

Research Note

Camera-Recorded Extrajudicial Executions by the Islamic State (2015-2020): Analysis – Statistics – Data Set

by Judith Tinnes

Abstract

This Research Note provides findings from a systematic monitoring effort of visually documented extrajudicial executions perpetrated by the Islamic State terrorist group. Based on a data set covering 2,414 individuals killed between January 2015 and December 2020 (1,224 incidents) – which was compiled for ‘Perspectives on Terrorism’ in the monitoring project ‘Counting Lives Lost’ (CLL) – it presents results from long-term measures of roughly 20 incident- and victim level variables, including citizenship, gender, geographic location, execution method, and IS’ justifying arguments for the killings. Accompanied by a supplementary statistics file featuring tabular and graphical representations of the data and the full data set, it highlights temporal trends, changing dynamics, and characteristic qualitative and quantitative patterns, providing unprecedented insights into the execution activities and victimization behavior of the terrorist organization. In contrast to earlier long-term studies, it includes local victims and is not geographically limited. The findings reveal a marked downward trend in incident and casualty numbers over time yet also make clear that IS executions have not come to a halt but continue to remain a persistent phenomenon. The data suggests that the group’s territorial breakdown impacted its publicized execution activities. Patterns for conflict-related hostage killings and governance-linked Sharia executions differed significantly. More than 95% of the victims were local citizens from conflict nations (most of them Muslims), while foreigner killings were rare. Less than 1% of the victims were females. The IS’ heartlands of Iraq and Syria constituted the main execution theater. Over time, execution activities relocated on a micro-level from urban to more rural areas (especially, within Syria and Iraq) and, on a macro-level, increasingly shifted to different regions (particularly West Africa). The IS named purported ‘charges’ of the captives as the reason for its violence. The bulk of these charges were related to the conflict between the group and its enemies, while accusations that were closely tied to its implementation of territorial governance had a much lower share. While the IS is often associated with transgressive execution methods, the majority of victims were killed by shooting, yet the group accounted for an unprecedented number of beheadings. Particular types of charges and execution techniques appeared to be associated with each other. Public executions before a physical audience varied for different killing styles and charges, and significantly decreased over time. In 52 execution incidents, the IS instrumentalized minors as executioners. While over 90% of the foreign hostages garnered coverage in Western news media, less than 10% of the locals were reported.

Keywords: Islamic State, IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh, extrajudicial executions, hostages, captives, beheadings, statistics, data

Introduction

The so-called Islamic State terrorist organization (henceforth: IS) has been conducting systematic human rights violations against its captives. To date, an unknown number of individuals has been kidnapped by the group, held, and often tortured, at its detention facilities or safe houses. The fate of numerous victims remains unclear at the time of writing.[1] Many of the captives ended up being executed, a fraction of these killings were visually documented by the group and publicized online. A small number of these media-transmitted atrocities (particularly those perpetrated against Westerners) and the visuals of them received tremendous attention by international mass media,[2] were actively sought by a significant number of internet users,[3] became “instant icons”[4] of the war on terrorism, and impacted politics of war in the victims’ home states.[5]

Despite this significant public interest in the topic and its political implications, quantitative empirical research on publicized IS executions is rare. The dearth of analysis inhibits a holistic and nuanced understanding of the scale, dynamics, and characteristics of the issue, reflects the “lack of scholarly focus on the victims of terrorism,”[6] and reconfirms Yun’s 2007 statement that the study of hostage takings “has suffered a shortage of quantitative data and corresponding analyses.”[7] Few representative quantitative contributions on hostage

takings[8] in the 21st century center on incident or victimization patterns. Kim, George, and Sandler[9] analyzed 1,900+ kidnapping incidents to determine trends, features, and changes in hostage-takings over four decades and to identify determinants of logistical and negotiation successes in hostage missions. In two long-term studies ($n = 1,400+$ individuals, 657 incidents), Loertscher and Milton[10] examined trends of jihadist kidnappings from January 2001 to mid of July 2015, contrasted them to those of other non-state actors, and investigated how a hostage's individual characteristics influence the outcome of a kidnapping incident. Mellon, Bergen, and Sterman[11] explored how the ransom policies of Western nations have affected efforts to safely recover hostages taken captive by terrorist, militant, and pirate groups between 2001 and 2016 ($n = 1,100+$ individuals). Based on two overlapping data sets of roughly 4,000 kidnapping and hostage taking incidents over a fifty-year period (1968-2018), Schmid[12] analyzed what can be done to prevent kidnappings and acts of hostage taking. All these representative, large- n , multi-year assessments have in common that they focus on foreign victims (mainly Westerners) or transnational incidents and exclude locals.

Recent quantitative or mixed-methods studies that include local victims focus on particular groups of captives, geographical regions, or media types employed to communicate the violence, and often do not use a long-term approach. In two analyses of 6,000+ IS executions in Iraq between June 2014 and October 2015, Burke[13] examined victim characteristics and contrasted publicized and "hidden" (i.e., off-camera) hostage killings. Barr and Herfroy-Mischler[14] investigated in two studies quantitative and qualitative facets of 62 IS execution videos (including displayed hostage type and execution style) published between August 2014 and June 2015 to gain insights into the IS' media strategy (particularly its audience segmentation). Mottet[15] studied cinematographic techniques (including themes) of selected retributive justice videos (44 of them by IS) and other jihadist groups. Pearson and Zenn[16] analyzed trends in kidnappings of females by Boko Haram and the IS' West Africa Province (ISWAP) from July 2017 to April 2020 ($n = 108$ incidents) through a gendered lens. A growing corpus of studies from different academic disciplines examines aspects of the Yazidi genocide or the refugee crisis, such as the mortality and kidnapping rate[17] and mental health effects to victims.[18]

Several other relevant studies had a different main focus than hostage takings but included data on local kidnapping victims or incidents. Nanninga[19] examined in a systematic analysis the complete IS' video output from mid 2015 to mid 2018 in the context of the group's territorial setback and reported data on 343 execution victims – such as gender, execution method, and whether the captives were alleged enemy fighters or spies. Likewise, Milton[20] contrasted executions of alleged enemy fighters and spies displayed in official IS visual media products between January 2015 and August 2016. Winkler et al.[21] assessed in two studies the IS' use of about-to-die images in its periodicals. Several analyses from different academic fields that focused on the IS' law enforcement activities and institutions quantified executions and other punishments meted out against captives.[22]

The Counting Lives Lost Project – Aims, Scope, and Method

The previous discussion makes clear that, although the "kidnapping of local nationals [...] is a significant phenomenon in its own right,"[23] a long-term analysis of hostage takings that includes local captives and is not confined to particular victim or incident characteristics is still missing to date. To address this desideratum for research in the context of IS hostage killings, the author initiated the execution monitoring project 'Counting Lives Lost' (CLL) for 'Perspectives on Terrorism' in January 2015. The main objectives of the CLL project – which is ongoing at the time of writing – are:

1. To provide a representative individual- and incident-level census of publicized IS hostage killings based on a systematic long-term data collection effort in order to contribute empirical quantitative and qualitative facts on the scale, dynamics, and characteristic patterns of IS' execution activities and victimization behavior;
2. To counterbalance the Western media's reporting bias against executions of non-Western hostages by offering data irrespective of victims' citizenship.

Findings of the CLL project are being communicated on the project web page[24] through a periodical statistics-only publication which was initially released in February 2016.[25] Via a Twitter account (@CountingLivesPT), the author informs readers on statistics updates and publishes additional charts and information. While the statistics summarize mainly aggregated findings, the present Research Note adds an additional component to the project by presenting results from long-term measures to illustrate temporal trends, changing dynamics, and other characteristic patterns that were previously not covered. This analysis is based on a unique data set covering the first six years of the monitoring period (January 1, 2015 to December 31, 2020).[26] The data set[27] records 2,414 individuals killed by the IS in publicized executions (1,224 incidents) and measures roughly 20 variables (including citizenship, gender, incident location, execution method, and IS' justifying arguments for the killings). It is not restricted to particular groups of captives and includes individuals irrespective of their citizenship, combatant status, geographic location of death, or other features.

To build up the data corpus (aimed to be exhaustive), the author systematically collected IS execution visuals by regularly tracking official[28] IS social media accounts on Telegram.[29] To create a data collection as completely as possible, not only videos were considered but also image publications, such as photo reports or separately posted pictures – which have often been neglected by previous research on IS publications. The collection included all videos related to executions, including those released by the A'maq News Agency as well as mixed-content compilations which were not thematically focused on executions but contained scenes of hostage killings. The registered reference date for counting an execution was the release date[30] of the visual material displaying the killing. When several visuals were released documenting the same incident, the release date of the first-published visual was recorded.

All relevant visuals were thoroughly examined, cross-checked with secondary sources[31] (if there were any retrievable), and coded for roughly 20 variables in a condensed data sheet. It should be pointed out that despite the author's effort to identify as many details as possible on each execution, information provided by the IS was often the only information available for some or all parameters of a killing – hence it could not be independently verified. This is particularly true for executions of non-Westerners.

Finally, the data was analyzed by using basic descriptives and cross-tabulations. When interpreting the results, it is important to keep in mind that these methods did not allow for statistical inferences such as correlations or even causation. Therefore, while suggesting possible explanations for developments, dynamics, or patterns and indicating potential associations between variables (which are encouraged to be used as starting points for future research endeavors by other researchers), this study cannot give any definite answers to 'Why' questions but is limited to answering 'What' questions.

Results and Discussion

The following sections will present and discuss findings from the data analysis for the different variables focusing on long-term developments and patterns. The Research Note's main text is accompanied by a supplementary statistics file featuring tabular and graphical representations of the data.[32] To distinguish objects of the present Research Note from those of the statistics file when referring to them, the latter were preceded by the capital letter 'S' (e.g., Table S1 vs. Table 1). Also published alongside the manuscript is an anonymized version of the full data set on which the analysis is based for allowing interested readers to conduct their own research or to replicate the results. Both supplementary items can be freely downloaded from the CLL project page (for access, see Supplementary Materials section at the end).

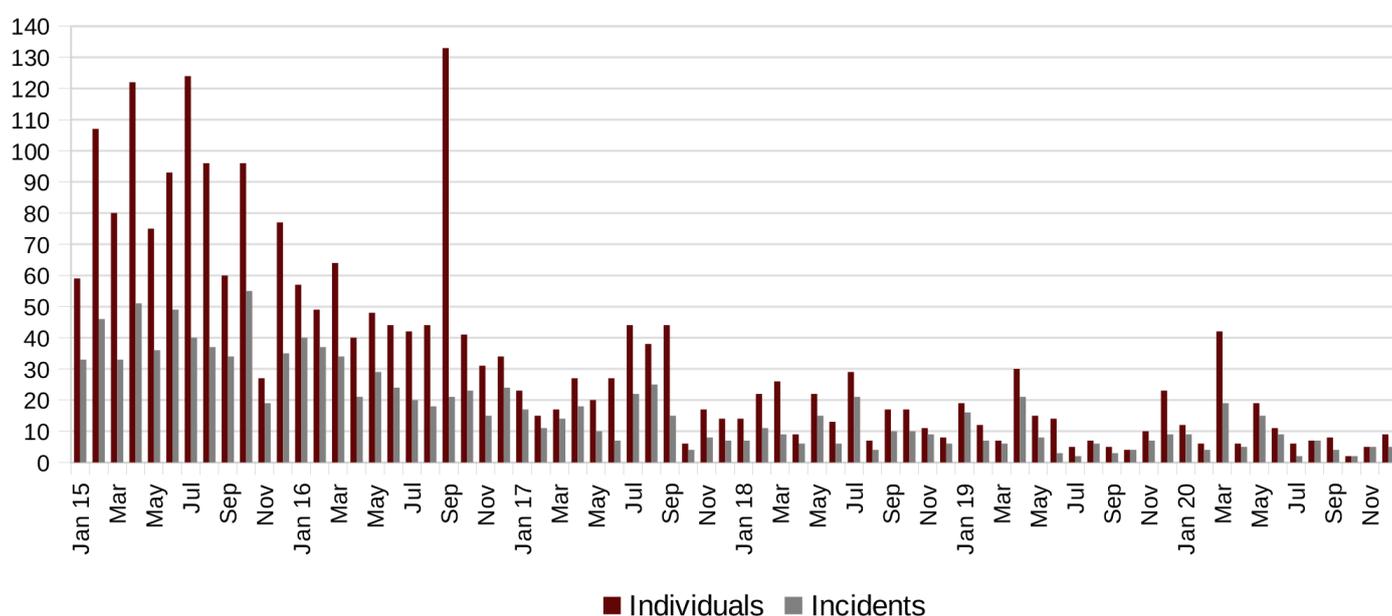
Victim and Incident Numbers

Between January 1, 2015 and December 31, 2020, the IS has extrajudicially executed 2,414 individuals in front of a camera in 1,224 execution incidents.[33] Over three-fourths of the incidents ($n = 932$, 76.14%) and individual killings ($n = 1,935$, 80.16%) took place in the first three years of the monitoring period (see Figures 1, S2 and Tables S1–S3).

The data reveals a marked downward trend in incident and casualty numbers over time (particularly during the first three years of the monitoring period while approaching a plateau afterwards), yet also makes clear that IS executions have not come to a halt but continue to remain a persistent phenomenon. The incident and fatalities rate temporarily diverged from its general patterns, with several peaks observable on both levels. On the incident level, tying these short-term spikes to a specific cause is problematic as they can usually be attributed to a combination of different factors. Some peaks were triggered by propaganda events, such as thematic media campaigns with increased publication volume or the release of longer compilation videos covering numerous (often undated) execution activities. On the individual level, spikes were often connected to mass executions – the largest one with around 60 victims occurred in September 2016 (see Figure 1).

