How surprising was ISIS' rise to power for the German intelligence community? Reconstructing estimates of likelihood prior to the fall of Mosul

Eva Michaels

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Abstract

This article provides a first attempt at evaluating the performance of the German intelligence community when anticipating ISIS' rise to power in Syria and Iraq and its reach into Europe in 2013-2014. It applies a new analytical framework for postmortem exercises after foreign policy crises which centres on a nuanced discussion of surprise and contextualised assessments of performance. This article finds evidence of partial to significant surprise among German intelligence analysts vis-à-vis four key events. Their performance was hindered by diagnostic difficulties and structural constraints which affected their ability to identify risks related to underlying vulnerabilities in Iraq and Syria.

1. Introduction

The gradual rise to power of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)[1] posed immense diagnostic difficulties for Western intelligence producers seeking to forecast potential risk-related developments.[2] In addition, they tended to experience structural constraints in the intelligence-policy nexus which affected their analytical capacity and ability to get decision-makers to engage with and act upon their estimates.[3] Drawing more attention to estimative intelligence as an integral part of German foreign policymaking, this article seeks to investigate the performance of the German intelligence community (IC) when anticipating ISIS' rise to power in Syria and Iraq and its reach into Europe in 2013-2014. Special attention is paid to the context in which the German IC operated, by considering factors which

hindered or enabled its performance during an early phase of the crisis (July 2013 – June 2014). The following interlinked questions guide my research. Were German intelligence producers able to forecast a relevant range of outcomes in an accurate, timely and convincing manner? To what extent were they surprised by key events? What could have been expected of them? Also, as a side question: if they experienced surprise and/or underperformed, why was this the case?

Answering these questions matters for a better understanding of the utility of estimative intelligence for Germany's response to crises as well as for discussions of what Germany can still learn from this case.[4] For Berlin, ISIS' rise to power turned out to be a highly complex foreign policy crisis with significant implications for national and European security, necessitating regular assessments of threats and risks by foreign and domestic intelligence analysts. The extent to which the crisis was affecting German interests became clearer during the period under study. While this article lacks the space to discuss experiences of surprise among German decision-makers, the fact that Iraq became a foreign policy priority over the summer of 2014 will have implied moderate to major Bayesian belief updating on their end. Policymakers reportedly became more receptive to intelligence assessments of ISIS' activities and underlying vulnerabilities after the fall of Mosul in June 2014, when the situation rapidly developed for the worse.[5] But what triggered most political attention were appeals by the Yazidi and Kurdish diasporas in Germany, resulting in a cross-party consensus in the *Bundestag* for the protection of Yazidis and support of Kurdistan, as well as media coverage of the Sinjar massacre in early August 2014.[6] As a result, a course of action which would have been considered very unlikely prior to the fall of Mosul became a reality twelve weeks later when Germany decided to supply weapons to Peshmerga fighters in Kurdistan.

Confronted with ISIS' expansion in Syria and Iraq, analysts at Germany's foreign intelligence agency (*Bundesnachrichtendienst*, BND) were reportedly divided over their assessments. In the summer of 2014, a BND report concluded that ISIS would *not* persist as a powerful player in its core conflict zone and soon become a "normal" terrorist group again. Internally, various analysts disagreed.[7] IC members beyond the BND expressed frustration vis-à-vis limited receptivity to their warnings during the period under study.[8] The IC is here conceptualised as including members of the foreign and domestic intelligence agencies, *Bundeswehr* intelligence analysts, desk officers in government departments dealing with foreign affairs and internal security, and diplomats posted abroad who all produced intelligence on Iraq, Syria, radicalisation and/or terrorism.[9]

The performance of the German IC in this case, as well as in other contemporary foreign crises, has received scant attention.[10] Scholars have been addressing gaps in the literature on the post-reunification evolution of the BND and the challenges it faces,[11] but the role of estimative intelligence in German foreign policymaking continues to be neglected.[12] As François Heisbourg aptly observed, 'intelligence remains an unloved stepchild in the German system'.[13] This was long reflected in the lack of scholarly attention to the role of intelligence in German politics.[14] Intelligence Studies emerged as an academic field in Germany over the past few years (it was still described as 'almost inexistent' in 2016)[15]. Most current efforts are going into a postgraduate programme for the German IC at the Bundeswehr University in Munich, with few research outputs focusing on intelligence assessments. Foresight has, by comparison, become a flourishing field of academic enquiry in Germany.[16]

