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Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria

I. Introduction

1. The armed group, the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” (hereinafter “the armed group” or “ISIS”)¹ has made calculated use of public brutality and indoctrination to ensure the submission of communities under its control. A terrorist group, as designated by Security Council under Resolution 2170, it has become synonymous with extreme violence directed against civilians and captured fighters.

2. This paper is based on first-hand victim and witness accounts describing the impact of ISIS’s rule on their lives. In addition, the report is informed by the publications, photographs and video footage distributed by the armed group. The material disseminated by ISIS actively promotes their abuses and crimes. This is in marked contrast to the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and other belligerents who conceal evidence of their violations and abuses. While this paper addresses ISIS conduct, this should not obscure that other parties to the conflict continue to commit egregious violations against civilians and captured belligerents.

3. By publicising its brutality, the so-called ISIS seeks to convey its authority over its areas of control, to show its strength to attract recruits, and to threaten any individuals, groups or States that challenge its ideology. The group has attacked journalists and activists trying to communicate the daily suffering of those living under its yoke. Those still living inside ISIS-controlled areas are often too frightened to speak out, fearing retribution.

4. Based on over 300 interviews with men, women and children who fled or who are living in ISIS-controlled areas, we bring to light the voices of Syrians who ISIS has sought to silence.

II. The rise of ISIS in Syria

5. Initially, ISIS was one faction among hundreds of other armed groups in Syria. In April 2013, it began to develop into a well-organised, dominant armed force in control of large swathes of populated areas in Syria and Iraq, posing a significant threat to peace and stability in the region.

6. Its origins lie in the establishment of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) by Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi in 2004. After merging with other Iraqi jihadist groups in 2006, AQI rebranded itself as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Although degraded by the 2006 - 2011 US counterterrorism campaign in Iraq, the group took advantage of the instability in the region to further recruit and mobilise, a process that accelerated with the outbreak of the Syrian conflict. In 2011, ISI members joined local radical militants in Syria as part of the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat Al-Nusra armed group to fight against Government forces.

7. Following a split with Jabhat Al-Nusra in April 2013, the newly-established ISIS appropriated most of Al-Nusra’s capabilities and manpower. Prioritising the construction of a “state” over fighting the Syrian Government, ISIS consolidated its authority by stifling dissent and targeting local community leaders, other armed group commanders, and activists. This triggered mounting resentment, which led to armed confrontations with other major armed groups in early 2014. Following a withdrawal to its strongholds in north-eastern Syria, the group consolidated its military control and financial capacity.

1 Also known as the «Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham» and “Daesh”.

8. ISIS's resources were eventually reinforced significantly by the group's gains in Iraq in July 2014. Since then, the group has steadily expanded its control over natural resources and territory in eastern Syria. Sporadic fighting in the Kurdish regions of northern Syria escalated into a protracted, intense sub-conflict between the Kurdish armed group YPG and ISIS, culminating in the ongoing battle for Ayn Al-Arab (Kobane) in September 2014.
9. The group's ideology and financial capabilities found resonance among socially and economically desperate communities. Locally, it exploited the gradual empowerment of the most radical armed groups and the existing social fragmentations along sectarian and tribal lines to secure a new network of alliances among local and external supporters.
10. Until the group's successful campaign in Iraq, the threat it posed to regional stability was underestimated by the international community. The failure to find a political solution or any other alternative to stop the violence in Syria and to relieve the population's suffering, left a dangerous vacuum that was filled by radicals and their foreign backers.
11. The external support provided to all belligerents in Syria has contributed to the radicalisation of armed groups, ultimately benefitting ISIS. Charity organisations and wealthy individuals funded radical entities willing to promote their ideologies and serve their agendas. Arms and support provided to armed groups deemed as moderate have repeatedly fallen into the hands of more radical actors, including ISIS.
12. The arrival of large numbers of foreign fighters has contributed to the group's expansion as the most extreme and experienced individuals have joined its ranks. Until very recently, the international community and neighbouring states failed to put in place efficient measures to prevent access to the conflict area.
13. ISIS functions under responsible command and has a hierarchical structure, including a policy level. The group has established a command and control system under Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, who holds absolute power and is supported by a number of entities including a military council. ISIS also depends on a network of regional and local emirs and military commanders to enforce tight discipline among its ranks and ensure full control of its territory. In recent months, the group has also relied on its centralised military leadership to coordinate large redeployments of fighters and equipment to different frontlines. Despite the recruitment of thousands of Syrians to its ranks, the ISIS leadership structure is still largely dominated by foreign fighters.
14. In recent months, the armed group's military capabilities have grown. It has extensively employed brutal tactics, including the use of explosive weapons, mass civilian casualty attacks through suicide or remote detonated car bombs, and the execution of fighters captured during military operations. The group has also relied on its increased mobility and firepower capabilities to surprise its opponents and ensure local superiority. Its military strategy also includes the negotiation of local agreements with various groups as part of a 'divide and rule' policy.
15. ISIS initially relied on military hardware looted from the other Syrian armed belligerents including materiel provided by their external backers. The group significantly boosted its military capabilities after its successful campaign in Iraq. Its financial independence has further allowed the group to acquire military hardware through local markets.
16. In Ar-Raqqah and other areas it controls, ISIS operates a primitive but rigid administrative system that comprises the Al-Hisbah morality police, the general police force, courts, and entities managing recruitment, tribal relations, and education. The group sustains the areas under its control by maintaining some basic services in a highly repressive environment.
17. On 29 June 2014, ISIS proclaimed itself a "Caliphate" initially based on, but not limited to, territories it controls in Syria and Iraq. Its creation had formed an integral part of

