Deterring Islamic State, an Italian Job

Has deterrence played a role in the reason for why Italy has not been attacked by Islamic State?

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January 10th 2019
Wordcount: 9549

Master Thesis
Political Science: International Politics
Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences
Abstract

In recent years, all large and influential EU member states have been the victim of terrorist attacks from Islamic State (IS), with the notable exception of Italy. This explanatory and outcome centred research project aims to answer the following research question using the theoretical assumptions of indirect deterrence and deterrence by denial: Has deterrence played a role in the reason for why Italy has not been attacked by Islamic State? The theoretical assumptions of indirect deterrence led to a first expectation: By degrading the support system of Islamic State, Italy managed to deter a terrorist attack on its soil. The assumptions of deterrence by denial led to a second expectation: By increasing its defence capacities, Italy managed to deter a terrorist attack from IS on its soil. In this case-study the congruence method is used to detect possible causal correlations between the two expectations and the outcome (the absence of an attack in Italy). I found evidence that Italy used both indirect deterrence and deterrence by denial strategies. However, Italy’s use of deterrence by denial has the most explanatory value for why Italy has not been attacked by IS. In conclusion, there is enough evidence to state that deterrence has played a role in the reason for why Italy has not been attacked by IS.
Introduction

After the Islamic State’s spokesman Abu Muhammed al-Adnani made the following statement: “If you can kill a disbelieving American or European [...] including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be” (Hegghammer & Nesser, 2015), Western Europe was forced to constantly be on its guard. Islamic State (IS) had officially targeted the US and its allies. In recent years, all large and influential EU member states have been the victim of terrorist attacks from IS, with the notable exception of Italy. The question of why Italy has been the exception to the rule is yet unanswered. Although there are some speculations on why Italy has not been attacked, the case remains puzzling. To the naked eye, Italy seems like a rather ‘easy’ target, considering the huge influx of refugees from conflict areas (presumably accompanied by those with bad intentions) that enter the country via sea routes. Thereby, Italy’s capital Rome seems like the obvious target for IS, as the city symbolises the cradle of Christianity in the Western world.

This is an explanatory research project, aimed at explaining one particular outcome: the absence of any IS attacks in Italy. I aim to find an answer to the unresolved question of why Italy has managed to prevent an attack from IS on its soil. In order to solve this puzzle, I build on Deterrence theory, which is still a rather unexplored angle of approach within the counter-terrorism literature. The role of deterrence as a counterterrorism strategy for homeland security has not yet been thoroughly investigated and understood (Morral & Jackson, 2014). Through this research project, I aim to contribute to the scarce literature on the use of deterrence strategies by states to counter terrorist attacks from IS, by presenting empirical evidence that Italy has deterred IS and therewith prevented an attack on its soil through this strategy. I formulate my research question as follows: Has deterrence played a role in the reason for why Italy has not been attacked by Islamic State?
In a literature review, I elaborate on existing arguments that speculate as to why Italy is such an exceptional case in the EU, after which I present reasons for why these existing explanations remain unsatisfactory. Thereafter the general assumptions of deterrence theory are briefly introduced and the problems of applying deterrence as a counterterrorism strategy are presented. In the theoretical section, I present some background information on Islamic State and I explain why I build on deterrence by denial (Anthony, 2003) and indirect deterrence (Davis & Jenkins, 2002) concepts to address the research question. Based on the theoretical assumptions of indirect deterrence and deterrence by denial I derive two possible expectations: 

E1: By degrading the support system of Islamic State, Italy managed to deter a terrorist attack on its soil

E2: By increasing its defence capacities, Italy managed to deter a terrorist attack from IS on its soil.

In the section that follows, I justify my case-selection strategy by arguing why Italy is such an interesting outlier and crucial case in Western Europe and I explain how I aim to measure the use of deterrence by denial and indirect deterrence by the Italian government. In this outcome centred research project, the congruence method is used to interpret data and the correlation between the two explanatory variables and the outcome of interest here, the absence of an attack from IS in Italy.

After analysing the data that I selected, I conclude that there is evidence that Italy used both indirect deterrence and deterrence by denial strategies to deter IS from attacking its territory. This conclusion is amongst other factors based on the evidence that Italy, after 2014, developed more and stricter legislation that criminalized all forms of support for terrorist organisations, in addition to the fact that Italy especially increased the use of one defence tool, deportation, making it harder for terrorists to successfully plan and execute an attack. However,
I argue that Italy’s use of deterrence by denial is a more plausible explanation for the fact that Italy has not been attacked by IS than Italy’s use of indirect deterrence.
Literature Review

The absence of an attack from Islamic State on Italian soil has not gone unnoticed. There are in fact some speculations on why Italy has been an exceptional case. In the following section the arguments which are used most often to account for this outcome are presented and thereafter problematized. I present an alternative explanation which has not yet been investigated in this case: the use of deterrence as a counterterrorism strategy by Italy. The reason for why deterrence theory has not yet successfully been applied to counterterrorism cases is explained at the end of this section, followed by a short overview of scholars that argue that deterrence should be an important counterterrorism strategy.

The Italian case

Many argue that an explanation for the absence of an attack is the relatively small group of Muslim extremists in Italy (Momigliano, May 2018; Montgomery, 2016; L Vidino, April 2014; Lorenzo Vidino & Marone, 2017). This statement is substantiated by some figures. Firstly, the group of foreign fighters (FF) (Europeans that leave their country to join IS in Syria or other conflict zones) with ties to Italy is small when compared to other large European states (see figure 2) (Montgomery, 2016; Lorenzo Vidino & Marone, 2017, p. 52). In 2017, data from the Italian Interior Ministry showed that 125 individuals (only a few of whom were in the possession of an Italian passport) left Italy to join IS overseas (see figure 1) (Ministero Dell'Interio, 2017). Compared to the number of FF from Belgium (478), Germany (915) and France (1,910), the Italian number of FF is considerably low (see figure 1). The problem of FF is an important
subject on security agendas nowadays, as “these individuals can access militant groups, acquire weapons training and combat experience and develop radical anti-Western positions” (Marone, 2016, p. 20).