I need to take one step back to discuss what could explain this lack of attention, and how a contextualised evaluation of the performance of the German IC adds value. German foreign policy has long had a reputation of being primarily driven by public opinion rather than expertise about potential and actual threats and risks, specifically under the Chancellorship of Angela Merkel between 2005 and 2021.[17] Some of those who were interviewed for this study also argued that German policymakers adopted an emotional approach to ISIS' rise as a destructive actor in Syria and Iraq while not necessarily listening to expert assessments or meeting the latter with scepticism.[18] This points to underlying structural challenges, as will be discussed in this article. While the German IC is here approached in a broad sense, it is worthwhile differentiating between the intelligence services and other actors (for example officials working for the foreign or defence ministry) who support governmental decision-making: the latter have an advisor in the Chancellor's office as well as a cabinet minister to raise awareness whereas the former find it traditionally harder to make their case at the highest political level. In addition, German intelligence rarely dares to differ from assessments in the US by both intelligence analysts and external experts.[19] This may well explain why limited attention has been paid to how the German IC performed when confronted with foreign policy crises and what could still be learned from past experiences.

A key limitation of studying the performance of the IC is the challenge of gaining access to intelligence producers and the lack of access to primary sources.[20] This is a broader problem for intelligence and security research, especially beyond the Anglosphere (where documents are frequently declassified). As such, researchers need to navigate the context with its inherent limitations. A further challenge is the avoidance of hindsight bias. It can

prove difficult for intelligence analysts to establish what they foresaw at the time, and they may inadvertently exaggerate this in hindsight, or to recollect specific details. Therefore, in addition to using interviews and a focus group to (at least partly) reconstruct intelligence estimates and experiences of surprise, this article draws on a detailed reproduction of *what could have been expected* of intelligence producers had they considered qualitatively solid open expert sources. An exploration of what the IC could have known contributes to discussions of how non-governmental expertise can improve intelligence estimates.[21] While this is here only raised in the margins, this is another neglected aspect in the German context where relationships between foreign policymakers and external experts tend to be uneasy.[22]

This article proceeds as follows. The first section shows how I adapt a recently published analytical framework for postmortem evaluations of surprise and performance after foreign policy crises as guidance for my analysis. The subsequent section elaborates on the methods that I am using to answer the research questions. Special emphasis is here placed on a reconstruction of what could have been expected of the IC when engaging in knowledge-sensitive forecasting. The third section investigates experiences of surprise and discusses how the IC performed. It also looks at underlying reasons for surprise and performance shortcomings while acknowledging that surprise is not per se an indicator of performance problems. The final section explores what could have been expected of the IC in terms of threat and risk assessments as well as warnings. Overall, this paper argues that the theoretical and methodological approach adds value to the literature on foreign policy surprises and warning intelligence.

2. Caught off guard? Evaluating experiences of surprise and the performance of intelligence producers

A recent article by Ikani, Guttmann and Meyer (IGM) offers a thorough discussion of the strategic surprise literature and a theoretical vantage point for this paper.[23] The authors have tailored an analytical framework for postmortem evaluations to the context of European foreign policy and to experiences of surprise about slower-burning, indirect threats and risks. Postmortem reviews, which are less common in continental Europe than in the US and UK, among others, are to identify the root causes of any errors made and discuss how performances can be improved in the future.[24] IGM's framework encourages comprehensive evaluations of the foreign policy process, rather than distinguishing intelligence performance from policy performance.[25] Due to space constraints, I look at intelligence producers without

including decision-makers as a unit of analysis. However, I discuss the intelligence-policy nexus as part of the context in which the former operate.

2.1 Performance expectations

My evaluation benefits from IGM's definition of performance criteria for "knowledge producers"[26] (accuracy, timeliness and convincingness) and consideration of contextual factors (related to diagnostic challenges, pre-existing analytical capabilities and the political environment) which could have hindered or enabled the production of high-quality assessments. Applying their framework for the first time and looking in depth at the performance of intelligence analysts leads me to expand their normative expectations slightly (Table 1).

Table 1. Performance expectations for intelligence producers

Components of estimative intelligence	**Performance criteria**	**Factors to hinder or enable performance**
Threat assessment Risk assessment Tactical and/or strategic warning	Timeliness Accuracy Convincingness	Case-specific diagnostic difficulties Pre-existing analytical capabilities Political environment Reflexivity

Source: Adapted from Ikani, Guttmann and Meyer, "An Analytical Framework for Postmortems of European Foreign Policy", 9.

