

Post-2017 ISIS Tactics and Provincial Religious Composition in Iraq

TPR Research Paper #1

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Abstract

Following the territorial decline of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its transformation into a guerrilla movement after Iraqi security forces recaptured Mosul in 2017, comprehending the tactics used by the group remains as crucial as ever. This essay delves into ISIS tactics in Iraq after the liberation of Mosul, with a focus on explosive attacks targeting civilians. Specifically, it investigates the potential correlation between these tactics and the religious diversity of provinces. Examination of data on ISIS explosive attacks until the end of 2020 reveals discernible patterns. While most attacks occur in the religiously mixed governorates of Diyala and Baghdad, the deadliest incidents occur in Shi'a-dominated areas in southern Iraq. Regions with a Sunni majority witness fewer attacks on civilians as a percentage. This study addresses a gap in the literature by providing insights into ISIS' post-2017 tactics in Iraq, contributing to a better understanding of contemporary terrorism dynamics.

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1.0 Introduction

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) caused a global panic following their rapid capture of territories across Iraq and Syria in 2014 and 2015, whereby in May 2015 the so-called Caliphate controlled roughly 40% of Iraq and 30% of Syria.¹ Iraqi forces, notably the regular army, the irregular militias comprising Popular Mobilisation Forces, and the Kurdish Peshmerga with support from Western airstrikes managed to capture the Caliphate's former capital by Iraqi on July 20th 2017.² This marked the transition of ISIS from a territorial-holding, quasi-state, to a guerrilla movement active all around Iraq, turning the war against ISIS into what is still today known as the IS Insurgency in Iraq.³

The tactics used by terrorist organisations vary by time and place, and this is exactly what this essay seeks to comprehend. What have ISIS tactics looked like since the liberation of Mosul in 2017? More specifically, is there a relationship between the religious demographics of differing provinces in Iraq and the deadliness and frequency of explosive attacks targeting civilians? This essay seeks to look at every ISIS explosive attack between the liberation of Mosul and the end of 2020 to discern whether there is a relationship between ISIS tactics and provincial religious diversity. The data suggests that explosive attacks attributed to ISIS most frequently occur in the religiously mixed regions of Diyala⁴ and Baghdad,⁵ whereas the deadliest attacks tend to occur in Iraq's Shi'a-dominated south. Whilst Iraq's majority-Sunni west and North indeed see the most attacks occur, as a percentage, fewer attacks target civilians.

¹ Cameron Glenn, "Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State," *Wilson Center*, 2016, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>.

² Jayson Geroux and John Spencer, "Urban Warfare Project Case Study #2: Battle of Mosul," *Modern War Institute*, September 15, 2021, <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/urban-warfare-project-case-study-2-battle-of-mosul/>.

³ Menmy, Dana. "What's Driving an Is Insurgency in Iraq and Syria?" *The New Arab*, January 3, 2023. <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/whats-driving-insurgency-iraq-and-syria>.

⁴ Michael Knights and Alex Mello, "Losing Mosul, Regenerating in Diyala: How the Islamic State Could Exploit Iraq's Sectarian Tinderbox," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 10 (October 2016). 2

⁵ Fanar Haddad, "Shia-Centric State Building and Sunni Rejection in Post-2003 Iraq," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, January 7, 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/01/07/shia-centric-state-building-and-sunni-rejection-in-post-2003-iraq-pub-62408>.

The study of terrorist tactics is not new, political scientists and analysts seek to understand the dynamics of conflict everywhere, but as of yet, no papers have sought to analyse ISIS' post-2017 tactics in Iraq.

2.0 Literature Review

This section of the paper will review the current literature on terrorist tactics, narrowing it down to ISIS tactics, where I will expose the gap in the academic literature that this paper will address.

2.1 Terrorist Tactics and Ideology

The first section of this literature review will position the relevant academia on the relationship between terrorist tactics and ideology. Ideology is identified as a 'significant' determinant of the tactics and operations of armed groups within civil wars,⁶ and more broadly within the study of political violence in an article by Sanin and Wood. The authors highlight the obvious role that ideology has played in some of the worst forms of political violence and genocide that have occurred within the last 80 years.⁷ On the topic of religiously motivated terrorism and political violence, it is argued that religion provides members of violent religious groups with guidance on where and how they can fight and can play a crucial role in determining out-group and in-group.⁸ This assessment of ideology, particularly religious ideology, may play a crucial role in understanding the role that ISIS' *takfiri* ideology may play in the greater targeting of certain religious groups over others. The article naturally takes a constructivist approach but does leave room for more realist counter-arguments, notably that groups or leaders may change ideologies to gain more power, and that ideological factors may not always explain violence conducted by non-state armed actors. An article by Choi and Acosta titled *Sunni Suicide Attacks and Sectarian Violence* argues that the prevalence of sectarian conflict between Sunni Muslims and non-Sunni Muslims is a positive predictor of forthcoming suicide bombings. The authors use the data collected and their analysis to contend that "fundamentalist Sunni Muslims employ suicide

⁶ Francisco Gutiérrez Sanin, and Elisabeth Jean Wood, "Ideology in Civil War: Instrumental Adoption and Beyond," *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 213–26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24557417>.

