



Security Policy Working Paper, No. 21/2016

# Attack on the West

## What is the strategy of ISIL?

by *Ulf Brüggemann*

**A string of attacks that began in 2015 shows that ISIL has expanded its militant activities to also include Western targets. Why is the organisation doing this, given the crucial importance of the caliphate project, and what is its strategy in this regard? The answers to these questions make it clear that Europe and the United States must brace themselves for a terrorist campaign within Western countries that is likely to continue for years.**

The war of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) against Western countries apparently began last November, when 130 people were killed in the Paris attacks. Shortly afterwards, a married couple murdered 14 people in California. In January 2016, a suicide bomber killed 12 Germans in Istanbul. A few months later, attacks followed in Brussels (32 dead), Orlando (49 dead), Istanbul once more (44 dead), Dhaka (28 dead), Nice (84 dead), and then in Würzburg and Ansbach, where several people were left seriously injured in both cases. Moreover, there were reports of attacks that had been foiled, for instance in Antwerp, Kenya, Düsseldorf and – once again – in the greater Brussels area. According to the investigating authorities, all these attacks and planned attacks could be attributed to ISIL.

This list already allows several conclusions. First of all, ISIL is now conducting its campaign at the global level and is no longer limited to Iraq and Syria. Secondly, ISIL has decided to launch a campaign against the states of the Western world (for the sake of simplicity, this refers to the member states of NATO and the EU). Thirdly, after seemingly not being targeted by jihadists for years, Germany is now among the countries in the crosshairs of ISIL.

Before the attacks in Paris, and even those in Brussels, the prevailing opinion among security experts was that ISIL was not fighting against the West, but focusing on expanding and securing the caliphate that it had proclaimed in 2014. On account of the unique and revolutionary nature of the caliphate project, opening another front would be too risky or even counterproductive for ISIL, or so the thinking went, especially if it were to lead to a confrontation with the United States. After all, the overwhelming US military power had already brought its predecessor organisation in 2006 to 2011, the so-called Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), to the brink of extinction. This reasoning still seems solid today, especially in view of the heavy losses ISIL has suffered in Syria and Iraq in the past months. It is nevertheless clear that ISIL is indeed engaged in a fight against the West. Either the assumption that the caliphate was the main priority was incorrect and the objectives of ISIL were wrongly or incompletely assessed, or something changed that led ISIL to expand its list of targets to include the West. Irrespective of which explanation is correct, it is important to understand why Western countries have become a key target for ISIL. That is the only way to make any conclusive

statements about how ISIL may continue its campaign and which options Western countries have in their fight against ISIL.

### **Attack and Counter-Attack**

From the viewpoint of ISIL, the “crusaders” have always been among the enemies of true Islam and an obstruction to the implementation of a divine order on earth. Because the ideology of ISIL legitimises violence against infidels, taking action against the West has essentially never needed further justification. Even so, it appears that, prior the attacks in Paris, ISIL and its predecessor organisations – Al-Qaeda in Iraq and ISI – practically never<sup>1</sup> carried out attacks in the West. The underlying reason for the change of strategy were the developments of the summer of 2014. In June, ISIL had rapidly conquered large parts of western Iraq and proclaimed a caliphate. When ISIL advanced into Kurdish territory in the course of continued fighting and, accompanied by massacres and enslavement of the local population, forced hundreds of thousands of Christians and Yazidis to flee, the United States intervened and started bombing ISIL positions on 8 August 2014. With support from several other countries, these attacks were also extended to Syria in September. Since then, an international military coalition led by the United States has played a key role in supporting regional forces in the fight against ISIL.

ISIL wasted no time in responding. Beginning on 12 August 2014, Western hostages that had been held by ISIL for some time were beheaded on camera to achieve maximum media attention. In September 2014, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the militant group’s spokesman, demanded that crusaders be killed wherever they are encountered, if necessary by running them over with a car or smashing their head with a rock. In January 2015 – ten months before the Paris attacks – an ISIL cell apparently on the verge of committing a terrorist attack was raided in the Belgian town of Verviers. This was followed by attacks against Western tourists in Tunisia in March and June of 2015. In August, a group of passengers managed to prevent a massacre on a Thalys train. More successful were the attacks in the Turkish cities of Suruç and Ankara, on a Russian airliner over the Sinai Peninsula, as well as in Paris and San Bernardino. This is but an incomplete list of successful and thwarted ISIL attacks. As outlined above, similar attacks followed in 2016.

The connection between the various events was not properly understood at least until the Paris attacks. In hindsight, however, the timeline of events is very clear. As the United States started its attacks against ISIL, the hostage executions designed for maximum propaganda effects followed almost immediately. Shortly afterwards, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani made his call to arms, which initially seemed more helpless than threatening in its blind fury and recommended choice of methods. In September, perpetrators inspired by ISIL already began to carry out attacks, including in Canada and Australia. Starting in early 2015, however, after the war against ISIL has been expanded, attacks were carried out or at least attempted in quick succession.

