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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL - Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies



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# SICUREZZA, TERRORISMO E SOCIETÀ

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# Table of contents

## ESSAYS

BARBARA LUCINI Critica della radicalizzazione pura. Forme ibride di radicalizzazione estremista .....	7
LUCA BREGANTINI Graffiti warfare of the Islamic State in the Western urban places .....	21
ELSA SORO E BARBARA LUCINI Crisi management e strategie comunicative nel dopo attentato terroristico: il caso della Tunisia .....	39

## ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARIES

LARIS GAISER Critical infrastructures and cyber security: a fundamental economic intelligence issue .....	53
DANIELE PLEBANI La guerra della memoria. Il patrimonio culturale tra conflitti, traffici illeciti e terrorismo .....	65



# Graffiti warfare of the Islamic State in the Western urban places

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## Nota Autore

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## Abstract

The jihadist propaganda of the Islamic State takes advantage of many creative solutions, ranging from social networks and other web strategies to more traditional media. Sociologists, psychologists and most analysts investigating this matter have focused their attention on the Internet, neglecting the role of informal visual communication in urban context. The main goal of this contribution is to offer a scenario of ISIS graffiti role, focused in the western countries and to test the hypothesis that ISIS graffiti represent a weak signal of dangerous radicalization. I present a wide open ISIS graffiti inventory in western urban places. I analyze graffiti localization – from a geographical and a territorial point of view – graffiti language, and graffiti content, both textual and iconic. The analysis of almost eighty cases of western ISIS graffiti presents many interesting findings. Shortly the ISIS graffiti scenario presents mostly spray-vandalic writings and show aggressive messages against the western democracies and communities. Intriguingly, regression analysis suggests that the appearance of ISIS is a warning indicator of dangerous radicalization and a weak predictor of possible terrorist attacks under specific conditions.

## Keywords

Graffiti warfare, Islamic State, ISIS graffiti, propaganda, weak signals.

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## 1. Status of the art

The jihadist propaganda of the Islamic State takes advantage of many creative solutions, ranging from social networks and other web strategies to the more traditional media. Yet, sociologists, psychologists and most analysts exclusively focus their attention on the Internet, neglecting the role of traditional visual communication in urban context. Thus, the graffiti propaganda inside and outside the Caliphate has been overlooked in this type of analysis. The main goal of the present communication is to offer a qualitative description of the role of ISIS graffiti, focused especially in North America and in the Western and Southern Europe, including the Balkans and to explore the possibility that graffiti may represent reliable warnings of dangerous radicalization. I provide a graffiti inventory with the main goal to offer a descriptive scenario of the graffiti warfare of the Islamic state in the Western urban places. I underline the lack of studies – both theoretical and empirical – of Islamic State graffiti, with the notable exception of anthropological works by Dawn Perlmutter and published on frontpagemag.com (*Jihadist Gang Graffiti, The hip, cool new medium of spreading the message of Islamic holy war* (2014), *“ISIS Is Here”: Islamic State Graffiti in America* (2015) and *Crashed Egypt Air Plane Tagged with Jihadist Graffiti, “We will bring this plane down”* (2016). However, the cited studies are useful to present a wide range of examples of the phenomenon in the United States but don't provide any significant contribution from an analytical point of view. Other theoretical studies on jihad and graffiti stress aesthetic more than political aspects (Hugh Lovatt, *The Aesthetics of Space: West Bank Graffiti and Global Artists*, 2010), but at the same time offer a good summary of graffiti impact in the West Bank. Anthropological studies about graffiti, vandalism and violence (Julie Peeteet, *The Writing on the Walls: The Graffiti of the Intifada*, 1996) also give us some interesting findings. I particularly refer to the following Julie Peeteet's considerations: 1. graffiti plays a role as a weapon in a battleground – as during the intifada – where all observers underline technological disparity in weaponry; 2. the production of graffiti is most prevalent among the younger generation; 3. graffiti are an act of defiance against the authorities; 4. graffiti may have complex texts, and the role of the reader and the writer, as in the case of symbolic language interpretation, is of fundamental importance. I also remark that graffiti are urban markers and in this perspective they can be considered as weak signals of terrorism in certain urban spaces. The presence of graffiti in urban or rural areas is – potentially – a sort of warning varying from simple propaganda and moral support to jihad to more concrete activism. Weak signals, however, are

by definition ambiguous. According to Elina Hiltunen (*Weak Signals in Organizational Futures Learning*, Helsinki School of Economics, 2010) a weak signal is an *early warning of change*, which typically becomes stronger when combined with other signals. The significance of a weak signal is thus determined by the objectives of its observers, and finding such meaning typically requires systematic searching of any other signal potentially in relation with it (behaviours of individuals and groups, events, social conditions, etc.). Discovering graffiti in urban spaces is thus only the first step in order to detect warning signals. Jihadist graffiti need to be considered together with many other warning indicators.