⁷ Ibid, 217.

⁸ Ibid.

attacks as a political tool in sectarian violence”.⁹ Specifically, the authors claim that fundamentalist Sunni Muslims use these attacks to “kill, punish, and deter members of minority Muslim sects.”¹⁰ This article conducted a large *n*-analysis to analyse the relationship between sectarian violence and Sunni-fundamentalist suicide bombings from 1980 to 2016. This article hence captures a wide array of regional contexts and different groups, and observable commonalities are found between all of these contexts. As for the Iraq case (which is one of the case studies expanded upon), it can be implied from this research that Sunni extremist groups such as ISIS may be more inclined to target Shi’a Muslims in heterogeneous and Shi’a-dominated regions in Iraq. Despite the robustness of this study, a research gap does open up when seeking to understand the nature of suicide bombings employed by ISIS, or for that matter, any Sunni fundamentalist group, after 2016. This article does corroborate well with the ideas presented by Sanin and Wood. Both articles stress the importance that ideology can, or in the latter article, does have on the operations and tactics of a group. More specifically, as per the ideas presented by Choi and Acosta, ISIS’s framing of suicide attacks against non-Sunni Muslim religious groups as being part of their ideological quest to establish the caliphate¹¹ would suggest that religion does indeed, or at least can, play an arguably fundamental role in shaping the tactics of non-state armed actors such as ISIS. Despite this apparent plausibility, Choi and Acosta’s framing of Sunni violent extremism lacks nuance. The goal of establishing a caliphate has only been a recent development in the discourse of Sunni extremism, and the authors neglect to mention historical grievances (which may accompany more fundamentally Islamist political aspirations) that may also be central to the ideology, and hence operations, of terrorist groups. This may be relevant when seeking to analyse why ISIS targets Shi’a Muslims, which despite the overtly stated takfiri discourse that labels them as apostates, is also fuelled by

⁹ Seung-Whan Choi and Benjamin Acosta, "Sunni Suicide Attacks and Sectarian Violence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 7 (2020): 1372.

¹⁰ Ibid 1373

¹¹ Ibid

historical grievances following post-2003 power shifts in Iraq.¹² Despite these shortcomings, the article provides a robust framework and research design where it is evident that Sunni extremist groups do indeed target minority religious groups. This idea of ideology being central to the operations and tactics of a terrorist group is challenged by a more recent, opportunistic terrorism line of thought. This question is central to a paper written by Krishnan, Pedahzur, and Jenkins, where the question of suicide bombing being an inherently strategic tactic is questioned.¹³ The paper finds that suicide is indeed an opportunistic tactic, which suggests that ideology may not play as important a role in suicide bombings as others have previously suggested.

2.2 ISIS and Strategic Targeting

Narrowing down from the previous section of the literature review to a closer look at the current academia on ISIS, and the tactics they have employed. More specifically, literature on whether there may be any indication of the relationship between religious demographics and ISIS tactics will be reviewed. Ashour writes extensively about ISIS tactics in his chapter *Implodes but Expands: How the 'Islamic State' Fights in Iraq*. When looking at the Islamic State's insurgency (2017 onwards) tactics, Ashour writes, "By March 2020, a year after President Trump's aforementioned declaration, IS had claimed responsibility for 1,146 attacks in seven out the 19 Iraqi governorates; a sustained overall-average of three armed operations per day for 365 days."¹⁴ This shows that the Islamic State had remained ever active in their attacks against targets in Iraq, be they military, police, or civilian. This builds the case for the relevance of understanding ISIS post-2017 attacks. Furthermore, the author details a case where an ISIS cell

¹²Fannar Haddad, "Shia-Centric State Building and Sunni Rejection in Post-2003 Iraq"

¹³Sarat Krishnan, Ami Pedahzur, and Bobby Jenkins, "Suicide Attacks: Opportunistic Tactic or Strategic Campaign?" (2011), <https://deliverypdf.ssrn.com/delivery.php?ID=520006116096072010064096101078124005120037062046029025071064118071069125074069091005018107016026040058048089074092096102102112040072009047028111100122086114004096086089069047098118119115001080120095107102020108022112006022093094117127098126021077071121&EXT=pdf&INDEX=TRUE>.

