

# Briefing Memo

## The Islamic State and Terrorism in Developed Countries

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### Introduction

This past October, the supreme leader of the Islamic State (IS), Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was allegedly killed in a U.S. military raid in which he died by self-detonating a suicide vest. His death was confirmed in a statement released by IS. President Trump praised the military raid for making the world safer world, but even with al-Baghdadi dead, IS ideology lives on, and some say that the dangers of radical Islamism persist and that their vows for revenge makes them even more dangerous. How should this be viewed?

The activities of IS in Iraq, Syria, and neighboring areas outside of Turkey that it once controlled, are roughly divided into two. One, are politically unstable developing countries, where existing anti-government Islamic extremists have sworn allegiance to the IS, and the other are developed democracies where acts of terrorism have occurred that may be connected to IS.

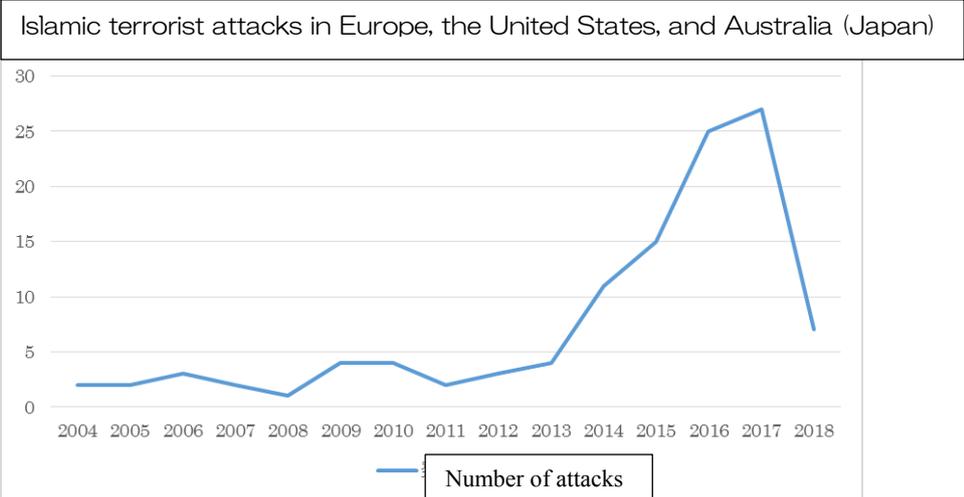
That is, in 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, which was active in Iraq and Syria, renamed itself the Islamic State with an eye to the world. IS revived the caliphate abolished 90 years ago, declared al-Baghdadi the caliphate, implemented Islamic law (Sharia) in its controlled territories, and called for allegiance to the caliphate al-Baghdadi from Muslims around the world.

This inspired antigovernment armed groups in developing countries. Antigovernment armed groups around the world pledged their allegiance to IS. It was reported in the Philippines that the allegiance went beyond any spiritual influence and extended to providing funds and combatants, and even giving the order to fight. However, even if it has intensified existing conflicts, it has not created any new conflicts or armed groups.

In developed democracies, on the other hand, there were terrorist attacks thought to have been orchestrated by IS. There has been some speculation that IS may launch systematic and widespread terrorist attacks. Even in Japan, there have been people who attempted to leave the country with the aim of joining IS, and others who supported it. This Briefing Memo outlines IS's involvement in terrorist attacks in advanced democracies.

**Comparison of the number of terrorist attacks**

The countries subject to comparison include major developed countries (G-7), Australia, and Western countries other than the G-7 that are parliamentary democracies and have functioning governance throughout the country. This includes Russia but excludes the former Eastern Bloc countries. The comparison covers the period from 2004 to 2018. This period includes the coordinated and transnational attacks of Al-Qaeda, where Osama bin Laden was the mastermind, such as the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, until the end of the group, and incidents of domestic terrorism to the present day. This period compares the number of terrorist attacks by Islamic militants before and after the emergence of IS<sup>1</sup>. The numbers are shown in the graph below.



From 2004 to 2013, the number of attacks varied between one and five. There are large-scale incidents such as the Madrid train bombing (2004), the London Underground/bus attack (2005), and the Boston Marathon bombing (2013), but the number of incidents remained virtually constant. When IS declared its independence in 2014, the number of attacks increased sharply (11), and further increased in 2015 (15), 2016 (25), and 2017 (27), with the number sharply dropping in 2018 (7).

