

Islamic State's Response to October 7

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Brief Analysis

The Islamic State's response to October 7 has centered on shifting their messaging to argue that attacks on targets within IS' pre-existing areas of operation are relevant.

For several jihadist groups, Hamas' October 7 surprise attack on Israel provided a platform around the world to reinvigorate their recruitment and propaganda. Sunni violent extremist organizations including [Haya'at Tahrir al-Sham \(https://jihadology.net/2023/10/17/new-statement-from-hayat-ta%25E1%25B8%25A5rir-al-shams-abu-mu%25E1%25B8%25A5ammad-al-jawlani-to-our-people-in-gaza/\)](https://jihadology.net/2023/10/17/new-statement-from-hayat-ta%25E1%25B8%25A5rir-al-shams-abu-mu%25E1%25B8%25A5ammad-al-jawlani-to-our-people-in-gaza/), the [Taliban \(https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-deny-claims-they-are-trying-to-join-hamas-on-the-battlefield/7303501.html\)](https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-deny-claims-they-are-trying-to-join-hamas-on-the-battlefield/7303501.html), and [al-Qaeda \(https://irregularwarfare.org/articles/the-extremist-domino-effect-of-october-7/\)](https://irregularwarfare.org/articles/the-extremist-domino-effect-of-october-7/) quickly declared their solidarity with jihad against Israel and the Jews. In contrast, the Islamic State (IS) was slow to organize a response, despite its status as one of the most well-known and widespread jihadist organizations in the world.

In part, the Islamic State's reticent response can be explained by the group's ideology, which has long prioritized the establishment of the caliphate and territorial control over rhetoric or operations related to the Palestinian cause. IS has [repeatedly criticized \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/252\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/252) Hamas over the years for its nationalist agenda and alliance with Iran. Al-Qaeda, in contrast, has long emphasized the Palestine cause in its ideology, which focuses on the expulsion of non-Muslim entities from traditionally Islamic areas, and was subsequently quick to praise "[the mujahideen of Palestine \(https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c204ogcm\)](https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c204ogcm)," in the week following October 7.

Another factor behind the Islamic State's slow response is its lack of an organizational presence within Israel and

Palestine, likely due to Israel's robust security sector and the presence of competing Palestinian nationalists, Islamist, and jihadist non-state actors in Gaza and the West Bank. Given this lack of capacity, the Islamic State's response to October 7 centered on shifting their messaging to argue that attacks on targets within IS' pre-existing areas of operation—which fall within their usual operational framework—still constituted a contribution to the Palestinian cause, despite not directly hitting Jewish or Israeli targets.

Delayed Development of a Response

The Islamic State's lack of Palestine focus meant it was slow to respond to October 7. Even when it did, IS' messaging and operations were largely consistent with pre-October 7 patterns, reflecting the group's inflexible ideological priorities. IS' initial response to the October 7 attack appeared in the group's weekly newsletter,

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2524> **al-Naba**

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2524>. The first editorial after October 7th did not overtly acknowledge the attack, only referencing the need for Muslims to undertake jihad in order to support each other in times of suffering. A week later, on October 19, IS was less circumspect, publishing an editorial in al-Naba titled **"The Steps of the Operation to Fight the Jews,**

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2570>," which argued that Muslims must first fight the Arab regimes serving as the "fortresses and walls" of the Jewish state in order to destroy Israel. In the article, IS claimed that it is doing its part to aid the Muslim Palestinians by attacking "apostate" un-Islamic regimes.

Yet this rhetoric and call to action did not lead to any sustained response on the ground until months later on January 4, when IS formally called on its followers to carry out a global attack campaign. In an audio message titled **"And Kill Them Wherever You Overtake Them**

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2899>," IS's official spokesperson, Abu Hudhayfah al-Ansari, specifically called on IS fighters to attack Christian and Jewish targets, telling them not to "distinguish between civilian and military apostates." Though IS is known to call on all of its affiliates to carry out a global campaign of attacks once a year, this call to action is noteworthy in that reverses the group's eschewal of this call in January 2023 for the first time in almost a decade.

The series of attacks began a day before the official announcement with the bombing of a commemoration ceremony for Qasem Soleimani in Kerman, Iran on January 3, which <https://apnews.com/article/iran-funeral-suicide-bombings-islamic-state-mideast-41ee9a74dfa0191acefa58705e318c70> killed 84 people and wounded around 280 others <https://apnews.com/article/iran-funeral-suicide-bombings-islamic-state-mideast-41ee9a74dfa0191acefa58705e318c70>. The audio message calling for the attack campaign was likely intentionally released the following day to build on the media attention the bombing attracted. The day after the release of the message (January 5), each of IS's active provinces—which largely operate autonomously while adhering to the IS brand and swearing allegiance to its "caliph"—began carrying out numerous smaller-scale attacks targeting military outposts, roadblocks, Christian civilians, military patrols, and alleged spies. A significant proportion of the claims included pictures or videos of the attacks, and the overall volume of media releases from IS during the campaign far exceeded the rate of posts in the previous twelve months.