¹⁴ Omar Ashour, "2. Implodes but Expands: How the 'Islamic State' Fights in Iraq" In *How ISIS Fights: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt*, 38-78. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474438230-006>

attacked a high-level meeting between a leader of a tribal militia and multiple officers in the Iraqi Army in Iraq's Sunni-majority Anbar province. The author claims that this operation may have been aimed at "punish[ing]/liquidate[ing] local militia leaders and Sunni loyalists to Baghdad, terrorise[ing] the population into submission and soften[ing]/wear[ing] down anti-IS forces in Iraq."¹⁵ Although this single example cannot be used to make generalisations about ISIS tactics in certain provinces, it does show that ISIS tactics differ between operations and the way they may attack a group of Shi'a civilians can differ from how they may attack Sunni militia commanders in Sunni areas. The focus of the chapter is on ISIS tactics pre-2017, leaving a research gap that this paper will aim to fill. The most relevant literature to this essay comes in the form of a paper written by Burch and Pizzi, *Strategic Targeting: The Islamic State and Use of Violence in Iraq and Syria*. This paper uses spatial analysis in an attempt to determine a relationship between ISIS attacks in Iraq and Syria and provincial diversity as well as with economic factors. The authors claim that although ethno-religious and economic factors are associated with the geography of ISIS attacks, there is not a strong enough relationship to establish a causal relationship. The authors argue that there is a stronger association between economic and ethno-religious factors and ISIS attacks in Iraq than there is in Syria, which seems to be the case, but there exist a number of problems with the methodology in this paper. Firstly, the authors do not seem to have an understanding of the spatial distribution of the Iraqi population, which impacts the potential relevance of oil and gas reserves being a factor that may cause ISIS attacks (most Iraqi gas fields are found along the rivers, which is where the vast majority of the population lives). Secondly, the map used to illustrate ethnic diversity in Iraq is inaccurate. It does not reflect the nature of Iraq's ethnic composition, particularly in Diyala, which is a hotspot for ISIS attacks. The paper also looks at ISIS attacks between 2013-2016, which is outside of the scope of this particular paper. Nevertheless, the paper does make some relevant conclusions, the most relevant of which is that locations with overlapping ethnic groups

¹⁵ Ibid.

experience more violent events.¹⁶ The paper makes no reference to the types of attacks conducted by ISIS, opening up this as a potential research gap.

2.3 Research Question

Hence, after identifying a research gap, this paper will attempt to answer the question of:

What is the relationship between the frequency and severity of ISIS bombing attacks targeting civilians and the religious composition of Iraqi governorates during the ISIS insurgency?

¹⁶ Michael Burchl, and Elise Pizzi. "Strategic Targeting: The Islamic State and Use of Violence in Iraq and Syria," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 6 (2022): 1162–84.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1763963>.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

The following section of the paper will explore and note the relevant theories that may be helpful in fostering an understanding of the topic. Broadly speaking, constructivism will act as the meta-theory for this paper. A relatively recent development in the field of international relations theory, constructivism emphasises the significance of ideational elements in shaping the behaviour of national, regional, and international actors. It positions itself as a counterargument to the conventional discussion between the realist and liberal schools, which, until the 1990s, dominated scholarly discourse in the area of international relations theory.¹⁷ A constructivist meta-theory will be crucial to understanding whether there is a relationship between the regional ethnic composition of Iraq and the severity and frequency of the ISIS suicide bombings that occur there. The targeting of non-Sunni Muslim groups is a cornerstone of ISIS's expressed ideology, and they have demonstrated it throughout history through their targeting of Yazidis, Christians, and other minority groups in the Middle East.¹⁸

Social movement theory and framing will be employed to assess how ISIS targetting certain provinces and regions based upon their religious composition fits into the ideology of *takfiriya* and how this contributes to the galvanisation of the in-group. In social movement theory, "movement actors are viewed as signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers."¹⁹ If ISIS does indeed attack provinces with higher shares of Shi'a Muslims with greater effectiveness and frequency, this plays into the meaning that the group seeks to convey to its supporters, namely

¹⁷ Felix Berenskoetter, "Identity in International Relations," Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies, 22 December 2017
<https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-218>.

¹⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28381455>

¹⁹ RD Benford, and DA Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26, no. 1 (2000): 611–639.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.26.1.611>.

that it is targeting the *kufar* Shi'a, who they frame as hurting the interests of Sunni Muslims in Iraq.

If the results of the investigation do not support any relationship between Iraqi regional and provincial religious composition and the effectiveness and frequency of civilian-targeted bombing attacks, then a more opportunistic terrorism and rational choice theory may be more appropriate in explaining this situation. According to rational choice theory, the best way to comprehend political behaviour is to use its purportedly objective premises, which portray people as self-interested, goal-oriented entities looking to maximise their advantages.²⁰

²⁰Mark P. Petracca, "The Rational Choice Approach to Politics: A Challenge to Democratic Theory," *The Review of Politics* 53, no. 2 (1991): 294-296, doi:10.1017/S0034670500014637.

4.0 Research Design

In order to address the question posed at the beginning of this paper, I will conduct a spatial analysis of the frequency and severity of civilian targeted bombing attacks attributed to ISIS between the 21st of July 2017 and the 31st of December 2020. This paper will use the data according to these parameters from the Global Terrorism Database.²¹ Then, I will use a combined descriptive statistics and a spatial analysis approach, where after describing the data, I will use a series of choroplethic maps that break down the attack statistics visually, by ethno-religious region and by governorate. Detailed statistics on the demographic breakdown of each Iraqi governorate are not readily available, so instead, this paper will categorise each Iraqi governorate as majority Sunni, mixed, or majority Shi'a. The Kurdistan Regional Government-administered governorates of Iraq (Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Dohuk, and Halabja) will not be accounted for, since these regions saw considerably fewer ISIS activities after 2017 due to an overall better security situation there.²² After collecting all of the data, I manually organised it by the governorate.

