

## Islamic State and Women: A Biopolitical Analysis

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Based on Islamic State (IS)'s own writings and images, this article seeks to understand the type of power wielded by IS. Focusing on IS's views and treatment of women, we conduct a textual analysis of IS's online English-language magazine *Dabiq*. Interpreting our findings through a theoretical framework combining the work of Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Achille Mbembe on biopolitics and necropolitics, we theorize IS's gendered biopolitical power. IS is obsessed with microregulating all aspects of Sunni Muslim women's lives, imposing a strict dress code and a regime of gender segregation and ensuring women's subjugation to men in the private and public domains. However, for non-Muslim Yazidi women, IS's sovereign power manifests itself in the subjection of captured Yazidi women to a "state of exception," reducing their lives to its bare biological minimum. Our comparative analysis of IS's treatment of Sunni and Yazidi women enables us to identify shifts and overlaps between biopolitical and necropolitical power.

*Keywords: Islamic State, IS, biopolitics, necropolitics, biopower, disciplinary power, sovereign power, Foucault, Agamben, Mbembe, Yazidi*

The organization that calls itself Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) rose to prominence in a dramatic blitzkrieg in the early summer of 2014 as it captured as much as one-third of Iraq's territory in addition to vast territories it already controlled in Syria (Naumkin, 2014). ISIS irrupted into the media spotlight as the world reacted with shock to the group's military conquests and graphic videos of atrocities against its enemies. Once in control of large parts of Iraq and Syria, ISIS declared the return of the caliphate in late June 2014 and adopted the name Islamic State (hereafter IS), reflecting planetary ambitions (Kraidy, 2018). IS then set out to establish the administrative structure of a state, including a judiciary, a police force, and social services.

IS's propensity to advertise its violence in graphic detail and its seemingly anachronistic worldview have led to much debate as to the nature of the group and its style of rule. In the Western news media, IS has been branded both "modern" and "medieval" (McDonald, 2014; Özkan, 2017), reflecting confusion about the group as well as a facile binary understanding of modernity in public

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discourse. There have also been significant attention to and controversy about the extent to which IS is "Islamic" (see, e.g., Volsky & Jenkins, 2014; Wood, 2015) and a tendency to use strong epithets such as "bloodthirsty" (Stewart, 2017) and "senseless" (Dienst, Connor, Winter, & Helsel, 2017) to describe IS and its violence.

In this article, we strive to move beyond these often-sterile debates to consider a fundamental, ontological question: What kind of power is IS? This is undoubtedly a broad question, and we focus here on IS's power as a form of gendered biopolitics and necropolitics. To do so, we probe the group's depiction and treatment of women. The question of women and the regulation of their bodies and behavior occupy important places in IS's ultraconservative religio-political ideology and governance. Through complex ideological and governance schemes, IS attempts to contain the liabilities arising from women's bodies and harness their positive, primarily reproductive, potential. To explore this topic, we examine all 15 issues of *Dabiq*, IS's English-language online magazine that was published between July 2014 and July 2016. The picture that emerges from our analysis via the conceptual lenses of Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Achille Mbembe bears the hallmarks of gendered biopolitical power preoccupied with microregulating all aspects of women's lives.

We use biopolitics as a broad framework integrating selected aspects of Foucault's and Agamben's conceptions of biopower, disciplinary power, and sovereign power as well as Agamben's notion of "thanatopolitics" and Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics." As a Salafi jihadi organization, IS enforces a draconian regime of bodily regulation, including a strict dress code ("ISIS 'Locks'," 2016), gender segregation, restricted women's mobility, and control over women's bodies. Salafi jihadis envision a utopian Islamic community akin to that of the pious forefathers, or *salaf as-salih*, which they believe existed in the early centuries of Islam and which promote jihad as the method of restoring such a community (McDonald, 2014; Turner, 2014). Salafism is noted for rigidity in orthodoxy and praxis and for fostering a profoundly restrictive and patriarchal ideology with regard to women in the form of requiring full covering of the body and social separation and segregation (Kuo, 2012; Laborde, 2013). Furthermore, Salafi jihadis tend to emphasize the military exploits of the early generations of Muslims to give their violence an even more immediate divine imperative (Hamid & Dar, 2016). From the Salafi standpoint, there is only one legitimate religious interpretation, and it leaves no place for Islamic pluralism (Hellmich, 2008).

