

War by Suicide:

A Statistical Analysis of the Islamic State's Martyrdom Industry

This Research Paper explores the so-called Islamic State's use of suicide tactics over the course of 12 months – from 1 December 2015 to 30 November 2016. It uses an exhaustive sample of the group's suicide operation reports as a window into the tactical and strategic underpinnings of its martyrdom industry. After first establishing what precisely is meant by the term 'suicide tactics' in the context of the Islamic State (IS), the 923 suicide operations that were individually reported in the group's official propaganda between December 2015 and November 2016 are statistically evaluated, allowing for an exploration of when, how and where IS used suicide tactics over the period in question, as well as who its suicide operatives were. The paper demonstrates that IS's present approach towards suicide bucks past trends. Instead of predominantly being carried out by *foreigners* against *civilian* targets, as was the case in Iraq in the 2000s, its suicide attacks are now primarily perpetrated by *local* operatives against *military* targets. This reflects a new phase of operationalisation for suicide warfare; a tactical shift with strategic implications that will change the insurgent and terrorist landscape for years to come.

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Introduction

The suicide attack, that most shocking tactic of terrorists and insurgents, has never been more commonplace than it is today. While a global phenomenon used by groups across the ideological spectrum,¹ nowhere has it been more prevalent than in Syria and Iraq, where suicide operations on behalf of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's so-called Islamic State (IS) have become a daily occurrence. Adopting an approach that is, tactically speaking, more in line with the kamikaze pilots of Imperial Japan than the terrorists of al Qaeda in the 2000s, IS has militarised suicide more sustainably than any other non-state actor to date. Indeed, it has made violent self-immolation a pillar of its insurgency – an act to which, by its own count, many hundreds have aspired.

In recent years, a number of useful forays have been made into this issue.² However, they were often held back by a low level of granularity in the data, which were almost always based on figures provided by IS's official Amaq News Agency. As such, analysts were only able to estimate the scale of the phenomenon and roughly map where attacks were happening, but not glean much detail about the specific contexts within which they occurred, nor who their perpetrators were. Hence, much of the strategising behind IS's suicide tactics has remained shrouded in mystery and, in the absence of demographic details, observations made about perpetrators ten years ago are still being recycled today, even when they no longer reflect the facts on the ground. The most prominent of these are set out in Martha Crenshaw's foreword to Mohammed Hafez's pivotal work on suicide attacks in Iraq. Writing in 2007, she noted that "civilians are the target of choice," that "the bombers are mostly foreign, not Iraqi," and that the tactic is a "largely imported phenomenon".³ However, as this paper shows, these trends no longer accurately reflect the use of suicide operations today.

Although IS's predilection for these attacks was borne of its predecessor groups, al Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State of Iraq, trends in its use of the tactic have not remained the same. The conflict paradigm has changed, and the group has innovated; what Diego Gambetta described in 2005 as Iraq's suicide "proto-industry" has now developed into a full-fledged economy.⁴

¹ See, for example, D. Gambetta, ed., *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* (Paperback) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); M. M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology in Martyrdom* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007); J. W. Lewis, *The Business of Martyrdom: A History of Suicide Bombing* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012); A. Moghadam, *The Globalization of Martyrdom: Al Qaeda, Salafi Jihad, and the Diffusion of Suicide Attacks* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); R. Pape, *Dying to Win* (New York City: Random House, 2005); A. Pedahzur, *Suicide Terrorism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005).

² T. Joscelyn, "The Islamic State's Prolific Martyrdom Machine," *The Long War Journal*, 8 June 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/06/the-islamic-states-prolific-martyrdom-machine.php>; T. Joscelyn, "Islamic State Claims Nearly 600 Suicide Attacks in First Six Months of 2016," *The Long War Journal*, 8 July 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/07/islamic-state-claims-nearly-600-suicide-attacks-in-first-six-months-of-2016.php>; T. Joscelyn, "Islamic State has claimed more than 1,000 suicide attacks thus far in 2016," *The Long War Journal*, 6 December 2016, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/12/islamic-state-has-claimed-more-than-1000-suicide-attacks-thus-far-in-2016.php>. Also worth reading: "The Devastating Islamic State Suicide Strategy," *The Soufan Group IntelBrief*, 29 May 2015, <http://soufangroup.com/tsg-intelbrief-the-devastating-islamic-state-suicide-strategy/>; B. Barfi, "The Military Doctrine of the Islamic State and the Limits of Ba'athist Influence," *The CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 2 (2016), pp. 18-24, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/CTC-SENTINEL-Vol9Iss211.pdf>; R. J. Bunker, "Daesh/IS Armored Vehicle Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (AVBIEDs): Insurgent Use and Terrorism Potentials," *TRENDS Research & Advisory*, 2 February 2016, <http://trendsinstitution.org/?p=1692>; S. D. Kavanaugh and G. Shiloach, "Will ISIS Ever Run Out of Suicide Bombers?" *Vocativ*, 5 April 2016, <http://www.vocativ.com/305613/will-isis-ever-run-out-of-suicide-bombers/>; M. Nance, *Defeating ISIS: Who They Are, How They Fight, What They Believe* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016), pp. 325-330; @PurpleOlive2, "The History and Adaptability of the Islamic State Car Bomb," *Zaytunajuwani*, 14 February 2017, <https://zaytunajuwani.wordpress.com/2017/02/14/the-history-and-adaptability-of-the-islamic-state-car-bomb/>.

³ See M. Crenshaw, "Foreword," in M. M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq* (2007), p. ix.

⁴ D. Gambetta, ed., *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* (2005), p. 311.

In the following paper, I explore IS's use of suicide tactics over the course of 12 months, using an exhaustive sample of its suicide operation reports as a window into the phenomenon's tactical and strategic underpinnings. Basing the analysis on data that I began gathering in July 2016, I go well beyond the general figures provided by the Amaq News Agency. After first establishing what precisely is meant by the term 'suicide tactics' and setting out my collection and categorisation methodology, I statistically analyse the 923 suicide operations that were individually reported by the group's official media between 1 December 2015 and 30 November 2016, examining when, how and where IS uses suicide tactics, as well as who its suicide operatives are. I demonstrate that, in contrast with past norms, its suicide attacks are now primarily perpetrated by *local* operatives against *military* targets. This reflects a new phase of operationalisation; a tactical shift with strategic implications that will change the insurgent and terrorist landscape for years to come.

Defining Suicide Tactics

Too often, discussions of suicide tactics suffer from a lack of nuance – indeed, as Martha Crenshaw notes, “the tactic is usually treated as though it were a single unified method of violence”.⁵ This desire for simplicity gives rise to a number of analytical issues, particularly in the context of IS, wherein the nature of the target varies as much as the means. Demonstrably, there is no one type of suicide attack – it is crucial that this is recognised.

Moreover, the ‘traditional’ definition of suicide operations – wherein ‘success is contingent upon the death of the perpetrator’ – does not always apply when it comes to IS.⁶ This is because its suicide fighters may die both by their own hand, or the hand of another.⁷ In the latter instance, operational success is not contingent upon the perpetrator's death, but on their proactive disregard for life. Hence, it is the suicidal intent of the fighter that underpins the success of the attack, not their resultant death. It is worth noting that salafi-jihadists adopt similar thinking when justifying suicide bombings, which they euphemistically term ‘*amaliyyat istishhadiyya*’ (‘martyrdom-seeking operations’). Invariably, the focus is on the intent of the perpetrator, not the means by which they die. While the data upon which this research paper is based all pertain to dead suicide operatives, it is important to keep in mind that the mainstream understanding of what constitutes a suicide attack does not reflect the definition agreed to by salafi-jihadists.

At this point, it is also worth distinguishing between ‘*amaliyyat istishhadiyya*’ and ‘*amaliyyat inghimasiyya*’, both of which are considered suicide tactics but the latter of which qualitatively differs from straightforward suicide bombing. A derivation of the Arabic word ‘*ghamasa*’, to submerge, ‘*inghimasi*’ literally means ‘one who plunges’. While IS's wholesale adoption of this tactic appeared only recently, the notion of *inghimas* is a famous one, owing to a substantial body of jihadist literature that dates back many hundreds of years. Ibn Taymiyya, for example, wrote a 79-page treatise on the subject – *Qa’ida fi-l-inghimas fi-l-adu wa hal yubah?* – and an entire chapter is devoted to it in

⁵ M. Crenshaw, “Explaining Suicide Terrorism: A Review Essay”, *Security Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007), pp. 133-162, https://fsi.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/Crenshaw_Explaining_Suicide_Terrorism.pdf.

⁶ Nor would it for other likeminded salafi-jihadist organisations.

⁷ Y. Schweitzer, “Suicide Terrorism – Development and Characteristics,” *International Conference on Countering Suicide Terrorism*, ICT Herzliya, 21 February 2000.

