, and as infidels are at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Ahram, 2019 p.187). ISIS has also declared that in the case of pregnancy resulting from a rape by one of its fighters, the child will belong to ISIS, spreading the use of forced impregnation of minority women to contribute to the growth of the organisation (Ahram, 2015 p.67). Having established a legal framework which renders sexual violence acceptable — or even encouraged — ISIS then defined the strategic use of sexual violence as an ethnic cleansing tool. Iraq is a multi-ethnic state, comprising of numerous communities, which ISIS defines as infidels and enemies. Paulussen (2021) explains that ISIS used sexual terrorism to further its Sunni fundamentalist ideologies, and to crush opposing communities through terror. Crawford et al. (2014) reinforce this idea by adding that ISIS used sexual violence as a weapon of terror with the goal of ethnic domination by using sexual torture, forced incest, forced abortion and forced perpetration of sexual violence. Sexual violence allows ISIS to reinforce its neo-patriarchal control, to build cohesion between its ranks and to attract foreign fighters, by promising them women as spoils of war (Ahram, 2015 p.67). The most characteristic use of sexual violence by ISIS is the use of sexual enslavement of women and girls of ethnic or religious minorities. By enslaving them, the group asserts its dominance over the community and also ensures a major revenue source by the sale of women to brothels or to private individuals (Ahram, 2015 p.67). ISIS can control the reproductive ability of the whole community and entirely destroy its social structure by separating the men and women (Kaya, 2019 p.7; Ahram, 2015 p.70).

Finally, ISIS's specificity in its use of sexual violence is that it publicly displays its crimes. The group records their actions on social media to gain a reputation of brutality to create fear and admiration for the organisation, and to terrorise its enemies (Amnesty International, 2014 p.11). ISIS employs a systematic use of sexual violence that seems particularly targeted towards ethnic and religious minorities, and that serves the purpose of better controlling them to eventually destroy them.

This section has demonstrated that the use of sexual violence by ISIS in Iraq is not a new phenomenon, as the Iraqi state has largely participated in creating a breeding ground for such violence in the last few decades. ISIS has used

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the foundations of sexual violence laid by the state in the larger concept of their state-building strategy. By making sexual violence acceptable, it becomes an effective tool of both terror and ethnic cleansing which is at the disposal of the group.

## Case study of the Yazidi community

This final part aims to illustrate, through the case study of the Yazidi community, how ISIS has used sexual violence as a weapon of terror to commit ethnic cleansing of an entire community. This case study allows us to analyse a concrete example of the use of sexual violence in Iraq by ISIS and to draw conclusions from this case study for our research question.

The Yazidi community is one of the largest and oldest minority groups in Iraq. They have traditionally lived in the Sinjarin district of Mosul (Van Zoonen & Wirya, 2017 p.7; Dahham, 2016 p.3). It is estimated that before August 2014, 600,000 Yazidis lived in Iraq (Van Zoonen & Wirya, 2017 p.7). The Yazidi faith is an ancient monotheistic religion, based on an oral tradition and with a strong connection to the land (Van Zoonen & Wirya, 2017 p.8). They observe a strict religio-political hierarchy and are mostly cultivators and herdsman (Minority Rights, 2017). They maintain a closed community, as a child can only be of Yazidi faith if both parents are Yazidis and because conversion to the Yazidi faith is not possible (Human Rights Council, 2016 p.6). As many minorities in Iraq, they have been marginalised and under threat for years, however, the Yazidis have been particularly targeted because their religion is often misinterpreted as a pagan and a devil-worshipping faith. Different Iraqi governments and terrorist groups have used this misinterpretation to justify the use of violence against them (Van Zoonen & Wirya, 2017 p.9; Kaya, 2019 p.11). They have been persecuted since the Ottoman Empire with campaigns of forced conversion, and later with Saddam Hussein's Arabisation campaign of Kurdistan. After the 2003 invasion, Al-Qaeda conducted regular terrorist attacks against the community as they believed that non-Muslims should be eradicated (Minority Rights, 2017; Human Rights Council, 2016 p.6; Van Zoonen & Wirya, 2017 pp.9-10). Kaya (2019 p.9) points out the lack of protection provided by the Iraqi and Kurdish governments to the Yazidis since the 2003 military intervention. The Yazidis live in a disputed territory between the Kurdish forces and Iraqi state, further destabilising their situation as both parties are competing for the control of the territory. This situation has also led to a division in the community between those who identify as Kurdish, and the members that view themselves as from a different and unique Yazidi identity (Minority Rights, 2017). The latest attack to the Yazidi community was ISIS's military advance in Iraq in 2014. As non-Muslims, the Yazidis were particularly vulnerable to ISIS' ideal of Sunni dominance in the region (Kaya, 2019 p.11).