## 2. Methodology

This research takes into account the period between 2014 and 2017 and consists of an inventory of ISIS graffiti in the western countries – texts and icons – found using an internet Google search, without support of any semantic searching tools. I have analyzed online archives of the main national newspapers and magazines across the world in which news regarding jihadist graffiti apparently referable to the Islamic State has been reported.

Research of this kind of urban images is a difficult task. Many difficulties concern the source of data: I considered only news coming from the online sites of local and national newspapers, TV channels, and magazines, avoiding any informal news coming from social media or other similar sources. Other difficulties concern the analysis, especially the quantitative output: I collected images – mainly photos – from the Internet; yet, I believe that the numbers reported are largely underestimated, in part because jihadist graffiti are erased before their diffusion through the web and social media. This hypothesis might help explaining divergences between data on foreign fighters and graffiti in Belgium, a country with heavy presence of radical Islam.

I present two types of results: the first regards the graffiti localization, in other words the geographical contexts – countries and settings – in which graffiti have been discovered. The second concerns the meaning of graffiti and refers to the content analysis: texts or symbols. As said above, graffiti were collected from Google search and selection of news based on relevant and credible media sources. This approach led to the following results: 78 graffiti settings in 15 countries and 131 graffiti in total. I then proceeded to content analysis of texts (94 cases) and symbols (37) and divided the graffiti in two main categories – vandalism acts (71 scrawls) and aesthetic graffiti (7 artworks).



Data were analyzed by using both qualitative and quantitative techniques; in other words content and regression analysis. Content analysis considered visible texts and images present in online media source (newspapers and magazines or TV). Regression analysis considered terrorist attacks (as a dependent variable) and graffiti normalized by percentage of population who is Muslim (as an independent variable). In order to strengthen the role of graffiti as a weak signal, I submitted to regression tests also the variables of terrorist attacks (dependent variable) and Muslim as percentage of population (independent variable).

Tabella 1 - *Graffiti settings, texts and symbols*

<i>Graffiti modality</i>	<i>numbers</i>
Graffiti (symbols and texts)	131
Symbols	37
Texts	94
Graffiti settings	78

Tabella 2 - *Graffiti typologies*

<i>Type</i>	<i>numbers</i>	<i>%</i>
Vandalism acts (scrawls)	71	91,0
Aesthetic graffiti (artworks)	7	9,0
Total	78	100

### 3. Main findings

**ISIS graffiti are largely American graffiti.** The Google search found 78 graffiti settings in total. They were discovered in 15 countries: 20 in the United States (in 11 towns), 13 in the Netherlands (in only one town), 8 in France (in two towns and an airport), 5 in Italy (in 5 towns), 5 in Kosovo (in one town and 2 villages), 5 in the United Kingdom (in 3 towns), 4 in Australia (in 4 towns), 4 in Spain (in 2 towns), 3 in Bosnia and Herzegovina (in only one village), 3 in Poland (in only one town), 3 in Sweden (in 2 town), 2 in Canada (in 2 town), 1 in Finland (in only one town) and 1 in Slovenia (in a village).

Tabella 3 - *Towns of graffiti warfare*

<i>Countries</i>	<i>Numbers of graffiti settings by country</i>	<i>Towns</i>
United States	20	Minneapolis, Youngstown, New York, Washington, D.C., Grand Rapids, Tucson, Colorado Springs, Pueblo, Scurry County, Jacksonville, Salem
Netherlands	13	Voorburg
France	8	St.Romain-au-Mont-d'Or Rhone-Alpes, Sartrouville and a French airport
Italy	5	Rome, Fiumicino (Rome), Castelfranco Veneto (Treviso), Piove di Sacco (Padua), Reggio Emilia
Kosovo	5	Visoki Decani, Pristina, Zubin Potok
United Kingdom	5	Londra (Chichester), Glasgow, Newcastle
Australia	4	Melbourne, Cairns, Mareeba, Sydney
Spain	4	Palma (Majorca), Ceuta (Spanish enclave in North Africa)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3	Gornja Maoca
Poland	3	Sochaczew (ad ovest di Varsavia)
Sweden	3	Gothenburg, Västerås
Belgium	1	Bruxelles
Canada	2	Vancouver, Burlington
Finland	1	Helsinki
Slovenia	1	Smarna Gora (Ljubljana)
Total	78	Number of towns: 39

At the top of the country ranks are the United States, the Netherlands and France. Looking at the jihadist graffiti in Europe and in the United States, it is possible to observe that in the United States they have been discovered in many different places, while in Europe they appeared in just a few towns and settings.

