

Beheading As a Signature Method of Jihadist Terrorism From Syria to France

By Mahmut Cengiz

With the recent beheadings in the Western world, jihadist terrorism has received greater attention because homegrown extremists inspired by jihadist ideology have used beheading as a terrorist tactic in two attacks in France. Jihadist terrorism has been not only the most dominant type of terrorism but also the deadliest, with thousands of victims across the globe. Jihadist terrorists have diversified their tactics and now use beheadings as their signature method of attack. Under the influence of jihadist ideology, other jihadist groups and lone actors in different regions have mimicked ISIS tactics and been involved in beheadings across a broader geographical territory ranging from the Philippines, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Somalia to Syria and France. Their aim is to attract attention, gain recognition, intimidate people in their territories, and spread fear and panic.

The world reels with horror as Salafi-jihadist¹ terrorist groups behead² one person after another, inflicting unrelenting carnage on their perceived enemies. Salafi-jihadist terrorist groups are relentless in the use of their signature tactic. As recently as October 2020, lone actor attacks targeted French civilians, beheading two individuals in two separate attacks. Each year, terrorism databases have recorded thousands of violent incidents perpetrated with tactics that range from shootings, kidnappings, and ambushes to bombings, hostage-taking, and beheadings. Salafi-jihadist terrorist groups have been the leaders in the beheadings category. These groups use twisted interpretations of Islamic practices to justify the beheading of both their "enemies" and random individuals. Western leaders continue to debate whether Islam, as a religion, approves of violent acts and beheadings against the Western world. These debates, however, divert attention from the origins of beheading as a means of avenging long-held grievances. This article, utilizing quantitative data³, clarifies the historical use of

¹ Salafi jihadism reflects the strict interpretation of the Qur'an and the Hadiths and seeks to advocate for Islamic ideological goals by violent means. According to Maher, "there are five essential and irreducible features of the Salafi Jihadi movement: tawhid [the unity of God], hakimiyya [sovereignty], al-wala' wa-l-bara' [loyalty and disavowal], jihad and takfir [excommunication, declaring someone an unbeliever]." Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*, (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 13-14.

² The atrocious and bloody act requires total separation of the head from the body.

³ This study used open media sources to collect data about beheading incidents around the world. The preliminary research pointed to several jihadist terrorist organizations that actively use beheadings to gain recognition and popularity, intimidate others, and punish their group members. Those groups are Al Shabaab, Boko Haram, the Taliban, Abu Sayyaf, and ISIS-Core in Syria and Iraq and its regional franchises in Mozambique, Libya, Afghanistan, and Nigeria. Given the extensive attention that beheadings by ISIS have garnered since the early days of 2014, the research covered the period between January 2014 and 2020, and included beheadings committed by lone actors. A total of 112 incidents were discovered, in which 1,251 individuals were beheaded. The data included several variables such as date of incident, country, number of beheaded victims, religion, occupation, and why the victims were beheaded. The data were limited to English-language sources; therefore, a significant number of beheading incidents may be missing. These 112 incidents, however, are sufficient for drawing conclusions about the descriptive characteristics of beheadings perpetrated by jihadist groups worldwide.

beheadings by terrorist groups and attempts to explain how beheadings have become the attack strategy of choice among jihadist terrorist organizations and homegrown extremists who act as individuals inspired by a jihadist ideology in the Western world.

Signature Methods

Symbolism is one of the features of terrorism. The targets that terrorists choose are intended to symbolize the righteousness of their violent acts and the evil nature of the groups with which they are at war. To terrorists, the use of symbolism is a way to rationalize and justify their violent actions.⁴ The need for symbolism also influences terrorist groups' selection of a method for carrying out their violent acts. The methods selected reflect the peculiarities of each terrorist group's political environment—often to the extent that those methods become synonymous with the terrorist group itself. These engrained methods become the *signatures* of distinct terrorist movements. For example, Italy's Red Brigade and the Irish Republican Army used kneecapping, a technique that involves shooting a victim in the back of the knee joint. Other signature methods, such as kidnappings, are associated with Abu Sayyaf. In contrast, hijackings are associated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and suicide bombings are associated with Iraqi insurgents and Tamil Tigers.⁵ For Salafi jihadist groups, the signature method has been beheadings.

Jihadist Groups

David Rapoport classified the historical development of terrorist organizations as occurring in four waves based on their ideologies. His classification specified the duration of these waves and, according to him, each wave lasted around 40 years. The fourth period is religious terrorism in which the world saw attacks by right-wing extremist groups exploiting Christianity in the Western world in the 1980s⁶ and a sarin nerve-agent attack by a religious cult in the 1990s in Japan.⁷ The dominant group in the fourth wave, however, is terrorist groups exploiting Islam.