To begin with, are these numbers valid as data? For Western Europe, North America, Australia, and Japan, with zero incidents, there are, at most, less than 30 attacks a year. In contrast, for example, in 2014, there were 14,164 intentional homicides in the United States, 594 in the United Kingdom, 792 in France, 716 in Germany, and 396 in Japan. In 2015, there were 15,883

intentional homicides in the United States, 649 in the United Kingdom, 1,017 in France, 682 in Germany, and 363 in Japan<sup>2</sup>. Compared to these numbers, it is valid to question whether the difference between five and 30 attacks is significant. However, the number of terrorist acts crimes has originally been small, and their proportion increased by a factor of three to five times from 2014 compared to that of the previous period, so it is possible to explore some trends.

### **The causal relationship between the circumstances of IS and terrorist attacks**

The number of Islamic terrorist attacks in developed democracies has increased since 2014. Of the 11 attacks in 2014, nine are after al-Baghdadi declared himself caliph. Since then, IS has issued statements claiming responsibility for these attacks to say nothing about the extent of its involvement. This makes it possible to hypothesize that IS promoted Islamic terrorism in developed democracies.

Is there a causal link between military operations against IS and Islamic terrorist attacks in advanced democracies? At one point, IS was in control of key portions of Iraq and Syria but has been weakened since 2015 by counterattacks by foreign military forces and local militias. In 2017, the IS lost most of its territory, losing the two major strongholds of Mosul (Iraq) and Raqqa (Syria). However, the number of Islamic terrorist attacks in developed democracies increased from 2014 until 2017.

Therefore, in terms of the absolute number of attacks, military action against IS was either ineffective at suppressing terrorist attacks or, conversely, helped foster them. (It can also be assumed that without any military action against IS, attacks could have increased even further). The decline in 2018 is significant.

If the circumstances surrounding IS are affecting Islamic terrorism in developed democracies, is it possible that this is not due to the military superiority or inferiority of IS but the extent of its exposure in the media and on the Internet? The news value of IS has diminished since the fall of Mosul and Raqqa, and IS did not publish its online newspaper last year.

### **The role of al-Baghdadi**

In an August 2018 statement, al-Baghdad himself called for lone-wolf terrorist attacks in Western countries, specifying how to attack with bombs, vehicles, and knives. Could this clamoring for terrorist attacks be a sign of IS's inability to command and support attacks? In

April 2019, shortly after the Easter bombing in Sri Lanka, which killed 260 people, IS broadcast a video featuring a person called al-Baghdadi. The man in the video claimed that the attack in Sri Lanka was revenge for the loss of Baghuzu in March, the last IS base. However, there is only audio for the part describing the Sri Lanka attack. Also, the date at the beginning of the video is early April, before the attack. It can be surmised that the creator of the video did not know of the plan for the attack and simply added the audio because the attack occurred just before the announcement.

Al-Baghdadi has disappeared since declaring himself caliph. Osama bin Laden frequently released audio tapes, video messages, and photographs, but al-Baghdadi has rarely done so. There are also theories about his life and death, with one theory that he is still alive and one that he is dead. It is a given that declaring himself caliph and then disappearing from the public eye would result in a loss of appeal. The leadership capabilities within the organization are unknown, but to the outside world, al-Baghdadi was a lame duck.

### **IS claiming responsibility for attacks**

Because IS claims that Muslims anywhere in the world can join IS and fight enemies of Islam, its claiming responsibility for the attacks below as their own is par for the course for IS. It claimed responsibility for the Las Vegas shooting that killed 58 and injured 546 in October 2017. However, the perpetrator in this incident is not Muslim and the offense had no religious motive. Authorities have also denied any connection between the shooting and IS.

Even in the recent stabbing incident that left two dead in London that is still fresh in the public's mind, IS-linked Amaq News Agency reported that it was committed by an IS fighter. The perpetrator was sentenced for his involvement in a bombing plot in 2012 and was released on parole last year. 2012 was before the Islamic State of Iraq changed its name from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and was a time when IS began a full-scale expansion into Syria and had yet to turn its attention to the world. It is also known that the perpetrator was influenced by a radical imam in the UK and that local police consider the attack to be a one-off incident.

Likewise, the IS-affiliated al-Naba newsletter states that most lone actors have never met IS leadership or operatives and were motivated by Islamic teachings of IS<sup>3</sup>. Al-Naba's view is equivalent to saying that in most cases of radical Islamism terrorism in Europe, the United States, and Australia, IS gave no direction or support, nor did it know of the attacks in advance. Thus,

IS claiming responsibility for any attacks may be them trying to be deceptive or taking advantage of a situation.

