

Caliphate Soldiers and Lone Actors: What to Make of IS Claims for Attacks in the West 2016-2018

Author: A staff member of the European Counter-Terrorism
Centre (ECTC) at Europol¹

May 2016, IS began implementing a strategy aimed at inciting lone actor attacks in Western countries, under the supervision of its “external security” body. This report examines changes in the ways in which IS has claimed credit for violent incidents in Western countries under this strategy in an effort to shed light on the links between the external operations and the main leadership of the organisation. IS’s claiming behaviour for attacks in the West fluctuated between leaving the initiative to perpetrators and trying to centralise the communication flow. The organisation, however, has experienced increasing difficulties in ascertaining information received from external sources, ultimately leading to the flawed claim for the Las Vegas shooting on 1 October 2017. Since then, communication between IS’s central media outlets and external sources seems to have largely broken down. At present, the hierarchical external operations structures of IS seem to have been replaced by individuals that communicate and, possibly, cooperate based on their common experience and acquaintance. The threat they pose will depend on their personal influence on others and their motivation rather than their position in the IS hierarchy.

¹ The author is a trained Arabist and possesses a PhD in Islamic studies. He has worked in monitoring and analysis of jihadist propaganda for more than a decade. All translations from the Arabic are by the author. The views expressed are the author’s own and do not necessarily represent those of Europol. The author would like to thank his colleagues who shared their views on earlier versions of this report, Bart Schuurman and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments. Responsibility for any error of fact or judgment rests with the author.

Introduction

On 9 November 2018, a man crashed his car into shop fronts in a Melbourne street, exited and started stabbing passers-by, killing one person. The man was shot by police and died in hospital. The same day, the so-called Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for the attack through a short online note issued by its A'maq News Agency to the effect that, according to a "security source", the attacker was an IS "fighter". Several days later, however, an article in IS's weekly Arabic newsletter *al-Naba'*, which is issued by the organisation's information "ministry", seemed to disavow this link, stating that it had learnt about the incident via the media. The newsletter went on to point out that most lone actors ("these heroes") never met any of IS's "commanders" or operatives ("men"), but were motivated purely by their belief in Islam as practiced by IS.²

For several years, IS has incited supporters in Western countries to perpetrate terrorist attacks on their own initiative, a strategy that has been promoted by the highest leadership of the organisation. The promised reward for perpetrators was to be posthumously declared IS "soldiers" or "fighters" that carried out their act "in response to (IS) calls for the targeting of citizens of (anti-IS) coalition countries". The ways in which IS has tried to link these attackers to the organisation have evolved over time, from the cells of IS-trained perpetrators of the 2015 Paris and 2016 Brussels attacks, to remotely guided individuals, to violent actors that are picked by IS based on rather obscure reasons.

Seen in this light, the contradictory statements with regard to the Melbourne attack are interesting, as they raise the question of what body within IS actually has the mandate to declare certain incidents to be IS attacks. This ambiguity is in itself in contrast with IS's efforts to project an image of a monolithic, hierarchical structure, a factor which allowed the group to maintain its appearance of a ruthlessly efficient organisation.

This report tries to shed light on the changes in the ways in which IS has claimed responsibility for attacks in Western countries. It follows the trail of violent incidents in the West for which IS claimed credit or were merely mentioned in IS propaganda without claim of responsibility, taking as a starting point the period following the March 2016 Brussels attack, the last incident in a Western country which directly involved returnees from Syria to date.³ By looking at how and by whom the credit was claimed at different times, it seeks to trace the shifts in decision making with regard to lone actor attacks within IS's structures. The report shows that, underneath its monolithic surface, IS has always been a complex organisation which, under the pressure that currently bears on its structures, is likely to disintegrate into multiple subgroups or networks that will probably survive the collapse of the "caliphate" structures.

Before delving into the analysis of IS claiming behaviour regarding attacks against Western targets, it is instructive to briefly discuss why the organisation should have wished to strike beyond its geographical boundaries in the first place. Indeed, before

² *Adwa' ala amaliyyat Melbourne al-mubarak* ("Spotlights on the Blessed Melbourne Operation"), *al-Naba'*, November 15, 2018, 8.

³ Rik Coolsaet and Thomas Renard, "Conclusion: Converging Policies on Returnees and Key Challenges Ahead," *Returnees: Who Are They, Why Are They (Not) Coming Back and How Should We Deal with Them? Assessing Policies on Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands*, eds. Thomas Renard and Rik Coolsaet (Brussels: Egmont Institute, February 2018), 72, http://www.egmontinstitute.be/content/uploads/2018/02/egmont_papers.101_online_v1-3.pdf?type=pdf.

2015, IS's attitude to attacking targets in the West was ambiguous: although lower echelons of the organisation were implicated in several plots, public statements by the leadership showed a certain reluctance to commit the organisation fully to a terrorist campaign in the West.⁴ After IS issued the first threat against the members of the newly established anti-IS coalition in September 2014, appeals for attacks in the West became more frequent in 2015 and 2016. During the same period, IS's English magazine *Dabiq* praised IS-related attacks in Europe.⁵

Research has shown that leaders of terrorist groups may refrain from acknowledging responsibility for terrorist attacks for fear of increased state repression.⁶ This may also have applied initially to IS, whose leadership must have been aware that dragging too many nations into the conflict would put at risk its state building project, presumably the main aim of its local cadre, in particular former members of the Iraqi Ba'athist regime.⁷ Possibly, IS experienced a principal-agent problem, in which lower ranks of the organisation—such as European IS members with grievances against their societies of origin—were pushing for attacks in the West, while the leadership might have considered these to potentially jeopardise the IS project.

IS did, however, overcome its reluctance to carry out terrorist attacks in the West. IS has consistently described its terrorist campaign against Western countries as retribution and deterrence against its enemies in the anti-IS coalition.⁸ In addition, in IS's narrative, Muslims hate the West not only for its enmity and foreign policies but because of its unbelief and, consequently, only conversion to Islam can stop the fight.⁹ Another argument that might have propelled this change in policy, however, was the competition with al-Qaeda. Since IS's emergence in 2013, and more so after its exclusion from the al-Qaeda network in early 2014, IS has had to compete with al-Qaeda on the global level, a fact that probably also accounts for the escalation of online propaganda during the same period.¹⁰ The presence of competing terrorist groups in a territory is a factor that increases the likelihood of terrorist groups claiming credit for attacks,¹¹ and the same probably applies to groups that have global vocation. For example, both IS and al-Qaeda have appealed to Western audiences to perpetrate lone actor attacks.¹² At least one defector reported that IS was bent on perpetrating a spectacular attack that would supersede al-Qaeda's 11 September 2001 attacks.¹³

⁴ Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser, "Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, issue 4 (August 2015): 14-30,

<http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/440>.

⁵ Petter Nesser, Anne Stenersen and Emilie Oftedal, "Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, issue 6 (December 2016): 5, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/553>.

⁶ Bruce Hoffman, "Why Terrorists Don't Claim Credit," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, No. 1 (Spring 1997): 1-6.

⁷ The extent to which former Ba'athist officers shaped IS has been a matter of debate, but the contribution of low- or mid-ranking officers in Saddam Hussein's security services to IS in terms of military capacities, networking, governance and repression was undoubtedly valuable. Compare Craig Whiteside, "A Pedigree of Terror: The Myth of the Ba'athist Influence in the Islamic State Movement," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, issue 3 (June 2017): 2-18,

<http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/605>; and Ronen Zeidel, "The Dawa'ish: A Collective Profile of IS Commanders," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, issue 4 (August 2017): 25, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/619>.

⁸ Nesser, Stenersen, and Oftedal, "Jihadi Terrorism in Europe: The IS-Effect," 5.

⁹ "Why We Hate You & Why We Fight You," *Dabiq*, no. 15, July 31, 2016, 30-33.

¹⁰ Gunnar J. Weimann, "Competition and Innovation in a Hostile Environment: How Jabhat Al-Nusra and Islamic State Moved to Twitter in 2013-2014," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2018, DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2018.1513692.

¹¹ Aaron M. Hoffman, "Voice and silence: Why Groups Take Credit for Acts of Terror," *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 5 (September 2010): 615-626.

¹² Haroro J. Ingram, "An Analysis of *Inspire* and *Dabiq*: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State's Propaganda War," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 5 (2017): 357-375.

¹³ The IS defector from Canada, identified as Abu Huzaifa, described that, at some point after the declaration of IS's "caliphate", he attended a meeting in Aleppo organised by the "external security" (*al-amm al-khariji*) together with a great number of other foreign IS members. Rukmini Callimachi, "Caliphate" podcast, Chapter 4: "Us vs Them," *New York Times*, May 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/podcasts/caliphate-isis-rukmini-callimachi.html>. In the interview, Abu Huzaifa states that this event took place in July 2014. He, however, admitted in a later chapter of

Terrorist groups across ideological divides have been found to conduct a cost-benefit analysis on whether to assume organisational responsibility for an attack carried out by their operatives: the group leadership claims responsibility when they assess that the anticipated political outcome is positive.¹⁴ Notably, most terrorist groups' leaders prefer not to claim responsibility for indiscriminate violence against civilians committed by their operatives. For IS, the situation differs in two respects. Firstly, the organisation has officially declared civilians in Western countries legitimate targets and explicitly encouraged indiscriminate violence against them, with the obvious aim to generate the greatest possible effect on the public. Hence the emphasis in IS rhetoric that the attacks are retribution for attacks by the anti-IS coalition. Secondly, the incitement of lone actor attacks reverses the hierarchical relation between the attacker and the IS leadership.

Whereas usually the perpetrator is recruited and instructed prior to the violent action, under IS's lone actor strategy it is the leadership, or whoever is entitled to determine the links of the attacker to the organisation, that chooses to designate certain attackers as IS operatives while not commenting on other incidents. Consequently, any incident for which IS takes credit serves a particular communication purpose, which those who decide on taking credit attach to the incident. Incidents that do not fit IS's communication needs at a given time remain unmentioned. In addition, certain IS media might find it useful to mention violent incidents without claiming responsibility, if they see it beneficial for their communication directed at specific audiences.

IS lost its reluctance to publicly acknowledge terrorist attacks in the West somewhere in 2015. Interestingly, however, as mentioned, the March 2016 Brussels attacks were the last successful plot that involved returnees from Syria, at least until the end of 2018. After Brussels, IS operatives increasingly used social media for incitement and operational support.¹⁵ In other words, IS appears to have moved to a more indirect relationship with terrorists operating in its name in the West somewhere in 2016.

IS had an apparatus in charge of organising and coordinating terrorist attacks outside IS territory, the "external security" (*al-amn al-khariji*, sometimes also referred to as the *Emni*).¹⁶ The "external security" probably was hierarchically integrated into the overall IS "public security" structure, which was one of IS's *diwans*, the central bureaucracies of the "caliphate", directly subordinated to the executive council of the "caliph", the "delegated committee" (*al-lajna al-mufawwada*).¹⁷ By mid-2016, the "external security"

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 the podcast that he joined IS after that period in time, probably between late 2014 and early 2015. The event is not mentioned in a later interview with him by CBC News (Nazim Baksh and John Lancaster, "Young Canadian ISIS Recruit Says He Saw Violence on Scale He Could Never Have Imagined," *CBC News*, September 11, 2017, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/isis-canadian-recruit-returns-1.4281860>). For a discussion on the changes in Abu Huzaifa's story after he became aware that he was under investigation, see CBC News interviews with Rukmini Callimachi and Nazim Baksh, "Canadian ISIS Fighter Changes His Story," *CBC News*, May 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KazZzhWYI5A>.