The study of ISIS' sexual crimes over the Yazidi community is interesting as the extent to which they used sexual violence is unique to this community. In contrast to treatment of other minorities, such as the Christians, ISIS did not leave the Yazidis a choice to pay a special tax giving them a status of religious minority that acted as a protection. Instead, they were offered two possibilities: either convert to Islam or be killed (Van Zoonen & Wirya, 2017 p.10). The turning point for the Yazidi community was on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August 2014, when ISIS attacked Sinjar, where the heart of the community lives. Many Yazidis tried to flee but were captured on the roads by ISIS fighters. In three days, nearly all villages had been emptied of their population and the Kurdish forces quickly withdrew as ISIS advanced in the Sinjar region (Human Rights Council, 2016 pp.6-7; Cetorelli & Ashraph, 2019 p.9). ISIS besieged Mount Sinjar for a week in order to capture the Yazidis that had sought refuge there (Cetorelli & Ashraph, 2019 p.9). During these first few days of attack, the UN estimates that 5,000 Yazidi men were executed, and 7,000 women and girls were captured to be later forced into sexual slavery (Van Zoonen & Wirya, 2017 p.10). This attack has initiated a systematic use of sexual violence against the Yazidis, on both boys and women, as a way to terrorise them and demean the community as a whole (Ahram, 2015 p.68; Dahham, 2016 p.3).

However, if these first days of attack were particularly brutal for the community, the sexual violence lasted for much longer with the organisation of a human trafficking network of Yazidi women and girls. Once captured, the Yazidi women were officially ISIS' property and were characterised as '*sabaya*' or slaves (Human Rights Council, 2016 p.12/23). The women were first jailed in the Mosul area, to later be taken to other parts of Iraq, or to neighbouring countries like Syria or Saudi Arabia to be sold to ISIS fighters in slave markets or to be given to some distinguished fighters as spoils of war (Dahham, 2016 p.3; Human Rights Watch, 2016; Human Rights Council, 2016 p.13).

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Interviews of former captured Yazidi women highlight that the abuse was constant, and that they had to endure rapes and other inhumane treatments on a daily basis. Mothers were often sold with their children, who were also victims of regular beatings, and sometimes sexual violence as well (Human Rights Council, 2016 p.14). These testimonies account for the deeply controlled aspect of the use of sexual violence by ISIS against the Yazidis. During their captivity, before being sold on the slave market, women were not abused by the soldiers, as the group leaders did not allow for this to happen (Human Rights Council, 2016 p.12). The 'enjoyment' of the Yazidi women was reserved to their 'owners' and strict rules were in place as to who was authorised to benefit from this privilege (Human Rights Council, 2016 p.12). These findings allow us to believe that the use of sexual violence against Yazidis was part of a wider strategy of terror and ethnic cleansing, rather than being motivated by personal lust and soldiers' fantasies.