Like other ultraconservative religious regimes, Muslim or not, IS confines women to obedient wifedom and motherhood ("The Fitrah," 2016). IS's disciplinary power is visible in public spectacles of corporeal punishment, some of which focus on women ("Clamping Down," 2015; "Hadd of Stoning," 2014). IS's sovereign power is most manifest in its treatment of non-Muslim Yazidi women, placing them in a state of exception whereby they are stripped of the rights enjoyed by Sunni Muslim women ("The Revival of Slavery," 2014), and their existence is reduced to what Agamben (2005) calls "bare life," or *zoe*, effectively turning them into contemporary versions of *homo sacer*—the figure in ancient Roman law that can be killed but cannot be (formally) sacrificed (Agamben, 1998). IS justifies its biopolitical regime via strategic references to religious texts and juridical precedent. IS's treatment of women is best understood as a microcosm of the group's uncompromising Manichean worldview.

In the sparse research published on the topic, scholars have examined women's roles in IS, which range from traditional wives to online recruiters and coordinators (Spencer, 2016), or themes and motives in IS recruitment of women (Ali, 2015; Tarras-Wahlberg, 2016). Some scholars have sought to understand how gender factors into radicalization and recruitment of women into jihadi organizations (Pearson, 2015), and some have explored the success of IS in attracting Western women to its ranks (Perešin, 2015). Bloom (2005, 2007, 2011, 2013), who has investigated online radicalization and recruitment of Muslim women by jihadi groups and the various factors motivating them to carry out acts of suicide bombing, has discerned an increasingly "leading role" for women within the ranks of these groups (2005, 2007). Rather than focusing on the recruitment of women, our study seeks to shed light on the nature of IS's exercise of power through its treatment of women.

### Method and Data Corpus

Our study employs textual analysis, a critical qualitative method that allows "researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of their world" (McKee, 2003, p. 1). In line with Barthes' (1972) approach, we understand *Dabiq's* content as texts and analyze them in their social, political, historic, and cultural contexts (see also Lester-Roushanzamir & Raman, 1999; Slagle, 2006, p. 20). Treating these texts as "material traces . . . of the practice of sense-making" (McKee, 2003, p. 15) by IS, we employ semiotic and interpretive approaches to analyze their underlying ideological and cultural assumptions (Fursich, 2009). As IS's major English-language publication for a couple of years, the combined verbal and visual texts of *Dabiq* provide an important window into the group's ideology and its view of women.

We conducted a close reading of 15 issues of *Dabiq*, formerly IS's signature online English-language magazine, the totality of issues released between July 2014 and July 2016. Using keyword searches, we examined all references to "woman/women," "female," "daughter," "mother," "sister," "wife," and "girl" as well as images of women in *Dabiq* to gain an in-depth understanding of IS's attitude toward women and the rules it imposes on women's bodies and sociopolitical behavior. The data corpus includes a total of 37 articles and six images:

- Eight articles are entirely about women (issues 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 15). These articles carry titles such as "To Our Sisters" or "From Our Sisters."
- One article is devoted to justifying the attacks on Yazidi religious group and the practice of sexual slavery against Yazidi women (issue 4).
- Twenty-eight articles contain references to women.
- Three images feature young girls (issues 15 and 12).
- Four other images show stonings of women; in two of these images, the women are not visible (issue 2), and in the other two, the women are visible (issue 7).

Ultimately, our aim is to go beyond that which is manifest by discerning the latent meaning, explicit patterns, themes, assumptions, and references emerging from the texts (Fursich, 2009; Ibroscheva, 2013) and connecting them with IS's broader ideological vision in terms of permissible or impermissible behavior for women. At times, borrowing from Fiske (2001), *Dabiq* draws on the dominant

and familiar knowledge bank of Muslim believers to justify what constitutes appropriate or inappropriate codes of behavior. The close analysis of the *Dabiq* texts, and other texts with which they interact, allows us to uncover the deeper, and coherent, ideological system of meaning that IS seeks to construct and impart to its targeted audiences via publications such as *Dabiq*. Aware of the limitations of our method, our aim is not to identify *the* "correct" interpretation of the texts (Lockyer, 2012) but rather to offer interpretations that are possible and likely, putting IS texts and images in the context of the group's actions toward different classes of women.

### **The Politics of Life and Death**

Though Foucault coined the notion of biopolitics to explain the transformation of power in the shift from the Renaissance to the contemporary world, his concept is helpful in understanding IS. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1978) distinguishes between two power modalities: biopower, which is concerned with regulation of populations, and disciplinary power, which is preoccupied with disciplining individual bodies. These are not antithetical, but "two poles of development linked together by a whole intermediary cluster of relations" (Foucault, 1978, p. 139). Though biopolitics is the administration and regulation of individual and collective life conditions and processes, for Foucault the objects of biopolitics are individual human features aggregated at the level of populations in order to define norms, establish standards, and determine average values (Lemke, 2011). As it regulates and produces life, biopolitical power needs continuous corrective mechanisms (Foucault, 1978).