Ibn al-Nahaas al-Dumyati's work, *Mashari' al-ashwaq ila masari' al-'ushaq*.⁸ In both instances, the authors argue that it is not only permissible but desirable for Muslims to proactively risk their lives when attacking a more numerous and better equipped enemy (provided, that is, that their intention is "sound"). These works, and others like them, are routinely pilfered by modern-day salafi-jihadist jurists seeking to religiously justify the use of suicide tactics – foremost among them, IS's most important theological influence, Abu 'Abdullah al-Muhajir, an Egyptian ideologue who Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi himself credited with introducing suicide tactics into his group's military repertoire.^{9,10}

In the context of IS, *'inghimasi'* operatives are distinct from *'istishhadi'* suicide bombers. Specifically, the term refers to special operations involving fighters that willingly put themselves in harm's way, maximising the risk of their deaths in order to cause as much damage as possible. In this sense, *inghimas* operations are different because their success does not necessitate the perpetrators' death, although their death is probable. In August 2015, an official IS video defined *inghimas* attacks as those in which:

[O]ne or more people plunge into an enemy position in which they are outnumbered, usually resulting in their death. *Inghimas* operations usually target fortified locations or urban buildings to kill important leaders[.] *Inghimas* operations are considered to be a lethal weapon by which to make the enemy shudder[.] As such, just one *inghimas* fighter can make an entire army collapse.¹¹

With the above in mind, when IS suicide tactics are referred to as 'suicide attacks' or 'suicide operations' in this paper, the terminology is deliberately vague and, unless specified, does not indicate the targeting framework of the attacks in question. Any variations in targeting and technique are, as much as is possible, specifically detailed and disentangled from each other in the text with a view to facilitating the highest level of nuance.¹²

Methodology

IS generates data about suicide attacks in two ways. First, it publishes notifications and statistics through the Amaq News Agency. As of 30 November 2016, it had produced no fewer than 19 infographics on the topic. As mentioned in the introduction, while imprecise, these offer some good data points, setting out regular figures for types and locations of operations.¹³ Easily accessible and published in both Arabic and English on

⁸ Ahmad bin 'Abd al-Halim bin Taymiyya, "قاعدة في الانغماس في العدو وهل يباح", compiled and annotated by Abu Muhammad Ashraf b. 'Abd al-Maqsud, Riyadh: Adwa' al-Salaf, 2002; Abu Zakariyya Ahmad bin Ibrahim bin Muhammad al-Dimashqi al-Dumyati, "مشارع الأشواق إلى مصارع", in "الباب الرابع والعشرون: في فضل انغماس الرجل الشجاع أو الجماعة القليلة في العدو الكثير رغبة في الشهادة", Beirut: Dar al-Basha'ir al-Islamiyya, 2002, pp. 522-564.

⁹ R. Molloy provides an excellent account of this. See "Deconstructing Ibn Taymiyya's Views on Suicidal Missions," *The CTC Sentinel* 2, no.3 (2009), <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Vol2Iss3-Art6.pdf>.

¹⁰ See C. Winter and A. K. al-Saud, "The Obscure Theologian Who Shaped ISIS," *The Atlantic*, December 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/12/isis-muhajir-syria/509399/>.

¹¹ "إنغماسيون.. فخر الأمة", *Barakah Province Media Office*, 2 August 2015.

¹² While the term "suicidal" tactics could perhaps be more precise, it has been eschewed in favour of "suicide" tactics to avoid confusion over the motivations of the attacker. While some attackers may be motivated by psychological issues, the purpose of this article is to examine suicide tactics from an organisational, not individual, perspective.

¹³ "إنفوجرافيك: العمليات", *Amaq News Agency*, 15 September 2015; "العمليات الاستشهادية التي نفذها مقاتلو الدولة الإسلامية خلال أسبوعين"

"إنفوجرافيك: الهجمات الاستشهادية التي نفذها مقاتلو الدولة الإسلامية خلال أسبوعين", *Amaq News Agency*, 30 September 2015; "إنفوجرافيك: العمليات الاستشهادية التي نفذها مقاتلو الدولة الإسلامية مؤخرًا في حي الزهراء بمدينة حمص"

"إنفوجرافيك: العمليات الاستشهادية التي نفذها مقاتلو الدولة الإسلامية مؤخرًا في حي الزهراء بمدينة حمص", *Amaq News Agency*, 5 October 2015.

a monthly basis, the Amaq News Agency figures have formed the foundation for almost all empirical studies of IS suicide tactics to date.

The second way in which the group reports on suicide attacks is through its provincial media offices. A source of data that has hitherto remained untapped, provincial media reports on suicide operations, which are published as .jpg files, offer a much greater degree of granularity than the Amaq News Agency data, containing details on both operatives and results. In order to identify and amalgamate them for this study, it was necessary to first compile a complete archive of IS .jpg files for the time period in question. To this end, in July 2016, I downloaded all those circulated by the organisation's official channel on Telegram since 1 December 2015 and, in the months that followed July, I collected them on a daily basis. In total, I assembled an archive of some 15,014 unique .jpgs for the time period in question, of which over a thousand provided operational details on suicide attacks and their perpetrators.¹⁴

Broadly speaking, these files can be separated into two categories: operation claims and photo reports. Released in the wake of most IS attacks, operation claims provide the date, location and type of a given operation, as well as a figure for how many casualties it caused. Most operation claims on suicide attacks contain the perpetrator's *kunya* (nom de guerre), the province in which they died, a description of the means by which they died and, finally, details of their target.¹⁵ Like operation claims, Islamic State photo reports on suicide attacks tend to contain the attacker's *kunya* (nom de guerre), the province in which they died, a description of the means by which they died and, finally, details of their target. For the purposes of this paper, operation claims and photo reports were analysed as unitary data points – no visual analysis was conducted on either set of propaganda.

According to the Amaq News Agency, a total of 1095 suicide attacks were carried out by IS between 1 December 2015 and 30 November 2016. Across the same time period, the group's provincial media offices gave individualised reports for a slightly lower

"انفوجر افيك: العمليات الاستشهادية لمقاتلي Amaq News Agency, 7 October 2015; نفذها مقاتلو الدولة الإسلامية في العراق وسوريا خلال أسبوع"

"انفوجر افيك: 54 عملية استشهادية نفذها Amaq News Agency, 2 November 2015; الدولة الإسلامية خلال شهر أكتوبر 2015 في العراق وسوريا"

"انفوجر افيك: العمليات; 21 عملية استشهادية نفذها مقاتلو الدولة الإسلامية على Amaq News Agency, 2 January 2016; الاستشهادية في العراق وسوريا لشهر ديسمبر 2015"

"85 عملية استشهادية نفذها مقاتلون Amaq News Agency, 31 January 2016; قوات النظام السوري في محيط مطار كوبرس منذ بدء حملة فك الحصار"

"90 عملية استشهادية نفذها مقاتلون من الدولة Amaq News Agency, 2 February 2016; من الدولة الإسلامية في العراق وسوريا خلال شهر يناير 2016"

"112 عملية استشهادية نفذها مقاتلون من الدولة Amaq News Agency, 5 March 2016; الإسلامية في العراق وسوريا وليبيا خلال شهر فبراير 2016"

"83 عملية استشهادية نفذها مقاتلون من الدولة Amaq News Agency, 1 April 2016; الإسلامية في العراق وسوريا وليبيا خلال شهر مارس 2016"

"انماط العمليات الاستشهادية التي ينفذها مقاتلو الدولة; 119 عملية استشهادية نفذها مقاتلون من الدولة الإسلامية في سوريا والعراق وليبيا خلال شهر مايو Amaq News Agency, 15 May 2016; الإسلامية"

"100 عملية استشهادية نفذها مقاتلون من الدولة الإسلامية في العراق وسوريا وليبيا خلال شهر يونيو Amaq News Agency, 7 June 2016; 2016, Amaq News Agency, 1 July 2016;

"59 عملية استشهادية نفذها مقاتلون من الدولة الإسلامية في العراق وسوريا وليبيا خلال شهر يوليو 2016; Amaq News Agency, 2 August 2016;

"81 عملية استشهادية نفذها مقاتلون من الدولة الإسلامية في العراق وسوريا وليبيا خلال شهر أغسطس 2016; Amaq News Agency, 5 September 2016;

"53 عملية استشهادية نفذها مقاتلون من الدولة الإسلامية في العراق وسوريا خلال شهر سبتمبر 2016; Amaq News Agency, 6 October 2016;

"120 عملية استشهادية نفذها مقاتلون من الدولة الإسلامية في العراق وسوريا خلال شهر أكتوبر 2016; Amaq News Agency, 5 November 2016;

"120 عملية استشهادية نفذها مقاتلون من الدولة الإسلامية خلال شهر نوفمبر 2016. Amaq News Agency, 5 December 2016.

¹⁴ On occasion, more than one media product was released pertaining to the same operation. See Khattab al-Imarati, below.

¹⁵ Some suicide operation claims do not give a name for the perpetrator. Such claims – which appeared irregularly – were not included in the dataset. The attacks in Brussels and Jakarta were instances of this. See "مفرزة أمنية من جنود الخلافة Central Media Office, 14 January 2016; and "بيان عن غزوة بروكسل المباركة على بلجيكا" Central Media Office, 22 March 2016.

figure of fighters – 923.¹⁶ The bulk of what follows below is derived from a statistical analysis of the latter, provincial data.

Before proceeding, a note on validation: in the majority of cases, independent verification of individual attacks is impossible. Most of the 923 operations reported by provincial media occurred in areas where no journalists are present. In places where journalists *are* present, only attacks that stood out by targeting civilians or being particularly destructive received media attention. That said, in many cases, it was possible to corroborate IS's provincial data by comparing them with reports provided by other sources.