¹⁴ Max Abrahms and Justin Conrad, "The Strategic Logic of Credit Claiming: A New Theory for Anonymous Terrorist Attacks," *Security Studies* 26, no. 2 (2017): 279-304, 301.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Rukmini Callimachi, "Not 'Lone Wolves' After All: How ISIS Guides World's Terror Plots from Afar," *New York Times*, February 4, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/04/world/asia/isis-messaging-app-terror-plot.html>.

¹⁶ Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla, "The ISIS Emni: Origins and Inner Workings of ISIS's Intelligence Apparatus," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, issue 1 (February 2017): 6,

<http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/573>. The term *amn* is used in many Arab countries to refer to intelligence or secret police services. Also other militant groups, such as *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham*, have an *amn* service, which carries out undercover actions, including detentions or fighting of dissident factions.

¹⁷ IS video "*Sarh al-khilafa*" ("The structure of the Khilafah [caliphate]"), *al-Furqan Media Production Company*, July 6, 2016. The video was released simultaneously in an Arabic and an English version. According to this source, The "Diwan for Public Security" (*diwan al-amn al-amm*) was in charge of "safeguarding internal public security in the Islamic State", "waging war against infiltration and against any spy network", and "protecting it [i.e. the caliphate] from anything that would disrupt it". The "Diwan for Public Security" had dedicated structures in each of the IS provinces (*wilayat*).

Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The Archivist: The Islamic State's Security Apparatus Structure in the Provinces," *Jihadology*, August 2, 2017, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/20129/the-archivist-the-islamic-state-security>. During IS's expansion,

reportedly had sent “hundreds of operatives” to Europe and had “hundreds more in Turkey alone”.¹⁸ According to statements by a former IS member who returned from Syria to Germany in July 2015,¹⁹ these operatives acted as nodes that could remotely activate potential suicide attackers who had been drawn in by propaganda. He stated that new converts to Islam, known as “clean men”, with no established ties to radical groups, were in charge of linking them.²⁰ They carried messages between “external security” handlers and their operatives.²¹

IS operatives actively contacted vulnerable individuals online to incite and direct them to carry out attacks.²² This was also done to back up IS claims of responsibility.²³ Among these virtual planners were people like Rachid Kassim, who is said to have instigated the Magnanville murder and several other attacks in the summer of 2016 online via his Telegram account,²⁴ and Mohammed Mahmoud, also known as Abu Usama al-Gharib, who is suspected of inciting German online contacts to perpetrate attacks.²⁵ In these contacts, “external security” members showed high levels of operational information security awareness, using different platforms, chat functionalities in video games and new mobile phones, among other means, to contact and retrieve data, including video statements, from lone actors.²⁶ In addition to controlling attack planning and execution, former IS members have stated that the “external security” was also overseeing IS propaganda. IS media outlets were not allowed to push any news or analysis about attacks or incidents happening outside territory controlled by IS without the “security” apparatus’s approval.²⁷

In sum, the available information seems to suggest that within IS a group of members, probably mainly of European origin, managed to convince the leadership of the

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the “security” apparatus was also in charge of reconnaissance and infiltration in areas beyond IS control. Christoph Reuter, “The Terror Strategist: Secret Files Reveal the Structure of Islamic State”, *Spiegel Online*, April 18, 2015, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html>.

¹⁸ Rukmini Callimachi, “How a Secretive Branch of ISIS Built a Global Network of Killers,” *New York Times*, August 3, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/04/world/middleeast/isis-german-recruit-interview.html>. Callimachi attributes this information to a senior US intelligence official and a senior US defence official, who spoke to her on condition of anonymity, and adds that it was confirmed by an IS dissident, imprisoned in Germany.

¹⁹ Rick Gladstone, “German ISIS Member Who Denied Killing is Charged in Murders,” *New York Times*, January 30, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/03/world/europe/harry-sarfo-isis-germany.html>.

²⁰ Callimachi, “How a secretive branch of ISIS.”

²¹ Speckhard and Yayla, “The ISIS Emni,” 9.

²² Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Madeleine Blackman, “ISIL’s Virtual Planners: A Critical Terrorist Innovation,” *War on the Rocks*, January 4, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/01/isils-virtual-planners-a-critical-terrorist-innovation/>; Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Seamus Hughes, “The Threat to the United States from the Islamic State’s Virtual Entrepreneurs,” *CTC Sentinel* 10, issue 3 (March 2017): 1-8, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-threat-to-the-united-states-from-the-islamic-states-virtual-entrepreneurs>.

²³ Speckhard and Yayla, “The ISIS Emni,” 9.

²⁴ Roland Gauron, “Rachid Kassim, le Djihadiste qui Téléguide les Attentats en France,” *Le Figaro*, September 11, 2016, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2016/09/11/01016-20160911ARTF1G00112-rachid-kassim-le-djihadiste-qui-teleguide-les-attentats-en-france.php>; “Le Djihadiste Rachid Kassim Cibl  par une Frappe de la Coalition en Irak,” *Le Figaro*, February 11, 2017, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2017/02/11/01003-20170211ARTF1G00036-le-djihadiste-rachid-kassim-cible-par-une-frappe-de-la-coalition-en-irak.php>.

²⁵ See, e.g., the account by Björn Stritzel (@bjoernstritzel, footnote 26), part 3, July 26, 2017, <https://twitter.com/bjoernstritzel/status/890196883284602880>. Mahmoud was also reportedly consulted by other German-speaking IS members who incited terrorism. Thomas Hoisl, “Die Verst renden Telegram-Kontakte des Wiener Terrorverd chtigen Lorenz K.,” *Vice.com*, January 1, 2018, https://www.vice.com/de_at/article/ev5a3p/die-verstorenden-telegram-kontakte-des-wiener-terrorverdachtigen-lorenz-k.

²⁶ Speckhard and Yayla, “The ISIS Emni,” 9. For example, probably in the second half of 2016, German journalist Björn Stritzel posed as a volunteer for an attack in Germany on Telegram. He was asked by an IS handler to immediately change to another social media platform, Wickr, and destroy his SIM card. During the period of his contacts with different handlers, he was advised on possible modi operandi for an attack in Germany and given instructions on what to say in his video statement. He was told that he did not need to record a video statement, if he thought that this posed a risk for himself or the attack. See Stritzel’s Twitter feed “How does ISIS instruct Jihadis abroad?” July 28, 2017, <https://twitter.com/bjoernstritzel/status/889517455231647746>. In his chats with a German-speaking IS handler, he mentions the publication of IS al-Raqqa province video “You must fight them, o muwahhid”, which occurred on 26 November 2016.

²⁷ Speckhard and Yayla, “The ISIS Emni,” 10.

necessity, based on ideological and tactical considerations, to wage a terrorist campaign against Western countries. They were entrusted not only with the recruitment of attackers, the planning of attacks and the supervision of the execution but were also given control on how IS media reported on these incidents. In light of the growing complexity of IS’s media landscape, this entailed the coordination of various actors responding to different entities within IS, whose roles and influence were shifting over time. Following these shifts, therefore, can help to understand the internal tensions within IS.

IS claims for attacks in the West

IS claimed responsibility for the 13 November 2015 attacks in Paris and the ones in Brussels on 22 March 2016 by issuing statements that did not carry the logo of a media outlet. They were disseminated through channels used, at the time, for the publication of official IS propaganda; and IS did not publish statements denying the group’s authorship. This demonstrates that these claims were issued by the IS central leadership (Figure 1, left).

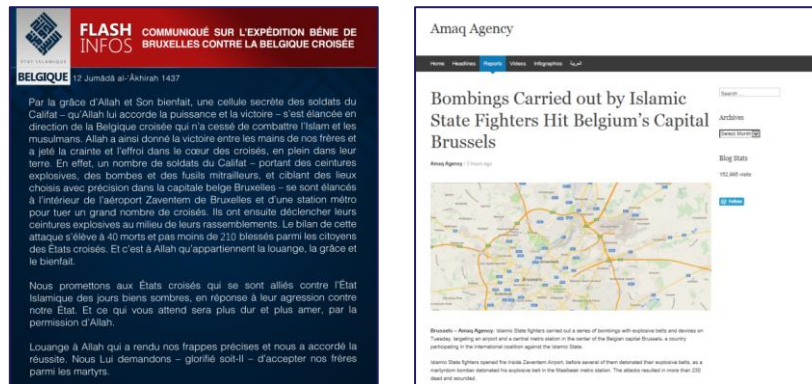


Figure 1: Claims for 22 March 2016 Brussels attack

These claims referred to geographical locations: “France” for the Paris attacks, “Belgium” for the Brussels attacks.²⁸ In doing so, the attacks are identified as occurring outside IS’s “caliphate”, as IS consistently has located events inside its “caliphate” as happening in one of its *wilayat* (sing. *wilaya*, “province [of the caliphate]”).²⁹ The distinction between IS territory and the rest of the world is to be understood as a practical application by IS of the difference made in classical Islamic jurisprudence between *dar al-Islam* (“abode of Islam”) and *dar al-harb* (“abode of war”).³⁰ Under classical Islamic doctrine, Muslims

²⁸ Equally, in the four IS central statements concerning attacks in the West in 2017, the locations of the events are stated as “Britain”, “Spain” and “America”, respectively.

²⁹ The status of “province” of a territory sometimes does not express more than a claim. For example, a suicide attack on the police headquarters in Damascus on 11 October 2017 was claimed by IS with the geographical reference to “Damascus province”, whereas IS has never controlled the Syrian capital. Maybe the difficulty of defining the status of particular localities led IS, in July 2018, to radically simplify its system of “provinces”, grouping all Syrian “provinces” into a “Levant province” and all Iraqi “provinces” into an “Iraq province”. The change was not explicitly communicated, but *al-Naba'*, no. 139 (13/07/2018), carried an infographic *Hasad al-ajnad: al-a'mal al-askariyya fi wilayat al-dawla al-Islamiyya* (“Harvest of the Armies: Military Actions in the Provinces of the Islamic State”, 2), which provided statistics of a total of 21 “provinces”, most of them in Syria and Iraq, whereas a similar infographic in *al-Naba'*, no. 140, July 20, 2018, 2, only specified the “Levant province”, the “Iraq province”, the “Khorasan [Afghanistan] province”, the “Sinai province” and the “Southeast Asia province”.

³⁰ Classical Islamic jurisprudence also allows for a third category, *dar al-sulh* (“abode of peace”) or *dar al-ahd* (“abode of covenant”), i.e. territories with which Muslim rulers agree on a (temporary) peace agreement (*sulh*). Majid Kadduri, *War and Peace in the Law of Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1955), 145. IS does not discuss this third option, dividing

in *dar al-harb* are obliged to perform the migration (*hijra*) to *dar al-Islam*, a view on which IS, under its self-declared status as the only legitimate Muslim power, has built its appeal to supporters around the world to join the organisation in areas under its control. In turn, IS cells outside the *wilayat* are operating in enemy territory and, consequently, come under the control of the “external security”.