Table S4 shows that two thirds of the execution incidents ($n = 812, 66.34\%$) were single murders. An additional quarter ($n = 320, 26.14\%$) led to 2–4 fatalities, while mass executions – defined as incidents with five or more victims – were comparatively rare ($n = 92, 7.52\%$); their annual share never exceeded the 10% mark throughout the whole monitoring period (see Table S5).

Figure 1. Individuals Executed and Execution Incidents by Month



Note. Total N individuals = 2,414. Total N incidents = 1,224.

Gender of Execution Victims

A striking key finding of the analysis is the marginal share of women in the data set. Of the 2,414 execution victims, only seven (0.29%) were female (see Table S6). The women were killed in five execution incidents; two of these cases were related. The extreme rareness of women is in line with the IS’ “strongly codified gender ideology”[34] that delegitimizes both violence against women and violence conducted by women and reflects a long-standing trend in jihadists’ and insurgents’ reluctance to target women.[35] Also remarkable is the fact that all female execution victims were either veiled, blurred, or not displayed at all in the visuals documenting the killings. This is consistent with previous findings on IS propaganda at large: According to Crone, “[i]t is an overarching characteristic of ISIS videos that they convey a masculine world from which women are by and large absent or at least blurred and veiled.”[36] In this context, it is important to keep in mind that the IS employs a distinct “pattern of disclosure and non-disclosure of executions”[37] that makes a generalization of targeting patterns observed in publicized executions problematic. While violence against women is largely absent in the IS’ officially distributed visuals, there are numerous reports on unpublicized atrocities perpetrated

by the group against women (including executions).[38] Sometimes, the lines blur between the group's hidden and visible victimization of females. For example, the IS has openly claimed and legitimized the captivity and enslavement of Yazidi women in textual publications (e.g., *Dabiq* magazine or other periodicals), yet has never shown any of these females in a visual. In other cases, unofficial videos featuring female captives were passed to negotiators or leaked to social media but were not publicly distributed by the IS.[39]

Of the seven executed females in the data set, four were French and three were Iraqi citizens (see Table S7). The four French victims were kidnapped together in Niger and killed by gunshots in two separate incidents (one summary execution, one single killing) that took place in 2020. Although termed "Crusaders", the women were not charged with a particular crime. The three Iraqi women were killed in their home country in three separate publicly administered stoning executions on charges of adultery. Two of the killings occurred in 2015 in the IS province of Nineveh, the third one took place in 2016 in the group's Kirkuk province. Remarkably, the executions of females were mainly documented in image format – only one incident was shown both on image and video (yet for only seconds without providing any close-up footage), which stands in strong contrast to the IS' preference to record hostage killings on video. Five of the victims received coverage in Western news media. As four of them were citizens from a Western nation, this is not surprising because foreigners tend to receive disproportionate media attention.

When analyzing the gender of the perpetrators, the absence of women becomes even more striking: Not a single executioner displayed in IS visuals was female. In one instance, it was stated that the executioner was the widow of a deceased IS fighter who was allowed to shoot to death a Syrian soldier in retaliation for her husband's killing; but no visual proof of her involvement was provided. However, the reluctance to show women as violent perpetrators must not distract from the fact that women "were very much a part of these crimes." [40]

Citizenship of Execution Victims

Between January 2015 and December 2020, citizens from 35 different states lost their lives in publicized IS executions (see Table S8). Over 95% of the victims were locals from conflict nations. More than three-fourths of the executed captives ($n = 1,891$, 78.33%) originated from the IS heartlands of Iraq and Syria, most of them were Iraqis ($n = 1,123$, 46.52%).[41] Five more nations – all having a significant IS presence – lost more than 50 citizens each (Egypt: $n = 142$, 5.88%; Afghanistan: $n = 84$, 3.48%; Libya: $n = 71$, 2.94%; Yemen: $n = 65$, 2.69%; Nigeria: $n = 56$, 2.32%). The disproportionate victimization of domestic citizens can most probably be attributed to a number of different factors: Locals constitute the main population group of countries with substantial IS activity and often lack adequate protection measures, which makes them easier targets than foreigners. Moreover, their frequent targeting reflects the IS' ruthless efforts to eliminate all 'near enemies' who endanger its state-building project through directly engaging the group militarily, collaborating with local or foreign opponents, or politically or ideologically opposing the organization. Additionally, numerous locals became victims of the IS' self-styled Sharia courts which ordered draconian punishments for secular, religious, moral, or social 'crimes'.

Of the remaining 28 states in the data set, 27 had between one and 15 of their nationals victimized in IS executions (16 of these nations lost a single citizen). One state (Ethiopia) sustained 34 casualties (1.41%). However, this number did not result from a frequent targeting of Ethiopian citizens but from two related mass execution incidents.

Eighty-seven execution victims (3.60%) were foreigners coming from 20 different nations (see Tables S9–S10). Eighty-three foreign victims were males, four were females (all of them French nationals). Only ten abductees (0.41%) originated from Western states (France: 6, Sweden: 2,[42] Croatia: 1, Norway: 1). The low share of foreign victims was likely influenced by a growing unavailability of foreigners in areas with IS activity. According to Revkin, the terrorist group grew increasingly suspicious of media outlets, humanitarian organizations, and other entities with ties to foreign governments over concerns of espionage in the later years of its territorial phase. It expelled individuals and organizations and refused to issue so-called amān documents that purported to guarantee the safe passage to visitors seeking access to its controlled areas.[43] These measures likely

deterred foreigners from entering the group's territories. Loertscher and Milton attribute the low number of foreigner kidnappings to

“the large amount of publicity given to very gruesome beheadings in recent years. Such publicity may have impacted the number of individuals traveling to high-risk areas, or, at the very least, increased their awareness of the threat and the importance of taking extra precautions.”[44]

Winter points to a deliberate media-strategic shift by the IS from Western- to local targets, concluding that

“since April 2015, Islamic State's propagandists have been decidedly more inward-looking, ... focusing on intimidating and provoking those forces militarily engaging the group on the ground.”[45]

Between 2004 and 2008, a similar shift from the ‘far enemy’ to the ‘near enemy’ could be observed in the media-strategic behavior of the IS predecessor organizations and other insurgent groups in Iraq and the Afghanistan / Pakistan region.[46]

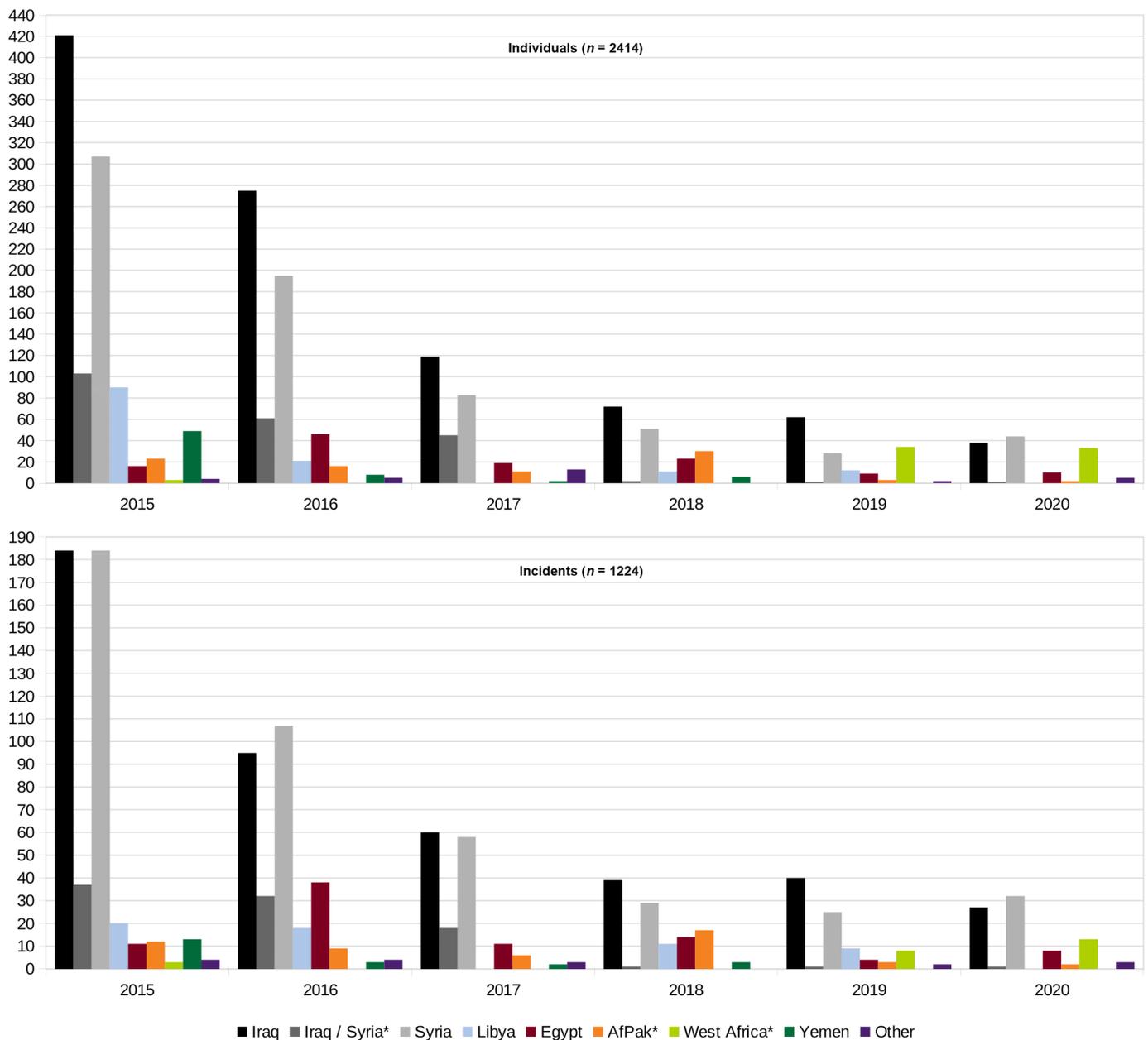
Table S11 shows that the majority of foreigners ($n = 74$, 85.06%) were executed in 2015. Libya was the main site for foreigner killings ($n = 63$, 72.41%) (see Table S12). However, when interpreting these numbers, it is important to consider that they were influenced by outliers as 58 of the foreign abductees were victimized in three mass execution incidents that took place in February and April 2015 in Libya.

Geographical Location of Executions

The main theater for publicized IS executions between January 2015 and December 2020 were the group's heartlands of Iraq and Syria (see Figures 2, S3, and Tables S13–S14). More than three-fourths of the execution victims ($n = 1,908$, 79.04%) lost their lives in these two states, most of them in Iraq ($n = 987$, 40.89%; vs Syria: $n = 708$, 29.33%; Iraqi-Syrian pan-border region[47]: $n = 213$, 8.82%). However, the difference in percentage share for both nations nearly dissolves, if one examines the data on incident level: while Iraq sustained more casualties, the number of execution incidents were almost identical in both countries (Iraq: $n = 445$, 36.36%; Syria: $n = 435$, 35.54%; Iraqi-Syrian pan-border provinces: $n = 90$, 7.35%), which implies that the level of IS execution activity in the two states was roughly comparable. Iraqi militants were more prone to mass killings, accounting for the higher body count (see Table S15): Forty of the 92 mass executions in the data set occurred in Iraq, almost twice as many as in Syria ($n = 21$).

A temporal breakdown of the geographical data by year reveals that the volume of execution incidents in Iraq and Syria continuously exceeded other nations throughout the whole monitoring period. Over 60% of the incidents ($n = 775$, 63.32%) and casualties ($n = 1,609$, 66.65%) occurred in the Iraqi-Syrian region during the territorial phase of the so-called caliphate, which ended in December 2017. Figure 2 shows that the decrease of execution activities in Iraq and Syria that coincided with the territorial breakdown of the ‘caliphate’ was the decisive factor for the sharp general decline in executions over time. Although it is empirically not possible to draw a causal relationship between the territorial losses of the terrorist organization and its publicized execution activities,[48] the observed pattern suggests that the territorial breakdown did have an impact.

Figure 2. Individuals Executed and Execution Incidents by State / Region: Development Over Time



Note. Asterisks mark IS territories stretching over parts of more than one state due to the group’s abolishment of borders. The decline of incidents in the Iraqi-Syrian pan-border region was influenced by the formal restructuring of the IS provincial system in 2018. After the reorganization, the IS usually attributed activities to either its Iraqi or Syrian provinces, while references to the former pan-border provinces of Al-Furat and Al-Jazirah fell largely out of use.

An examination of the IS’ execution activities in states beyond the group’s Iraqi-Syrian core area reveals several discernible patterns. To begin with, the data shows that all states or regions with significant execution activity (henceforth defined as more than 50 casualties, or 20 execution incidents, respectively) were conflict nations / regions (as were Iraq and Syria) with a substantial IS presence: Libya (individuals: $n = 134$, 5.55%; incidents: $n = 58$, 4.74%), Egypt (individuals: $n = 123$, 5.10%; incidents: $n = 86$, 7.03%), the Afghanistan-Pakistan region (individuals: $n = 85$, 3.52%; incidents: $n = 49$, 4.00%), the West African region (individuals: $n = 70$, 2.90%; incidents: $n = 24$, 1.96%), and Yemen (individuals: $n = 65$, 2.69%, incidents: $n = 21$, 1.72%). This finding parallels previous research on Jihadist kidnappings[49] and is not surprising as, according to Schmid,

“[c]ivil war, foreign intervention, absence of good governance, widespread corruption, economic misery, huge black markets, unpunished crime and lack of rule of law and human rights are some of the up- and mid-stream factors that are likely to contribute to down-stream kidnappings and acts of hostage taking.”[50]

The execution activities in Libya, Egypt, Yemen, the Afghanistan-Pakistan-, and the West African region varied with regard to incident regularity and casualty numbers. Execution activities in Libya – where the IS controlled larger parts of territory and maintained governance structures in 2015 and 2016 – appear to be declining after territorial losses. Activities flared up for short time intervals in the years of 2018 and 2019, between years of complete inactivity (2017, 2020), yet were not enduring. The bulk of execution activities in Yemen occurred in 2015, decreased afterwards, and eventually came to a halt in 2018.[51] By contrast, executions in Egypt and the Afghanistan-Pakistan region – while fluctuating in frequency – occurred at a regular pace throughout the whole monitoring period and appear to remain persistent.[52] Both areas had strikingly low numbers of mass executions (Egypt: $n = 3$; Afghanistan-Pakistan region: $n = 2$; see Table S15). In the West-African region, patterns of hostage killings show a marked upward trend since 2019. Starting its execution activities in 2015 with sporadic engagement (three incidents), followed by a long span of complete inactivity between 2016 and 2018, the West African IS branch not only significantly increased the pace of its executions (to eight incidents in 2019 and 13 in 2020) but was also responsible for the highest per-location share of mass executions in the data set (29.17%; $n = 7$).[53]

The six remaining states with execution activities (i.e., Philippines, Somalia, Tunisia, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Bangladesh) had only a marginal share in the overall events (combined: incidents: $n = 16$, 1.31%; individuals: $n = 29$, 1.20%). In sum, the seven geographical areas of Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Afghanistan / Pakistan, and West Africa accounted for nearly 99% of all execution incidents and casualties – indicating that publicized IS executions are mainly a region-bound, rather than widespread international phenomenon and appear to be tied to a significant physical IS presence in a conflict zone.

