



## Analysis of ISIS's Claims of Responsibility for Terrorist Attacks Carried Out Abroad

August 15, 2017

### Overview<sup>1</sup>

This study examines the forms of ISIS's claims of responsibility for terrorist attacks **it carried out abroad** (i.e., not in Iraq and Syria, its "core countries"). It covers **22 claims of responsibility for attacks carried out between June 2016 and June 2017**. The study shows a close correlation between the form of the various claims and the types and locations of the attacks. The ITIC is of the opinion that the **insights gained from the study can be used as a methodological tool to examine ISIS claims of responsibility and assess their significance**.

- ▶ Most of the attacks examined for this study **were carried out by ISIS in Western countries** (the United States and western Europe), **some in Arab-Muslim countries** (Egypt, Turkey Iran) and **some in others** (Israel, Russia, Kenya). **In ITIC assessment, most of the attacks in the West were ISIS-inspired**, that is, inspired by but not directed by ISIS, without its logistic support or the involvement of its external operational headquarters in choosing a target or reaching it. Some of the attacks (especially in Arab-Muslim countries) were planned by ISIS, and preceded by the methodical collection of intelligence, procuring weapons and training the operative or operatives who carried them out.
- ▶ A comparison of the various claims of responsibility indicates that **three different patterns** are used:
  - ◆ **The "short form:"** The most frequently used type of claim of responsibility. It uses phrases and terms that repeat themselves in most of the announcements. In ITIC assessment **the short form is relevant mostly for ISIS-inspired attacks carried out in the West**. The announcements are composed after the attack and disseminated within a short time (usually the **day after the attack**). Apparently whoever composes the announcements prefers not to include unnecessary details because the full picture

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<sup>1</sup> The full English version of this bulletin will appear on the ITIC website. The full Hebrew version can be accessed on the ITIC website.

is not yet sufficiently clear and in order not to reveal the fact that the announcements were written after the attack and the terrorists who carried out the attack do not have an organizational link to ISIS.<sup>2</sup> Short-form announcements are **similar to one another but not identical** (with small, insignificant differences in terminology and style).

- ◆ **The "long form:"** Such claims of responsibility are long and detailed, and include information about the attack and explicit reasons for their having been carried out. **They are issued mainly for attacks which were planned in advance and for which ISIS paid attention to the aspect of propaganda.** They are most commonly used for attacks carried out in Arab-Muslim countries. They are regularly issued in Syria, Iran and other countries where there are branches of ISIS (e.g., the Sinai Peninsula). The attacks examined for this study revealed four such claims of responsibility: for the suicide bombing attack in the Coptic cathedral in Cairo (December 12, 2016); the shooting attack in the nightclub in the heart of Istanbul (January 1, 2017), and the combined suicide bombing and shooting attack in Tehran (June 7, 2017). The announcement issued after the suicide bombing attack in Manchester (May 22, 2017) also belongs to that category.<sup>3</sup>

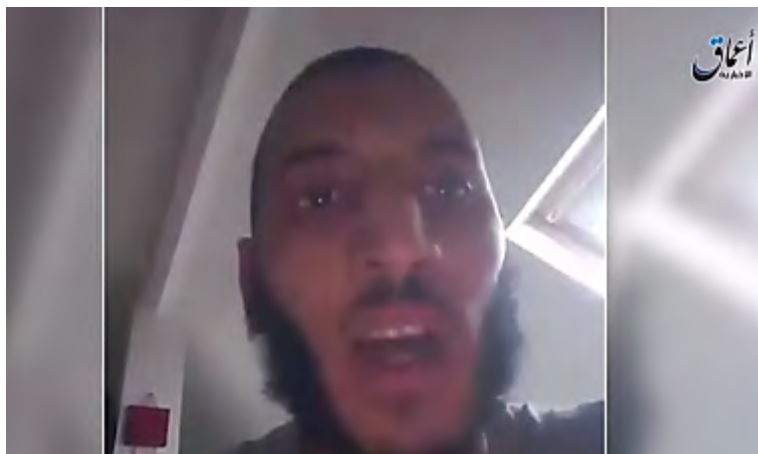
- ◆ **Claims of responsibility including videos:** About one third of the short-form announcements issued after ISIS-inspired attacks **included videos**, in most cases published after the attack. **In each instance the video was filmed at the initiative of the terrorists who carried out the attack.** They photographed themselves before the attack and sent the pictures to ISIS, which were published by its **Amaq news agency** (or by other media). There were also **several instances of attacks photographed and the pictures published in real time.** The videos included threats against Western countries and oaths of allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. **The inclusion of videos increases the propaganda impact of the attacks.** The attack in Tehran, which was well-planned, was photographed in real time as part of the overall the plan. In Syria and Iraq, and other Arab-Muslim countries where provinces of ISIS operate. It is

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<sup>2</sup> In the past ISIS did not customarily issue claims of responsibility for ISIS-inspired attacks. Apparently, during 2016, when they became a significant modus operandi in the West, a general announcement was composed that was relevant for ISIS-inspired attacks.