An explanation for the absence of an attack from IS in Italy is often sought in the scarcity of jihadi Muslim extremism in Italy. Secondly, a demographical factor should also support this argument, namely that large-scale Muslim immigration began substantially later in Italy (late 1980, early 1990) than in most Western European countries (Lorenzo Vidino, 2008). As such, individuals from the first wave of ‘second-generation Muslims’ are only now entering adulthood. Knowing that the most common profile of an average IS militant is that of a young (26-27) male (second generation) Muslim, reinforces the argument that there are relatively few individuals who fit that profile in Italy (Dearden, april 2016). Consequently, Italy harbours a relatively small number of homegrown jihadists (Lorenzo Vidino & Marone, 2017, p. 51). As Francesca Galli argues, there is no large population of second-generation immigrants in Italy that have been, or potentially could be, radicalized (Kirchgaessner & Tondo, june 2017; Montgomery, 2016). Considering these statements, the reason for why Italy has not (yet) suffered from an attack from IS should be due to demographic differences. I find this conclusion insufficient and it can be countered with the arguments that are presented below.

Geographically speaking, Italy is relatively close to the Middle East and Northern Africa, regions that are more influenced by IS than any other region in the world. Libya-based IS affiliates are so to speak “just south of Rome”, according to the Interior Minister of Italy
Thereby, Italy has faced a large influx of refugees and migrants from conflict areas entering the country on boats within the last couple of years, many of whom were not often faced by strict border security checks, partly because of Italy's relatively porous sea borders (Lorenzo Vidino & Marone, 2017). As shown in figure 3, in 2016 and 2017, Italy was the second most popular refuge centre in Europe, dealing with more refugees than other large EU countries like France, Spain and the UK. Figure 3 only shows the number of official asylum applications. In reality, almost 70 percent of all of the migrants that entered the EU in 2017 entered through Italy. Due to its sea borders and the high influx of migrants, Italy is relatively more vulnerable than other EU countries to migrants with a terrorist motive.

The argument that the number of IS militants in Italy is low and therefore negligible is misleading. Italian IS militants have taken part in multiple attacks in Europe. Anis Amri, the man responsible for the terrorist attack on the Christmas market in Berlin in December 2016, was radicalized in the Italian prison system. After the attack, Amri returned to Italy where he was executed by the Italian police. Similarly, Youssef Zaghba, co-responsible for the London Bridge attack in June 2017, was Italian and lived in Bologna with his family. Ahmed Hanachi, responsible for the death of two women in Marseille in October 2017, lived in an Italian town called Aprilia near Rome. His brother was a foreign fighter (Momigliano, May 2018; Lorenzo Vidino & Marone, 2017). Various Italy-based IS militants performed attacks throughout Europe in the name of IS. Why these Italian jihadists refrain from attacking their own country but do
perform attacks abroad is therefore puzzling. It is wrong to argue that just because the extremist scene is smaller than ‘normal’, it is less amenable to produce radicalized individuals willing to perform attacks. Additionally, the fact that the attacks in European countries were not always performed by residents from the same country, invalidates the argument that Italy has not suffered from an attack because it has few homegrown extremist jihadists.

In fact, even the statement that the jihadist scene is small in Italy can be problematized. In northern Italy there are, like in other European states, large urban regions where a significant amount of radicalized individuals have been localized, such as in Veneto, Lombardy and Emilia Romagna (Groppi, 2017). However, unlike in other countries, there is also quite a lot of radicalization in rural areas (such as small towns and cities) throughout the country. Closer investigation has uncovered that in every region of Italy radicalization cases and networks have been present (Lorenzo Vidino & Marone, 2017). Finally, although ‘only’ 125 Italian individuals have been listed as FF in 2017, 22 of them have returned (figure 1), posing a serious threat to Italy (Marone, 2016; Ministero Dell'Interio, 2017; Lorenzo Vidino & Marone, 2017). The number may be relatively low, but it should not be marginalized. Namely, returned FF are considered a serious security threat because of the military training and battle field experience they might have acquired during their time abroad (Van Ginkel & Entermann, 2016).

As the existing arguments for the absence of an attack from IS in Italy are not satisfactory, a new and overlooked argument is presented building on Deterrence theory. After a short introduction of the concept, the reason why deterrence has not yet been applied to understand many counter-terrorism cases is explained. Lastly, I present a short overview of the literature that argues that terrorists can be deterred.
Deterrence theory

Deterrence as a concept can be defined as “the use of threats by one party to convince another party to refrain from initiating some course of action” (P. K. Huth, 1999, p. 26) or as “threatening with punitive retaliation to prevent a foe from attacking” (Sigal, 2015, p. 247). There are three waves of deterrence research which have been identified and categorized by scholars such as Robert Jervis (1979). A fourth wave of deterrence research began to emerge after the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11th 2001 (9/11), and scholars began to focus on deterring terrorism (Gearson, 2012). The literature on deterring terrorism is still largely theoretical: “[…] it consists of plausible suggestions, but in many cases the underlying theoretical logic has not been thoroughly developed, and the ideas have not been tested against empirical evidence” (Wenger & Wilner, 2012, pp. 37-38). Within the fourth wave of deterrence literature, three approaches have received most attention: ‘indirect deterrence’, ‘deterrence by denial’, and ‘deterrence by delegitimization’. This research project aims to contribute to this fourth wave of deterrence research by building on the first two of its theoretical approaches in the Italian case. Deterrence by delegitimization is mostly used when discussing terrorism and the involvement of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) (Knopf, 2012, pp. 22-23). Since WMDs are irrelevant in the deterrence relationship between Italy and IS, this research project will not focus on this type of deterrence.