The overarching research question will be broken down into two smaller research questions:

- a) Is there a relationship between the frequency of civilian-targeted bombing attacks conducted by the Islamic State and the religious composition of the governorates and regions in which these attacks occurred?

²¹ Global Terrorism Database, National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), 2023, <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>

²² Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, "Iraq: Security situation in Erbil [Arbil, Irbil], including ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) [also known as Islamic State (IS), and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)] activities (November 2014-February 2016)" (February 16, 2016), IRQ105417.E, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/56d7fb114.html>.

- b) Is there a relationship between the severity of civilian-targeted bombing attacks conducted by the Islamic State and the religious composition of the governorates and regions in which these attacks occurred?

4.1 Data Parameters

In order to collect the data for this research project, I searched the Global Terrorism Database with the following search parameters:

<u>Category</u>	<u>Parameter</u>
When?	21st of July 2017 - 31st of December 2020
Country	Iraq
Perpetrator Group	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
Attack Type	Bombing/Explosion
Target Type	-Private Citizens & Property -All (<i>For Question B</i>)
Terrorism Criteria	-Include Ambiguous Cases -Include Unsuccessful Attacks

4.2 Operationalisation

4.2.1 Independent Variable

The independent variable for both sub-questions is the ethnic composition of each governorate. Since there is no reliable census or official data breaking down the official religious affiliation statistics of each governorate, I categorised the governorates of Iraq into three categories represented numerically.

0 - Majority Sunni

1 - Mixed Sunni-Shi'a

2 - Majority Shi'a

I categorised each governorate using secondary literature on a variety of topics that mentioned the religious composition of each governorate. This was done for the governorates that registered civilian-targeted bombing attacks attributed towards ISIS for the years above (excluding the Kurdistan Region). This is illustrated in the table below.

Category	Provinces	Notes/Sources
0 - Majority Sunni	Nineveh	The European Union Agency for Asylum states that in the Nineveh governorate, "Sunni Arabs constitute the majority, but other groups also share power and influence." ²³
	Saladin	The European Union Agency for Asylum states that the "Salah al-Din" governorate is predominantly inhabited by Sunni Arabs. ²⁴
	Anbar	The European Union Agency for Asylum states that the Anbar governorate is "predominately inhabited by Sunni Arabs." ²⁵
	Kirkuk	The European Union Agency for Asylum states that "the predominant religious group in the governorate are Sunni Muslims." ²⁶
1 - Mixed Sunni-Shi'a	Diyala	The European Union Agency for Asylum states that "Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmens make up the majority of the population. Other ethnic and religious groups also reside in the governorate." ²⁷ According to a 2006 UNHRC report, "Diyala is widely considered to be one of the most diverse Governorates in Iraq" with large communities of Shi'a, Sunni, Christians, and other groups. ²⁸
	Baghdad	The European Union Agency for Asylum states that in the governorate of Baghdad, "the majority are Shia and Sunni Muslims." ²⁹
2 - Majority Shi'a	Babil	According to the European Union Agency for Asylum, the majority of the Babil governorate is Shia Arab. ³⁰
	Basra	According to the European Union Agency for Asylum, the majority of

²³ "Country Guidance Iraq 2021," European Union Agency for Asylum, 2021, <https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-iraq-2021>.

²⁴Ibid

²⁵Ibid

²⁶Ibid

²⁷Ibid

²⁸UNHCR, "Diyala Governorate Assessment Report" (2006), <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/471f4c9b17.pdf>.

²⁹"Country Guidance Iraq 2021"

³⁰Ibid

		the Basra governorate is Shia Arab. ³¹
	Dhi Qar	According to the European Union Agency for Asylum, the majority of the Dhi Qar governorate is Shia Arab. ³²
	Karbala	According to the European Union Agency for Asylum, the majority of the Dhi Qar governorate is Shia Arab. ³³

4.2.2 Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is different for the two sub-questions this paper seeks to answer. For the first question, the dependent variable is the percentage of civilian-targeted bombing attacks attributed to ISIS overall bombing attacks attributed to ISIS. As an equation, this looks like:

$$\frac{\text{Number of Civilian Targeted Bombing Attacks in Provinces}}{\text{Number of Bombing Attacks in Province}} \times 100$$

This number allows a better understanding of the frequency of civilian-targeted bombing attacks in relation to all bombing attacks, where the target may be a military target, for example. The advantage of this approach is to see the extent to which civilians are being targeted relative to the extent that a certain province is subject to violence. After this, the total sums of all provinces in an ethno-religious region (denoted as 0, 1, or 2) will be calculated by the following equation:

$$\frac{\text{Number of Civilian Targeted Bombing Attacks in Provinces A, B, C, D}}{\text{Number of Bombing Attacks in Province A, B, C, D}} \times 100$$

This allows for an understanding of ISIS' targeting strategy across all provinces that make up an ethno-religious region (Sunni, mixed, or Shi'a).