Multiple videos accompanying the attacks featured footage of IS fighters asserting their solidarity with Gaza and proclaiming their determination to continue their jihad against Christians and Jews. One video claim even **featured** <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2924> an IS fighter in Mali firing rockets inscribed with the message "Revenge for the Muslims in Gaza." In an al-Naba <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2933> infographic <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2933> summarizing the campaign,

IS claims that their fighters carried out more than 110 attacks between January 1 and January 10, killing or wounding at least 610 people. While these numbers seem impressive, the nature of the post-Kerman attacks are noticeably consistent with the type of attacks IS provinces had been launching prior to the campaign. Coupled with IS's tendency to (<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-islamic-states-shadow-governance-in-eastern-syria-since-the-fall-of-baghuз/>) underreport attacks, (<https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-islamic-states-shadow-governance-in-eastern-syria-since-the-fall-of-baghuз/>) it is likely that it was the pace of the publicized claims that increased during the campaign rather than the actual pace of attacks.

External Operations

Notably, the attack campaign only included one external operation: the suicide bombings in Kerman executed by the Islamic State's Khorasan Province (ISKP)—primarily based in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Even so, IS apparently felt the need to justify targeting Iran at a time when, as (https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/_pda/2024/01/The-Islamic-State-al-Naba%25CC%2584-Newsletter-425.pdf) they put it, (https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/_pda/2024/01/The-Islamic-State-al-Naba%25CC%2584-Newsletter-425.pdf) “we find many calling for opposing the Jews and their crimes against all Muslims.” It dedicated the primary (https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/_pda/2024/01/The-Islamic-State-al-Naba%25CC%2584-Newsletter-425.pdf) al-Naba editorial (https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/_pda/2024/01/The-Islamic-State-al-Naba%25CC%2584-Newsletter-425.pdf) the following week to explaining that the suicide bombing in Kerman was necessary to remind Muslims that Iran, the supposed leader of the “axis of resistance” against Israel, was still an enemy of Sunni Islam, an argument that is characteristic of the Islamic State's distinctive anti-Shia ideology. The defensive tone of the article, which claimed that IS is “more keen on the doctrinal outcome than on the military outcome,” suggests that IS felt the need to justify its inability to organize external attacks targeting Jewish or Christian targets to its audience.

And indeed, there have been attempts to reach these targets. Beyond the bombings in Iran, in recent months authorities have uncovered a number of attempted external operations against Christians and Jews in Europe, Turkey and Kyrgyzstan coordinated by ISKP, which in the past several years has increased its external networks as the core group in Iraq and Syria focuses on its own survival.

During the last week of December 2023, eight members of an ISKP cell with operatives in (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2792>) Vienna (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2792>) and (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2881>) western Germany (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2881>) were arrested for a (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2880>) plot (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2880>) to bomb the Cologne Cathedral and St. Stephen's Cathedral over the winter holidays. That same week, on December 25, two teenage boys were (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2844>) arrested in Kyrgyzstan (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2844>) for plotting to bomb a central square and a church in Jalal-Abad at the instructions of their ISKP handlers. A few days later, on December 29, thirty-two people were (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2883>) arrested in Turkey (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2883>) for an ISKP-directed plot to bomb a Catholic church and two synagogues in Istanbul. After this succession of foiled plots, on January 28, IS's Turkey Province successfully (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2967>) executed (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2967>) an attack on an Istanbul

church, which killed one person and injured another. The perpetrators, a Tajik and Russian national, were [linked to an ISKP \(https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2024/02/03/kilise-saldirisinda-yeni-gelisme-17-supheli-daha-yakalandi\)](https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2024/02/03/kilise-saldirisinda-yeni-gelisme-17-supheli-daha-yakalandi) network operating within Turkey. If IS manages to carry out more external attacks against Christians or Jews, they may be able to present a more concrete contribution to its so-called “[Operation to Fight the Jews \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2570\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2570),” IS’ declared strategy to support the Muslims in Gaza.

As it stands, IS has not altered their operational patterns in the wake of October 7 outside of a brief spike of activity in the beginning of January during their global attack campaign. While their messaging has shifted in an attempt to link their existing operational patterns to the conflict in Gaza, IS continues to promote its previous anti-Shia and takfiri talking points and has [stopped discussing \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2960\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/islamicstateinteractivemap/%23view/2960) the situation in Gaza, again in sharp contrast to al-Qaeda (<https://jihadology.net/2024/01/15/new-nashid-from-al-qaidah-in-the-indian-subcontinent-the-call-of-palestine/>). The primary operational escalations in response to October 7 have come from ISKP, whose plethora of plots towards the end of December indicate a growing external operations capability. It remains to be seen whether IS’s ideological lack of adjustment to the post-10/7 reality will hurt its appeal going forward, but it is unlikely that the group will substantially change its priorities to reflect the Palestine-centric jihadism of other extremist groups. Even so, the group’s ability to capitalize on chaos remains, and they are likely biding their time to see how the growing instability among many state and non-state actors in the Middle East will best serve its interests, and particularly whether a US withdrawal from Iraq and Syria would provide them with the opening they have been waiting for to expand their operations. ❖

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