A breakdown of the data to the provincial level provides further insights. In most of its operational areas, the IS has established administrative divisions (so-called Wilayat) that are analogous to provinces.[54] At the peak of the group's territorial expansion, the majority of these were located in its heartlands in Iraq and Syria.[55] Over the course of the monitoring period, the IS publicized hostage killings in 36 individual provinces – in addition to a few other areas – where either no officially declared provinces existed or where the group did not provide any provincial information. The most active provinces on incident level were Nineveh ($n = 105$), Al-Khair ($n = 91$), and Raqqah ($n = 87$).

Table S16 and Figure S6 illustrate several interesting trends: Wilayat in the IS' core territories that harbored densely populated urban strongholds of high symbolic value during the heydays of the 'caliphate' (such as Nineveh, Raqqah, and Halab [Aleppo]) and used to be some of the most active provinces – not only for executions but for IS activity in general[56] – significantly lost relevance during the territorial breakdown phase and turned to low-level activity after 2017. Other Wilayat in Iraq and Syria were engaging in execution activities in a more consistent manner throughout the monitoring period, albeit sometimes showing patterns of peaks and troughs. These included provinces where the IS has long-standing historical roots (such as Kirkuk, Diyala, Al-Anbar, Dijla, and Shamal Baghdad)[57] and / or provinces with large ungoverned rural and desert areas (such as Al-Khair and Homs) where militants were able to shift their activities from urban centers to sparsely populated, hardly accessible regions, that offered safe havens and allowed them to blend into civilian communities.[58]

Beyond the IS' core operational realm of Iraq and Syria, a number of provinces showed patterns of regular activity as well. Remarkably, Sinai Wilayat (Egypt) turned out to be the fourth most active province on an incident level ($n = 85$). Wilayat Khorasan (Afghanistan-Pakistan region) ranked tenth ($n = 49$). Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiyya (West African region) ranked comparatively low on aggregate level (rank: 20, $n = 24$), yet has shown a clear pattern of emergent activity since 2019. In 2020, it turned into the most active province (alongside Homs).

As already observed on the macro level with states / regions, the incident and fatalities rate varied for different provinces. Some of these variations were triggered by mass execution incidents. The largest of these summary killings (60 victims) occurred in Wilayat Shamal Baghdad, which ranked second on casualty level, yet only 14th on an incident level. These metrics indicate that high casualty numbers are not necessarily a strong indicator for a high regular IS activity in a province.

Finally, while beyond the scope of this Research Note, there is a factor worth mentioning which should be taken into account when assessing variations tied to geographical attributes: several IS affiliate groups originated as independent terrorist organizations (or franchises of established groups) with a longer history before joining the IS. Some of the variations reported in this and the next sections might therefore be rooted in the fact that these pre-existing organizations followed their local organizational cultures, norms, and behaviors which were not always in line with the core groups' policies.[59]

Arguments Stated by IS to Justify Execution Victims' Killings

The long-term data collected for the CLL project make clear that the IS invests significant effort for its justification[60] of camera-recorded extrajudicial executions. The terrorist organization tries to portray itself as a rationally acting force that does not engage in arbitrary violence. According to the group, 1,979 (81.98%) of the 2,414 execution victims in the data set were involved in adversarial behavior against it – either by warfare, enemy collaboration, or political / ideological opposition – and were therefore treated as conflict participants who constituted a threat to its state project and to Islam in general (see Table S17). Usually, the IS tries to legitimize hostage killings by referring to purported 'charges' of the victims (or the collective they symbolically represent). Over the course of the monitoring period, the charges variable was registered 4,263 times.[61] In 4,042 of these times (94.82%), the terrorist organization brought forward specific accusations against its victims; in additional 160 times (3.75%), the killed captives – though not specifically charged – were described as enemy fighters (such as soldiers or militia members), implying their conflict involvement. In only 61 times (1.43%), no justifying arguments were given at all.

Throughout the monitoring period, the IS specified a total of 34 distinct charges. It is important to point out that these charges were raised in terrorist propaganda and could often not be verified independently.[62] Table S18 provides a detailed breakdown of the specified charges which offers a number of interesting insights. First of all, the majority of victims killed in publicized IS executions were Muslims. This key finding is implied by the fact that 1,506 captives (62.39%) were charged with apostasy. This charge was the most often used justification in the data set, making up more than one third (35.33%) of the total volume of accusations. While this result might not be intuitive, it is consistent with earlier studies on Jihadist violence.[63] Notably, except for a few singular cases, the IS did not declare fellow Muslims to be apostates because they had deliberately abandoned Islam by converting to another religion or becoming atheists. Instead, following its extreme, self-styled form of Sunni Islam, the terrorist group excommunicated the victims (takfir) due to purportedly sinful acts or beliefs that 'nullified' their religious affiliation (such as working for or collaborating with hostile governments) and made them eligible for capital punishment.

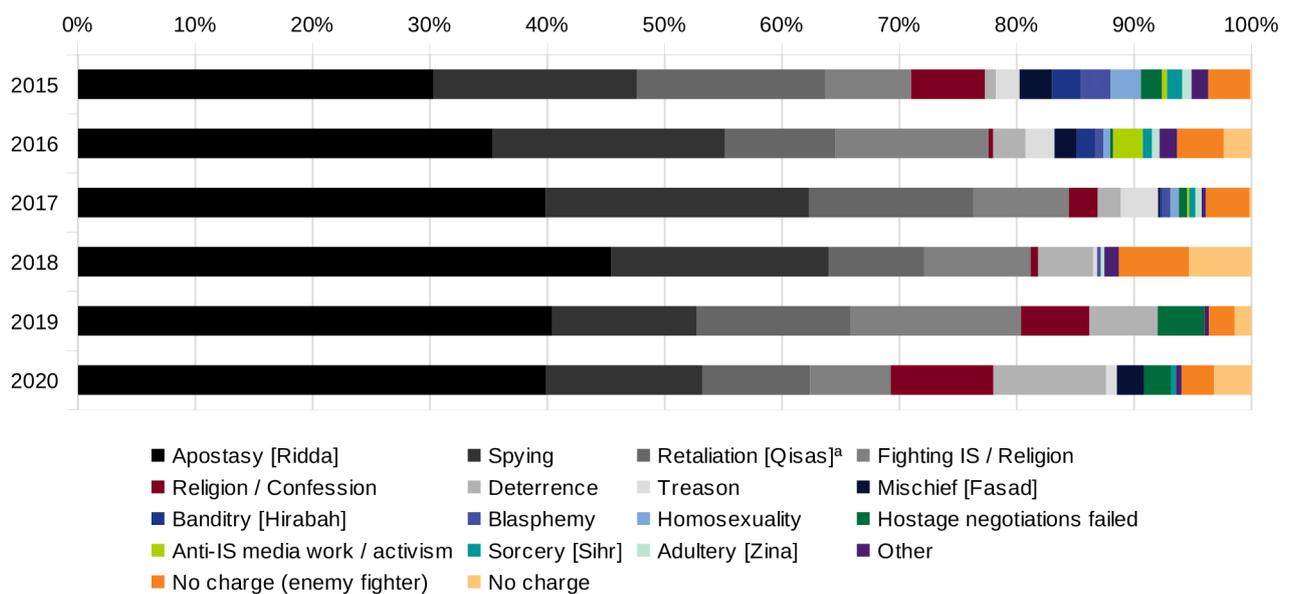
The majority of specific charges was related to the conflict between the IS and its numerous enemies. Combined, the charges of apostasy, spying, retaliation, fighting IS (or its self-styled form of Islam), deterrence, treason, and anti-IS media work / activism made up 81.59% ($n = 3,478$) of the total sum of charges. Throughout the whole monitoring period, they constituted between 74% and 90% of the annual volume (see Figures 3, S7, S9, and Tables S19–S20). In areas with significant execution activity, the predominance of conflict-related charges was particularly pronounced in Egypt, Yemen, and the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, where this accusation category occupied more than 90% of the respective per-location share.

The comparatively high percentage for the spying [64] charge (18.32%) – which was the second most often named charge in the data set ($n = 781$) – indicates that the terrorist group

“has a spy problem. [...] Though the executions are designed to terrify the local population, they also demonstrate that the group is shaken by that same population's ability to provide accurate intelligence to the various militaries targeting it.”[65]

Interestingly, the spying charge was never used in the West African region throughout the whole monitoring period.

Figure 3. Execution Victims’ ‘Charges’ (as Stated by IS to Justify Killings): Annual Percentage



Note. Total N charges = 4,263. In the figure, terms used by the IS’ illegitimate Sharia courts for Hudud or other Islamic punishments are added in brackets. It is worth recalling that the group derives these terms from traditional Islamic penal law yet uses its own interpretation of Sharia law when implementing ‘justice.’^a i.e., *lex talionis*; includes the crime of deliberate murder.

The charges of mischief, banditry, blasphemy, homosexuality, sorcery, and adultery – that usually related to civilian ‘offenses’ in the so-called caliphate – were featured far less often in IS execution visuals than conflict-related accusations. Combined, they made up 7.13% ($n = 304$) of the total volume of charges. Notably, they were largely confined temporarily to the first three years of the monitoring period (in sum: 97.37% of their use) and geographically to the states of Iraq, Syria, and – to a much lesser extent – Libya (in sum: 97.04% of their use), which strongly suggests that they were closely tied to the IS’ implementation of territorial governance and mostly fell out of use after the group lost control of its former territory.

During its territorial reign, the IS engaged in “applied theology”[66] striving to establish a “caliphate upon the prophetic methodology.”[67] One of the instruments to reach this goal was the introduction of a penal code that resembled traditional Sharia (Islamic law), yet actually was a “very own, rigorous, interpretation [...] indicat[ing] that ISIS never felt obliged to comply with the legal framework set out by Qur’an and Ahadith.”[68] The penal code served several strategic purposes at once – such as building a new, divinely-sanctioned order (and deterring transgressions against it), providing security and stability, “purif[y]ng space, society and the Muslim community,”[69] and delivering ideological legitimacy before its constituency and rivals. The implementation of the code resulted in numerous executions of locals for secular, religious, moral, or social ‘crimes’. Many of these punishments were meted out publicly in front of large civilian crowds (including children). When losing command of its territory and re-transforming from a pseudo-state with an administrative structure to a clandestine organization that relies on terrorist- and insurgent tactics, the IS’ strategic imperatives appear to have shifted accordingly, rendering governance-related charges less important. Moreover, the loss of territory mostly deprived the group of the safe havens required to implement punishments before a physical audience.

Interestingly, the IS openly claimed to execute captives due to their religious or confessional affiliation. 158 individuals were killed for this charge, making it the fifth most common accusation in the data set (3.71% of the total volume of charges). For 80 victims it was even the only cited justification. While these numbers were inflated by several mass execution incidents, they are nevertheless remarkable because they document a communicative behavior which used to be untypical for jihadist organizations before, even for the IS’ predecessor groups,[70] which – though systematically engaging in religious or sectarian violence – refrained from overtly claiming it (either by issuing no claims at all, or by offering justifications unrelated to faith, such as purported

personal ‘crimes’ of the victims, e. g., working for hostile security forces). In contrast, the IS openly propagates religious and sectarian cleansing – including civilian victimization. Libya, the IS’ core area of Iraq and Syria, the West African region, and the Philippines were most affected by the group’s demonstrative faith-based violence against captives. In Yemen and the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, the charge was never used, while in Egypt it was named only once. Notably, the large-scale sexual violence against women of the Yazidi religious minority in Iraq and Syria was openly claimed and legitimized by the IS in textual publications, yet none of the female hostages has been ever shown in propaganda visuals – most likely due to the group’s gender ideology.

Although all individuals in the data set were captives, failed hostage negotiations were named strikingly rarely as a killing reason – this justifying argument constituted only 1.22% ($n = 52$) of the total volume of charges. While there were several high-profile cases in the past where the IS publicly engaged in negotiations with different foreign governments, it is also known that the group conducted behind-the-scenes negotiations[71] – something that might possibly explain why it was comparatively reluctant to refer to negotiation activities in public statements. Notably, the West African region had the highest per-location share for this charge (13.01%).