To maximise the credibility of its claims, IS implements its own rigorous eight-step process for verification. This process is illustrated below, using as an example the case of Khattab al-Imarati – a fighter from the United Arab Emirates who died in Mosul in November 2016. First, the Amaq News Agency releases an initial claim announcing that a suicide attack has been perpetrated (see Image I below). Next, it releases details on the results of the attack itself (Image II). A few hours later, the provincial media office in charge of propaganda for the area in question releases a formal operation claim providing biographical information on the perpetrator, as well as more details on the attack itself (Image III). Just under one third of the time, operation claims are accompanied by a 'Breaking News' photograph of the attacker (Image IV) that is, on occasion, followed up with a formal photo report (Images V). In most cases, these photograph- and text-based claims are then reiterated by IS's daily al-Bayan Radio bulletins (Image VI), weekly al-Naba' newspapers (Image VII) and, on rare occasion, propaganda videos (Image VIII).

While IS's suicide reporting usually stretches to just three or four of these steps, the process means that, while there is no way to independently validate the figures, there is much in the data to suggest that, most of the time, the reports are reliable.

¹⁶ Aside from October, 2016, in which the Amaq News Agency reported 47 more suicide attacks than the provincial media offices, each set of data closely reflects the other.

The Case of Khattab al-Imarati

- I. Initial Amaq News Agency report on operation – 1424 Mosul Time, 6/11/16



- II. Follow-up Amaq report on operation results – 1455 Mosul Time, 6/11/16



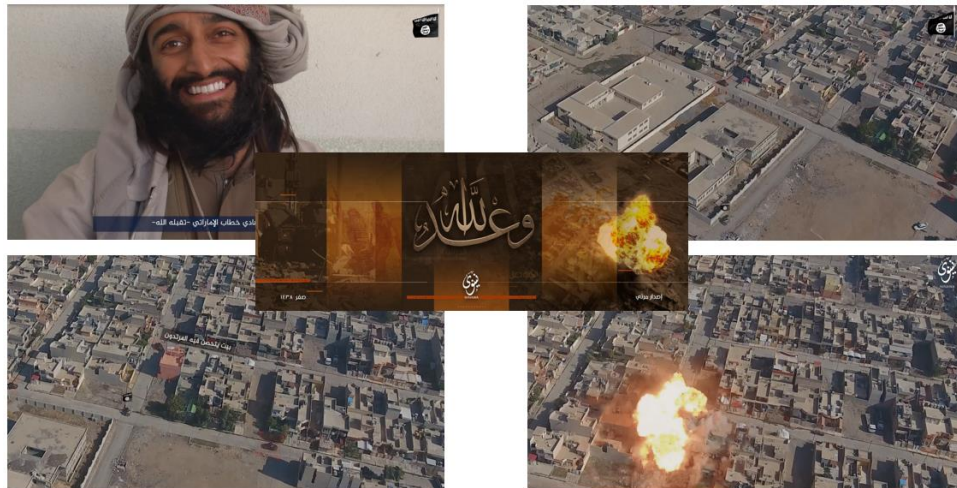
- III. Provincial media operation claim for attack – 1857 Mosul Time, 6/11/16



VII. Al-Naba' Newspaper, 1521 Mosul Time, 10/11/16



VIII. Provincial Media video, 2029 Mosul Time, 14/11/16



The Data

1. Rate of Use

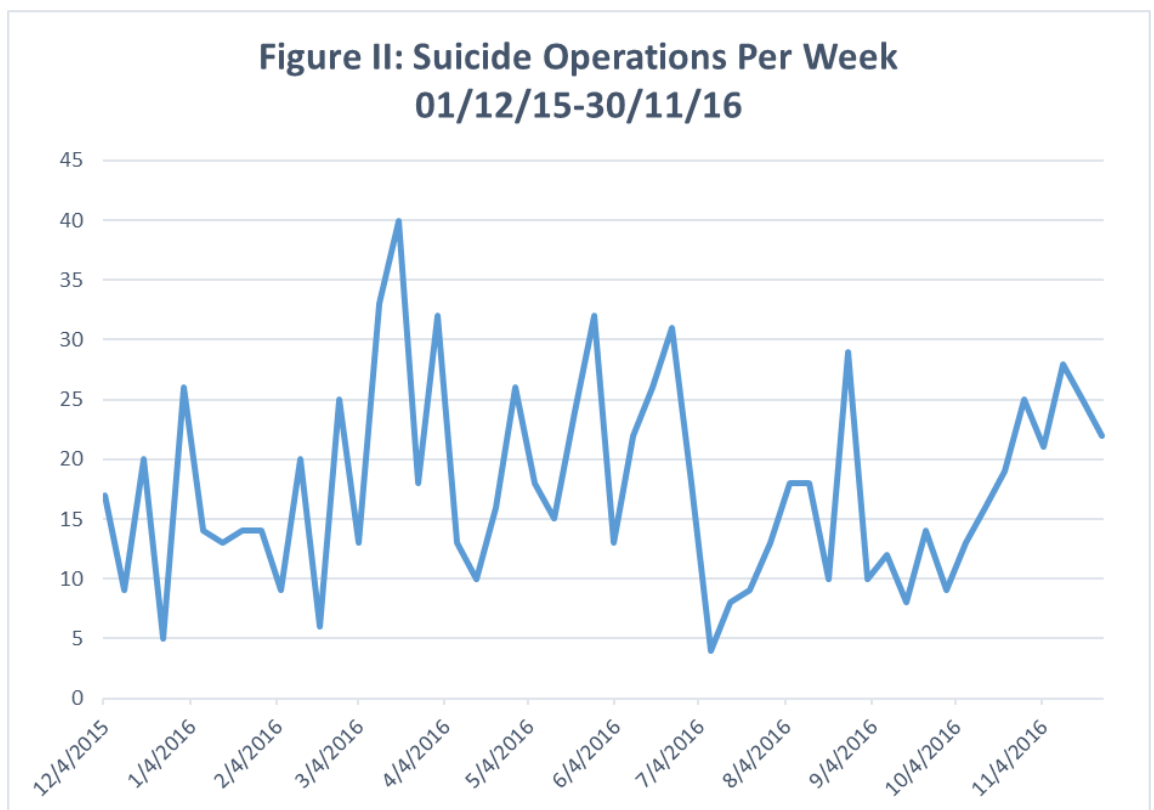
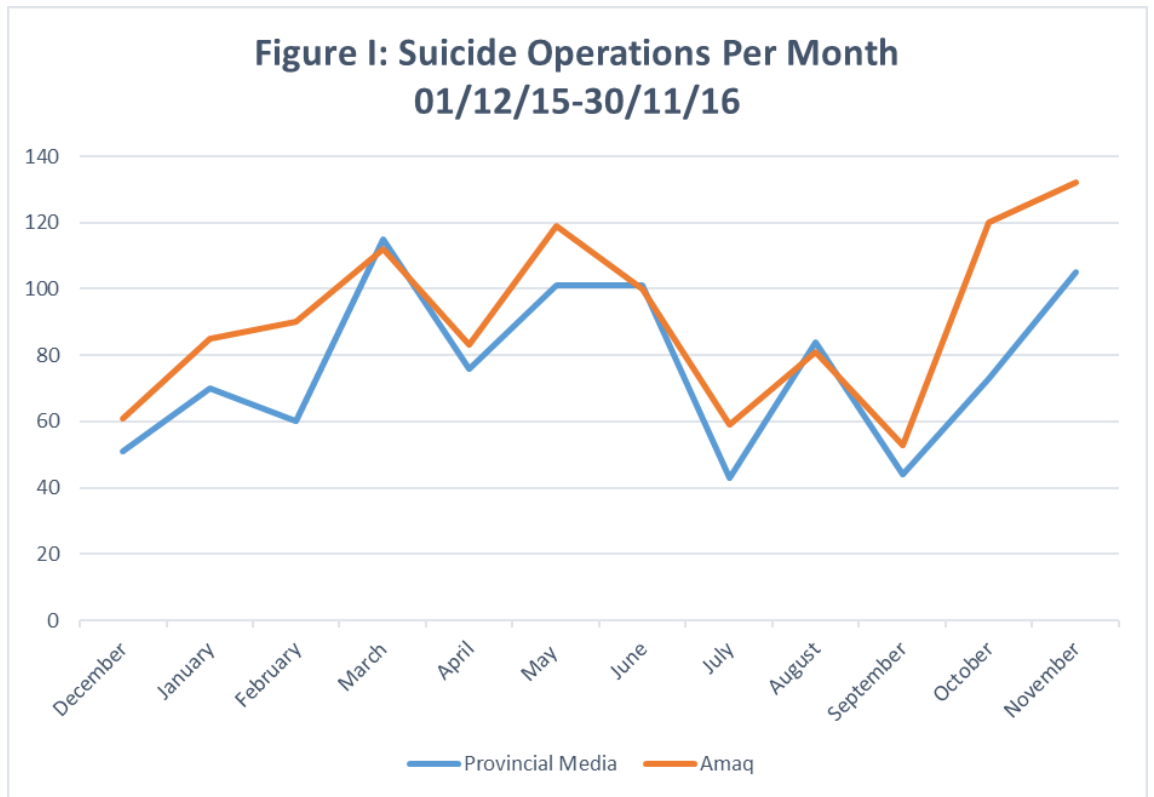
As Figures I and II show, the rate at which IS used suicide tactics varied significantly over the year in question; according to the Amaq News Agency, there were just 61 operations in December 2015, compared to 119 in May 2016 and a record 132 in November 2016. When the provincial data are broken down on a weekly basis, this variation becomes even more apparent; only six suicide attackers were commemorated by provincial outlets during the week beginning 19 February 2016, whereas, just one month later, during the week commencing 18 March 2016, the same outlets reported that no fewer than 40 individuals had killed themselves in the caliphate's name in just seven days.