For the second sub-question, on the severity of the attacks, the paper will look at the average (mean) of all civilian-targeted bombing attacks attributed to ISIS in a particular province. It will use the following equation.

$$\frac{\text{Total Number of Casualties in Civilian-Targeted Bombing Attacks in Province}}{\text{Number of Civilian-Targeted Bombing Attacks in Province}}$$

³¹Ibid

³²Ibid

³³Ibid

Then, as per the first sub-question, the paper will also look at this statistic from an ethno-religious region (0, 1, 2) using the following equation:

$$\frac{\text{Total Number of Casualties in Civilian-Targeted Bombing Attacks in Provinces A, B, C, D}}{\text{Number of Civilian-Targeted Bombing Attacks in Provinces A, B, C, D}}$$

This allows for an understanding of whether areas inhabited by certain ethno-religious groups are subject to more violent attacks than areas inhabited by other ethno-religious groups. It also reduces the visibility of outliers. If one province was subject to one large attack whereas the provinces also in its ethno-religious region were subject to multiple smaller attacks, the statistics would balance out.

4.3 Limitations

The major limitation of this paper and specifically the dataset is the lack of any reliable numerical data on the religious composition of provinces (or to a more micro level - districts). Iraq. The last census in Iraq was in 1997,³⁴ and it did not include the religious breakdown of the country. Having access to such data would allow for a linear regression model to be employed with a scaled x-axis from 0% to 100%. This would make the analysis more comprehensive and the discernment of statistically significant relationships possible. With 10 governorates split into 3 categories, a linear regression model is not suitable due to the low degree of scaling on the x-axis.

³⁴“Iraq: Country Profile.” Central Intelligence Agency, January 9, 2024.
<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/iraq/>.

5.0 Data

This section of the paper will present the statistics via tables, graphs, and choroplethic maps per the two subquestions.

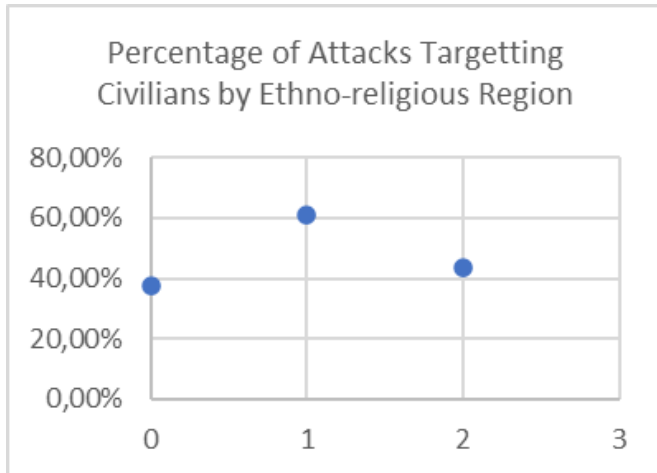
5.1 Frequency of Civilian Targeted Bombing Attacks by Governorate and Region

The following tables show the frequency of civilian targeted bombing attacks attributed to ISIS by governorate and ethnographic region.

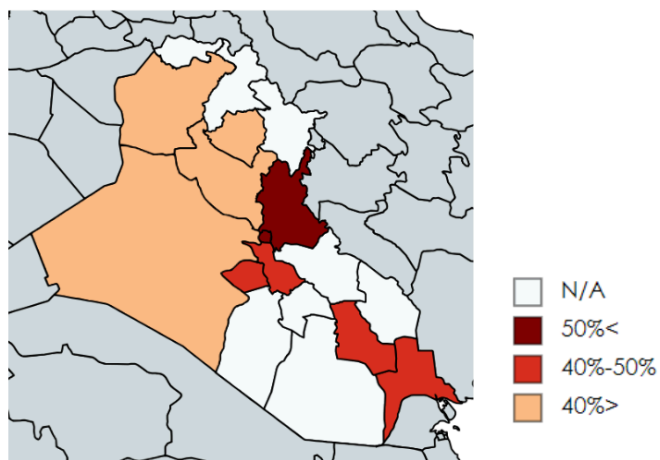
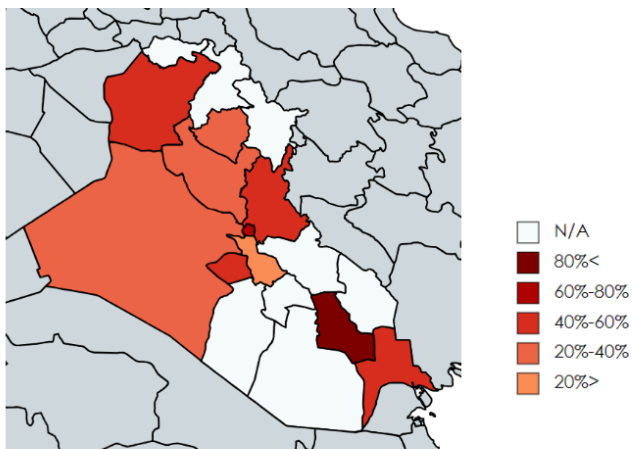
<u>Province</u>	<u>Total Bombing Attacks</u>	<u>Bombing Attacks Targeting Civilians</u>	<u>Civilians/Total</u>	<u>Percentage of Civilian Targeted Attacks out of all Bombing Attacks</u>
Diyala (Mixed)	169	86	0.50887	50.89%
Kirkuk (Sunni)	139	48	0.34532	34.53%
Nineveh (Sunni)	109	50	0.45871	45.87%
Saladin (Sunni)	129	44	0.34108	34.11%
Baghdad (Mixed)	88	70	0.79545	79.55%
Babil (Shi'a)	10	2	0.2	20%
Basra (Shi'a)	2	1	0.5	50%
Dhi Qar (Shi'a)	2	2	1	100%
Anbar (Sunni)	146	55	0.37671	37.67%
Karbala (Shi'a)	2	2	1	50%

