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Islamist Extremist Strategy: Executions

CO-EXISTENCE

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Islamist extremist organisations executed 1,976 individuals in 2017, according to the Global Extremism Monitor (GEM), under a self-declared religious mandate and based on a literalist interpretation of sharia law. These executions, which were conducted by 21 extremist groups in 15 countries, were carried out in retribution for alleged offences. Violent Islamist organisations use executions to bolster their rule and order, ensuring local communities conform to their authority. Public executions demonstrate the scale of a militant group's autonomy and power over a territory.

Beyond this, violent Islamist organisations use executions for strategic aims. Militants coerce civilians and opposing military forces by using fear to quash dissent. At times, local populations agree to take up arms for a terrorist organisation to avoid punishment. At other times, civilians are forced to act as human shields to escape execution. Groups also employ executions to consolidate their strength at times of weakness, amid heightened counter-terrorism operations.

"Islamist extremist organisations executed 1,976 individuals in 2017... [they] adopted a warped ideological justification for killing scores and devastating communities." Read @InstituteGC's first annual Global Extremism Monitor report

(<https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?text=%22Islamist%20extremist%20organisations%20executed%201%2C976%20individuals%20in%20retribution%20for%20alleged%20offences%20by%2021%20extremist%20groups%20in%2015%20countries%20in%202017%20under%20a%20self-declared%20religious%20mandate%20and%20based%20on%20a%20literalist%20interpretation%20of%20sharia%20law%20.%20These%20executions%20were%20conducted%20by%2021%20extremist%20groups%20in%2015%20countries%20in%20retribution%20for%20alleged%20offences%20.%20Violent%20Islamist%20organisations%20use%20executions%20to%20bolster%20their%20rule%20and%20order%20ensuring%20local%20communities%20conform%20to%20their%20authority%20.%20Public%20executions%20demonstrate%20the%20scale%20of%20a%20militant%20group's%20autonomy%20and%20power%20over%20a%20territory%20.%20Beyond%20this%20%2C%20violent%20Islamist%20organisations%20use%20executions%20for%20strategic%20aims%20.%20Militants%20coerce%20civilians%20and%20opposing%20military%20forces%20by%20using%20fear%20to%20quash%20dissent%20.%20At%20times%20%2C%20local%20populations%20agree%20to%20take%20up%20arms%20for%20a%20terrorist%20organisation%20to%20avoid%20punishment%20.%20At%20other%20times%20%2C%20civilians%20are%20forced%20to%20act%20as%20human%20shields%20to%20escape%20execution%20.%20Groups%20also%20employ%20executions%20to%20consolidate%20their%20strength%20at%20times%20of%20weakness%20%2C%20amid%20heightened%20counter-terrorism%20operations%20.%22>)

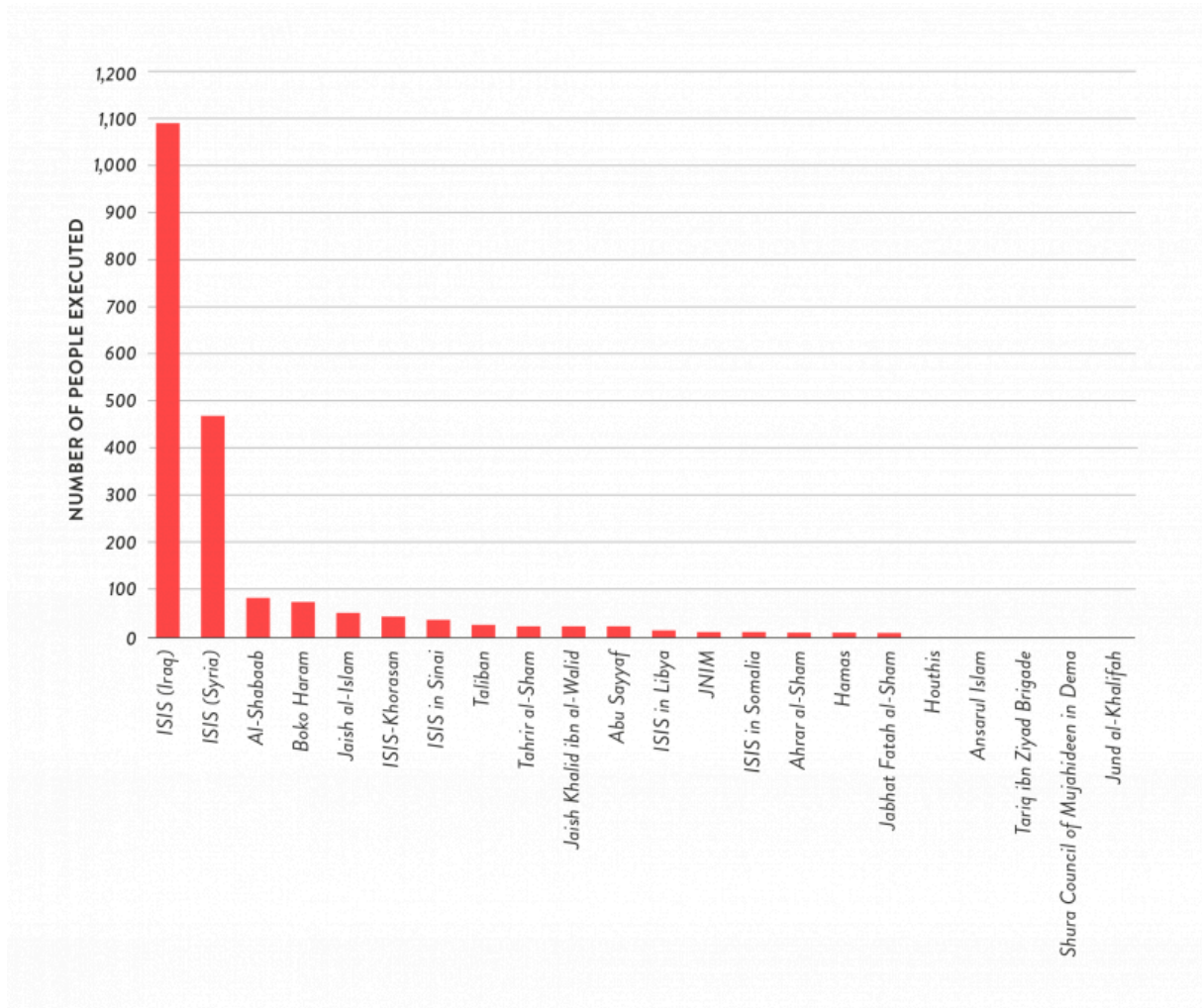
This fifth part of the Global Extremism Monitor 2017 examines how violent Islamist organisations use executions for strategic aims. Twenty-one groups conducted executions in 15 countries in 2017. Access the full Global Extremism Monitor 2017 here (<https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/collections/global-extremism-monitor>).