While some have argued that the "specificity of the biopolitical techniques lies in the positive and not repressive relation to life" (Muble, 2014, p. 79), if we take biopolitics in its fundamental sense of life organization and regulation, then not all biopolitical exercises can be cast as positive. Biopolitical power is "productive" in both positive and negative—that is, repressive—ways. At its extreme, a repressive politics of life becomes a politics of death—biopolitics becomes necropolitics. IS's regulation of women's bodies, with strict definitions of the permissible and the prohibited, is repressive. Furthermore, IS rule is as much about making decisions about death as it is about managing life. As Mbembe (2003) wrote in his coining of the notion of necropolitics, "To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power" (p. 12). This is particularly true in the case of war machines like IS (Kraidy, 2017). Indeed, when Mbembe (2003) wrote of "figures of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but the *generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations*" (emphasis in original) (p. 14), he could have been describing IS, whose self-declared caliphal statehood is as much about claiming a population and territory as it is about destroying anyone who refuses to submit to its will.

Controlling women's bodies through religiously sanctioned social rituals and separating them from men (see Al-Rasheed, 2007; Doumato, 1992) are important aspects of IS governance. For example, *Dabiq* declares rules for women in matters such as the appropriate period of mourning for a deceased husband as "four months and ten days" and that she should refrain from colorful clothes or any adornments during that period ("Advice on Ihdad," 2016, p. 24). IS forcefully delineates limits on women's private and public behavior. *Dabiq* articulates a general set of principles centered primarily on the body, sexuality, and reproductive functions that link to laws, social norms, and regulatory practices. Laws and norms are

central to biopolitical governmentality, because they act toward “normalizing society” where “the law operates more and more as a norm” (Foucault, 1978, p. 144). This process, for instance, can be seen in IS’s imposition of full body veil and its enactment of a strict gender segregation regime; although they originate as laws, they are meant to eventually become social norms tied to values such as chastity, justified and sanctioned on religious grounds.

Our analysis of *Dabiq* identifies three interrelated themes—character, role, and status—in IS’s views of women. Character encompasses moral values such as chastity, honor, and modesty. Role is mostly limited to the domestic tasks of motherhood and wifehood. In IS’s social order, women’s status is inferior to men’s.

### ***Chastity, Honor, Modesty***

*Dabiq* instructs Muslim women to adhere to chastity, honor, and modesty as concrete organizing behavioral guidelines rather than abstract values. An article in the 15th issue of *Dabiq* titled “The Fitrah of Mankind and the Near-Extinction of the Western Woman,” claims that human *fitrah* (an Arabic term meaning disposition, nature, or instinct) “entails modesty and chastity” (“The Fitrah,” 2016, p. 23). *Fitrah* or *fitra* is a complex notion in Islamic theology, connoting innate goodness and natural disposition to want to be close to the Creator, to virtue, and to justice (Kadirov, Allayarova, & Boulanouar, 2015) or “that inherent capacity to accept the truth” (Hulwe, 2009). Relying on a verse from the Koran, the *Dabiq* article urges women to “lower their gaze and guard their private parts and not expose their adornment except that which [necessarily] appears thereof and to wrap their veils over their chests” (“The Fitrah,” 2016, p. 23). These words call for women’s confinement to private domestic space, full veiling when in public space, and restriction of *ikhtilat*, or social mixing between unmarried or non-kin females and males (Kraidy, 2010).

*Dabiq* reflects IS’s regulation of the minutia of women’s behavior, revealing an obsession with women’s bodies as an always-already imminent threat to social and moral order. The magazine thus deploys chastity, modesty, and honor as disciplinary aspirations, attained when women’s bodies perform in specific ways, remaining in private space, veiling when out in public, and doing their utmost not to awaken men’s desire. Since these qualities are a natural state of affairs (*fitrah*), failure to uphold them amounts to a transgression of the natural order of life. In *Dabiq*, it is honor and chastity that distinguishes good, believing women from “vile” women (“In the Words,” 2015, p. 53). Defaming “chaste” women is described as a major sin (“The Danger,” 2015, p. 23), and those who slander the “honor” of female believers are branded as “sick-hearted” (Al-Muhajirah, 2015c, p. 35). Images of women and girls published in *Dabiq* embody chastity and modesty, instructing women what these values mean in actual physical appearance. *Dabiq* avoids publishing images of adult women, except in two images showing scenes of women being stoned for committing adultery. Even then the bodies are fully veiled (“Clamping Down,” 2015). And when images of young girls are published, only their faces and hands are uncovered. Providing important cues of IS’s proper dress and behavioral code, such pictures reflect IS’s gendered biopolitical regime.