Sexual violence was used as a strategy of terrorism to deter the Kurdish and Iraqi forces in order to oppose resistance to the capture of the Sinjar region. Yazidis' defence relied on these two groups, as the community does not have a strong enough military organisation to fight ISIS itself. However, both the Iraqi and Kurdish army quickly withdrew as, among other reasons, they were afraid of the widespread use of sexual violence as a strategy of reprisal, and some preferred to protect their families rather than risk putting them in the hands of ISIS (Amnesty International, 2014 p.11). The threat of gang rape or sexual torture was also used as a deterrent for Yazidis who attempted to escape during their captivity (Human Rights Council, 2016 p.23). Sexual violence was also used as a strategy of ethnic cleansing of the Yazidi community in the broader strategy of establishing a Sunni fundamentalist ideology in Iraq. Eradicating non-Muslim communities was a key aspect of ISIS' goals, and, in order to do so, they resorted to systematic sexual violence by controlling the reproductive abilities of Yazidi women. The UN Human Rights Council (2016 p.27) reports that the terrorist organisation systematically committed crimes of sexual mutilation, forced sterilisation, forced birth control, separation of the sexes and forced impregnation of Yazidi women. These techniques have had a profound impact on the renewal of the community, as a child is a member of the Yazidi community only if both his parents are, as noted earlier. By separating men and women, ISIS stifled the reproductive rates of the community, and thus its population diminished. The Commission for International Justice and Accountability (CIJA) has proved that ISIS had planned to enslave and rape Yazidis as a way to eradicate the birth rate of Yazidi children (Yazda, 2020 p.2).

The Yazidis' ethnic cleansing highlights the epitome of ISIS' use of sexual violence as a strategy of terrorism and destruction. The Yazidi case study is pertinent as it entails not just a strategy of ethnic cleansing, but also elements of genocide. Since 2016, some institutions and governments such as the European Parliament, the US House of Representatives, and the United Nations have recognised that ISIS is committing genocide against the Yazidis (Yazda, 2021). To be defined as a genocide, war crimes must be committed with intent to destroy an ethnic, racial or religious group, through the mass killing of group members, the cause of serious bodily or mental harm to the group, inflicting inhumane living conditions, preventing birth, and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (General Assembly of the UN, 1948 p.1). This definition applies to the sexual crimes committed by ISIS to the Yazidi community, as the previous examples highlighted in this paper are testimonies of ISIS' intent to destroy the community. It is important to notice that sexual violence was not the only strategy used by ISIS to destroy the community, as they also engaged in mass killings and forced conversions of boys and men. However, the systematic use of sexual slavery and sexual torture is a key element in the realisation of the atrocities committed by ISIS as a genocide against the Yazidis (Barber, 2016 p.4).

Studying the aftermath of the ethnic cleansing of the Yazidis gives us an insight on the long-term impact that sexual violence can have on a community even once the physical threat has been destroyed. If Sinjar was retaken from ISIS control in 2015 by the Kurds, only few Yazidis have been able to return to their homeland. The area is still under military control, and most Yazidis feel unsafe going back to their homes, due to the fear of reprisal (Minority Rights, 2017). The Human Rights Council (2016 p.33) reports that every member of the Yazidi community has been affected by the conflict, either by being captured, killed or displaced. In 2016, an estimated 3,700 Yazidis remained in captivity by ISIS. Between 2014 and 2016, 120,000 Yazidis have sought asylum in Europe (Minority Rights, 2017). It has been estimated that 85% of the remaining Yazidis of the community are still forcibly displaced (Yazda & FYF, 2015 p.7). Despite losing territorial power over the community, ISIS still has influence over the survival of the community. Through the use of sexual violence, the terrorist organisation has successfully managed to divide the community by instilling shame in the victims of sexual violence, and by inflicting severe mental health issues on the

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survivors of the conflict (Human Rights Council, 2016 p.36). Many Yazidis reported that they do not feel safe anymore in Iraq and that they wish to leave, even if it means leaving their sacred land (Kaya, 2019 p.16). This is characteristic of the indirect influence that ISIS still exercises on the religious group as an aftermath of sexual violence in a community.