ISIS in Iraq and Syria embodied the most devastating use of executions in 2017. It demonstrated the level of brutality a violent Islamist extremist group can reach when it begins an exercise in state building. All the extremist groups that conducted executions in 2017 adopted a warped ideological justification for killing scores and devastating communities.

DEADLIEST GROUPS

The GEM recorded 21 extremist groups worldwide that executed individuals in 2017 (see figure 5.1). These groups justify the use of violence on the basis of a literalist interpretation of Islam and seek the implementation of sharia law as the primary mode of governance.

Figure 5.1: Groups Responsible for Executions, 2017



The GEM found that 38 per cent of the groups that conducted executions were either directly affiliated to ISIS or allied to the organisation. Twenty-four per cent were directly linked to al-Qaeda. Through a global network of factions, these two parent organisations seek to demonstrate their version of governance and warped interpretation of Islam.

ISIS IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

Fifty-seven per cent of all executions the GEM documented in 2017 were carried out by ISIS in Iraq and Syria. At least 1,568 people were killed by this group, affirming it as the world's deadliest extremist group for executions. The GEM has delved into the circumstances behind these executions, finding that ISIS commands authority through fear while implementing its binary worldview, which sees societies as either good or evil. These actions also drive forward wider strategic aims to benefit the group's insurgency.

ISIS's hard-line nature has become a central part of its global identity. Since declaring a caliphate across Iraq and Syria in 2014, ISIS has developed and implemented rules to govern civilians, monitor the behaviour of militants and discipline senior members in its areas of control. In its propaganda, the group has championed itself as an agent for positive change, claiming, "For the first time in years, Muslims are living in security" and "Corruption, before an unavoidable fact of life in both Iraq and Syria, has been cut to virtually nil while crime rates have considerably tumbled."¹

In his first official speech as the group's so-called caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi stated the significance of being able to govern in accordance to sharia: "So if [the caliph] orders the people to fear Allah and he is just, then he is rewarded. And if he orders with anything else, then he will be held accountable for that."² Efforts to integrate a governance structure reinforce the group's claims to legitimacy, enabling it to evolve from an insurgency into what it perceives as a state and to justify the expropriation of land.

The violent governance practices of ISIS in Iraq and Syria are based on the group's "Documents of the City", which were issued in 2014 to residents of the group's declared territories. Stating the obligations for life in the so-called Islamic state, these constitution-

1 "The Fifth Column: Understanding the Relationship Between Corruption and Conflict", Transparency International, July 2017, http://ti-defence.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/The_Fifth_Column_Web.pdf. For a comparison of ISIS propaganda with that of other groups, see El-Badawy, Comerford and Welby, *Inside the Jihadi Mind*.

2 Voltaire Network, "Proclamation of the Caliphate", 1 July 2014, <http://www.voltairenet.org/article184550.html>.

like texts also listed punishments, which ranged from amputation and exile to lashing and death.

In 2016, ISIS released a document entitled “Clarification [regarding] the hudud” to serve as a reminder and warning to those under the group’s governance. The hudud, or list of punishments, is derived from a literalist interpretation of Islam that exploits historical narratives and fails to take historical context into account. Many of the punishments listed have been codified into law in a number of Muslim-majority states. However, under ISIS, the frequency and severity of the punishments depicts an extreme level of barbarism embraced by an organisation that rejects contemporary positive law.

The gulf of difference between ISIS’s executions in Iraq and Syria highlights the variation in the group’s operations. In Syria, ISIS was responsible for at least 19 per cent of fatalities from executions. This is a significantly lower proportion than in Iraq. Activities in that country were restricted to the northern Nineveh province, from where ISIS regulated and controlled the behaviour of the population in a prized area. Over 47 per cent of ISIS executions were recorded in this province, where the group’s de facto capital of Mosul is located.

In Iraq, ISIS killed on average 12 people per execution, over five times more than in Syria. There, executions were spread across eight provinces in 2017, with the eastern town of Deir ez-Zor accounting for more than two-thirds. This uneven spread is symptomatic of the fragmented nature of ISIS’s operations in Syria in 2017. Over the year, the Syrian government wrested back territory from the group in many provinces, diluting its capacity to exercise authority and govern residents.

Further dissection of the data reveals similarities in the composition of the group’s victims. In both Iraq and Syria, ISIS killed militants in its own ranks. Additionally, over 77 per cent of those killed by ISIS in Syria were civilians, as opposed to people killed for being enemies or for renouncing membership of the group. In Iraq, the same targeting of civilians accounted for more than 87 per cent of ISIS’s executions. Despite losing territory in both countries in 2017, these high proportions of civilian targeting demonstrate how

ISIS harnesses authority and violence to offset territorial losses and a weakened image.

By providing a quasi-judiciary and enforcing governance, ISIS tries to legitimise itself in a region where corruption has been endemic. Before the group's emergence in Syria and Iraq, the two countries were ranked 168th and 171st respectively out of 177 in Transparency International's 2013 Corruption Perception Index.³

OTHER GROUPS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Although ISIS was the most active group to engage in executions across the Middle East, a further seven groups killed individuals after levelling accusations against them. Five of these were Syria-based groups that sought to establish an ultra-conservative Islamic system of governance: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Jaish Khalid ibn al-Walid, Jaish al-Islam, Ahrah al-Sham and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham.⁴ GEM research shows that 29 per cent of incidents carried out by these groups involved the executions of other members of violent Islamist groups or people belonging to rebel factions.

Hamas and the Houthis were the remaining groups in the Middle East that executed individuals in 2017. Hamas engaged in the executions of alleged spies and those suspected of collaborating with Israel, while the Houthis killed people on charges of rape. Although dissimilar in nature, these incidents highlight the severity of punishments handed down to individuals who fail to abide by the laws dictated by violent Islamist extremist groups.

GROUPS IN NORTH AFRICA

In North Africa, three of the five groups that executed individuals in 2017 were native to Libya: the Tariq ibn Ziyad Brigade, the jihadi alliance of the Shura Council of Mujahideen in Derna and ISIS in Libya. Ten of the 14 people executed in Libya were members of the

³ "Corruption Perceptions Index 2013", Transparency International, <https://www.transparency.org/cpi2013>.