These fluctuations are not spontaneous. Rather, they indicate that IS implements suicide attacks in a manner that is both carefully calculated and precisely coordinated. The events of March 2016 offer a window into this phenomenon. That month, after weeks of sustained territorial losses all over Iraq, IS conducted a nationwide, suicide-led counter-offensive. No fewer than 76 percent of the 114 operations reported by provincial outlets that month were mounted in Iraq, with attacks taking place in ten of IS's 12 claimed Iraqi provinces. The attacks were not geared towards capturing territory (there has been no real strategic offensive in Iraq since 2015); rather, they were an attempt to destabilise security in general and derail operations geared towards preparing the ground for large future offensives. That all were mounted within quick succession and close proximity of each other suggests a high degree of centralisation.

This ability to tactically orchestrate suicide campaigns was even more apparent in the context of the coalition-backed offensive to retake Mosul. Notwithstanding the Iraq Security Forces' (ISF) early territorial successes, pro-government advances soon slowed as it became clear that IS had long been preparing a robust infrastructure with which to deliver a sustained asymmetric resistance. Foremost in its defence was the liberal use of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), which were launched at an entirely unprecedented rate, even by IS's standards: in the first week alone, the Amaq News Agency alleged that there had been 58 suicide operations in Mosul and its environs.¹⁷ In the months that followed, the average number of Mosul suicide attacks increased more than tenfold, settling at about 26 per week by the end of November 2016.¹⁸ Trends such as these indicate that suicide attacks are rarely used spontaneously by the Islamic State. Rather, behind every human bomb, there is a tactical or strategic objective.

¹⁷ "أسبوع على معركة الموصل", *Amaq News Agency*, 24 October 2016.

¹⁸ By way of contrast, in the year running up to October 2016, there had been an average of just 1.5 attacks a week in the same area.



2. Location of Attacks

According to the provincial data, nearly two thirds of all IS suicide operations between 1 December 2015 and 30 November 2016 occurred in Iraq, a figure consistent with the Amaq News Agency's aggregated statistics. Just 24 percent of the attacks were carried out in Syria, 43 percent of which were in a single area, IS's Aleppo Province. The remainder of attacks for which the organisation released detailed reports occurred in Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, and Nigeria.¹⁹

Both the Amaq and provincial data show that there is a strong correlation between the use of suicide attacks and the intensity of the military threat faced by IS. In Iraq, where the group confronted great strategic challenges throughout 2016, it resorted to suicide attacks far more regularly than anywhere else. Indeed, over the course of the year, they were perpetrated nearly twice as often in Iraq than in all other states combined. As 2016 progressed, the context within which suicide operations were used in Iraq shifted. Initially, they tended to be perpetrated pre-emptively, carried out with a view to derailing nascent operations. However, from early spring 2016 onwards, IS began to use its suicide cadres more as a direct tactical response to ISF advances than anything else, a trend that peaked during the Mosul offensive in October 2016.

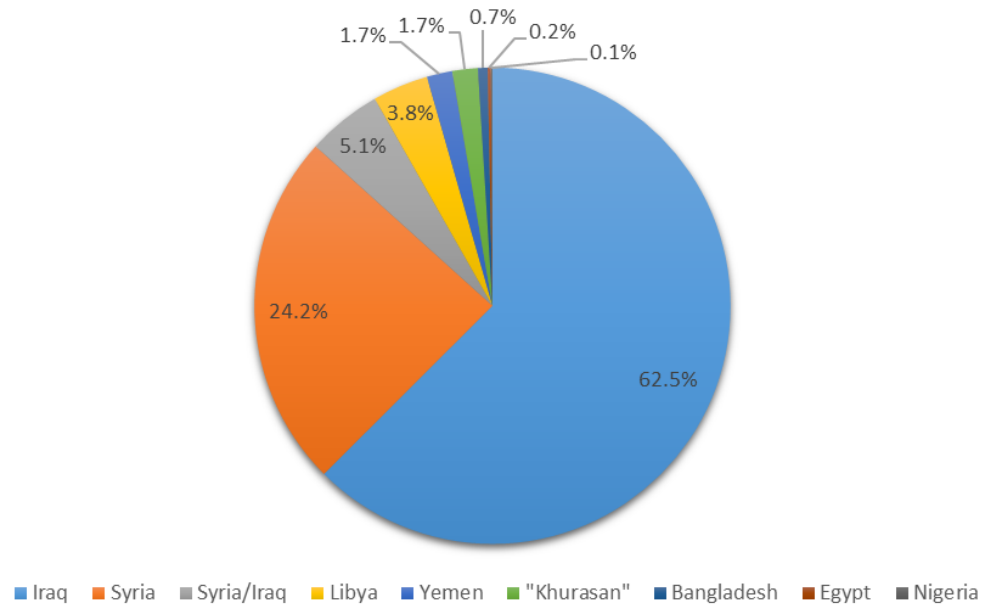
As Figure III demonstrates, far fewer suicide operations occurred in Syria than in Iraq. This could be because the military dynamic in Syria is more contested and, unlike in Iraq, IS is not the sole focus of government operations; rather, it is just one of many competing military actors.²⁰ As such, IS in Syria has generally faced less pressure and fewer potentially existential challenges. For that reason, the group seems to have been able to exercise greater restraint when it came to suicide tactics. Indeed, for the most part, they were launched sparingly. That said, as Figure IV shows, this was not the case in Aleppo Province in north western Syria, a region in which IS's position was heavily contested in 2016 as a result of both coalition support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Turkey's Euphrates Shield intervention.²¹ Seemingly as a result of the disproportionate pressure in Aleppo Province, IS resorted to suicide attacks in a disproportionate manner, mounting them at a similar rate to that found in its key Iraqi territories.

¹⁹ Over the year in question, there were other suicide operations in, for example, Indonesia and Belgium. However, when reported by the central media foundation, no details were released regarding the perpetrators. For that reason, operations such as these were excluded from the dataset.

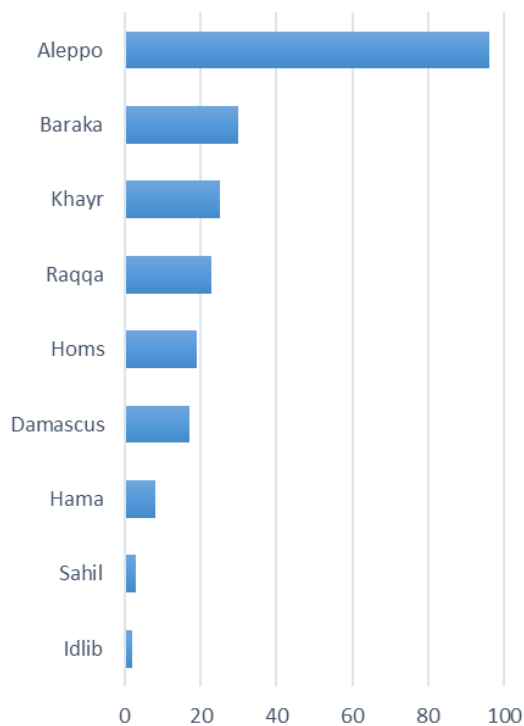
²⁰ For a comprehensive account, see C. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2016).

²¹ S. al-Khalidi, "U.S.-Backed Forces Win Control of Most of Syria's Manbij from Islamic State: Spokesman," *Reuters*, 31 July 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-manbij-idUSKCN10B0TG>; A. Deeb, "Operation 'Euphrates Shield' ends ISIL rule in Jarablus," *Al Jazeera*, 25 August 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/2016/08/operation-euphrates-shield-ends-isil-rule-jarablus-160825085704650.html>.

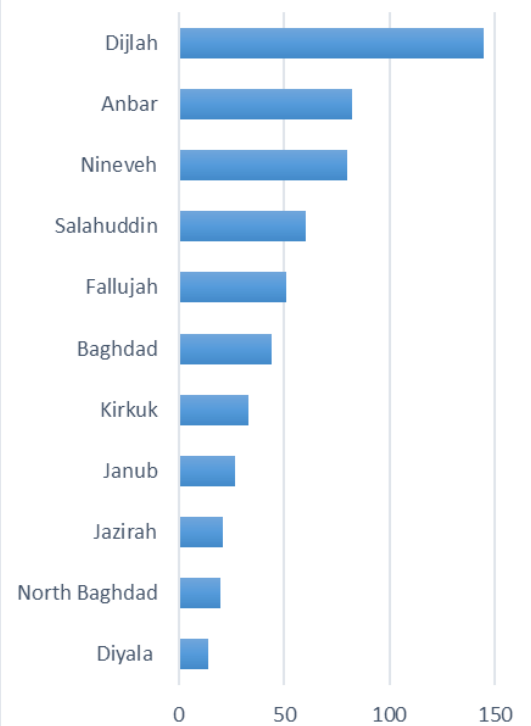
**Figure III: Location of Suicide Operations
01/12/15-30/11/16**



**Figure IV: Operations in
Syria, 01/12/15-30/11/16**



**Figure V: Operations in
Iraq, 01/12/15-30/11/16**



When cumulatively presented – as in Figure VI – the data offer a useful lens through which to evaluate IS's military thinking. In the context of Dijlah, Fallujah and Nineveh Provinces in Iraq and Aleppo Province in Syria, it is clear that the frequency with which suicide attacks are used varies according to situational exigency.²² Among other things, the data demonstrate that IS does not hesitate to retreat from a given battle if it deems it to be a lost cause. An expeditious reduction in the use of suicide tactics serves as an indicator for this; the group appears reluctant to waste operatives in a campaign for which the conclusion is foregone.

