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The Islamic State, which has been a global safety and security problem since 2011, has recently continued to lose military, political, and social influence. Considering the attributes of the Islamic State, which adopts terrorism as a form of political behavior, it is possible to analyze, evaluate, and predict the rise or fall of this group by observing its public activities. In this case, Chief Research Fellow Takaoka provides analysis based on the results of the activities of the Islamist Extremist Monitor Team of the Middle East Institute of Japan.

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The Decline of the Islamic State as Seen from Its Public Relations

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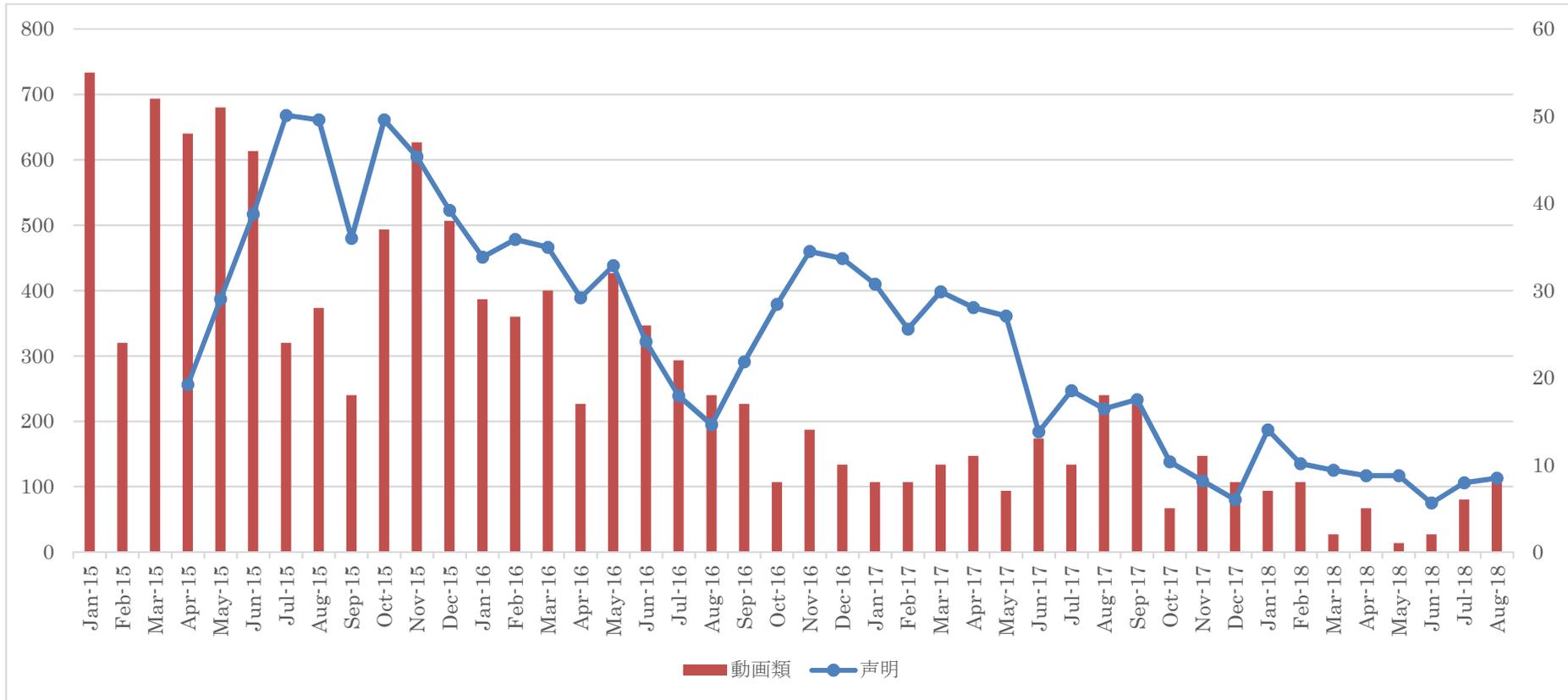
Introduction