ISIS graffiti is American graffiti because most of ISIS graffiti were discovered in the United States, where 20 cases were found, scattered in 11 towns. Already by October 2014 graffiti and other Islamic State symbols were discovered in the Lyndale neighborhood of Minneapolis<sup>2</sup>. The acronym “ISIS” was depicted in bubble letters joined with the words “*will remain*”. The phrase “*ISIS will remain*” is an evident reference to the terrorist group’s motto “*Remaining and Expanding*”. The level of knowledge of the Islamic State symbolism may suggest that the author was an ISIS sympathizer. It is interesting that this first discovery was made in Minne-

<sup>2</sup> Dawn Perlmutter, ‘*ISIS Is Here*’: *Islamic State Graffiti in America*, February 9, 2015 <http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/251005/isis-here-islamic-state-graffiti-america-dawn-perlmutter>.

apolis, a place known to host a large group of Islamic State supporters. Indeed, at least a dozen young American Muslims from Minneapolis have left their homes to join and fight alongside the Islamic State in Syria. In 2016 graffiti were discovered in many locations of the United States and Canada including Scurry County<sup>3</sup> (Texas), Tucson<sup>4</sup> (Arizona), Grand Rapids<sup>5</sup> (Michigan) and Colorado Springs<sup>6</sup>. The main content of the American graffiti is mere vandalism. Indeed, in all the cases reported here we face a phenomenon substantially different from the ISIS-street-art case of Minneapolis. “*ISIS is Here*”, “*ISIS will Rise*”, “*ISIS We R Here*”, “*Kill Trump*”, “*Kill USA*”, “*Kill Cops*”, “*Allah Akhbar*”, etc. The Canadian graffiti found in Vancouver<sup>7</sup> on August 2016 follows the same pattern. The graffiti, painted in blue, reads “*ISIS is here and let the killings start*” and other similar offenses. Similarly, in Europe, from Northern countries to the Balkans, graffiti look like a phenomenon closer to crime and vandalism than street art. On January 2013 a church in Helsinki<sup>8</sup> was similarly vandalized with Islamic graffiti and in October 2015 Assyrian Christians in Gothenburg<sup>9</sup> (Sweden) received chilling graffiti message from ISIS: “*Convert or Die*”. Between 2014 and 2015 iconic signs of the Caliphate appeared also in the Balkans.

Grffiti are characterized by a dual nature. From a sociological point of view ISIS graffiti represent mainly urban and vandalic phenomena. Indeed, in a total amount of 78 graffiti settings, only 8 were discovered in rural environment, mostly in the Balkans. As an example, on the walls of Monastery

<sup>3</sup> Rob Snyder (KFYO), *Are Islamic Terrorists Making Their Way Through Texas? Graffiti in Scurry County Targeted Against Lubbock*, (May 11, 2015 2:56 PM), <http://kfyo.com/are-islamic-terrorists-making-their-way-through-texas-graffiti-in-scurry-county-targeted-against-lubbock>.

<sup>4</sup> ADI News Services, *ISIS Tags Appear In Northwest Tucson Neighborhood*, (February 8, 2016), <https://arizonadailyindependent.com/2016/02/08/isis-tags-appear-in-northwest-tucson-neighborhood>.

<sup>5</sup> ‘*ISIS*’ graffiti found on Grand Rapids home, Posted 4:51 PM, March 30, 2016, by Adam Duke, Updated at 08:29PM, March 30, 2016, <http://fox17online.com/2016/03/30/isis-graffiti-found-on-grand-rapids-home>.

<sup>6</sup> Chris Loveless (KRDO, News Channel 13), *ISIS graffiti found at Pueblo Riverwalk* (Posted: Jul 27, 2015 10:31 PM MDT Updated: Jul 15, 2016 03:45 AM MD), <http://www.krdo.com/news/local-news/isis-graffiti-found-at-pueblo-riverwalk-35198822>.

<sup>7</sup> Jill Slattery (Global News), *Pro-ISIS graffiti discovered in Vancouver*, (August 19, 2016 8:19 pm Updated: August 19, 2016 8:20 pm), <http://globalnews.ca/news/2893434/pro-isis-graffiti-discovered-in-vancouver>.

<sup>8</sup> KGS (The Tundra Tabloids), *Church in Helsinki Finland Defaced with Islamic Slogans Allahu Akbar Jesus-is a Muslim* (August, 2013), <http://tundratabloids.com/2013/08/christian-church-in-helsinki-finland-defaced-with-islamic-slogans-allahu-akbar-jesus-is-a-muslim>.

