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Crusader Hirelings or Loyal Subjects? Evolving Jihadist Perspectives on Christian Minorities in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

In contrast to common assumptions, jihadist movements' view of Christian minorities in the Middle East has been neither unambiguous nor static. It changes according to the overall political conflict in the region and is characterized by specific, unpredictable struggles that arise locally. By studying the official statements of al-Qaeda and ISIS, their ideological and strategic writings and their conduct *vis-à-vis* indigenous Christians in the Middle East, this article seeks to paint a more complex picture of how jihadists perceive this minority. One key finding is that the Christians of the Middle East and the foreign Christian 'Crusaders' are not a single phenomenon or foe in the conceptual worldview of jihadists. Second, rather than seeking to eradicate Christians completely, jihadist movements wish primarily to demonstrate the dominance of Muslims and their role as legitimate rulers over Christian minorities. Third, terrorist attacks on Christians and churches have been devastating and deadly, especially in Egypt and Iraq, but local Christian minorities are not a top priority target for most jihadist groups.

KEYWORDS

Jihadism; Christians in the Middle East; Iraq; Syria; al-Qaeda; ISIS

Introduction

The rise of al-Qaeda, the 'Islamic State' (ISIS)[1] and related jihadist groups[2] in several Middle Eastern countries has highlighted the issue of how militant Islamists view and relate to Christian minorities in Muslim countries.[3] At first glance, this seems relatively straightforward. Al-Qaeda and ISIS are waging a global war against the Western Judaeo-Christian civilization led by the US, and their enemies are often described by references to Christianity, such as the 'Crusader alliance' and 'Jews and Crusaders'. All groups and persons who in one way or another can be associated with this alliance are the enemies of the jihadists.

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[1]The jihadist movement that calls itself the 'Islamic State' is known under a plethora of names and abbreviations. In this study we use the abbreviation ISIS ('Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham'). Other common terms include IS, ISIL and Daesh.

[2]The jihadist movement can be defined as composed of militant Sunni Muslim rebel and/or terrorist groups that by and large share the ideological worldview of al-Qaeda and/or ISIS, including their commitment to violent struggle. In this article, we use jihadism and militant Islamism interchangeably. For a discussion of the term jihadism, see e.g. Sedgwick, 'Jihadism, Narrow and Wide'.

[3]An early version of this paper was first published in Norwegian as Lia, 'Korsfarernes medløpere eller lydige undersåtter?'.

Oftentimes, the term Christians or 'Nazarenes' (*al-Naṣārā*)[4] is used explicitly to denote the enemy. Thus, it comes as no surprise that jihadist terrorist campaigns and insurgencies have had a particularly severe impact on Christian minorities in the Middle East, as witnessed in a long series of brutal terror attacks on churches and other visible symbols of the Christians' presence in the Middle East over the past decades. Jihadist attacks that take place against small, already marginalized Christian communities lead to sustained displacement and can – in practice – mean an existential threat for a community.

In the mass media coverage of jihadist terrorist attacks and the public debate, the historical context and strategic dimension that underlie jihadist terrorism against Christian minorities receive scant attention. This type of violence is often framed as blind or wanton, driven by religiously motivated hatred. An overall strategy or rationale is seldom attributed to jihadist groups beyond a boundless general hatred of Christians or Christianity. The fast-growing scholarly literature on jihadism has also paid little attention to how, why and to what degree Christian minorities are targeted. When Christians and Christianity are mentioned in this literature, it is usually as an inherent part of the 'Crusader-Jew-alliance'. The growing literature on ISIS in recent years rarely makes a more nuanced analysis of the group's relation to Christians.[5] There are exceptions that offer more details on ISIS's relation to Christians[6] but, usually, little or no distinction has been made between the group's view on Christians and its view on other religious minorities such as Shi'a Muslims and Yezidis.[7]

Upon closer inspection, however, this is somewhat misleading. To our knowledge, there has been no substantial analysis of jihadists' ideological views on Christians and their manifestations on the ground in recent jihadist proto-states. A study of official statements of al-Qaeda and ISIS, their ideological and strategic writings and their conduct *vis-à-vis* indigenous Christians in the Middle East, reveals a more complex picture of how jihadist movements perceive this minority, resulting in three key findings. First, the Christians of the Middle East and 'the Crusaders' in al-Qaeda's conceptual world are two very different groups, and they are not referred to as a single phenomenon or foe. It is true that Middle Eastern Christians are regarded with a substantial amount of distrust, suspicion and at times hostility, but they are nevertheless not ideologically defined as the main enemy by most jihadists.

Another key finding is that, rather than seeking to eradicate Christians completely, the jihadists wish primarily to demonstrate the dominance of Muslims and their role as legitimate rulers over Christian minorities.[8] In situations where jihadist groups control territories with a civilian population, Christians (who choose, or are forced, to stay) are required to act as inferior, obedient minions with low visibility and minimal religious activities. An explicit prohibition of anything akin to public preaching or proselytization

[4]Transliterations of Arabic terms in this article are used mainly to help clarify and define concepts and in references and sources originally rendered in Arabic. Names of persons and groups are generally not transliterated but are written as they usually appear in English. (An exception is the English-language ISIS journal *Dābiq*, which is written with *ā* as in the original.)

[5]See, for example, McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse*; Stern and Berger, *ISIS*; Warrick, *Black Flags*.

[6]Revkin, 'Legal Foundations of the Islamic State', 16; Aarseth, *Mosul under ISIS*, 33–4, 38; Rubin and Wasserstein, *Dhimmis and Others*.

[7]See, for example, Kruczek, 'Christian Minorities'; Raben, 'ISIS Eradication'.

[8]This view on minorities is not unique to the jihadist movement, but is a rather typical feature of a number of ultra-nationalist or right-populist currents throughout the world.

is strictly enforced. Jihadist groups will simultaneously – in their quest to appear as true Salafists and followers of the Prophet's way of life – often proclaim that they are giving Christians the status of a protected minority as 'People of the Book'. There are clear examples of this being the case, as we shall see below.[9] However, despite the lack of a declared aim to eradicate Christians, the result of jihadist groups' control has often amounted to eradication because Christian communities are small and vulnerable, and flee their homes in response to the threat against them.

A third key finding is that it is not a priority for most jihadist groups to attack local Christian institutions, churches and persons. Harassment, violent skirmishes and religious persecution affecting Christian minorities are without a doubt a major issue in a number of Muslim majority countries, but low-level violent events of this kind are often not the work of organized jihadist groups. One key reason for this is that the al-Qaeda leadership has been keen to avoid local violent conflicts, which take away the focus from the main enemy, namely the external enemy: the United States and its 'Crusader' and apostate allies. When jihadist attacks on Christian minorities occur, they are justified by claims that the Christians have overstepped their boundary markers. They have gone beyond their rightful role as People of the Book, and they must be punished to teach them their proper place, as a subordinate group, under the banner of Islam.

In what follows, three themes are discussed in more detail: ideological outlook, the exercise of state authority, and target priorities. The empirical basis for this analysis is founded upon a variety of primary sources. First, the ideological dimension analysis draws upon textual material from online repositories of jihadist propaganda literature. The discussion of the second theme – the exercise of state authority – also relies on propaganda material produced by al-Qaeda and ISIS, especially the archive of administrative documents gathered and published by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi. In addition, during fieldtrips to Iraqi Kurdistan in 2016 and 2019, the authors conducted interviews with Christians who had been living in Mosul and surrounding villages when ISIS took control of the area.[10] Finally, the exploration of the third theme – jihadist target priorities –builds on data from existing databases on jihadist violence.

Christians in jihadist theology

Christian minorities in the Middle East are seldom referred to in the jihadists' voluminous propaganda materials. Rather, attention is directed towards the alleged crimes of the West and the US and the complicity of Arab and Muslim regimes in the oppression, occupation and persecution of Muslims. Incumbent political and religious authorities and moderate Islamic opposition movements are the subject of a harsh critique and, when the situation allows, physical threats and violent attacks. Very often, the degree of proximity to and cooperation with foreign occupation forces and political authorities determine how the enemy hierarchy is regarded.

In jihadist ideological and theological literature, one finds broad references to a series of 'deviant' ideological currents and schools of thought (*ikhwān*, *surūriyya*, *ḥizb al-taḥrīr*,

[9]Another People of the Book, the Jews, are only infrequently referred to as such. ISIS has included Jews with Christians as protected people in its primary propaganda journal (ISIS, 'Break the Cross', 63), but this remained a largely theoretical issue as there were hardly any Jews living in the areas occupied by ISIS.

