

Mizan: Journal for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations

Volume 1, Issue 1 / 2016

The Islamic State in Comparative and Historical Perspective

Edited by Michael Pregill

www.mizanproject.org/journal-issue/the-islamic-state-in-historical-and-comparative-perspective/

Response to Kecia Ali, “Redeeming Slavery”

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In numerous publications, including its online magazine *Dabiq* (published in several languages), ISIS has spoken of its revival of the institution of slavery as a means of improving the moral life of its fighters and as a way to fulfill one of the “signs of the hour,” indicating the imminence of the end of time.¹ By sexually enslaving captive Yazidi girls, ISIS claims to believe that it is revivifying Islam, offering its followers a version of Islam that was practiced by the *salaf*, unencumbered by hermeneutics or the accretions of historical practice. How are we to interpret these claims?

Slavery has been employed through most of human history, including during the early period of Islam. It was abolished in most countries by the end of the nineteenth century, but remained legal in a number of states in the Middle East and Africa until well into the twentieth, among them Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates.² Slavery is now *de jure* illegal in all nations of the world, but modern slavery—including sex trafficking, involuntary domestic servitude, and child soldiering—is a highly profitable global business, generating billions of dollars per year.³ Indeed, United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon refers to human trafficking as “one of the world’s most shameful ills.”⁴

There are numerous references to slavery and to concubinage in the *hadith*, as ISIS claims and as Kecia Ali’s work confirms. But does that make ISIS’ practice of enslaving its captives “Islamic”? Some analysts and scholars have said that it does, arguing that those who reject ISIS’ claim to religious legitimacy are falling into the same *takfir* trap that ISIS has—taking it upon themselves to determine who is, and who is not, a real Muslim.⁵

But there is nothing uniquely Islamic about slavery. Just as Islamic texts reflect the historical period in which they were written, so too do Jewish and Christian texts. There are many references to slavery in both the Jewish and Christian bibles. For example, the book of Leviticus provides detailed instructions regarding which peoples may be taken as slaves, and rules for purchase and inheritance:

As for your male and female slaves whom you may have: you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are around you. You may also buy from among the strangers who sojourn with you and their clans that are with you, who have been born in your land, and they may be your property. You may bequeath them to your sons after you to inherit as a possession forever. You may make slaves of them, but over your brothers the people of Israel you shall not rule, one over another ruthlessly.⁶

Are we to refer to the practices of modern-day slave traders as Jewish or Christian because these practices are delineated in Jewish and Christian texts?

Kecia Ali proposes that ISIS' use of tradition must be seen not as a way to purify Islam by restoring it to some historical or original essence but as a means of inventing and controlling the future—both that of its caliphate and of its victims. She urges that Muslim scholars neither practice *takfir* by declaring ISIS un-Islamic nor accept the view, promulgated by Bernard Haykel and others, that ISIS has as much of a claim to religious legitimacy as anyone else.

To her arguments I would add two observations. First, ISIS is by no means unique among religious terrorists in referring to sacred texts to justify violations of both national and international laws, as well as of contemporary religious practices and norms.⁷ I have found in my interviews of religious terrorist groups, across religions, that it is common to justify illegal actions by referring to religious texts. Second, it seems likely that there is an additional, more pragmatic reason for ISIS' "Revival of Slavery Before the Hour": to enable them to compete successfully with rival groups fighting on behalf of Sunnis in Iraq and Syria. As ISIS implies in its own writings, it is offering an alternative to sex outside marriage for those fighters who cannot afford to marry.

In the article entitled "The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour," to which Kecia Ali has referred, the author explains:

Finally, a number of contemporary scholars have mentioned that the desertion of slavery had led to an increase in *fāhishah* (adultery, fornication, etc.), because the *sharī* alternative to marriage is not available, so a man who cannot afford marriage to a free woman finds himself surrounded by temptation toward sin. In addition, many Muslim families, who have hired maids to work at their homes, face the *fitnah*

of prohibiting *khalwah* (seclusion) and resultant *zinā* [unlawful sexual relations between unmarried persons] between the man and the maid, where if she were his concubine, this relationship would be legal.⁸

Thus, it would seem, enslaving women is not only a means of avoiding sin, as Kecia Ali concludes, but is also expedient for the movement, in that fighters who can't afford to get married can be enticed to join the Islamic State with the promise of sex.