In addition to the official IS leadership statement, the Brussels attacks—in contrast to the Paris attacks—were also claimed via an article published on the A’maq News website, active at the time (Figure 1, right).³¹ This article, which described the perpetrators as “Islamic State fighters”, was published some hours before the formal IS statement was released. This replicated an already established pattern, as A’maq News announcements also preceded the official claims of responsibility by IS for the 2 December 2015 attack at San Bernardino, California, and the 14 January 2016 attack in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Prior to late 2015, however, the A’maq News Agency focused exclusively on military activities in territories under IS control. A’maq News was created in 2014 to counter the negative coverage of IS activities, which mainstream media increasingly published in real time by posting “breaking news” banners on social media, in particular Twitter. Replicating this method, A’maq News items served to attract and pre-condition public attention immediately following an attack and, thereby, prepare for a subsequent release of an official claim of responsibility. To maintain the appearance of independence, IS did not acknowledge A’maq News as an official media outlet.³² This changed only in July 2017, when A’maq News was officially endorsed by IS.³³ Internal documents, however, show that A’maq News has been part of IS’s central media structures from the start.³⁴

Initially, A’maq News reported on its own authority mainly on military operations in Syria and Iraq, without referring to sources of information. To all appearances, it has never been subordinate to IS’s central media department but operated in parallel, only reporting to the “delegated committee”. This apparent operational autonomy from IS’s central media department allowed a quicker reaction time, which was necessary to build credibility of the claims and, at the same time, preserve the impression of independence from IS. The constant references by other IS media to A’maq News items, thus, are probably more than a rhetorical figure.

With regard to incidents outside territory controlled or claimed by IS, however, A’maq News has relied on “sources”, which goes to show that it did not have the authority to report on events outside the “caliphate” independently.³⁵ A’maq News also seems to use references to “sources” for information received from the IS bureaucracy. For example, the announcement of the death of IS spokesman and alleged head of the “external

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the world only in IS territory, in which, according to IS interpretation, Islamic law applies, and the unbelieving rest. See *Taw’iyat al-ra’iya bi-l-siyasa al-shari’iyya* (“Making the subjects aware of politics according to the shari’a”), Islamic State (IS), *Maktabat al-Himma*, January 14, 2016, 39-44.

³¹ “Bombings Carried out by Islamic State Fighters Hit Belgium’s Capital Brussels”, Islamic State, *A’maq News Agency*, March 22, 2016.

³² Europol, *EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2017* (The Hague, Europol, 2017), 30, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/eu-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-te-sat-2017>.

³³ Europol, *EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2018* (The Hague: Europol, 2018), 30, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2018-tesat-2018>.

³⁴ Daniel Milton, *Pulling Back the Curtain: An Inside Look at the Islamic State’s Media Organization* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, United States Military Academy, August 2018), <https://ctc.usma.edu/pulling-back-the-curtain-an-inside-look-at-the-islamic-states-media-organization>.

³⁵ For example, the claim for the assassination of Muhammad al-Shaykh Khalil in Urfa city, Turkey, on 7 October 2016 was introduced by the phrase “source to A’maq Agency”.

security” Abu Muhammad al-Adnani on 30 August 2016 was communicated by A’maq News referring to a “military source”.³⁶

A’maq News’s citing sources for events outside IS territory is a recognition of the prerogative of “external security” to control reporting on external operations. Indeed, a particular kind of source that A’maq News relies on with regard to terrorist attacks outside IS territory is the “security source” (*masdar amni*). This is an obvious reference to IS’s “security” apparatus. In A’maq News claims in European languages, the terminology *masdar amni* is rendered as “inside(r) source”³⁷ (also French: *source interne*³⁸; and German: *Insiderquelle*³⁹), “secret [or covert] source” (French: *source secrète*)⁴⁰, “security circles” (German: *Sicherheitskreise*)⁴¹ or “intelligence source” (German: *Geheimdienstquelle*).⁴² All these translations refer to a clandestine, centrally organised structure.

In 2016, A’maq News statements became the preferred way for IS to claim terrorist attacks in the West. At the time, Europol assessed that the use of the purportedly independent A’maq News outlet to describe lone actor attacks in Western countries as “IS soldiers” was a deliberate policy, which created some distance between the IS leadership and the perpetrators. While it provided incentives to other potential attackers, it placed the responsibility for the success of the attack entirely on the perpetrator.⁴³

In addition to these specific claims of attacks, IS used other media to report on attacks, in particular news items in its online publications, in which the perpetrators again were glorified as “IS soldiers”. Articles on attacks were included in IS’s weekly Arabic newsletter *al-Naba’*; the English-language magazine *Dabiq*; or the multi-lingual magazine *Rumiyah*.⁴⁴ *Al-Naba’* has been primarily addressed to audiences in territories under IS control—which consist of IS members but also populations controlled by IS that are not necessarily sympathetic of the organisation.⁴⁵ Since October 2016, the magazine carries a note on its front page identifying it as a publication of IS’s “central media diwan”.⁴⁶

By contrast, *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* were publications focused on audiences outside IS territory, including Western countries. All major non-Arabic IS publications were produced by the al-Hayat Media Centre. Although nominally responding to IS’s “Diwan of Media”, it seems safe to assume that al-Hayat Media, which had managed to incorporate a substantial number of online activists from Western countries, was closely

³⁶ The statement reads: “Military source to A’maq Agency: Martyrdom of Shaykh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the spokesman of the Islamic State, while inspecting the resistance to the military campaigns against Aleppo.”

³⁷ A’maq News claim for the 14 July 2016 Nice attack – English, 16 July 2016; A’maq News claim for the 18 July 2016 Würzburg (Germany) attack – English, 19 July 2016; A’maq News claim for the 24 July 2016 Ansbach (Germany) attack – English, 25 July 2016; A’maq News claim for the 26 September 2017 Saint-Etienne du Rouvray (France) attack – English, 26 July 2016.

³⁸ A’maq News claim for the 24 July 2016 Ansbach (Germany) attack – French, 25 July 2016; A’maq News claim for 20 April 2017 Champs-Élysées attack – French, 20 April 2017.

³⁹ A’maq News claim for the 18 July 2016 Würzburg (Germany) – German, 19 July 2016; A’maq News claim for the 24 July 2016 Ansbach (Germany) attack – German, 25 July 2016; A’maq News claim for the 26 September 2017 Saint-Etienne du Rouvray (France) attack – German, 26 July 2016.

⁴⁰ A’maq News claim for the 18 July 2016 Würzburg (Germany) attack – French, 19 July 2016; A’maq News claim for 22 March 2017 London attack – French, 23 March 2017.

⁴¹ A’maq News claim for 22 March 2017 London attack – German, 23 March 2017. The expression “security circles” is a common reference in German-language media to sources in law enforcement and intelligence.

⁴² A’maq claim for 19 December 2016 Berlin attack – German, 20 December 2016.

⁴³ Europol, *TE-SAT 2017*, 26.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 30.

⁴⁵ Dounia Mahlouly and Charlie Winter, “A Tale of Two Caliphates: Comparing the Islamic State’s Internal and External Messaging Priorities,” *VOX-Pol Network of Excellence*, 2018, http://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/A-Tale-of-Two-Caliphates-Mahlouly-and-Winter.pdf.

⁴⁶ *Al-Naba’*, no. 49, October 6, 2016.

linked to, or at least acted under the supervision of, the “external security”. Interestingly, the news section in the English version of *Rumiyah* is titled “Military and covert operations”, probably also referring to the basic distinction made by IS between “military operations” that take place on “caliphate” territory and “covert/intelligence/security operations” carried out in enemy territory.

In September 2016, *Rumiyah* replaced the separate IS high-profile publications in English (*Dabiq*, last issue published on 31 July 2016), French (*Dar al-Islam*, 20 August 2016), Turkish (*Konstantiniyye*, 16 August 2016) and Russian (*Istok*, 1 May 2016). *Rumiyah* was issued on a monthly basis in eight, later ten, and finally eleven languages, including English, French, German, Russian, Turkish and Bosnian. The last issue of *Rumiyah*, no. 13, was released on 9 September 2017. Many articles in *Rumiyah* are translations of texts previously or simultaneously published in Arabic in *al-Naba’*. While there were some differences of the contents of the different language versions, all of them contained a section on “military and covert operations” of identical content.

With the disappearance of *Rumiyah* after September 2017, communication with internal audiences seems to have become the main concern for the remaining official IS media outlets. IS largely managed to maintain the regular publication and editing quality of *al-Naba’* during the period under review in spite of the increasing military pressure.⁴⁷ By contrast, propaganda directed at audiences in Western countries has increasingly taken the form of user-generated content, issued by an ever-increasing number of newly emerged self-styled media outlets that are supporting but not officially affiliated with IS. This has increasingly blurred the distinction between official and unofficial activism.⁴⁸ In 2018, much of the threats and incitements of attacks outside IS territory, for example regarding the FIFA World Cup in Russia, were produced by unaffiliated media outlets and individuals.

Already this short outline of IS media involved in claiming credit for attacks in the West shows that there are several, potentially competing entities at play. Reporting on external operations has been the prerogative of the “external security”, which in principle has the authority to authorise or refuse authorisation to IS media to claim credit for particular incidents. A’maq News has the task of spreading IS messages as quickly as possible, usually preceding the central media department, which often does no more than echo and elaborate on A’maq News messages in *al-Naba’* or publish videos in praise of the attack through provincial media outlets. Finally, among IS media outlets, al-Hayat Media seems to have enjoyed a special position, probably for two reasons: its orientation towards audiences outside “caliphate” territory, which places it under “external security” supervision; and the likely substantial overlap between its staff and IS members coming from Western countries.

Attacks claimed or mentioned by IS

To shed light on the changing relationships between the entities involved in IS credit claiming for attacks in the West, this study examines violent incidents in Western countries that occurred after the 22 March 2016 attacks in Brussels, the last attacks in the West perpetrated by individuals that were proven to have received training by IS in territory controlled by the group, and before the end of 2018. Incidents were considered

⁴⁷ One issue of *al-Naba’* was skipped in June 2018, with no. 136 appearing only on 22 June 2018 after no. 135 was released on 8 June 2018.

⁴⁸ Europol, *TE-SAT 2018*, 31. It should be noted, however, that al-Hayat Media continued its activity on a low scale, publishing videos such as the “Inside the Khilafah” series.

when they were referred to by IS, either by claiming responsibility or simply mentioned in official propaganda publications, and took place in EU Member States and other Western countries.⁴⁹ A small number of these incidents were no more than a reaction to evacuation measures in Western countries, which IS claimed to be the result of larger operations that were thwarted by security forces. For practical reasons, the data collection was restricted to A’maq News statements; video statements by perpetrators published by A’maq News; IS central leadership statements; as well as news reporting in *al-Naba’*, *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah*.⁵⁰

A total of 48 incidents matching the abovementioned selection criteria were identified. The incidents took place in twelve countries: France (13), the USA (9), Germany (7), the UK (4), Belgium (4), Spain (2), Sweden (2), Australia (2), Canada (2), as well as Austria, Denmark and Finland (1 each). The nature of the attacks varies significantly, ranging from bombs allegedly smuggled into Paris Charles de Gaulle airport on 17 September 2017 or a stabbing incident in Brussels on 25 August 2017, in which a soldier was slightly injured, to the mass shooting in Las Vegas on 1 October 2017, which killed 59 people and left more than 500 injured. There does not seem to exist a threshold of minimum damage for IS to claim responsibility for an attack. Equally, the attack target does not seem to have played a role for IS; attacks claimed by IS have targeted civilians and security personnel alike.