Execution Methods

While the IS is often associated with particularly cruel and spectacular killing methods, the majority of victims in the CLL data set ($n = 1,454$, 60.23%) were killed by shooting (see Table S21 and Figure S10). Yet the high number of beheadings ($n = 694$, 28.75%), stands out, as it is unprecedented – even for jihadist organizations – and turns the strategic guiding principles voiced by Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2005 upside down.[72] While the then-Al-Qaeda deputy – in an explicit referral to publicized decapitations – instructed the IS predecessor organization to avoid excessive violence that the Muslim masses do not understand or approve for the reason of not losing their support, the IS made beheadings a central element of their violent brand. Beheading executions became emblematic for the group and inspired other extremist and criminal actors around the world to copycat this technique.[73]

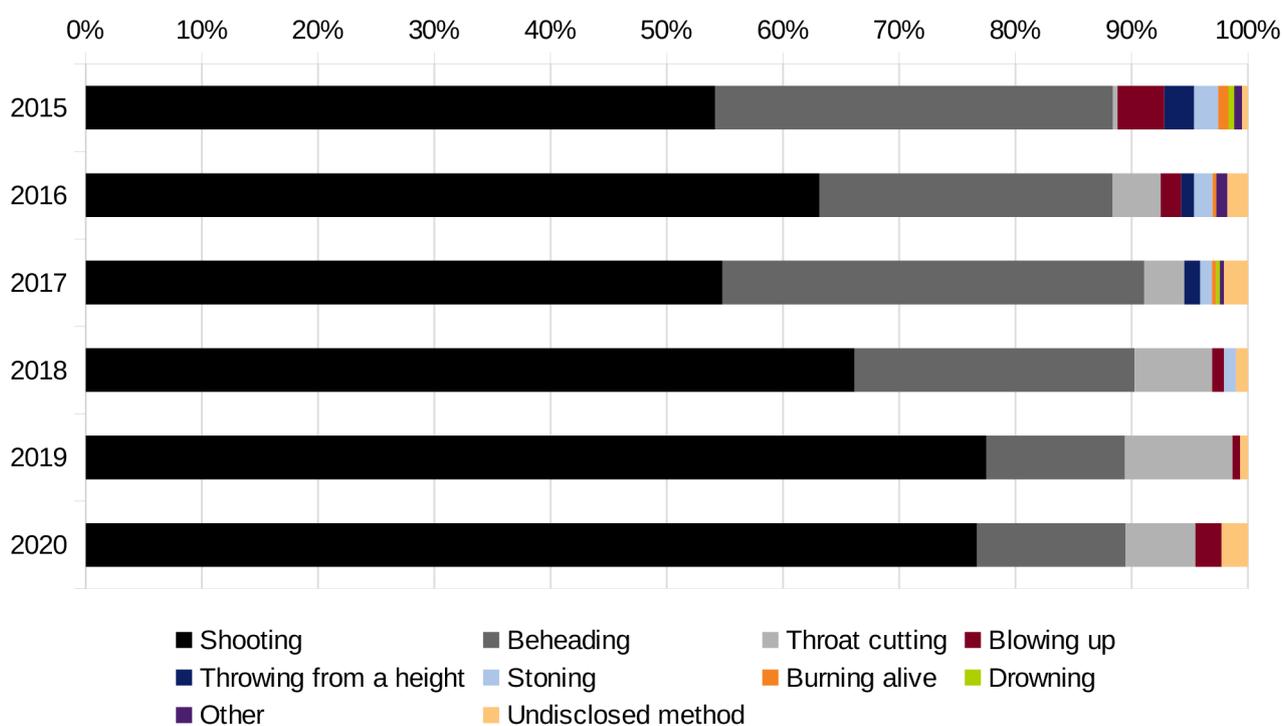
That IS militants still preferred gunshot executions over decapitations is likely owed to pragmatic considerations: Shooting is quicker and easier to implement and “facilitates psychological and emotional detachment,”[74] while beheading requires strength, know-how, and physical proximity to the victim. “In this respect, beheading as a terrorist strategy is effective only in terms of theatricality, rather than an effective way of killing the enemy.”[75] Notably, most decapitation victims in the data set were killed by knife ($n = 503$, 20.84%) – a pejorative allusion to the halal slaughter of animals aimed at dehumanizing the victim – while the quicker and less painful technique of beheading by sword that has traditionally been used in Islamic punishment (in Saudi Arabia until today), was implemented to a much lesser extent ($n = 164$, 6.79%). Throat cutting, a method very similar to beheading in implementation and symbolism,[76] was the third most often used execution style ($n = 75$, 3.11%). In sum, 2,223 individuals (92.09%), were killed by either shooting, beheading, or throat cutting. Compared to that, other execution techniques constituted a marginal share ($n = 163$, 6.75%). For 28 victims (1.16%), the killing method could not be determined.

If one breaks down the use of execution techniques to foreign and local victims (see Table S22), the order of the two most common killing methods reverses: Beheading becomes the prevalent execution style, making up more than half of all foreigner killings ($n = 44$, 50.57%), and shooting ranks second ($n = 39$, 44.83%). However, when interpreting these numbers, it should be considered that they were to some extent influenced by mass executions. As foreign captives tend to receive a much greater amount of media attention, the higher share of decapitations for this victim group has likely strengthened the role of beheading as a signature element of the IS brand. Combined, beheading, shooting, and throat cutting made up 96.55% ($n = 84$) of all foreigner killings. The only other method used to execute foreigners was immolation ($n = 3$, 3.45%).

The spectrum of the applied execution techniques was broadest during the first three years of the monitoring period and most predominant in Iraq and Syria (where militants used more than ten different killing styles), indicating that the variance was to some degree tied to the territorial phase of the ‘caliphate’ (see Figures 4, S12, Tables S23–S24). The annual percentage for execution methods other than beheading, shooting, and throat

cutting dropped from 10.73% in 2015 to 3.42% in 2017. From 2018 onward, it constituted less than 2.50%. Since 2019, the killing of captives by explosives has been the only execution method used beyond the three most common techniques. It is likely, that the less common killing styles tended to require a territorial safe haven for their implementation – either due to their complexity and time-consuming preparation and employment (including their visual documentation) or because they were connected to public punishments which necessitated the presence (and sometimes even the involvement) of a physical audience.

Figure 4. Execution Method: Annual Percentage



Note. Total N individuals = 2,414. When several killing methods were employed to execute a victim, the primary method was counted.

The role of shooting as the prevalent execution method became even more pronounced during the last two years of the monitoring period when it increased to over three-fourths of the annual percentage. By contrast, the number of decapitations significantly decreased, dropping to roughly 12%. One of the reasons for these dynamics was the growing number of executions in the West African region, where IS militants had the highest preference for shooting and the lowest for beheading compared to other geographic regions with significant execution activity.

A breakdown of execution methods by the alleged charges the IS brought forward against its victims reveals an association between particular types of justifying arguments and execution techniques (see Table S25 and Figure S13). Predominantly conflict-related accusations (i.e., apostasy, spying, retaliation, fighting IS / religion, deterrence, and anti-IS media work / activism) were tied to a broader spectrum of execution methods (with the exception of treason) than charges that usually related to civilian ‘offenses’ in the so-called caliphate (i.e., mischief, banditry, blasphemy, homosexuality, sorcery, and adultery). In public discourse, the variance in applying punishments for conflict-related charges is often misinterpreted as mere arbitrariness or barbarism. However, this strips the phenomenon of its complexity and precludes a nuanced assessment. In the heydays of its ‘caliphate’, the IS followed a logic of climax and outbidding[77] in its execution visuals that aimed at deterring and humiliating its enemies in a rational-strategic “management of savagery”.[78] Moreover, many of the malevolent-‘innovative’ execution methods used to kill individuals (or the collective they belonged to) constituted not only psychological warfare but retaliatory acts that served “to show that the group is the defender of (Sunni) Muslims and punishes the crimes of its enemies against the Muslim community (umma) in

kind.”[79] The neglect of this retaliatory component leads to the messaging of IS execution visuals being either missed or misunderstood.[80]

Compared to other justifying arguments in the CLL data set, the charge of retaliation, or “qisas, a term in fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) for revenge/retaliation/retributive justice,”[81] was punished with the broadest spectrum of execution methods. This is unsurprising, as the concept of qisas represents an equal form of retaliation (analogous to the biblical ‘an eye for an eye’). Consequently, the nature of a particular penalty is connected to the nature of a particular crime, implicating an intrinsic variation on a case-by-case basis.[82] In this context, it is important to note that the IS often meted out qisas punishments in a manner that exceeded victims’ alleged crimes.[83] This excessive application of the qisas principle can be considered as a deliberate behavior, as it was openly propagated by the group. For example, the former IS-leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi stated in a speech published on July 1, 2014: “we will take revenge, and every amount of harm against the ummah will be responded to with multitudes more against the perpetrator.” Notably, the IS did not follow the qisas concept consistently but often used common execution methods to kill victims when avenging their alleged crimes. One of the reasons for this behavior might be found in pragmatic considerations: Standard execution styles were more efficient, not only in their preparation and application, but also because they did not require specific ideological justifications for unprecedented forms of violence to prevent unwanted criticism and backfire effects.

Compared to conflict-related charges, governance-linked accusations showed more homogeneous patterns: Some of them were strongly or even exclusively tied to particular killing styles or -sub-styles (e.g., of the 53 victims who were killed for homosexuality, 67.92% were executed by throwing them from a high place; 100% of the 25 captives charged with adultery were stoned to death; 91.43% of the 35 individuals executed for sorcery were decapitated by sword). The more consistent application of punishments in the context of governance indicates that the IS tried to communicate to the ‘citizens’ of its so-called caliphate that its penalties “are mandated by Shari’a law and are meted out not in an arbitrary fashion but as part of the group’s established system of Shari’a courts and judges.”[84]

In 106 of the publicized individual killings (4.39%), IS members desecrated the victims’ bodies after their executions (see Table S26). While this behavior was comparatively rare – or at least not shown – for visually documented executions, it was actually a widespread practice in territories under the IS’ control according to reports by human rights organizations based on accounts of locals.[85] The most often used practice of post-mortem desecration ($n = 73$, 68.87%) was crucifixion, whereby victims’ bodies were placed on public display on crosses or scaffolds in a crucifixion position for up to three days. Posthumous crucifixion, which is historically rooted in traditional Sharia law and is still in use in Saudi Arabia, not only serves as a deterrent but also intends to humiliate the victims and prevents their relatives from burying their loved ones on the day of death (as it would be required by Islamic tradition). Throughout the monitoring period, post-mortem desecration was geographically confined to states where the IS held significant territory (97.17% occurred in Iraq and Syria, 2.83% in Libya). Temporarily, it mainly coincided with the heydays of the ‘caliphate’: 2015–2016: 97.17%; 2017–2018: 2.83%; 2019–2020: 0.00%). The post-mortem desecration of 68 execution victims (64.15%) was tied to executions in front of a physical audience. Together, these findings suggest a strong association between post-mortem desecration and the IS’ territorial phase.

Public Nature of Executions

In places where it had access to governed territory or local safe havens, the IS meted out public punishments of opponents or civilians who transgressed against the group’s self-styled, rigorous form of Sharia law. From the organization’s perspective, public executions, which were often carried out at squares, roundabouts, or other central places, served to

“provide a sense of law and order. The punishments signal the end of arbitrariness, demonstrate the power of the authorities, and express the idea that law is being applied now—not mere law, but God’s law, rooted in scriptures and the practices of authoritative predecessors.”[86]

Of the 2,414 execution victims in the CLL data set, 650 (26.93%) were killed publicly in front of a civilian crowd witnessing the event. For 32 individuals (1.33%) it could not be determined whether their executions were administered before a physical audience or not. The vast majority of captives ($n = 1,732$, 71.75%) were executed with no spectators present at the execution site – except the executioners, other involved IS militants, and the camera crew documenting the killings (see Table S27). On an incident level, public executions made up roughly a third of the total share ($n = 392$; 32.03%; vs non-public: $n = 815$, 66.58%; public nature undisclosed: $n = 17$, 1.39%). These numbers illustrate that the IS had a preference for carrying out visually documented executions in private.

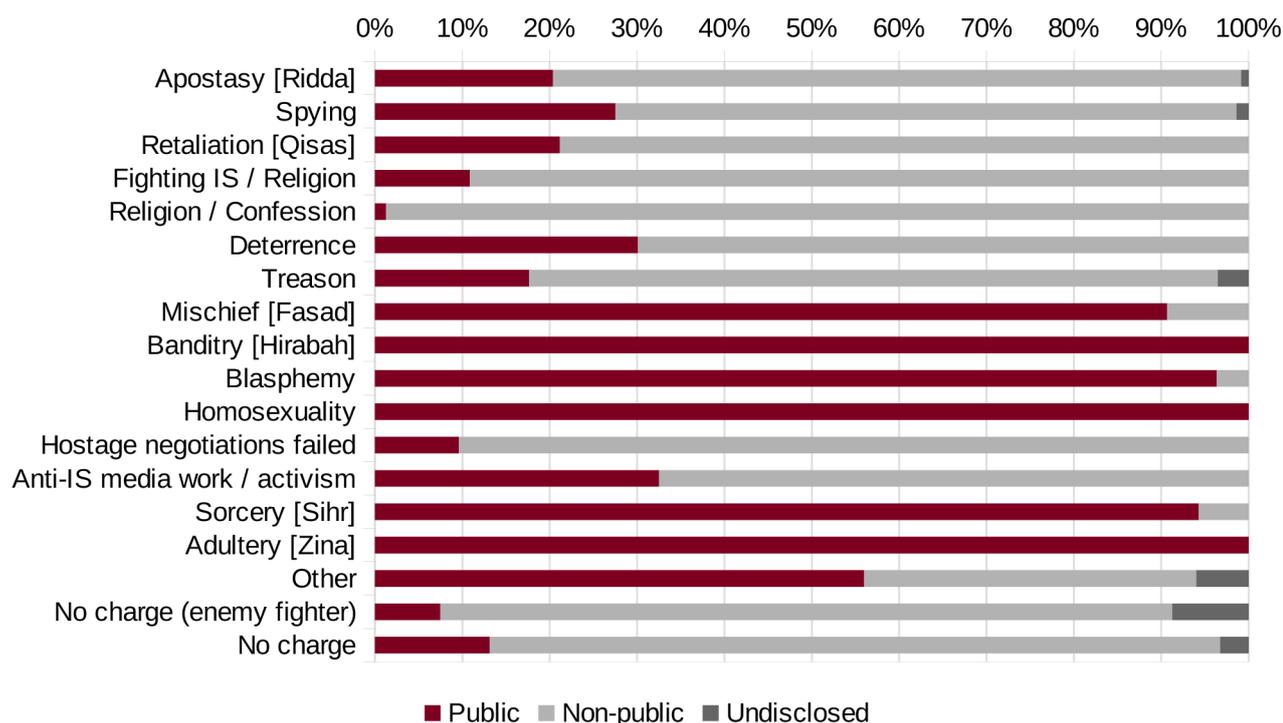
Most of the victims killed in front of spectators were locals, only three were foreigners.[87] The local victims encompassed three women. The audience of public executions often comprised children of all ages, usually boys.[88] Civilians were routinely urged by the IS to attend public executions whereby the group's pressure tactics included the use of force.[89] Moreover, the terrorist organization often involved civilians (including minors) directly in the implementation of executions (e.g., stonings), using its 'citizens' as tools to communicate its rules – as well as the costs of violating them.[90]

Over the course of the monitoring period, the number of public executions significantly decreased (see Table S27, Figures S14–S15), dropping from 248 incidents in 2015 (when the volume of public executions exceeded that of private executions) to zero in 2020. The vast majority ($n = 378$, 96.43%) of public executions occurred between 2015 and 2017. Geographically, public execution incidents were largely confined to Iraq, Syria, and, to a much lesser extent, Libya ($n = 379$, 96.68%; see Table S28, Figures S16–S17). 368 public executions (93.88%) were administered in these areas during the territorial phase of the so-called caliphate, indicating an association with the group's implementation of governance. Since public punishments were an essential method for the IS to realize its state-building project, they apparently lost significance when the organization was deprived of its territory and forced to resort to insurgent-level activity.