[10]All interviewees are anonymized for their own security.

wasaṭiyya, *murjiʾa*, *shīʿa*, *al-aḥbāsh*, *ṣūfiyya*, etc.) – with a detailed and substantiated explanation of why they are deviant, misled, disbelievers and apostates. The majority of this literature is devoted to refuting the arguments of the Muslim critics of Salafi-Jihadism. Nevertheless, in the apologetic jihadist literature, one does find discussions about Christianity. More recently, ISIS devoted almost an entire issue of their propaganda magazine *Dābiq* to Christians and Christianity.[11]

Jihadist discourse on Christian minorities often relies on crude readings of classical Islamic scholars and their anti-Christian polemics. The complex and interwoven history of early Islam and Christianity, and 'the diversity of Muslim attitudes' towards Christian doctrines is largely ignored, however.[12] Instead, jihadist ideologues have favoured a literal reading of Prophetic traditions and qur'anic verses, prescribing a circumscribed and subservient position for Christian subjects under Muslim overlordship. In this context, the concepts of *dhimmī* (protected) and *ahl al-dhimma* (people of the covenant) are frequently referred to in jihadist texts dealing with Christian minorities (see below). The notion originates in a pact concluded by the Caliph ʿUmar with the Christians of Syria, which laid the foundation for minority policies during the first Caliphates.[13] However, in contrast to the multifaceted approach to this concept in Islamic scholarship,[14] the jihadists have adopted a hardline interpretation, not unlike many contemporary Salafist scholars.[15] Hence, the jihadists appeal to the same Salafist constituencies when they claim to be reviving authentic norms and traditions, 'the real Islam', at a time when Muslim scholars are seeking modernist interpretations compatible with the modern world.

Pre-ISIS jihadist ideologues on Christian minorities

Historically, the largest online library of Salafi-Jihadist ideological literature, the now defunct website *Minbar al-tawḥīd wa-al-jihād* (The pulpit for monotheism and jihad, www.tawhed.ws), has played a key role in defining the authoritative texts of the Salafi-Jihadist ideological corpus. The website, featuring thousands of written texts, as well as audio-taped speeches and lectures, by more than 120 authors, had its own section devoted to '*al-naṣrāniyya*' (Christianity),[16] which contained 13 texts ranging from long apologetic writings with theological proofs of the infallibility of Islam and historical 'studies' about the Copts' alleged 'dubious role' in the struggle against external enemies, to communiqués and commentaries on actual political issues, such as Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Israel in 2009.

The website gave the numbers of readers and/or downloads for each text and they ranged from approximately 3,600 to over 37,000 (by early 2015) but none of the texts

[11] *Dābiq* 15), published ca. July 2016. This issue was given the title 'Break the Cross'.
[12] Cited in Hoover, 'Early and Medieval Muslim Attitudes', 2. See also Freidenreich, 'Christians'; Heyberger, 'Eastern Christians'; Accad, *Sacred Misinterpretation*.
[13] For a translation of the Pact of ʿUmar, see Halsall, 'Medieval Sourcebook'.
[14] For scholarly literature on early Islamic interactions with Christians and the *dhimmī* concept, see Haddad, 'Ahl al-dhimma'; Shah, 'Concept of al-Dhimmah'; Rubin and Wasserstein, *Dhimmis and Others*; Emon, *Religious Pluralism*; Ahmedov, 'Origins of Law'; Awang, 'Status of the Dhimmi'; Simonsohn, *Common Justice*.
[15] See e.g. Bosanquet, 'From Obscurity to Authority', 249–54.
[16] The designation *al-naṣrāniyya*, or corresponding terms, is preferred by leading Salafi scholars (IslamQA, 'Hal yusammā atbāʿ al-diyāna al-naṣrāniyya "al-naṣārā"?') as it is used to refer to Christians in the Qur'an. However, Copts seem to oppose being called *al-naṣārā* (the Nazarenes) or *al-naṣrāniyya*, as these terms equate 'Christianity' with Christian currents that no longer exists (Shakir, 'Al-naṣrāniyya'). They insist that the terms *masīḥī* (Christian) or *al-masīḥiyya* (Christianity) should be used instead.

had a particularly high number of readers when compared with other texts on the website.[17] The two most popular texts in the *al-naṣrāniyya* section are, not surprisingly, written by the well-known jihadist ideologue, Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisī. For most of the post-9/11 period, he was one of the most cited ideologues in the movement and his disciples are believed to have operated the *Minbar al-tawḥīd wa-al-jihād* website.[18]

The first of these texts is entitled ʻAl-tuḥfa al-Maqdisiyya – fī mukhtaṣar taʾrīkh al-naṣrāniyya bi-bidāyatihā wa-muntahāhāʾ (Al-Maqdisī's masterpiece: A summary of the history of al-Naṣrāniyya from beginning to end'), written around the year 2000.[19] Another piece is a 320-page tract from February 2008 with the title ʻMan kāna baytuhu min zujāj, fa-lā yarmi ghayrahu bi-ḥajarʾ (ʻThose in glass houses should not throw stones' [freely translated]).[20] It reads as an indictment, addressed to Pope Benedict XVI, Geert Wilders (the Dutch parliamentarian and Islam critic), Theo van Gogh (Dutch film director, author and journalist, killed in 2004) and Wafa Sultan (a Syrian writer and Islam critic resident in California).[21] Both tracts are mainly theological statements devoted to demonstrating the internal contradictions in Christianity as well as establishing proof for Islam's interpretation of who Jesus really was. The latter text, however, is harsher and shaped by the aftermath of the Muhammad cartoons crisis in 2006.

The political backdrop is also clearly visible in Hānī al-Sibāʿī's text ʻHal li–al-aqbāṭ dawr taʾrīkhī fī muqāwamat al-muḥtall?ʾ (Did the Copts have a historical role in the struggle against occupation?'),[22] which had almost 15,000 readers (at January 2015) and is one of the most read in the *al-naṣrāniyya* section in the *Minbar al-tawḥīd wa-al-jihād* library. Al-Sibāʿī's article also reads like an indictment, but unlike al-Maqdisī's writings, he discusses specifically the Coptic minority in Egypt, whom he accuses of lacking true patriotism and loyalty to the Egyptian state as a Muslim country.[23] His tract was produced in the aftermath of the controversial case of Camilia Shahata and Wafa Constantine – an intense and at times bloody conflict in Egypt in which two Coptic women were said to have secretly converted to Islam. They were both alleged to have run away from their homes in order to convert, and were then ʻkidnapped' and ʻimprisoned' by the Coptic Church. The controversy over these women attracted enormous attention in Egypt, and Ayman al-Ẓawāhirī, al-Qaeda's current leader and himself an Egyptian national, commented on the matter in several statements, including in November 2008.[24] Al-Sibāʿī's text should be read in this context; he presents and embellishes key points made by al-Ẓawāhirī.

In all the texts in the *al-naṣrāniyya* section, it is striking to observe the extent to which the debate revolves either around classical theological defences of belief and of Islam as the only true religion against the heresy of Christianity, or around specific political controversies in which the behaviour and role of Christians are condemned. Some are very specific, such as ʻKharāfat ẓuhūr al-ʿadhrāʾ fī Asyūṭʾ (The myth of the appearance of the

[17]The Egyptian jihadist writer and activist Hānī al-Sibāʿī's text about the Copts had almost 15,000 readers/viewers (in mid-2015), but several of his other writings have a higher number (*Minbar al-tawḥīd wa-al-jihād*, 2015).
[18]Wagemakers, *Quietist Jihadi*, 1–2.
[19]Al-Maqdisī, ʻMukhtaṣar taʾrīkh al-naṣrāniyya'.
[20]Al-Maqdisī, ʻMan kāna baytuhu'.
[21]Wafa Sultan was nominated as one of the world's most influential persons by *Time Magazine* in 2006.
[22]Al-Sibāʿī, ʻHal li-al-aqbāṭ dawr'.
[23]For scholarship on Muslim–Coptic relations in Egypt, see e.g. Zeidan, ʻThe Copts'.
[24]SITE, ʻEgyptian Church Bombing'.