This sequence of events alone strongly suggests that, firstly, ISIL started its campaign against the West in the second half of 2014 in response to the international military coalition beginning its fight against ISIL.

Secondly, the slight delay in this response is interesting. The hostages were already in the hands of ISIL and could be beheaded immediately. Al-Adnani’s call to arms is followed by initial attacks by individual perpetrators, though with a small number of victims. The full-blown terrorist attacks, however, only began a few months later. The likely explanation is that, once the decision to launch attacks against Western targets had

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<sup>1</sup> There is one attack associated with ISIL that took place as early as May 2014, namely the shooting at the Jewish Museum in Brussels. The attacker, Mehdi Nemmouche, had spent time in Syria in 2013 and had been part of a group that guarded French prisoners of ISIL. Several months before the attack, Nemmouche had also had a long telephone conversation with Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who later played a significant role in the Paris attacks of November 2015.

been made, logistic preparations were required before they could be carried out. In early 2015, ISIL was ready. This sequence of events is consistent with the theory that ISIL changed its strategy in response to the air strikes in August and September 2014. It also demonstrates the remarkable ability of ISIL to significantly extend its activities past all European security authorities within a period of approximately six months.

Thirdly, ISIL itself has repeatedly emphasised the connection between its terror attacks and the attacks carried out by the coalition. The first such instance was the beheading of James Foley on 12 August 2014, which ISIL claimed was a direct response to the US air strikes. The same applies to al-Adnani's announcement in September of that year, which focused on the attacks of the "crusader nations", and to the attacks in Paris and Brussels as well as to the more recent incidents in Würzburg and Ansbach. Al-Adnani's latest appeal, launched at the beginning of Ramadan, also focused on the air strikes of the "crusaders" as he called on the faithful living in Western countries to no longer travel to the caliphate to fight there but to carry out attacks in their own home countries. This appeal to the faithful to carry out attacks in their own societies and the justification on the grounds of Western attacks against ISIL was again reiterated in a recent English-language video distributed by ISIL in mid-August 2016.

But not all the facts fit into the picture. The attack on the Jewish Museum in Brussels in particular took place three months before the events outlined above<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, several suspected members of ISIL terror cells were arrested in Spain in 2015, even though Spain is not involved in the air strikes. Spain, however, is a member of NATO and the international coalition against ISIL and home to three US military bases. The attacks in Indonesia and Bangladesh in 2016 may also have a different background, even though they targeted tourists as well as a restaurant frequented mostly by Italians. This may well have been an attempt by ISIL to establish itself in the Asian region.

Although reality is rarely completely unambiguous, the bottom line is very clear.. The ISIL attacks against Western targets are not an expression of blind aggression, an attempt to spread hate, to divert attention away from setbacks, or an effort to establish an Islamic theocracy in Europe. Some of these aspects may play a role but they are not the primary reason. *ISIL is attacking us because we are attacking them.* A group of Western states has been waging a military campaign against ISIL since the summer of 2014, thus ISIL has been waging war against the West. From the perspective of ISIL, however, this war dates back much further than two years. It is part of a narrative according to which Christianity has been leading a war against Islam at least since the Middle Ages. The coalitions' intervention in Iraq and Syria is only the latest wave of attacks by the "crusaders", following on from the Crusades, colonialism, the establishment of the State of Israel, the support provided for various Arab regimes, and several wars in the region. Consequently, the caliphate undoubtedly remains the main project of ISIL, and the organisation is still fighting to protect and expand it. Yet, it now not only faces the Kurds and the Shiites, but also – once again – the United States, France and Germany, among others. As long as this state of war persists and ISIL continues to be subjected to attacks that it considers unjustified, it will try to continue its attacks against Western targets.

### **The strategy of terror**

How will ISIL conduct this war? The treatise *Management of Savagery* written by Abu Bakr Naji provides some insight into the underlying considerations. The jihadist text was published in 2004 and is widely read

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<sup>2</sup> In an interesting article in The New York Times, Rukmini Callimachi argues that ISIL began its campaign against the West at least two years before the attacks in Paris (see: [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/29/world/europe/isis-attacks-paris-brussels.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/29/world/europe/isis-attacks-paris-brussels.html?_r=0)). The article does not explain, however, why ISIL suddenly started to attack countries that are far superior in terms of military power and had so far completely ignored the organisation. After all, in early 2014 President Obama had still referred to ISIL as a "junior varsity team" that posed no real threat compared with Al-Qaeda.

among the members of ISIL. It focuses on the age-old problem of terrorism: How can a group in an apparent position of weakness impose a social order through violent means?