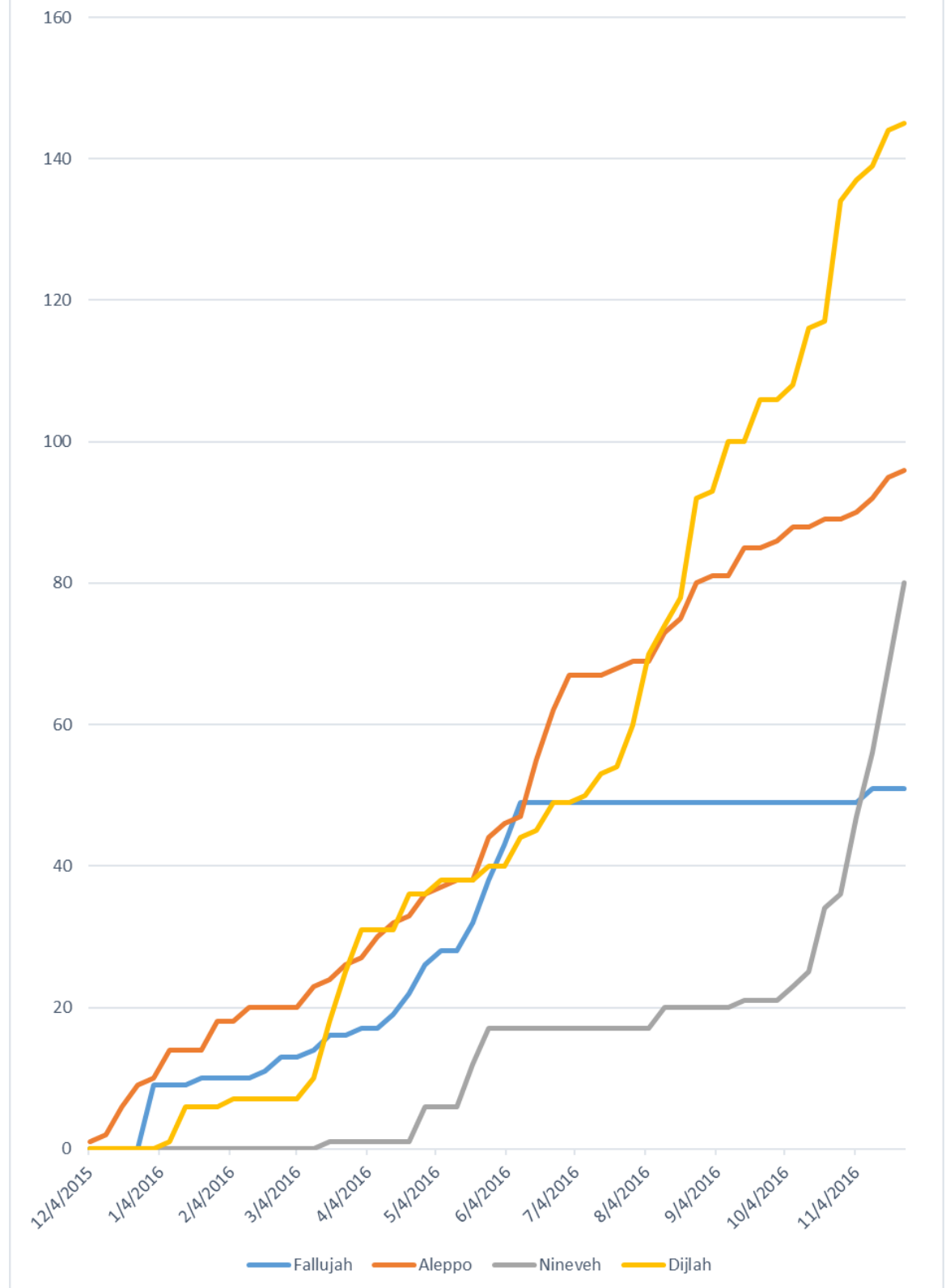
The experience of Fallujah portrays this story particularly vividly; in response to the ISF campaign to retake the city in May 2016, IS initially put up a fervent resistance, increasing the use of defensive suicide attacks almost exponentially at first. However, three weeks into the campaign, it appears that the IS leadership decided to abandon the city and, as such, curtailed the use of suicide operations. In the weeks that followed, the group continued to defend Fallujah, but its resistance was only symbolic. In this sense, the frequency of localised suicide attacks could be used as a way to determine IS's strategic objectives regarding a given area. Provided it was not caused by other factors, when suicide attack reports drop off suddenly yet defensive operations continue, it would appear that this could be a precursor to full retreat in the foreseeable future. Needless to say, such conclusions should be drawn with the utmost caution.

Conversely, a persistent suicide attack rate offers a way to identify areas that IS deems to be of long-term strategic significance. In parts of Aleppo Province in Syria and Dijla Province in Iraq, for example, the data show it putting up an unusually costly fight, sparing no human expense. The same can be said of its defence in Nineveh Province. In these cases, IS uses suicide attacks with sustained and sometimes accelerated frequency, a trend that indicates its desire to hold onto the territory in question at vast cost. Hence, in some contexts, suicide operations appear to be something of a 'last resort' tactic, a way to mitigate or distract from losses when all other means are deemed insufficient. Without more complete information, it is only ever possible to know when strategic defence becomes last resort with the benefit of hindsight.

Whatever the case, as these distinct operational trends suggest, there appears to be a central authority charged with determining when and where suicide attack campaigns take place, as well as when they have run their course.

²² Dijla Province forms part of Iraq's Nineveh Governorate, and was established by the Islamic State in February 2015.

**Figure VI: Suicide Operations (Cumulative)
01/12/2015-30/11/2016**



3. Type of Attack

Eighty-four percent of IS's suicide operations between 1 December 2015 and 30 November 2016 were geared towards achieving military goals: most were defensive, an effort to thwart enemy advances and pre-empt counter-attacks;²³ others were part of the group's war of attrition, perpetrated in pursuit of psychological, not territorial gains;²⁴ the rest were offensive in nature, part of a broader tactical attempt to gain territory from adversaries or break through fortifications.²⁵ Just 16 percent of the time, IS used suicide attacks to target civilians. Given that the regularity of the group's terrorist activities dwarfs that of any other contemporary terrorist organisation, this figure is testament to the sheer scale of the group's use of suicide on the battlefield.²⁶

Suicide attackers commemorated in IS's provincial propaganda fall into three categories. First, there are the VBIED operators. Second, there are the *inghimas* fighters, the special operatives who attack their target with light arms and suicide belts. Third, there are the human-borne IED bombers, the operatives who predominantly carry out attacks against civilians using explosives-laden vests or belts. For each of these categories, both the modus operandi and target vary significantly, so it is worth examining each in more detail.

Vehicle-Borne IEDs (VBIEDs)

Seventy percent of IS's suicide fighters died in VBIED operations, a term that refers to attacks perpetrated using, according to the Amaq News Agency, one of nine types of vehicle: cars, lorries, tankers, Hummers, infantry combat vehicles, tanks, armoured personnel carriers, bulldozers and motorbikes. On occasion, IS also reports '*thana'iyya*' (joint) suicide attacks in which two fighters die – one who drives the VBIED while the other shoots from it.²⁷

The vehicle used varies depending on the context. For example, a tank-borne IED is much more useful in a battlefield setting than a scooter-borne bomb, which is itself better placed for smaller,



²³ For example, "هلاک ما یزید عن 16 من النظام النصيري في محاولة تقدم فاشلة باتجاه (حزم مهين)", Damascus Province Media Office, 4 February 2016.

²⁴ For example, "قتل العشرات من الجيش الرافضي بعملية انغماسية داخل (معسكر طاروق) شرقي الفلوجة", Fallujah Province Media Office, 1 January 2016.

²⁵ For example, "عملتان استشهاديتان تستهدفان قوات النظام النصيري بحبي الحويقة والرشدية", Khayr Province Media Office, 29 January 2016.

²⁶ U. Friedman, "Is Terrorism Getting Worse?" *The Atlantic*, 14 July 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/07/terrorism-isis-global-america/490352/>.

²⁷ For an excellent and comprehensive account of the Islamic State's VBIED arsenal, read @PurpleOlive2, "The History and Adaptability of the Islamic State Car Bomb," *Zaytunajuwani*, 14 February 2017, <https://zaytunajuwani.wordpress.com/2017/02/14/the-history-and-adaptability-of-the-islamic-state-car-bomb/>.