No attacks in Western countries were claimed in the period between the 22 March 2016 Brussels attacks and the mass shooting in Orlando, Florida, and the double murder in Magnanville near Paris on 12 and 13 June 2016, respectively (Figure 2). During this period, however, at least one incident linked to Islamic extremism took place, when a bomb attack perpetrated by two 16-year-old boys targeted a Sikh temple in Essen (Germany) on 16 April 2016. There are indications that the perpetrators, who were known for their jihadist convictions, were incited to carry out the attack by prominent members of the presumed IS network in Germany at the time.⁵¹

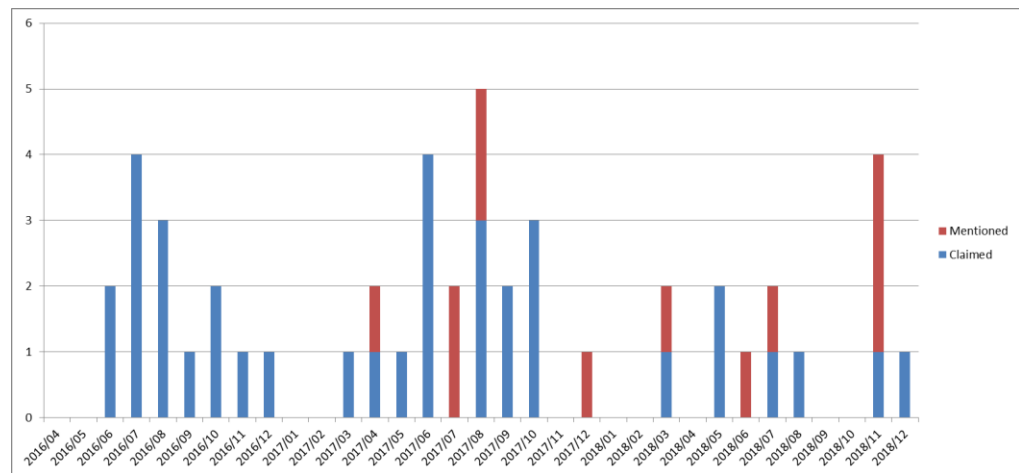


Figure 2: Violent incidents claimed or mentioned by IS per month

⁴⁹ In addition to those in EU Member States, IS referred to incidents in Australia, Canada and the USA in the period under review.

⁵⁰ Excluded from the data collection were other IS videos glorifying attacks in the West, as these generally praise attacks that had already been claimed through A’maq News or IS statements. Ideological texts that referred to several attacks as examples of IS success were not considered either. For example, an article entitled “Game Over” in *Dar al-Islam*, no. 10, August 20, 2016, 26-27, mentioned several attacks in Europe, but the overall aim of the article is to demonstrate that France is losing the war against IS. No other relevant news reporting was found in *Dar al-Islam* in the period under review. *Konstantiniyye* and *Istok* were excluded from the data collection.

⁵¹ Alex Spilcker, “Anschlag auf Sikh-Tempel: Attentäter wird Kronzeuge und belastet Abu Walaa,” *Kölner Stadtanzeiger*, July 1, 2018, <https://www.ksta.de/politik/anschlag-auf-sikh-tempel-attentaeter-wird-kronzeuge-und-belastet-abu-walaa-30713326>.

The gap in the timeline of attacks claimed or mentioned by IS, thus, may indicate a period of strategic re-orientation within the IS leadership following the Brussels attacks. Possibly, this re-orientation was motivated by the perception that, instead of relying on dedicated networks led by IS members trained in the conflict area, such as the network that perpetrated the attacks in Paris and Brussels, it would be more effective to incite and guide potential perpetrators remotely. This period ended with IS expressing its preference in late May 2016 for supporters to perpetrate lone actor attacks rather than to try to join IS in areas under its control.⁵² To ensure immediate implementation of the new strategy, it seems, the message included a call for Muslims to dedicate the then upcoming month of Ramadan (6 June to 5 July 2016) to “jihad”. Around the same time, IS increased its efforts to recruit potential lone actor attackers on social media, through virtual planners.⁵³

In light of this, IS’s failure to claim responsibility for the 16 April 2016 attack on the Sikh temple in Essen, Germany, although the group very likely was aware of it, might be due to the relatively unspectacular results: three injured persons, including one seriously. Possibly, in early 2016, it was still unclear what kind of attacks could be expected as a result of the online incitement of lone actor attacks that was just being devised, and the outcome of the Essen attack was not considered to be impressive enough to cause the desired mobilisation effects.

Between the 19 December 2016 attack on a Christmas market in Berlin and the London Westminster attack on 22 March 2017, IS again entered a period in which it did not claim any terrorist attacks in Western countries.⁵⁴ During this time frame, IS was arguably preoccupied with the offensive that had been launched against its strongholds in Mosul by Iraqi forces and in northern Syria by the Turkish-led Euphrates Shield operation, which probably necessitated the relocation of its remaining media capacities. Nevertheless, it is difficult to correlate both developments with any degree of certainty.

Following the Westminster attack, a series of incidents were claimed, which will be discussed below. After the Las Vegas mass shooting on 1 October, however, the frequency of attacks in the West claimed by IS decreased significantly. In what remained of 2017, IS only claimed responsibility for the 31 October 2017 vehicle ramming in Manhattan, New York City, but not for the attempted bomb attack on 11 December in the same city. In parallel, overall IS propaganda production experienced a sharp decrease.⁵⁵ This was probably the result of events in Syria that took place in late September or early October, such as strategic advances in and around the Syrian cities of al-Raqqa, al-Mayadin, or al-Bukamal, which might have forced IS to again relocate its central media hub.⁵⁶

IS claims regained momentum only in the second quarter of 2018, after IS claimed credit for the shooting and hostage taking in Trèbes, France, on 23 March. In total, IS claimed responsibility for seven violent incidents in Western countries in 2018, as opposed to 21

⁵² Abu Muhammad al-Adnani audio speech *Wa-yahya man hayya an bayyina* (“And those who lived might live after a Clear Sign [had been given] [Qur’an 8:42]”), *Islamic State (IS)*, *al-Furqan Media Production Company*, May 21, 2016.

⁵³ Gartenstein-Ross and Blackman, “ISIL’s virtual planners.”; Meleagrou-Hitchens and Hughes, “The Threat to the United States.”

⁵⁴ The 3 February 2017 attack at the Louvre in Paris was not claimed or mentioned by IS. In addition, the mass shooting at the Reina nightclub in Istanbul, Turkey, in the night of 31 December 2016 falls into this period.

⁵⁵ Charlie Winter and Haroro J. Ingram, “Terror, online and off: recent trends in Islamic State propaganda operations,” *War on the Rocks*, March 2, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/03/terror-online-and-off-recent-trends-in-islamic-state-propaganda-operations>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

in 2017. In addition to the claimed attacks, twelve violent incidents in Western countries were mentioned in IS publications without IS claiming responsibility. In 2017, starting with the 28 July 2017 stabbing in a Hamburg supermarket, a total of 6 incidents were mentioned by IS without taking credit. In several cases, the victims were described as “Crusaders”, but the perpetrators did not receive the honorific of “IS soldiers”. Other violent incidents were mentioned in 2018 without being claimed, including a 20 July 2018 stabbing in a bus in Lübeck, Germany;⁵⁷ and a 20 November 2018 stabbing attack in Brussels.⁵⁸ At least in the latter case, a jihadist motive seemed plausible as the attacker reportedly shouted “Allahu akbar”.⁵⁹ In all, however, it seems that IS, as other observers, had increasing difficulties in distinguishing attacks clearly motivated by its own propaganda from other violent incidents.

For 2016, in most attacks for which IS claimed responsibility, the perpetrators had been killed by the time the claim was released. The only exceptions are the perpetrator of the 11 October 2016 Malmö arson, who was arrested, and the perpetrator of the 16 October 2016 Hamburg stabbing, who has remained unidentified. In 2017, this pattern changed to a certain degree. Of the 15 attacks claimed by IS that year, claims of responsibility were issued for four, while the perpetrators were alive. In the case of the 17 August 2017 attack in Barcelona, IS claimed responsibility immediately, whereas the perpetrator was shot and killed by police only on 21 August. The presumed perpetrator of the Parsons Green Underground attack in London on 15 September 2017 was later arrested. The perpetrator of the 31 October 2017 ramming attack in Manhattan was shot by police and arrested. In addition, for an alleged attempted IS bomb attack at Paris Charles de Gaulle airport on 9 August 2017, no arrests have been reported.

No pattern can be deduced from such limited data and it remains impossible to conclude, for example, whether IS only claims attacks while the perpetrator is still alive, if it had prior knowledge of the plot. In the seven attacks for which IS claimed credit in 2018, the perpetrators were killed. By contrast, the perpetrators of the 2018 stabbing incidents in Lübeck and Brussels, for which IS did not claim credit, were arrested.

Changes in claiming behavior

Not only the frequency of credit claiming, also the ways in which IS issued claims for attacks in Western countries has fluctuated between 2016 and 2018. These fluctuations are probably due to a multitude of factors, many of which—in particular the military contingencies on the ground, as seen above—are beyond the scope of this report. In what follows, in addition to the content of the claims, three variables are examined: the sequence of claims, their temporal distance from the event and the sources referred to. Under the assumption that different IS media are controlled by different sub-entities of the organisation that have different levels of autonomy, looking at these factors is a way to disaggregate to a certain extent the group’s communication behaviour. Figure 3 shows the sequence and temporal distance to the incident of claims of responsibility for or references to violent incidents in Western countries.

⁵⁷ *Isabat 10 bi-hujum bi-sikkin fi Almanya* (“10 Injured in Knife Attack in Germany”), *al-Naba’*, no. 141 July 27, 2018, 11.

⁵⁸ *Muhajim yahtif Allahu akbar yat’an shurtiyyan bi-Belgika bi-sikkin* (“Attacker shouts ‘Allahu Akbar’, Stabs Policeman in Belgium with Knife”), *al-Naba’*, no. 157, November 22, 2018, 11.

⁵⁹ Richard Pérez-Peña, “Brussels Police Officer Is Stabbed, Officials Say”, *New York Times*, November 20, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/20/world/europe/brussels-police-officer-stabbed.html>.

IS franchising lone actor attacks

In 2016, a typical sequence of IS claims for attacks started with a “breaking news” statement by A’maq News, generally published in several languages. Usually, A’maq News statements were published on the day of the attack or the following day. Exceptions are the claims for the 14 July 2016 attack in Nice and the 31 August 2016 Copenhagen attack, where two days passed before the A’maq News statement was issued. In addition, the stabbing in Hamburg on 16 October 2016, in which one 16-year-old boy was killed, was claimed through A’maq News 15 days after it had occurred, without providing explanations for the delay.⁶⁰ Such occasional delays might indicate that A’maq News was waiting for authorisation from a “security source” to report that a particular incident was perpetrated by individuals affiliated with IS.