The Islamic State, since the early activities of its precursor organization in Iraq in 2004, has gained attention by using public relations (PR) tactics such as the release of videos that garner a significant response from society. Taking foreigners hostage and then releasing videos of their decapitation while wearing orange prisoner's uniforms, as a form of revenge for the abuse of suspected Islamic extremists by the US military at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, is one of these public relations tactics. Islamist extremist groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaida—by releasing their political claims and demands along with reports of their destructive acts or military

successes—aim to spur their supporters to action and affect the behavior of governments and people hostile to their cause. This style of behavior, “the spread of one’s opinions and the realization of one’s demands through violent behavior or the threat of violent behavior,” belongs in the category of terrorism. Consequently, the standard to determine success or failure of the military operations of the Islamic State is not the destruction it causes in battle or at the scene of its crimes, but to what extent its actions can gain the world’s attention. Moreover, to what extent news organizations report its actions and ideologies, how far these actions and ideologies are disseminated in social medias, and so on.

In light of the above, for the Islamic State, along with conducting certain acts during battle and at the sites where it operates, broadcasting those acts widely has become a matter of life or death. That is, if the Islamic State is unable to release an enough statements and videos promptly concerning its activities and successes, then the significance and results of these acts will be considerably reduced. The active production and publication of works by the Islamic State concerning the “destruction of national borders” (between Iraq and Syria), the “establishment of a caliphate,” the “expression of the allegiance of supporters and imitators in every region,” and the use of “intimidating statements in Western languages” are solely intended to provoke the interest of society, the acquisition of resources such as personnel, goods, money, and so on, and the disturbance of public sentiment in countries that are hostile to it. Therefore, by observing the quantity and quality of the public relations conducted by the Islamic State, it will be possible to determine the rise and fall of the power of this group and to understand how it may act in the future.

Graph: Status of the release of statements and videos, and so on by the Islamic State from Jan. 2015 to Aug. 2018



Source: Produced by the author. The vertical axis on the left corresponds to the line graph and shows the number of statements, and so on released by the Islamic State each month. The vertical axis on the right corresponds to the bar graph and shows the number of video and audio files released by the Islamic State each month. Each number is the total number posted in the “Statement Corner” and “Archives” of the internet bulletin board site where the Islamic State posts statements and so on and excludes postings such as “daily battle results” and so forth. Furthermore, regarding the

“Archive,” as the publication criteria and the frequency and quality of works such as statements posted in the “Archive” by the site administrators varies, the values in the graph are all reference values.

[Graph translation RED: Videos, etc. BLUE: Statements]

Discussion

In the above graph, an overview of the release of statements (blue lines) and videos, etc. (red bars) by the Islamic State from January 2015 to August 2018 is shown. As can be seen from this graph, the peak comes in the first half of 2015 and is then followed by a decline in the long term. The slump in the number of videos and other such materials released is significant, particularly the dramatic decrease in the ability to make videos, and so on following around April and May of 2016. Before this, after a “theme” had been set somewhere within the organization of the Islamic State, the “various provinces” belonging to the Islamic State would simultaneously release similar videos within a short time frame, therefore conducting a “PR campaign” of sorts. There were a variety of “themes,” such as threats towards specific countries or societies, commendation for specific military gains, criticism regarding the current state of society, slander against hostile sects of al-Qaida, and so on. “PR campaigns” offered opportunities to express the intentions of the Islamic State, such as declaring the targets of threats and attacks, and also to express their views on specific issues. The interruption of these campaigns is directly connected to a decline in the quality of public relations performed by the Islamic State. From releasing political messages through “PR campaigns,” it might be said that the Islamic State’s luck ran out in the spring of 2016.