Mujahedeen fighters, whom the Western world referred to as "religious warriors" when the group fought against the Soviet Union during the Soviet-Afghan War, also were part of the fourth wave. When the Soviets withdrew their soldiers from Afghanistan in 1989, the Western world turned a blind eye to the mujahedeen fighters who shortly afterward traveled to other regions.⁸ They sought out jihadist regions where the Muslim population was being oppressed, specifically Bosnia and Kosovo. The formation of al Qaeda and its attacks in the 1990s once again brought attention to jihadist groups. The Western world, however, did not take serious precautions against these groups until the September 11, 2001 attacks.⁹ The United States subsequently changed its counterterrorism strategies, and criminal justice policies¹⁰ were replaced with a military strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan.

⁴ Gus Martin, *Understanding Terrorism* (Boston: Sage, 2018), p. 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 264 and 265.

⁶ Daryl Johnson, "The U.S. government, media organizations, and political scholars often characterize the "War on Terror" as a clash of civilizations or a battle against radical Islam," Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018 Spring Issue, February 10, 2018.

⁷ David Rapoport, *The Four Waves of Modern Terror: International Dimensions and Consequences*, in *An International History of Terrorism: Western and Non-Western Experiences*, eds. Jussi M. Hanhimaki and Bernhard Blumenau (New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁸ "Who Is responsible for the Taliban?" Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 1, 2002.

⁹ Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press 2002), p. 18 and D. Benjamin and S. Simon, *The Age of sacred Terror* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 98 and 102.

¹⁰ Robert Chesney and Jack Goldsmith, "Terrorism and the convergence of the criminal and military detention models," *Stanford Law Review*, (2008) 60(4): pp. 1079- 1134.

Countries in the Western world have successfully protected themselves after the 9/11 attacks, but they have failed to predict the unintended consequences of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. After overthrowing the regime of Saddam Hussein, the discriminatory policies¹¹ of Iranian-backed Shia governments pushed Sunni tribes into the hands of Salafi-jihadist groups. Huge masses joined al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), a group founded and led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.¹² No one had predicted that AQI would evolve into the wealthy and powerful terrorist organization known as ISIS nor that it would control a swath of vast territory in Iraq and Syria.¹³

The Arab Spring in the early 2010s was successful in ousting long-serving authoritarian leaders but left security gaps that Salafi-jihadist groups were quick to fill.¹⁴ These groups competed to declare loyalty to either ISIS or al Qaeda in 2014 and 2015, at a time when ISIS was the most popular terrorist group.¹⁵ The appeal of ISIS lay with the large amount of territory the group controlled and the financial resources the organization was able to generate. According to the 2018 Annex of Statistical Information Report, ISIS had affiliated groups in 26 countries while al Qaeda had such groups in 15 countries.¹⁶ The jihadist groups' failures against well-developed and well-equipped Western military forces pushed the jihadist groups to develop a new type of terrorism. Inspired by either ISIS or al Qaeda ideology, homegrown extremists have begun to threaten the security of their home countries in the Western world.¹⁷

Recent trends demonstrate that jihadist groups have found favorable ground in many regions of the world. Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Somalia, and Yemen were the countries with the most terrorist incidents in 2019, recording 52 percent of all terrorist incidents.¹⁸ Jihadist groups are the deadliest and most influential terrorist groups when compared with other types of terrorist organizations. The fatality rate is higher for jihadist groups than it is for other kinds of terrorist organizations.¹⁹ In 2019, seven of the ten terrorist groups with the most incidents were jihadist groups, and the Taliban, ISIS, al Shabaab, and Boko Haram were the perpetrators of 35 percent of all terrorist incidents.²⁰ The top 10 terrorist organizations responsible for the most casualties included nine jihadist groups, which, collectively, were responsible for killing or wounding more than 25,000 people in 2019.²¹ The victims of these groups in 2019 were civilians and government and military personnel,²² and a vast majority of the victims were Muslims. The Taliban, ISIS, and al Shabaab were the top three organizations to use tactics that included suicide bombings, assassinations, and improvised explosive devices (IEDs).²³

¹¹ Daniel L. Byman, "The resurgence of al Qaeda in Iraq," Brookings Institute, December 12, 2013.

¹² Abdul Basir Yosufi, "The Rise and Consolidation of Islamic State: External Intervention and Sectarian Violence," Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Fall 2016): pp. 91-110.

¹³ Patrick B. Johnston and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Foundations of the Islamic State," *Rand*, November 15, 2015.

¹⁴ James Phillips, "The Arab Spring Descends into Islamist Winter: Implications for U.S. Policy," The Heritage Foundation, December 10, 2012.