*Dabiq's* references to chastity, modesty, and honor indicate that IS's understanding of women is effectively informed by the unruly sexual potential of their bodies—hence any manifestation of a woman's body in front of others is, even if indirectly, linked to sexuality and, as such, an act threatening to cause moral debauchery and corruption. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1978) argues that at the juncture of the body and the population, sex becomes a "crucial target" of any power system aiming to manage life (p. 147). In Foucauldian terms, one could claim that IS women's bodies are sites "thoroughly saturated with sexuality" (p. 104). This ultimately places the feminine body

in organic communication with the social body (whose regulated fecundity it was supposed to ensure), the family space (of which it had to be a substantial and functional element), and the life of children (which it produced and had to guarantee, by virtue of a biologico-moral responsibility. (p. 104)

In fact, an intense fear guides IS's ideological and policy attitude toward the female body in the public and domestic realms. Nothing but a full concealment of this corrupting feminine body appears to be acceptable to the group. At one point, railing against the conditions of women in the West, *Dabiq* states that a Western woman "displays of her body what no man ever displays," lamenting that such behavior is "more promiscuous" than a prostitute's ("The Fitrah," 2016, p. 25).

IS wields biopolitical power to defend society against threats born of its own body—in this case, the individual and collective bodies of its women and the threats arising from lack of control over these bodies (Foucault, 1997, p. 216). The ultimate goal is to suppress women's sexual potential by constraining the display and movement of these bodies. This requires a strict regime of gender segregation that enforces a ban on *ikhtilat*, the illicit mixing of unrelated and unwed women and men. The fear is that *ikhtilat* might lead to flirting, physical contact, or even extramarital sexual intercourse (see Kraidy, 2010, p. 54), seen as a great sin that may be punished by death. Fear of *ikhtilat* lurks in a number of *Dabiq* passages. An advertorial encouraging applications to a medical college in IS's capital city, Raqqa, promises prospective female students that they will be taught exclusively by female staff ("Healthcare in the Khilafah," 2015, p. 26). Through the enforcement of a meticulous order of gender segregation, IS aims to thwart any embodied interactions. In seeking to control women's bodies, IS is not alone; rather, it is an extreme version of a phenomenon seen throughout history.

### ***Motherhood and Wifehood***

Controlling women's bodies fits broader social roles that IS writers assign to women in the pages of *Dabiq*. These roles tame women's sexual energy by shifting it from a social liability to a biological necessity: the reproductive function. Women's worth resides in giving birth to children and raising them. Motherhood is romanticized in *Dabiq*. Imagining the Islamic *ummah* (community) as a body, one female writer describes women as "the most effective part" of that body, because they raise Muslim generations (Al-Muhajirah, 2015a, p. 44). "As for you, O mother of lion cubs. . . . And what will make you know what the mother of lion cubs is? She is the teacher of generations and the producer of men" (Al-Muhajirah, 2015a, p. 44). "Lion cubs" is IS terminology for child soldiers.

Enumerating the vices of “Western” women, *Dabiq* claims they have abandoned “motherhood, wifedom” by choosing to compete with men in the workplace (“The Fitrah,” 2016, p. 25). On several occasions, *Dabiq* urges women to perform a “support” role to their husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons (“A Brief Interview,” 2015, p. 51). While IS does not prohibit women from working outside the home, as evidenced by *Dabiq*’s advertising of medical college admissions and acceptance of female students, motherhood and wifedom are the primary social functions women are expected to fulfill regardless of whether they pursue professional roles outside home. Elucidating IS’s position further, *Dabiq* slams the West for believing that

woman need not be a mother, a wife, or a maiden, but rather, she should work like man, rule like man, and have intercourse like an animal, without being conscious of her Lord watching both her and her heinous partner in crime. (“The Fitrah,” 2016, p. 20)

In contrast, IS imagines itself building a utopia inhabited by ideal Muslim women.

### ***Superiors and Subordinates***

IS goes to great lengths to establish a male-dominated society with a formalized system of gendered power relations that narrowly demarcates the boundaries of life for women. The system is enshrined in various behavioral injunctions backed by social and legal norms, establishing a dichotomy between male superiority and female inferiority. The subjugation of bodies, Foucault (1978) aptly reminds us, is at the core of biopower, and power techniques are used to normalize new social practices and conduct of populations (De Larrinaga & Doucet, 2008). To rationalize and justify its views toward women’s place in life, IS handily resorts to the vague concept of *fitrah* again to decree that “woman does not rule man” (“The Fitrah,” 2016, p. 23). Thus, women’s equality to men is framed as upsetting the natural order of life and, as such, is unacceptable.