Virgin Mary in Asyut).[25] As far as one can ascertain, none of them are outright declarations of war against Christians simply because they are Christians. Rather, the texts mostly set out to disprove well-known 'Christian' criticisms of Islam and to address specific 'Christian' behaviour in specific political situations. There is no clear parallel with the Jew-hatred of Nazism or the Bolshevik struggle against the class enemy in which extermination was the only legitimate goal. Christians should be taught a lesson and may deserve punishment, but not extermination, for being religiously misled and politically arrogant. They have distorted true belief, the texts claim, and usurped a political position of power that they should not have as a non-Muslim minority.

Hānī al-Sibāʿī's text is perhaps the most interesting of the eleven publications on the website.[26] He is, unlike the others, much more specific in his critique of a specific Christian minority in the Middle East, the Coptic population of Egypt. Here, religious or theological heresy is not the main topic, but rather the minority's political role and exercise of power *vis-à-vis* the Muslim majority. Even though the title indicates a historical study, the text is written in a highly topical setting. The main complaint is that the Copts have sought to usurp political power and dominance. Al-Sibāʿī claims that the Copts have attempted 'to blackmail (*ibtizāz*) the government', which 'consistently rolls over and submits to their arbitrary demands'.[27] He alleges that Egyptian authorities are showing far too much tolerance of the Coptic minority while the country's 'Muslims' are exposed to 'all types of suppression and harassment', and especially those who 'may be suspected of having a relative who has been a political prisoner or who previously has had ties to Islamic groups'.[28]

Al-Sibāʿī argues that the Copts believe they have the full support of the United States and the Christian world, including the powerful Coptic diaspora. This has made the Christians in Egypt presumptuous and enables them to exert undue political pressure on Egyptian authorities, which, in turn, treat Coptic provocateurs and demonstrators with kid gloves. The boldness and audacity of the Copts surged when the 'Christian' East-Timor successfully seceded from the Muslim 'Motherland', Indonesia, and al-Sibāʿī swears that the same will never happen in Egypt:

> We would like to whisper in the ears of the Copts that the Islamic Egypt – that which was conquered by ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ, Zubayr ibn al-ʿAwwam, ʿUbāda ibn al-Ṣāmit and all of these good men – is not and never will be Coptic again. History will not repeat itself even if delusional people may dream of it.[29]

In other words, al-Sibāʿī is accusing the Copts of having hidden separatist intentions. He spills much ink describing the numerous Coptic rebellions during the first three centuries after the Islamic conquest. The recurrent theme is the ingratitude of the Coptic community and their repeated violations of the Islamic pact of protection *vis-à-vis* the Christians

[25] Al-Ghunaymī, 'Kharāfat ẓuhūr al-ʿadhrāʾ'.
[26] Al-Sibāʿī's status as a jihadist ideologue is not as prominent as that of al-Maqdisī. Al-Sibāʿī (born 1961) has lived relatively safely in exile in London. He reportedly has a background with the Egyptian jihadist group Jamāʿat al-jihād bi-Miṣr, and his name figures on several official lists of wanted terrorists (UN and US). He runs the website Al-Maqreze Center for Historical Studies (http://www.almaqreze.net/) and often appears in the media as a commentator. Al-Sibāʿī's writings and interviews have been distributed and promoted on several of the most important jihadist web forums since the early the 2000s.
[27] Al-Sibaʿi, 'Hal li-al-aqbāṭ dawr', 1.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., 2.

as a People of the Book – despite the Muslim rulers' historical 'magnanimity' towards their rebellious minions. Al-Sibāʿī also casts doubt on Christian historical hero figures in Islamic history such as ʿĪsā al-ʿAwwām, a Christian boy who presumably helped Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn against the Crusaders. Similarly, the Copts' role under Napoleon's occupation of Egypt in 1798–1801 is vilified: the Copts 'exploited Napoleon's occupation' and served as 'the French army's eyes' and accomplices.[30] According to al-Sibāʿī, 'one cannot prove historically that the Nazarenes [i.e. the Christian Copts] fought against the French occupation', despite 'fictitious heroic stories that, for example, some Copts during the second Cairo revolution gave money to the rebels … '[31]

With the introduction of a more secular jurisdiction in the modern era, the Copts are portrayed as beneficiaries at the expense of the Muslim majority. While Sharia courts and *awqāf* institutions were gradually subjected to state control with their activities and authority curtailed, 'the Copts' *awqāf* remain untouched!!'[32] The Copts' undue political influence also expanded, with appointments as government ministers and occasionally also as prime minister. The Coptic Patriarch Shenouda III is singled out for particularly vitriolic criticism for his unacceptable political influence on President Anwar al-Sadat. Shenouda succeeded in thwarting plans to 'introduce sharia courts in Egypt'; the Copts 'used all possible means of coercion from the media to channels of communication', assisted by the Coptic diaspora, until the legislative proposals were withdrawn.[33] Al-Sibāʿī claims that the same happened in the case of Wafa Constantine in 2004, as Shenouda succeeded in inducing the authorities to release the Coptic demonstrators.[34] He writes with his usual sarcasm that the Copts 'had attacked the brave police forces with insults and blows' and the latter 'only show their strength when they raid mosques or arrest Muslims!!'[35]

Al-Sibāʿī concludes his study by questioning the status of the Copts as a 'protected people' (*ahl al-dhimma*) under Islamic law, reaching the unequivocal answer that they are not, and claims that they have not been so since the dynasty of Muḥammad ʿAlī Pasha, offering a five-part explanation: (i) the rulers have not adhered to Islamic law; (ii) the Copts cooperated with the French occupation forces; (iii) in the absence of an Islamic ruler, the Copts must renew their pledge of allegiance in order to remain a protected people; (iv) the participation of Coptic officers and soldiers in Egypt's wars from 1956 to 1973 does not entitle them to be a protected people as this occurred under secular rule; and (v) citizenship is not equivalent to a 'protection pact' (*ʿaqd al-dhimma*) and payment of the poll tax (*jizya*).

Al-Sibāʿī concludes his tract by listing numerous demands and preconditions that must be met in order for the Copts to again enjoy the full status of a protected people under Islamic legislation: Do not cast doubt on or mention the Prophet, the Qur'an or Islam with contempt or distort its content; do not seduce or marry Muslim women; do not convert Muslims to other religions; and do not help 'the people of war' in any way.[36] Underlying these specific demands is a general indictment of the Copts as a

[30]Ibid., 4.
[31]Ibid., 5.
[32]Ibid., 6.
[33]Ibid.
[34]BBC News, 'Egyptian Pope Goes into Seclusion'.
[35]Al-Sibāʿī, 'Hal li-al-aqbāṭ dawr', 7.
[36]Ibid., 8.

community for their lack of subservience as a religious minority. His statements reflect an inveterate suspicion of a minority that, according to him, should have remained an invisible community of obedient minions, but instead have usurped an unacceptably high position of power and prominence in Egyptian society.

Al-Sibāʿī's verbal attacks on the Copts have much in common with the early Egyptian jihadist groups, Al-Jamāʿa al-Islāmiyya (JI) and Al-Jihād, which is not surprising, given al-Sibāʿī's own past involvement with these movements.[37] There were strong anti-Coptic tendencies in these groups from the 1970s onwards, even though they were primarily revolutionary, not sectarian, and fought, first and foremost, against the Egyptian state.[38] One of the religious authorities for these groups, Shaykh ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, is believed to have given religious legitimization for robbing Coptic jewellers as long as the objective was to 'finance jihad'.[39] Violence against Copts seems to have been driven as much by socio-economic grievances as by ideological zeal. However, within JI there were leading figures who wanted to prioritize the struggle against the Copts. One of these was Karam Zuhdī, in Upper Egypt. He held that the struggle against the Christians was much more important than fighting and toppling the Egyptian regime since 'Christian proselytism [was] the major obstacle to the propagation of Islam'.[40] This belief was not shared by the rest of the JI leadership, who believed the problem would be solved when an Islamic state became a reality. Thus, the example from Egypt shows clearly that the jihadists' view on Christian minorities has not been constant or had unanimous support. Rather, it reflects the heterogeneous nature of contemporary jihadism, in which positions on a variety of issues fluctuate across time, geography, conflict settings and group allegiances.

