

## MIDDLE EAST

# A News Agency With Scoops Directly From ISIS, and a Veneer of Objectivity

By RUKMINI CALLIMACHI JAN. 14, 2016

The San Bernardino shootings. The killing rampage this week in a Baghdad mall. On Thursday, it was the explosion that ripped through a Starbucks in Jakarta.

In each of those terrorist attacks, an outlet called the Amaq News Agency was first with the news that the Islamic State was going to claim responsibility. The agency has been getting the scoops because it gets tips straight from ISIS, and for those of us on the terrorism beat, that has made Amaq a must-read every time a bomb goes off.

It publishes a heavy stream of short releases on an encrypted phone app called Telegram, functioning much like an official news agency might inside a totalitarian state. The alerts, articles and videos take on the trappings of mainstream journalism, with “Breaking News” and “Exclusive” headings.

And its reporters try to appear objective, toning down the jihadist hyperbole ISIS uses in its official releases. (The Jakarta attackers were “Islamic State fighters” rather than the ISIS-preferred “soldiers of the Caliphate.” Victims are “foreign citizens” rather than “Crusaders.”)

Make no mistake, though: Amaq is putting out the Islamic State’s message, and the veneer of separation between the terrorist group and what has now become its unacknowledged wire service is quickly disintegrating. Though the group is not officially part of the ISIS media apparatus, it functions much that way.

“It has become much more assimilated into the Islamic State’s propaganda infrastructure, and now it’s a fully fledged and very important part of it. It has become the first point of publication for claims of responsibility by the group — though not as a rule,” said Charlie Winter, a senior researcher at the Transcultural Conflict and Violence Initiative at Georgia State. He pointed out that one of the biggest attacks — the Nov. 13 killings in Paris — followed the more traditional route, with the claim of responsibility published directly by ISIS.

The Islamic State maintains its official Al Bayan radio station, which puts out daily news bulletins, and its monthly magazine Dabiq, as well as many production companies that put out its grisly videos. Beyond those, there are also media offices in each of the Islamic State’s provinces. The material that goes out on these official outlets has the ultimate stamp of ISIS approval — that’s what they want us to know about their ideology and their tactics.

Those messages are tightly controlled, honed to both appeal to the largest numbers of recruits as well as designed to intimidate and sow fear.

As one example of how much they control their messaging, consider what happened to the British jihadist Omar Hussain. This month, Mr. Hussain published a string of essays about life under the Islamic State — and then he was served a cease-and-desist order by the ISIS Media Committee.

The terror group ordered him to shut down his Telegram account or face the consequences, according to a screen grab of the message which he shared with his followers in his farewell post. Perhaps they didn’t like the 6,000-word diatribe he posted, ranting against Arabs and accusing Syrian children of stealing his phone charger.

Amaq appears to have been created, or allowed to develop, as a way to create a source of information that is still basically controlled by the Islamic State but is somewhat removed from the group, giving ISIS more of the appearance of legitimacy.

One of the closest watchers of jihadist propaganda for years has been SITE Intelligence in Washington. The researchers there say they first saw the Amaq

name pop up during the drawn-out battle for Kobani, the Kurdish town on the Syria-Turkey border that ISIS captured in 2014. The tracking group's director, Rita Katz, said she and her staff noticed that ISIS fighters were sharing the Amaq updates on their personal accounts.

For much of its evolution, Amaq appeared to be posting updates and on-the-ground developments, but there was no clear pattern of Amaq preceding ISIS in claims of responsibility.

That changed last month, when a married couple, Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik, burst into the holiday party at the San Bernardino County Health Department and began shooting. Amaq was the first to report that the two supported the Islamic State. A day later, the Islamic State said the same thing in its official broadcast.

As more and more attacks have broken out in recent days, Amaq has almost always been first to report that the Islamic State was behind them.

"They are behaving like a state media. ISIS sees themselves as a state, as a country — and a country needs to have its own media," Ms. Katz said.

Taking its cues from the Western media, Amaq has even been featuring "embedded" reporters at the scenes of major ISIS battles. When ISIS took the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria, it was an Amaq cameraman who captured the first footage, Mr. Winter said.

One thing to remember, though, is that Amaq's function is to spread Islamic State propaganda. You hardly have to dig to see the spin. When United State Special Forces helped Kurdish forces free dozens of prisoners from an ISIS jail in northern Iraq in October, one American soldier was killed. But the Amaq headline had a different take: The headline was "A Failed Airdrop Operation by the American Army."

A version of this article appears in print on January 15, 2016, on page A10 of the New York edition with the headline: A News Agency With Scoops Directly From ISIS.