The release of short messages by the Islamic State’s self-styled news agency, al-A’amaq, drew attention as a possible way to compensate for the decline in this kind of PR activity. al-A’amaq’s short broadcasts are not included in the totals on the graph but, as the “de facto” letter of responsibility for various attacks that occurred all over the world between 2016 and 2017 considered to be attributable to the Islamic State, they were often reported on by the news media. However, broadcasts by al-A’amaq ultimately only related the fact that a relationship with the Islamic State existed. They did not serve the function of a letter of responsibility insofar as they did not reveal secrets that only the organizer of the crime would know, such as the identities of the perpetrators and so forth. That is, even for incidents for which al-A’amaq broadcast a short message, it was necessary to wait for the later release of a statement of intent or for commentary on the act published in a magazine to understand the significance of the Islamic State’s intentions or military gains.

The magazine published by the Islamic State was also an important PR medium that was published in ten or more languages at the height of its power. These magazines were considered to be extremely dangerous, as they included articles that provided information about targets and methods for attacks and incited followers to perform them. There was, therefore, some concern that they might agitate Islamic State followers or sympathizers to conduct such attacks. However, these magazines also ceased publication after September 2017. The publication of the weekly Arabic “al-Naba,” which primarily published summaries of the results of battles and religious editorials, continued after this, but this newsletter was hardly practical as a PR medium for a terrorist organization.

Regarding the release of statements, while some dips and minor recoveries were experienced, overall the trend can be seen to move downwards as time progressed. This is a confirmation of the military defeat of the Islamic State, and one cause for this downward trend was the continued reduction in occupied territory and military victories. Also, the reduction in materials on topics concerning the daily lives of Islamic State fighters and specifics on “government” within its occupied territory, which even included many images of the weather in the area, is thought to have affected this decrease. For example, following cuts to the logistics and cooking department, which provided fighters with their meals, a marked decrease in the quality of food given to fighters could be seen even in the PR materials for the Islamic State itself. These subjects, therefore, became more difficult to report on in terms of crafting effective PR. The military attacks carried out by many countries, and the exhaustion of territory that the Islamic State occupied for exploitation is one reason for the downfall of the Islamic State, but it cannot be overlooked that, even before the military actions of different countries had obtained any concrete gains, the quantity and quality of the Islamic State’s PR activity was already in decline.

Conclusion

The Islamic State has been regarded as a dangerous “self-styled nation” or “group that has become more than a terrorist organization.” However, the attributes and style of behavior of a terrorist organization and whether a specific group “controls territory” or “acquires enormous financial resources” are essentially different questions. That is, regardless of the quality and

quantity of the resources held by an individual organization and the size of its active territory, if it adopts a method of action that aims to achieve its political objectives through violent acts and intimidation, we should expect to be able to suppress its real activities by monitoring its PR activities as we would any terrorist organization and by taking countermeasures in the domain of PR itself. In contrast, the nervous overreaction to the Islamic State's PR, including the focus on the amount of occupied territory and resources obtained, served to prolong the life of the Islamic State even after it had passed its peak in the quality and quantity of PR activities.

The attacks in European countries from late 2015 to mid-2017 that gained attention as the "spread" of the Islamic State can essentially also be understood as incited by the declining quantity and quality of PR due to an inability to achieve significant results in Iraq and Syria. The short messages broadcast by al-A'amaq concerning incidents in many areas supplemented the decrease in the quantity of PR but, as they did not function to broadcast the message of the Islamic State, they were not able to make up for this lack of quality. Reactions that treated al-A'amaq's broadcasts as letters of responsibility and thinking that observers could surmise the intentions and statements of the Islamic State from them may have merely prolonged the life of the Islamic State.

From observations of the PR activities of the Islamic State, it has become clear that the decrease in the quality and quantity of PR activities preceded the physical degeneration of the state through the contraction of its occupied territory. That is, in the future, in situations where an Islamic extremist organization with a style of behavior similar to the Islamic State is expanding its power, such an expansion should be visible in the improvement of the quality and quantity of its PR and an increase in its audience even before any expansion in its physical powers. The importance of monitoring the PR activities of any terrorist organization, not only Islamic extremist organizations, lies in this point.

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