<u>Ethno-Religious Region</u>	<u>Total Bombing Attacks</u>	<u>Bombing Attacks Targeting Civilians</u>	<u>Civilians/Total</u>	<u>Percentage of Civilian Targeted Attacks out of all Bombing Attacks</u>
Majority Sunni (0)	<u>523</u>	<u>197</u>	<u>0.37667</u>	<u>37.67%</u>
Mixed Sunni-Shi'a (1)	<u>255</u>	<u>156</u>	<u>0.61176</u>	<u>61.18%</u>
Majority Shi'a (2)	<u>16</u>	<u>7</u>	<u>0.4375</u>	<u>43.75%</u>

Expressed as a graph, the latter table presents itself as such.



The two tables, presented on choroplethic maps appears as such:



The data shows that ISIS targets ethno-religiously mixed governorates and regions more than governorates with a clear Sunni or Shi'a majority, with the average across the two mixed regions being 61.18%. Within governorates with a clear ethno-religious majority, majority-Shi'a governorates are subject to more frequent civilian-targeted bombing attacks (43.75%) than majority-Sunni governorates (37.67%) when looking at all bombing attacks that take place. However, Shi'a governorates are subject to far fewer attacks in general than the majority Sunni region. Between the 21st of July 2017 and the 31st of December 2020, Shi'a majority regions saw a mere 16 bombing attacks take place, of which 7 were targeted at civilians. Comparatively, Sunni governorates received a total of 523 bombing attacks conducted by ISIS, 197 of which were directed at civilians. During this same time period, the ethnoreligious mixed governorates of Diyala and Baghdad received a total of 255 ISIS bombing attacks, of which 156 of these said attacks targeted civilians.

Looking at specific governorates, Diyala (86 civilian targeted bombing attacks, 50.89% of all bombing attacks) and Baghdad (70 civilian targeted bombing attacks 79.55% of all bombing attacks) received the most civilian-targeted bombing attacks conducted by ISIS (both as a total and as a percentage of total ISIS bombing attacks).

5.2 Severity of Civilian Targeted Bombing Attacks by Governorate and Region

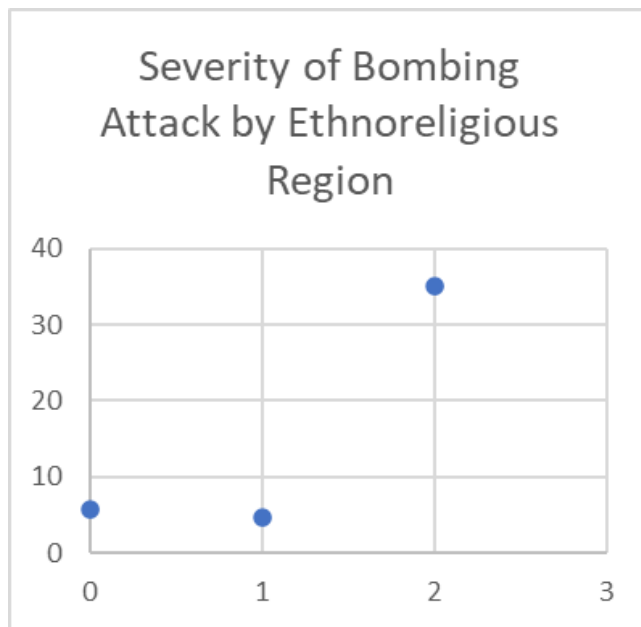
The following tables show the severity of civilian targeted bombing attacks attributed to ISIS by governorate and ethnographic region. Casualties are defined as deaths plus injuries.