ISIS discourse on Christian minorities

Another useful source of empirical material for the study of jihadist groups' views on Christian minorities is the Islamic State's (ISIS) English-language magazine *Dābiq*, of which 15 issues have been published online since its first appearance in July 2014, each issue amounting to between 40 and 82 pages. Here too, we find relatively few references to Christians. The term occurs much less frequently than the word 'Crusade'. In ISIS's discussion on Christians, they are rarely referred to as a minority in the Middle East. 'Christian' most often occurs as a name for the Western world, as a historical enemy (referring to the Byzantine Empire [Byzantium]) or as a more generic designation of an enemy, an antithesis to Islam. ISIS seems to maintain a distinction between, on the one hand, Christians in general and Christian minorities and, on the other, the West as a Christian imperial superpower.[41] However, the distinction is often less than clear. For instance, the final issue of *Dābiq*, 'Break the Cross' from July 2016, features an article

[37]Al-Sibāʿī served as defence lawyer for Islamist prisoners in Egypt. According to a biography, prepared by one of his followers, he 'participated in most cases involving Islamist [prisoners] from the mid-1980s until 1993, when he went into hiding and fled the country'. See al-ʿIzz, 'Al-sīra al-dhātiyya'.
[38]Kepel, *Jihad*, 87.
[39]Ibid., 282.
[40]Kepel, *Muslim Extremism*, 207. Kepel writes of Karam Zuhdī: 'In his view, jihad was an imperative upheld by all consistent preachers, but he also felt that it had to be waged first of all against the Copts, and only later against the president, whom he considered their hostage' (ibid., 206).
[41]There are, for example, 28 occurrences of 'Crusade' (as both adjective and noun), but only one of 'Christian' in the sixth issue of *Dābiq*.

entitled 'Why We Hate You [Westerners] and Why We Fight You', in which ISIS offers a religious justification as its primary reason for its hatred of Christians:

> We hate you, first and foremost, because you are disbelievers; you reject the oneness of Allah – whether you realize it or not – by making partners for Him in worship, you blaspheme against Him, claiming that He has a son, you fabricate lies against His prophets and messengers, and you indulge in all manner of devilish practices. It is for this reason that we were commanded to openly declare our hatred for you and our enmity towards you. […] [W]e have been commanded to fight the disbelievers until they submit to the authority of Islam, either by becoming Muslims, or by paying *jizyah* – for those afforded this option – and living in humiliation under the rule of the Muslims.[42]

The remaining reasons listed in the article are partly religious and partly political in nature: the West's secularism and liberalism; the proliferation of atheism and insults against Islam; and Western occupation of and warfare against Muslim countries. In the passage quoted above, ISIS equates the West with Christians more generally, and names Christian beliefs as the top reason for jihad against the West.

Most often, however, it is in the theological and eschatological parts of the ISIS propaganda literature that one finds references to Christians. The term appears when ISIS writers quote classical Islamic references, and use the designation 'Christians and Jews' as an antithesis to Islam when elaborating on the eternal struggle between good and evil, between Islam and its enemies. For example, an 18-page feature article in 'Break the Cross' is devoted to theological discussions aimed at discrediting Christianity and Judaism. It casts doubt on the authenticity of the Bible and the crucifixion of Jesus and devalues the idea of the Holy Trinity. With reference to the Old Testament and historical disagreements within the Church, the article aims to demonstrate contradictions and inconsistencies in the Christian faith.[43]

In the *Dābiq* article 'Reflections on the Final Crusade', future scenarios and prophecies are discussed with several references to the Islamic Hadith literature. Teachings and guidelines taken from the historical conflicts between Muslims and the Christian Roman Empire are foregrounded. Interestingly, the enemy is the aggressive Christian Europe and its colonies in the Middle East, not the Christian minority populations in Muslim countries.[44] A common theme is that the Christian Byzantine Empire (Byzantium) was deceitful and did not honour its pact with the Muslims. Thus, conflict was inevitable and the war will go on until it ends in a decisive battle in which the Muslim armies will triumph.[45] The very possibility of a pact with a Christian power nevertheless suggests that the Muslim–Christian war, in the ISIS worldview, is not one in which

[42]ISIS, 'Why We Hate You', 31.
[43]ISIS, 'Break the Cross'.
[44]'These ahādīth indicate that the Muslims will be at war with the Roman Christians. Rome in the Arabic tongue of the Prophet (sallallāhu 'alayhi wa sallam) refers to the Christians of Europe and their colonies in Shām prior to the conquering of Shām at the hands of the Sahābah. There will be a pause in this war due to a truce or treaty. During this time, the Muslims and Romans will fight a common enemy. The fact that they fight a common enemy does not necessitate there is any form of military cooperation between them, as some of the hadīth commentators have said' (ISIS, 'Reflections on the Final Crusade', 34).
[45]'Then the Romans will commit treachery by raising the cross and killing a Muslim. This will lead to the continuation of the war between the Muslims and the Romans. They will demand access to those who enslaved some of them or the former captives themselves who accepted Islam so as to fight them. This enslavement will have taken place either before the signing of the truce or after the treachery, and Allah knows best. These events all lead up to the final, greatest, and bloodiest battle – al-Malhamah al- Kubrā – between the Muslims and the Romans prior to the appearance of the Dajjāl and the descent of al-Masīh. This battle ends the era of the Roman Christians, as the Muslims will then

annihilation is the only legitimate outcome. This interpretation receives some support from the observation that Christians receive slightly less vitriolic criticism in *Dābiq* than do other non-Muslim minorities. An example of this is an article about the end-time prophecies of the Levant (*al-Shām*) and the decisive role in Islamic eschatology of the prophet ʿĪsā (Jesus), who is given power to kill the Dajjāl, the False Messiah. While 'the Christians and the Jews' are initially referred to as enemies ('the final battles that the Muslims will engage in with the Christians and Jews'), attention quickly switches to the Jews, whose allegedly treacherous character cannot be overstated: 'the cursed Jews, who have a history of betraying and even killing the Prophets of Allah'.[46]

In the jihadist propaganda literature, one finds ample examples of derogatory terms applied to Christian minorities and their line-up alongside other arch-enemies of Islam: 'Christians, Jews, mushrikīn, and apostates'.[47] Yet, one does not find the same intense hatred and uncompromising tone as in jihadist elaboration on other non-Muslim minorities such as the Yezidis, Alawites, Shiʿites and Hindus. In fact, ISIS appears to offer Christian minorities special treatment as People of the Book, unlike other non-Muslim minorities. The organization has established an ideological distinction between Christian minorities on the one hand and other non-Muslim minorities, such as the Yezidis, on the other. One example is the assessment in *Dābiq* on why it is Islamically justified to enslave Yezidi women. In the article 'The Revival of Slavery before the Hour', the struggle against the Yezidis is described as a religious duty. Their mere existence is a great sin, which, according to ISIS, sincere Muslims must redress. Allowing even their very existence will have consequences for orthodox Muslims on judgement day.[48] By contrast, Christians are nowhere described in this manner. In fact, Christian testimonies are cited as proofs of the unbelief and godlessness of the Yezidis: 'Their creed is so deviant from the truth that even cross-worshipping Christians for ages considered them devil worshippers and Satanists, as is recorded in accounts of Westerners and Orientalists who encountered them or studied them.'[49] Unlike Yezidis, Christian minorities are to be protected, albeit under very strict conditions. Following careful examinations by ISIS's 'sharia students' of this theological matter, ISIS determined that the correct interpretation of Islamic law was to grant Christians the right to protection on condition of paying poll tax (*jizya*) and accepting Muslim hegemony. In 'Break the Cross', the justification for *jizya* is outlined:

> [Allah] said, 'Then kill the pagans wherever you find them' (At-Tawbah 5). In His eternal wisdom, He made an exception to only one group of disbelievers. He said, 'Fight those

advance upon Constantinople and thereafter Rome, to conquer the two cities and raise the flag of the Khilāfah over them' (ibid., 35).

[46]ISIS, 'Yahya', 4. The Islamic State writes, for example, as follows: 'A number of the narrations concerning the events that take place in Shām as the Hour draws closer include the mention of ʿĪsā Ibn Maryam ('alayhis-salām), one of the five Prophets known as 'ulul-'azm – the Messengers of strong will. These narrations typically speak of the final battles that the Muslims will engage in with the Christians and Jews, including the confrontation in which the Muslims are led by ʿĪsā ('alayhis-salam) against the Dajjāl' (ibid).

[47]Ibid, 33.

