

# MP-IDSA *Commentary*

## The Islamic State and Europe

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### *Summary*

European countries have put in place enhanced security policies to deal with the threat posed by the Islamic State sympathisers.

The Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), located in Afghanistan, has focused on recruitment and mobilisation from around the region, including Central Asia and the Caucasus. It has also made overtures to supporters in Europe to commit acts of terrorism across the European continent.<sup>1</sup> The ISKP has threatened to carry out attacks against events such as music concerts and sports events.

This is, however, not a new tactic of the Islamic State, as the group or its various vilayets have attempted attacks on sporting events before. In 2015, it carried out attacks at the Stade De France and the Bataclan Theatre that led to the death of 131 people and injured over 400. Attacks by ISIS members/sympathisers have also occurred in Dortmund, Germany (2017) and in Brussels, Belgium (2023). On 23 August 2024, in the German city of Solingen, three people were killed in a knife attack by an Islamic State supporter. The threat posed by ISKP sympathisers have raised concerns in European countries.

## Islamic State Motives

The IS, across its various vilayets, has drawn motivation from past events or current geopolitical complexities. Its 22 March 2024 attack on the Crocus City Hall in Moscow was attributed to Russia’s past military campaign in Afghanistan, its involvement in Syria and its actions in Chechnya. The IS has called for lone-wolf attacks against Jews and Christians in Europe in response to Israel’s military action in the Gaza Strip.<sup>2</sup> It has urged its followers and sympathisers to take “practical steps to fight the Jews”.<sup>3</sup> IS propaganda mouthpieces highlight Western military support for Israel.<sup>4</sup>

The group uses past incidents such as the Bosnia massacres after the collapse of the Yugoslav state to radicalise individuals. It also glorifies incidents such as the 2015 Paris attacks, to create new narratives and recruit new cadres. IS propaganda outlets justified the killing of two Swedish citizens in Belgium in 2023 on account of the controversial Quran burning incidents in Sweden and Denmark. Pro-ISIS Al-'Adiyat Foundation, an online media organisation, has targeted the Swedish leadership for allowing Quran burnings and asked people to attack the ‘crusaders’ in Sweden and across Europe.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> **“Intel Brief: Islamic State Khorasan Province Poses a Unique Counterterrorism Challenge”**, The Soufan Centre, 10 April 2024.

<sup>2</sup> **“ISIS Calls For Jihad in Europe to Avenge Muslim Deaths in the Gaza Strip”**, The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 4 September 2024; Jason Burke, **“Al-Qaida and IS Call On Followers to Strike Israeli, US and Jewish Targets”**, *The Guardian*, 22 October 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Jason Burke, **“Al-Qaida and IS Call On Followers to Strike Israeli, US and Jewish Targets”**, no. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Smith, Levent Kemal and Lucas Webber, **“Islamic State Khorasan’s Westward Network Expansion Into Iran, Turkey, and Europe”**, *The Diplomat*, 30 April 2024.

<sup>5</sup> **“Pro-Islamic State (ISIS) Media Foundation Threatens Swedish Prime Minister, Calls On Muslims in Sweden and Europe to Attack ‘Crusaders’”**, *Jihad and Terrorism Monitor*, The Middle East Media Research Institute, 13 March 2023.

## Islamic State Propaganda

The Islamic State has been actively using social media platforms such as Telegram and other tools to spread its ideology and attempt to radicalise individuals. Different social media outlets, including TikTok and Telegram, along with its own magazines such as the *Voice of Khorasan*, have been used to spread its message. Since 2022, the Al-Azaim Foundation, which is run by the ISKP, has aggressively ramped up media production in multiple languages, including English.<sup>6</sup>

The Islamic State has focused on using various local languages to further its propaganda, as evident from multiple propaganda pieces in Tajik, Arabic, Pashtun, Bengali and Hindi which the group uses to connect with individuals living in Europe and the West. The group has published books, magazines and translations of its media material and provided subtitles and voice narration in English to connect with a large international audience.<sup>7</sup> This is done mainly through the *Voice of Khorasan* magazine, the flagship publication, with the objective being to connect with more radicalised elements in Europe and the West.