⁴ For background on violent Islamist groups active in Syria, see *If the Castle Falls*, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.

anti-Islamist Libyan National Army, led by General Khalifa Haftar. Executions took place in four districts of Libya—Derna, Jufra, Tarnah and Ajdabiya—highlighting the diffuse nature of the country’s extremist dynamics.

Libya has been a fractured state since the 2011 ouster of leader Muammar Qaddafi, which led to a number of Salafi-jihadi groups feeding off the power vacuum, poor living standards and marginalisation of minorities. Many groups fighting across Libya have sought to install governance structures in the form of status, salaries and services. Meanwhile, harsh rule and summary executions have allowed Salafi-jihadi groups in Libya to stake a claim to a form of legitimacy amid the many actors seeking to gain power.

Jund al-Khalifah Algeria and ISIS in Sinai also executed individuals in North Africa in 2017. The latter executed 37 people throughout the year, and the nature of its killings is emblematic of the environments in which the group is immersed. Convolutional tribal dynamics and a strong military presence in northern Sinai have created fertile ground for mistrust.

GROUPS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab executed 82 people in 2017, and in a similar vein to ISIS, the group prioritised executions of civilians. At least 73 per cent of the group’s killings involved civilians. The group conducted many of its executions in front of local crowds, often followed by self-proclaimed al-Shabaab judges announcing the executions through the group’s radio station, Andalus. Making the public aware of the executions is crucial in al-Shabaab’s efforts to instil fear in local people. Al-Shabaab has been trying to impose its strict version of Islam across Somalia, and despite renewed efforts by the state to remove extremist elements, the group has still been capable of enforcing its own judicial system on local populations.

While al-Shabaab conducted nearly twice as many executions as any other sub-Saharan African extremist organisation, the GEM recorded a further four groups in the region that conducted executions in 2017: Boko Haram, Ansarul Islam, ISIS in Somalia and

JNIM. At least 88 people were killed in these acts of violence, with Boko Haram responsible for 80 per cent of these deaths.

Since 2014, Boko Haram has claimed to be targeting the Muslim “establishment” in Nigeria for not defending the population, accusing it of “corruption” and “perverting Islam”.⁵ Similarly, Islamic preacher Malam Ibrahim Dicko, the leader of Ansarul Islam, founded the group by denouncing corruption, inequality and abuses by the Malian state.⁶ Such rhetoric is characteristic of the sub-Saharan African groups in the GEM data sample. These groups regularly exploit what they perceive to be nations of weak governance, immoral culture and endemic corruption to garner local support.

GROUPS IN ASIA

Sixty-one people were executed in three Central and South Asian countries in 2017 at the hands of two groups: the Taliban and ISIS-Khorasan. With the exception of a Chinese couple killed in Balochistan, Pakistan, on charges of preaching, all ten of ISIS-Khorasan’s executions took place in Afghanistan. The Afghan-Pakistani faction sits as a small piece in ISIS’s global network of affiliates, which collectively seek an Islamic system of governance across the world. The Taliban, by contrast, ruled Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001 in what was known as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. The group commands a force of more than 60,000 militants, compared with ISIS-Khorasan’s much lower 1,000–2,000. As of early 2018, the Taliban controlled roughly 10–12 per cent of the Afghan population.⁷

Nearly one-third of the Taliban’s executions involved allegations of adultery. The group handed down punishments for lifestyle offences rather than crimes that inhibit its insurgency. Meanwhile,

5 David Choi, “ISIS’ deadliest ally has started fighting itself”, Business Insider, 15 September 2016, <http://uk.businessinsider.com/boko-haram-fighting-itself-2016-9>.

6 Human Rights Watch, “By Day We Fear the Army, By Night the Jihadists”, 21 May 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/05/21/day-we-fear-army-night-jihadists/abuses-armed-islamists-and-security-forces>.

7 Ben Brimelow, “ISIS wants to be as dangerous as the Taliban – but it’s not even close”, Business Insider, 11 February 2018, <http://uk.businessinsider.com/isis-taliban-afghanistan-terrorism-2018-2>.

69 per cent of those killed by ISIS-Khorasan were alleged to be spies. This may indicate the group's lack of support in Afghanistan, where the more extreme Wahhabi Salafi-jihadi tenets that ISIS-Khorasan espouses have created enmity towards it.

In East and Southeast Asia, Abu Sayyaf continued its trend of executing hostages it had kidnapped. The group regularly abducts individuals and then issues ransoms for their release. Failure to make the exact payment by deadlines set by the group has for the most part resulted in the deaths of the hostages. Following the beheading of German hostage Jürgen Kantner in February 2017, a government envoy said, "Up to the last moment, many sectors, including the armed forces, exhausted all efforts to save his life. We all tried our best but to no avail."⁸

⁸ "Philippine Abu Sayyaf jihadists behead German hostage in video", BBC, 27 February 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-39102762>.