[48]'Their continual existence to this day is a matter that Muslims should question as they will be asked about it on Judgment Day, considering that Allah had revealed Āyat as-Sayf (the verse of the sword) over 1400 years ago. He ta'ālā said, {And when the sacred months have passed, then kill the mushrikīn wherever you find them, and capture them, and besiege them, and sit in wait for them at every place of ambush. But if they should repent, establish prayer, and give zakah, let them [go] on their way. Indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.} [At-Tawbah: 5]' (ISIS, 'Revival of Slavery', 14).

[49]Ibid.

> who neither believe in Allah and the Last Day, nor do they forbid what Allah and His Messenger forbade, nor do they follow the religion of truth, of those who were given the Scripture, until they give the *jizyah* willingly while they are humbled' (At-Tawbah 29). So those who have been sent the Scripture before the Quran, namely the Jews and Christians, shall be spared if they pay the *jizyah* and accept its terms. These terms are based on elevating the true believers – the Muslims – over the disbelieving People of the Scripture who arrogantly reject the Lord's message.[50]

The article lists numerous conditions imposed on those who pay the *jizya*, including bans on building or repairing churches, public display of faith, ownership of weapons, selling wine, having taller buildings than Muslims, and raising their voices in church. In addition, Christian subjects must offer their seat to a Muslim who wants to sit, and make their buildings available for Muslims on request. Any violation of these apartheid-like laws is punishable by death.[51] While enslaving Christians is not permissible, those Christian subjects who do *not* enter into the peace treaty and pay the *jizya* will be treated as 'polytheists' and can thus be made slaves like the Yezidis.[52]

These are very harsh terms, and it is understandable that Western politicians came to describe the jihadists' persecution of Christians and Yezidis as the embodiment one single phenomenon, as was the case in President Barack Obama's declaration of war on 7 August 2014.[53] However, as shown above, this view glosses over important nuances in which jihadist interpretations of the concept of People of the Book have played an important role. Furthermore, there were also divergent opinions between al-Qaeda and ISIS. The latter's position on Christians appears more hard-line and uncompromising than that of the pre-ISIS generation of jihadist ideologues. As the ISIS–al-Qaeda infighting escalated in the first part of the 2010s, these ideological differences became more pronounced on the subject of non-Muslim minorities. As will be shown below, this issue became a key bone of contention between the two competing alliances in global jihadism in the early and mid-2010s.

The importance of the minority issue for most jihadist groups should not be overstated. For both ISIS and al-Qaeda jihadists, the term 'the Christians' remained a mostly generic term, synonymous with a persisting external threat, with little or no connection to Christian minorities in the Middle East. In a similar vein, ISIS propaganda also makes very frequent mentions of Rome, Romans, the Pope, the Vatican and Italy, in a way that is highly disproportionate to the low level of ISIS terrorist plotting in Italy, highlighting the symbolic and historic relevance of such terms to ISIS ideologues.[54]

Thus, the term 'Christians' serves as a rhetorical device to attack qualitatively different enemies. For example, when the term 'Christians' appears in the *Dābiq* article 'Reflections on the Final Crusade', the word simply denotes the external enemy, and the rhetorical firepower is directed against competing currents within the broader jihadist landscape,

[50]ISIS, 'Break the Cross', 63.
[51]Ibid.
[52]Ansarukhilafah, 'Questions & Answers'.
[53]Obama, 'Statement by the President'.
[54]Marone and Olimpio, '"We Will Conquer Your Rome"'.

the ‘self-style jihadist ideologues and quasi-mujāhidīn’, who dare to question the legitimacy and methods of the ISIS project.[55] Similarly, the jihadists’ frequent use of the qur’anic verse:

> O you who have believed, do not take the Jews and the Christians as allies. They are allies of one another. And whoever is an ally to them among you – then indeed, he is [one] of them. Indeed, Allah guides not the wrongdoing people (Q 5.51)

is also illustrative. This verse became popular among jihadist propagandists precisely because it could be construed as a validation of a key tenet in jihadism, namely the un-Islamic character of Arab states, and in particular that of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, given the latter’s alliances with the United States, a ‘Christian’ superpower. As far as can be ascertained, the jihadists rarely used it to justify a position on Christian minorities.

While the formation of a jihadist policy on religious minorities was a mostly theoretical issue during the early 9/11 era, the rise of ISIS as a proto-state occupying large swathes of territories in Syria and Iraq, hosting many religious minorities, suddenly brought the issue into the sphere of day-to-day politics.

The jihadist proto-states and their policies on Christian minorities

Although jihadist groups had temporarily controlled territories with civilian populations on many occasions prior to the emergence of the ‘ISIS Caliphate’,[56] the very size and duration of ISIS’s territorial expansion in Syria and Iraq, including areas with significant religious minority populations, made jihadists’ brutal treatment of minorities a top international policy concern. ISIS’s genocidal campaign against the Yezidi minority in northern Iraq in the early autumn of 2014 eventually prompted a Western military response, including the formation of a US-led international coalition to defeat ISIS. More generally, the mass exodus of civilians from ISIS-controlled areas highlighted the plight of vulnerable minorities, including that of various Christian sects in Syria and Iraq. While the scale of the mass killings, displacement and enslavement of Yezidi civilians by ISIS came to be recognized as a genocide by UN bodies, no such recognition has been extended to Christian or Shiʿite civilian sufferings at the hands of ISIS. Scholars have argued that the UN ‘erred when it failed to distinguish the violence against Christians as genocide, as well’.[57] The legal discussion on what qualifies as genocide is outside the scope of this article. Suffice it to note that ISIS atrocities against Christian minorities resulted in a very disproportionate number of Christians fleeing ISIS-controlled areas compared with the civilian population overall. It is estimated that Iraq had a Christian population of between 800,000 and 1,400,000 before 2003. Following nearly two decades of hardship and persecution, the Christian population shrank dramatically to an estimated 300,000 in the post-ISIS era.[58]

While most sources have highlighted how ISIS policies as warfighters and governors served to drive out all religious minorities, the picture is not entirely black-and-white.

[55]‘It is as if they haven’t read the verses of the Qur’ān teaching us that the Jews and Christians fight the Muslims for their religion and that the more one is fought by them for his religion the closer he is to the path of the Prophet (sallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam). {And never will the Jews or the Christians approve of you until you follow their religion. Say, ‘Indeed, the guidance of Allah is the [only] guidance}’ (ISIS, ‘Reflections on the Final Crusade’, 43).

[56]Lia, ‘Understanding Jihadi Proto-States’.

[57]See, e.g., Raben, ‘ISIS Eradication’, 1.

[58]European Asylum Support Office, *Iraq*, 84.

The following account of ISIS's early policies vis-à-vis the Christian minority population in Mosul illustrates how pro-ISIS media sought to portray the new Caliphate as a protector of the Christian minority. A photo reportage by ArraggahMedia.com, an ISIS-friendly media bureau,[59] starts by showing a series of pictures of ISIS armed 'police forces' manning a guard post outside a church in Mosul, with a priest arriving by car while civilians pass by (see Figure 1). The media bureau clearly wants to correct mainstream media coverage of ISIS's ill-treatment of Christians, and comments on the pictures as follows:

> The Islamic state is a just state. Allah's law is just a law for every human being regardless of faith. The city of Mosul is home to approximately 130,000 Christians who live a carefree [life] thanks [to the] justice of Allah's law, which is administered by the Islamic State (Caliphate). Christians in the Islamic country are required to pay the *jizyah* (tax) and after that they are protected from anyone. We are witnesses to mass media through their web portals, television channels and screens want to satanize Muslims, and all the Muslim documenting the Muslims as 'killers', 'terrorists', 'bloodhounds', 'one wishing mess' that is, things are exactly the opposite of all those attributes that unbelievers want to attribute[d] to Muslims. Muslims have historically demonstrated their righteousness and goodness. The figures below show how the Islamic Caliphate police protect Christian churches and [how] Christians [pay taxes] to the Islamic State.[60]

Pro-ISIS media coverage is obviously propaganda meant for outside consumption, but the very fact that ISIS portrays itself in this manner demonstrates the importance to ISIS sympathisers of ISIS honouring the Islamic injunctions to protect the People of the Book.[61] In reality, the situation for Christian residents in Mosul was far more dire. The number of Christians living there in 2014 was grossly exaggerated in the Arraqqah-Media report. There were only a few thousand Christians left when ISIS seized the city in mid-2014, following years of harassment and persecution by criminal gangs and militant groups, including al-Qaeda. Furthermore, by the time the ArraqqahMedia report was published in October 2014, most Christians had already fled Mosul, as described below.