<sup>9</sup> Leah Marieann Klett (The Gospel Herald), *Assyrian Christians in Sweden Receive Chilling Graffiti Message from ISIS: ‘Convert or Die’*, (Oct 19, 2015 01:32 PM EDT), <http://www.gospelherald.com/articles/58852/20151019/assyrian-christians-in-sweden-receive-chilling-graffiti-message-from-isis-convert-or-die.htm#closepopup>.

of Visoki Dečani<sup>10</sup> (Kosovo) a pro-ISIS vandalic-graffito writing (*Caliphate is coming*) and a pro-Albanian acronym (AKSH was the acronym for the Albanian national army) were found. Similarly, in the Bosnian village of Gornja Maoca (Bosnia and Herzegovina) a rural fencing and walls of a residential rural building were painted with Islamic State icons.

Tabella 7 - *Graffiti settings*

<i>Graffiti settings</i>	<i>Numbers</i>	<i>%</i>
Urban setting	70	89,7
Rural setting	8	10,3
Total	78	100

Tabella 8 - *Language of graffiti warfare*

<i>Language</i>	<i>Numbers of graffiti</i>	<i>%</i>
English	76	63,3
Arabic	21	17,5
Not Arabic and not English	15	12,5
Not available information	4	3,3
Total	120	100

**Graffiti language.** The large majority of graffiti are in English (Tab. 8). This may not be surprising because, as argued above, ISIS graffiti are by and large American graffiti. This being said I would suggest that the English language is deliberately chosen for the Islamic State propaganda in order to reach out to the transnational target audience of Muslim population in Western countries. This explains why only 21 graffiti were in the Arabic language (almost 1 on five). In addition in the residual category – *not Arabic and not English* – we count graffiti in which the Arabic is transliterated in Latin characters into the expression “*Allah akhbar*” (Allah is great) to be better understood in any cultural context, because the graffiti warfare of the Islamic state has a dual target: Muslim communities around the world as well as non-Muslims, and in both these groups the comprehension of the Arabic language may be limited.

<sup>10</sup> Serbian Orthodox Church, *ISIS graffiti on the monastery of Dechani*, (13. October 2014 - 13:38), [http://www.spc.rs/eng/isis\\_graffiti\\_monastery\\_dechani](http://www.spc.rs/eng/isis_graffiti_monastery_dechani), InSerbia, *Kosovo: New “ISIS” Graffiti On Visoki Decani Monastery*, (Oct 13, 2014), InSerbia, *Kosovo: New “ISIS” Graffiti On Visoki Decani Monastery*, (Oct 13, 2014), *Kosovo: New “ISIS” Graffiti On Visoki Decani Monastery* <https://inserbia.info/today/2014/10/kosovo-new-isis-graffiti-on-visoki-deceni-monastery>.

**Graffiti in urban settings.** The majority of graffiti are found on private residential building (almost 30%) and in the urban areas with the highest visibility (Tab. 9). Indeed, graffiti were discovered in schools or colleges, places with the highest presence of youth, in line with the main target audience of the Islamic State communication strategy. In November 2015 jihadist messages were discovered at Youngstown State University<sup>11</sup> (Ohio, USA). They were spray-painted on the traditional big rock of the Youngstown Campus. Aggressive sentences such as “France deserves destruction”, “YSU supports ISIS”, and “We are coming for you” were painted on the stone. After this event campus maintenance crews were quick to cover the messages with paint, but not before some images could be distributed over social media. The main risk of aesthetic-impact-graffiti – as in the case of Minneapolis – is the concrete possibility of a viral circulation of jihadist message in the Internet. Street art graffiti can play a significant role as a push factor in the recruitment process, especially among the youth. The link between social media and real life is at the core of the ISIS propaganda in western countries. Anyway, university and schools are usually a target in the graffiti warfare. At the Oregon elementary school in Salem<sup>12</sup> (Oregon) – in June 2015 – were discovered vandalic graffiti with jihadist content (“ISIL we R here”). And it is not surprising that religious building are also settings for graffiti attacks (Tab. 9, 13% of cases). Targets for vandalism and scrawls are both Christian and Islamic buildings. In Europe, in the Dutch town of Voorburg<sup>13</sup>, Jews and Christians have been targeted in pro-ISIS graffiti outside a school with slogans including “Jews will die” because of the symbolism of the struggle against Israel for the jihadist propaganda (Tab. 11, 7%). Threats to the Jewish community are spread across the globe. Besides Voorburg, in 2015 anti-Semitic graffiti have also been discovered in Sochaczew<sup>14</sup>, a

<sup>11</sup> WFMJ, YSU: “*Isis*” graffiti poses no credible threat, (Posted: Nov 23, 2015 4:45 PM Updated: Nov 23, 2015 11:48 PM), <http://www.wfmj.com/story/30585508/ysu-isis-graffiti-poses-no-credible-threat>.