ISIL knows that the West is clearly superior in terms of military power. The strategy suggested by Naji and pursued by ISIL therefore assumes a protracted and hard fight that will also take a heavy toll on ISIL itself. The strategy is thus not to follow the example of Al-Qaeda and carry out just one or a few large-scale attacks like that of 9/11 and then hope that the West will fold. The plan is rather to frequently carry out smaller attacks on different targets. Their organisation and choice of location should be decentralised. Not only does this approach protect the independently operating cells from discovery and guarantee a maximum surprise effect, but it also forces an enemy, who after all does not know where and how the next attack will occur, to expend a great deal of energy on protecting any conceivable targets. The plan is not to achieve a single grand victory, but rather to triumph as a result of many small victories won through many successful strikes against the enemy. The idea is that the Western states will pay such a high price in terms of lives and money that they eventually just give up. The terrorist fight is thus a war of attrition by design, and the side that proves toughest and most tenacious is set to win it.

Naji and ISIL are confident that they can win this fight because the West may be superior in terms of military force but not in terms of morale. They believe that Western societies are shaped by materialism and self-interest. According to their diagnosis Western people care only about the mortal world, living a life of indulgence, and amassing material goods. While jihadists see themselves in a context that is greater than their own lives, they feel that Western societies are devoid of deep-rooted social cohesion because of this materialism and all-pervading self-interest. Everything, and thus also the fight against Islam, is guided by the intention of securing material well-being. It follows that as soon as the costs become too high for them, Western societies will seek to end the fight out of self-interest, unwillingness to make sacrifices and lack of perseverance. They believe that this is what makes us vulnerable.

From a Jihadist point of view it is thus imperative to attack and undermine the willingness of Western societies to wage war. This may include an economic component that is forcing the opponent to invest large sums – which would otherwise have been available for other purposes – for protection and countermeasures to safeguard against the omnipresent threat. But above all this is about killing as many people as possible as brutally as possible for maximum shock value. The more callous the attacks and the greater the horror, the less willing Germany, France, etc. will be to continue the fight against such an opponent – that is the simple but infernal idea behind this terror. Restraint in the use of violence would be counter-productive. The greater the bloodshed, the clearer the message. As soon as Western societies realise that the terror is not going to stop despite all countermeasures and resulting restrictions, their willingness to continue the fight will erode. Victory will thus more than anything be the result of the greater will to persevere, and the terror campaign will continue until ISIL is either unable to do so any longer or until the enemy withdraws, i.e. ceases to fight the caliphate.

## **Outlook**

In theory, the link between the terrorist attacks and the fight against ISIL provides the states involved in the coalition against ISIL with a way to prevent further terrorist attacks by leaving the coalition and abandoning the fight against ISIL. This, however, would not only destroy any state's solidarity with its closest allies but would also mean leaving ISIL free reign, including its potentially genocidal actions against Shiites, Yazidis etc. It would also mean no longer taking action against extremist Islam in Germany and elsewhere. This option must therefore be ruled out and there is no alternative to fighting ISIL as resolutely as possible using military means, intelligence services, police and socio-political means.

Hence, Germany, Europe, and the other Western states will have to expect further terrorist attacks. They may be carried out by well-organised commandos, by lone perpetrators with a rather broad mandate or by persons who have had no direct contact with ISIL at all but have been mobilised by its propaganda. Since ISIL frequently calls for “lone wolf attacks” and, through its constant propaganda, attempts to incentivize people to commit attacks in order to retroactively claim responsibility for them, such attacks are part of ISIL strategy and must be attributed to the organisation. Whether ISIL actually directed an attack or not is irrelevant for the question of whether it really is an ISIL attack<sup>3</sup>.

Overall, ISIL terrorist attacks use simple means. Since this modus operandi is successful it will continue to be used. Apart from that, however, the approach does not seem to follow any rigid rules but rather adapts to the relevant circumstances. In future, we must therefore expect to see new approaches and targets. It follows from the terrorist logic of ISIL that, in the interest of shock value, it aims to achieve as high a number of victims as possible. The targets most at risk are thus unprotected venues where many people come together. It is a strategy that is designed to go on for years and can still be continued after the collapse of the caliphate, especially since ISIL does not consider a destruction of the caliphate the final defeat but only one waypoint in a long hard fight. The number of ISIL fighters is immense compared to all prior terrorist groups. It can draw not only on the approx. 7,000 fighters from Western countries who have travelled to Syria, but also on many supporters who have followed Adnani’s call to stay home and lead the fight there. Because of its immense revenues, ISIL also likely has plenty of funds available.

In view of this, the war against this terrorist organisation will likely continue for years and will claim many lives on our side, too. It is thus all the more important that we strengthen our resilience and resolutely fight this organisation with all the means that our constitutional state allows.

*Dr Ulf Brüggeman is a Counsellor at the Federal Academy for Security Policy. The article reflects the author's personal opinions.*

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<sup>3</sup> Experience, however, shows that public discussion often too quick to assume a self-radicalized lone wolf. Further investigation often finds that, unlike initially assumed, attackers did have contact with others persons or were even directed.