The situation for Christians under ISIS rule is captured more realistically in a video documentary by VICE News, one of the few independent media bureaus to record in ISIS-controlled areas. The VICE reporter was allowed into Raqqa in Syria after ISIS captured the city and is seen visiting the 'Office for Ahl al-Dhimma cases' established by the new ISIS 'government', where he interviews a judge [in Arabic in the video footage]:

> On 23 January 2014, a contract of protection (ʿ*aqd dhimma*) was made with non-Muslims and it was approved by Caliph al-Baghdādī. The Christians asked for this pact, this contract. We had a meeting with them together with a representative of Caliph al-Baghdādī. He offered them a chance to convert to Islam. If you do not accept it, then you are allowed to pay a tax for non-Muslims, as the Qur'an has required. If you do not accept, there will be nothing between us but killing and strife. Then they said that we want to pay the *jizya* (tax). I swear by God, we did not hurt or expel them.[62]

In his report, however, the VICE News journalist notes that, despite the contract, most of the Christians fled Raqqa. Paying a visit to the building of the Armenian Catholic church

[59]ArraqqahMedia, 'Mosul Church'.
[60]Ibid. Original text in English. Words in brackets inserted by authors to make the text more intelligible.
[61]See also Dar al-Islam, 'L'état islamique applique le jugement d'Allah', 18.
[62]VICE News, 'Christians in the Caliphate'.

Figure 1. Screengrab from ArraqqahMedia.com, October 2014.

in the city, he finds that it has been converted into an 'Islamic centre', and an ISIS official explains the new situation:

> We are now in Raqqa's Islamic State Centre of Proselytization. This place used to be a church. Here, the cross was worshipped instead of God. When the Islamic State took over this place and this office, the cross that was on top of this church was destroyed. So the cross was destroyed and the place was done nicely and the way you see it now. It became a centre of proselytization where God is worshipped, and where one teaches the people about Islam.[63]

ISIS has also published details around the protection pact with Christians, detailing its various 'tax rates' and its conditions:

> According to the agreement, wealthy Christians will pay 4 gold dinars per year, middle class will pay 2, and poor will pay 1; Christians must not build churches or other houses of worship, nor rebuild those that were destroyed; they must not possess weapons; and they must not display the cross nor broadcast prayer services in Muslim areas. […] If they [the Christians] violate anything contained in this agreement, then they have no pact of protection, and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant will make befall them what befell the people of war and rebelliousness.[64]

In February 2015, a website critical of ISIS published pictures of receipts for the payment of the *jizya*, which indicates that ISIS attempted to put this agreement into practice with the few Christians remaining in Raqqa.[65] Thus, the organization's official approach to the

[63]Ibid.
[64]ISIS, 'Awwal ʿaqd dhimma'; idem, 'First Pact of Protection'.
[65]Al-Raqqa tudhbiḥ, 'Awwal ṣūra li-waṣl 'dāʿishī' bi-istilām jizya min masīḥī'.

Christian minority there was not to expel or annihilate them, although, in practice, the harsh conditions regarding loyalty and absolute submission probably served to accelerate the exodus of Christian residents. There had been reports of widespread 'confiscations' and destruction of Christian property by ISIS in both Syria and Iraq,[66] which further exacerbated the dire situation experienced by local Christians.

Interviews the authors conducted with displaced Christians by and large corroborated media reports that ISIS seized abandoned homes, property, churches, monasteries and possessions of Christians who left.[67] The remaining Christians faced a difficult ultimatum: either convert to Islam, pay a levy or face death.[68] Administrative documents from the ISIS Department of Agriculture list Christian properties including a monastery among those confiscated around Mosul.[69] There were also media reports of the killings of Christians and of Christian women being sold at ISIS slave markets.[70] In Mosul, ISIS summoned Christian leaders to a meeting shortly after the group took control of the city. In the invitation letter, Christians were offered the three options mentioned above. However, the Christian leaders agreed between themselves not to attend the meeting, because they feared for their lives and refused the idea of converting to Islam or paying *jizya*.[71] Following their decision, ISIS issued a final warning that Christians who did not leave the city within two days would be killed.[72] Nearly all of Mosul's Christians left the city during the first weeks of ISIS rule.[73] A Christian leader recounts:

> Because we did not go [to the meeting], they became angry. They drove around with cars shouting in loudspeakers that all Christians had to leave the city or they would be killed. In the letter, they had given us a third option of paying *jizya*. Now only two options remained: Death or leaving. As I was fleeing the city, Daesh [militants manning the city's] checkpoints stole all our belongings; we escaped with only the clothes we were wearing. 20–30 Christians remained. They were scared or old. Some converted to Islam, because it was the only way to stay in the city.[74]

Interviews with Christians from Iraq's largest Christian town Qaraqosh (also known as Hamdaniya or Bakhdida) indicate that not all Christians were given the option to pay the *jizya* – or even the option to leave. ISIS seized Qaraqosh on 6 August 2014 after several weeks of fighting Kurdish forces. According to civilians' testimonies, ISIS first threatened Christians to force them to convert to Islam and destroyed Christians' shops. On 22 August, ISIS militants rounded up the Christians in a health centre, where young men were separated from women, children and the elderly. The militants searched them and took their gold, money and documents. Some were subsequently placed on buses that drove them to a desert area, from which they walked to the Kurdish area. Others were forced to walk the 60 kilometres to Erbil. However, groups

[66]Khan, 'Iraq Christians Get Islamic State's warning'; Hubbard, '"There Are No Girls Left"'.
[67]Authors' interviews with displaced Christians from Qaraqosh conducted in November 2016 in Erbil, and with displaced Christians from Mosul conducted in October 2019 in Erbil.
[68]In Mosul, an ultimatum was issued by ISIS in July 2014. A similar ultimatum was issued in Raqqa in February 2015 (BBC News, 'Islamic State "Abducts Dozens of Christians"'.
[69]Margolin et al., '"You Reap What You Sow"', 21.
[70]Lodge, 'Yazidi and Christian Women'.
[71]Authors' interview with Christian leader from Mosul, conducted in Erbil, October 2019.
[72]ISIS, 'Ultimatum for the Christians of Mosul'.
[73]Aarseth, *Mosul under ISIS*, 33. In 2005, approximately 30,000–40,000 Christians lived in Mosul. In 2014, only approximately 3,000 Christians remained, after almost a decade of forced displacement and attacks by jihadist groups.
[74]Author's interview with Christian leader from Mosul, conducted in Erbil, October 2019

of young men were not allowed to leave. A Christian woman who was forced onto a bus out of Qaraqosh recounted:

> My husband stayed behind together with 60 or 70 other men. They were not allowed to leave. I don't know anything about him until this day, and two years have passed. Nobody knows what happened to them. Daesh said they would [be allowed to] come after us. But they didn't.[75]

Some scholars have argued that the *jizya* option and the contract signing was merely a ploy to gather Christian community leaders and have them all executed.[76] Research by Mara Revkin indicates that in Raqqa, Syria, unlike in Mosul, the *jizya* was implemented with an unknown number of the city's Christians. Although many Christians fled at the time of the ISIS takeover, some Christians allegedly stayed in Raqqa, accepted the terms of the *jizya*, and were left unharmed by ISIS.[77]

The widespread flight of Christians from Mosul in the early days of the ISIS occupation in mid-2014 must be seen in the context of local Christians' experiences pre-ISIS. From 2005, al-Qaeda's Iraqi branch had gradually turned Mosul into a stronghold and they eventually controlled much of the city's economy through mafia-style shakedowns and assassinations.[78] Iraqi civilians of all faiths and denominations were targeted, but the Christian minority were particularly vulnerable to al-Qaeda's extortion methods, prompting many to leave the city in the years preceding 2014. The extremists often gave religious justifications for extorting or attacking Christians. Several Christian leaders were murdered and churches attacked. In Syria, by contrast, ISIS's jihadist predecessor did not exert much influence on the ground until after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011. This may have affected the decision of some of Raqqa's Christians to stay behind.