ACCUSATIONS

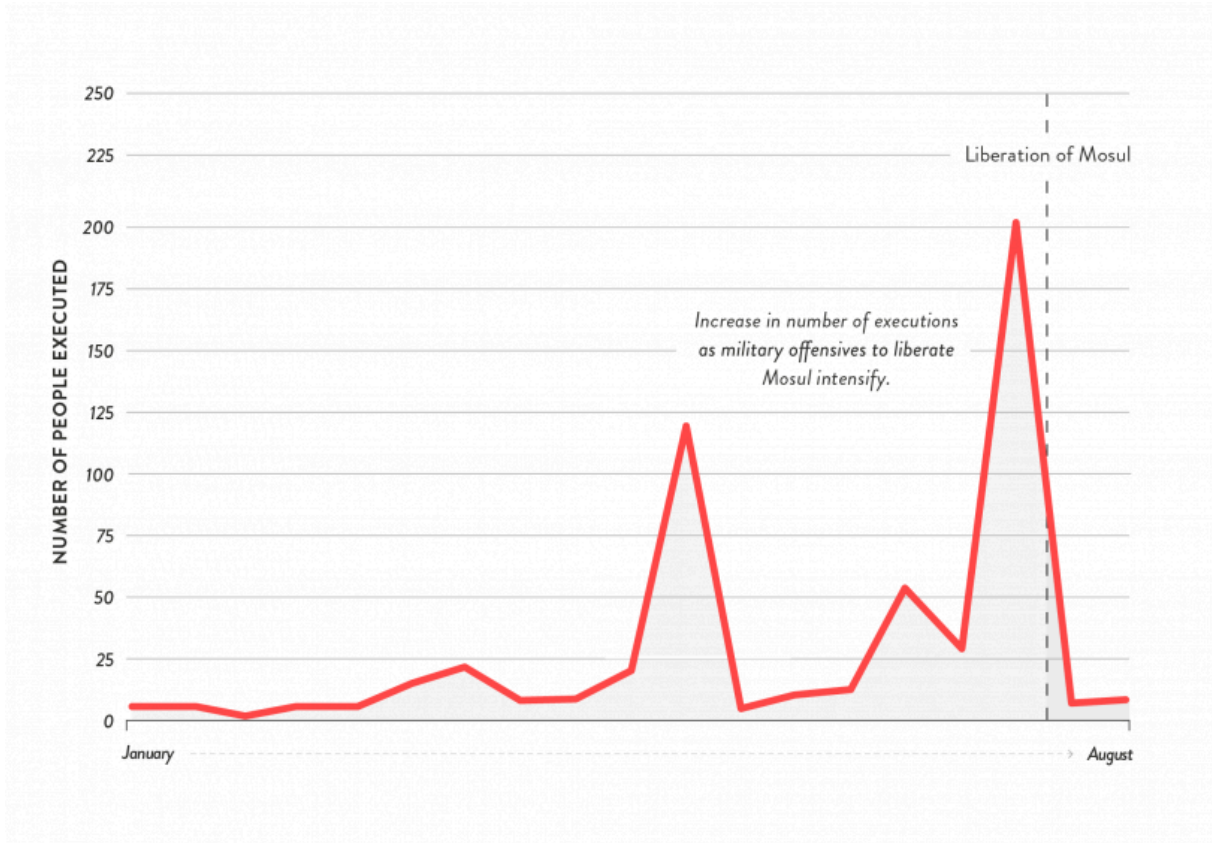
The GEM has found ideological endorsements in many of the executions conducted by groups in 2017. At the same time, groups often synchronised their killings to support a wider strategy. Consolidating authority, instilling fear and steering the behaviours of populations were some of the motivations for the executions recorded throughout the year.

FLEEING

ISIS in Iraq and Syria was the only group in 2017 to kill civilians attempting to flee a territorial stronghold. Although many were killed while doing so, the executions discussed here focus explicitly on those intercepted and charged with attempting to escape. These killings constituted 28 per cent of all data recorded on executions, emphasising the group's desire to maintain authority over residents of its territories. Most of these killings were carried out in Iraq. ISIS in Iraq and Syria was also the only group to execute militants seeking to desert the battlefield, according to the GEM.

Sixty per cent of these executions took place in and around Mosul, where ISIS occupied its largest urban stronghold in 2017. Although the 548 deaths occurred throughout the year, there was a surge during the anti-ISIS besiegement and heavy bombardment of the city from May (see figure 5.2). In the final weeks before the liberation of Mosul in July 2017, the GEM captured the executions of 200 Iraqi Turkmen, including women and children. ISIS had held the hostages in prison for two months for attempting to flee to safer regions. Given that prisons are often places where inmates can be indoctrinated with the ways of ISIS, with many ISIS clerics visiting prisoners, the removal and subsequent execution of these Turkmen reveals how ISIS prioritises its wider insurgent objectives—in this case, the need to instil fear and maintain control of a population that was seeking liberation—over the indoctrination of inmates.

Figure 5.2: Timeline of Executions of Civilians Attempting to Escape ISIS in Iraq and Syria, 2017



ISIS also forced residents to remain in the urban conflict zone of Mosul. Many of these inhabitants were used in coercive measures to ward off potential offensives against ISIS-held positions. ISIS is widely reported as using civilians as human shields. After an airstrike on the al-Aghawat al-Jadidah neighbourhood in western Mosul that left at least 230 civilians dead, the UN released a statement reaffirming that “international humanitarian law is clear” and “combatants cannot use people as human shields”.⁹ Many local people attempted to seek solace by trying to flee Mosul, despite the restrictions ISIS placed on them. In May, the group shot dead 13 civilians after they attempted to leave their houses. Later that month, ISIS executed 47, mainly women, children and elderly people as they tried to flee towards security forces.

By accusing and killing civilians attempting to leave the religious fold, ISIS can discourage others from escaping and label those who

⁹ “UN Expresses Profound Concern about Terrible Loss of Life in Western Mosul”, Relief Web, 24 March 2017, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/un-expresses-profound-concern-about-terrible-loss-life-western-mosul-enkuar>.

seek escape as weak in faith and treacherous. Sixteen-year-old Abdul Malik recalled an ISIS fighter saying, “You will never leave this house” and “We will die here, and so will you.”¹⁰ Orchestrating the movements of residents is a means to generate artificial and temporary defences, but at the same time, the group uses its brutality and religiosity to exploit civilians as instruments of its violent jihad. Attempting to leave, or failing to become a subject of the caliphate, is a crime in the group’s “Documents of the City”. Article 9 of ISIS’s penal code states that “God commands that you join the society [Islamic State] and renounce factions and strife. . . . Division is one of the traps of the devil.”¹¹

Seventy-six members of ISIS made efforts to leave the group’s stronghold in 2017, according to the GEM. As these events portray a weak and treacherous image of the group, many of them are unlikely to have reached the public domain. In May, ISIS ordered the execution of three of its own members after they attempted to escape the battlefield in Raqqa. The militants were accused of high treason and disloyalty to Baghdadi, and were subsequently shot dead in front of hundreds of locals in downtown Raqqa. According to ISIS propaganda, “The leader is required to ensure that he and his soldiers are held responsible for the rights that Allah has made obligatory and the limits that He has set.”¹² ISIS was the only group to execute people in its ranks on such charges. These findings add to the evidence that many who end up joining ISIS may fail to grasp the realities of daily life in the group.

Militants’ attempts to leave coincide with increased levels of state and nonstate military intervention. In May, seven members were executed for trying to flee during battle, as Iraqi forces conducted clearance operations in the last few districts held by the group in Mosul. Four senior leaders were killed for fleeing the group’s stronghold in Anbar, western Iraq. Such incidents reveal the merciless and intolerant nature of ISIS. It is clear that an individual’s

10 John Beck, “Battle for Mosul: ISIL’s human shields”, Al Jazeera, 6 March 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/03/battle-mosul-isil-human-shields-170305092224416.html>.

11 Mara Revkin, “The legal foundations of the Islamic State”, The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, analysis paper no. 23 (July 2016), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Brookings-Analysis-Paper_Mara-Revkin_Web.pdf.