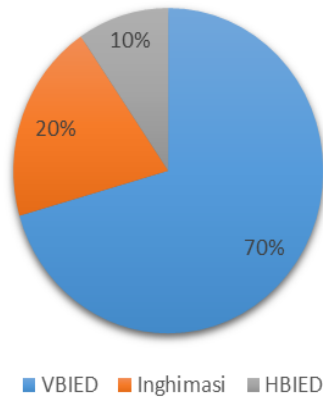
more targeted terrorist attacks and hence more regularly seen in urban settings. In the majority of cases, IS's vehicle of choice is the armoured four-wheel-drive. Given that most suicide operations are geared towards conventional battlefield goals, this is logical; such IEDs are relatively cheap to construct and can cover larger distances in a short amount of time, thus giving them an element of surprise. In the first few months of the Mosul campaign, for example, they proved ideal for launching against advancing ISF units from concealed garages. By way of contrast, because of their more cumbersome nature and the greater costs associated with their production, heavier VBIEDs (like armoured personnel carriers and bulldozers) generally appear less frequently. However, while less agile, they can be both more powerful and more difficult to defend against and, as such, have played an integral role in the early stages of major IS offensive and defensive operations.²⁸

In 2014 and the first half of 2015, when IS territories were still expanding, VBIEDs appeared in primarily offensive contexts, usually in swarms. Notoriously, they featured in its Ramadi surge in May 2015, in which 27 VBIEDs were used in two waves in just three days. During the first wave, heavy VBIEDs breached the city's outer defences, thereby facilitating the passage of a second wave of lighter VBIEDs that were able to strike ISF positions previously thought to be invulnerable.²⁹ By way of contrast, in the latter half of 2015 and 2016, a time that was characterised by territorial losses for IS, the tactical application of VBIEDs changed. Instead of supporting offensives geared towards capturing large swathes of land and population centres, VBIEDs – still attacking in groups – were predominantly used defensively, to pre-empt and undermine counter-offensives by making terrain at IS's peripheries as inhospitable to enemy forces as possible. Latterly, of course, they also began to serve as the last line of defence, particularly in places like Mosul in Iraq and Bab in Syria.

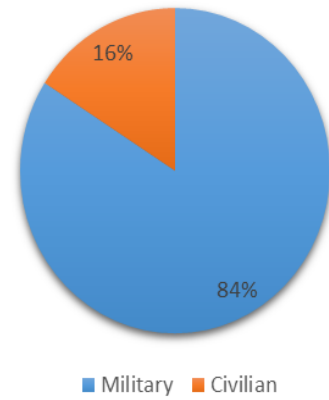
²⁸ For example, BMPs, Soviet-made amphibious tracked infantry fighting vehicles, featured in the following operations against Assad regime lines in Syria: "عملية استشهادية تدك بوابة (كتيبة الكيمياء) للجيش النصيري في ريف حمص شرقي", *Homs Province Media Office*, 24 May 2016; "هلاك عشرين عنصرا من الجيش النصيري بعملية استشهادية قرب منطقة حوييس", *Homs Province Media Office*, 14 May 2016; "قتل العشرات من جنود النصيرية بعملية استشهادية في منطقة الدوة", *Homs Province Media Office*, 11 January 2016; "عشرات القتلى والجرحى بعملية استشهادية في منطقة الدوة", *Homs Province Media Office*, 21 January 2016.

²⁹ M. Coker, "How Islamic State's Win in Ramadi Reveals New Weapons, Tactical Sophistication and Prowess," *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 May 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/islamic-states-gains-reveal-new-prowess-on-battlefield-1432592298>.

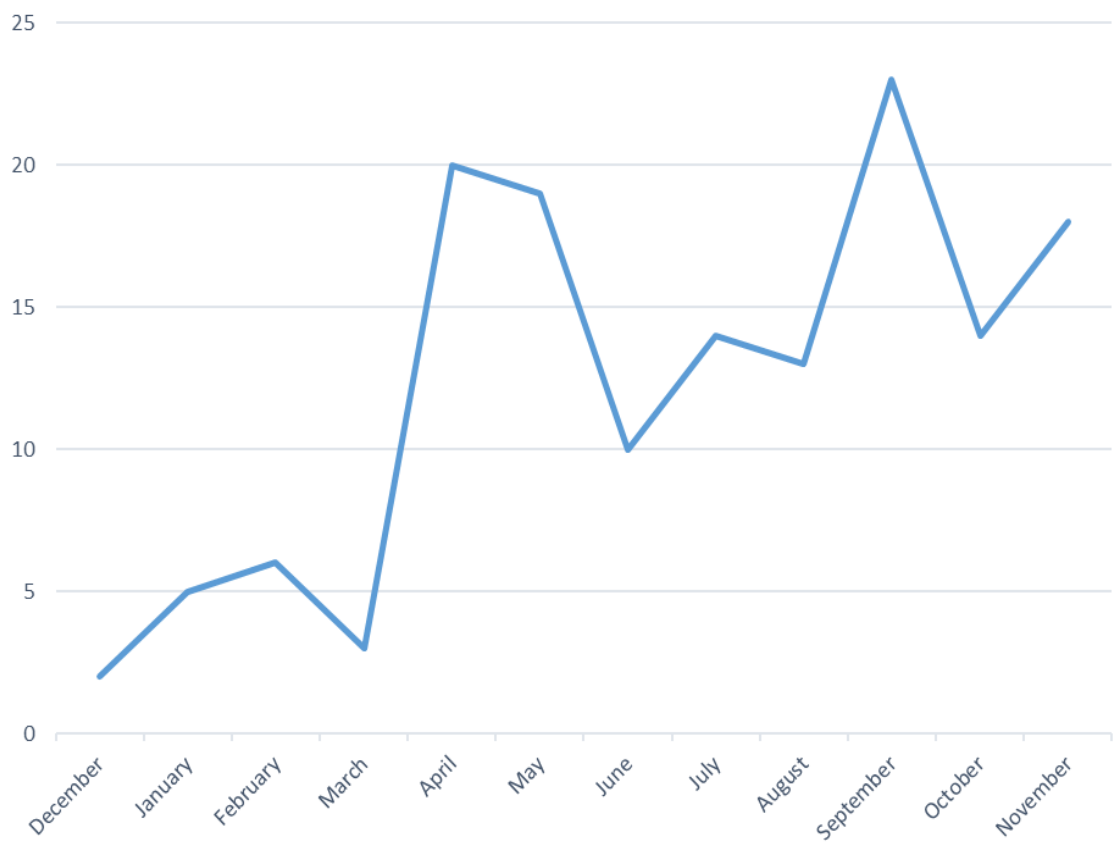
**Figure VII: Attack Type
01/12/15-30/11/16**



**Figure VIII: Target Type
01/12/15-30/11/16**



**Figure IX: Suicide Attacks on Civilians
01/12/15-30/11/16**



Inghimas Operations

Between 1 December 2015 and 30 November 2016, 184 suicide attackers killed themselves as *inghimas* fighters. The majority died in Iraq, where most *inghimas* operations were launched, primarily against targets in the Iraqi portion of Euphrates Province, Anbar Province and Dijlah Province.³⁰

For IS, there are at least three categories of *inghimas*. The first is the 'battlefield *inghimas*,' in which suicidal operatives swarm an enemy position, attacking it with light weapons and occasionally detonating suicide belts. In this iteration, which Scott Atran came across in the course of his fieldwork in Iraq, the *inghimas* attackers seek out death, but not by their own hand – as such, 'martyrdom', while highly likely, is not a foregone conclusion.³¹ Indeed, reflecting this on a number of occasions in 2016, IS reported that one or more of its *inghimas* fighters safely returned back to base after an operation.³²

The second variant is the 'psyop *inghimas*,' which is geared, more than anything else, towards undermining enemy soldiers' morale.³³ As such, they tend to be launched as surprise attacks against camps, barracks and police stations. A notable pair of examples came in January 2016, when eight *inghimas* fighters launched a night-time raid on Camp Tariq near the Iraqi city of Fallujah. According to the organisation's operation claim, the attack lasted for three hours and resulted in the deaths of 30 ISF soldiers.³⁴ The day after, another such attack took place, this one targeting cadets housed at Camp Speicher. According, again, to the operation claim, seven *inghimas* fighters infiltrated the camp in the early hours of the morning, using grenades and light weapons to kill as many people as possible before detonating their explosives-laden vests four hours later.³⁵ Neither of these assaults was geared towards capturing territory – rather, their primary value was propagandistic. In this sense, the October 2016 incursions in Kirkuk and Rutba could also be considered 'psyop *inghimas*' attacks.³⁶

The last form – the 'terrorist *inghimas*' – occurs in a civilian setting, wherein suicide fighters attack soft targets with light weapons before detonating suicide belts or vests (if they have them). The November 2015 Paris attacks were an example of this, as were the January 2016 assault against the Pakistani consulate in Jalalabad, and July 2016's attacks against Dhaka's Holey Artisan Bakery and Kabul's Deh Mazang square.³⁷

³⁰ It is worth noting that, from December 2016 onwards, *inghimas* operations appeared with greater frequency in Syria than Iraq.

³¹ S. Atran, "ISIS: The Durability of Chaos," *The New York Review of Books*, 16 July 2016, <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/07/16/nice-attack-isis-durability-of-chaos/>.