Despite local variations between Raqqa and Mosul, there was no official ISIS policy to execute Christian residents en masse, even though atrocities against Christians did occur. For example, a mass grave containing the remains of 40 Christians was found in Mosul in March 2018.[79] Many Christians disappeared during the war and are still unaccounted for but they appear to be a fraction of the number of victims from other religious or ethnic groups found in mass graves in ISIS-held territories after liberation. More than 200 mass graves containing up to 12,000 bodies have been found in Iraq.[80] In Raqqa alone, some 16 mass graves containing more than 5,000 bodies have been discovered.[81] In the case of Qaraqosh, a possible reason for ISIS's decision to detain and/or execute military-age men was that Christians in the city had formed an anti-ISIS militia, the Qaraqosh Protection Committee, which defended the town alongside Kurdish forces before it fell to ISIS in mid-2014. Thus, the local Christians' participation in armed action against ISIS probably resulted in bloody reprisals, a common ISIS strategy to deter resistance and rebellion in areas they occupied.

ISIS's ambiguous policies *vis-à-vis* local Christians as outlined above differ markedly from the organization's extremely hostile policy *vis-à-vis* Shi'ite Muslims and Yezidis.

[75]Authors' interview with displaced Christian from Qaraqosh, conducted in November 2016 in Erbil.
[76]Shea, 'ISIS Genocide'.
[77]Revkin, 'Legal Foundations'.
[78]Aarseth, *Mosul under ISIS*, 33.
[79]Iraqi News, 'Mass Grave'.
[80]Britton, '200 Mass Graves'.
[81]El Deeb, '16th Mass Grave'.

In fact, one of ISIS's hallmarks has been its clear and systematic implementation of genocide against Shiʿite Muslims.[82] It killed thousands of unarmed Shiʿites, destroyed their places of worship and confiscated their property. In an even more brutal ISIS campaign, thousands of Yezidis were killed and surviving captives were commonly subjected to enslavement by ISIS, on the orders and with the official blessing of the ISIS leadership.

In contrast to Christians, both Shiʿite Muslims and Yezidis were considered apostates and infidels by ISIS. Their theologians had some discussions regarding whether Yezidis were apostates or infidels,[83] but this theological uncertainty had a minimal impact on ISIS's treatment of the two groups and did nothing to stop the murderous onslaught. Neither of the two communities was given the option to live under ISIS protection and pay the *jizya*. Furthermore, they were often not even given the option to convert to Sunni Islam. In addition, Islamic institutions, Sufi shrines and mosques deemed to belong to 'deviant' schools and tendencies were destroyed or confiscated.[84]

Christian minorities as targets

The study of Christian minorities as targets of jihadist extremism is fraught with methodological difficulties,[85] including that of distinguishing ideologically motivated violence by organized jihadist groups on the one hand from violence by street vigilantes, youth gangs, rioting mobs and profit-seeking criminals on the other. A number of Western governmental and international bodies issue annual reports on the situation of religious minorities worldwide.[86] These reports have taken note of the deteriorating situation for Christian minorities in the Middle East over recent decades, including that of Christian communities in Iraq since 2003, where the rise of al-Qaeda and other militant Islamist organizations has created a hostile and sometimes deadly environment for local Christians. The post-2003 era in Iraq has been marked by protracted civil conflict, the absence of law and order and a lack of strong government institutions, making Iraq a very violent society. Armed attacks affecting Iraqi citizens who happen to be Christians may not necessarily be ideologically or politically motivated, nor are they overwhelmingly the work of jihadist extremists. Furthermore, when Iraqi rebel factions are involved, it is not always obvious why Christian residents and institutions in Iraq are targeted. Are the attacks motivated by purely anti-Christian sentiment or by the fact that the persons or institutions targeted represent the government or state authorities in one way or another? For example, a US State Department report on religious freedom published in 2013 lists the attempted assassination of Sargon Sulaywah, Iraq's Minister of Environment and a Christian member of the government, as an example of attacks against 'Christians' in Iraq.[87] This type of attack, however, tells us very little about al-Qaeda's policy on Christian minorities. From its official establishment in Iraq in late 2004, al-Qaeda in Iraq conducted tens of thousands of attacks, many of them against regime targets, and a minister in the Iraqi government would, regardless of his or her ethno-religious background,

[82]Hawley, 'ISIS Crimes against the Shia'.
[83]ISIS, 'Revival of Slavery', 14–15.
[84]Mamouri, 'Islamic State Destroys Sacred Shrine in Mosul'.
[85]E.g. McCaslin, 'Conflict in Nigeria'.
[86]E.g., US Department of State, 'Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces'.
[87]Ibid.

be a prime target. Likewise, it is not very informative – if one wants to know more about jihadist movements' views and policies on Christian minorities – to use the number of jihadist rebel attacks on 'Christian village[s] under government control' during the Syrian civil war as a valid measure of jihadist persecution of Christians.[88] During the Syrian civil war, jihadist and non-jihadist rebels alike would attempt to seize government controlled areas and, in most cases, the religious affiliation of the civilian population in the area mattered only if it would impact on the military outcome.

In view of the examples above, it is pertinent to question the validity of existing statistics for 'Christian victims' of jihadist terrorism in the Middle East, if the categorization 'Christian' is made based simply on the victims' nominal affiliation. Furthermore, jihadist violence against Christian minorities is part of a broader picture of anti-Christian discrimination, harassment and violent persecution in the Middle East, where abject poverty, gross inequalities, inadequate and/or corrupt law enforcement and encouragement of anti-Christian hate speech by authoritarian rulers, etc. all contribute to creating insecurity for vulnerable minority groups.[89] At the same time, there is little doubt that, in a number of countries in the region, particularly Egypt, Syria and Iraq, jihadist groups, and ISIS in particular, have singled out local 'Christian targets' with very tragic outcomes. When such attacks occur, however, there are often specific underlying causes beyond the notion that local Christians are enemies *per se*. For example, since the early 2010s, ISIS has sought to exploit pre-existing anti-Christian sentiment in Egypt, not only to win over new recruits and gain a foothold in the most populous country in the region, but also to outbid and dethrone al-Qaeda, its mother organization.

Two examples may illustrate this strategy: the bloody terror attacks on a church in al-Karada in Baghdad at the end of October 2010 and on a church in Alexandria in Egypt on New Year's Eve the same year. Both incidents were closely connected to the above-mentioned case of the conversion of Camilia Shahata and Wafa Constantine in Egypt.[90] The Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), the Iraqi precursor of ISIS, had published several warnings prior to the deadly attacks, threatening violent action if the two 'Muslim girls' were not 'released'.[91] In one ISI communiqué addressing Christian institutions and leaders in Iraq, the following demands were set out:

> First: To publicly disown what the leaders of the Egyptian Church did in their war against our sisters and brothers who entered Islam, and their abuse of them. Second: To demonstrate your serious efforts to pressure the Church to clarify the status of our sisters and to release them, just as you strove to save Tariq Aziz [Saddam Husayn's foreign minister and the only Christian member of his government] from the gallows. Third: To keep to your selves, your monasteries and your work, and to keep your followers away from indulging in the occupation project and the satanic pact between the Crusaders and the Rafidah [Shi'ites] in Baghdad. Fourth: To avoid any missionary activities in the area, directly or indirectly.[92]

[88]National Post, 'Syrian Rebels'.
[89]For an interesting report in Egypt, see for example Salter, 'Some Proposals'.
[90]The identity of the perpetrators of the Alexandria massacre is not clear. Egyptian authorities have claimed that a Gaza-based jihadi group was behind it, while ISI's coverage of the attack suggests that it played a role.
[91]Islamic State of Iraq, 'Statement of Warning'; idem, 'Statement from the Ministry of War'; al-Ẓawāhirī, 'Message of Hope: Part II'; Roggio, 'Suspected Suicide Bomber'.
[92]Islamic State of Iraq, 'Exclusive Message'.