the group's rhetorical and military expansionist aims since the outset of its activities. For those inclined to join the movement, the existence of the newly self-proclaimed entity served as an additional motivating factor to join the group. New recruits were not only expected to engage in military activity but also help with building the emerging "state". This declaration demonstrates that the group envisions a long-term plan and has undertaken military operations toward this end.

18. At the core of ISIS's propaganda strategy is an effective use of modern communications, particularly social media for purposes of recruitment and fundraising. Many new recruits, from the region and beyond, have been influenced by widely disseminated violent images of executions, beheadings and stonings.

III. Impact on civilian life

I told the guards that my cousin was imprisoned only because he had said something that ISIS considered to be blasphemous. I said this was not correct, and that it should be for God to deliver his own sentence. This made the guards very angry. They pushed me violently, forcing me to the ground and beating me. I was whipped 400 times and imprisoned for several weeks.

- Interviewee from Aleppo

The ISIS emir answered me in a harsh tone: "Why? Do you have your house here? Do you have your village here? This is not your village and you have no house. I don't want to see you talk about a house here. You don't belong here. By tomorrow not one of you will remain here or come back here".

- Kurdish interviewee forced from his home in northern Aleppo

19. Civilians, including men, women and children, ethnic and religious minorities who remain in ISIS-controlled areas live in fear. Victims and witnesses that fled consistently described being subjected to acts that terrorise and aim to silence the population. ISIS has systematically targeted sources of dissent, detaining and threatening activists, non-governmental organisation workers and journalists with death. Most have fled and ceased reporting from ISIS areas.

20. In areas under the armed group's control, civilians have experienced a relentless assault on their basic freedoms. ISIS enforces its rules summarily, inflicting harsh penalties discriminating against those who transgress or refuse to accept their self-proclaimed rule. ISIS has obstructed the exercise of religious freedoms, the freedom of expression, assembly and association, which are guaranteed by international law. The group has systematically enforced its edicts through its Al-Hisbah morality police to conduct constant surveillance within local communities. Children have been asked to inform on their parents' compliance with ISIS rules. Civilians who fled described a rapid imposition of strict social instructions followed by brutal enforcement. ISIS has attacked social and cultural practices – including weddings, musical events and traditional ceremonies – deemed incompatible with their self-proclaimed beliefs in both urban and rural areas, demonstrating their intent to eradicate these aspects of Syrian culture.

21. Many residents of ISIS-held areas complained of the brutality of violent acts perpetrated under the guise of corporal hudud punishments based on the group's radical interpretation of Shariah law, including lashings and amputations, for offences such as

smoking cigarettes or theft. Victims of ISIS punishments described being subjected to a system based on the principle that “you are guilty unless you can prove your innocence.” Corporal punishments are imposed during public events in an effort to deter those who may oppose the group’s rule and to spread terror among the civilian population.

22. Humanitarian actors supporting the population’s access to food have been unable to reach the nearly 600,000 people in ISIS-controlled Dayr Az-Zawr and Ar-Raqqah governorates since May and July 2014, respectively. In Al-Hasakah governorate, ISIS obstructed the importation of medicine by doctors and medical personnel. One interviewee said that, in April 2014, “once ISIS took over, people who left ISIS areas to get medicine risked being arrested by ISIS.” Doctors and nurses described fleeing due to the restrictions on their professional activities imposed by ISIS. By preventing the supply of humanitarian aid, the group reinforces the dependence of civilians on the services it controls.

23. The group deploys its fighters and materiel in close proximity to civilian areas. Since the start of the international coalition’s aerial attacks on ISIS (‘Operation Inherent Resolve’), civilians living in Minbij (Aleppo) described how ISIS fighters began to position themselves in civilian houses and farms. Airstrikes on ISIS positions have led to some civilian casualties. In one instance, a civilian whose relatives were killed in a coalition airstrike was forced to flee because he complained to ISIS about its presence near his home.

24. Where ISIS has occupied areas with diverse ethnic and religious communities, minorities have been forced either to assimilate or flee. The armed group has undertaken a policy of imposing discriminatory sanctions such as taxes or forced conversion – on the basis of ethnic or religious identity – destroying religious sites and systematically expelling minority communities. Evidence shows a manifest pattern of violent acts directed against certain groups with the intent to curtail and control their presence within ISIS areas.