12 Ibid.

status, rank and membership in the group become void on betrayal. The impression of fellowship and brotherhood is propagated merely as an illusory recruitment tool. According to one ISIS defector who admitted succumbing to the extremist group's propaganda, "There are many people in ISIS like me. Tens of thousands. If they'd known the truth they wouldn't have joined."¹³

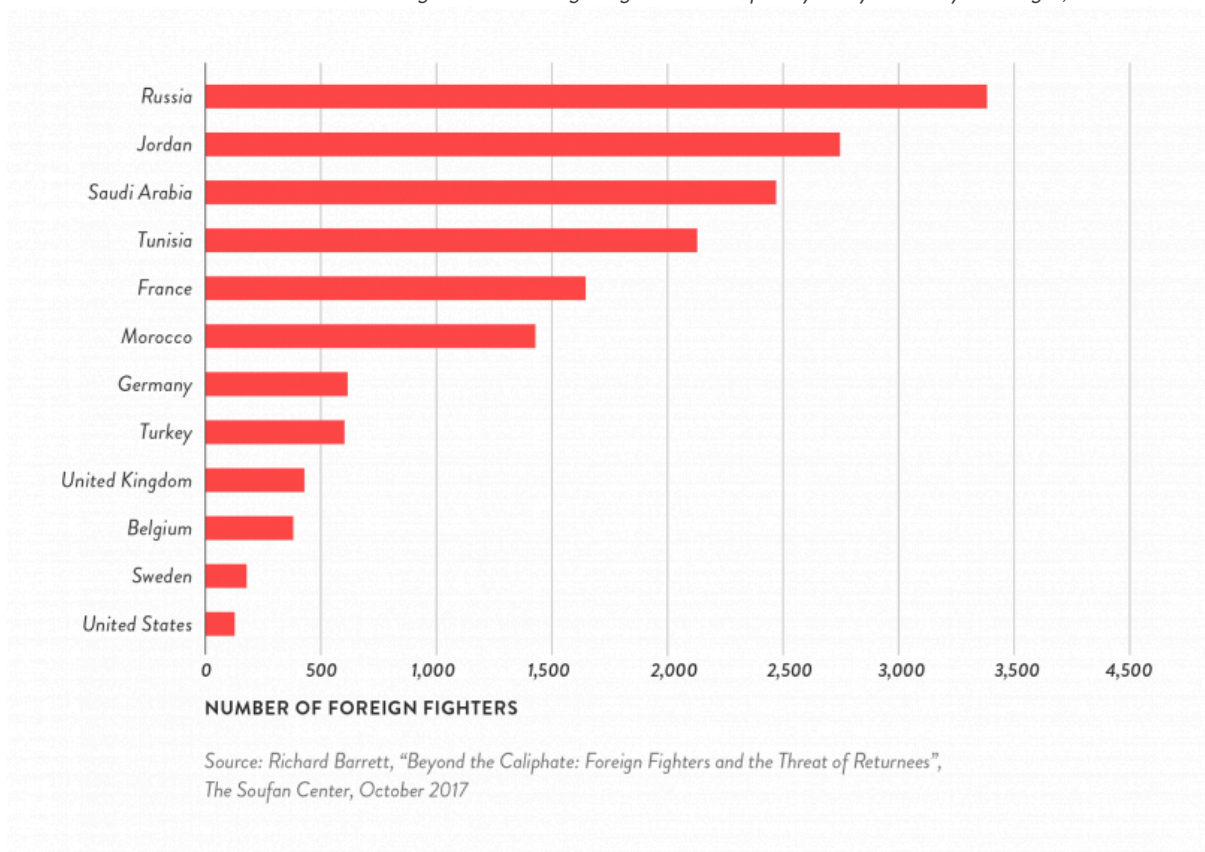
Up to 30,000 foreign fighters from over 100 countries are believed to have travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight with ISIS and other violent Islamist groups (see figure 5.3).¹⁴ Many decide to make the journey after being swayed by the narratives of success and utopia projected by extremist groups. The reality is a brutal environment in which existential dedication to the group's ideology and universal worldview is the single most important factor. Only the most committed members can continue with ISIS as the group begins its next phase as an insurgency after the fall of the so-called caliphate. Meanwhile, up to 2.6 million residents who were forced to live under the group's ultraconservative vision of an Islamic state remained displaced in Iraq as of January 2018.¹⁵

13 Holly Williams, "ISIS kills 'anyone who argues with them,' says defector", CBS News, 10 March 2017, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/isis-kills-anyone-who-argues-with-them-says-defector/>.

14 Martin Chulov, Jamie Grierson and Jon Swaine, "Isis faces exodus of foreign fighters as its 'caliphate' crumbles", Independent, 26 April 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/26/isis-exodus-foreign-fighters-caliphate-crumbles>.

15 "Iraqis returning home outnumber displaced for first time since 2013, says UN migration agency", United Nations: Humanitarian Aid, 12 January 2018, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/01/1000302>.