Apart from the *Voice of Khorasan*, the Islamic State has also used the I'lam Foundation to spread propaganda in Europe. Unlike the Al-Azaim Foundation,<sup>8</sup> the I'lam Foundation acts as a dark web channel and sets up crypto wallets to raise funds. It acts as a repository and distribution channel for its propaganda and collects cryptocurrency funds for operations.<sup>9</sup> The I'lam Foundation also acts as an archive of the Islamic State's past print and video media content in various languages in addition to the regular translations of the newly added materials.

The group has posted propaganda in various European languages, such as French and Spanish, to radicalise and further the cause of the IS. Another major outlet used by the Islamic State has been a coalition of independent propaganda collective called the 'Fursan al-Tarjuma' (Knights of Translation). The collective created in 2023 has merged 14 Islamic state entities, including Al-Azaim, to produce propaganda in 18 languages, including in English (Halummu) and in French (French Centre Mediatique An-Nur), which are both jihadi translation services used by the Islamic State.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lucas Webber and Laith Alkhouri, **“ISKP Ups Status in Global IS Media Ecosystem, Boosts Relations with Translation and Archival Platform”**, *Militant Wire*, 5 July 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Al Azaim Foundation came into focus in 2021 after the Taliban shift to power in Afghanistan, functioning within the framework of the ISKP. Al-Azaim Foundation is not considered the main propaganda arm of the ISKP but it publishes the bulk of the group's original content. The production house plays a vital role in the spread of Islamic State propaganda globally and has been translated into 12 languages. See Abdul Basit, **“Afghanistan-Pakistan's Radical Social Media Ecosystem: Actors, Propaganda Comparison and Implications”**, *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* (CTTA), Vol. 15, No. 4, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, September 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Laith Alkhouri and Lucas Webber, **“I'lam Foundation for Translations Emerges as a Boon to Pro-Islamic State Media Ecosystem”**, *Militant Wire*, 18 April 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Lucas Webber and Daniele Garofalo, **“Fursan al-Tarjuma Carries the Torch of Islamic State's Media Jihad”**, *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*, 5 June 2023.

## Government Responses

One of Europe's steadfast reactions to the Islamic State threats has been to raise the terrorism alert level. In August 2023, Sweden raised its threat level to 4, in the aftermath of the Quran burning incidents. The Netherlands also raised its terrorism alert level to 4 in December 2023. Threat level 4 is the second highest response level to a threat situation on a five-tier scale. Spain has maintained a level 4 security alert since the 2015 Paris attacks. Countries such as France and the United Kingdom have deployed additional security personnel to protect large gatherings, including sporting events. The ISKP issued threats against Germany, which hosted the EURO football tournament in the summer of 2024.

In recent times, European countries have taken significant actions to counter the threat posed by IS propaganda activities. Germany, Spain, Netherlands, Iceland and the US took down IS propaganda websites in June 2024. Seven radicalised individuals were arrested. The propaganda outlets focused on French, English, Spanish, German and Danish content.<sup>11</sup> The European Union has also put counter-terrorism as a priority with member states working closely with one another to prevent terror attacks and ensure safety of the population. These efforts have been prevalent since the terror attacks in Paris in 2015, and extra efforts were made in 2020 post attacks in Germany, France and Austria.

With rising terror attacks in Europe since 2023, the member states have upped the ante and ensured there is effective information sharing to track terror activities.<sup>12</sup> There is also cooperation with non-EU countries such as the Western Balkans, North Africa, the Sahel region and the Horn of Africa.<sup>13</sup> There is increased intelligence collaboration and monitoring the activities of IS-affiliated suspects living in Europe. Collaboration and information sharing will continue to determine the long-term success of curbing terrorism in Europe, especially given the pan-European focus of the Islamic State.

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<sup>11</sup> **“Major Takedown of Critical Online Infrastructure to Disrupt Terrorist Communications and Propaganda”**, *Europol*, 14 June 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Nigel Howard, **“Amidst Complex Threats, How Can the EU Fight Terrorism More Effectively?”**, *Centre for European Reform*, 30 August 2024.

<sup>13</sup> **“The EU's Response to Terrorism”**, *European Council*, 18 December 2024.

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