### **The November 2015 Paris attacks and IS**

Among the alleged attacks supported and directed by IS, the November 2015 Paris attacks on a stadium, theatre, and restaurants, which killed 130 people and injured 300, is the most closely linked to them. There is a view that the attacks were led by IS members from Syria, and that most of the perpetrators were trained in Syria.

The man who allegedly coordinated the attacks was a dual Belgium and Algeria citizen who was confirmed to have traveled to Syria on numerous occasions, but his connection to IS is tenuous. The main perpetrator of the attacks was a Belgian of Moroccan descent who joined IS and fought in Syria, and also has an interview with his photo in IS's online newspaper. It is almost certain that this man received combat training from IS.

Therefore, although IS looks to have been heavily involved in the November 2015 Paris attacks, the perpetrator was someone who was based in Europe and conducted the attacks, as opposed to someone sent from the Middle East by a terrorist organization (al-Qaeda) as in the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center. These perpetrators can be seen as having used the IS. In other words, they are essentially home-grown criminals, and it is unclear to what extent IS was actively involved.

### **Radicalization and ideology**

According to one survey, between June 29, 2014 and June 1, 2017, 87% of European and American terrorists were known to authorities before an attack, 57% had a criminal record, 34% had spent time in prison, and 73% were citizens of the country in which the attack was carried out<sup>4</sup>. They were hardly devoted Muslims, but rather engaged in theft or violence, and were heavy users of alcohol or illegal drugs.

There are two views on the role of ideology. One view is that the actions of the perpetrators and their supporters can be attributed to a violent ideology. Another view is that ideology is only a pretense, and the nature of their actions is to subvert society. Although these two views are not mutually exclusive, I emphasize the latter regarding the Islamic terrorists who are the subject of

this memo. The perpetrators are vague in their defiance of society, and crime factor largely as the outlet of their frustrations.

### **Summary**

IS (al-Baghdadi) has gained attention by declaring al-Baghdadi caliph and appealing for the creation of a new state. The killing of hostages, which were put on the Internet, shocked the world. This helped to attract people with violent tendencies who are disaffected with their current circumstances and lead them to terrorism. They can feel a sense of fulfillment if IS claims responsibility after an attack and they are recognized as a combatant. They can increase their own value if they can make the world a turbulent place.

However, even with the largest and most coordinated attack in this survey, the November 2015 Paris attacks, the organizational involvement of IS is unclear. Although the majority of the perpetrators investigated have parents or grandparents from the Middle East or North Africa, they are from the West and live in Europe and the United States. Despite their contact with IS, it is not certain that IS planned the attacks.

As al-Naba reports, most of them have never met with IS leadership or operatives. There are exceptions where those who have joined the IS have received training, but it is unclear whether they joined on their own initiative or were recruited by an IS sympathizer in Europe, but radicalization itself is happening in Europe. Fundamentally, this is a domestic problem for countries around the world.

To return to the question at the outset, the death of al-Baghdadi has made the world neither safe nor more dangerous. The ideology of radical Islamism was more resolute and widespread before al-Baghdadi claimed to be IS's caliph. Armed conflict in developing countries is chronic and has circumstances unique to its locale. IS has already lost its influence over terrorism in developed countries. However, Muslim opposition to Western policies on Islam, particularly in the wake of 100,000 non-combatant deaths in military operations, means that there will be some level of hatred, so we should be prepared for sporadic terrorist attacks in the future.

### **References**

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<sup>1</sup> For the basis of the calculation, see Yoshio Katayama, “A Study of Islamic States and Radicalization,” *Journal of World Affairs*, November and December 2019, p. 60-61.

<sup>2</sup> 2018 edition of the *White Paper on Crime*, Table 1-3-1-1, “Change in the number and rate of murders by country”

<http://hakusyo1.moj.go.jp/jp/65/nfm/images/full/h1-3-1-01.jpg> (accessed June 17, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> <https://icct.nl/publication/caliphate-soldiers-and-lone-actors-what-to-make-of-is-claims-for-attacks-in-the-west-2016-2018/> (accessed on June 16, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone, Eva Entenmann, *Fear Thy Neighbor: Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West* (<https://icct.nl/publication/fear-thy-neighbor-radicalization-and-jihadist-attacks-in-the-west/>), accessed August 30, 2018.

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