¹⁵ Mahmut Cengiz and Kutluer Karademir "Why Salafi-Jihadist Terrorist Groups Pledge Allegiance to Al Qaeda or ISIS", *International Journal on Criminology*, Volume 7, Number 2, Spring (2020): pp. 8-29.

¹⁶ "Annex of Statistical Information 2018," U.S. Department of State, October 2019, pp. 5-6.

¹⁷ Kim Cragin, "Addressing the Threat of Homegrown Violent Extremists Sympathetic to the Islamic State," *Lawfare*, July 7, 2019.

¹⁸ "Annex of Statistical Information 2019," U.S. Department of State, June 10, 2020, p. 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

The tactics and targets of jihadist terrorist groups have evolved since the 1980s to the point where they have used a variety of tactics in their home countries and in the Western world. Typically, jihadist terrorist groups have used IEDs, vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), and suicide bombings to target local governments or Western military forces in their home countries.²⁴ However, homegrown extremists were more likely to use car-ramming and stabbings as their preferred modes of attack.²⁵ Beheadings as a mode of the attack had primarily been contained to conflict zones. Jihadist lone actors in Western countries, however, have begun to adopt beheadings as their preferred mode of tactic.

How Do Jihadist Groups Justify Beheading?

The ideological foundations of beheadings are grounded on the Salafi jihadist interpretation of the Qur'an. A twisted version of Salafism has expanded in the world, using a literal translation of the Qur'an and Hadiths. This version bases the government on a Salafi interpretation of Islamic law. It identifies Muslims as heretics who disagree with jihadi Salafi ideology and approves the killing of Shi'ites because they are apostates and wage offensive jihad against idolatry.²⁶ The teachings of several well-known scholars have inspired today's jihadist groups. For example, Ibn Taymiyya introduced new ideas about purity and militancy and called for the destruction of heretics and invaders, making jihad the sixth pillar of Islam.²⁷ He emphasized the Tawhid and attacked religious practices not endorsed by Prophet Mohammad and the first four caliphs. He also expanded the meaning of jihad by advocating attacks on nonbelievers.²⁸ Ibn Abdul Wahhab, affected by Ibn Taymiyya's teachings, started a purification movement that took root in the Arabian Peninsula. His followers have forced their puritanical views on those who disagree with them.²⁹

The most recent Salafi scholars have inspired jihadist groups to rule by terror and operate alone in the Western world. For example, Abu Bakr Naji inspired the idea of ruling by terror and believed that ruthlessness is necessary to create the caliphate.³⁰ Naji called for relentless war against all internal and external enemies and argued that jihadist groups must brutally conduct savage public torture and butchery against all who resist.³¹ In his study titled "A Call to Global Islamic Resistance," Abu Musab al Suri popularized leaderless resistance in jihadi Salafist circles.³² Al Suri called for jihad on the individual level and urged urban terrorism and covert solo attacks by wholly separate cells because he believed that Al Qaeda would not succeed against well-developed Western military forces and intelligence agencies. Al Qaeda's leader described Suri's teachings as a "rich river" for holy warriors.³³

Salafi jihadist groups have strictly interpreted verses of the Qur'an, and they base their use of beheadings on Sura 47:4 in the Qur'an. There are various translations³⁴ of this verse. Here is one example used by Sufi³⁵ Muslims:

²⁴ Matthew Hedges, "Evolving Terrorist Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTP) Migration Across South Asia, Caucasus, and the Middle East," *Inegma Special Report 7*, May 2010.

²⁵ "What is the Threat to the United States?" *New America*.

²⁶ Cole Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State," Brookings Institution, March 9, 2015.

²⁷ Jonathan R. White *Terrorism and Homeland Security* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2018), p. 252 and 253.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 254-255.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, p. 254.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ In one example, "When you meet those who disbelieve in battle, immediately smite at their necks. When you finally overwhelm them, tie the bond tight, and capture them. Until the war lays down its burdens, then release them

“Therefore, when ye meet the Unbelievers in battle, smite at their necks; At length, when ye have thoroughly subdued them, bind a bond firmly (on them): thereafter (is the time for) either generosity or ransom: Until the war lays down its burdens. Thus (are ye commanded): but if it had been God's Will, He could certainly have exacted retribution from them (Himself); but (He lets you fight) in order to test you, some with others. But those who are slain in the Way of God,- He will never let their deeds be lost.”³⁶

Salafi jihadists, however, translate and interpret Quranic verses literally. Here is one example, also from Qur'an 47:4:

So, when you clash with the unbelieving Infidels in battle, smite their necks until you overpower them, killing and wounding many of them. At length, when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly, making (them) captives. Thereafter either generosity or ransom until the war lays down its burdens. Thus are you commanded by God to continue carrying out jihad against the unbelieving infidels until they submit to Islam.³⁷

Jihadist terrorist groups selectively use the first sentence and ignore its context. "Smite their neck" actually refers to being in a war and is limited to killing only those who have not surrendered.³⁸ When the war is over, the verse says that one can either release captives or demand ransom for them, but the verse does not approve of killing those captives. The second misinterpretation is related to the identification of nonbelievers. Today's Salafi jihadist groups categorize all Westerners as nonbelievers and Muslims who do not endorse their ideology as heretics or apostates.³⁹

Perpetrators of Beheadings

Humans have used beheadings in the name of capital punishments for millennia. Some cultures viewed beheadings as the proper form of death. During the period of the French Revolution known as the Reign of Terror, the guillotine was used for beheadings and became the only legal method for punishing rebels

when the war is over, either free of charge or by ransom. This is the order of Allah. Had Allah willed, Allah would have taken revenge on them otherwise, but that is how it is to try you out with each other. As for those who are killed in the way of Allah, Allah will never fail their deeds." "Elmalili Hamdi Yazir: Muhammet Suresi 4. Ayet Meali," Namaz Zamani. In another example, "So when you meet the "disbelievers" in "battle", strike "their" necks until you have thoroughly subdued them, then bind them firmly. Later "" free them either as" an act of grace or by ransom until the war comes to an end. So will it be. Had Allah willed, He "Himself" could have inflicted punishment on them. But He does "this only to" test some of you by means of others. And those who are martyred in the cause of Allah. He will never render their deeds void." Mustafa Khattap "Muhammad Verse 4," Quran.

³⁵ The Sufis are seen as peaceful, tolerant and moderate. Their leaders dedicate themselves to promote love and peace worldwide. Rachid Acim, "The Reception of Sufism in the West: The Mystical Experiences of American and European Converts," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Volume 38, (2018 - Issue 1, pp. 55-72.

³⁶ "Quran 47:4 When You Meet the Infidels, Smite Their Necks," *Comparative Religion*, November 5, 2012.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Nonetheless, verse 47:4 limits the killing of nonbelievers during a war unless they have surrendered. Pro-ISIS writer Ibn Mahmud, however, used verse 47:4 to justify the beheading of American journalist James Foley in 2014. According to Mahmud, Foley entered Islam's state without a covenant, so he was seen as an enemy alien. As for the actual method of killing Foley, Mahmud claimed that beheading non-Muslim adversaries was ordered by God according to Sura 47:4 in the Qur'an. Joas Wagemakers, "Salafi Source Readings between al-Qaeda and the ISIS," Oasis Center, July 29, 2016.

³⁹ Jean Heery, "Latest ISIS Propaganda Rails Against Apostasy," Tony Blair Institute For Global Change, March 9, 2017.

and criminals.⁴⁰ During other periods in history, beheading was regarded as a contemptuous practice.⁴¹ Recently, beheadings had become associated with drug cartels and terrorism. Drug cartels, for example, have aimed to force the population in their territories to cower in fear and never challenge the cartels' power.⁴² In the terrorism realm, Salafi jihadist terrorist groups have practiced beheadings in the name of Islam. The practice has been traced to the war in Chechnya from August 1999 to April 2009, where Chechen fighters captured and decapitated Russian soldiers in Eastern Europe.⁴³ In the Middle East, meanwhile, terrorists targeted Westerners for beheading.⁴⁴

After the toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime in 2003, jihadists in Iraq used beheadings to force countries that had deployed troops to Iraq to withdraw them, prevent private companies from making investments in Iraq, and intimidate Iraqis not to join the Iraqi armed forces. It should be noted that ISIS's televised beheadings were intended to attract the support of European Muslims. A survey of 3,300 adults in the United States showed that about 25 percent of the respondents watched at least part of ISIS's beheading video.⁴⁵ Two common reasons the respondents gave for why they watched the video were to gain information or to verify the authenticity of the beheadings because they were interested or curious.⁴⁶

The systematic routinized campaign of beheadings of Muslims and non-Muslims peaked when ISIS invaded a vast territory in Iraq and Syria in 2014. According to the database used for this study, jihadist groups beheaded 1,251 victims between 2014 and 2020. The number of beheading victims was the highest in 2015 and decreased steadily thereafter (see Figure 1).

⁴⁰ Roberson, Cliff, and D.K. Das *An Introduction to Comparative Legal Models of Criminal Justice* (New York: CRC Press, 2008), p. 172.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Pamela L. Bunker and Lisa J. Campbell, "Torture, beheadings, and narcocultos," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, February 2010 21(1): pp. 145-178.