25. Between September and October 2013, ISIS fighters attacked three Christian churches in Ar-Raqqah governorate, destroying the Greek Catholic church; occupying Al-Shuhada Armenian Orthodox church in Raqqah city and burning an Armenian church in Tel Abyad. As ISIS spread throughout eastern Syria, Christians and their places of worship continued to be attacked. In September 2014, ISIS fighters destroyed an Armenian church in Dayr Az-Zawr.

26. On 23 February 2014, ISIS published a statement addressing Christians that had fled Ar-Raqqah establishing conversion to Islam and the payment of a jizya tax as conditions for their return. The forced conversion of several Assyrian Christians has been documented.

27. Father Dall’Oglio, an Italian Jesuit priest and a peace activist who had been exiled from Syria in 2012 after criticising the Government, was abducted in Raqqah city by ISIS on 29 July 2013. His fate and whereabouts remain unknown.

28. ISIS began to forcibly displace Kurdish civilians from towns in Ar-Raqqah governorate in July 2013. After demanding that all Kurds leave Tel Abyad or else be killed, thousands of civilians, including Turkmen and Arab families fled on 21 July. Its fighters systematically looted and destroyed the property of Kurds, and in some cases, resettled displaced Arab Sunni families from the Qalamoun area (Rif Damascus), Dayr Az-Zawr and Ar-Raqqah in abandoned Kurdish homes. A similar pattern was documented in Tel Arab and Tal Hassel in July 2013. As ISIS consolidated its authority in Ar-Raqqah, Kurdish civilians were forcibly displaced from Tel Akhader and Ayn-Al Arab (Kobane) (Aleppo) in March and September 2014, respectively. As a direct consequence of ISIS conduct, which runs contrary to international humanitarian law and amounts to the war crime of displacing civilians, the demographics of northeastern Syria have been altered.

29. Perpetrated as a widespread and systematic attack against the Kurdish civilian population, these acts amount to the crime against humanity of forcible displacement.

According to former residents, attacks on Shi'a Husaynias and homes in Ar-Raqqah caused mass displacement, while others converted "to survive." The complete destruction of the Uwais Al-Qarni Shi'a Mosque and the desecration of 7th century tombs on 31 May 2014 in Ar-Raqqah were carried out as part of an assault against Shi'a in the area. Sunni mosques constructed around tombs or shrines of religious figures have been considered idolatrous and also destroyed by ISIS.

30. ISIS carries out large-scale victimisation through the systematic imposition of harsh restrictions on basic rights and freedoms indicating an underlying policy. The brutal nature and overall scale of abuses is intended to reinforce the group's absolute monopoly on political and social life to enforce compliance and conformity among communities under their control. Imposition of severe measures disguised as religious edicts has formed part of the attack against the civilian population, in addition to the perpetration of armed violence against civilians, mistreatment of persons taking no active part in hostilities, and violence against identified communities.

31. In attacking churches, historic monuments and buildings dedicated to religion and culture, which did not contain any military objectives, ISIS violated its obligations under customary international humanitarian law. Targeted as such, ISIS has perpetrated the war crime of attacking protected objects. These crimes were committed as part of ISIS's attack on the civilian population in Ar-Raqqah, Dayr Az-Zawr and Aleppo governorates, deliberately inflicting terror. The result of these attacks has been the expulsion of large segments of these communities and the subjugation of those who remained.

IV. Attacks on the civilian population

Both victims' hands were tied to each side of the improvised cross. I went to read the placards. On the first one it read, "This is the fate of those who fight against us." I realized that my 7-year-old son was next to me, still holding my hand and watching this horrifying scene. He later asked me, "Why were they there? Why was their blood on the heads and bodies?" I had to lie to him and say they were waiting for ambulances to come and rescue them.

- Witness to the displayed body of an ISIS victim, Dayr Az-Zawr

ISIS declared through mosques that "Al-Hadd", an Islamic punishment, in this case for looting, would be implemented against someone in [a public square]. At the designated time on the following day, a man was brought to the square, blind-folded. A member of ISIS read the group's judgment. Two people held the victim tightly while a third man stretched his arm over a large wooden board. A fourth man cut off the victim's hand. It took a long time. One of the people who was standing next to me vomited and passed out due to the horrific scene.

- Witness to an amputation in Ar-Raqqah

32. ISIS has beheaded, shot and stoned men, women and children in public spaces in towns and villages across northeastern Syria. ISIS employs the practice of takfir, declaring someone to be a heretic, in order to justify attacks on any individual or group it perceives to be a challenge to its dominance. Many of those executed were accused of being affiliated with other armed groups or collaborating with the Government. In public declarations made before the executions, ISIS has designated such people as kufar or infidels.

33. The mutilated bodies of male victims are often placed on display, a warning to the local population of the consequences of failure to submit to the armed group's authority.