To further legitimize its patriarchal vision, *Dabiq*, drawing again on Koranic terminology, proclaims that “woman, as is known, was created from a curved rib” (Al-Muhajirah, 2015d, p. 22). The notion that women are created from a curved rib symbolizes anomaly and the deviance of women. This serves as a rationale for justifying the inferiority of women and their subjugation to men. And women are told to unquestionably accept their divinely condoned lower status, for it is a test of their faith.

“Righteous women are devoutly obedient” to their husbands, and *Dabiq* cites a Koranic verse in support of its worldview, making it clear that a woman’s refusal to succumb to male domination amounts to an encroachment on the faith: “So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [the husband’s] absence what Allah would have them guard” (“The Fitrah,” 2016, p. 23). Polygamy is another technique of power, used to bolster the superior status of men vis-à-vis women and entrench a dominant-subordinate relationship. Women are ordered to accept polygamy as a divinely sanctioned practice. *Dabiq* says up to four wives are allowed and that opposing this amounts to standing against God (Al-Muhajirah, 2015d, pp. 19–22). For women who are critical of this idea, *Dabiq* warns that religious rules have to be accepted as an inseparable whole: “It is not permissible for a woman who believes in Allah and the Last Day to argue

concerning the Sharī'ah of Allah, accepting what pleases her and rejecting what goes against her desires" (Al-Muhajirah, 2015d, p. 21).

*Dabiq* discusses disciplinary measures to ensure women's subservience. The magazine narrates the story of a man whose friends had wondered whether he should "boycott" or "beat" his mother for performing her prayers poorly ("Tawhid and Our Duty," 2015, pp. 16–17). Beating her was ruled out only because the woman in question was his mother, but the mere fact that it was initially considered a possible option indicates that beating as a tool of disciplining women within the confines of homes is acceptable under certain conditions. However, measures more draconian than beating are deployed to enforce and maintain order.

IS carries out public spectacles of punishment designed to deter others from committing similar "crimes." These measures hark back to coercive, pre-disciplinary types of power. Foucault (1995) explained the occurrence of spectacular scenes of public punishment in Europe by defining the body as the major site of punishment (p. 8), where power relations are invested. The body is at times subject to torture and other forms of punishment used to carry out tasks, perform ceremonies, and emit signs (p. 25). Inflicting physical pain in spectacular rituals constitutes a core feature of IS's conception of punishment, thus mixing coercive violence with disciplinary power. *Dabiq's* pages showcase four images of women who were publicly stoned to death "for committing adultery" ("Clamping Down," 2015, p. 43; "Hadd of Stoning," 2014, p. 36). In the images, large crowds of men have gathered to carry out the punishment—a ghastly public spectacle where men are enforcers of a regime of domination.

It is in such scenes that we can glimpse the porous boundary between biopolitics as the politics of life and necropolitics (or, in Agamben's terminology, thanatopolitics) as the politics of death. Indeed, as Agamben (1998) himself argued,

If there is a line in every modern state marking the point at which the decision on life becomes a decision on death, and biopolitics can turn into thanatopolitics, this line no longer appears today as a stable border dividing two clearly distinct zones. (p. 72)

In blurring this line, IS is not exceptional, but the organization is particularly adept at turning pure violence into a necropolitical spectacle that terrorizes IS members into obedience and enemies into fear. That is how graphic violence contributes to a politics of rule. Given that in the context of the caliphate, adultery is an act between a woman and a man, the male "criminal" is conspicuous by his absence from the images. *Dabiq* does not mention the fate of male partners or whether they were subjected to any punishment at all. That solely women are used to teach a moral lesson reflects the position of men and women in IS's power hierarchy. Women's bodies are not their individual possessions but sites of collective honor and chastity, and their punishment—which may include death—serves to restore a sense of violated honor for men. In this way, necropolitics feeds, however perniciously, the productive energy of biopolitics. The most extreme manifestation of this dynamic is in IS's treatment of women from the Yazidi minority, to which we turn next.