The fantasy of reviving an uncontaminated form of religious practice is not unique to ISIS. The essence of fundamentalism is longing for an imagined, purer past, an antidote to the moral and spiritual confusion of modernity. But sacred texts are filled with contradictions. Christian slaveholders and abolitionists both pointed to religious texts to justify their positions on slavery. The same can be said regarding terrorists who kill “baby butchers” and those who, often using the same religious texts, strongly oppose violence against abortion providers. Terrorists across religions find justification in sacred texts to do what they want to do—in the case of ISIS, to rape, pillage, and plunder.

Millenarian terrorist groups are not just aiming to change or purify the world. They are also organizations *qua* organizations. Like any other non-profit or for-profit firm, terrorist organizations do not survive for long if they don't attend to the emotional and physical needs of their workers. Just like McDonald's or the March of Dimes, they need to attract capital and labor, and they need to articulate a brand. ISIS is using sexual slavery not only to compete for labor with rival groups, but also to raise revenue. Over time, many terrorist groups become more focused on the wellbeing of participants than achieving the mission, becoming “incentive-driven” organizations rather than “mission-driven” ones.⁹

Still, it is not clear that the practice of enslaving girls will help ISIS attract foreign fighters. Some ISIS “fanboys” in the West have refused to believe that the stories are true. One commentator, “AAibrah52,” wrote in response to an article in the *New York Times* that described ISIS' practice of rape from the perspective of the victims, “What an ugly lie. You kuffar are sex obsessed.”¹⁰ Another wrote, “Media getting desperate.” When her parents revealed to the media that US government officials had discovered that ISIS' leader, Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī, had kept the American hostage Kayla Mueller as a sex slave, some ISIS fanboys expressed doubts about the veracity of the report, claiming that it was impossible to believe that Baghdādī would have sex with a white girl.¹¹

Terrorists who have left their profession often say that “seeds of doubt” about their leaders' integrity or true purpose led them to defect.¹² In my interviews of terrorists across religions, I have found that new recruits often believe that the purpose of the group, and the aim of its leader, is to change the world for the better. But over time, they are often disappointed to discover that one of

the principal goals may be to enhance the political power or wealth of its leaders.¹³ Sometimes, these “seeds of doubt” may be related to the group’s ideology. Maajid Nawaz, who left Hizb ut-Tahrir, an extremist Islamist group, explained that the “accumulated kindness of strangers,” including non-Muslims, together with his continuing Islamic education, transformed his thinking about the group that he had initially found so attractive. He came to view the ideology he once subscribed to as “totalitarian,” “stifling,” and even “un-Islamic.”¹⁴

Defectors from ISIS have told journalists that they found themselves in an increasingly brutal regime, not at all like the utopian state that they had hoped to find. An analysis of fifty-eight of these defectors by Kings College in London revealed that some complained of mistreatment by their commanders; some were repulsed by ISIS’ practice of murdering civilians and hostages; while still others were disappointed that life in the “caliphate” was neither as lucrative, nor as thrilling, as they had anticipated.¹⁵ One defector who spoke to the BBC explained, “In the beginning ISIS used goodness with the population in order to attract the people and they provided them with what they needed in order to attract them quickly, because they suffered so much under Bashar and his regime,” he said. “Once ISIS succeeded in attracting people they changed dramatically, from being good to being cruel and harsh.”¹⁶ It is important to ensure that the reports of those who have seen what life in the caliphate is truly like, and have left, is shared not only with traditional media outlets, but also via the same social media outlets that ISIS uses to recruit.