One man, a witness to the killing of a 16-year-old boy in Al-Ashara (Dayr Az-Zawr), said the boy's body was hung on a cross in a public square "for people to see what it looks like to be punished by ISIS."

34. Executions have been recorded in Aleppo, Ar-Raqqah, Idlib, Al-Hasakah and Dayr Az-Zawr governorates. They follow a consistent pattern. ISIS, often through the Al-Hisbah morality police, informs residents of the time and place of the execution and urges them to attend. Those found on the streets nearby are taken by force to witness the killings. Before executions, ISIS fighters announce the victims' "crimes". Following the killings, the corpses are placed on public display, often on crosses, for up to three days, serving as a warning to local residents. Witnesses saw scenes of still-bleeding bodies hanging from crosses and of heads placed on spikes along park railings.

35. Interviewees have remarked that executions have become common and that there are "always" heads and bodies on display in the squares and roundabouts of the larger towns. The growing desensitisation underpins the trauma of the civilian population.

36. ISIS also carries out amputations and lashings in public spaces in its areas of control. Men have had their hands amputated for allegedly committing theft. The group has also amputated the fingers of men caught smoking. Men have been lashed for being in the company of women who ISIS considers to be "improperly" dressed, for smoking, not attending Friday prayers, trading during prayer times and for having tattoos.

37. ISIS regards Yazidi Kurdish community as infidels and their religious practices, 'deviant'. On 29 May 2014, ISIS attacked Al-Taliliyah (Al-Hasakah), which used to contain a Yazidi Kurdish community. The village had been taken over by internally displaced persons, most of whom were women and children, from Al-Safira (Aleppo). ISIS fighters – mainly foreign fighters who did not speak Arabic and so could not understand the protestations of those they were killing – believed their victims to be Yazidi Kurds. The executions halted only when an Iraqi fighter arrived and translated to the other ISIS fighters that the civilians were Sunni Arabs.

38. ISIS has set up detention centres in former Government prisons, military bases, hospitals, schools and in private houses. Former detainees described being beaten, whipped, electrocuted and suspended by their arms from walls or the ceiling. Witnesses to public executions remarked that the victims often bore signs of prior beatings. Detainees are held in dirty and overcrowded cells. Many spent long periods of time in handcuffs. Detainees interviewed stated that neither they nor their cellmates received medical treatment. One detainee recalled a FSA fighter being left in his cell beaten, with his hands cuffed behind his back and an open fracture on his leg.

39. ISIS has sought to control the flow of information in the areas it controls. Scores of Syrian journalists and human rights activists have been abducted, disappeared, tortured and executed. Their targeting largely failed to attract widespread media attention. As early as June 2013, ISIS began to abduct and torture Syrian journalists in Aleppo and Ar-Raqqah governorates. Former prisoners stated that the most brutal treatment inside ISIS detention centres was meted out to those suspected of being part of other armed groups, local media workers, and fixers working with international journalists.

40. One journalist, abducted in June 2013, was beaten in the ISIS detention centre in Jarablus (Aleppo) accused of being a spy. Another Syrian journalist, held in an ISIS detention centre in Ar-Raqqah governorate in January 2014, was beaten and, upon release, was threatened with death if he photographed or filmed any of the armed group's activities, with one fighter telling him "we will make sure you will never again be able to do anything on top of the earth".

41. In October and November 2013, journalists working for international television channels were killed in Aleppo city. Since that time, media workers have disappeared in

ISIS-controlled areas; their fate and whereabouts remain unknown. On or about 19 August and 2 September 2014, ISIS executed two American journalists. On 13 September 2014, the group executed a British aid worker. All three had been abducted and detained inside Syria. The group filmed the executions, attempting to impact international policy and the anticipated aerial attacks on their positions.

42. Journalists and activists working to document the violations and abuses suffered by their local communities under ISIS have been denied their special protection under international humanitarian law and have been disappeared, detained, tortured and killed.

43. As an organised armed group exercising effective control over territory, ISIS has an obligation to ensure humane treatment. By regularly using violence to life, torture, mutilation, cruel treatment, ISIS is violating binding international humanitarian law. Its commanders can be held individually responsible for the ensuing war crimes.

44. Subjecting persons to mutilation, by permanently disfiguring or disabling them through the removal of appendages amounts to the war crime of mutilation, cruel treatment and torture. Displays of dead, mutilated bodies are deliberate acts intended to humiliate and degrade the victims and their family, amounting to the war crimes of outrages upon personal dignity.

45. By orchestrating systematic harm against a civilian population, ISIS has demonstrated its capacity and intent to wilfully apply measures of intimidation and terror, such as violence to life and inhuman treatment inflicting great suffering and injury to bodily integrity.

46. ISIS has committed torture and murder as part of an attack on a civilian population in Aleppo, Ar-Raqqah, Dayr Az-Zawr and Al-Hasakah governorates, amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity. The war crime of murder has been committed in Idlib governorate. The group has further committed the crime against humanity of enforced disappearance in Ar-Raqqah and Aleppo governorates.