With regard to the expected references to “security sources”, there were some exceptions in 2016. The claims for the 12 June 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting, the 13 June 2016 Magnanville murder, the 31 August 2016 Copenhagen shooting and the 16 October 2016 Hamburg stabbing referred only to an unspecified “source”. By contrast, all A’maq News claims for attacks in 2017 refer to a “security source”. Apparently, IS communication regarding the new virtual planner strategy was consolidated in the course of 2016 in a way that all terrorist attacks in the West were explicitly attributed, in IS propaganda, to the “external security” apparatus.

In most cases, following the release of the A’maq News statement, *al-Naba’* repeated the information provided by A’maq News and expanded it with information taken from media or other sources for the consumption of audiences in IS-controlled territory. Finally, the topic was taken up in the monthly non-Arabic magazines, directed at external audiences.

This sequence was observed in many of the attacks in 2016 and 2017. There, however, are also significant variations. One exception in 2016 was the 11 October arson attack on a Shi’i cultural centre in Malmö, Sweden. The attack was only claimed through an article in *al-Naba’*, which described the perpetrator as an “IS soldier”, specifying that the information was received by *al-Naba’* directly from a “security source”.⁶¹ The reason why the incident was not claimed immediately through an A’maq News statement might have been a problem of internal communication. The perpetrator of the Malmö arson attack had been in contact, since mid-September 2016 at the latest, with a 23-year-old Syrian national, who reportedly entered Germany in September 2015 and acted as a contact person between A’maq News and potential attackers.⁶² The day following the attack, this individual is alleged to have requested a statement of responsibility from the attacker, arguing that A’maq News was not willing to publish a claim without such evidence. *Al-Naba’* also reported exclusively on an alleged bomb plot at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris on 17 September 2017. Based on information that it said it had received directly from a “security source” talking to the magazine, *al-Naba’* claimed that a “security detachment of Islamic State soldiers” was able to smuggle explosive devices into the French airport and plant them in previously specified locations, but the “Crusaders” were

⁶⁰ The statement follows the usual model: “Source to A’maq Agency: a soldier of the Islamic State stabbed two individuals in Hamburg city on the 16th of the current month [16 October 2016]. He carried out the operation in response to calls for the targeting of citizens of coalition countries.”

⁶¹ *Junud al-khilafa yudammiruna markazan li-l-rafida fi al-Swid* (“Caliphate Soldiers Destroy a Rafidi [Shi’i] Centre in Sweden”), *al-Naba’*, no. 51, October 20, 2016, 3.

⁶² *Festnahme eines mutmaßlichen Mitglieds der ausländischen terroristischen Vereinigung ‘Islamischer Staat’ (IS)* (“Arrest of a Suspected Member of the Foreign Terrorist Organisation ‘Islamic State’ (IS)”), *German General Federal Prosecutor (Generalbundesanwalt) press release 55/2017*, June 8, 2017, <https://www.generalbundesanwalt.de/de/showpress.php?newsid=712>.

able to detect them before they exploded.⁶³ This claim was probably an attempt by *al-Naba'* to capitalise on news of an airplane being searched at Paris Charles de Gaulle based on a false bomb alarm⁶⁴ with the aim to project an image of strength for its internal audiences.

The focus on internal audiences was also apparent in two attacks in 2016. On 6 August 2016, two female police officers were injured by a man with a machete in front of a police station in Charleroi, Belgium. Four days later, a suspect blew himself up in a taxi when confronted by police following a raid on his home in Strathroy, Ontario, Canada. Both incidents were claimed as IS attacks via A'maq News and mentioned in *al-Naba'*, but they were not mentioned in the first issue of *Rumiyah*, which was published on 5 September 2016. At the time, the editors of *Rumiyah*, presumably under "external security" supervision, probably did not consider these incidents good examples of lone actor attacks in Western countries that they wanted to promote among audiences in Europe.

In 2017, by contrast, *Rumiyah* was used to claim responsibility for attacks that had not been previously claimed through statements by the IS leadership or A'maq News. The 19 June 2017 attack on the Champs-Élysées in Paris and the 20 June 2017 bomb attack in Brussels' Central Station were only mentioned in *Rumiyah*, no. 11, which was released on 13 July 2017, more than three weeks after the attacks had occurred.⁶⁵ *Rumiyah* described the attackers as "caliphate soldiers", without referring to a "security source", a fact that may be taken as additional confirmation of "external security" control of the publication. Both attacks apparently failed to achieve their objectives, with the Paris attacker dying of toxic fumes in his car and the Brussels attacker prematurely detonating his device. It may be for this reason that IS initially refrained from claiming responsibility. There would have been ample opportunity to do so in *al-Naba'*, with four issues of the newsletter appearing between the attacks and the release of *Rumiyah*. The aim of the belated homage paid to the perpetrators, thus, was to send a message to Western audiences, rather than to internal ones.

This change in communication with audiences in Western countries from 2016 to 2017 was certainly based on considerations of how to maximise involvement of IS supporters in the West and motivate them to act. In 2016, IS was prepared to praise only attacks of a certain sophistication with the aim to make potential attackers strive for spectacular attack scenarios. In 2017, by contrast, the threshold for receiving honours from IS by being labelled an "IS soldier" seems to have been considerably lower, as even attacks which initially had remained unmentioned were eligible to receive the IS label after some time of reflection. This might have been a concession to the attitudes of IS supporters in the West. One could imagine that supporters outside IS territory started wondering why IS refrained from acknowledging the two lone actor attacks in June 2017. Such chatter might have pressured the "external security" into granting the perpetrators the status of "IS soldiers", after initially refusing to give permission to A'maq News and *al-Naba'* to claim responsibility for the attacks. This change occurred at a time when the communication capabilities of the external operations apparatus were already stretched. Not long after, on 9 September 2017, the last issue of *Rumiyah* was released.

⁶³ *Ubuwwa nasifa bi-ta'ira fi Paris wa-ukhra tusib 30 salibiyyan fi London* ("Explosive Device in an Airplane in Paris and Another Injures 30 Crusaders in London"), *al-Naba'*, no. 98, September 22, 2017, 3.

⁶⁴ "Un Vol Paris-Londre Retardé après une Fausse Alerte à la Bombe," *Le Point*, September 17, 2017, https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/un-vol-british-airways-paris-londres-avec-130-passagers-evacue-a-roissy-17-09-2017-2157657_23.php.

⁶⁵ "Military and Covert Operations," *Rumiyah*, no. 11 (English), July 13, 2017, 43.

IS centralising

In five cases in 2016, the A'maq News claim was accompanied by a video showing the perpetrator(s) announcing the attack and pledging allegiance to IS.⁶⁶ Four of them took place in the summer of 2016, followed by the 19 December 2016 Berlin Christmas market attack (figure 3). In the latter case, the video was released after the perpetrator had been killed in Milan, Italy, four days later. Remarkably, the method was not replicated by A'maq News in attacks in Europe in 2017.⁶⁷ This is surprising, as pre-recorded video messages seem a convenient way of proving the attacker's motivation and avoiding speculation about the nature of the attack. At the same time, however, publication of the video statement by A'maq News publicly demonstrated some kind of direct or indirect contact of the perpetrators with IS operatives, thereby drawing attention to IS's covert activities, including in Europe. It might also have been felt that this method was difficult to apply consistently, as the transfer of the videos might be impractical or intercepted in some cases. Possibly, IS also considered the transfer of videos as a potential risk for detection. If IS or A'maq News requested and received video statements from perpetrators in 2017, they refrained from publishing them, maybe to keep them for future use, for example in case IS authorship was disputed. In several cases, however, IS did not release such proof, even when authorities publicly announced that they had not found any links between the perpetrator and the group.

⁶⁶ In addition, a video showing two alleged perpetrators of an attack on Russian policemen in Balashikha, east of Moscow, on 17 August 2016 was published by A'maq News. Thomas Joscelyn, "Jihadists who Attacked Russian Police Appear in Islamic State Video," *FDD's Long War Journal*, August 18, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/08/jihadists-who-attacked-russian-police-appear-in-islamic-state-video.php>.

⁶⁷ Following the stabbing attack in Surgut, Russia, on August 19, 2017, however, IS's Furat Media published a video showing the perpetrator as he pledged allegiance to IS. Furat Media video *Surgut: al-dam al-dam* ("Surgut: More Blood"), *Islamic State (IS)*, August 21, 2017. More recently, on March 21, 2018, A'maq News released a video allegedly showing the perpetrator of an attack in Grozny, Chechnya, on March 20, 2018 pledging allegiance to IS. Thomas Joscelyn, "Grozny Jihadist Swore Allegiance to Baghdadi before Assaulting Police," *FDD's Long War Journal*, March 22, 2018, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/03/grozny-jihadist-swore-allegiance-to-baghdadi-before-assaulting-police.php>.