Interestingly, the public nature of individual killings strongly varied for different execution methods (see Table S29 and Figure S18). While some execution techniques were exclusively (e.g., killing by explosives, burning, drowning) or predominantly (e.g., throat cutting: 93.33%) employed in private killings, others were usually performed before – or even with the direct involvement – of an audience (e.g., throwing victims from a high place: 97.30%, stoning: 97.22%). There are most likely several different reasons for these variations – possible explanations could be, for example: a risk that spectators might get injured (killing by explosives), a time-consuming preparation, application, and documentation of killings that required a controlled environment without interference (all executions by burning and drowning were carefully choreographed and filmed with high-quality equipment), or the use of killing methods connected to governance-related punishments which necessitated a local audience to achieve the deserved effect (throwing victims from a high place, stoning).

A breakdown of the public nature of executions by the alleged charges the IS brought forward against its victims discloses that punishments for governance-linked accusations (i.e., mischief, banditry, blasphemy, homosexuality, sorcery, and adultery) were largely or even exclusively administered before a physical audience (percentages ranged from 91% to 100%) (see Figure 5 and Table S30). By contrast, executions for conflict-related charges (i.e., apostasy, spying, retaliation, fighting IS / religion, deterrence, treason, and anti-IS media work / activism) were mainly carried out in private (percentages ranged from 68% to 89%). Killings for failed hostage negotiations were predominantly implemented beyond public view as well (90%).

Figure 5. Public Nature of Execution Victims’ Killings: Percentages for Alleged Charges



Note. Total N charges = 4,263. Public = captive was executed publicly in front of an unarmed civilian crowd. Non-public = captive was executed with no spectators present at the execution site (except from camera crew / attending militants).

Interestingly, public executions of captives for their religious or confessional affiliation were strikingly rare. Only 1.27% of the killings connected to this charge (2 victims) were applied in front of spectators. As mentioned previously, jihadist organizations have traditionally been reluctant to openly claim the killing of individuals merely for their faith. While the IS shows a distinct communication behavior in this matter and does not shy away from using the controversial charge when executing captives at locations hidden from public view (as it did with 156 victims), it appears to be cautious to name it when administering the death penalty in front of a physical audience – maybe to preclude local unrest. It is highly likely that the IS was aware of the (non-)permissiveness of its local environment to its violent activities. That in turn could explain its inclination to execute individuals for particular charges (e.g., homosexuality) exclusively in front of civilian spectators. As the IS’ core region’s legal and religious climate is largely inhospitable towards the LGBT-community – whose members were persecuted well before the IS conquered its territory[91] – punishments for homosexuality have a high social acceptance in the local population. Therefore, the IS did not have to anticipate significant backfire effects when killing homosexuals in public.

Recording Site of Executions

The vast majority of captives killed in visually documented IS executions ($n = 2,286, 94.70%$)[92] were executed outside of buildings. Only 4.72% of the hostages ($n = 114$) were killed indoors. For 14 victims (0.58%), it could not be determined whether the execution site was located in- or outside (see Tables S31–S32). When performing outdoor executions, perpetrators can demonstrate that they are in full control of the geographic area and do not have to hide at a clandestine location. By contrast, indoor killings bear a lower risk for executioners to be detected by security forces. With that in mind, it is surprising to see that, with only one exception,[93] all victims executed within buildings were killed in Iraq and Syria where the IS held its core territory. Furthermore, 67 indoor executions (58.77%) occurred between 2015 and 2017 (most of them in 2016) when the group had not yet been expelled from its dominion. While the annual percentage for indoor executions constantly increased between 2015 and 2019 (from 1.18% to 19.21%), it dropped to 2.26% in 2020 (the second-lowest

share of the monitoring period).

Executions carried out at historical sites attracted a disproportionate amount of media coverage, yet made up only a marginal share ($n = 11$, 0.90%) of the total number of execution incidents in the CLL data set (see Table S33). The conquest of historical sites and their exploitation for publicized killings constitute an act of provocation towards the international community, connote a military triumph over important political and historical symbols, and contribute to the theatricalization of executions.[94] All 11 incidents occurred 2015 in Syria (seven in the IS Wilayah of Al-Khair, four in Homs). The affected historical sites in Homs were all located in Palmyra: the Roman Theater, the Arabic Citadel, the Great Colonnade, and the Old City. In Al-Khair, the sole location was the Citadel of al-Rahba (which is located in the outskirts of al-Mayadin). Notably, eight of the 11 incidents involved minors as executioners. Two of the 11 executions were performed in front of spectators. A total of 39 individuals (all of them male locals) were killed at historical sites, 25 of them in a public mass execution carried out by child executioners at the Roman Theater in Palmyra. 36 captives were killed by shooting, three by beheading.

Involvement of Minors in Execution Incidents

One of the most distressing aspects of IS executions is the instrumentalization of children and youths in publicized hostage killings. Turning minors (including pre-school age children) into executioners provokes global outrage as it transgressively breaches international norms regarding the protection of childhood. The IS terrorist organization demonstratively propagates its employment of children and youths in violent acts. From the group's perspective, the use of child recruits is justified as it is rooted in prophetic traditions. In its own words, the "lion cubs" are "a new generation waiting in the wings" that is being prepared by its fighters "to face the crusaders and their allies in defense of Islam and to raise high the word of Allah in every land" and that will "stain [its] bullets with the blood" of its enemies.[95] Because a "key aim of its education system is to incentivize and emotionally justify violence by children",[96] the IS mentally and physically desensitized its child recruits to extreme violence. In training camps, minors were indoctrinated to the group's radical ideology, made to watch execution videos on large screens, urged to attend public executions as witnesses, and had to practice executions with dolls before some of the boys were eventually tasked to carry out executions themselves in military drills, public punishments, or for propaganda purposes.[97] A number of children who were instrumentalized to commit hostage killings had been forcibly recruited from persecuted communities, such as the Yazidi minority.

Of the 1,224 camera-recorded execution incidents documented in the CLL data set, 52 (4.25%) involved minors[98] as executioners (see Table S34). Four of these incidents were mass executions. Ten killings by child executioners were carried out in public. In 18 additional cases (1.47%), minors were not instrumentalized as direct perpetrators of the killings but had to perform other tasks in the execution procedure (e.g., guarding the execution site, leading the victims to the execution spot, distributing knives to the perpetrators, or operating the media equipment for the visual documentation of the killings). In the remaining incidents – which constituted the vast majority ($n = 1,154$, 94.28%) – the executioners were either adults or were not displayed in the execution visuals. While any passive involvement of minors in executions (such as spectatorship) was not considered in the data collection, it is important to point out that children of all ages routinely witnessed public executions[99] in IS territories.

Although the IS instrumentalized very young children as executioners several times, none of the execution victims in the data set was a pre-pubescent child. However, a few victims (usually members of rival militant groups) were youths. As the IS does not hesitate to kill children in secrecy,[100] the group's restraint to victimize young kids in publicized executions is likely rooted in a media directive aimed at preventing counterproductive effects of its propaganda campaign.

The bulk of incidents with minor executioners ($n = 47$, 90.38%) took place between 2015 and 2017, when 12–19 cases occurred annually. Since 2018, the number has significantly decreased to 0–4 incidents per year (see Table S35).

Geographically, incidents with child executioners were confined to the IS' Iraqi-Syrian heartlands, concentrating in Syria, where 31 of the 52 incidents occurred (59.62%; vs. Iraqi-Syrian pan-border region: $n = 10$, 19.23%; Iraq: $n = 5$, 9.62%), and the regions of Afghanistan-Pakistan ($n = 5$, 9.62%) and West-Africa ($n = 1$, 1.92%) (see Table S36). Of the five incidents that took place during the last three years of the monitoring period, two occurred in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, and one in West Africa, indicating a geographical shift. Interestingly, in Libya, Yemen, and Egypt – all areas with significant IS presence, execution activities, and territorial safe havens – the terrorist organization did not employ any child executioners throughout the whole monitoring period. These geographical variations might be rooted in local organizational cultures and norms that resulted in differing behaviors. As mentioned previously, several IS Wilayat historically emerged as independent militant organizations before joining the IS and therefore brought in their own distinct policies.

A breakdown of the killing methods used by minor executioners reveals a preference for shooting: 32 of the 52 incidents (61.54%) involved this killing technique (see Table S37). Beheading was the second most common execution style ($n = 10$, 19.23%), followed by stoning ($n = 6$, 11.54%). In two additional incidents, the victims were first thrown from a high place by IS militants and then stoned to death by a civilian crowd which included children ($n = 2$, 3.85%). In one case (1.92%), an armed boy executioner forced a captive to jump from a high building and shot him while dying afterwards. The remaining incident involved a four-year-old child who was made to detonate a car bomb by remote control. Except for the decapitations (which were all conducted by knife), the applied execution methods did not require much physical strength, which might be one of the reasons why the IS employed them in incidents with minor recruits.

Use of Symbol-Colored Jumpsuits

In media reports and public discourse, symbol-colored prisoner clothing – particularly the orange jumpsuit – is commonly regarded as a key feature of IS execution visuals and is strongly associated with the group's violence against captives. The iconic status of jumpsuit imagery illustrates that the terrorist organization has been successful in drawing the public's attention to its purposefully directed symbolism. Doubtlessly, the IS regards the infamous symbolic feature as an important element of its hostage media campaign: The CLL data shows that a significant number of captives ($n = 990$, 41.01%) were forced to wear symbol-colored overalls before and / or during their killings, the majority of them ($n = 709$, 71.62%) had to don orange jumpsuits (see Tables S38–S39). Notably, the relative percentage for foreigners displayed in symbolic garments (82.76%, $n = 72$) was more than twice as high as for locals (39.45%, $n = 918$).

First introduced in May 2004 by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (the founder and leader of the IS' predecessor organization), the symbolic dress often conveys a retaliation narrative, alluding to the abuse of Muslim prisoners in Western or local detention centers such as Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, or Camp Bucca. As “a symbol and an icon of injustice”[101] it aims at justifying the IS' violence against hostages as a punishment in kind. At the same time, it signals a reversal of the political balance of power by turning the captured enemies into subjugated humiliated creatures without any rights[102] and emphasizes the IS' status as a sovereign 'state' whose security forces exercise power over life and death. The role of the symbol-colored garments in communicating the IS' statehood becomes evident from the fact that the colored overalls are also used in non-retaliatory, governance-related punishments. In a broader sense,

“[t]he jumpsuit's combined association with the West and its symbolic signification of guilt in ISIS areas serves as a reminder to all who see it of the low status of the jumpsuit's wearer, as well as a warning to those who would try to fight or challenge ISIS's authority or interpretation of Islam.”[103]

To date, the IS has not yet released an official explanation for its employment of particular color codes. While in some cases the symbolic meaning of a color is more or less obvious (e.g., orange as a reference to prisoner uniforms at the U.S. Guantanamo prison or yellow to prisoner garments in the Camp Bucca detention facility in Iraq), in others, the intention to use a color remains unclear.[104] Notably, in at least one incident, the IS altered the jumpsuit color with image editing software (see note in Table S38), indicating that colors, even if their meaning is not always intuitive and their use not always consistent, are likely not randomly chosen.

Over time, the use of the jumpsuit symbol significantly declined. The number of hostages forced to don symbol-colored garments dropped from 470 in 2015 to 19 in 2020. The mean annual percentage of captives displayed in symbolic clothing decreased from 46% in the first three years to 17% in the last three years of the monitoring period (see Table S40 and Figure S20).

Geographically, the symbolic dress code was most frequently used in the IS' Iraqi-Syrian heartlands, with a concentration in Iraq where it historically originated ($n = 347$, 35.05%; vs. Syria: $n = 253$, 25.56%; Iraqi-Syrian pan-border area: $n = 124$, 12.53%). The per-location percentage of areas with significant IS execution activity was highest for the Afghanistan-Pakistan region (67.06%), followed by Libya (66.42%), and the Iraqi-Syrian pan-border zone (58.22%) (see Table S41 and Figure S21). Interestingly, in Iraq – the state where symbolic clothing used to be most common – the employment of the dress code has stopped after autumn 2017. The reasons for this development are unclear, as are the reasons for the general decline in the use of the jumpsuit symbol.