⁴³ Maura Reynolds, "War has no Rules For Russian Forces Fighting in Chechnya," *Los Angeles Times*, September 17, 2000.

⁴⁴ For example, journalist Daniel Pearl from the *Wall Street Journal* was kidnapped in January 2002 on a directive from al Qaeda and beheaded a month later. In 2004, American Nick Berg, an American freelance radio-tower repairman who went to Iraq after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, was beheaded while wearing an orange jumpsuit that his captors intended to mimic the clothing worn by prisoners held by the United States at Guantanamo Bay. Other beheading victims over the years have included captured Iraqi soldiers.

⁴⁵ S. Redmond, S., N.M. Jones, E.A. Holman "Who Watches an ISIS Beheading—And Why." *American Psychologist*, 74(5), (2019): pp. 555-568.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

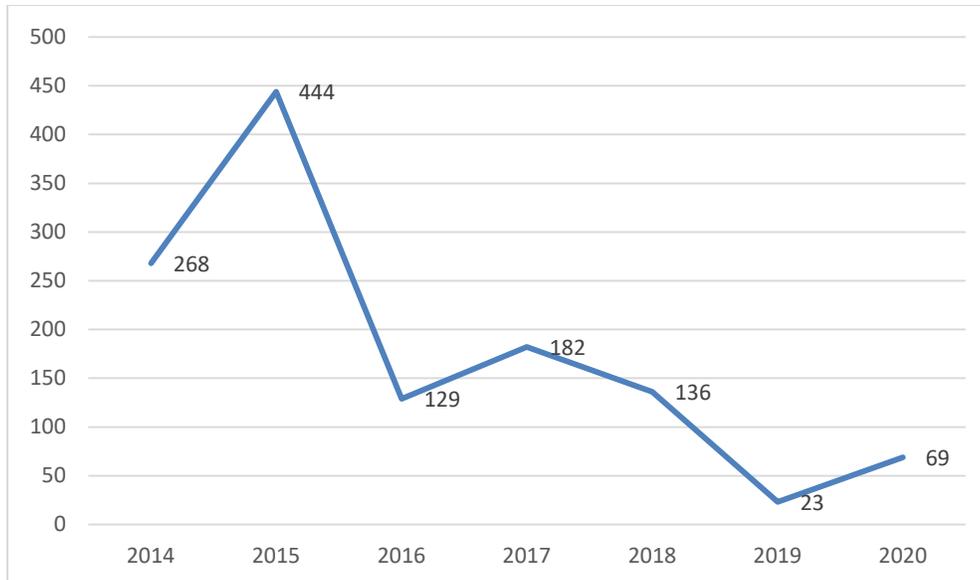


Figure 1: Number of beheaded victims between 2014 and 2020

Figure 2 shows the countries where victims were beheaded. Syria recorded the largest number of beheading cases because ISIS was acting like a de facto state in that country where it ruled more than 6 million people from 2014 through 2015. Mozambique had the second largest number of beheading cases, most of which were perpetrated by the Mozambique franchise of ISIS. Nigeria had the third largest number of beheading cases, all of which were perpetrated by Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa Province (ISWAP). The remaining countries (in decreasing order of cases) were Afghanistan, where another ISIS franchise, the ISIS-Khorasan⁴⁷, beheaded most of the victims; Libya and Egypt, where ISIS branches in those countries were the responsible parties; Iraq; the Philippines, where Abu Sayyaf was responsible for most of the beheadings; Somalia and Kenya, where al Shabaab was the main perpetrator; and France, where two lone jihadist actors were the perpetrators.

⁴⁷ It should be noted that ISIS-K was the most deadly terrorist organization by casualty rate in 2019. “Annex of Statistical Information 2019,” p. 10.