The analysis of the Yazidi community has allowed us to draw concrete evidence of the use of sexual violence in Iraq by ISIS. It has highlighted that sexual violence was largely used as a strategy of terrorism, with a particular goal of the ethnic cleansing of religious and ethnic Iraqi minorities. By using sexual violence as a way to control the social order of a community, the terrorist group was able to regulate every aspect of their daily lives, ranging from weddings to reproductive rights, impeding severely on the ability of the community to ensure the creation of a new generation. Furthermore, sexual violence on the Yazidis was also used as a deterrent strategy for larger military groups such as the Kurdish forces that were discouraged from defending the Yazidis because of the threat of experiencing the same physical punishments. Through the systematisation of sexual slavery, ISIS committed acts of genocide, further demonstrating that sexual violence is not a side effect of the conflict, but a key strategy in attaining its goals. Sexual violence gives the belligerents means of controlling the population in ways that other weapons cannot achieve as easily. ISIS incorporated the use of sexual violence in its hierarchy and ideology, justifying its actions through the use of sacred texts published as official propaganda of the organisation (Yazda & FYF, 2015 p.6).

On a larger scale, this study has allowed us to test the implications of the use of sexual violence by a terrorist organisation. The analysis of a recent conflict offers us a contemporary analysis of the strategic use of sexual violence as a weapon of terror. We have argued that sexual violence cannot be understood separately from the wider context of gender and minority discrimination that was already existent in Iraq (Kaya, 2019 p.19). ISIS mirrored the actions of the state in order to create its own legitimate new Iraqi state through the establishment of a Caliphate. Sexual violence in this context of terrorism is therefore a strategy that directly serves the organisation as a way to achieve its goal of creating a new state and controlling the population. In order to do so, sexual violence is used to 'purify' the population of undesirable minority groups and achieve the ideology of the terrorist group. In spite of Koos' (2017 p.1937) argument that it is difficult to qualify rape as a weapon of war because of the lack of evidence regarding its strategic use, this research has shown that sexual violence was in fact strategically planned in the case of ISIS in Iraq. The documents analysed in this paper account for the fact that sexual violence was part of ISIS' strategy of terror in Iraq; evidence which was used in proving that these crimes were part of a genocidal campaign against the Yazidis.

Going further, this research could be transformed into a comparative study of ISIS's use of sexual violence with another contemporary terrorist organisation, to assess whether the findings of this essay are a unique phenomenon. If studying the sexual violence committed by ISIS against the Yazidis has highlighted the systematic use of sexual slavery and ethnic cleansing, it would be interesting to compare it to the other techniques used by terrorist groups in internal conflicts in the region to find out if it is a widespread technique in other conflicts as well. Another way to pursue this study would be by analysing the post-conflict period in Iraq and the impact of sexual violence on the rebuilding of the state and its institutions, with a particular focus on the communities that were most affected by the conflict, such as women and/or minority groups.

## Conclusion

To conclude, this essay has used the case study of the Yazidi community to assess why the terrorist organisation ISIS used sexual violence in the internal conflict that started in Iraq in 2014. This study has proposed an overview of the debate on sexual violence through a literature review highlighting the different strategies that could be defined as reasons for the use of sexual violence in a conflict. This essay applied this theoretical approach to a more concrete example of ISIS in Iraq. It shows that it was crucial to observe sexual violence in the larger context of state building and as a phenomenon that had foundations in deeply rooted gender stereotypes promulgated by the previous governments and social order. Finally, studying the case of the Yazidi community provided evidence on how terrorist groups can resort to sexual violence as a strategy of ethnic cleansing. We have found that sexual violence was an important weapon to take into account when analysing the strategic aims of an organisation in a conflict. This paper adds to existing argument on why sexual violence is so recurrent in conflicts and why women and minorities are

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particularly targeted.

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