Governorate	Bombing Attacks Targeting Civilians	Total Casualties	Average Casualties per Attack
Diyala (Mixed)	86	224	2.61
Kirkuk (Sunni)	48	219	4.56
Nineveh (Sunni)	50	256	5.12
Saladin (Sunni)	44	392	8.91

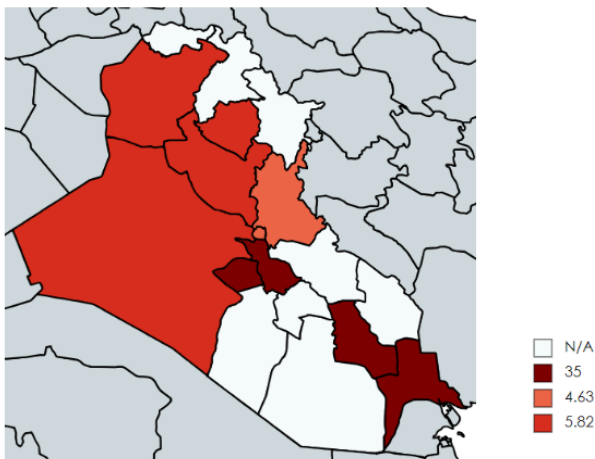
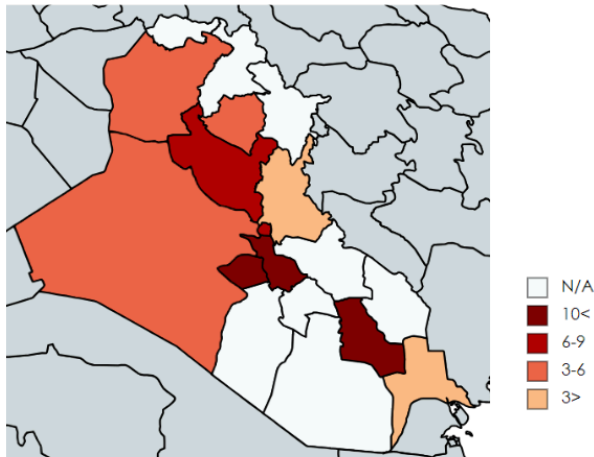
Baghdad (Mixed)	70	498	7.11
Babil (Sh'a)	2	40	20
Basra (Shi'a)	1	2	2
Dhi Qar (Shi'a)	2	183	91.5
Anbar (Sunni)	55	279	5.07
Karbala (Shi'a)	2	20	10

Ethno-Religious Region	Bombing Attacks Targeting Civilians	Total Casualties	Average Casualties per Attack
Sunni Majority (0)	197	1146	5.82
Mixed Sunni-Shi'a (1)	156	722	4.63
Shi'a Majority (2)	7	245	35

Expressed as a graph, the latter table presents itself as such.



The two tables, presented on choroplethic maps appear as such:



The data shows that ISIS conduct its most severe and effective civilian-targeted bombing attacks in the majority Shi'a region of Iraq, with the Shi'a ethno-religious region registering an average casualty count of 35 in every civilian-targeted bombing attack conducted by ISIS (with 245 casualties spread over 7 attacks). The Shi'a majority Dhi Qar governorate registered the highest average casualty count (91.5) over the period from 2017 - 2020. Sunni majority regions (5.82) and mixed Sunni-Shi'a regions (4.63) both registered much lower average casualty counts from civilian-targeted bombing attacks attributed to ISIS. Interestingly, despite registering the most civilian-targeted bombing attacks in the aforementioned time period, Diyala had the lowest average number of casualties in these said attacks (2.61).

6.0 Discussion

The data above, in conjunction with the selected literature, theories, as well as further literature, points towards an interesting discussion on the relationship between the religious composition of Iraqi provinces and the use, both by frequency and severity, of civilian-targeted bombing attacks. It appears that there may be an argument to be made, no doubt to be supplemented with greater demographic data, that ISIS targets provinces with mixed or majority Shi'a populations to greater extents (for the frequency subquestion), or with greater intent (for the severity subquestion).

Firstly, regarding the subquestion on the severity of attacks, and as briefly discussed in the data section of this paper, it can be observed that ISIS-attributed civilian-targeted bombing attacks in the majority of Shi'a provinces are more much more severe in terms of the numbers of dead and wounded that they see in each individual attack, but it is also worth noting that these attacks happen much less frequently than otherwise. ISIS' doctrinal hate for Shi'a Islam and Shi'a Muslims is well established in the field of terrorism studies. ISIS propaganda always refers to Shi'a Muslims as *rafidhi* and *murtad*,³⁵ two derogatory terms meaning rejectionist (based on the idea that Shi'a Muslims reject the first three Caliphs) and apostate. It celebrates the killing of Shi'a Muslims every week in its weekly (online) newspaper al-Naba'a, featuring a page near the front of every paper showing an exaggerated number of Shi'a Muslims killed in a certain week. There is no doubt that since its inception in 2013 and even before then in its predecessor movements, ISIS has been a fundamentally anti-Shi'a group that seeks to kill all Shi'a, an idea that has not gained as much attention as it maybe should have in the field of genocide studies, but nevertheless, one article published in 2017 discusses whether the label of genocide should be applied to ISIS' campaign against Shi'a Muslims, in the same way that label has been