V. Violations against women

A 19 year old university student committed suicide because her parents forced her to marry a man from members of ISIS. Many families marry their daughters (including those under 18) to ISIS members because of their fears to be arrested or killed.

- Interviewee from Ar-Raqqah

After capture, the Yazidi women and children were then divided according to the Shariah amongst the fighters... who participated in the Sinjar operations, after one-fifth of the slaves were transferred to the IS's authority to be divided as khums [spoils of war].

DABIQ (ISIS publication)

47. In ISIS-controlled areas of Syria, women and girls have largely been confined to their houses, excised from public life.

48. ISIS regulations dictate what women must wear, with whom they may socialise, and where they may work. Women and girls over the age of 10 years must be fully covered when venturing outdoors. One woman, who had fled from the ISIS-stronghold of Minbij (Aleppo), described her clothing being checked at multiple checkpoints as she moved about the town. She explained, "you can hardly see your way...I fell many times. It is hard to

breathe. You are walking in the street but it feels like a prison cell.” Women and girls are not permitted to be in the company of men outside of their immediate family. For women whose male relatives are dead, missing or fighting, the simple act of going to purchase food has become a hazardous undertaking.

49. ISIS’s rules exacerbate the subordinate role of women in society, reinforcing patriarchal attitudes. Failure to abide by these rules is punishable by lashing. Punishments may be carried out by the Al-Hisbah morality police but increasingly they are the responsibility of the all-female brigade, Al-Khans’aa, which assists in monitoring adherence to dress codes and enforcing punishments.

50. These enforcement brigades act in violation of international humanitarian law and perpetrate the war crimes of outrages upon personal dignity, torture and cruel treatment against women. The psychological and physical harm caused by ISIS’s treatment of women, the onerous instructions imposed on their dress code, and restrictions on their freedom of movement demonstrate discriminatory treatment on the basis of gender.

51. Unmarried women – whom ISIS considers to be females over the age of puberty – pose a particular threat to the armed group’s enforced social order. Parents of unmarried women and girls are terrified of their daughters being forced to marry ISIS fighters and as a result, early marriage is on the rise. Their fears are not unfounded. There are distressing accounts of fighters taking girls as young as 13 years old away from their families, resulting in violations of international humanitarian law and acts that amount to war crimes of cruel treatment, sexual violence and rape.

52. ISIS has executed women, as well as men, for unapproved contact with the opposite sex, resulting in charges of adultery. In Ar-Raqqah governorate, ISIS executed eight women on these grounds on three separate occasions in June and July 2014. Most were stoned to death, ostensibly for adultery. Others interviewed indicated that the women had been discovered helping fighters from other armed groups. According to footage released by ISIS, the women were made to stand, while veiled with their hands bound to their sides, in a shallow grave, while men hurled large rocks at their heads until they collapsed and eventually died from their injuries. Stonings, perpetrated by ISIS and allied clans, have recently been documented in Dayr Az-Zawr and Hama governorates. In August 2014, ISIS detained and beheaded a female dentist in Al-Mayadin (Dayr Az-Zawr) who had continued to treat patients of both sexes. These killings violate binding international humanitarian law and amount to the war crimes of torture, cruel treatment, outrages upon personal dignity, murder, and sentencing and execution without due process. The killings and acts of sexual violence, perpetrated by ISIS as part of its attack on the civilian population, constitute the crimes against humanity of murder, torture, rape and sexual violence.

53. During its early August 2014 attack on Sinjar in northern Iraq, ISIS abducted hundreds of Yazidi women and girls. Some abductees have been taken into Syria and sold as ‘war booty’ in markets in locations across Ar-Raqqah. Regarded as chattels, these women and girls are imprisoned in houses and are being held in sexual slavery.

54. While some women appear to have been sold to individual men living in Ar-Raqqah, others are held in ISIS rest houses in urban areas in the governorate. Those held by ISIS are suffering rapes by multiple fighters returning from the battlefield. The systematic sexual violence and enslavement – perpetrated by ISIS and by the men who have bought them at public auction – is continuing.

55. ISIS has publicised its own intentions regarding these violations stating “after capture, the Yazidi women and children were then divided according to the Shariah amongst the fighters... who participated in the Sinjar operations, after one-fifth of the slaves were transferred to the IS’s authority to be divided as khums [spoils of war].” The group, in its recent magazine, welcome the enslavement of the Yazidi women, declaring one of the signs of the Hour [Apocalypse] to be when “the slave girl gives birth to her

master”. In sexually enslaving Yazidi women and girls and forcing them to bear the children of ISIS fighters, the armed group views the offspring as belonging to the father, superior to the mother, and prevents another generation of Yazidis from being born.

56. ISIS attacks on Yazidi women and girls now being held inside Syria are violations of international humanitarian law and amount to the war crime of sexual slavery, sexual violence, rape and forced pregnancy.