### **Sovereign Power and Sexual Slavery**

IS's genocide of the Yazidis, recognized as such by the United Nations ("UN Human Rights Panel," 2016), and the group's harsh treatment of Yazidi women reveal the darker recesses of sovereign power. Followers of an ancient monotheistic faith, Yazidis are a largely Kurdish-speaking group, the majority of whom are centered in Iraq's northern Nineveh province that fell to IS in the summer of 2014 (Kubalek, 2015; Savelsberg, Hajo, & Dulz, 2010). Although a unique religion, Yazidism is believed to have been influenced throughout the ages by Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Nestorian Christianity, and later Islam. The Yazidis have been persecuted for centuries due to their religious identity and practices (Yazidi, 2017). In its propaganda, IS branded Yazidis as pagans to justify its atrocities against them ("The Revival of Slavery," 2014). The accusation of paganism emanates from the high esteem that Yazidis have for Malak Taus (Peacock Angel), whom some consider to be the same as Satan or Lucifer. This has led some, including IS and those in the surrounding communities, to view Yazidis as devil worshippers (Yazidi, 2017).

As IS took over the Yazidis' ancestral territory of Sinjar in northern Iraq, militants murdered older Yazidi women and buried them in mass graves. Younger women were taken as sex slaves (Costello, 2016). Many were sold or passed on from one militant to another, allegedly pushing some to suicide (Shubert & Naik, 2015). Around 6,500 Yazidis, mostly women and children, are believed to have been abducted by IS from Sinjar. As of mid-2019, nearly half of them were still in captivity, including up to 2,000 females ("Fifty Percent," 2017; "Yazidi Woman," 2019). Despite universal outrage, IS boasted of its anti-Yazidi atrocities. The pages of *Dabiq* are dotted with references to the legitimacy of sex slavery of non-Muslim women:

After capture, the Yazidi women and children were divided according to the *shariah* amongst the fighters of the Islamic State who participated in the Sinjar operations, after one fifth of the slaves were transferred to the Islamic State's authority to be divided among other fighters. ("The Revival of Slavery," 2014, p. 15)

Whereas *Dabiq* reflects IS's obsession with controlling the bodies of Sunni Muslim women, its revival of slavery bespeaks a shift in sovereign power from the politics of life to the politics of death. Mbembe's (2003) discussion of slavery in the context of necropolitics is worth quoting at length:

The slave condition results from a triple loss: loss of a "home," loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political status. . . . The slave is therefore kept alive but in a state of injury, in a phantom-like world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity. The violent tenor of the slave's life is manifested through the overseer's disposition to behave in a cruel and intemperate manner and in the spectacle of pain inflicted on the slave's body. Violence, here, becomes an element in manners, like whipping or taking of the slave's life itself: an act of caprice and pure destruction aimed at instilling terror. Slave life, in many ways, is a form of death-in-life. (p. 21)

In the pages of *Dabiq*, IS justifies the death-in-life of its Yazidi slaves by articulating violence with justice, insisting that the enslavement of Yazidi women is inherently just by being the manifestation of "many divine wisdoms and religious benefits, regardless of whether people are aware of this" (Al-Muhajirah, 2015b, p. 45). *Dabiq* denounces Muslims who might question or disapprove of the enslavement of women as "weak-minded and weak hearted," vindicating slavery as an established component of sharia law ("The Revival of Slavery," 2014, p. 17). As it dispenses death and disrupts, IS sees itself as the righteous embodiment of strength and justice. In this role, IS recalls Agamben's notion of sovereignty as "a scandalous unification of the two essentially antithetical principles" of violence and justice (Agamben, 1998, p. 24).

By declaring the enslavement of non-Muslims acceptable in its interpretation of Islamic Law, IS effectively places Yazidis in a "state of exception." In this state, the sovereign power attempts to "include the exception itself within the juridical order by creating a zone of indistinction in which fact and law coincide" (Agamben, 2005, p. 26). Under such circumstances, normal law is not enforced, and, instead, the sovereign power enacts the force that law provides, reducing people to bare life (Agamben, 1998). IS's treatment of Yazidi women can be understood via Agamben's framework. As he explained,

Insofar as its inhabitants were stripped of every political status and wholly reduced to bare life, the camp was also the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation. (Agamben, 1998, p. 97)

IS's treatment of Yazidis echoes the Nazi genocide of Jews: an attempt to systematically annihilate a whole community, its culture and identity, and severe exploitation of surviving members whose continued life is temporary. Accounts by Yazidi survivors of IS and by the propaganda put out by the militant group itself show that IS did in fact apply a "state of exception" treatment to its Yazidi captives. Treated as spoils of war in IS's worldview ("The Revival of Slavery," 2014), Yazidi women were at times held in large detention facilities and subjected to forced marriage, torture, and sexual violence (Roth, 2015). IS positioned Yazidi women it captured outside the legal regime governing its territories.