³² See, for example: "قتل قرابة 10 جنود من الجيش والحشد الرافضيين قرب قرية كرمدي غربي مخمور", *Dijlah Province Media Office*, 25 March 2016; "عملية انغماسية على مركز عمليات صحوات الردة في ريف حلب الشمالي", *Aleppo Province Media Office*, 10 April 2016; "السيطرة على قرية (قره كوبري)", *Jazirah Province Media Office*, 22 April 2016; "عملية انغماسية على ثكنة لمرتدي البيشمركة بمنطقة دوميز في سنجار", *Aleppo Province Media Office*, 5 May 2016; "وصول على قرينتي (قره مزرعة) و(دلحة) في ريف حلب الشمالي", *Anbar Province Media Office*, 17 May 2016; "عملية انغماسية على مقر للجيش", *Barakah Province Media Office*, 2 August 2015.

³³ "قتل", *Fallujah Province Media Office*, 1 January 2016; "قتل العشرات من الجيش الرافضي بعملية انغماسية داخل (معسكر طارق) شرقي القلوجة", *al-Naba' XII*, 5 January 2016.

³⁴ "هجوم انغماسي في قلب قاعدة سبايكر الجوية شمال مدينة تكريت", *Salahuddin Province Media Office*, 3 January 2016.

³⁵ The Islamic State's Amir of the War Office hinted as much in an interview with *al-Naba'*, its weekly newspaper. See "The Apostates Will See What the Mujahidin Have Prepared for Them after Their Campaign on Mosul Has Been Broken," *al-Naba' 55*, November 2016.

³⁶ "قتل العشرات من المرتدين باقتحام لجنود لخلافة على القنصلية الباكستانية بمدينة جلال آباد", *Khurasan Province Media Office*, 13 January 2016; "هلاك 23 صليبيبا وضابطي شرطة بهجوم انغماسي", *Central Media Office*, 14 November 2015; "بمدينة دكا في بنغلاديش هلاك 70 وإصابة نحو 200 من الرافضة المشركين بعملتين استشهائيتين في مدينة", *Bangladesh Media Office*, 1 July 2016; "كابل", *Khurasan Province Media Office*.

Because they only featured suicide bombers, the March 2016 bombings in Brussels should not be considered ‘terrorist *inghimas*’ operations.³⁸

Human-Borne IEDs (HBIEDs)

Ten percent of the suicide attacks in the time period in question were standalone operations using explosive belts or vests. Seventy-three percent of these attacks were directed against civilian, rather than military, targets, and over half of them took place in Iraq. In 85 percent of them, the perpetrators were local. When targeting civilians, this percentage was even higher. Indeed, probably because of their enhanced ability to infiltrate civilian locations without causing suspicion, the perpetrators of HBIED attacks targeting civilians only were local in all but two cases. The exceptions were when, in June 2016, two Palestinians, accompanied by a Syrian VBIED operator, used suicide belts to attack the Sayyida Zaynab suburb of Damascus.³⁹ In any case, as Figure IX demonstrates, the frequency of attacks on civilians increased significantly over the course of 2016, a result of the fact that such operations are a good means with which to distract from territorial contraction.

4. Origins of Suicide Attackers

Between 1 December 2015 and 30 November 2016, just 20 percent of IS’s suicide attackers – whether they were VBIED drivers, *inghimas* operatives, or HBIED bombers – were ‘foreign fighters’. Indeed, the vast majority were local to the region within which their operation took place (hence, they were mainly Iraqis or Syrians). It is not possible to determine whether the largest proportion of suicide attackers was from Iraq or Syria because, besides those that refer to their towns or cities of origin, there are three *kunyas* that could mean an individual was from these states – “al-‘Iraqi,” which denotes that a fighter is from Iraq, appeared in 182 cases; “al-Shami,” which denotes that they were Syrian, appeared in 104; and “al-Ansari,” which signifies that they were a local supporter of IS without detailing where they were from, appeared in 196. Both Iraqis and Syrians could use the “al-Ansari” *kunya*. Whatever the case, given the widespread belief that it is foreigners that make up the bulk of IS’s suicide cadres, these figures are striking indeed.

In total, 186 foreigners died as suicide operatives in the year in question. Fifteen were commemorated with the *kunya* “al-Muhajir,” which, similar to “al-Ansari,” indicates they were foreign but does not specify a country of origin. The remaining individuals – 86 percent of whom died as VBIED operators – hailed from 31 states. Most came from Tajikistan, followed by Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Tunisia, and Russia. Tajikistan’s presence at the top of this list is curious. Over the twelve months in question, significantly more Tajiks died in VBIED and *inghimas* operations in Syria and Iraq than any other foreign national. This figure is even more striking when considered on a per capita basis, and suggests that Tajiks were being singled out for use in suicide attacks at least in part because of their nationality.⁴⁰ While a similar phenomenon appears to be the case with the other top-scoring states, the disproportionality of Tajikistan is strange indeed. It is beyond the scope of this paper to determine why this might be, but it is worth noting

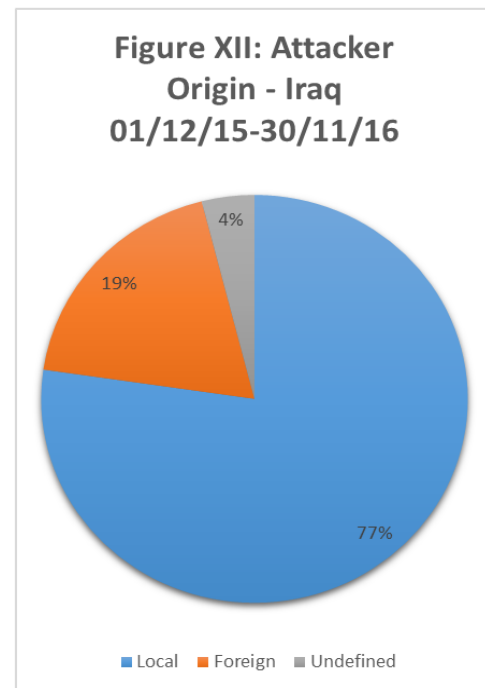
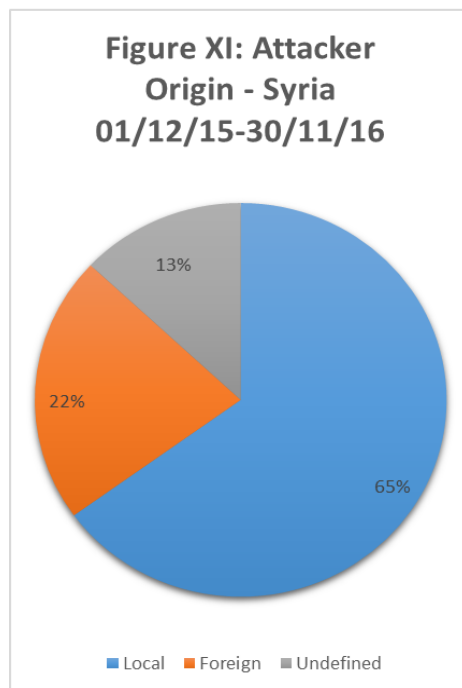
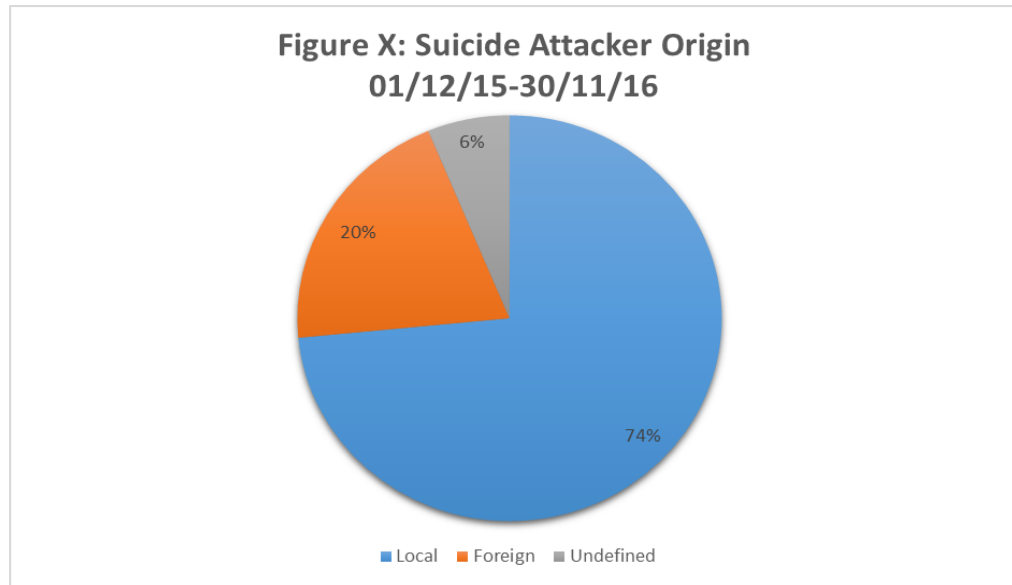
³⁸ “بيان عن غزوة بروكسل المباركة على بلجيكا الصليبية” *Central Media Office*, 22 March 2016.

³⁹ “هلاک وإصابة أكثر من 80”, *Tripoli Province Media Office*, 17 May 2016; “عملية استشهادية تستهدف تجمعاً لمرتدي فجر ليبيا غرب جسر السدادة”

⁴⁰ “العملية استشهادية تستهدف تجمعاً لمرتدي فجر ليبيا غرب جسر السدادة”, *Damascus Province Media Office*, 11 June 2016.