From the communiqué, it is obvious that the Iraqi Christians are targeted not because of their beliefs alone, but because of their (alleged) actions or failures to take action in a specific case. Once again, we see that Shiʿites are portrayed in far more hostile terms (their 'Satanic alliance' with the Crusaders), whereas local Christians are not depicted as a permanent and irreconcilable enemy. Despite the evident hyperbole of jihadist propaganda, one should also note that the claim that missionary work took place among Muslims in Iraq in the aftermath of the American occupation was not completely baseless.[93]

The thesis that jihadists did not prioritize the targeting of Christian minorities receives some further corroboration from statements by the leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Ẓawāhirī in the early 2010s. He was clearly ambivalent when he discussed the deadly attack on the church in Alexandria in an audiotape from February 2011. Like Hānī al-Sibāʿī, al-Ẓawāhirī held the view that the Coptic Church has usurped too much power: It had become a 'government above the government' and the bombing of the church in Alexandria came as a consequence. Al-Ẓawāhirī dismissed, however, the allegation that al-Qaeda had a role in the attacks,[94] and there were strong indications that many voices in the jihadist ideological universe at that time wanted to distance it from random acts of violence against Christian minorities and their sacred places, at least when the strategic purpose of such violence was not clearly evident. In several statements in 2013 and early 2014, al-Ẓawāhirī warned explicitly against attacks against the Christian minorities.[95] He instructed 'the holy warriors' (*mujāhidūn*):

> to avoid attacking Christians, Sikhs, and Hindus in Islamic lands. If they are belligerent, the reply should be equal to the aggression. We should indicate that we are not the ones who will start a confrontation, since we are busy fighting the head of international infidelity, and that we are keen on living with them in peace and harmony, if the nation of Islam rises soon, by the will of God.[96]

Apparently, the al-Qaeda leader did not want anything to detract from the struggle against the main enemy, 'the Crusaders' and local conflicts with relatively peripheral minority groups could easily become a dangerous distraction.

After the coup d'état in mid-2013 in Egypt against the country's first democratically elected president, Muḥammad Mursī, Coptic leaders have openly supported Egypt's new dictator, General ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī, thus clearly taking side against the country's Islamist movement. Adding fuel to the fire, a Coptic billionaire openly boasted of his key role as the financier and mastermind of the Tamarrud movement, which critically helped the army seize power by staging huge popular demonstrations in June 2013.[97] In the early post-coup period, Egypt was shattered by a series of violent incidents against Copts, including killings, harassment and violent attacks on Christian institutions, property and churches. Al-Ẓawāhirī argued, however, that this kind of violence took attention away from the main enemy:

[93] McAlister, 'What Would Jesus Do?'
[94] Al-Ẓawāhirī. 'Message of Hope: Part II'.
[95] Mortada, 'Al-Qaeda's New Orders'. See also Huffington Post, 'Al Qaeda Leader Ayman al-Zawahri Says'.
[96] Mortada, 'Al-Qaeda's New Orders.'
[97] Hubbard and Kirkpatrick, 'Sudden Improvements'.

> we have to be busy with confronting the Americanized coup of [Gen. Abdel-Fattah] el-Sissi and establish an Islamic government instead. […] We must not seek war with the Christians and thus give the West an excuse to blame Muslims, as has happened before.[98]

In other words, violence against Christian minorities has contributed negatively to al-Qaeda's struggle and should thus be avoided. Al-Ẓawāhirī's statements are not unprecedented among jihadists. Other jihadist groups such as Anṣār al-Islām and the Islamic Army in Iraq have previously published communiqués denying responsibility for, or criticizing, attacks on Christian minority targets in Iraq.[99]

Al-Qaeda's relatively moderate position on Christian minorities was challenged by ISIS, the powerful jihadist upstart, which at that time sought to outshine and overtake al-Qaeda as the leading powerhouse of global jihadism. In the intensifying rivalry between them, the issue of 'the honourable Muslim women', Shahata and Constantine, in Egypt became a central theme. As ISIS clearly wanted to outbid its former mother organization by appearing a more uncompromising defender of Islam, it took it upon itself to avenge the alleged Coptic violations of the two Christian female converts to Islam. This was a suitable arena in which to outbid al-Qaeda, since al-Ẓawāhirī unexpectedly displayed such pragmatism – in ISIS's view, treacherous leniency – in his views on Christian minorities. This was the context in which ISIS staged its mass execution of 21 Egyptian Copts in Libya in spring 2015. They were, like many other guest workers in Libya, abducted in the turmoil following the collapse of the Libyan state. In a gruesome mediatized performance, the Islamic State's 'Province of Tripoli' lined up the terrified victims and decapitated all of them in a professionally produced video in which the victims were wearing jumpsuits resembling those worn by prisoners in Guantanamo Bay. The connection to the case of Shahata and Constantine was evident from the start, and the film ends with: 'This filthy blood is just some of what awaits you, in revenge for Camelia and her sisters.'[100] When ISIS later wrote about the misdeed in their journal, it left little doubt that the underlying goal was to shame the al-Qaeda leadership. *Dābiq* specifically cited al-Ẓawāhirī's conciliatory statements regarding the Christian minority in Egypt, contemptuously describing them as 'a proposal to the war-mongering Copts'.[101]

Precisely because al-Qaeda's leadership called for them not to be targeted, the Egyptian Copts tragically became an explicit and prioritized goal for ISIS terrorists. In other words, a Christian minority became victims of the intra-jihadist rivalry and strife that accompanied the rise of ISIS in the first half of the 2010s.[102] The al-Qaeda–ISIS civil war turned the Copts from being a marginal low-ranking actor in the enemy hierarchy of jihadist movements to a highly prioritized target. In the February 2015 issue of *Dābiq*, where the massacre of the Coptic hostages was advertised and celebrated in the usually macabre style of ISIS propagandists, the authors left little doubt as to high priority they attached to attacks on Egyptian Copts at that time. The Copts had been elevated to the top enemy category of 'Crusaders': 'Finally, it is important for Muslims everywhere to

98 Youssef, 'Al-Qaida Leader'.
99 Jamāʿat Anṣār al-Islām in Mosul, 'Statement'; Islamic Army in Iraq, 'Justice is the Basis of Dominion'.
100 Cited in AhramOnline, 'Video Shows Beheading'.
101 ISIS, 'Revenge for the Muslimāt', 32.
102 For the ISIS–al-Qaeda rivalry, see Hamming, 'Jihadi Politics'; Byman, and Williams, 'Jihadism's Global Civil War'.

know that there is no doubt in the great reward to be found on Judgment Day for those who spill the blood of these Coptic crusaders wherever they may be found … ’[103]

Conclusion

The jihadists’ view on Christian minorities in the Middle East has been neither unambiguous nor static. It changes according to the overall political conflict in the region and is characterized by specific, unpredictable struggles emerging locally. This article has attempted to make sense of the jihadists’ shifting views and policies based on ideological statements and writings and observed behaviour towards Christian minority groups, primarily in Syria, Iraq and Egypt. One key finding is that Middle Eastern Christians and foreign Christian ‘Crusaders’ are portrayed differently. Only in certain contexts and special circumstances are local Christians and foreign Crusaders described as the same enemy. Even though Christian minorities are portrayed with suspicion and hostility, they are not ideologically defined as enemies *a priori*. Rather, they are expected to act as obedient minions in an Islamic state where their duties and rights will, in principle, be defined by Islamic law. Christians (those very few who remained) in jihadist-controlled areas were required to pay the *jizya* and were allowed only a minimum of religious practice. In ISIS-controlled cities, Christian symbols were often destroyed and churches were made into administration centres or preaching facilities for Muslims.

Terrorist attacks on Christians and churches have been devastating and deadly, especially in Egypt and Iraq, but local Christian minorities are generally not considered top priority targets for jihadist groups, as the examples of al-Ẓawāhirī’s statements illustrate. In recent years, the al-Qaeda leadership has sought to balance local violent conflicts with its overall agenda to fight foreign enemies, ‘the Crusaders’. Just as al-Qaeda leaders and its Iraqi branch were in dispute over the targeting of civilian Shiʿite Muslims in Iraq in mid-2004, so ISIS and al-Qaeda have clashed over the strategic wisdom of killing Egyptian Copts since the New Year’s Eve bombing of All Saints Church in Alexandria in 2011. The Shahata and Constantine case, and the wave of anti-Coptic terrorism in the wake of Egypt’s military coup illustrate how vulnerable groups like Christian minorities in the Middle East easily become targets in countries with strong jihadist networks. Although the minority group was supposed to have the status of a protected People of the Book, they became victims in what was in reality an intra-jihadist civil war. Similarly, ISIS’s treatment of Christians in Iraq and Syria was in no small part a contextual consequence of the civil war, ISIS’s previous atrocities and Christian self-defence mobilization.

More generally, the cases reviewed in this article point to an underlying supremacist theme in the jihadists’ worldview, in which Christian minorities are expected to be highly servile and obedient minions, to be severely punished if they usurp a role beyond what they can rightfully claim as a People of the Book and subjects under an Islamic State.

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[103]ISIS, ‘Revenge for the Muslimāt’, 32.

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