Media Type Used for the Documentation of Executions

Although videos represent a minority of the IS' official media content,[105] the terrorist organization has a preference for visually documenting hostage killings on video. Generally, the group uses three different formats to visualize its activities: Videos, still-images, and a combination of both media types. Videos are highly influential (particularly when they involve Western victims or perpetrators) and have thus been the driving factor of the IS' branding efforts, yet can be considered the costliest release format for the group in terms of resource investment.[106] By contrast, still images can be produced more quickly and easily, yet are usually less prestigious and have smaller impact. The IS publishes images either as pictures which are embedded in social media postings or releases them as so-called photo reports, i.e., collections of related images on a particular event or topic that are usually arranged in a chronologically ordered series. Jihadist groups tend to propagate their activities through redundant cross-media publications, a practice that dates back to at least 2004,[107] so it is not surprising that the IS' propagandists have adopted this modus operandi and often visually communicate the same event in both still-image and video form.

Of the 2,414 individual killings in the CLL data set, the majority were exclusively documented on video ($n = 1,292$, 53.52%). Notably, the relative percentage for video-transmitted killings of foreigners was higher than for locals (85.06% vs 52.34%). Also, incidents involving minor executioners had a higher ratio of video documentation than those with adult or unseen perpetrators (69.23% vs 43.85%). The deaths of 703 execution victims (29.12%) were solely mediatized in the form of still images. The killings of the remaining 419 captives (17.36%) were publicized hybridly in both image and video format (see Tables S42–S44 and Figure S22). With very few exceptions, the propagandists hereby followed a standardized publication order, whereby image publications preceded video releases. The time lag between the different releases ranged from a few hours to 713 days ($M = 109$, $SD = 140$, $Mdn = 53$).

In the first three years of the monitoring period, videos represented the most common media type for the communication of hostage killings (mean annual percentage: 57%), followed by images and hybrid releases. In the years 2018 and 2019, this pattern temporally changed: In 2018, images became the predominant format, succeeded by videos (which dropped to a 32%-low), and hybrid releases; in 2019, the video share climbed back to the 50% mark, hybrid releases rose to the second rank, while images declined to the least common format. Interestingly, in 2020, the pattern returned to its initial structure from 2015–2017. These trends might reflect to some extent the IS' territorial losses and the re-adjustment of its media apparatus to the changed environmental circumstances.

Geographical shifts combined with regional specifics may have played into the temporal dynamics as well. Table S45 and Figure S23 show that the preference for particular media types varied for different geographical areas. In zones with significant execution activity, Yemen had the highest per-location share for video documentation[108] (90.77%), followed by Libya (73.88%), and the West African region (72.86%). The Afghanistan / Pakistan area accounted for the lowest video ratio (41.18%) and constituted the only region where images

were the most-preferred media type (45.88%). Execution activities in the region peaked in 2018 – a factor that contributed to the predominant role of image publications in that year. Similarly, the increase of execution activities in the West African region in 2019 / 2020 influenced the re-establishment of videos as the most common media type.

Analyzing the use of different media types by execution method (see Table S46 and Figure S24) reveals that spectacular, non-traditional execution styles tended to have disproportionately high ratios of video documentation (e.g., killing by explosives: 94.83%; burning: 100%; drowning: 100%), while more traditional killing techniques which were employed in governance-related Sharia punishments were predominantly mediatized in image form (throwing victims from a high place: 56.76%; stoning: 72.22%). Interestingly, shooting executions were more frequently video-transmitted than beheadings (54.95% vs 50.43%) – a finding that departs from earlier data on jihadist hostage media (which showed a reversed pattern[109]) and indicates that “beheadings have gone mainstream.”[110]

A breakdown of the specific media types by the alleged charges the IS brought forward against its victims brings to light that the group communicated killings for conflict-related accusations (i.e., apostasy, spying, retaliation, fighting IS / religion, deterrence, treason, and anti-IS media work / activism) visually in a different form than those for governance-linked charges (i.e., mischief, banditry, blasphemy, homosexuality, sorcery, and adultery): while the majority of killings in conflict-connected punishments were video-transmitted (the relative percentages ranged from 48% to 95%), executions for governance-based reasons were predominantly publicized via still images (range: 49%–91%) (see Table S47 and Figure S25). Public executions in front of local spectators were mainly image-transmitted as well (56.46% vs. non-public killings: 17.84%, see Table S48). These findings seem to indicate that the IS’ propagandists invested less effort in the mediatization of execution activities tied to local governance implementation within its state project. By contrast, executions resulting from failed hostage negotiations (which often had an international impact) were predominantly video-transmitted (80.77%). Interestingly, killings connected to the religious or confessional affiliation of the victims (that were rarely administered before a physical audience, as discussed previously) were largely mediatized through video footage (83.54%), suggesting that the IS – while apparently being reluctant to kill for this reason in front of its local ‘citizens’ – invested significant effort in the propagation of faith-based executions that were carried out without a local audience present.

Coverage of Execution Victims’ Killings in Western News Media

A few visually documented IS executions of Western hostages received tremendous attention by international mass media[111] and had significant political impact.[112] However, this should not belie the fact that the vast majority of camera-recorded hostage killings – though being similar in nature – were either underreported or even remained entirely beyond the scope of the news value system that determines coverage by the Western mainstream media. When collecting data for the CLL project, media coverage was indexed as a binary variable, which was tagged ‘yes’ if a Google News search for the queries ‘ISIS execution’ respectively ‘Daesh execution’ returned ≥ 50 news articles from different Western news outlets within the first 48 hours after the release of the visual that documented a captive’s killing, and ‘no’ if this criterion was not fulfilled. The results show that of the 2,414 victims in the data set, only 291 (12.05%) received this level of media coverage, while the remaining 2,123 captives (87.95%) were either underreported or entirely overlooked. The most significant factor for the (non-)reporting of individual killings was the victims’ foreigner status: Table S49 and Figure S26 reveal a striking bias between the levels of coverage for foreigners and locals, manifesting in patterns that are almost exactly reversed: While 79 (90.80%) of the 87 foreigners garnered coverage and only eight victims (9.20%) were underreported or ignored, only 212 (9.11%) of the 2,327 locals received coverage while all remaining captives ($n = 2,115$, 90.89%) were only marginally reported or overlooked. The observed bias is not only problematic in terms of ethical aspects – such as the valuing or “grievability”[113] of victims – but also because the extent to which an execution

“is made visible is profoundly implicated in shaping what meaning and significance will be ascribed

to the act, including what consequences the act will have for the victims and perpetrators. In short, visibility has political implications.[114]

The disproportionately heavy coverage of a small selective subset of publicized executions also obscures empirical patterns of victimization which are required to correctly understand the full scope of IS execution activities and to craft an adequate response to them (as mentioned before, the bulk of victims were not foreigners but citizens from non-Western conflict nations – many of them Muslims). Moreover, the ignorance regarding local victims plays into the hands of the perpetrators (who are aware of the bias[115]) because it perfectly fits into their ‘Western arrogance’ narrative. Interestingly, the IS seems to capitalize on the very same bias it is openly criticizing by appropriating it for its own purposes: In its *Dabiq* magazine,

“quite similar to Western media’s emphasis on the executions of foreigners, ISIS visually emphasizes the executions of foreign hostages, despite their relatively rare occurrence compared to executions of locals.”[116]

2015, the year when most victims of publicized IS executions received media coverage ($n = 207$, 71.13%), was also the year when the majority ($n = 74$) of the 87 foreigners in the data set were executed. While a fifth of the hostage killings in 2015 garnered coverage, the annual percentage share significantly dropped the year after. Since then, the mean per-year ratio for coverage has been 5% (with a 9% high in 2016 and a nadir of zero coverage in 2018) (see Table S50). The geographic area with the highest per-location share for media coverage (47.01%) was Libya, which is unsurprising as it was the state with most foreigner casualties ($n = 63$) – not a single victim who received coverage there was a local (see Table S51).

Although the data suggests that the foreigner status was the most significant factor for (non-)coverage in Western news media, it was not a stable predictor, implying that a number of other factors influenced the newsworthiness of hostage killings as well. One of these appeared to be the execution method, as several ultra-violent, non-traditional killing styles (executing by explosives, burning, drowning) had disproportionately high ratios for coverage (ranging from 41% to 92%; see Table S52), most likely due to their spectacular nature which particularly grabbed the attention of sensationalist news outlets, such as tabloids.

Failed hostage negotiations appeared to be a catalyst for media coverage as well. 65.38% of the individual killings for this reason received coverage, although only seven of the 52 victims were foreigners (see Table S53). In all of these cases, the hostage takings were already known to the media before the execution visuals were released and most incidents involved earlier proof-of-life images or videos of the captives. The open-ended life-and-death situations at the beginning of the reporting combined with the availability of pre-execution visuals might explain the greater newsworthiness of these cases. Compared to that, victims killed for their religious or confessional affiliation – the charge connected to most foreigner casualties (59 of 158 victims) – had a lower coverage ratio (54.43%), yet still the second highest in the data set. Killings of anti-IS media workers or activists accounted for the third largest coverage share (30.00%; only two of the 40 deceased were foreigners), most likely because members from this victim group operated own media outlets and maintained professional relationships with international news networks, which might explain why their deaths were comparatively often reported by the media community.

The instrumentalization of minors as executioners appeared to be another driver for newsworthiness (see Table S54). With 34.62%, the relative percentage for coverage of incidents involving child executioners was more than five times higher than the one for killings by adult or undisclosed perpetrators (6.07%). Also, video-transmitted executions received more media attention than killings that were visually communicated via still images (18.65% vs 3.98%); however, here it is important to take into account that most foreigner killings (74 of 87) were mediatized through video footage (see Table S55). Eventually, one factor that was not considered in the data set but is noteworthy and deserves examination in future research is the involvement of foreign executioners, as the reporting bias most likely not only applies to victims but to perpetrators as well.

Summary of Key Findings

This Research Note provided findings from a systematic monitoring effort of visually documented extrajudicial executions perpetrated by the so-called Islamic State terrorist group. Based on an extensive data set covering 2,414 individuals killed between January 2015 and December 2020 (1,224 incidents) – which was compiled for *Perspectives on Terrorism* in the monitoring project ‘Counting Lives Lost’ (CLL) – it presented results from long-term measures of roughly 20 incident- and victim level variables, including citizenship, gender, geographic location, execution method, and IS’ justifying arguments for the killings. Accompanied by a supplementary statistics file featuring tabular and graphical representations of the data and the full anonymized data set, it highlighted temporal trends, changing dynamics, and characteristic qualitative and quantitative patterns, providing unprecedented insights into the execution activities and victimization behavior of the terrorist organization. In contrast to other long-term studies of this kind, it included local victims and was not limited to a single geographical area.

The findings reveal a marked downward trend in incident and casualty numbers over time (particularly during the first three years of the monitoring period while approaching a plateau afterwards), yet also make clear that IS executions have not come to a halt but continue to remain a persistent phenomenon. Although it is empirically not possible to draw a causal relationship between the territorial losses of the terrorist organization and its publicized execution activities, many patterns observed in the data analysis suggest that the territorial breakdown did have an impact. Cross-tabulations between several variables in the data set revealed differing patterns for conflict-related hostage killings and governance-linked Sharia executions that served the group to implement its state-building project – the latter ones appear to have lost significance when the group re-transformed from a pseudo-state with an administrative structure to a clandestine organization that relies on terrorist- and insurgent tactics. While outside the scope of this Research Note, it is highly likely that several other factors beyond territorial realities (such as political events, geographic conditions, organizational cultures and norms, counter-terrorism measures, and even personal characteristics[117] of militants) influenced the observed trends, dynamics, and patterns as well.

Over 99% of the victims in the data set were males – the marginal share of women is in line with the group’s gender ideology that delegitimizes both violence against women and violence conducted by women. Small children were never displayed as being executed. Since the terrorist organization does not hesitate to kill children and women in secrecy, the group’s reluctance to victimize young kids and females in publicized executions can thus most likely be ascribed to a media directive aimed at preventing counterproductive effects of its propaganda campaign.

More than 95% of the victims were local citizens from conflict nations, most of them Iraqis and Syrians, while foreigners made up less than 4% of the total share; only few individuals originated from Western states. At least 62% of the victims were Muslims. The IS’ heartlands of Iraq and Syria constituted the main theater for publicized executions – 79% of the incidents and casualties in the data set occurred in this region, the volume continuously exceeded other nations. Over 60% of all recorded executions took place in the IS core area during the group’s territory-holding phase, which ended in December 2017. The decrease of execution activities in Iraq and Syria that coincided with the territorial breakdown of the ‘caliphate’ was the decisive factor for the sharp general decline in executions over time. The seven geographical areas of Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Afghanistan / Pakistan, and West Africa accounted for nearly 99% of all execution incidents and casualties – indicating that publicized IS executions are mainly a region-bound, rather than widespread international phenomenon and appear to be tied to a significant physical IS presence in a conflict zone. Over the course of the monitoring period, execution activities relocated on a micro-level from urban to more rural areas (especially within Syria and Iraq) and, on a macro-level, increasingly shifted to different regions (particularly West Africa).

The IS invested significant efforts in its justification of camera-recorded extrajudicial executions, naming alleged ‘charges’ of the captives (or the collective they symbolically represented) as the reason for its use of violence. Over 80% of the accusations against the victims were related to the conflict between the terrorist organization and its numerous enemies, whom it saw to be a threat to its state project and to Islam in general.

By contrast, charges that were closely tied to the IS' implementation of territorial governance made up less than 8% of the total share of accusations. Punishments for governance-linked charges were almost exclusively meted out in Iraq, Syria, and – to a much lesser extent – Libya, and declined sharply after the group's territorial breakdown. Interestingly, the IS openly claimed to kill captives for their religious or confessional affiliation which constitutes a break with the traditional media-strategic behavior of jihadists.