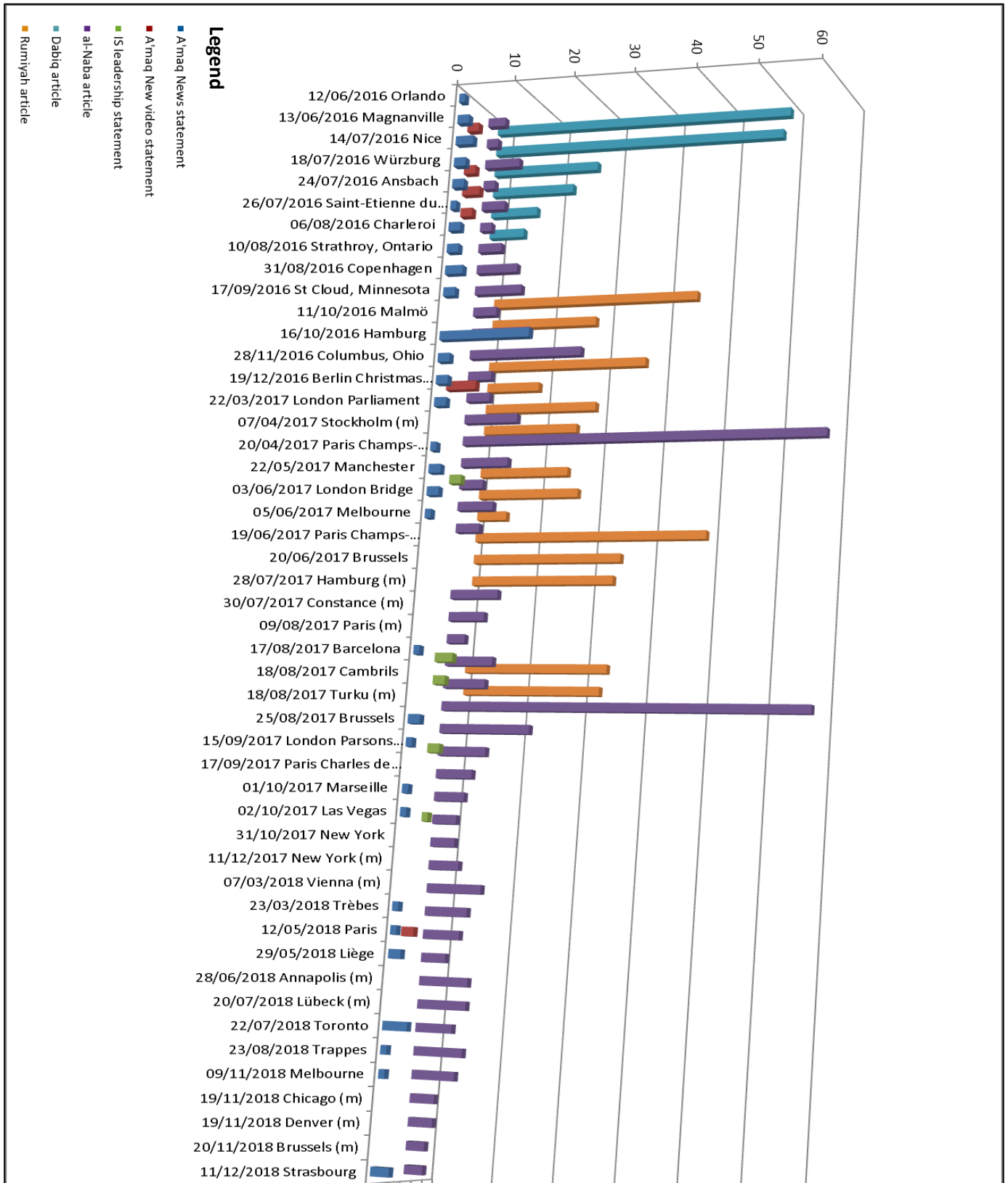


Figure 3: IS claims or mentions per incident⁶⁸

⁶⁸ The height of the columns indicates time distance since the attacks, with 1 meaning that the claim was published on the day of the attack. In case of multiple mentions in one medium the first occurrence is displayed. The columns of the 7 April Stockholm and the 18 August 2017 Turku attacks are shortened. Attacks only mentioned are marked (m).

Alternatively, abandoning the publication of perpetrator video statements may have been a strategic decision. The release of perpetrator video statements is an example of IS's bottom-up approach in propaganda production, in which new communication methods developed by individuals are adopted by the organisation in case they prove effective. The method was first employed by the perpetrator of the Magnanville murders: after killing his two victims, he broadcast a video message live from the location of the crime through a social media service. The video was quickly deleted from the platform but later re-published on the A'maq News website in an edited version containing a title and the A'maq News logo. Public IS guidelines for lone actor attacks, such as the "Just Terror Tactics" series in *Rumiyah*, which appeared in the second half of 2016, did not mention this method explicitly but advised the perpetrator to leave some kind of evidence at the scene stating the motivation of the attack and his allegiance to IS, such as a note attached to the victim's body or a last will.⁶⁹

Possibly, the discontinuation of publishing perpetrator video statements after the Berlin attack—before re-emerging in one instance in 2018—reflects a change in editorial policy at a time when IS struggled to maintain its media capacities.⁷⁰ The reason for the change might have been that the IS leadership assessed that featuring the perpetrators with video statements gave excessive publicity to the individual attacker. IS has displayed an ambivalent attitude to the glorification of individual members: it has published innumerable accounts of suicide attackers that try to incite others to follow their example, but has been careful not to overemphasise the importance of particular members, including the "caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, to the survival of the group.⁷¹

Therefore, IS might have sought to replace the video statements of perpetrators by another means, one that draws the attention away from the individual perpetrator and onto the attack itself. This may be the reason why, in addition to A'maq News statements, in 2017 IS started to issue central claims of responsibility again, similar to what had been observed in the 13 November 2015 attacks in Paris and those of 22 March 2016 in Brussels. After the 22 May 2017 Manchester concert bombing, IS leadership statements were released for the 17-18 August attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils; the Parsons Green London Underground attack on 15 September 2017 and the Las Vegas shooting of 1 October 2017 (*figure 3*). Like in 2015, the four IS statements in 2017 were published only hours or a single day after the A'maq News "breaking news". All these are incidents to which IS probably wanted to draw special attention. Possibly, simple claims via A'maq News or mentions in *al-Naba'* had become too common to be considered by IS to provide sufficiently strong incentive for other potential attackers. From this perspective, IS claiming behaviour seems to have been driven by the expected effect on Western audience.

⁶⁹ Europol, *TE-SAT 2017*, 26.

⁷⁰ As mentioned earlier, the Berlin attack was marked by almost three months during which no attack was claimed in the West, probably due to the necessity of re-locating the remaining media capacities. In addition, in late May 2017, the founder of A'maq News, Rayan Meshaal was killed in an airstrike. "U.S.-Led Coalition Strike Kills Founder of Islamic State Media Outlet: Brother," *Reuters*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-islamicstate-idUSKBN18R36F>.

⁷¹ Haroro J. Ingram and Craig A. Whiteside, "The Caliph's Role in the (un)Surprising Resilience of the Islamic State", After the Caliphate Project, *Foreign Policy Research Institute Program on the Middle East*, October 25, 2018, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/10/the-caliphs-role-in-the-unsurprising-resilience-of-the-islamic-state>. Similarly, IS media were ordered to look for different IS members to carry out assassinations in IS videos to avoid that any one of them rose in prominence above others. Rukmini Callimachi, "The English Voice of ISIS Comes Out of the Shadows," *New York Times*, February 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/17/world/middleeast/isis-islamic-state-narrator.html>.

At the same time, however, decreasing accuracy of information concerning violent incidents in Western countries spread through A'maq News and *al-Naba'* in 2017 pointed to a focus on internal audiences. In addressing Western audiences, it would have been important to stay close to verifiable facts if IS was to preserve credibility.⁷² In 2015, IS still exhorted its media operatives to stick to the truth.⁷³ In 2017, IS's major preoccupation was apparently to boost the morale of IS fighters and intimidate local populations in IS-controlled territory by projecting the image of an organisation that was still able to perpetrate spectacular attacks outside its territory. In the eyes of the IS media operatives, the potentially negative effects on IS's credibility might have been mitigated by the fact that IS has managed to largely isolate the populations under its control from outside information, aiming to establish a communications monopoly for its own propaganda.⁷⁴

An example of incorrect reporting concerns the claims for the failed bomb attack aboard an Underground train at Parsons Green station in London on 15 September 2017, planted by a 17-year-old Iraqi refugee.⁷⁵ Both A'maq News and the IS leadership statement attributed the lone actor attack to an IS "detachment" (*mafraza*) planting several explosive devices in the station. In addition, a week after the attack, an article in *al-Naba'* claimed, relying on a "field source", that a "security detachment of IS soldiers" planted the bombs in "Yarsons [sic] Green" Underground station.⁷⁶ The IS leadership and *al-Naba'* both stated inaccurately that the device exploded in the station, whereas in reality it deflagrated aboard a train. The misspelling of the station's name might be a simple typographical error, but it might also be the result of a failure in written communication, such as through an encrypted communication app.⁷⁷

The most striking miscommunication, however, occurred with regard to the Las Vegas mass shooting, which also was the last incident in 2017 for which an IS leadership statement was issued. IS failed to provide evidence for its claim that the Las Vegas attacker was linked to IS. Until the time of writing, no indication of a jihadist motive for the mass shooting has come to light.⁷⁸

The perpetrator started shooting at the concert location shortly after 22h00 on 1 October 2017. Early on 2 October, A'maq News issued two banners in short succession.

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⁷² One of the principles of propaganda according to Joseph Göbbels was that truth "should be used as frequently as possible; otherwise the enemy or the facts themselves might expose falsehood, and the credibility of his own output would suffer. [...] Lies, consequently, were useful when they could not be disproven." Leonard W. Doob, "Goebbel's Principles of Propaganda," *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1950): 419-442, at 428.

⁷³ "The believing, monotheist media worker speaks justice and truthfulness in a time in which the people of truth are scarce and the veracious rare! He conveys to the ordinary people a realistic image of the battle without exaggerations or lies." *Mujahid anta ayyuha al-i'lami* ("You are a Mujahid, O Media Worker"), Islamic State (IS), Maktabat al-Himma, "second edition" dated Ramadan 1436 AH (18/06/2015-16/07/2015 AD), published on February 23, 2016, 40.

⁷⁴ Charlie Winter, "Totalitarian Insurgency: Evaluating the Islamic State's In-Theatre Propaganda Operations," *Center for Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups (CIWAG) Case Studies* 15 (2017), <http://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/ciwag-case-studies/15>.

⁷⁵ Ian Cobain, "Parsons Green Bomb Trial: Teenager 'Trained to Kill by ISIS'," *The Guardian*, March 07, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/07/parsons-green-tube-bombing-ahmed-hassan-on-trial>.

⁷⁶ *Ubuwwa nasifa bi-ta'ira fi Paris wa-ukhra tusib 30 salibiyyan fi London* ("Explosive Device in an Airplane in Paris and Another Injures 30 Crusaders in London"), *al-Naba'*, no. 98, September 22, 2017, 3.

⁷⁷ In Arabic script the difference between the letter *ba* (ب), also used to transcribe *p* as in Parsons, (بارسونز) and *ya* (ي), used in the *al-Naba'* article, (يارسونز) is one as opposed to two diacritical dots below the line. It is not unlikely that the misspelling occurred when information received from an external source was entered into *al-Naba'* by an editor not familiar with locations in London.

⁷⁸ This has not been the first mass atrocity claimed by IS that does not seem to be linked to the group. For example, IS claimed an attack on a casino in Manila, Philippines, on 2 June 2017, which killed at least 36 people. Philippine police, however, stated that the attack more likely had a criminal background. Oliver Holmes and Kevin Rawlinson, "Philippines Attack: Dozens Feared Dead after Manila Gunman Sets Fire to Resort," *The Guardian*, June 2, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/01/philippines-manila-explosions-and-gunshots-heard-at-manila-entertainment-resort>. The attack was praised in *al-Naba'*, no. 84, June 8, 2017, 11; and *Rumiyah*, no. 10 (English), June 7, 2017, 33.

The first one described the attacker as an “IS soldier” in a phrasing known from previous A’maq News claims. Less than ten minutes later,⁷⁹ a second message claimed that he had “converted to Islam several months ago”. In both news items, A’maq News referred to a “security source”. Less than one hour later, an IS leadership statement, marked as “breaking news”, was issued.⁸⁰ In the next edition of *al-Naba’*, published on 5 October, an article combined the information in the A’maq News messages and the IS statement, but introduced passages taken from the IS statement and the A’maq News claim as coming from a “media source”.⁸¹

The Las Vegas shooting was also mentioned in two items in the *al-Naba’* issue of the following week. This time, however, they were part of the “Happened in a week” section. This section appeared for the first time in *al-Naba’* in late July 2017.⁸² It has combined reports, consistently based on non-IS media sources, on natural disasters, such as hurricanes in the Caribbean or forest fires in California, and political crises outside IS territory, like the North Korean conflict, in an effort to show the weakness of IS’s enemies and the divine wrath befalling them. With regard to the Las Vegas shooting, the “Happened in a week” section referred to statements by US authorities concerning the police response in the Las Vegas attack. It reiterated that the perpetrator converted to Islam six months prior to the attack, but did not describe him as a “caliphate soldier”.⁸³ Possibly, the editors of *al-Naba’* wanted to keep the discussion about the Las Vegas shooting going, without repeating the claim that the perpetrator was an IS member. To all appearances, the contents of the “Happened in a week” section are selected by the editors of *al-Naba’*. The “Happened in a week” section has also been used to report on violent incidents outside IS territory in 2017 for which IS did not claim responsibility.⁸⁴ Including this information on the Las Vegas attack allowed the editors of *al-Naba’* to circumvent the “external security” prerogative of controlling information released on attacks in the West.