Figure 5.3: Foreign Fighters in Iraq or Syria by Country of Origin, October 2017



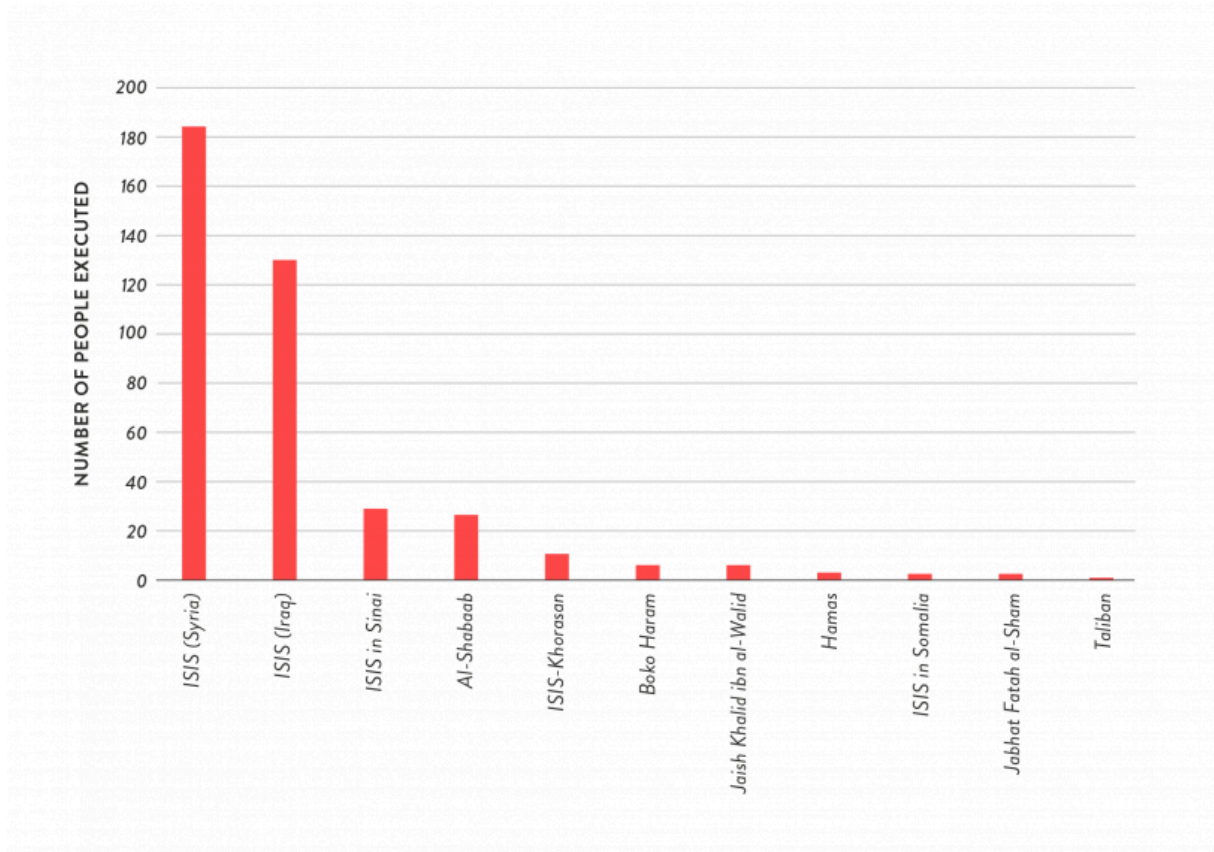
SPYING

Executions of those charged with spying and with passing information to and collaborating with perceived enemies are symptomatic of the mistrust and paranoia that engulf militant insurgencies. Seventeen per cent of all executions recorded by the GEM were of people who had been accused of spying. This category extends beyond ISIS in Iraq and Syria and includes a further 11 violent Islamist extremist groups. Many of the groups that accuse people of being spies are engaged in conflicts involving multiple state and nonstate actors. The accused include civilians and militants.

ISIS was responsible for 66 per cent of all those executed on charges of spying (see figure 5.4). "Spying for unbelievers" is listed as a crime punishable by death in "Clarification [regarding] the hudud". The executions of 134 people in Iraq and 194 in Syria point to a fundamental mistrust among the group's insurgents. In

October, 128 civilians were executed in central Homs, Syria, during a three-week period. Of those, 83 were killed in the two days before the Syrian military retook the town from ISIS. The group accused the victims of being “agents of the regime”.¹⁶

Figure 5.4: Groups Responsible for Executions on Charges of Spying, 2017



In January, two men were crucified after claims they supported the People’s Protection Units (YPG), a Kurdish militia, and the US-led coalition. The following month, militants drowned 13 civilians in central Mosul on charges of collaborating with security forces. According to Article 2 of the ISIS penal code, “We show mercy to a Muslim, unless he has apostatized or given aid to criminals.”¹⁷ The severe punishments handed down to those accused of spying can be considered attempts to dissuade others from engaging in similar

16 “ISIS Reportedly Killed 128 People In Syrian Town Over 3-Week Period”, Huffington Post, 23 October 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/syria-isis-massacre_us_59edc0f0e4b00f08619fd078.

17 “Mara Revkin, “Does the Islamic State Have a ‘Social Contract’? Evidence from Iraq and Syria”, University of Gothenburg Program on Governance and Local Development, working paper 9 (2016), <https://mararevkin.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/gld-wp9.pdf>.

acts of espionage, which ISIS sees as an activity that threatens its version of a state.

These punishments reinforce another key point: ISIS is not as strong or as unified as it appears. In April, eight members of the group, including senior commander Abu Abdul-Rahman al-Hayali, were killed on charges of leaking information to Iraqi security forces. This highlights not only the divisions between members of the group but also the extent to which extremists offset paranoia to enforce loyalty.

ISIS's affiliate in Egypt's Sinai province was responsible for 11 per cent of executions on charges of spying in 2017. The vast majority of those killed were accused of collaborating with the Egyptian army and government. The group executed five civilians in February it claimed had been spying for the army, and in June, ISIS released a photo of a beheaded individual the group suspected of being an agent for the Egyptian intelligence services and police.

Egypt's Sinai province harbours a myriad of actors engaged in high-intensity conflict, including Bedouin tribespeople whom ISIS has sought to radicalise and recruit. However, many of these indigenous groups also actively oppose the group's efforts to "burn, kill and rob in the name of religion", in the words of Tarabin tribe leader Ibrahim al-Rajai.¹⁸ GEM data confirm the intertwining of actors in this region, which has potentially encouraged the group to seek out infiltrators and spies.

Al-Shabaab also conducted executions against alleged spies in 2017. The group accounted for 7 per cent of the total number executed on these charges, killing 18. In December, the group executed five civilians who confessed to leaking information to intelligence services in Somalia, the United States and Jubbaland, an autonomous region in southern Somalia. Seven people were executed in separate incidents following accusations of collaboration with Ethiopian and Kenyan troops.

Much like the ISIS executions, al-Shabaab killed the accused in front of local crowds. Al-Shabaab demands subservience from

¹⁸ Yoni Ben Menachem, "Sinai Bedouin Aligning with Egypt Against ISIS", Institute for Contemporary Affairs 17, no. 9 (May 2017), <http://jcpa.org/article/sinai-bedouin-aligning-egypt-isis/>.

Somali communities, and executions aim to shore up civic obedience through fear. With at least 21,000 troops of the African Union Mission in Somalia operating across the war-ravaged country, and more than 500 US troops stationed there, al-Shabaab strives to eliminate the potential for civilians to engage with those fighting the group. Mitigating the risk of collaboration with the authorities is a key factor in the group's ability to exercise jurisdiction and realise its vision of an Islamic state in Somalia.

A further eight extremist organisations were recorded to have conducted executions of alleged spies in 2017: ISIS-Khorasan, Boko Haram, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (which became Hayat Tahrir al-Sham), Jaish Khalid ibn al-Walid, Hamas, the Taliban, JNIM and ISIS's nascent faction in Somalia. With the exception of ISIS in Somalia, whose activities are confined to the north of the country, all extremist groups in this list are regularly confronted by state and nonstate actors. Such environments have the potential to breed mistrust and tenuous alliances. In this context, executions on charges of spying are a key tactic that violent Islamist extremist organisations use to impose loyalty on their ranks, deprive local people of their liberty and consolidate their jurisdiction.