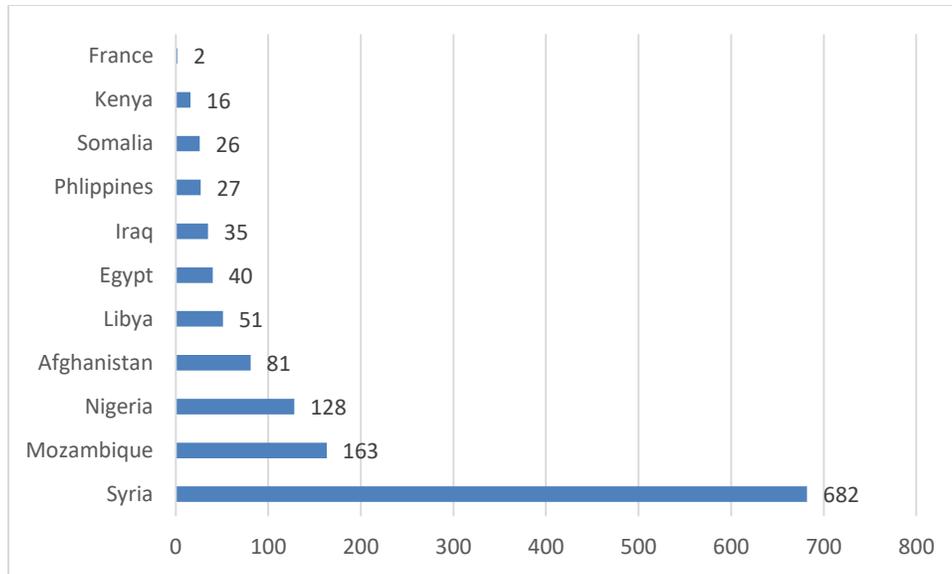


Figure 2: Number of beheading victims between 2014 and 2020, by country

Figure 3 shows the perpetrators of beheadings. More than 60 percent of the beheadings that took place in 2014 and 2015 were perpetrated by ISIS. The peak year was 2015, when the organization controlled its most enormous amount of territory. The group targeted not only Western journalists and aid workers in Iraq and Syria but also its militants who attempted to leave the organization in 2014 and 2015. One hundred of these militants were beheaded in 2014; two years later, 20 more were beheaded. ISIS remained the top perpetrator in 2016 and 2017, with 111 beheadings and 99 beheadings, respectively. When ISIS fell from power in 2018, the number of beheadings for which the group was responsible dropped in 2019 and 2020.

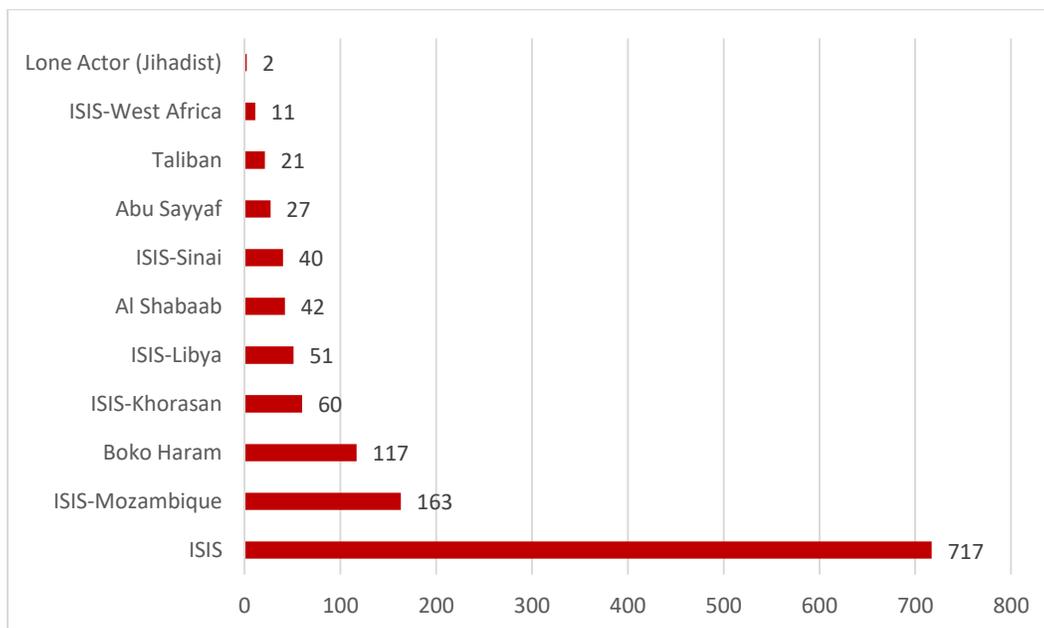


Figure 3: Number of beheaded victims, by perpetrator

The ISIS franchise in Mozambique beheaded the second largest number of victims. The group beheaded 7 victims in 2017 and 116 in 2018. Boko Haram beheaded the third largest number of victims. The group began the practice of beheading when it pledged allegiance to ISIS in 2015. Boko Haram and ISWAP⁴⁸ beheaded 128 victims in total. Most of Boko Haram's beheading victims were villagers. ISWAP was one of the deadliest terrorist groups in 2019, and the group targeted Christian civilians in West Africa and logged the group's largest number of beheadings that year.⁴⁹ ISIS-Khorasan beheaded police officers, hostages, Taliban members, and its own members if they engaged in organizational infighting. ISIS-Khorasan is an example of how jihadist groups punished their members with beheadings.