Most likely, IS claimed the shooting purely for opportunistic reasons, to signal to its own fighters and the local populations under its control that the organisation was still capable of striking the USA. A’maq News certainly had no possibility to independently confirm

⁷⁹ Rita Katz, “What ISIS has to Lose if it’s Lying about Las Vegas,” Insite Blog on Terrorism & Extremism, October 5, 2017, <http://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/categories/jihad/entry/426-what-isis-has-to-lose-if-it%E2%80%99s-lying-about-las-vegas-1>. Katz states that the first A’maq News was published “Monday morning”, i.e. after midnight on October 2, 2017, the second following ten minutes later. Less than an hour later, the IS leadership statement was released.

⁸⁰ The statement was released in Arabic and English, among other languages. The bad quality of the English translation is noteworthy.

⁸¹ *Jara’a hujum li-ahad junud [a]l-khilafa 60 qatilan wa-akthar min 500 musab min al-salibiyyin fi Las Vegas bi-Amrika* (“In an Attack by a Caliphate Soldier 60 Crusaders Killed and more than 500 Injured in Las Vegas, America”), *al-Naba’*, no. 100, October, 5, 2017, 3.

⁸² See *Hadatha fi usbu’* (“Happened in a Week”), *al-Naba’*, no. 90, July 20, 2017, 15.

⁸³ *Kayfa ahbata munaffidh hujum Las Vegas khutta muhakkama li-mukafahat al-irhab* (“How the Perpetrator of the Las Vegas Attack Thwarted a Well-Conceived Counter-Terrorism Plan”), *al-Naba’*, no. 101, October 13, 2017, 15. A second article in the section commented on the expressions of sympathy by Western governments. *Tawaghit wa-salibiyyu al-alam yatabakun ala qatlahum fi Las Vegas* (“The Tyrants and Crusaders of the World Weep for Their Dead in Las Vegas”), *ibid.*

⁸⁴ These are the 28 July 2017 stabbing in a supermarket in Hamburg, a shooting incident at a nightclub in Constance, Germany, on 30 July 2017 and a vehicle-ramming attack on French soldiers in Paris on 8 August 2017. *Akthar min 10 salibiyyin bayna qatil wa-jarih bi-hujumayn munfasilayn fi Almanya* (“More than 10 Crusaders Killed and Injured in Two Separate Attacks in Germany”), *al-Naba’*, no. 92, July 4, 2017, 15; *Dahs 6 junud min “mukafahat al-irhab” fi Firansa halat 3 minhum harija* (“Ramming of 6 Counter-Terrorism Soldiers in France, with Three of Them in Serious Condition”), *al-Naba’*, no. 93, August 11, 2017, 15. The same applies to the 7 March 2018 Vienna stabbing incident. *Isabat arba’a bi-juruh khatira fi hujumayn bi-l-sakakin fi al-Nimsa* (“Four injured severely in two knife attacks in Austria”), *al-Naba’*, no. 123, March 15, 2018, 11. In February 2018, the “Happened in a week” section also reported on the trials for the 7 April 2017 vehicle ramming in Stockholm, Sweden, and the 18 August 2017 stabbing in Turku, Finland, for which IS did not claim responsibility. *Munaffidh hujum Finlanda qala innahu jundi lil-dawla al-Islamiyya* (“The Perpetrator of the Finland Attack Says that he is an Islamic State Soldier”), *al-Naba’*, no. 118, February 8, 2018, 11; *Munaffidh hujum Stockholm: kuntu urid al-istishhad athna’ al-hujum* (“Stockholm Attack Perpetrator: I Wanted to Achieve Martyrdom during the Attack”), *al-Naba’*, no. 120, February 22, 2018, 11.

the information received, and it is not unlikely that, in late 2017, IS's network of external sources and operatives lacked redundancy to quickly verify information received and passed it on without the necessary scrutiny.⁸⁵ Once the claim was issued, it was impossible for IS to retract it.

Whoever was behind the "intelligence source" for the Las Vegas claim might have relied on, or been inspired by, comments spread among US right-wing activists, immediately after the attack, to the effect that the shooting was a "Muslim terror attack".⁸⁶ Also the idea that the perpetrator was a convert to Islam seems to have circulated before the release of the A'maq News claims.⁸⁷ Although some of these statements were later rectified,⁸⁸ the rumours circulating might have provided an incentive for IS to claim the attack. This seems to indicate that IS closely monitors Western Internet chatter with the aim of quickly adapting its communication strategy to circumstances for maximum effect.

In sum, IS most likely claimed responsibility for the Las Vegas shooting to give a strong signal to its own fighters and the populations under its control that it retained its external operations capabilities. The risk of losing credibility, should the claim be contested, might have been assessed as tolerable, in the light of IS's strict control of information flows towards audiences in areas under its control. However, as seen above, Las Vegas constituted a break with regard to both the number of attacks claimed by IS and the ways in which IS referred to them. The group, thus, seems to have recognised it as a major communications disaster.

Overreach and disruption?

The subsequent attack in a Western country for which IS claimed responsibility, the 31 October 2017 vehicle ramming attack in New York, was exclusively claimed through an article in *al-Naba'*.⁸⁹ Although this was not the first attack for which IS claimed responsibility through *al-Naba'* only, this article did not refer to a "security source", but reported that "one of the Islamic State's soldiers in America" attacked "a number of Crusaders in one of the streets of New York City" close to the monument for the 11 September 2001 attacks. The details of the attack by "the mujahid brother" were related quoting media sources. Astonishingly, the article compared the attack to the Las Vegas shooting and described it as one of "the most prominent attacks targeting Crusaders in America".

⁸⁵ This possibility is suggested as one of three scenarios in Amarnath Amarasingam, Jade Parker and Charlie Winter, "ISIS's Vegas Claim Tells Us More About the Group than About the Attacker," *Just Security*, October 17, 2017, <https://www.justsecurity.org/45994/isis-vegas-claim-tells-group-attacker>.

⁸⁶ The shooting started shortly after 22h00 on 1 October 2017, lasting for some ten minutes. At 23h52, e.g., US American right-wing commentator Wayne Root tweeted "This is real thing. Clearly coordinated Muslim terror attack. PRAY for our Vegas police. PRAY for victims. VERY bad. Awful" (<https://twitter.com/realwayneroot/status/914744822107340800>). Thus, this tweet was published shortly before the release of the A'maq News statement claiming responsibility for the shooting.

⁸⁷ See, e.g., a tweet by Arutz Sheva (@ArutzSheva_En) on 2 October 2017, 2:53am (GMT-7), https://twitter.com/arutzsheva_en/status/914790471741984768: "Las Vegas gunman identified as American convert to Islam". The tweet of Arutz Sheva, which contains a link to an article on the newspaper's website, probably reflects rumours circulating immediately after the attack.

⁸⁸ The article linked in the abovementioned tweet was last updated in the afternoon of 2 October 2017 and states that "While initial reports claimed Paddock was a recent convert to Islam, Clark County Sherrif Joseph Lombardo said he had no knowledge of Paddock's religious beliefs". Thus, when the tweet was posted, the article in its initial form contained the information about the perpetrator being a convert to Islam. David Rosenberg, "Las Vegas gunman identified as 64-year-old Mesquite, NV man," *Arutz Sheva*, October 2, 2017, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/236219>.

⁸⁹ *Hujum li-ahad junud al-khilafa wasat Manhattan fi Amrika yusfir an maqal wa isabat akthar min 20 salibiyyan* ("Attack by a Caliphate Soldier in Central Manhattan in America Leads to more than 20 Crusaders Being Killed or Injured"), *al-Naba'*, no. 104, November 2, 2017, 3.

Like the October attack in New York, the failed attack in an underground passage near New York's bus terminal on 11 December 2017 was mentioned in *al-Naba'* only, but contrary to the former incident, IS did not claim credit. A short article in the "Happened in a week" section,⁹⁰ referring to US police sources, reported that the perpetrator had stated that he was an "IS soldier" and that he carried out the attack to avenge the Crusaders' bombing of Muslims in Iraq and Syria.

The different treatment by IS of these three incidents in late 2017 in the USA seems to indicate a period of confusion in IS communication following the Las Vegas shooting. Whereas IS put the full weight of its propaganda apparatus behind the obviously flawed claim of responsibility for Las Vegas, the New York incidents were only commented upon by *al-Naba'*, without intervention or authorisation by the "external security". The similarities between the failed Parsons Green attack and the New York incident indicate that failure of the attack or survival of the perpetrator are not valid explanations for IS not claiming credit for the bus terminal incident. It seems more likely that, after Las Vegas, *al-Naba'*'s editors believed that they had to overstep their competencies with regard to classifying the October New York attack as an IS operation but, possibly as a result of internal contestation, acted more cautiously regarding the December incident.⁹¹ By the end of 2017, thus, IS seemed to have increasing difficulty in maintaining the established lines of communication with external sources. *Al-Naba'*, which had been under pressure to strengthen IS's image of invincibility in messages directed at internal audiences—not all of them sympathetic to IS's struggle—felt the need to praise purported terrorist attacks in the West, but had difficulties getting accurate information from the "external security".

Consolidation?

In the light of these developments, it is remarkable that, starting in March 2018, IS claims of responsibility for attacks in Western countries returned to a pattern that resembled those in 2016. Between March and December 2018, seven attacks were claimed through an A'maq News statement.⁹² All A'maq News statements cited "security sources" and described the perpetrators as "IS soldiers", with the exception of the 23 August 2018 stabbing in Trappes, France, and the 9 November 2018 Melbourne attack, in which the perpetrators were labelled as "IS fighters" (*muqatilun*). In addition, following the 12 May 2018 stabbing in Paris's Opéra district, A'maq News released a video, in a pattern reminiscent of 2016, in which the perpetrator pledged allegiance to IS and urged Muslims to join IS or perpetrate an attack.⁹³

All incidents were also mentioned in *al-Naba'*, whose main aim in doing so now seemed to have become inciting vulnerable individuals to carry out lone actor attacks on behalf of IS, rather than projecting an image of strength towards internal audiences. Regarding

⁹⁰ *Hujum bi-qunbula ala tajammu' lil-salibiyyin wasat New York wal-muhajim yu'lin annahu min junud al-dawla al-Islamiyya* ("Bomb Attack on a Gathering of Crusaders in Central New York, the Attacker Declared Being a Soldier of the Islamic State"), *al-Naba'*, no. 110, December 15, 2017, 11.

⁹¹ IS's central media department might have had its own motives in portraying IS as a force in the global fight against unbelief. It has been the entity within IS espousing the most radical ideological positions, as demonstrated by IS's internal ideological rift. Cole Bunzel, "The Islamic State's Mufti on Trial: The Saga of the 'Silsila 'Ilmiyya'," *CTC Sentinel* 11, issue 9 (October 2018): 14-17, <https://ctc.usma.edu/islamic-states-mufti-tri> al-saga-silsila-ilmiyya.