CRIMINALITY

Attempts to replicate a form of law and order serve as a foundation for violent Islamist extremist groups to create an Islamic society in their areas of control. The GEM has explored these groups' efforts to govern citizens and has dissected the allegations made against them. A fervent desire to join such strict Islamic societies is what drove many people to journey to conflict zones and subscribe to the ideological vision of extremist organisations.¹⁹

The GEM recorded the deaths of individuals executed on charges of adultery, sorcery, drug dealing, blasphemy and murder. Many of these charges are proscribed in the religious texts of Islam. Twelve violent Islamist extremist organisations conducted executions on such charges in 2017, according to the GEM. These groups espouse varying ideologies, from the Zaidi revivalism that guides the Houthi movement to the Salafi-jihadi thread that underpins Tahrir al-Sham

¹⁹ For background on the importance of recruitment and conflict hubs in the building of a global jihadi network, see Ahmed, Comerford and El-Badawy, *Milestones to Militancy*.

in Syria. However, the consensus shared by these groups is a desire to implement an interpretation of divine sharia law to create what they see as a just and righteous Islamic state.

Adultery and Rape

Five groups executed 26 people on charges of adultery and rape in 2017: al-Shabaab, the Taliban, the Houthis, Tahrir al-Sham and ISIS. Adultery and rape are strictly forbidden under Islamic sharia law; these crimes belong to the hudud punishments, which are considered fixed and mandated by God. Extremist groups attempt to emulate the period of conflict during the time of the Prophet Mohammad, with misinterpretations of this era providing ISIS with a justification to enforce archaic practices. For example, ISIS has enslaved scores of women, particularly from Iraq's Yazidi population, many of whom have been raped and tortured by members of the group on the grounds that they are spoils of war.²⁰ In Nigeria, Boko Haram members have raped kidnapped women and girls and forced to them marry militants.²¹

Violent Islamist extremist groups regularly take justice into their own hands to consolidate a message of puritanical Islam. In Afghanistan, the Taliban has established a state within a state, with its own legal code. An example of this is the group's approach to adultery, on which its punishments are at odds with those of the central Afghan government. After the Taliban executed Amir Begum for adultery in February 2017, a spokesman for the Badakhshan provincial governor said, "We strongly condemned the brutal killing of Amir Begum in front of the eyes of her family members", adding that if there were any truth to the allegations, they should be taken up by a court, not by armed men.²²

20 David Barnett, "Women who are captured by Isis and kept as slaves endure more than just sexual violence", Independent, 29 November 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-sex-slaves-lamiya-aji-bashar-nadia-murad-sinjar-yazidi-genocide-sexual-violence-rape-sakharov-a7445151.html>.

21 Harriet Sherwood, "Boko Haram abductees tell of forced marriage, rape, torture and abuse", Guardian, 27 October 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/27/boko-haram-forced-marriage-rape-torture-abuse-hrw-report>.

22 "Taliban kill Afghan woman accused of adultery in northeast", Daily Mail, 1 February 2017, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-4179428/Afghan-official-Woman-killed-accused-adultery-Taliban.html>.

The Taliban was the only group to hand down a sentence other than stoning to those found guilty of adultery, killing two women and a man by gunfire. The Quran does not mention stoning specifically as a punishment for any crime, but all schools of jurisprudence agree to the stoning of offenders who are “adult, free, Muslim, and . . . married”, on the basis of the Hadith, a collection of traditions containing sayings of the Prophet Mohammad.²³ ISIS and al-Shabaab executed individuals by stoning in 2017 after processing the claims through their quasi-judicial courts. In October, al-Shabaab publicly stoned a woman for having an extramarital affair. The group’s district governor for the Jubba region, Sheikh Mohamed Abu Abdalla, said, “Her legal husband brought the case to the court. She admitted she illegally married a second husband.”²⁴

Sorcery

The belief in polytheism or engaging in acts considered idolatrous, such as sorcery, witchcraft and black magic, is strictly forbidden in Islam. The GEM recorded four groups that executed a total of seven individuals for engaging in such acts in 2017: ISIS in Iraq and Syria, ISIS-Khorasan, ISIS in Sinai and Jaish Khalid ibn al-Walid, which was active in southern Syria. On sentencing two Sufi men in Egypt’s Sinai to death by decapitation, ISIS in Sinai militants said the crime had been committed on the basis of “apostasy, sorcery, claiming the ability to tell the future, and leading people to polytheism”.²⁵ ISIS deems adherents of Sufism, an approach in Islam that promotes mystic rituals for worship, to be sorcerers and heretics.

Similarly, talismans are considered haram and a form of shirk—the worship of anyone or anything besides Allah. The GEM recorded the death of a man at the hands of ISIS-Khorasan who was executed in Sar-e Pol, Afghanistan, for allegedly offering talismans to locals.

23 P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs, *Encyclopaedia of Islam* Second Edition (Leiden: E. J. Brill).

24 “Somalia’s al Shabaab stones woman to death for cheating on husband”, Reuters, 26 October 2017, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-somalia-violence/somalias-al-shabaab-stones-woman-to-death-for-cheating-on-husband-idUKKBN1CV304>.

25 “Islamic State beheads two for ‘sorcery’ in Egypt’s Sinai”, Reuters, 29 March 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-egypt-insurgency/islamic-state-beheads-two-for-sorcery-in-egypts-sinai-idUSKBN16Z2PX>.

Although uncharacteristic of ISIS-Khorasan, which tends to focus its punishments on defectors or spies, this incident highlights the rigid view ISIS holds of those who fail to follow the strict, monotheistic practices in its interpretation of Islam. In Syria, ISIS executed individuals for similar acts deemed un-Islamic. Three people were executed by the group in 2017 after they were accused of being wizards and performing magic.

Drug Dealing

Al-Shabaab was the only group documented by the GEM to have accused and executed people for selling drugs. In May, two men were beheaded by the group for dealing khat, a leaf-based stimulant. Al-Shabaab has deemed the drug haram and in 2012 banned the chewing and trading of the plant in many of the group's strongholds.²⁶ Despite al-Shabaab's imposition of rules regarding the taking and selling of narcotics, and its attempts to control Somalis' day-to-day activities, security professionals have argued that the trade in such drugs is in fact a funding source for the group's terrorist activities in Somalia.²⁷

Blasphemy

The GEM recorded eight cases of people being executed on charges of blasphemy in 2017. The Quran reprimands those guilty of such crimes, but it is only in the Hadith that death is suggested as a punishment.²⁸ Violent Islamist extremists killed 11 people for engaging in such acts, with Jaish Khalid ibn al-Walid executing five of them. The group seeks to implement sharia law in areas under its control, enforcing a strict dress code and schedules for prayer. In July, militants shot a man at point-blank range over accusations of blasphemy. The group later released photos of the killing and stated that any person who insults Allah will face death.