The application problem

Prominent scholars and analysts within the field of international relations (IR) have argued that deterrence is not useful as a counterterrorism strategy (Betts, 2002; Davis & Jenkins, 2002; Trager & Zagorcheva, 2006). George (2003) stated that direct deterrence is not very effective in intra-state conflicts against non-state actors (like terrorists and suicide bombers) who perceive the conflict as a zero-sum conflict and who feel no need to consider any other strategies other than to attack (p. 465). The dominant approach to explain deterrence theory has been
through rational choice theory and game theory. These theories require, for deterrence to be successful, that all parties involved are rational actors that can make transparent and transitive preference orderings. Terrorists are thought to be irrational and therefore unresponsive to the requirements of deterrence. The claim that terrorists are irrational should be addressed when discussing deterrence and counterterrorism as it is a common key argument against deterrence as a counterterrorism strategy and is also an often used statement in the popular media/press (Trager & Zagorcheva, 2006, p. 87). The success of deterrence also requires that all parties involved share a certain ‘understanding’ over the boundaries and the consequences/punishment of crossing them. Consequently, it is hard to establish a deterrence relationship between a state and a terrorist group, as these parties often do not have overlapping preferences, as they do not share believes about what is or is not morally acceptable (Trager & Zagorcheva, 2006, p. 92; Wenger & Wilner, 2012, p. 31). As Thomas Schelling puts it: "If his pain were our greatest delight and our satisfaction his greatest woe, we would just proceed to hurt and frustrate each other" (Schelling, 2008, p. 100). The application problem can be explained by a visualisation (see figure 4):

The Deterrence Game consists of two players that pick a strategy sequentially. The players must choose between two strategies: cooperate ‘c’ (not-attack) and defect ‘d’ (attack). The possible outcomes of the game (x, y, z) are listed in figure 4. The challenger in this game, Player 1, is *Terrorist group X*. The defender in this game, Player 2, is *State X*. For the Deterrence Game to be successful, both actors need to be able to make a preference ordering that is transitive and transparent. This is problematic since the preference ordering of terrorists is either (often) unknown (which...
makes it difficult for the defender to determine its strategy), or the preference ordering is structured in a way that the status quo will always be the challenger’s least favoured outcome. This means that the challenger is not ‘scared off’ by the probability of outcome z. For instance, if the preference ordering of Terrorist group X is y>z>x, the preferred strategy will always be d, to attack. Namely, outcome x is the least favoured outcome for Player 1, which is why Player 1 would never choose strategy c, as this directly leads to outcome x (Pellikaan, TBA). IS militants are willing to die for the goals of IS (I elaborate more on IS and its goals in the theoretical section). If death will not deter terrorists, which other means could player 2 use to deter the challenger (Pape, 2003)? Additionally, Player 1 is only deterred by Player 2 if Player 2 has a credible retaliation capability. However, since terrorist groups (often) lack a clear return address, retaliation is difficult, if not impossible. This is because, most of the time, terrorists do not have control of a clear and/or permanent territory and operate in clandestine ways (Trager & Zagorcheva, 2006).

There are also other problems when it comes to applying deterrence theory to counterterrorism cases. For instance, the United States (US) declared with the ‘War on Terror’ its ultimate goal, which was to destroy al Qaeda. This last part makes the use of deterrence problematic. Namely, “deterrence is a bargaining tactic that emphasizes the use of threats to manipulate an adversary’s behaviour and hinges on offering an adversary a way out” (Wenger & Wilner, 2012, p. 4). Since the US openly stated that they wanted to destroy al Qaeda no matter what, al Qaeda knew that regardless of their next steps, there was no ‘way out’, as the US sought to destroy them despite their future choices. Hence, a deterrence dilemma is created. This is in line with Thomas Schelling’s well-known second-wave observation that “deterrent threats must be paired with assurances that the threat will not be implemented if the other actor refrains from challenging one’s deterrent commitment” (Knopf, 2012, p. 7). In other words, if total annihilation of a terrorist organisation is the goal, it creates a problem for the use of
deterrence. Another problem in regard to using deterrence as a counterterrorism tool is that there is no deterrence tactic that works on every terrorist group. The differences in goals and motivations of terrorist groups - like nationalistic, ideological or religious – are important for the preference ordering of different terrorist groups and therefore for whether and how deterrence can be applied and the design of a deterrent strategy (Wenger & Wilner, 2012, p. 4).

**Deterring terrorists**

There is a growing number of scholars that argue that deterrence should be an important counterterrorism strategy. Trager and Zagorcheva (2006) do not support the notion that terrorists cannot be deterred because they are irrational. They believe that terrorists can be deterred from specific terrorist actions against a specific targeted state. As explained in the previous section, deterrence requires that threats are paired with assurances that the threat will disappear if the challenger chooses to refrain from its intended behaviour. A deterrence strategy could be to present the challenger an (implicit or explicit) offer of an alternative state of affairs if the challenger would refrain from its intended behaviour (Trager & Zagorcheva, 2006, p. 90).

According to Davis and Jenkins (2002), we might not be able to find a general deterrence strategy, but we can deter specific terrorist actions. They believe that terrorists are not reckless but actually risk-averse and wary of operational risks (Davis & Jenkins, 2002, p. 60). Following the same line of argument, Huth and Russet (1984) argue that even terrorists make simple cost-benefit calculations: “[…] the expected gains from an attack must be so small, or the expected losses so substantial, that abstaining from attack will produce a more favourable outcome” (P. Huth & Russett, 1984, p. 500). As such, even terrorists can be deterred if the losses of engaging in particular behaviour are high enough or the gains low enough. A theoretical assumption follows that establishing an expected-utility model for a terrorist organisation makes deterrence possible. In other words, if one can figure out when ‘outcome z’ is the least preferred outcome of a terrorist group, one is able to deter that specific group.
To conclude, there is a growing literature on how deterrence scholarship can be used to explain how states can fight terrorism. However, there is little empirical research to derive clear and applicable theoretical assumptions to specific cases. This research will add to the scarce empirical research, using a case study to reveal whether deterrence strategies have been used by Italy in order to avoid terrorist attacks from IS. I think that the Italian case is an interesting one to evaluate the relevance of the fourth wave theoretical assumptions of deterrence by denial and indirect deterrence.
Theoretical Framework

Islamic State

Islamic State (IS) is also known by other names: Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Daesh (an acronym for al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Iraq wal-Sham, which basically means ISIL). All refer to the same Sunni jihadist group. Jihadism is a radical type of Islamism with an extremely violent interpretation of Islam (RAND corporation, 2018). Jihadist groups believe that violence is the only credible strategy to achieve the true purpose of the Islamic religion and they have anti-democratic and anti-Western convictions (Khosrokhavar, 2015, p. 1; TE-SAT, 2017). IS was originally an Iraqi branch of Al Qaeda and its ideology can be classified under jihadism (Firestone, 2012; Khosrokhavar, 2015; RAND corporation, 2018; Lorenzo Vidino, 2008; L Vidino, April 2014). However, IS is no typical jihadist group (Gulmohamad, 2014).