57. The enslavement of Yazidi women was undertaken as part of ISIS’s attack on civilian communities considered to be infidels. Their treatment in unlawful confinement and stated motivation behind their capture and enslavement demonstrates the intent of ISIS to forcibly impregnate and thereby affect the ethnic and religious composition of the group. Undertaken as part of a widespread and systematic attack, these acts amount to the crimes against humanity of enslavement, rape and sexual violence. The nature of attacks on the Yazidis, taken together with ISIS’s public statements over social media, suggests a denial of this religious group’s right to exist.

VI. Violations against children

I saw at least ten armed ISIS members aged 13–14 years old. These boys served as guards at ISIS headquarters and at checkpoints. They were armed with Kalashnikovs and grenades.

- Interviewee from Al-Hasakah

People who were caught eating during the fast of Ramadan were lashed in the streets. An ISIS member approached a 14-year-old boy after seeing him drinking water, then dragged him to the middle of the crowd in the street, announced his ‘crime’ and lashed him 79 times.

- Interviewee from Ar-Raqqah

58. Children have been the victims, perpetrators and witnesses of ISIS executions. Boys under the age of 18 have been executed – either beheaded or shot – for alleged affiliation with other armed groups. ISIS fighters under 18 years of age are said to have performed the role of executioner. A 16-year-old fighter reportedly cut the throats of two soldiers, captured from Tabqa airbase in late August 2014, in Slouk (Ar-Raqqah). Children are often present in the crowds at the executions and cannot avoid seeing the publicly displayed corpses in the days that follow. One father from Dayr Az-Zawr stated that the first time he saw the body of a man hanging from a cross in Al-Mayadin in late July 2014, he stood for several minutes, transfixed by the horror of the scene, before realising that his 7-year-old son was with him, also looking at the body. That night, his son was not able to sleep and woke up repeatedly in panic. His father described feeling immense guilt for exposing his son to such cruelty.

59. The public execution of 15-year-old Mohammed Qatta, a coffee seller in Aleppo on 9 June 2013 was an early demonstration of the brutal way in which ISIS punishes and uses terror to ensure discipline among children, in particular boys. Collected information reveals that ISIS prioritises children as a vehicle for ensuring long-term loyalty, adherence to their ideology and a cadre of devoted fighters that will see violence as a way of life.

60. Education is employed as a tool of indoctrination, designed to foster a new generation of supporters. In many areas, the school curriculum has been amended to reflect ideological priorities and weapons training. It has established training camps across areas

under its control. Since September 2013, Al-Bouhtri School in Al-Bab (Aleppo) has been used as an ISIS recruitment and military training facility for boys under the age of 18. The Sharea youth camp near Tabqa (Ar-Raqqah) reportedly trains over 350 boys between the ages of 5 and 16 years for combat roles. The armed group also deliberately aims propaganda at children. In Raqqah city, children are gathered for screenings of videos depicting mass executions of Government soldiers, desensitising them to extreme violence. By using, conscripting and enlisting children for active combat roles, the group is perpetrating abuses and war crimes on a massive scale in a systematic and organised manner.

61. Following the abduction of 153 Kurdish boys, aged between 14 and 16 years, on 29 May 2014, the group detained them in a school in Minbij (Aleppo), screened videos of beheadings and attacks, and subjected the boys to daily instruction on militant ideology for a five-month period. Those who disagreed were punished with severe beatings. Upon their release, they were told they had completed their religious training. Parents of the boys described fearing that their sons were deliberately groomed to inject ISIS's worldview into their Kurdish communities.

62. ISIS has instrumentalised and abused children on a systematic scale. The deliberate nature of violations against children is apparent. By exploiting schools to indoctrinate children, the armed group fails in its obligations to ensure education and the protection of children from the dangers arising in war. In training and using children for combat roles, ISIS has violated international humanitarian law and perpetrated war crimes on a mass scale.

VII. Violations committed during ISIS military assaults

The exhibition of heads (of the captured soldiers) by ISIS took place in the centre of the town. It seems that they were killed just a short time earlier, as the signs of blood were still apparent.

- Interviewee from Ar-Raqqah

The senior judge came, and said "we do this in front of your eyes, so you can go back and tell your children and your neighbours that this is how kufar end up, this is what they will eventually face."

- Witness to an execution of a Kurdish fighter in Ar-Raqqah

63. By mid-2014, ISIS had besieged the 17th Division's base in Raqqah city and the Tabqa airbase, two of the last Syrian army positions in Ar-Raqqah governorate. When the 17th Division base fell on 25 July 2014, the armed group committed large-scale violations of binding international humanitarian law and the war crime of murder and mutilation, killing the soldiers captured inside and later beheading many of their corpses. Residents of Raqqah city and Slouk described that, in the days that followed the attack, ISIS displayed the bodies and heads in the town squares. Videos, some recorded by the group, showed children looking at the mutilated corpses.