<sup>3</sup> Other examples of attacks carried out in Europe, after which a long-form claim of responsibility was issued, were the attacks at the airport in Brussels and the attack near the headquarters of the EU (both on March 22, 2016). It was a **well-planned attack** and considerable attention was paid to the aspect of propaganda.

**very common for long-form claims of responsibility to be accompanied by videos prepared in advance** (especially when suicide bombing attacks are carried out).



**Larossi Abballa, who stabbed a French police officer and his partner to death in the residential commune of Magnanville, north-west of Paris. He photographed himself with his cell phone. As part of the video he recorded himself swearing allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (Amaq, June 14, 2016).**

► During the period studied, one instance of an ISIS-inspired attack was found for which **ISIS did not claim responsibility**. On June 8, 2016, two terrorist operatives carried out a shooting attack in the Sarona commercial and entertainment complex in the heart of Tel Aviv (four killed, seven wounded). **The two attackers were inspired by ISIS**; one of them had been **influenced by ISIS ideology while studying in Jordan**. They were assisted by a third operative, who provided them with weapons. ISIS did not claim responsibility for the attack despite the media capital it could have made from inspiring an attack in Tel Aviv. ISIS's motives for not claiming responsibility are unclear. It is possible that ISIS did not have sufficient information about the attack while it was being carried out to indicate the terrorists had been inspired by the organization.

► **How reliable are ISIS's claims of responsibility?** In ITIC assessment, **most of the attacks for which ISIS claims responsibility were in fact carried out by its operatives** (planned attacks), or by **terrorists who were inspired by the organization** (inspired attacks). However, those are **exceptional cases**. For example, through its Amaq news agency, ISIS claimed responsibility for the combined shooting and stabbing attack carried out near the Nablus Gate in the Old City of Jerusalem (June 16, 2017). According to the announcement, the attack was carried out by the "lions of the caliphate in the Palestine Province [of ISIS]." In ITIC assessment, **the announcement was false, and reflected ISIS's desire to boast of a**

**success in a symbolic location such as "Palestine,"** given the severe pressure exerted on the organization in Syria and Iraq.

**In conclusion, an examination of the claims of responsibility revealed a connection between the pattern of announcement and the nature and location of the attack. Short-form announcements** seem to indicate an **ISIS-inspired attack, usually carried out in a Western country**, primarily by Muslims or people who have converted to Islam, been radicalized, and identify with ISIS's ideology. **Long-form announcements, on the other hand, seem to indicate a previously-planned ISIS attack.** They are usually carried out in **Syria, Iraq and Arab-Muslim countries**, where ISIS has high operational capabilities.<sup>4</sup> **Videos are included in claims of responsibility for both ISIS-inspired attacks and planned attacks.** The difference between them is that in ISIS-inspired attacks the inclusion of a video is improvised and inserted **on the initiative of the terrorists who carry them out**, and then disseminated by ISIS's propaganda machine. In planned attacks, publishing videos is **part of preparations for the attack and attention is given to the aspect of propaganda.** ISIS uses many languages in its announcements, depending on the target audience (**Arabic and English are popular languages for the videos**).

## Composition and style of ISIS's claims of responsibility

### Short-form announcements

► The following are the various **linguistic and content characteristics** of claims of responsibility issued as short-form announcements:

- ◆ **Headline:** The headline includes the source of the announcement (usually ISIS's Amaq news agency), the date and the degree of urgency.
- ◆ **Body of the announcement:** The announcement is usually written in modern Arabic, short and succinct. In most cases the language is grammatically correct.
- ◆ **Source:** Information is often attributed to "**a security source.**" In ITIC assessment, that creates the impression (not always accurate) that ISIS has access to "security sources" with knowledge about the attack in whatever country it occurred. Sometimes only a "**source**" is mentioned.

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<sup>4</sup> Attacks carried out by ISIS operatives in Syria and Iraq were not examined in this study.