In principle, IS’s main goal is to create a caliphate across Iraq, Syria and beyond. The current leader of IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is labelled the ‘Caliph’ of all Muslims (which means the successor to the Prophet Muhammed) (Wood, 2015). The Caliph is the sole leader of the Caliphate. The Caliphate exceeds traditional borders and is subject to Sharia law. Sharia law is an Islamic law that is directly based on the Quran and the teachings of the prophet Muhammed. Sharia law clashes with secularism and democracy, is very strict and regulates public and private behaviour (Elbaum, 2018; Gulmohamad, 2014). According to IS, they established a

Figure 5: Time-lapse of Iraqi territory in control of IS (Karklis & Meko, 2017).
Caliphate on the 29th of June in 2014 (Wood, 2015) and made al-Baghdadi the self-declared ruler over all Muslims. IS called on Muslims everywhere in the world to pledge allegiance to this self-declared Islamic state (Klompenhouwer, 2014). Unlike ‘average’ terrorists, IS thus controlled territory (figure 5). Although IS has rapidly lost territory does not imply that their dangerousness has diminished, in the contrary. Stefano Dambruoso (counterterrorism expert and member of Italian Parliament) stated the following: “The caliphate has been practically defeated, but the terrorists haven't, and they're now moving to other failed states, such as Libya” (Livesay, 2017). This is of concern to Italy because of the proximity of Libya to the Italian territory.

IS is also the organizer of transnational terrorism outside of Syria and Iraq (Beauchamp, 2015). IS creates videos, magazines, pamphlets and other propaganda in order to recruit new militants. This material is shared on websites and social media platforms, like Twitter, YouTube and Facebook. The aim is to convince their supporters to launch terrorist attacks directed at their biggest enemy, ‘the West’, in particular Europe and the United States (Bayoumy, September 2014; Clarke, 2017). The recruitment and further communication between IS members, jihadist cells and ‘lone wolves’ (lone-actor terrorist) also takes place online, mostly through encrypted applications like Telegram (Clarke, 2017). Using these online communication methods, IS members help individuals in Europe to plan each step of an attack from a distance. Additionally, IS sends fighters from Middle Eastern conflict zones into Europe to perform attacks in their name (Gulmohamad, 2014). The fact that IS makes use of contemporary tools like social media makes that their influence on extremists on European soil is difficult to control (Farwell, 2014; Wood, 2015).

In the following section I introduce the two types of deterrence that I aim to detect in the Italian counterterrorism strategy: indirect deterrence and deterrence by denial.
Indirect deterrence

After the 9/11 attacks, the RAND Cooperation and the institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) developed a report on how terrorism could be deterred. Subsequently, Davis and Jenkins (2002) established a framework to deter terrorism. Davis and Jenkins (2002) argued that we should see terrorist organisations, like al Qaeda, as systems (p.13). For deterrence to be successful, it is necessary to decompose these systems into classes of actors (p.14) (see figure 6). “Terrorists operate within a much larger system, some elements of which are potentially more vulnerable than others” (Davis & Jenkins, 2002, p. 14). In other words, Davis and Jenkins argue that some actors within the system of a terrorist group are more ‘deterrable’ than others. To explain this line of argument, it is necessary to mention that Davis and Jenkins distinguished ‘internalist terrorists’ and ‘externalist terrorists’, which they called type A and type B terrorists (figure 7). They argue that within the system of al Qaeda (or any other (jihadi) terrorist group), both type A and B exist. “Although al Qaeda leaders are Type A terrorists, many elements of the larger al Qaeda system [...] fall into Type B” (Davis & Jenkins, 2002, p. 12). This is important for their argument, because type A terrorists, like religious leaders (for instance Bin Laden) and their foot soldiers, are hard to deter because of their high level of spiritual commitment and their willingness to die for religious purposes. Davis and Jenkins argue that, other than focussing on eradicating ‘the worst’ (type A) within the system of a terrorist group, the focus should be on suppressing the ‘less-violent’ (type B) actors, as they are more likely to be deterred. The following quote will make this idea less abstract: “Bin
Laden may feel he has nothing to lose, but at least some of his financiers live comfortably with wealth, family, and prestige. Obviously, they do have something to lose” (Davis & Jenkins, 2002, p. 15). Differently stated, “[…] the various supporters and enablers of terrorism who are not themselves eager to sacrifice their own lives for the cause can be threatened with retaliation for their role in facilitating terrorist operations” (Knopf, 2012, pp. 10-11). Targeting external suppliers/facilitators and heads of supportive states (figure 6) is an indicator of an indirect deterrence strategy. For this research project, indirect deterrence would imply the efforts of Italy to not directly deter not IS terrorists but rather the actors that support/enable IS to act on their threats to attack Italy. This leads to the formulation of the first expectation:

Expectation 1: By degrading the support system of Islamic State, Italy managed to deter a terrorist attack on its soil.

Deterrence by denial

Despite their previous argumentation that the focus of deterrence should not (per se) be on type A terrorists, Davis and Jenkins (2002) also argued the following: “the empirical record shows that even hardened terrorists dislike operational risks and may be deterred by uncertainty and risk” (p. xii). This implies that by degrading the probability that individual attacks will succeed, even type A terrorists can be deterred (Knopf, 2012, p. 12). This line of argumentation fits within the second type of deterrence: deterrence by denial. Snyder (2015) explained the essence of deterrence by denial quite concise by comparing it with deterrence by punishment: “Where punishment seeks to coerce the enemy through fear, denial depends on causing hopelessness” (p.3).
Robert W. Anthony (2003) studied the effectiveness of preventing terrorist attacks on the West by “either challenging the terrorists’ underlying motivations for the attack or undermining their confidence in its expected success” (p. 9). After the investigations of the attacks of 9/11, it was concluded that terrorists, even suicide terrorists, are risk-averse and cautious when it comes to the planning of attacks. Profound research indicates that if the aviation security had been stricter, the US would have met the conditions necessary to deter al Qaeda from committing the 9-11 attacks (Anthony, 2003, p. 2). Additionally, much evidence indicates that al Qaeda planned, practised and executed their attack very carefully, which is empirical evidence that (suicide) terrorists are indeed willing to delay an attack in order to make sure that the risk of failure is as low as possible (Anthony, 2003).