64. By 23 August 2014, the group had launched its final assault on Tabqa airbase. As it became apparent that the base would fall to ISIS, some soldiers fled across the desert. While a few made it to the safety of army positions many miles away, others were captured and killed. Two soldiers, captured outside the base, were brought to Slouk and executed in a public square between 28 and 30 August 2014. ISIS read the judgment, declaring that the

soldiers, who were Sunni, were traitors and kufar before cutting their throats. Two more captured soldiers were executed publicly in Tabqa in late August 2014.

65. After killing the soldiers captured near the base, ISIS mutilated their bodies. The group placed the decapitated heads of some of the soldiers on public display in squares and on roundabouts in Tabqa and Raqqah cities, terrorising the local population. Other soldiers, injured during the attack on the base and weakened from lack of water, died in the desert.

66. Over two hundred men, most captured still inside the Tabqa airbase, were stripped to their underwear and forced to walk into the desert. A video of this forced march was recorded and later distributed by ISIS. A later video showed hundreds of bodies lying dead in the sand, bearing gunshot wounds to the head.

67. In mid-July 2014, ISIS fighters seized the Sha'ar gas field in eastern Homs, killing an alleged 350 people in close quarters after capturing the area. Among those killed were technicians and other staff working at the gas fields and their family members, including children. The body of a doctor who was killed in the attack was found on 27 July in his medical clinic, with his hands tied and shot at close range. Civilian residents of nearby villages, such as Al-Mahfoura, were also killed in the attack.

68. Ar-Raqqah, Dayr Az-Zawr and Al-Hasakah governorates, with dominant tribal communities, have posed a particular challenge to ISIS rule. The massacre of the Al-Sheitat tribe in Dayr Az-Zawr in August 2014 was perpetrated in a struggle for control of oil resources near the town of Mohassan. One survivor described seeing "many heads hanging on walls while I and my family escaped." Individuals living nearby reported seeing freshly dug mass graves. Published video indicates that ISIS fighters conducted a mass execution of fighting-age male members of the Al-Sheitat tribe. On 6 November 2014, it was reported that ISIS commander, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, issued a statement, granting members of the Al-Sheitat tribe permission to return to their homes, upon the condition that they do not assemble, surrender all weapons and inform on all "apostates" to ISIS. All "traitors" would be killed.

69. Since early 2014, ISIS has besieged the predominantly Kurdish region of Ayn Al-Arab (Kobane), cutting off supplies of food and electricity into the area. The group had launched several attacks, which had been successfully repelled by the YPG, Kurdish forces fighting inside Syria. On 15 September 2014, buoyed by its recent successes in Syria and Iraq, ISIS launched a multi-front attack on the Ayn Al-Arab (Kobane) region with heavy weapons, artillery, tanks, and thousands of fighters.

70. Between 15 September and 5 October 2014, ISIS advanced quickly through the countryside, amidst heavy clashes with the YPG. By the first week of October, the group entered the city, seizing some of its outer neighbourhoods. As ISIS moved towards Ayn Al-Arab (Kobane), more than 200,000 persons were displaced as they fled ISIS attacks. Most of those interviewed stated that they feared executions, rape, and abductions that ISIS reportedly committed against the Yazidi Kurds in Sinjar, Iraq during the ISIS attack there in September 2014. Close to 400 villages were emptied. Some of those who did not flee – who were too old, too infirm or who had remained to protect their property – were executed by ISIS. Others were taken by force to Tel Abyad (Ar-Raqqah) where they were detained and beaten. On release, they were forced to leave the area. Houses in rural Ayn Al-Arab (Kobane) were systematically looted by ISIS fighters, with goods and livestock transported to markets in Ar-Raqqah governorate.

71. ISIS has executed Kurdish fighters captured during its attack. In mid-September 2014 in Tel Abyad (Ar-Raqqah), ISIS executed a female Kurdish fighter before a group of detained civilians from Ayn Al-Arab (Kobane). Before cutting her throat, a fighter told the crowd "she has fought us for three months with the kufar, and now we will behead her in front of you, and then, when you leave, you will tell your children, and neighbours, that this is the end and the fate of kufar".

72. In carrying out mass killings of captured fighters and civilians following military assaults, ISIS members have perpetrated egregious violations of binding international humanitarian law and the war crime of murder on a massive scale.

VIII. Conclusions

73. The testimonies collected reveal that ISIS seeks to subjugate civilians under its control and dominate every aspect of their lives through terror, indoctrination, and the provision of services to those who obey. ISIS has sought to entrench its militant extremist ideology by indoctrinating children and suppressing freedom of expression. Surveillance, coercion, fear and punishment are used to inhibit any dissent. Discrimination on the basis of gender is used to implement rigid social norms.

74. As an armed group bound by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and customary international law, ISIS has violated its obligations toward civilians and persons hors de combat, amounting to war crimes. In areas where ISIS has established effective control, ISIS has systematically denied basic human rights and freedoms and in the context of its attack against the civilian population, has perpetrated crimes against humanity.