- ◆ **Timing of releasing the announcement:** In most instances, the announcement is issued the day after the attack. In exceptional instances, it is issued on the same day or two days later.
- ◆ **Language:** ISIS issues the announcements in **Arabic**, but obviously makes the attempt to issue them in the language of the country where the attack took place. For ISIS-inspired attacks, **some of the announcements are also presented in English, to increase the impact of ISIS's message on Western audiences.** The claim of responsibility for the attack at the night club in Istanbul also appeared in **Turkish**.
- ◆ **Publisher:** Most of the claims of responsibility for attacks in the West are issued **by ISIS's Amaq news agency.** It also issues claims of responsibility for attacks carried out in Syria, Lebanon and the Arab-Muslim world. Most of the announcements in the Middle East are issued by **Haq**, another ISIS news agency. In one instance (the attack in Manchester) Amaq issued a short announcement in Arabic and Haq issued two longer announcements, one in Arabic and one in English.
- ◆ **Names of the operatives:** Generally speaking, **the names and pictures of the operatives who carried out attacks do not appear.** On exceptional occasions the aka of the terrorist, which relates to his country of origin, does appear. The aka is not necessarily accurate: in one instance a terrorist was reported as "Abu Yusuf the Belgian," when in fact he came from Algeria.
- ◆ **Description of the attack:** Attacks are described as "**attacks**" or "**operational actions**". On rare occasions the term is "**an armed attack**". In ITIC assessment, there is no real difference between the terms. Another term used is "**an act of self-sacrifice**," which describes a suicide bombing attack (which are fundamentally different from other types of attacks).
- ◆ **Number of victims:** Often the number of victims is not mentioned (possibly because of the lack of precise information). **Sometimes the number is a combination of those killed and wounded.** That is done **to magnify the attack** and make it seem like a greater "achievement."
- ◆ **Terms for the coalition attacking ISIS:** In most instances, the forces of the coalition attacking ISIS are referred to as "**Crusaders**." Sometimes the coalition is referred to as "**international**." However, the word "Christian" appears more than "Crusaders" to describe the people who are the targets of ISIS attacks. In ISIS's

perception **a religious war is being fought, Muslims against Christians, in which Muslims indiscriminately attack Christians.**

◆ **Reason for the attack:** The most common reason for an attack comes in answer to ISIS's call to attack the countries of the coalition fighting ISIS in Syria and Iraq. The objective is to exert pressure on the citizens of the coalition countries, creating public opinion to stop the attacks on the Islamic State.

### Structure of a short-form claim of responsibility for an ISIS-inspired attack



### Analysis of long-form announcements

► Long-form announcement have **several unique features:**

◆ **Pattern and language:** The long-form announcements **are written in classic literary Arabic, are clearly Islamic in style, and use religious terminology.** For example, *mushrikin* (polytheist), *fitna* (civil war), *amir al-mu'minin* (ruler of the faithful), *Salibiyin* (Crusaders), and *khilafa* (caliphate). Alongside such terms there are also words from modern Arabic.

◆ **Description, location and manner of the attack:** The attack is described at length and has details which do not appear in short-form announcements. For example, a suicide bomber with an explosive belt blew himself up in a suicide bombing attack targeting a gathering of local Christians [i.e., Copts] in the central cathedral in Cairo. The location of the attack is mentioned to stress the size of the attack and because it

was centrally located and crowded. Other long-form announcements were issued for the attacks on the nightclub in Istanbul and the Manchester Arena to illustrate that they were carried out in crowded sites.

◆ **Detailed description of the target using Islamic terminology:** Long-form announcements include details about the targets. In Egypt, the **Copts** were called Crusaders (*Salibyīn*) or "Christians in Egypt." The announcement also referred to Muslims who had allegedly abandoned Islam, calling them "infidels" and "abandoners of Islam." The announcement about the attack in the nightclub in Istanbul accused Turkey of being an Islamic country that had abandoned Islam, calling it "the defender of the cross" (i.e., as having left Islam).

### Justification for the attacks

► The announcements chosen for examination indicate that the **justification for carrying out terrorist attacks**, including indiscriminate attacks, **is based on religious arguments, at the center of which is the struggle of Muslims against Christians and "infidels," that is, people of other religions holding different beliefs.** The terrorist who carries out the attack is called a **"soldier" in the ranks of the Islamic State, who fights against its enemies under the direction of the "emir of the faithful,"** that is, the caliph (ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi). Another justification for the attacks appearing in many announcements is **revenge against the coalition countries and other enemies** fighting ISIS, which it represents as enemies of Islam and Muslims. ISIS exerts pressure on their citizens by terrifying them (the announcements use the term *irhab*, which means to frighten or sow fear among people, and does not mean to carry out a terrorist attack).

**The main message sent by the claims of responsibility and ISIS's primary objective as reflected in them is the following:** ISIS continues to wage a holy war (jihad) against its many enemies, including **Christians** ("Crusaders"), **Shi'ites** (rejecters of Islam), **Muslims who abandoned Islam**, and anyone who is not monotheistic, according to ISIS's interpretation. ISIS's primary objective is to spread its version of Islam around the globe following its victory over the various "infidels." **That is an overall goal when has no genuine chance of being achieved, but it turned a large number of states and population groups into enemies, which ISIS feels it has religious justification to kill.**



**Representing terrorism as a religious war between Muslims and Christians. The cover of the July 2017 issue of ISIS's English-language magazine, Dabiq. In the picture an Islamic State "soldier" tears down a cross atop a church. The cover of the magazine reads, "Break the Cross" (Dabiq, issue #15, July 2016).**