While the IS is often associated with particularly cruel and spectacular execution methods, the majority of victims (60%) were killed by shooting. However, the group accounted for a high number of beheadings (29%) – which is unprecedented, even for jihadist organizations, who usually shun to publicize excessive violence for reasons of not losing support and explains why decapitations became a signature element of the IS' brand. Throat cutting, a method very similar to beheading in implementation and symbolism, was the third most often used execution style (3%). Other execution techniques, although often receiving considerable media attention, had in sum only a marginal share (< 10%) and became even more insignificant in the last three years of the monitoring period. The number of beheadings dropped to roughly 12% in 2019 and 2020, while the prevalence of shootings increased (> 75%). Particular types of justifying arguments and execution techniques appeared to be associated with each other. Conflict-related accusations were tied to a broader spectrum of execution methods than governance-linked charges which showed more homogeneous patterns – some of them were strongly or even exclusively tied to particular killing styles or sub-styles (such as stoning for adultery, throwing individuals from a high place for homosexuality, or decapitation by sword for sorcery).

More than a quarter of the victims were executed publicly in front of a civilian crowd witnessing the event. The number of public executions significantly decreased over the course of the monitoring period, dropping from 248 incidents in 2015 (when the volume of public executions exceeded that of private executions) to zero in 2020. 94% of the incidents occurred during the territorial phase of the so-called caliphate in Iraq, Syria, and, to a much lesser extent, Libya. The public nature of individual killings strongly varied for different execution methods and alleged charges. Punishments for governance-linked accusations were mainly or even exclusively administered before a physical audience (sometimes even involving spectators in the killing), while the majority of executions for conflict-related reasons were carried out away from the public eye. Public executions of captives for their religious or confessional affiliation were strikingly rare (< 2%).

The vast majority of execution victims was killed outdoors, less than 5% were executed within buildings. Executions carried out at historical sites (such as the Roman Theater in Palmyra) attracted a disproportionate amount of media coverage, yet had only a marginal share (< 1%) in the total number of incidents.

In 52 execution incidents, the IS instrumentalized minors as executioners, 90% of these cases occurred between 2015 and 2017. In 18 additional incidents, minors were not involved as direct perpetrators of the killings but had to perform other tasks in the execution procedure (e.g., guarding the execution site or leading the victims to the execution spot). Almost 90% of the incidents with child executioners took place in the IS' Iraqi-Syrian heartlands, concentrating in Syria. Of the five incidents that occurred between 2018 and 2020, two happened in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region, and one in West Africa, indicating a geographical shift.

Over 40% of the captives were forced to wear symbol-colored overalls (most often orange jumpsuits) before and / or during their killings. The relative percentage for foreigners displayed in symbolic garments was more than twice as high as for locals. The use of the jumpsuit symbol significantly declined over the course of the monitoring period.

Although videos represent a minority of the IS' official media content, the terrorist organization has a preference for visually documenting hostage killings on video. The deaths of more than 70% of the victims were either solely communicated through video footage or transmitted via both still images and videos. The preference for particular media types varied for different geographical areas. Executions for conflict-related charges were predominantly video-transmitted while governance-linked Sharia killings were mainly publicized via still images. Executions of foreigners, incidents involving minor executioners, and killings by spectacular, non-traditional execution methods were particularly often recorded on video.

Only 12% of the hostages in the data set received coverage in Western news media, while the remaining captives were either underreported or entirely overlooked. A striking bias exists between the levels of coverage for foreigners and locals: While over 90% of the foreigners garnered coverage, less than 10% of the locals were reported. Although the foreigner status was the most significant driver for coverage, other factors influenced the newsworthiness of hostage killings as well. Especially, executions involving ultra-violent, non-traditional killing styles, failed hostage negotiations, and child executioners tended to attract above-average levels of media attention.

Limitations of the Data

While the data set on which this analysis is grounded is the result of a long-term systematic monitoring effort, it is not without limitations which need to be kept in mind before drawing any further inferences from it. The main restrictions are:

1. The CLL data collection is confined to executions perpetrated by the IS and therefore excluded similar atrocities committed by other terrorist organizations.
2. The data set is restricted to executions of captives. On-the-spot killings, such as battlefield killings, drive-by-shootings, or assassinations were not considered. Deceased individuals displayed in aftermath-only visuals (i.e., videos or pictures that exhibited captives' remains, but neither showed them alive nor their executions) were only included if it became clear from them that a person was killed in captivity[118] or if a sufficient amount of clarifying information on the related incident could be found in secondary sources.
3. The data set only includes publicized executions, i.e., killings that were visually communicated by the IS through videos or still images. Executions claimed in text- or audio-only statements without providing any visual proof of an incident were excluded. Country-based execution statistics released by human rights organizations, activists, researchers, and other sources provide casualty numbers much higher than those of the corresponding geographic subsets of the CLL data set, which means that the IS publicizes only a fraction of its extrajudicial executions.[119] Camera-recorded executions are part of a carefully designed propaganda strategy which is not necessarily meant to create an authentic representation of reality and might even include deliberate deception efforts by the group. Therefore, patterns derived from the data set cannot be generalized to the entirety of the IS' execution activities.
4. As the data collection was started in January 2015, the data set does not cover the IS' execution activities in the first year of the 'caliphate', which was declared on June 29, 2014, and therefore does not represent a full account of the IS' visually documented executions.

Despite these limitations, the data set provides unprecedented quantitative and qualitative insights into the IS' publicized execution activities and victimization behaviors. The author encourages everyone interested to use the data set (see Supplementary Materials) as an auxiliary instrument for their own research.

Supplementary Materials

The Supplementary Materials contain the following items (for access, see Index of Supplementary Materials below):

- The research data on which the study is based (including coding information);
- A statistics file featuring additional tabular and graphical representations of the data.

Index of Supplementary Materials

Tinnes, Judith (2022, February): *Counting Lives Lost – Statistics of Camera-Recorded Extrajudicial Executions by the “Islamic State” (January 1, 2015 – December 31, 2020)*. [Research data and codebook]. Archive.org. https://archive.org/download/ctlstatistics/CLL_Data_Set_2015-2020.zip

Tinnes, Judith (2022, February): *Counting Lives Lost – Statistics of Camera-Recorded Extrajudicial Executions by the “Islamic State” (January 1, 2015 – December 31, 2020)*. [Statistics file with tabular and graphical representations]. Archive.org. https://archive.org/download/cllstatistics/CLL_Statistics_2015-2020.pdf

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Notes

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- [26] Incidents from 2014 documented in previously unseen footage that was published only in 2015 or later were also included; however, one video displaying the large-scale massacre at the Camp Speicher military base in Iraq in June 2014 was excluded due to its outlier status. For a short description of the incident, see Table S56.
- [27] Last update: February 6, 2022.
- [28] A small number of unofficial releases (i.e., unbranded visuals published by non-official sources) were included in the data set as well, preconditioned that they had been distributed or re-posted by several pro-IS social media accounts, and that the displayed execution incidents could be verified by alternative sources.
- [29] Initially: Twitter (until the group's expulsion from there).
- [30] It is important to keep in mind that this was often not the date when the execution had been carried out. Due to the underre-

porting of local victims, the actual execution date could often not be determined; therefore, the release date of the visual was used to have a consistent reference date.

[31] Such as websites or social media accounts of news outlets, journalists, activists, think tanks, and researchers.

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[33] Summary executions of two or more persons at the same time and place were counted as single incidents.

[34] Pearson, Elizabeth (2018, May): Wilayat Shahidat: Boko Haram, the Islamic State, and the Question of the Female Suicide Bomber. In: Jacob Zenn (Ed.): *Boko Haram Beyond the Headlines: Analyses of Africa's Enduring Insurgency*. (Report). West Point: Combating Terrorism Center (CTC), p. 34. URL: <https://ctc.usma.edu/boko-haram-beyond-headlines-analyses-africas-enduring-insurgency>

[35] For statistics on the gender of abductees targeted in publicized hostage takings between 2004 and 2008, see Tinnes, Judith (2010, November): Counting Lives in a Theater of Terror – An Analysis of Media-Oriented Hostage Takings in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 4(5), p. 9. URL: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2010/issue-5/counting-lives-in-a-theater-of-terror---an-analysis-of-media-oriented-hostage-takings-in-iraq-afghanistan-pakistan-and-saudi-arabia-judith-tinnes.pdf>

[36] Crone, Manni (2020, May): It's a Man's World: Carnal Spectatorship and Dissonant Masculinities in Islamic State Videos. *International Affairs*, 96(3), pp. 573–591. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaaa047>, see also Salih, Mohammed A.; Kraidy, Marwan M. (2020): Islamic State and Women: A Biopolitical Analysis. *International Journal of Communication*, 14, p. 1937. URL: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/9866>

[37] Burke (2016, September), op. cit.

[38] See, for example, relevant publications by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). URL: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/PublicationsResources/Pages/Publications.aspx>, Burke (2016, September), op. cit., and Cetorelli et al. (2017, May), op. cit.

[39] See, for example, al-Lami, Mina (2018, October 24): Analysis: Has IS Changed its Strategy on Hostages After Territorial Losses? *BBC Monitoring*. URL: <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c200c8sh> and Pearson & Zenn (2021, February), op. cit., p. 16.

[40] Duffy, Liam (2021, March): *Western Foreign Fighters and the Yazidi Genocide*. (CEP Report), p. 3. URL: <https://www.counter-extremism.com/sites/default/files/Western%20Foreign%20Fighters%20and%20the%20Yazidi%20Genocide%20Report%2016%20March%202021.pdf>; see also Almohammad et al. (2017), op. cit. and Pearson (2018, May), op. cit.

[41] The number is most likely higher as 27 additional victims (1.12%), whose citizenship could not exactly be determined, were either Iraqi or Syrian citizens.

[42] Both victims had an Iraqi background.

[43] Cf. Revkin (2016, July), op. cit., pp. 22–23.

[44] Loertscher & Milton (2015, December), op. cit., p. 17.

[45] Winter, Charlie (2015, October): *Documenting the Virtual "Caliphate"*. (Report). London: Quilliam, p. 22.

[46] See Tinnes (2010, November), op. cit., pp. 9–10.

[47] The geographical information in the data set is based on the IS' self-styled provincial system. Due to the group's abolishment of internationally recognized borders, some of its provinces spanned over more than one state. For these territories, information is provided on regional- instead of state level.

[48] There is no general consensus in the research literature on whether there is a correlational relationship between the IS' territorial control and its propaganda production capacities – see, for example, Nanninga (2019a, April), op. cit., Frampton, Martyn; Fisher, Ali; Prucha, Nico (2017, September): *The New Netwar: Countering Extremism Online*. (Policy Exchange Report). URL: <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/the-new-netwar-countering-extremism-online>, and Kaczkowski, Wojciech et al. (2021, June): Intersections of the Real and the Virtual Caliphates: The Islamic State's Territory and Media Campaign. *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 6(2), Article ogaa020. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogaa020>

[49] See, for example, Loertscher & Milton (2015, December), op. cit., p. 32.

[50] Schmid (2020), op. cit., p. 746.

[51] The trend for Libya and Yemen continued in 2021, when IS militants in both countries did not account for any publicized execution incidents.

[52] The trend for Egypt and the Afghanistan-Pakistan area continued in 2021.

[53] The findings on the West African region, Egypt, and Libya mostly parallel general IS attack statistics in Africa in 2019 and 2020; see Rolbiecki, Tomasz; Van Ostaeyen, Pieter; Winter, Charlie (2020, August): The Islamic State's Strategic Trajectory in Africa: Key Takeaways from its Attack Claims. *CTC Sentinel*, 13(8), pp. 31–40. URL: <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/CTC-SENTINEL-082020.pdf>

[54] Cf. Revkin (2016, July), op. cit., p. 39.

[55] The geographical information in the data set is based on the IS' self-styled Wilayat system. It is important to note that in 2018, the group reorganized the structure of its administrative system – amongst other things, by condensing the Iraqi, Syrian, and Iraqi-Syrian pan border provinces into just two Wilayat (Iraq and Sham). However, as the IS continued to use the names of the former Wilayat in form of sub-regional information, the location of the execution incidents could still be mapped to the former Wilayat system. An exception were the pan-border provinces of Al-Furat and Al-Jazirah that largely fell out of use after the restructuring.

[56] See, for example, Frampton et al. (2017, September), op. cit., Milton (2016, October), op. cit., and Nanninga (2019a, April), op. cit.

[57] For an analysis of general attack metrics for Iraqi provinces see Knights, Michael; Almeida, Alex (2020, May): Remaining and Expanding: The Recovery of Islamic State Operations in Iraq in 2019–2020. *CTC Sentinel*, 13(5), pp. 12–27. URL: <https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CTC-SENTINEL-052020.pdf>

[58] For accounts on IS activities in the Syrian desert see Waters, Gregory; Winter, Charlie (2021, September): *Islamic State Under-Reporting in Central Syria: Misdirection, Misinformation, or Miscommunication?* (MEI Report). URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/islamic-state-under-reporting-central-syria-misdirection-misinformation-or> and Lister, Charles (2020, April): *The Growing Threat of ISIS in Syria's Badia*. (MEI Policy Analysis). URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/growing-threat-isis-syrias-badia>

[59] Cf. Revkin, Mara Redlich; Wood, Elisabeth Jean (2021, June): The Islamic State's Pattern of Sexual Violence: Ideology and Institutions, Policies and Practices. *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 6(2), Article ogaa038, p. 16. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogaa038>

[60] For nuanced background information on the IS' ideological justification and reasoning for its violence, see the following in-depths accounts: Prucha, Nico (2013): Kangaroo Trials: Justice in the Name of God. In: Rüdiger Lohlker (Ed.): *Jihadism: Online Discourses and Representations*. (Studying Jihadism, Vol. 2). Göttingen: V&R unipress, pp. 141–206. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14220/9783737000680.141>; Lohlker, Rüdiger (2016): *Theologie der Gewalt: Das Beispiel IS*. (Islamica, Vol. 4648). Wien: Facultas, and Van Ostaeyen, Pieter (2021, February 18): The Islamic State and the Application of Islamic Penal Law. *The ISIS Blog*. URL: <http://theisisreader.com/the-islamic-state-and-the-application-of-islamic-penal-law>

[61] The total number of charges ($N = 4,263$) is higher than the total number of victims ($N = 2,414$) as the IS often used several arguments for justifying the killing of a captive. Up to four major charges per individual killing were documented ($M = 1.77$, $SD = 0.92$, $Mdn = 2.00$). Therefore, percentages referring to execution victims in relation to charges do not add up to 100%.