75. Since its establishment, ISIS has acted toward a common purpose. The level of organisation, character of its ranks and membership, and long-term vision indicate a cohesive and coordinated group. The military operations carried out by ISIS have been motivated by the group's desire to seize natural resources in northeastern Syria and to subdue the civilian population living in areas under its control.

76. ISIS functions under responsible command and has a hierarchical structure including a policy level. The group has demonstrated its capacity to impose a policy on its members and ensure the coordinated implementation of decisions made by its leadership. With the capacity and means to attack the civilian population on a large scale, ISIS has carried out mass victimization against civilians, including segments of the population on the basis of gender, religion and ethnicity. According to the evidence collected, there are reasonable grounds to believe that ISIS has carried out attacks in accordance with an organisational policy.

77. ISIS has perpetrated murder and other inhumane acts, enslavement, rape, sexual slavery and violence, forcible displacement, enforced disappearance and torture. These acts have been committed as part of a widespread and systematic attack against the civilian population in Aleppo, Ar-Raqqah, Al-Hasakah and Dayr Az-Zawr governorates. This attack has emerged from April 2013 to the present day and is manifested through the coordinated campaign of spreading terror among the civilian population. The terror inflicted on the civilian population is clearly evidenced by witness and victim accounts. The abuses and crimes committed led to the intended submission of the civilian population. This terror was inflicted through a systematic imposition of restrictions on basic rights and freedoms and through the widespread commission of international humanitarian law violations and war crimes, including sentencing and executions without due process, killing, mutilation, rape, sexual violence, forced pregnancy, torture, cruel treatment, the use and recruitment of children, and outrages upon personal dignity.

78. The abuses, violations and crimes committed by ISIS against Syrians have been deliberate and calculated. The commanders of ISIS have endorsed and directed harm against the civilian population under their control. The commanders of ISIS have acted wilfully, perpetrating these war crimes and crimes against humanity with clear intent of attacking persons with awareness of their civilian or hors de combat status. They are individually criminally responsible for these crimes.

VII. Recommendations

79. On the basis of its legal findings, the Commission makes the recommendations below:

80. To the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic:

(a) Honour its binding legal obligation to protect its citizens from crimes against humanity and other grave violations.

81. To all parties to the conflict:

(b) Take immediate steps to de-escalate the violence and to increase the protection of civilians;

(c) End all human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law;

(d) Comply with international humanitarian law and prioritise the protection of civilians and children recruited into ISIS;

(e) Comply effectively with Security Council Resolution 2139 including through facilitating the expansion of humanitarian relief operations and allow rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access for United Nations humanitarian agencies and their implementing partners.

82. To the international community:

(f) Reach a sustainable solution to the ongoing armed conflict in Syria through an inclusive and Syrian-led political process with a view to full implementation of the Geneva Communiqué of 30 June 2012; recognising that the lack of a political process has allowed extremism to fester, the international community and the Syrian Government cannot further delay this process;

(g) Ensure that peace or reconciliation discussions systematically incorporate child protection concerns including the cessation and prevention of violations against children, rehabilitation and reintegration of recruited children, and accountability for perpetrators of grave violations against children;

(h) Implement effectively Security Council Resolution 2170 and ensure that the members of ISIS most responsible for the perpetration of abuses of human rights and violations of international humanitarian law are held accountable;

(i) Adopt stronger remedial and preventative actions in Security Council resolutions, focusing on the suppression of war crimes and combating current climate of impunity benefiting ISIS;

(j) Engage international accountability mechanisms, including the International Criminal Court, to hold individuals, including ISIS commanders, responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

83. To influential states:

(k) Comply with obligations as High Contracting Parties to the Geneva Conventions to take all possible steps to ensure compliance with the rules of international humanitarian law;

(l) Cease any transfer, supply, or selling of arms to actors in Syria if there is a risk that they will be used in the commission of crimes against humanity, grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions, attacks against civilian objects or civilians, or other war crimes;

(m) Exert influence over armed groups to take appropriate measures ensuring that they abide by the obligations set out in Security Council Resolutions 2139, 2165, 2170 and 2178, in particular through the cessation of funding and trade with ISIS and individuals affiliated with the armed group;

(n) Prioritise child protection through the Children and Armed Conflict agenda at the Security Council;

(o) Respect the principle of non-refoulement and abstain from forcibly returning any refugees to the Syrian Arab Republic, unless the conduct of all parties to the conflict improves, as verified by UN human rights monitors;

(p) Address adequately individuals' violations of international humanitarian law in order to contribute to efforts to suppress war crimes, when undertaking domestic efforts to prosecute foreign fighters in line with Security Council Resolution 2178.

84. To humanitarian agencies:

(q) Give priority to and expand the provision of psychosocial support to children associated with armed groups, including rehabilitation of children who have been subjected to indoctrination in ISIS training camps and schools;

(r) Give priority to and expand the provision of specialised medical services and psychosocial support to women and girls, in particular victims of sexual violence.