The mathematical rationale of deterrence by denial is visualized in figure 8. The essence of the model in figure 8 is that there is a negative relationship between the willingness of terrorists to commit a crime and the probability of being apprehended (p. 4). The probability of being apprehended is increased with more/stricter defence capabilities. Trager and Zagorcheva (2006) listed a few measures to increase defence capabilities that should harden targets and therewith deter terrorists: fortify embassies, reinforce cockpit doors, sharpen immigration controls, and improve border security. Although the increase of defence capabilities can probably not fully protect all targets within a state, it can decrease the terrorists’ power to hurt and thereby lessen the impact of a terrorist attack. Subsequently, this reduces terrorist motivation, which increases the effectiveness of defensive strategies (Trager & Zagorcheva, 2006, p. 106). This leads me to formulate a second expectation:

*Expectation 2: By increasing its defence capacities, Italy managed to deter a terrorist attack from IS on its soil.*
Research design

Methodology

This is an outcome-centred research project, meaning that the explanation for the lack of an attack from IS in Italy is the main research objective. To execute this single-case study and interpret the data that I find, I use the congruence method. The congruence method is often used in single-case studies and allows the researcher to test which theory best predicts the variance on the dependent and independent variables (Ulriksen & Dadalauri, 2016). The congruence method is suitable for this project, because I do not aim to unpack each part of the causal process of the suspected deterrence relationship, I merely want to identify a possible relationship between some factors/strategies and the absence of terrorist attacks (Wauters & Beach, 2018, p. 296). Amongst other sources (primary and secondary), I used annual defence budgets, official government statements, academic papers, expert opinions and legislative reports. As the subject of this research project is greatly contemporary, I also used media sources.

Case Selection Strategy

By looking at the states that have suffered an attack from IS in Western Europe, Italy is an extreme case, i.e. an outlier. Whereas EU member-states nearby, such as Spain, France, Germany, Belgium and the United Kingdom, have been subject to terrorist attacks from IS, Italy has not. But why is this puzzling and why does this make Italy an interesting case-study? It is puzzling because there are many indicators that make Italy an obvious target and Italy is on many levels similar to Western European countries that have been attacked by IS (figure 9) (Bolon, Karasz, & Mckinley Jr, August 17 2017; Foster, August 18 2017; Groppi, 2017; Milt & Blessing, 2018; The Global Coalition, 2018).
The row-categories are selected on the assumptions that a state’s association with them would enlarge the state’s risk of being targeted by IS. Namely, IS declared that they wanted to destroy the Western world and everyone who would stand in their way, for instance, the participating states in the fight against IS in Syria, Libya and Iraq (Hegghammer & Nesser, 2015). The countries were selected because they are most similar to Italy on the basis that they are large western European countries and represent the centre of Western democratic and liberal values.

The Carabinieri (a special Italian military police force) have played a crucial role in the international coalition against IS, mostly by training police officers and military personnel overseas (Braw, 2018). In 2016, similarly to France and the UK, Italy sent thousands of soldiers to Libya to fight IS. Particularly France and Italy are key players conducting counterterrorism operations in Libya. Unlike Italy, France and the UK both suffered attacks from IS in 2017, namely the Paris shooting on April 20th, the Manchester terror attack on May 22nd and the London Bridge attack on June 3rd (Foster, August 18 2017). The absence of an attack in Italy can thus not be explained by a lack of Italian participation in the global fight against IS abroad.

Over the last few years, the refugee flows from conflict areas to Italy have increased substantially, with significant numbers of refugees reaching Italian shores through the ‘central Mediterranean route’ (Milt & Blessing, 2018; The UN Refugee Agency, 2017, p. 11). Experts have confirmed that IS militants are making advantage of these refugee flows to enter Europe.
According to Frontex data, the number of refugees that entered Italy in 2016 through this route was 181,126, which is more than in 2015 (153,946) and 2014 (170,760) (Milt & Blessing, 2018). The fact that most of the refugees that enter the EU go through Italy (almost 70 percent in 2017) makes Italy relatively vulnerable for those with bad intentions (Tondo, Messina, & Wintour, 2017).

There is also no lack of indicators that IS has had plans to attack Italy. For example, at the end of 2016, a video from IS, which was circulating on the web, identified the Vatican in Rome as ‘the next target’. After the attacks in Barcelona in 2017, IS threatened to attack the Vatican in Rome in yet another video called ‘The Islamic State - Inside the Caliphate’.

“Telegram, the ‘app-of-choice’ for terrorists, […] urged lone wolves to hit specific targets within Italy” (Giangravè, August 25 2017). The slogan ‘devi combatterli’ has circulated ever since, which is Italian for ‘you have to fight them’. The fact that the slogan is written in Italian indicates that the source is home-grown (L Vidino, April 2014). IS’s spokesman al-Adnani already stated in 2014: “We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women” (Hegghammer & Nesser, 2015, p. 16). IS also announced in 2014 that it aimed to assassinate Pope Francis (Squires, September 2014). There are several more indicators that an attack on Italy has been historically planned by IS (Lyman, Februari 22 2015; Squires, March 29 2018). Beyond these explicit threats, Italy is also a rather logical target for IS. Rome carries a certain symbolism, as the centre of Christianity in Europe.

In conclusion, Italy has the potential to be attacked by IS, but it has not happened so far. All elements together make it puzzling why Italy has not been attacked yet, as it has been targeted multiple times. It is also clear that Italy is similar to states that have been attacked by IS on fundamental factors. This makes Italy an interesting and extreme case within the region of Western Europe.
Operationalisation

In the following section, I explain how I aim to measure the use of deterrence by denial and indirect deterrence by the Italian government.

Indirect Deterrence

The first aim is to find evidence that supports that Italy has used indirect deterrence to prevent an attack from IS on its soil. With indirect deterrence, the focus is not on deterring the more obvious targets, the terrorists themselves, but on deterring the actors in the system that support the terrorists. Hence, for this first part of the analysis, the deterrence relationship is not between Italy and terrorists of IS, but between Italy and the indirect supporters of IS. Simply stated, the aim of indirect deterrence is to degrade the support system of a terrorist group, in this case study IS. Support can be expressed in many ways. For instance, by donating money or supplying terrorists with raw materials suitable for making bombs or other weaponry. However, it can also be observed in the form of providing terrorist with means of transportation, as well as providing terrorists with a place to shelter, to gather, to recruit members and to express/propagate their ideology. The aim of this research is not to expose the financial and material supporters of IS or even prove that these support streams exist, but to expose actions of the Italian government that have been implemented to counter such support.