³⁵ ISIS propaganda nowadays is mostly limited to closed Telegram groups, two of which I have access to, but am unable to source due to the closed nature of the groups.

applied to Yazidis and Iraqi Christians.³⁶ The author starts by highlighting the 2013 Bardoush prison massacre, where “Shi’a inmates were separated from Sunnis and Christians, marched to the edge of a ravine, and were fired upon. Some 600 men, nearly entirely Shia Muslims, were massacred.”³⁷ The higher number of casualties in majority Shi’a governorates is likely explained by this. The paper also claims, quoting Dr. Mohammed Abu Rumman, an expert on Islamism, that “the struggle with the Shia is the core of their [ISIS] discourse.”³⁸ Acting upon this discourse, whether to galvanise their support base or to spread fear amongst their enemies, undoubtedly explains why ISIS attacks in Shi’a majority provinces are higher than those in majority Sunni and mixed Sunni-Shi’a regions. However, the security situation in these governorates may also explain both the reason that they occur much less frequently, and why the casualties tend to be higher. The Shi’a majority south was never captured by ISIS, and the Shi’a south has been much safer for the past ten years than the Sunni and mixed areas in Iraq’s North and East, as illustrated by the European Union Agency for Asylum’s mapping of Iraq by danger per governorate, which states that Iraq’s Shi’a dominated regions are not as threatened by terrorism as its mixed Sunni-Shi’a and majority-Sunni regions.³⁹ The fact that these regions are much more secure may mean that ISIS needs to plan a proposed attack to a greater extent than they may in mixed Sunni-Shi’a or Sunni-majority regions. This higher degree of planning due to the overall better security situation, and the length it may take to plan such an operation, may explain why these attacks occur less frequently, and why the casualty count is often higher than in other regions. Conversely, ISIS attacks on civilians using bombs and explosives in Sunni-majority and mixed Sunni-Shi’a regions likely do not take as long to plan due to the worse security situation and are much easier to pull off. The frequency of which attacks can occur

³⁶Emily Hawley, "ISIS Crimes Against the Shia: The Islamic State's Genocide Against Shia Muslims," *Genocide Studies International* 11, no. 2 (2017): 161, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26986071>.

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid, 161.

³⁹ “Country Guidance Iraq 2021,”

makes up for the lower casualty count that ISIS-attributed civilian-targeted bombing attacks cause in these regions.

Moving on from the first subquestion to the subquestion on the frequency of attacks, a similar logic can be followed, notably that the security situation in majority Sunni and mixed Sunni-Shi'a governorates allows for more attacks to take place, and the presence of Shi'as in these mixed governorates would signify the higher number of bombing attacks targetting civilians as a percentage of all bombing attacks conducted by ISIS in these governorates, specifically Diyala and Baghdad. In Diyala specifically, the poor security situation is expressed by Richard Buchanan, former coalition interrogator for the region during the US occupation of Iraq, in an article by Knights and Mello, ““The recovery and refit area for the Sunni insurgents was always Diyala province. The insurgents who were married moved their families there, and their wounded would be often moved there as well.”⁴⁰ Knights and Mello continue, stating that geographic factors are part of the attractiveness to increased jihadist activity in Diyala. Geographical factors contribute to Sunni militant groups' attraction to Diyala. To the west are Tarmiyah and other jihadist hubs in the southern Saladin province; Diyala serves as a hub connecting other militant operating regions. Access to the northern Iraqi provinces and eventually Syria is made possible by the Jallam Desert and the Hamrin Mountain range located to the north. To the north lie the violent, ethno-sectarian melting pots of Kirkuk and Tuz Khurmatu, connected to Baghdad by Highway 2, which passes through northern Diyala. Diyala encircles the eastern Baghdad metropolitan region in the south, which includes Sadr City, a two million-person mostly Shi'a metropolis and a prime takfiri target. Highway 5's pilgrim route, which travels through the Diyala River Valley, welcomes Shi'a tourists from Iraq and Iran throughout the year.⁴¹ Furthermore, the economic hardships felt by the Sunni tribes in the North of Diyala make hiding amongst the civilian population easier for ISIS.⁴²

⁴⁰ Knights and Mello, “Losing Mosul, Regenerating in Diyala,” 1.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, 3.

7.0 Conclusion

In summary, the transition of ISIS from a territorial organisation to a guerrilla movement signified a dramatic change in the organisation's character and strategy. This essay's focus on ISIS' civilian-targeted bombing attacks from 2017 until the end of 2020 detects a noteworthy pattern. The data indicates that the most frequent bombing attacks that target civilians occur in religiously mixed districts such as Diyala and Baghdad, even though the majority of attacks take place in Sunni-dominated governorates of the country's west and north. The Shi'a-dominated south of Iraq often experiences the most severe attacks. This highlights the intricate dynamics at work in the ISIS Insurgency in Iraq and raises concerns about the possible relationship between ISIS tactics and the ethnoreligious diversity of Iraq's governorates.

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