<sup>12</sup> *ISIS Graffiti At Oregon Elementary School Playground: Islamic State Writing Says ‘ISIL We R Here’*, (Aug 05, 10:36 AM EDT) <http://www.ibtimes.com/isis-graffiti-oregon-elementary-school-playground-islamic-state-writing-says-isis-we-1949257>.

<sup>13</sup> CUFI Christians United for Israel, *Jews and Christians targeted in pro-ISIS graffiti outside Dutch school*, (Aug 26, 2016), <http://www.cufi.org.uk/news/jews-and-christians-targeted-in-pro-isis-graffiti-outside-dutch-school>, KGS (The Tundra Tabloids), *Anti-Semitism in the Netherlands, Netherlands: Graffiti Praises ISIS, Calls for All Jews to Be Killed*, (October, 2014), <http://tundratabloids.com/2014/10/netherlands-graffiti-praises-isis-calls-for-all-jews-to-be-killed>.

<sup>14</sup> Eliezer Sherman (The Algemeiner), *Jewish Cemetery in Poland Vandalized; Graves Covered in Antisemitic, Pro-ISIS Graffiti*, (December 16, 2015 2:13 pm), <https://www.algemeiner.com/2015/12/16/jewish-cemetery-in-poland-vandalized-graves-covered-in-antisemitic-pro-isis-graffiti>.

Polish cemetery not far from Warsaw. But anti-Semitism seems more an attitude of a large amount of people in Europe than a specific threat of the Islamic State. In the Voorburg graffiti some expletives were directed also against a Dutch politician. In this case the threats had no consequences, but in any case I suggest to consider specific threats as a weak signal of potential dangerous events.

Tabella 9 - *Places of graffiti warfare*

<i>Graffiti settings</i>	<i>Numbers</i>	<i>%</i>
Private residential building (urban / rural)	23	29,5
Religious building	10	12,8
Car parked in town	6	7,7
Urban fence	6	7,7
Road signs and street furniture	5	6,4
School and University	5	6,4
Utility box / power plant	5	6,4
fuel tanks easyJet planes at airports	4	5,1
Jewish cemetery	3	3,8
Restaurants and shops	3	3,8
Giant poster on a residential building	2	2,6
Container	1	1,3
Dining area of a motorway	1	1,3
Front door	1	1,3
Subway station	1	1,3
Governmental site	1	1,3
Overpass	1	1,3
Total	78	100

Not only Jews but also Muslims are victims of sectarian vandalism. In May 2017 shocking ISIS graffiti appears on wall of Glasgow mosque<sup>15</sup>. Vandals have scrawled the word ISIS within a “loveheart” on the building of Scotland’s largest mosque. And overseas, an Islamic community center in Melbourne has been fire-bombed after the words “*Islamic State*” were scrawled on the building<sup>16</sup>, which had already been the subject of several arson attacks.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.glasgowlive.co.uk/news/glasgow-news/shocking-graffiti-appears-wall-glasgow-13076941>.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/islamic-centre-firebombed-and-tagged-with-islamic-state-graffiti-20161211-gt8ngm.html>.

In 2014 many generic threats appeared in Rome<sup>17</sup>. Italian graffiti were discovered in a street underpass similarly to many other jihadist scrawls spread around the world: “*We take revenge of the American massacres*”, “*Mohammed is the only prophet*”, “*Allah is great*”, “*Where are the warriors of Allah*”, “*Allah give you time, but don’t forget about you*”. This is not the only case recorded in Italy. In 2016 a more interesting case was discovered in Fiumicino, where Rome’s international airport<sup>18</sup> is located. These graffiti captured my attention because of the technique used in the case: it was one of the rare cases of stencil graffiti in Europe. The ISIS acronym was painted in big black letters on the electric control unit’s wall and the final result was visually very effective.

**Graffiti and symbols.** Within the sample considered I was able to identify twenty significant symbols and icons. ISIS flag within the prophet’s seal is frequently found in the western countries. It appeared from Europe to America in almost forty percent of icons (Tab. 10). To external observers it is always difficult to understand the real meaning of symbols and pictures, especially those related to ethnic communities and religious groups, because of their high degree of ambiguity. Yet, symbols and icons are usually immediately clear to the in-group members.