For this research, I need to determine what specific actions I will consider indicators for the Italian attempt to degrade the support system of IS. Davis and Jenkins (2002) mentioned one action in their project, namely that a government should draw a legal line when it comes to supporting terrorists. Anyone crossing that line “will be pursued relentlessly—forever, if necessary—with all the means necessary and with the United States willing to lower its standards of evidence, presume guilt, violate sovereignty, attack pre-emptively, and so on” (p. 60). Knopf (2012) and (George, 2003) referred to indirect deterrence as the act of threatening supporting actors with financial sanctions or imprisonment. In line with the other authors, for
this research I will also proxy tools of indirect deterrence as legislative measures against the support system of terrorists. Therefore, indicators of Italy’s use of indirect deterrence are the introduction or adjustments of legislative measures like sanctions, imprisonment or other kinds of criminal prosecution aimed at those who provide IS with financial or material support on Italian soil. These actions from the Italian government form the first independent variable (IV1). The variation of this variable is measured over time, meaning that this project focuses on the change of Italian legislative measures before and after Italy was immediately threatened by IS (a tipping point). I assume that a clear difference between Italy’s legislation before and after the tipping point is an indicator for the Italian attempt to diminish IS’s support system. I give more information on the tipping point in the analysis section.

**Deterrence by Denial**

The second aim is to find evidence that Italy has used deterrence by denial to deter an attack from IS on its soil. Simply stated, the aim of deterrence by denial is to undermine the confidence and/or motivation of terrorists causing them to abandon their plans to attack. Theory predicts that this can be accomplished by increasing a state’s domestic defence capacities and security measures (Anthony, 2003; Gearson, 2012; Wilner, 2011). For this research, I need to determine what specific actions I will consider indicators for the increase of Italy’s homeland defence capacity. In the previous section, Trager and Zagorcheva (2006) listed some of these actions, such as sharper immigration controls and border security. Gearson (2012) determined that active military and law enforcement deployments are indicators of the increase of defence capacity. Knopf (2012) suggested actions like warrantless surveillance and racial profiling, although this would require a trade-off with core democratic values (p. 38-39). Anthony (2003) focussed solely on upscaling aviation security, like implementing stricter passports and baggage checks, training ticket agents to check the terrorist watch list and the use of more on-board Air Marshals etcetera. I noticed that every author that writes about deterrence by denial strategies
takes the liberty to interpret for him-/herself what should be understood by ‘increasing defence capacities’. There is no conclusive list of actions, so I will use the actions listed by other authors, but I will also suggest new indicators. For instance, the establishment of agencies that are specialized at exposing and countering terrorist networks and activities. The second independent variable is therefore the increase of Italy’s defence capacities using the actions listed in this section (IV2). Just like the IV1, the variation of the variable is measured over time, on which I will elaborate more in the analysis section.
Results and Analyses

Tipping point

As explained in the latter part of this project, I aim to find variation in the independent variables over time. To do this, I determined a tipping point, a point after which Italy was directly threatened by IS. The purpose of this tipping point is to establish whether Italy changed something in its behaviour or started some course of action after being specifically threatened by IS, that indicates the use of deterrence by denial and/or indirect deterrence strategies. I believe that the tipping point was in the summer of 2014, because as of then IS specifically named Italy (and the EU) a target, urging its militants and lone wolves to execute attacks. Experts called the following statement, made on the 22nd of September in 2014 by Abu Muhammed al-Adnani (the lead spokesman of IS), the most significant verbal threat to the West:

“If you can kill a disbelieving American or European – especially the spiteful and filthy French – or an Australian, or a Canadian, or any other disbeliever from the disbelievers waging war, including the citizens of the countries that entered into a coalition against the Islamic State, then rely upon Allah, and kill him in any manner or way however it may be. Do not ask for anyone’s advice and do not seek anyone’s verdict. Kill the disbeliever whether he is civilian or military, for they have the same ruling” (Hegghammer & Nesser, 2015, p. 17).

This statement indirectly refers to Italy because IS threatens all countries that entered a coalition against IS. Since Italy is a member of the Global Coalition against IS and is a key player in the fight against IS in Libya, Iraq and Syria, Italy is indirectly targeted. Additionally, Europeans in general are being targeted, which implies automatically that Italians are targets too.

Two other statements from Abu Muhammed al-Adnani from January 2015 and March 2015 confirmed the existing suspicion that there were centrally directed attacks from IS planned in Europe:
“What lies ahead will be worse – with Allah’s permission – and more bitter, for you haven’t seen anything from us just yet” and “know that we want Paris – by Allah’s permission – before Rome and before Spain, after we blacken your lives and destroy the White House, the Big Ben, and the Eifel Tower” (Hegghammer & Nesser, 2015, p. 17).

In addition, the leader of IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (the so-called ‘caliph’), made explicit statements from 2014 onwards that indicated that IS was directly threatening European targets, specifically Rome:

November 2014: “[...] indeed the Crusaders will be defeated. By Allah’s permission, they will be defeated. And indeed the Muslims will be victorious. By Allah’s promise, they will be victorious. And the march of the mujahidin will continue until they reach Rome, by Allah’s permission”

May 2015: “We call upon every Muslim in every place to perform hijrah to the Islamic State or fight in his land wherever that may be” (Hegghammer & Nesser, 2015, p. 17).

Experts determine that 2014 was the year in which IS became a serious threat to the European territory, including the Italian territory (Hegghammer & Nesser, 2015). As of this reason, I see 2014 as a tipping point.
Evidence part one, *Deterrence by Denial*

During my research, one particular security measure stood out. Italy increased its use of deportations significantly after 2014 (figure 10). Deportations are clearly the cornerstone of the Italian counterterrorism strategy (Kfir, Patel, & Batt, 2018; Lorenzo Vidino & Marone, 2017). Between January 2015 and October 2017, Italian authorities have deported 221 individuals who were suspected of being a security risk. Deportations are often used when sufficient evidence for prosecution against a person is absent, but suspicion that that individual is posing a threat to national security remains present (Marone, 2017; Lorenzo Vidino & Marone, 2017). Deportation is an aggressive and quick measure to eliminate suspected terrorists from the territory and, according to experts, an important factor of why Italy has maintained low levels of radicalization in the country. Anyone who dares to speak the word ‘Jihad’ and anyone with the slightest link to extremism is considered a threat and is immediately apprehended (Luttwak, 2015). The so-called Italian ‘fast-track deportations’ have largely prevented the formation of extremist Jihadi groups as well as terrorist violence (Luttwak, 2015; Marone, 2017; Lorenzo Vidino & Marone, 2017).