ISIS-Libya was responsible for the beheading of 51 Christians. Al Shabaab, active in Somalia and Kenya,⁵⁰ targeted and beheaded Muslim and Christian civilians, Somali soldiers, and alleged Somali spies. Al Shabaab is another example of how terrorist groups have used beheadings as punishment and intimidation tactics. ISIS-Sinai also targeted civilians, soldiers, and alleged spies but broadened its scope in 2016 when it beheaded a Sufi cleric. Abu Sayyaf differs from other groups in that it beheaded its victims when the ransom sought to spare the person's life was not paid on time. The Taliban is the second group in Afghanistan, along with ISIS-K, that targeted law enforcement personnel, military personnel, civilians, and alleged informants. Lone actors were responsible for two beheadings, both of which occurred in France.

Figure 4 shows beheading victims by religion. Salafi jihadist organizations threaten the Western world and aim to attack Western targets. These groups, however, have not spared their fellow Muslims in Muslim countries. According to terrorism databases, jihadist groups have killed thousands of people in their own countries of origin. For example, 72 percent of casualties in 2019 were recorded in Muslim countries.⁵¹ The number of Muslim casualties in other countries also was significantly high that year. Jihadist groups also have not shied away from targeting Muslims for beheading. For the period covered by the current study, 92 percent of beheading victims were Muslims.

⁴⁸ Splintered from and formed by Boko Haram defectors, ISWAP selectively targeted state institutions, military personnel, and Christian groups. The group then began to target civilians and killed 38 villagers in Nigeria in June 2020. "ISWA's Recent Attacks Could Signal a New, Deadlier Approach in Nigeria," Council on Foreign Relations, June 19, 2020.

⁴⁹ "Annex of Statistical Information 2019," p. 11.

⁵⁰ David Anderson and Jacob McKnight, "Understanding al-Shabaab: clan, Islam and insurgency in Kenya" *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, September 2015, 9(3): pp. 1-22.

⁵¹ "Annex of Statistical Information 2019," p. 20.

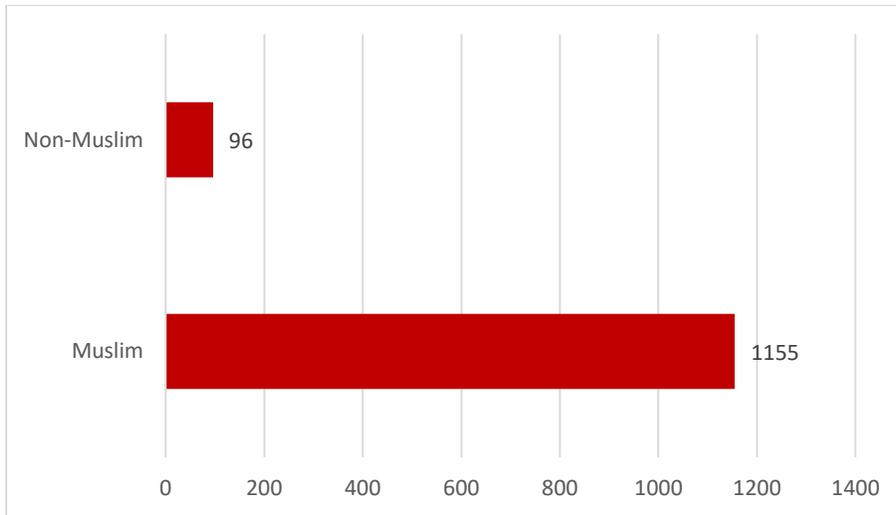


Figure 4: Number of beheaded victims, by religion

Jihadist groups have beheaded more non-military individuals than military individuals (see Figure 5). In their early years of existence, terrorist groups target military or law enforcement personnel and abstain from killing civilians because they know that sparing civilians will lead to public support for their cause and enhance their ability to recruit militants to join the group. When terrorist groups lose power, however, they change course and begin to target civilians. ISIS and its franchises have targeted civilians more than other terrorist groups sampled for the current study.