[62] In several cases of violence against captives, the veracity of the IS' accusations has been credibly doubted. Furthermore, the implementation of the group's penalties has been described as subjective and unsystematic in nature. See, for example, the following studies (all based on accounts of locals): Al Aqeedi, Rasha (2016, February): *Hisba in Mosul: Systematic Oppression in the Name of Virtue*. (GW Program on Extremism Occasional Paper). URL: <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/downloads/Al%20Aqeedi.pdf>, Revkin (2016, July), op. cit., and Justice for Life Organization (JFL) (2018, June): *They Killed Them to Make Them an Example: ISIS Crimes Against the Villages of Al Shuaitat Tribe in Deir Ezzor*. (Report). URL: <https://jfl.ngo/they-killed-them-to-make-them-an-example>

[63] See, for example, Helfstein, Scott; Abdullah, Nassir; al-Obaidi, Muhammad (2009, December): *Deadly Vanguard: A Study of al-Qa'ida's Violence Against Muslims*. (CTC Occasional Paper Series). URL: <https://ctc.usma.edu/deadly-vanguards-a-study-of-al-qaidas-violence-against-muslims> and Reynié, Dominique (Ed.) (2021, September): *Islamist Terrorist Attacks in the World 1979–2021*. (New ed. – Data collected through 31 May 2021). (Research Report). Paris: Fondation pour l'innovation politique (Fondapol). URL: <https://www.fondapol.org/en/study/islamist-terrorist-attacks-in-the-world-1979-2021>

[64] For an in-depth account of the role of agent networks in counterterrorism and -insurgency (and deadly implications for them), see Stime, Britta (2017): Counterinsurgency Agent Networks and Noncombatant-Targeted Violence. *Intelligence and National Security*, 32(1), pp. 107–125. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2016.1210770>; see also Sherko, Pasar (2021, February 2): Islamic State Messaging on Counter-Espionage Operations. *Fikra Forum*. URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-state-messaging-counter-espionage-operations>

[65] Soufan Center, The (TSC) (2016, February): *The Islamic State's Spy Problem*. (TSG IntelBrief). URL: <https://thesoufancenter.org/tsg-intelbrief-the-islamic-states-spy-problem>, see also Milton (2016, October), op. cit., pp. 33–34 and Nanninga (2019a, April), op. cit., p. 17 who both contrasted the numbers of alleged enemy fighters and spies displayed in IS execution media, concluding that the proportion of spy executions was increasing over the course of their monitoring periods.

[66] Frampton et al. (2017, September), op. cit., p. 23.

[67] An IS key slogan; for a context analysis see: Prucha, Nico (2017, August 1): “Islamic State” Briefing: Part 2. “Upon the Prophetic Methodology” and the Media Universe. *Online Jihad: Monitoring Jihadist Online Communities*. URL: <https://onlinejihad.net/2017/08/01/part-2-upon-the-prophetic-methodology-and-the-media-universe>

[68] Van Ostaeyen (2021, February), op. cit.

[69] Nanninga, Pieter (2019b): “Cleansing the Earth of the Stench of Shirk”: The Islamic State’s Violence as Acts of Purification. *Journal of Religion and Violence*, 7(2), p. 130. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5840/jrv2019112266> URL: https://www.academia.edu/43939241/2019_Cleansing_the_Earth_of_the_Stench_of_Shirk_The_Islamic_State_s_Violence_as_Acts_of_Purification_Journal_of_Religion_and_Violence_7_2_p_128_157

[70] See, for example, Tinnes, Judith (2010, May): *Internetnutzung islamistischer Terror- und Insurgentengruppen unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von medialen Geiselnahmen im Irak, Afghanistan, Pakistan und Saudi-Arabien*. (Doctoral Thesis, Universität des Saarlandes, Saarbrücken, Germany), p. 635. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22028/D291-25626>

[71] See, for example, Loertscher, Cynthia (2019-): *Bringing Americans Home: A Nongovernmental Assessment of U.S. Hostage Policy and Family Engagement*. [Report series published by New America and the James W. Foley Legacy Foundation]. URLs: <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/bringing-americans-home>
<https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/bringing-americans-home-2020>
<https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/reports/bringing-americans-home-2021>

[72] Cf. Tinnes, Judith (2015, February): Although the (Dis-)Believers Dislike it: A Backgrounder on IS Hostage Videos – August - December 2014. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9(1), p. 85. URL: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/custom-sites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2015/volume-1/6-although-the-dis-believers-dislike-it.-a-backgrounder-on-is-hostage-videos-%E2%80%93-august---december-2014-by-judith-tinnes.pdf>

[73] See Koch, Ariel (2018, June): Jihadi Beheading Videos and their Non-Jihadi Echoes. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 12(3), pp. 24–34. URL: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2018/issue-3/02---jihadi-beheading-videos-and-their-non-jihadi-echoes-by-ariel-koch.pdf>

[74] Phillips, Everard M. (2015, May): How Do Kidnappers Kill Hostages? A Comparison of Terrorist and Criminal Groups. *Homicide Studies*, 19(2), p. 139. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088767914522466>

[75] Impara, Elisa (2018, June): A Social Semiotics Analysis of Islamic State’s Use of Beheadings: Images of Power, Masculinity, Spectacle and Propaganda. *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, 53, p. 34. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijl-cj.2018.02.002> URL: <https://eprints.kingston.ac.uk/40779/6/Impara-E-40779-AAM.pdf>

[76] Some of the throat cuttings in the data set might have actually been decapitations that were not displayed until their completion.

[77] Cf. Zywiets, Bernd (2018, April 20): Zur Ästhetisierung in und von IS-Video-Propaganda (I). *Online-Propagandaforschung*. URL: <https://www.online-propagandaforschung.de/index.php/texte/aesthetisierung-is-video-propaganda-i>

[78] Book by jihadist ideologue Abu Bakr Naji published in 2004 that serves as a strategic reference for IS.

[79] Nanninga (2019a, April), op. cit., p. 17.

[80] Cf. Van Ostaeyen, Pieter (2016, June 30): The Messaging and Concepts Behind Islamic State Execution Propaganda. *Jane’s Militant Propaganda Analysis*. Available from <https://www.ihs.com/products/janes-militant-propaganda-analysis.html>, see also Alex P. Schmid (2021): *Terrorism, Counter-Terrorism and Prevention*. Contribution for the Plenary Session “Academic Challenges in Researching Modern Terrorism”, 20th World Summit on Counter-Terrorism, Herzliya, Israel, 12 September 2021, who concludes that “[r]evenge is a greatly underestimated cause of acts of terrorism.”

[81] Van Ostaeyen (2016, June 30), op. cit.

[82] Some examples from the data set: A fighter pilot was burned alive in a cage before being buried under debris to imitate the impact of an airstrike, a tank driver was run over and crushed by a tank, a mine engineer was killed with the same type of mines he was planting to target IS fighters.

[83] E.g., a Mosul resident and anti-IS collaborator, who openly expressed support for the military intervention against the group and metaphorically advocated in a public radio show to use the antiseptic “Dettol [.] to clean up all the areas of lice [i.e., IS fighters]”, was waterboarded and drowned in a fish tank, in water mixed with Dettol.

[84] Paraszczuk, Joanna (2015, May 6): Heart of Darkness: The Core Beliefs Justifying IS Brutality. *RFE/RL*. URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-punishments-brutality/26998016.html>

[85] See, for example: United Nations Human Rights Council, Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian

Arab Republic (2014, November): *Rule of Terror: Living Under ISIS in Syria*. (Report A/HRC/27/CRP.3). URL: https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/HRC_CRP_ISIS_14Nov2014.doc and Tayler, Letta et al. (2016, May): “We Feel We Are Cursed”: *Life Under ISIS in Sirte, Libya*. (HRW Report). URL: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/05/18/we-feel-we-are-cursed/life-under-isis-sirte-libya>

[86] Nanninga (2019b), op. cit., p. 147.

[87] The men originated from Mauritania, Tunisia, and Palestine.

[88] See, for example, Kavanaugh, Shane Dixon; Weiss, Amit (2015, September 13): Caliphate Kids Are Growing Up Watching Public Executions. *Vocativ*. URL: <https://www.vocativ.com/229853/child-spectators-isis-executions>, who analyzed more than a thousand images of public punishments and executions carried out by IS militants.

[89] See, for example, United Nations Human Rights Council, Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (2014, November), op. cit., para. 34.

[90] Cf. Revkin (2016, July), op. cit., p. 26.

[91] Cf. Zelin, Aaron Y.; Olidort, Jacob (2016, June): *The Islamic State's Views on Homosexuality*. (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 2630). URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-states-views-homosexuality>

[92] These include all 650 execution victims who were killed in front of a physical audience.

[93] The victim was executed in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.

[94] Cf. Hoogkamer, Loes (2016, Spring): *Fatal Aesthetics: A Study on the Theatrical Representation of the Public Execution in the Islamic State's Palmyra Execution Video*. (Master's Thesis, Lund University, Lund, Sweden). URL: <http://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/record/8877346>, p. 36.

[95] Islamic State (2015, March): The Lions of Tomorrow. *Dabiq*, 8, pp. 20–21.

[96] Morris, James; Dunning, Tristan (2020): Rearing Cubs of the Caliphate: An Examination of Child Soldier Recruitment by Daesh. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 32(7), p. 1574. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1495628>

[97] See, for example: Morris & Dunning (2020), op. cit., Almohammad, Asaad (2018, February): *ISIS Child Soldiers in Syria: The Structural and Predatory Recruitment, Enlistment, Pre-Training Indoctrination, Training, and Deployment*. (ICCT Research Paper). URL: <https://icct.nl/publication/isis-child-soldiers-in-syria-the-structural-and-predatory-recruitment-enlistment-pre-training-indoctrination-training-and-deployment>, and Horgan, John G. et al. (2017): From Cubs to Lions: A Six Stage Model of Child Socialization into the Islamic State. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 40(7), pp. 645–664. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1221252>

[98] In line with international definitions of childhood, everyone under the age of 18 was considered a minor.

[99] See, for example, Kavanaugh & Weiss (2015, September 13), op. cit.

[100] See, for example, Burke (2016, September), op. cit., and Cetorelli, Valeria; Ashraph, Sareta (2019, June): *A Demographic Documentation of ISIS's Attack on the Yazidi Village of Kocho*. (LSE Middle East Centre Report). URL: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/101098>

[101] Prucha, Nico (2013), op. cit., p. 161.

[102] Cf. Ulrich, Anne (2017): “Hello, I’m John Cantlie”: Dschihadistische Propaganda und die gespenstische Medialität von Bedrohung. *Zeitschrift für Semiotik*, 39(3-4), p. 117.

[103] Richey, Patrick G.; Edwards, Michaela (2019): It’s More Than Orange: ISIS’s Appropriation of Orange Prison Jumpsuits as Rhetorical Resistance. In: Michael Krona; Rosemary Pennington (Eds.): *The Media World of ISIS*. (Indiana Series in Middle East Studies). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 174.

[104] See also Hegghammer, Thomas (2015, September 14): IS Jumpsuit Colour Codes. *The Bored Jihadi*. URL: <https://boredjihadi.net/2015/09/14/is-jumpsuit-colour-codes>

[105] Cf. Milton (2016, October), op. cit., p. 22.

[106] Cf. Nanninga (2019a, April), op. cit., p. 2.

[107] See, for example, Tinnes (2010, May), op. cit., pp. 731–732.

[108] For analytic ease, the hybrid category was excluded from this and subsequent comparisons.

[109] See Tinnes (2010, November), op. cit., p. 16.

[110] Koch (2018, June), op. cit., p. 24.

[111] See, for example, NBC News & The Wall Street Journal (2014, September), op. cit.

[112] See, for example, Friis (2015, July), op. cit., pp. 725–746.

[113] For the concept of grievability, see Butler, Judith (2016): *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Radical Thinkers). London: Verso. (Original work published 2009)

[114] Friis (2015, July), op. cit., p. 744.

[115] For example, an article in Issue 252 of the IS' Arabic weekly *An-Naba* (September 17, 2020) covering the group's killing of French aid workers in Niger, pointed out that the attack "caused a media uproar, given the nationality of the dead" (cf. p. 9).

[116] El Damanhoury, Kareem (2019): Picturing Statehood During ISIS's Caliphal Days. In: Michael Krona; Rosemary Pennington (Eds.): *The Media World of ISIS*. (Indiana Series in Middle East Studies). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 83.

[117] For an analysis on how leadership changes have affected the operational dynamics (including kidnapping activities) of the IS and its predecessor organizations, see Regens, James L.; Mould, Nick (2017): Continuity and Change in the Operational Dynamics of the Islamic State. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 10(1), pp. 53–80. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.10.1.1526>

[118] E.g., if a person was blindfolded or shackled.

[119] For example, Burke (2016, September 20, op. cit.) – who examined the pattern of disclosure and non-disclosure of IS executions between June 2014 and October 2015 in Iraq – found that people executed on social media made up only 29% of the 6,019 people executed by ISIL in his data set.