![Figure 10: Individuals deported from Italy for security reasons (Lorenzo Vidino & Marone, 2017, p. 7).](image-url)
The reason why Italy is able to deport people solely based on suspicion and without any prior trial (Marone, 2017) is because Italy’s unique and restrictive citizenship laws. Being ‘Italian’ is mostly based on the principle of ‘jus sanguinis’, which means ‘based on bloodlines’. If you want to become an Italian, you face a complex and lengthy process. Children of immigrants can only obtain full citizenship if they apply for it within a year after becoming 18 years old provided that they can prove they lived in Italy legally and uninterruptedly since birth. A second important factor is that, although Italy has a growing Muslim population (nearly two million Muslims make Islam the second-largest religion), Italy does not recognize Islam as an official religion (Livesay, 2017). This is also the reason why many mosques operate ‘underground’ and why there are only eight official mosques in Italy (Saint-Blancat & Schmidt di Friedberg, 2005; Lorenzo Vidino, 2008). Khalid Chaouki (the only Muslim member of the Italian parliament and president of the Islamic Cultural Center at Rome’s Grand Mosque) said in an interview in 2017 that “Italy doesn’t want to recognize you as Italian Muslim. […] And you can never really be Italian and really Muslim” (Livesay, 2017). Besides the fact that it is already hard to obtain Italian citizenship without ‘Italian blood’, it is even harder to obtain citizenship for Muslims. Consequently, it is relatively easy for Italy to deport suspected extremists because they (almost) never have Italian citizenship (Marone, 2017; Montgomery, 2016).

In order to deport people, they must be apprehended first. Italy’s institutional setup in the fight against terrorism is extensive. According to experts, this has everything to do with Italy’s long standing historical relationship with terrorism and organised crime within its borders (Milt & Blessing, 2018, p. 7). Examples are the Red Brigades, the Ndrangheta, the Camorra and the Sicilian Mafia (Lorenzo Vidino & Marone, 2017, p. 6). During an interview about the reason why Italy has been spared from an attack by IS, Stefano Dambruoso (member of the Italian parliament and counterterrorism expert) and Giampiero Massolo (head of the
Italian secret service until 2016) both made the statement that Italy had learned about deterring terrorism from its experience with the Italian Mafia. Antonio Nicaso (expert on the Italian mafia and organized crime) argued the same: “The mafia helped Italy to prepare for terrorism, because the Italian government is using the same systems that they utilized for decades to deal with organized crime, building intelligence and controlling the territory” (Livesay, 2017). Stefano Dambruoso declares in the same interview that, because of the terroristic threat of IS, Italy strengthened cooperation between the secret service and law enforcement (Livesay, 2017). In 2015, the mandate of the National Anti-Mafia prosecution Office was extended to include cases that involved terrorism (Degree Law No. 7/2015), forming The National Anti-Mafia and Counter-Terrorism prosecution Office (NAM&CT office). This office is empowered to coordinate all actions and investigations against terrorism and organized crime. The investigation techniques include extensive surveillance tools like wire taps, web sites navigation and all digital and face-to-face communication intercepts (CODEXTER, 2017). Another security measure that Italy has taken after 2014, is the deployment of more armed police officers and carabinieri on the streets in addition to regular patrols. In 2016, Italy activated new counterterrorism response teams, the A.P.I. (First Intervention Team) and the S.O.S. (Operative Support Squad). Especially the A.P.I. patrol the streets both with weaponry and uniform (giving a tangible sign of their presence), and without (blending with the population). The new counterterrorism response teams are heavily armed and equipped with special suits and assault rifles (Palumbo, 2017).

In sum, deportation is the cornerstone of the Italian counterterrorism strategy. The strict Italian citizenship law and the fact that Islam is no official religion in Italy denies (Islamic) migrants to obtain citizenship. Consequently, this makes it easier for Italy to deport people. Italy invests a lot in intelligence, which results in a highly trained investigation service, primary focussing on surveillance, tracing and the detection of suspicious behaviour. This makes them
well-considered worldwide (Livesay, 2017). The combination of these three elements make that Italy possesses an effective counterterrorism tool.

I argue that Italy’s unique use of deportation is a perfect example of deterrence by denial. First of all, the numbers in figure 10 show that Italy increased its use of deportations significantly after the tipping point. I interpret this as a clear change of behaviour in response to the terrorist threat of IS. Secondly, by using deportation based solely on suspicion, Italy denies any potential extremist activity within its territory. Thirdly, the success of the deportations is largely a result of Italy’s extremely well-organised co-operation between intelligence services, law enforcement (including the Carabinieri’s) and other government branches that focus on the apprehension of suspected IS sympathisers. This co-operation has also been tightened after the tipping point, for instance with the establishment of the NAM&CT office and the activation of specialized counter terrorism teams. As I determined, the establishment of agencies that are specialized at exposing and countering terrorist networks and activities is also considered a tool of increasing a state’s defence capacity and thus prove of the use of deterrence by denial strategies.