⁴⁰ “The Majority of Tajiks Fighting for ISIL in Iraq and Syria Salafists, Says Tajik Chief Prosecutor,” *ASIA-Plus*, 3 March 2016, <http://news.tj/en/news/majority-tajiks-fighting-isil-iraq-and-syria-salafists-says-tajik-chief-prosecutor>.

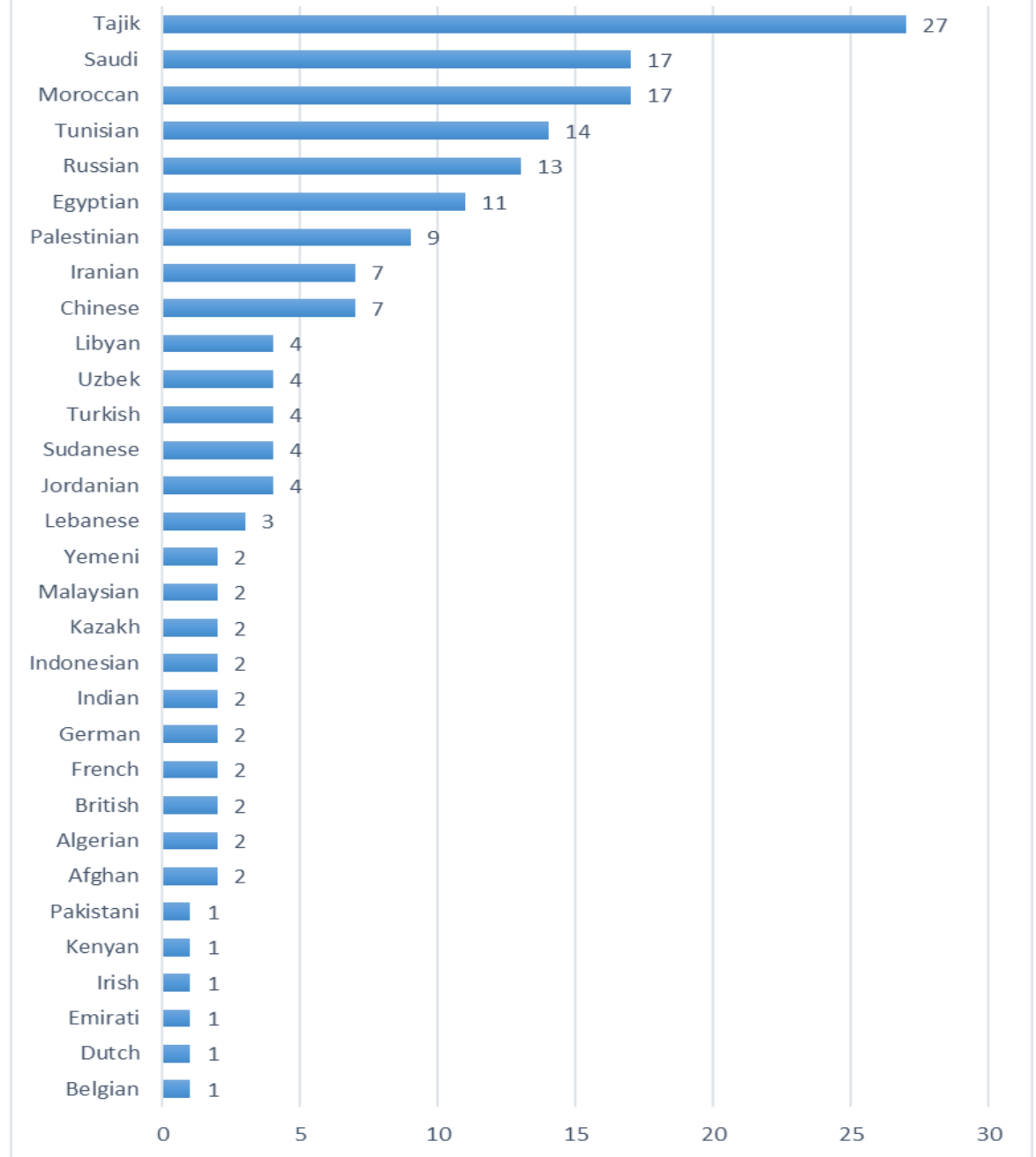
that the man currently rumoured to be IS's highest military authority – Gulmurod Khalimov – is a Tajik national.⁴¹



⁴¹ A. E. Kramer, "Tajik Police Commander, Trained in U.S., Appears to Rise in the Islamic State Ranks," *The New York Times*, 10 November 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/11/world/asia/tajikistan-islamic-state-isis.html>.

Figure XIII: Nationality of Foreign Suicide Fighters

01/12/15-30/11/16



Conclusion

According to the University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database, the total number of suicide attacks perpetrated around the world increased at a steady rate in the five years leading up to 2016. In 2011, there was an average of 17 suicide attacks each month. In 2013, there were 52 and, by 2015, there were 76.⁴² It is striking, then, that according to IS's data, it has been perpetrating suicide attacks at a higher rate per month than all other groups combined for five years running. Evidently continuing upon the trajectory of military and terroristic innovation established by its progenitors, IS uses suicide tactics in an unprecedented, unparalleled manner, one that has already transformed, almost beyond recognition, the conflict paradigm in Iraq, Syria and beyond.

Given that this is not a new phenomenon, one cannot argue that IS uses suicide tactics simply because of military pressure or territorial loss.⁴³ However, the rapid pace at which IS accelerated their use in 2016 is undeniable. It seems that suicide attacks, which were adopted long ago as a result of strategic calculations, might now be motivated by something more tactical. Indeed, in a manner not dissimilar to Imperial Japan, which formally adopted militarised suicide in the final stages of World War II after it had suffered a series of crippling strategic defeats, IS seems to have begun to resort to defensive suicide as a way to mitigate territorial loss and resist the immensity of the military pressure it faces.⁴⁴

This is not cause for hope. It is apparent from the scale of IS's suicide industry that there exists a dedicated infrastructure for manufacturing would-be martyrs and it is only increasing in efficiency. As a result, more research into the group's suicide infrastructure and the strategic propaganda that supports it is needed. Furthering our understanding of this phenomenon is critical; after all, if the case of Mosul is anything to go by, as IS's territorial might continues to wane, its use of suicide tactics will become even more instrumental to perpetuating its cause.

In any case, it is important to note that, while the rate of suicide attacks has utterly transformed in recent years, the considerations that drive their use seem to have persisted. Similar to what Hafez noted in 2007 of its predecessors in Iraq, suicide attacks are primarily used by IS because of their unconventional merits: they have a high margin of casualties per fighter lost; their human operators have a unique ability to seek out targets; they are difficult to defend against; and, as spectacular operations, they can shatter enemy morale.⁴⁵ In terms of its terrorist activities, too, IS's tactical motivations remain similar to those of its predecessors in the 2000s. Suicide attacks are preferred because of their communicative abilities: they are a way to aggressively insert terror into the political fabric of their target; they enable it to outmanoeuvre other salafi-jihadist groups by communicating ideological resolve and persistence; and,

⁴² National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). (2016). Global Terrorism Database [201512300020 - 201101010001]. Retrieved from <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd>.

⁴³ "In [Robert] Pape's view, ISIS has trained its sights on countries like Belgium, France, Russia, and Turkey because the U.S. coalition's air and ground campaign, along with military operations by Russia and its ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, have significantly eroded ISIS territory in Syria and Iraq in recent months". U. Friedman, "The 'Strategic Logic' of Suicide Bombing," *The Atlantic*, 23 March 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/brussels-attacks-terrorism-isis/474858/>.

⁴⁴ J. Orbell and T. Morikawa, "An Evolutionary Account of Suicide Attacks: The Kamikaze Case," *Political Psychology* 32, no. 2 (2011), p. 302.

⁴⁵ M. M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq* (2007), pp. 6-11.

lastly, they indicate wilful abhorrence towards human life, something that ensures, in the most horrific cases at least, media attention, thereby allowing the organisation to continue to benefit from the elixir of notoriety.⁴⁶

In seeking to understand how the current state of affairs has come to be, it serves to return to the 'proto-industry' analogy made by Gambetta in 2005.⁴⁷ Operating according to basic economic theory, he noted, those behind the "suicide missions" in Iraq were "exploit[ing] scale economies and specialisation".⁴⁸ Ten years on, it would appear that this exploitation has simply continued on the same trajectory, occasionally accelerating when circumstances permit. Indeed, it would appear that, assisted by innovative thinking, a willingness to take risks and a rapid disintegration of the rule of law in both Iraq and Syria, IS's suicide tacticians have perfected their art, not only developing explosives that are more powerful and reliable than ever, but creating what appears to be a sustainable stream of utterly brainwashed would-be suicide fighters. With that in mind, the wholesale proliferation of IS's use of suicide attacks is novel, but not 'new' – and, certainly from an organisational perspective, it is not something borne of irrationality. Instead, it is more a logical outcome of evolutionary economics and protracted revolutionary conflict, an issue that is as intractable as it is troubling.

⁴⁶ M. M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq* (2007), pp. 11-13.

⁴⁷ D. Gambetta, ed., *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* (2005), p. 311.

⁴⁸ D. Gambetta, ed., *Making Sense of Suicide Missions* (2005), p. 311.

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