Tabella 10 - *ISIS acronym, symbols and icons of graffiti warfare*

<i>Type of Islamic State symbols and icons</i>	<i>Numbers of symbols and icons</i>	<i>%</i>
ISIS flag in graphics (prophets seal)	7	35
Symbol for Christians (Nazarene, ☩ in Arabic)	4	20
Star of David	3	15
Drawing of a bomb	1	5
Heart (it circumscribes an “ISIS” acronym)	1	5
Horus’s Eye	1	5
Star and crescent (within “ISIS” acronym)	1	5
Swastika	2	10
Total	20	100

<sup>17</sup> Giovanni Masini, *Roma, comparse scritte pro-Isis* (Ven, 05/09/2014 - 17:42), <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/roma-comparse-scritte-pro-isis-1049416>, RaiNews, Roma, apparsi graffiti in favore dell’Isis sulla via Casilina (video), <http://www.rainews.it/dl/rainews/media/Roma-apparsi-graffiti-in-favore-Isis-sulla-via-Casilina-video-f3a33285-62d0-4716-9ba6-4942c7556b79.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Adnkronos Corporate, *Fiumicino, spunta scritta nera ISIS all’ex centrale Enel*, (Pubblicato il: 11/10/2016 13:59), [http://www.adnkronos.com/fatti/cronaca/2016/10/11/fiumicino-spunta-scritta-nera-isis-all-centrale-enel\\_UflvMfOcR0FNuzM6lR9GbM.html](http://www.adnkronos.com/fatti/cronaca/2016/10/11/fiumicino-spunta-scritta-nera-isis-all-centrale-enel_UflvMfOcR0FNuzM6lR9GbM.html).

It is my assessment that the two most interesting symbols discovered in my research are the *Eye of Horus*, and the “ن” symbol (the Arabic for letter “N”). In January 2017 the ISIS acronym, and close to it the Eye of Horus, were painted in the metro station of Dykman Street<sup>19</sup> (New York). For the ancient Egyptians the Eye of Horus was a protective and regal emblem: an eye that sees everything, a symbol of indestructibility and therefore likely to promote the revival. Thus, my interpretation suggests “*the eye*” as a sort of message whose content is that we are steadily under control of a ubiquitous Caliphate. The idea of a continuous control is also suggested by a message found in the Italian graffiti whose text recited: “*Allah give you time, but don't forget about you*”.

On the other side, the “ن” symbol is used by the Islamic State to identify who is a Nazarene, a Christian. It has been drawn on doorways and in front of houses both in captured Iraqi cities as Mosul, allowing militants to quickly assert where the loyalties of the inhabitants lie, and in cities of Northern Europe as in Voorburg (Holland)<sup>20</sup> and in Gothenburg (Sweden)<sup>21</sup>. Thousands of people have since taken the symbol and reversed its meaning using it to express solidarity with Iraqi Christians. If we consider the fear produced by the “ن” symbol among the Christian community of Syrians in Europe, and remember the use made by the Islamic State militias in Mosul, we can consider the symbol as a weak signal.

Tabella 11 - *Textual content of graffiti warfare*

<i>Textual content analysis of graffiti</i>	<i>Numbers</i>	<i>%</i>
"ISIS" acronym	48	44,0
Threats to Westerners / anti-Western contents	36	33,0
References to Allah, Mohammed and Islam	10	9,2
Antisemitic contents and threats to Jews	8	7,3
ISIS flag in graphics (prophets seal)	7	6,4
Total	109	100

<sup>19</sup> NBC New York (NBCUniversal Media), *Police Investigate 'ISIS' Graffiti in Upper Manhattan Subway Station*, (Published at 12:27 AM EST on Jan 24, 2017 | Updated at 12:37 AM EST on Jan 24, 2017), <http://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/NYC-Police-Investigate-ISIS-Graffiti-in-Upper-Manhattan-Subway-Station-411609085.html#ixzz4d5Rmw4Lw>.

<sup>20</sup> CUFI Christians United for Israel, *Jews and Christians targeted in pro-ISIS graffiti outside Dutch school*, (Aug 26, 2016), <http://www.cufi.org.uk/news/jews-and-christians-targeted-in-pro-isis-graffiti-outside-dutch-school>.