**Evidence part two, Indirect Deterrence**

I searched for variation in Italian legislative measures before and after the tipping point and listed the most important reforms below. Italy adjusted its legislation regarding terrorism six times over the past eighteen years. The first important legislative measures were taken immediately after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. From that moment on, law no. 438 criminalized the participation in terrorist organisations, the promotion and financing of terrorist purposes and the provision of terrorists with shelter, food, hospitality and means of transportation and communication. Legislation on terrorism was further expanded in 2005 with law no. 155 (‘Urgent measures to fight international terrorism’), which criminalized new actions that could lead to terrorist acts, like the recruitment and training for terrorist causes (CODEXTER, 2017).
However, the most invasive reforms were made after September 22nd 2014, the period in which IS urged its sympathisers to attack Western ‘disbelievers’ (Bayoumy, September 2014). Italy developed its legislation intensively in 2015, 2016 and 2017 by ratifying international laws concerning the criminalization of supporting terrorist organisations (laws that for instance Spain and France had already ratified for almost ten years (Council of Europe, 2018)): the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention of Terrorism (CETS No. 196) and its Additional Protocol (CETS No. 217); the 2003 Protocol amending the European Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism (CETS No. 190); the UN International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism and the Council of Europe Convention on Laundering, Search, Seizure and Confiscation of the Proceeds from Crime and on the financing of Terrorism (CETS No. 198) (CODEXTER, 2017, p. 2). Additionally, in 2015, Article 270 quarter 1 of the Criminal Code introduced by the 7/2015 decree law, a prison sentence from five to eight years was installed for everyone who recruited, organised, financed or promoted travels abroad for the purpose of performing acts of terrorism. In 2015, Art. 678 and 679 bis of the Criminal Code introduced by decree law 7/2015, punishes up to eighteen months in prison for those who provide or introduce substances that can be used to make explosives and anyone who omits to reports the disappearance or theft of these materials in the Italian territory. In 2016, Article 270 quinquies.1 of the Criminal Code introduced by law no. 153/2016, a prison sentence from seven to fifteen years was installed for all whom collect or supply money and assets for terrorists organisations (CODEXTER, 2017, pp. 3-4).

After the 2014 tipping point, Italy ratified international laws that criminalize the support of terrorism. Italy did not only introduce new laws against the support of terrorism but also made existing laws stricter. What stands out is that after 2014, the offenses regarding the support of terrorism are now clearly paired with a statement about the length of imprisonment that is imposed after committing one of these crimes. This was to a lesser extent the case before
the tipping point (CODEXTER, 2017). I argue that a combination of the implementation of new laws and the adjustments of existing laws are an indicator that Italy tries to threaten persons that supposedly would support IS on Italian soil. Regarding the operationalisation of indirect deterrence in this research, this would imply that Italy uses indirect deterrence strategies to diminish the support system of IS in Italy.
Conclusion and Discussion

After analysing the data that I selected, the actions of the Italian government seem to match the expected variation of my assumptions about the two deterrence strategies. I can conclude that there are indicators that Italy used both indirect deterrence and deterrence by denial strategies in order to deter IS from attacking its territory. The conclusion that Italy used indirect deterrence strategies is based on the evidence that, after the tipping point in 2014, Italy developed wider and stricter legislation that criminalized all forms of support for terrorist organisations. I argue that the accumulation of all the new and adjusted laws indicate that Italy was actively aiming to degrade the support system of IS. However, I do not believe that these measures are the reason for why Italy has been spared from an attack from IS. A different finding seems to have more explanatory value.

The conclusion that Italy used deterrence by denial strategies is based on the evidence that Italy increased its defence capabilities, which made it harder for terrorists to successfully plan and execute an attack. Italy established an agency that is specialized at exposing and countering terrorist networks and activities, the NAM&CT office. Also, Italy expanded its law enforcement by activating two new counterterrorism response teams, the A.P.I and the S.O.S. According to my operationalization, these two developments are an indicator of the increase of a state’s defence capacity and therewith prove for the use of deterrence by denial. However, I argue that one specific security measure undermined IS’s confidence and/or motivation that an attack in Italy would be successful the most, being Italy’s unique use of deportation. The Italian use of deportation is unique in the sense that other targeted European countries (like France, Spain, the UK and Belgium) do not, or cannot legally, use this tool (Luttwak, 2015). The strict citizenship laws enable Italy to deport people based on just the suspicion of someone’s involvement with IS. Thereby, the tool is effective due to the extremely functional Italian intelligence service. In other words, the use of deportation is strengthened by the climate in
which it is being used. Logically, the uniqueness of Italy’s strategy contributes to its explanatory value.

This is an explanatory research project, aimed at explaining one particular outcome: the absence of any IS attacks in Italy, despite the existence of similar conditions as in other cases/countries which were attacked by IS. Although I found indicators that Italy used indirect deterrence strategies, I am not convinced that these measures explain the outcome. I would like to argue that the deterrence by denial strategies prove more potential for being the reason why Italy managed to deter IS. In my opinion, Italy’s aggressive use of deportations has the most explanatory value for the absence of an attack. I believe that the significant increase of deportations after the tipping point (see figure 10) is an indicator that Italy actively and knowingly used this tool in order to deny IS, its militants, lone wolves and anyone with a link to IS the chance to attempt any malicious activity on the Italian territory.

I conclude that I have found enough evidence to confirm my second expectation (E2): *By increasing its defence capacities, Italy managed to deter a terrorist attack from IS on its soil.* I believe that Italy’s unmatched use of deportation is crucial. I am not confident that I proved my first expectation (E1). Since this is a single case study and because of the limited wordcount and time for this project, I was not able to thoroughly compare Italy’s legislative measures after the tipping point with those of other European states. I can therefore not conclude that these measures are explanatory for the absence of an attack in Italy as I do not know whether attacked states have used this same indirect deterrence strategy.

Consequently, my findings should be subject to more extensive research in order to determine whether they reflect the actual explanation for how Italy deterred an attack from IS. In a comparative case-study, the Italian counterterrorism strategy could be compared with the strategies of other targeted states, like France, the UK, the Netherlands and Germany. The comparison might expose crucial differences in strategies of non-attacked states and attacked
states. This will result in a more thoroughly constructed conclusion on which (set of) measures are supposedly responsible for deterring IS.

As stated in the introduction, to the naked eye, Italy seems like a rather logical target for IS, considering the huge influx of refugees from conflict areas, the symbolic value of Rome and its porous sea borders. This research project concludes that the functionality of Italy’s intelligence services in combination with strict citizenship laws enabled a unique deportation strategy, which denied IS the chance to successfully attack Italy. I argue that this is the reason for Italy’s exceptionalism. Although my findings are not directly generalizable, some of them might be applicable to other cases, under certain conditions. Furthermore, one could argue that the findings could lead to some possible policy implications about deterrence as a counterterrorism strategy. This case study is therefore a contribution to the scarce literature on the use of deterrence strategies by states to counter terrorist attacks from IS. Maybe, these findings might even be a cautious step in the direction of establishing knowledge on when ‘outcome z’ is the least favoured outcome of IS (see figure 1). For now, I will formulate the answer to my research question: Deterrence has played a role in the reason for why Italy has not been attacked by Islamic State.
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