*Dabiq* magazine provides crucial insights into IS's view and treatment of Yazidi women captives. In several articles, IS paints itself as a sovereign power with a clear mandate over the life and death of those under its rule. For most of their time in captivity, Yazidi women were not necessarily held in fenced camp-like facilities, but the rules and conditions forced on them were tantamount to a metaphorical camp where a brutal state of exception prevailed. The idea of camp does not necessarily have to embody actual concentration camps but can be applied to any space in which "bare life" is systematically produced (Lemke, 2011). After all, as Agamben (1998) wrote, "The camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule" (p. 96). Under IS rule, the existence of Yazidi women was reduced to a most bare form of life. These women were allowed to live because their bodies offered sexual pleasure to IS militants (Roth, 2015). They were also exploited as reproductive machines to give birth to a new generation of militants (Al-Muhajirah, 2015b, p. 45).

Further insights into IS's view of Yazidis can be gleaned from a passage in *Dabiq's* ninth issue, in which captured Yazidi women are identified as *saby* and the enforcement of sex slavery among these women is hailed as a "great prophetic Sunnah" (or tradition) (Al-Muhajirah, 2015b, p. 47). *Saby* is an Arabic term defined in a separate IS pamphlet as a woman from among *ahl al-harb* (the people of war, or those fighting Muslims) who has been captured by Muslims ("Islamic State," 2014). In *Dabiq*, *saby* is used interchangeably with *mulk al-yamin*—meaning "property of the right hand," a sharia concept that describes the lawfulness of enslaved sexual partners (Al-Muhajirah, 2015b, p. 44). The normal laws of the land are suspended when it comes to enslaved women, as *Dabiq* states that such women "became lawful for the one who ends up possessing them even without pronouncement of divorce" by their former husbands (Al-Muhajirah, 2015b, p. 44). In this state of exception, Yazidi women are treated as property, bereft of any sense of value or worth beside their sexual services, and can be disposed of at whim by giving them to other militants or selling them for profit in a slave market ("Islamic State," 2014; "The Revival of Slavery," 2014). The use of concepts such as *saby* and *mulk al-yamin* underscores that enslaved women do not enjoy the same legal status accorded to other Sunni Muslim or non-slave women living under IS jurisdiction.

An article purportedly penned by a woman named Umm Sumayyah Al-Muhajirah (2015b) points to historical examples of the practice of *saby* in the Arabian Peninsula vis-à-vis non-Muslim tribes that fought Muslim armies in the early Islamic period. Aiming to justify the enslavement of Yazidi women, Al-Muhajirah asks, in an instance of twisted logic, whether enslaved women—"concubines," in her words—are better than prostitutes. Addressing Muslims who are critical of IS, she poses a rhetorical question:

Are slave-girls whom we took by Allah's command better, or prostitutes—an evil you do not denounce—who are grabbed by quasi men in the lands of kufr [unbelief] where you live? A prostitute in your lands comes and goes, openly committing sin. She lives by selling her honor, within the sight and hearing of the deviant scholars from whom we don't hear even a faint sound. As for the slave-girl that was taken by the swords of men following the cheerful warrior . . . , then her enslavement is in opposition to human rights and copulation with her is rape[?]. (p. 48)

In the IS imaginary, Muslim women embody the honor of Muslim men, and by extension the Muslim *ummah*, but captured Yazidi women are instruments of pleasure, mere objects. IS's view on slavery is visible when *Dabiq* rejoices that slave markets are established again "against the will of the politically correct" (Al-Muhajirah, 2015b, p. 48) and warns the women and children of "unbelievers" in Western nations that they will be "sold by us in the markets of the Islamic State" ("Interview with Abu Muqatil," 2015, p. 62). As numerous references in *Dabiq* demonstrate, IS views itself as a contemporary manifestation of a historical form of Islamic sovereign power—the caliphate—and thus is fully legitimate in its beliefs and practices. IS bolsters the legitimacy of its enslavement of Yazidi women by reproducing alleged accounts of similar practices by revered figures in Islamic history such as the first rightly guided caliph, Abu Bakr ("The Burning of the Murtad Pilot," 2015, p. 7). Taking it a step further, *Dabiq* attempts to portray Yazidi women's enslavement as a sign of divine support for the prophet of Islam, asking:

Would it be befitting of Allah, the Wise, to continue to support an alleged liar against his supposedly truthful slaves for 23 years (and centuries thereafter at the hands of his caliphates), facilitating for him their slaughter and exodus and the enslavement of their women and children? ("The Fitrah," 2016, p. 24)