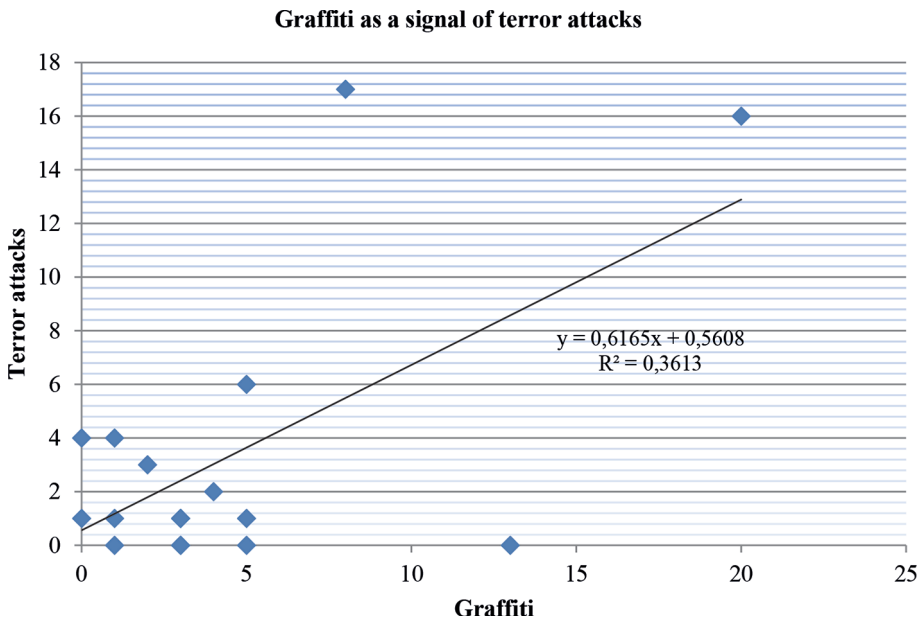
<sup>21</sup> Leah Marieann Klett (The Gospel Herald), *Assyrian Christians in Sweden Receive Chilling Graffiti Message from ISIS: 'Convert or Die'*, (Oct 19, 2015 01:32 PM EDT), <http://www.gospelherald.com/articles/58852/20151019/assyrian-christians-in-sweden-receive-chilling-graffiti-message-from-isis-convert-or-die.htm#closepopup>.



Scrawls frequently contain threats to Westerners and anti-western contents – such as references to Allah and Islam or anti-Semitic threats –, but the large majority of them are writings in form of “ISIS” acronym, the most evident and globally recognizable signal of the Islamic State.

A goal of present research is to test whether graffiti could be considered as a sort of warning for terrorist attacks and a general jihadist cells mobilization. Regression analysis of the available data suggests that the appearance of graffiti may be considered a signal of potential dangerous radicalization and a possible warning of impending terrorist activities in a certain country. Interestingly, my analysis suggests that graffiti settings represent a stronger warning sign than foreign fighters numbers.

Graph 1 shows the correlation between the appearance of graffiti and terror activity. The value of  $R^2$ , the coefficient of determination, is 0.3613. The value of  $R$  is 0.6011. This is a moderate positive – but significant – correlation, between graffiti settings and terrorist attacks. Because correlation is significant (the  $p=0.01089$ .) graffiti setting could be considered as a weak signal of a general jihadist activity in a certain country. Therefore, graffiti in urban context appears a good proxy to predict general jihadist activity within the country.



Furthermore, Graph 2 shows the existence of a significant correlation between terrorist attacks and foreign fighters. The value of R is 0.5031. And the value of R<sup>2</sup>, the coefficient of determination, is 0.2531 (R=0.503, R<sup>2</sup>=0.253, p= 0.041.). Thus, the number of foreign fighters could also be considered a weak signal of terrorist activity.

Furthermore, these data support the hypothesis that existence of graffiti in urban settings could be considered as a warning signal of jihadist activity and not just the existence of a radical fringe of the Islamic State outside of the Caliphate. Furthermore, the comparison between graffiti settings and foreign fighters suggests that graffiti could be considered a stronger signal than the presence of foreign fighters in a certain country. However, likely dataset incompleteness and general difficulties in data collection impose us to avoid any easy and deterministic conclusion. Nevertheless, quantitative analysis also suggests that the role of graffiti settings in the jihadist activity of the Islamic State should not be underestimated.

Obviously, because of gaps in the data, at the moment it is necessary to be very cautious before making more general conclusions. However, what has been said above can show an interesting way to make further progress in a warning system design.