ISIS in Iraq and Syria also executed people deemed guilty of insulting God, the prophet and Islam. The group executed six people

26 "Somalia: Al Shabab Bans Chewing, Selling Khat", allAfrica, 12 April 2012, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201204121072.html>.

27 Naomi Grimley, "Khat ban: Why is it being made illegal?", BBC, 21 June 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-27921832>.

28 Jonathan Fox, *Political Secularism, Religion, and the State: A Time Series Analysis of Worldwide Data* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 83.

on these charges in 2017, including one in November for insulting Allah and another in July for cursing God. ISIS's "Documents of the City" states that blasphemy of God and of Islam requires punishment by death. For individuals accused of blasphemy against Allah, death is served not only to those who are guilty but also to those who repent for such actions. ISIS believes that it is a religious obligation to declare a caliphate and that the rules and regulations governing the so-called Islamic state are inherent in God's law. Therefore, to undermine and defame the name of God is the ultimate sin, and ISIS has shown it will condemn anyone who commit such crimes to a violent death.

Murder

In January 2017, ISIS executed two men in Raqqa on murder charges. The group claimed the accused had broken "into the homes of Muslims . . . attacking their owners and killing them".²⁹ The group also punished militants for similar crimes, executing five members by firing squad for the murder of another militant. The members were executed in front of locals—a warning that the so-called caliphate will impose its law on its entire population, regardless of their membership of ISIS as a group.

REBELLIOUS ACTS

Extremists pursue a puritanical form of Islam that they use to proselytise followers. While many people reject such pathways from the outset, those who adhere initially may come to renounce the ideology over time. In extremist-held areas, such renunciation carries life-threatening consequences.

Refusing to Join

The GEM found that 45 people were executed in Iraq in 2017 for refusing to join ISIS. Since the group began to misappropriate land across the Middle East and North Africa, ISIS has sought to consolidate its ranks and increase the number of fighters at its disposal. In 2014 it was reported that the group boasted up to 31,500 fighters across Iraq and Syria.³⁰ However, following an increase in military efforts to eradicate the group, estimates at the

²⁹ "Casualties in violent counter attacks in the western countryside of Al-Raqqa", Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 25 January 2017, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=59764>.

end of 2017 placed the number of remaining fighters in the low thousands.³¹

In 2017, reports of forced conscription surfaced.³² After the liberation of Mosul, ISIS circulated a statement in Deir ez-Zor calling for all men aged between 20 and 30 to take up arms against Syrian government forces. Such tactics intensified once it became clear the group was losing fighters at an increasing rate in Iraq and Syria. Yet at the same time, many recruits refused to subscribe to the group's hard-line form of Islam.

In April 2017, three months before Mosul was captured by an alliance of military actors, 42 men were executed for refusing to join the group. Furthermore, one source revealed that “[ISIS] militants in Mosul are looking for women to get [the men] involved in the so-called jihadul Nikah [sexual jihad]”.³³ Sexual jihad refers to the practice of women either being forced or offering voluntarily to be married to militants. In the case of the 42 men executed, ISIS used sexual jihad to entice fighters to take up arms; when the men still refused to do so, they were executed.

This episode depicts not only the measures ISIS employs to motivate its militants but also the tactics to which it resorts at times of desperation. Such cases are revealing of the realities of fighting against an entity such as ISIS. In a context where the numbers of militants are unpredictable and difficult to ascertain, the response must consist of multifaceted military strategies that take into account the impulsive nature of the group's operations.

Disobeying Orders

30 Jim Sciutto, Jamie Crawford and Chelsea J. Carter, “ISIS can ‘muster’ between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters, CIA says”, CNN, 12 September 2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/11/world/meast/isis-syria-iraq/index.html>

31 Greg Myre, “Where Did All The Islamic State Fighters Go?”, NPR, 1 January 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2018/01/01/574967338/where-did-the-islamic-state-fighters-go>.

32 “Isis leaders begin forcibly conscripting Syrian civilians in unprecedented move”, Independent, 4 August 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-leaders-syria-conscription-civilians-raqqa-deir-ez-zor-us-led-coalition-forces-syrian-army-iraq-a7876606.html>.

33 Nehal Mostafa, “42 civilians executed over refusal to join IS in Mosul”, Iraqi News, 22 April 2017, <https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/42-civilians-executed-refusal-join-mosul/>.

Similarly, the GEM recorded the deaths of 65 people at the hands of three extremist groups for not following instructions. ISIS executed 87 per cent of these people, including 14 of its own members. In July, the group shot dead five ISIS members for their reluctance to fulfil duties as instructed by the group. One month later, ISIS killed five of its own leaders for similar crimes.

Civilians were the most vulnerable when it came to receiving orders. The most notable incident the GEM recorded occurred in March, when the group shot dead 23 civilians for refusing to evacuate their homes in Mosul and move to other districts with the militants. Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram also executed civilians for failing to take orders, with the latter killing eight men after they tried to defy the group's sharia police. In a video of the execution published shortly afterwards, a militant is heard saying, "These people are not different from vigilantes fighting us, spies and Nigerian soldiers."³⁴

Disrupting Operations

The executions of 18 individuals for engaging in other acts deemed rebellious further illustrates locals' hostility towards violent Islamist extremist groups. In 2017, ISIS in Iraq and Syria and Tahrir al-Sham killed individuals for attempting to derail their operations. ISIS executed five people in February on the charge of forming anti-ISIS cells and plotting assassinations against the organisation. In September, the Salafi-jihadi coalition of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham was suspected of slaughtering a school principal who was accused of insulting and strongly criticising the group.

Many groups also accused people of being rebellious. In July, ISIS leader Abu Qutaiba was alleged to have been stirring sedition through a Friday prayer sermon by inadvertently suggesting Baghdadi had been killed. Shortly afterwards, the militant was arrested and burned to death in the group's Tal Afar stronghold.

34 Ananya Roy, "Boko Haram executes 8 people in northeast Nigeria for opposing Sharia law", International Business Times, 13 July 2017, <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/boko-haram-executes-8-people-northeast-nigeria-opposing-sharia-law-1630111>.

THE FULL REPORT

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This fifth part of the Global Extremism Monitor 2017 examines how violent Islamist organisations use executions for strategic aims. Twenty-one groups conducted executions in 15 countries in 2017.

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