Under IS rule, female Yazidi captives in effect became exemplars of what Agamben (1998) famously analyzed as "*homo sacer*"—a figure in ancient Roman law that can be killed but cannot be sacrificed. Agamben (1998) sees "the specificity" of *homo sacer* as follows:

*the unpunishability of his killing and the ban on his sacrifice. . . . What, then, is the life of homo sacer, if it is situated at the intersection of a capacity to be killed and yet not sacrificed, outside both human and divine law? (p. 48, emphasis in original)*

In other words, by excluding its Yazidi victims from the politico-legal community, IS reduces their personhood to mere material existence—or bare life (Agamben, 1998). Bare life, state of exception, and *homo sacer* are ultimate expressions and manifestations of a sovereign power that determines not only whether one has a right to live but how and under what circumstances her or his existence can continue (Agamben, 1998). Once it defined Yazidi women as material spoils of war, IS located them outside the realm of law and life, with a "pattern of methodical plan" subjecting them to cruel mistreatment and forced through circumstances where they would actually long for death (Wheeler, 2016). IS projects itself as a power possessing absolute truth, unwavering and justified in its vision, and commanding life and death in its dominion.

### Conclusion

This article theorizes the type of power that IS wields by focusing on its views and treatment of women. We performed an analysis of all 15 issues of *Dabiq* magazine, IS's main English-language online magazine that was published between July 2014 and July 2016, and focused on IS's textual and visual depictions of women. We analyzed the data through the theoretical framework of biopolitics as developed by Foucault, Agamben, and Mbembe. Our article explains what we call IS's gendered biopolitics by analyzing and comparing IS's treatment and views of Sunni Muslim women, where we see the deployment of disciplinary power, to the way the group treated non-Muslim Yazidi women, a clear example of sovereign and necropolitical power, arguing that Yazidi women were reduced to bare life in conditions that in some ways are similar to a concentration camp.

As a Salafi jihadi group defining itself as a state, IS wields biopolitical power in its disciplinary and sovereign forms. It regulates the lives of women living under its dominion in Iraq and Syria and beyond, down to minute details. It sets rules for how women must dress, what proper roles they should pursue in society, and what the terms of their relationship with men must be. IS's view of women is principally an embodied one, shaped by the fear of women's sexual energy and its effect on men and the social order at large. It neutralizes what it sees as threatening aspects of female sexuality by promoting motherhood and wifehood as key social roles for women. While IS's vision for Muslim women is highly strict, its treatment of the Yazidi religious community, particularly the women, brings the full force of its sovereign power. IS

not only grants itself a mandate over people's right to live or die but also decides what form of life and what form of death they get to have. The group has enslaved Yazidi women, subjecting them to camp-like conditions where they are placed in a state of exception that involves the suspension of prevalent laws for Yazidi women. The juridical order includes the exception within itself and creates a "zone of indistinction" where fact and law coincide. Victims are thus reduced to their biological residue, stripped of any rights, and rendered fair game for exploitation and termination. This underscores the fact that "The very body of *homo sacer* is, in its capacity to be killed but not sacrificed, a living pledge to his subjection to a power of death" (Agamben, 1998, p. 61).

Considered historically, IS is not an aberration. The connection between controlling women and wielding political power has been on display in different guises, worldwide, and throughout history. In fact, it would be a mistake to conclude that our analysis is concerned only with women. Rather, it is concerned with gender as a prism on broader issues of power. As the historian Joan Scott (1986) made clear in a landmark article, "Gender is a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated" (p. 1069).

In fact, IS's reactionary treatment of women and its wielding of various forms of biopolitical power as analyzed in this article open a vista on the group's Manichean worldview that goes far beyond women. In this sense, the way IS views and treats women is a microcosm of its uncompromising worldview of self and other. This echoes an important aspect of Foucault's theory of biopolitics noted by Mbembe (2003), who argued that, by "dividing people into those who must live and those who must die" and "operating on the basis of a split between the living and the dead," biopower organizes "human species into two groups, the subdivision of the population into subgroups, and the establishment of a biological caesura between the ones and the others," which is what Foucault defines as "*racism*" (pp. 16–17, emphasis in original). Our analysis reveals how biopolitics shifts into necropolitics when a group holding rigid and uncompromising views of selfhood and alterity wields power over individuals and populations. IS's differential treatment of Sunni Muslim women and Yazidi women—deploying mostly disciplinary power on the former and sovereign power on the latter—reveals how IS divides the world into rigidly separated groups, with anyone who is not a Sunni Muslim man who pledges allegiance to Salafi jihadism as represented by the caliphate to be subjected to stringent social control, slavery, or death.

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