About the author

[Jessica Stern](#) is a Research Professor at Boston University’s Pardee School of Global Studies, and a Fellow at both the Hoover Institution and Harvard’s School of Public Health. Her current work is a study of Radovan Karadzic, president, psychiatrist, poet, and war criminal, convicted in 2016 for genocide. Stern is the co-author of [ISIS: The State of Terror](#) (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), with J. M. Berger, and the author of [Denial: A Memoir of Terror](#) (New York: HarperCollins, 2010); [Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill](#) (New York: HarperCollins, 2003); and [The Ultimate Terrorists](#) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). In 2009, she was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for her work on trauma and terror. Stern taught at Harvard University from 1999 to 2015.

Notes

All digital content cited in this article was accessed on or before September 21, 2016.

[1] See William McCants, [The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State](#) (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015).



[2] The best resource on a timeline that we can find is “Abolition of Slavery Timeline,” Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abolition_of_slavery_timeline).

[3] Ethan B. Kapstein, “[The New Global Slave Trade](#),” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2006; “Trafficking in Persons Report,” U.S. Department of State, July 2015 (<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/245365.pdf>). See also Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: A History of Violence and Humanity* (London: Penguin Books, 2011) and Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy, Updated with a New Preface* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

[4] Thirteenth United Nations Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, Doha, April 12–19, 2015 (http://www.unis.unvienna.org/unis/en/events/2015/crime_congress_human_trafficking.html).

[5] See Graeme Wood, “[What ISIS Really Wants](#),” *The Atlantic*, March 2015.

[6] Lev 25:44–46, English Standard Version (ESV). For many more examples of biblical references to—or even endorsements of—slavery, see the resource “100 Bible Verses about Slavery,” *OpenBible.info* (<https://www.openbible.info/topics/slavery>).

[7] See Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: Ecco, 2003).

[8] “The Revival of Slavery Before the Hour,” *Dabiq* 4 (Dhū’l-Hijjah 1435 [September–October 2014]): 17.

[9] Jessica Stern with Amit Modi, “Organizational Forms of Terrorism,” in Thomas Biersteker and Sue Eckert (eds.), *Countering the Financing of Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

[10] “[The Islamic State is Forcing Women to Be Sex Slaves](#),” *The New York Times*, August 20, 2015.

[11] The issue was first revealed by Ashley Collman and the AP for *The Daily Mail Online* (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3198571/Islamic-State-ruler-kept-26-year-old-American-air-worker-personal-sex-slave-killed-February.html>). These quotes were found utilizing J. M. Berger’s Intelwire Database at the author’s request. See also the Canadian Security Intelligence Service report “Al Qaeda, ISIL and Their Offspring,” Chapter 10, “The Foreign Fighters Problem: Why Do Youth Join ISIL?” (<https://www.csis-scrs.gc.ca/pblctns/wrldwtch/2016/2016-05-02/chap-10-en.php>), to which this author contributed.

[12] This theme—that seeds of doubt led the formers to defect—was revealed at a gathering of former extremists attended by the author. The meeting, which was organized by Google Ideas, was held in Dublin from June 27–28, 2011. For more information, see <http://www.cfr.org/projects/world/summit-against-violent-extremism-save/pr1557> and Jessica Stern, “[Can Google Make Non-Violence Cool?](#)” *Defining Ideas: A Hoover Institution Journal*, August 25, 2011.

[13] Stern with Modi, *op. cit.*

[14] Christopher Dickey, “[Maajid Nawaz: The Repentant Radical: A Former Extremist Warns of a Resurgent al Qaeda.](#)” *Newsweek*, October 15, 2012.

[15] Peter R. Neumann, “ISCR Report – Victims, Perpetrators, Assets: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors,” International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence, October 12, 2015 (<http://icsr.info/2015/10/icsr-report-victims-perpetrators-assets-narratives-islamic-state-defectors/>).

[16] Paul Wood, “[Isis \[sic\] Defector Speaks of Life Inside Brutal Jihadist Group.](#)” *BBC Panorama*, July 14, 2016. There are numerous examples of such defectors speaking to media outlets.

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