⁹² By contrast, IS claimed the ramming attack targeting Western cyclists in Tajikistan on 29 July 2018 through an A'maq News item and an IS leadership statement and backed up the claim with a video showing the perpetrators and an article in *al-Naba'*.

⁹³ A'maq News video *Wasiyat muna'fidh amaliyyat al-ta'n bi-madinat Paris fi Faransa* ("Will of the Perpetrator of the Stabbing Operation in Paris, France"), May 13, 2018.

the 23 March 2018 shooting and hostage taking in Trèbes, an article in *al-Naba'*, referring to “news coming from France”, praised the attack as an example of “what so-called lone wolves can do in the countries of the Cross”.⁹⁴ On 30 August 2018, *al-Naba'* commented on a 23 August incident in which a mentally ill man killed his mother and sister in Trappes, France, by saying that the attacker stabbed “a number of Crusaders” and that IS leader al-Baghdadi had previously praised the perpetrators of such attacks in enemy country and incited the targeting of anti-IS alliance countries and their citizens “of all sorts” (*bi-kull ashkalihim*).⁹⁵

Contrary to A'maq News, *al-Naba'* gradually grew more independent in 2018 with regard to its sources for reporting on incidents outside IS's core areas, including with regard to attacks in the West. Following the 29 May 2018 murders in Liège, an article in *al-Naba'*, after repeating the contents of the A'maq News claim, cited “private sources” (*masadir khassa*) to the effect that the perpetrator converted to Islam “some time ago” while in prison in Belgium and carried out the attack the day following his release.⁹⁶ It has not been uncommon for *al-Naba'* to refer to its own sources. These are different from IS's provincial media offices and seem also to be distinguished from what the newsletter refers to as “field sources” (*masadir maydaniyya*), albeit the latter distinction remains unclear. In the months prior to the Liège murders, *al-Naba'* reported on several incidents outside the core areas of IS in Syria and Iraq by exclusively quoting “private sources”.⁹⁷

As mentioned in the beginning of this report, following the 9 November 2018 attack in Melbourne, *al-Naba'* acknowledged that it had lost contact to outside sources. The 11 December 2018 mass shooting in Strasbourg confirmed the loss of direct communication between *al-Naba'* and the “external security”: IS took credit for the attack in an A'maq News statement released on 13 December, after the death of the perpetrator. In its edition published the same day, however, *al-Naba'* mentioned the attack only in its “Happened in a week” section.⁹⁸ Quoting “French media sources”, the short article reported that the perpetrator “engaged [in fighting] with policemen who continue chasing him until this moment”. At the time of editing, thus, *al-Naba'* was not aware of the claim of responsibility issued by A'maq News and planned to treat this violent incident by referring to media or official sources without taking credit on behalf of IS, as it had done in the preceding months for other incidents, possibly because the perpetrator was still alive and had been detained during the editing process. *Al-Naba'* tried to compensate the failure by including a prominently placed long article in the

⁹⁴ *Amaliyya jadida li-ahad junud al-khilafa wa-maqtal wa-isabat 16 salibiyyan janub faransa* (“New Operation of a Caliphate Soldier and 16 Crusaders Killed or Injured in Southern France”), *al-Naba'*, no. 125, March 29, 2018, 3.

⁹⁵ *Qatla wa jarha min al-salibiyyin bi-hujum li-jundi min al-dawla al-Islamiyya fi Faransa* (“Dead and Injured Crusaders in Attack by an Islamic State Soldier in France”), *al-Naba'*, no. 145, August 30, 2018, 10.

⁹⁶ *Mujahid yuhajim al-shurta al-Belgikiyya al-salibiyya wa-yaqtul adadan minhum sharq al-bilad* (“A Mujahid Attacks Crusader Belgian Police and Kills a Number of Them in the East of the Country”), *al-Naba'*, no. 134, June 1, 2018, 3.

⁹⁷ For example, *al-Naba'* referred to a “private source” in reports on clashes with the Philippine army on Jolo island on 15 March 2018 (*Maqtal 6 anasir min al-jaysh al-Philippini fi jazirat Jolo* [“6 Philippine army elements killed in Jolo island”], *al-Naba'*, no. 124, March 22, 2018, 7); an attack on government-linked militias in Yemen on 29 March 2018 (*Al-saytara ala mawaqi' wa mu'askar lil-jaysh al-yamani al-murtadd fi Qifa* [“Taking control of positions and a training camp of the apostate Yemeni army in Qifa”], *al-Naba'*, no. 128, April 20, 2018, 3); and an ambush in Libya on 19 April 2018 (*Junud al-khilafa fi al-Barqa yukammunun lil-jaysh al-libi al-murtadd ala tariq Marada-al-Aqila* [“Caliphate soldiers in al-Barqa ambush the apostate Libyan Army on Marada-al-Aqila road”], *al-Naba'*, no. 130, May 4, 2018, 3. Relying on a “private security source” (*masdar amni khass*), *al-Naba'* reported on a suicide bombing targeting Tunisian security forces in Ben Gardane in southern Tunisia on 19 March 2018 (*Istishhadi yufajir sutratuhu fi anasir al-amn al-Tunisi wa yusib 4 murtaddin* [“Martyrdom seeker detonates his [explosive] vest on elements of the Tunisian security [forces], injuring 4 apostates”], *al-Naba'*, no. 126, April 5, 2018, 3. According to the “private security source”, two members of the Ajnad al-Khilafa battalion in Tunis were trying to get to Libya when they were confronted by Tunisian security in Ben Gardane. One detonated his explosive vest, the other one was also killed. Presumably, the “private security source” was meant to imply that *al-Naba'* corresponded with a member of an IS cell in Tunisia directly without mediation of the “external security”.

⁹⁸ *Hatafa Allahu akbar athna' qatlihim lahum* (“He Shouted 'Allahu akbar' While He Killed Them”), *al-Naba'*, no. 160, December 13, 2018, 11.

following issue including a picture of the perpetrator that had been released by French police, referring the information presented tersely to “the source”.⁹⁹

The apparent return to past claiming patterns in 2018 might at first glance be interpreted as a consolidation of communication structures after a period of disturbances, meaning that IS has been able to reconstitute lines of communication, possibly after relocating essential parts of its communication structures to secure places inside or outside the conflict area. Remarkably, however, A’maq News, the purportedly independent news outlet, continues receiving information directly from IS’s “external security” body, whereas *al-Naba’*, which is published under direct supervision of the IS leadership, seems to be largely cut off from information on external operations. Possibly, the return to previous patterns signals a breakdown of the established communication lines altogether. With the disruption of information exchange between IS entities, the control formerly exercised by the IS leadership over the “external security” might have been replaced by a greater autonomy of IS’s remaining operational and propaganda capabilities to report on incidents that previously would have fallen under the control of the “external security” body.

Conclusions

The so-called ‘Islamic State’ is arguably one of the most complex organisations in the history of terrorism. Despite its centralisation in the person of the “caliph” and the “delegated committee”, different parts of the organisation seem to enjoy considerable autonomy. As the bureaucratic structures built by the organisation during the time of its success have come under increasing strain, the relations between these entities are constantly redefined.

Interestingly, it seems that, at least initially, perpetrating terrorist attacks in Western countries was not a top priority for IS leadership cadres. They might have yielded to pressure from lower ranks of the organisation, most likely from IS members from Western countries, to adopt a policy of escalation that, ultimately, led to the attacks of Paris and Brussels in November 2015 and March 2016, respectively.

One argument to convince the leadership was probably the competition on a global scale with al-Qaeda. To project an image of ascendancy over its competitor, IS aimed to claim credit for the greatest number of attacks possible. For these claims to remain credible, IS needed to devise a communication system that would be reliable enough to allow it to issue claims in temporal proximity to the incident, thereby giving the impression that they had prior knowledge that the incident would happen, and without running the risk of being disproven. These requirements obviously created problems with regard to the strategy of inciting lone actor attacks.

Under the lone actor strategy, adopted in the first half of 2016, IS’s “external security” was in charge of recruiting and liaising with prospective attackers. The “external security” also had the monopoly of authorising the release of information related to violent incidents outside IS territory. IS media directed at external audiences—the central media outlet for this has been the al-Hayat Media Centre—appear to have been under direct supervision of the external operations apparatus. Other IS media, like A’maq News and *al-Naba’*, whose main audiences are members of IS and populations

⁹⁹ Sharif Shikat *ustunfira fa-nafara wa aqadda madaji’ al-kafirin: 16 qatilan wa jarihan fi amaliyya mubarakata bi-dawlat al-Salib Faransa* (“Chérif Chekatt was Called to Fight and Fought and Robbed the Unbelievers’ Sleep: 16 Killed and Injured in a Blessed Operation in the State of the Cross, France”), *al-Naba’*, no. 161, December 20, 2018, 3.

living in areas controlled by IS, depended on the “external security” for authorisation to disseminate information on incidents in the West. The consistent sourcing of such information to “security sources” in *A’maq News* and *al-Naba’* in 2016 and 2017 proves that this monopoly was respected. In essence, the “external security”, relying on information provided by its informants, decided which incident should be classified as an IS attack.

As has been shown throughout this report, decisions on the type of incidents for which the “external security” would take credit in the name of IS depended on circumstances but also on strategic decisions made with considerable variations over time. After the adoption of the lone actor strategy in May 2016, IS seems to have hoped for high profile attacks by supporters in Western countries, but had to limit expectations in 2017, when it started to also reward failed attacks with a claim of responsibility. In addition, in the second half of 2017, the “external security” seemed to have encountered increasing difficulties in ascertaining the link to IS of various violent incidents, many of which *al-Naba’* decided to mention but not officially claim on behalf of the organisation. The culmination of this development was the false claim for the Las Vegas shooting, which seems to have signalled the breakdown of the established communication structure. IS’s central media department, represented in the *al-Naba’* newsletter, struggled to overcome the communication monopoly of the “external security” and, by late 2018, acknowledged that it had lost contact with external sources.

With regard to audiences that remain under IS control, the organisation aims to maintain the image of a potent organisation, whose influence stretches beyond its reduced territory. From this point of view, it is crucial to give the impression that the external operations apparatus continues functioning and organising attacks. The format of *A’maq News’* claims, including the reference to the “security source”, therefore, must be maintained, even in the event of a breakdown of communication lines to external sources.

Concurrently, it has been noticed that direct threats against Western countries are published mainly as user-generated content, indicating that the media production of IS’s external operations apparatus has been largely delegated to unofficial actors probably located outside the conflict area. Rather than a consolidation of IS’s external operations structures, the recovery of IS claiming methods in 2018, therefore, more likely signifies a metamorphosis of the hitherto hierarchically organised external operations structures into a network that is less built on a strict distribution of tasks and more geared towards seizing opportunities. These actors probably now act as “security sources” and “private sources” for IS media as a basis to continue claiming attacks in the West.

The remnants of IS’s external operations structures seem to persist as a network of individuals that can communicate and, possibly, cooperate based on their common experience and acquaintance. With regard to the persistence of the threat from lone actors in the future, much will depend on these operatives’ personal influence on others and their motivation to continue the activities of “IS soldiers” in the West.

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Contact ICCT

T: +31 (0)70 763 0050

E: info@icct.nl