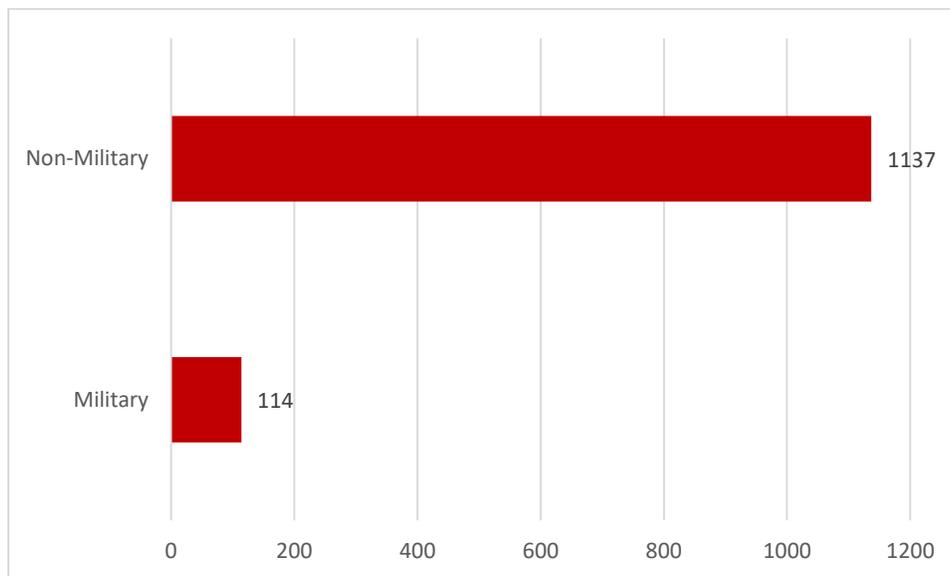


Figure 5: Number of beheading victims, by military or non-military

Conclusion

Salafi-jihadist terrorist groups have expanded their scope and are capable of executing attacks in many regions of the world. They are the deadliest terrorist groups with a record of inflicting the most casualties on civilian and non-civilian populations. These terrorist groups have used a variety of tactics to kill their victims, including IEDs, VBIEDs, mines, ambushes, beheadings, and suicide bombings. One of the most

common tactics among Salafi-jihadist terrorist groups since 2014 has been beheadings. The beheadings continue because the terrorists know that each incident brings with it another chance for worldwide attention to their cause.

The theory and ideology behind terrorists' use of beheadings are based on a strict interpretation of the Qur'an. Jihadist groups believe that they are at war against the Western world and justify the beheadings of Westerners because, as they see it, Westerners are nonbelievers and deserve to be beheaded. The terrorists' extreme interpretations, unfortunately, are readily accepted by their brainwashed militant followers who have obediently beheaded hundreds of victims over the last decade. The various jihadist groups operating in the Middle East and elsewhere, however, differ in their reasons for using beheadings to advance their cause. In addition to gaining attention and intimidating others, they may aim to punish their militants for disloyalty and spread fear and panic among people who live in the territories the terrorist groups control. In contrast to common belief, jihadist groups have beheaded more Muslims than non-Muslims.

It is not surprising that ISIS is the leading organization in terms of having committed the most beheadings. The number of people that ISIS beheaded peaked between 2014 and 2016 but decreased significantly in Syria and Iraq after losing power in those countries. The legacy of ISIS, however, has been mimicked by its franchises in other countries. ISIS-Khorasan, ISIS-Sinai, ISWAP, ISIS-Libya, and ISIS-Mozambique all have been involved in beheading cases. The heinous beheading of two individuals in France in October 2020 shows that homegrown extremists and lone actors have begun to use beheadings as a tactic to draw attention to their cause.

Policy models that address the root causes and ideological foundations of beheadings would be more effective in terms of stemming the tide of beheadings worldwide. Beheadings appear to have direct relations with the violent ideology of Salafism. Wherever violent Salafist ideology has spread, beheadings have occurred. It would be one of the most significant policy mistakes to debate beheadings in the context of Islam. A prime example is the October 2020 attacks in France. A considerable number of Muslim communities around the world do not approve of al Qaeda's or ISIS's interpretation of the Qur'an. Generalizing terrorism in the assumption of Islam's approval to violence would place death instruments into the hands of jihadist militants. For example, ISIS used its social media accounts and telegrams after the attacks in France to highlight the Western world's political rhetoric against Islam in an attempt to rally generalized Muslim support for the jihadist militants' twisted ideology. It should be noted that corrupt political Islamist governments in the Muslim world have exploited these generalizations and reacted with ire to the Western world's response, although these governments have known well that the jihadist terrorism ideology is based on the twisted version of the Qur'an. These debates will only worsen the situation, and it would not be wrong to say that the world will see an increasing number of violent attacks and beheadings by jihadist terrorist groups.

About the Author

Dr. Mahmut Cengiz is an Assistant Professor and Faculty with Terrorism, Transnational Crime and Corruption Center (TraCCC) and the Schar School of Policy and Government at George Mason University as well as the co-author of *The Illicit Economy in Turkey: How Criminals, Terrorists, and the Syrian Conflict Fuel Underground Markets*. Follow @mcengiz_doc.