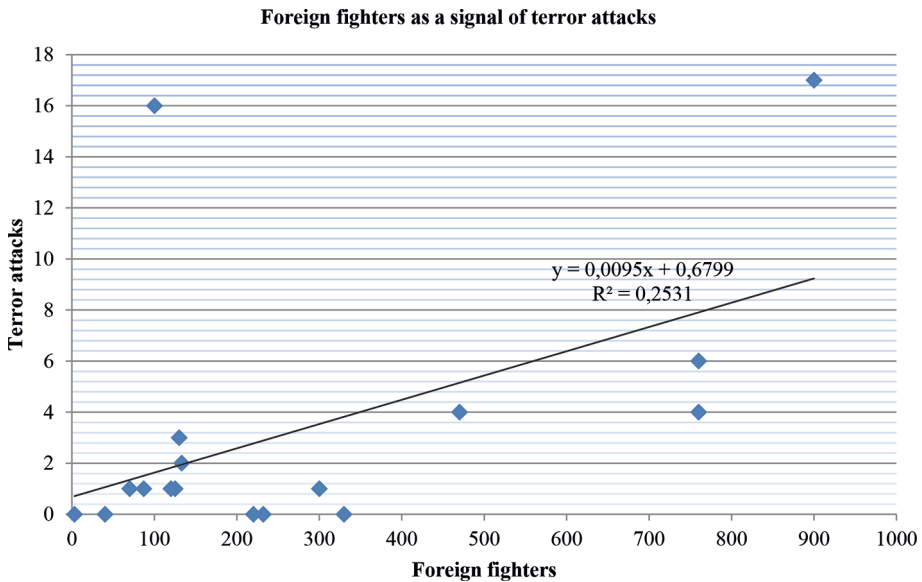


Tabella 12 - *Graffiti settings vs. foreign fighters*

Country	Terrorist attacks <sup>1</sup>	Foreign fighters <sup>2</sup>	Graffiti settings
France	17	900	8
United States	16	100	20
United Kingdom	6	760	5
Germany	4	760	0
Belgium	4	470	1
Canada	3	130	2
Spain	2	133	4
Finland	1	70	1
Sweden	1	300	3
Australia	1	120	3
Italy	1	87	5
Denmark	1	125	0
Poland	0	40	3
Kosovo	0	330	5
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0	232	3
Slovenia	0	3	1
Netherlands	0	220	13

<sup>1</sup> Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone, Eva Entenmann, *Jihadista della porta accanto Radicalizzazione e attacchi jihadisti in Occidente*, Ledizioni LediPublishing, giugno 2017, Gli attentati terroristici in Europa dal 2014 a oggi <http://www.tpi.it/mondo/europa/attentati-jihadisti-union-europea-2014-a-oggi/#r>, Attacco in Finlandia: 8 persone ferite, due i morti. Fermato l'attentatore, Redazione ANSA, 18 agosto 2017 - 20:02, Australia, attacco Isis. Terrorista uccide un uomo e prende una donna in ostaggio. Ultimo aggiornamento: 6 giugno 2017 ore 11:23, <http://www.quotidiano.net/esteri/isis-australia-1.3177358>, Torna la paura a Bruxelles, militari feriti a coltellate, Redazione ANSA, 26 agosto 2017 00:14, [http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/2017/08/25/con-machete-attacca-polizia-a-bruxelles-neutralizzato-\\_39c785cf-d2a1-44b2-89e4-f3b0f54042c6.html](http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/2017/08/25/con-machete-attacca-polizia-a-bruxelles-neutralizzato-_39c785cf-d2a1-44b2-89e4-f3b0f54042c6.html).

<sup>2</sup> The Soufan Group (TSG), December 2015.

**Conclusions.** My conclusion is that the graffiti represent a generic warning of dangerous radicalization but not a specific threat for imminent terrorist attacks. While we shouldn't worry excessively about the sheer appearance of the "ISIS" acronym by itself because it has been reproduced forty times in the 71 settings analysed, we still have to take it seriously because it seems to represent the existence of jihadist extremism and not only a generic and moral support within a marginal part of the Muslim community. Furthermore, quantitative analysis shows significant correlation between graffiti and terror attacks. More academic investigations and further research are however needed before making any general conclusion. Because graffiti are an act of defiance against the authorities, their potential link with youth protests could

amplify their role in the recruitment policies, especially across the United States and the peripheries and ethnic districts of Europe.

Tabella 15 - *Anti-western aggressions*

<i>Textual and iconic aggressions</i>	<i>numbers</i>
Aggression against western targets	30
Graffiti	116
Anti-western aggression index	0,3

In the majority of cases the textual content of graffiti is characterized by a generic tone of verbal aggression against the west in general (*anti-western aggression index* is 0,3), and only in a few cases against specific communities such as the Jewish community and the Christian community of Assyrians and the Islamic too.

Tabella 16 - *Aggressions against religious sites*

<i>Religious settings</i>	<i>numbers</i>
Christian sites	4
Jewish sites	3
Islamic sites	3
Total religious settings	10

Finally, a constant and attentive observation and comprehension of graffiti messages in urban spaces seems to represent a useful intelligence tool, although graffiti must always be considered within a larger system of urban signals (attitudes and behaviours of individuals, events, radical and recruitment centres, etc.).

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