Estimative intelligence comprises forward-looking intelligence provision in support of decision-making. Through the first column in Table 1, I am expanding IGM's framework to highlight different elements of estimative intelligence: based on an assessment of threats and risks, intelligence producers *can* formulate warnings regarding potential long-term (strategic) or short-term (tactical) developments. I conceptualise threat as a function of a threat group's capability and intent and the extent to which it could exploit structural vulnerabilities. I understand risk as a function of the likelihood that a threat group will engage in a specific action and that structural vulnerabilities will deteriorate and of potential consequences.[27] I shall return to the components of threat and risk further below. I draw on Meyer, De Franco

and Otto's understanding that a warning should, as a minimum, include a knowledge claim about future harm.[28] My understanding of the stages of intelligence production is guided by David Omand's model but I am, unlike him, including strategic warning under estimation.[29] The performance expectations discussed here refer to estimative intelligence, but we should ideally also consider the extent to which it proved challenging to produce current intelligence (on past and present developments). Performance shortcomings during earlier stages of intelligence production can lead to flawed estimates, given that threat and risk assessments and warnings build on situational awareness and explanations. The latter two remain relevant when seeking to anticipate what can happen next and/or where.[30]

While the performance criteria (second column in Table 1) of timeliness and accuracy are relatively straightforward, convincingness is more complex and deserves special attention.[31] IGM suggest that '[t]he ability to convince arises from a combination of factors such as clarity, specificity, fear appeal, authoritativeness, and credibility of the source, and more generally, the degree to which intelligence is successfully tailored to the "consumer" in terms of content, evidence used, timing of delivery, channel, format, and actionability'.[32] This definition is helpful when evaluating the convincingness of *available* assessments. Not having access to estimates by the IC and drawing on limited interview data, I approach convincingness as *the demonstrated ability to (1) persuade policymakers that past and present events and trends are of strategic consequence and to (2) judge the probability and harm of likely future developments in clear and accessible terms.* It has been argued that actionability in warnings improves receptivity, and action claims have been identified as essential if warnings are to be effective.[33] I, however, believe that we cannot categorically expect intelligence producers to include those. This can even make their assessments less convincing, as action claims may interfere with professional norms or consumer expectations.

Based on this, intelligence producers performed well if they provided timely, accurate and convincing estimates. But we also need to consider context-specific factors which could have hampered or improved their performance (third column in Table 1). The first three sets of factors have been identified and discussed by IGM.[34] Adding "reflexivity" allows for the integration of another set of relevant factors, such as attention to weak signals, efforts to overcome biases or intra-crisis learning. Reflexivity implies a commitment to question approaches, findings and reactions regularly, together with a willingness to learn from past experiences.[35] A reflexive attitude can be at play at the individual level (e.g. intelligence analysts seeking to compensate for their own biases or a lack of resources), or at the organisational level through formalised procedures. One example is intra-crisis learning

which occurred at the institutional and intra-institutional level at a later stage of the crisis studied here.[36]

2.2 Unpacking threats and risks

This article draws on a distinction between threats and risks as explored in depth by David Strachan-Morris.[37] This offers helpful guidance when discussing performance expectations for threat and risk assessments and for an integration of risk perceptions into conceptualisations of surprise. According to Strachan-Morris, threats can be assessed by looking in equal parts at the capability and intent of the group in question.[38] In his own words,

> Capability takes into account the known abilities of the group in question, its logistical resources, command and control capability, success rate of previous attacks, sophistication of previous attacks, level of training, and whatever is known of the capabilities that the group is trying to acquire.[39]

He proposes that intent can be evaluated by considering 'previous attacks or attempts to conduct attacks (which) could indicate an intent to attack' and 'rhetoric in public statements'.[40] While Strachan-Morris further suggests looking at will *and* opportunity when seeking to assess intent,[41] I am adapting his approach as follows. Given that the extent to which ISIS could exploit underlying vulnerable conditions in Syria, Iraq and Europe affected its potential to cause harm, I am adding those vulnerabilities (e.g. Shia-Sunni tensions) as a third threat component and am discussing opportunity here. Looking at ISIS' known capability and ascertaining whether and how it intended to use it helped assess whether ISIS posed a threat. The additional evaluation of how it could use structural vulnerabilities in its area of operations facilitates more nuanced and holistic judgements, and those factors were indeed on the radar of the German IC when preparing threat assessments.[42] Also, a consideration of structural vulnerabilities makes the threat assessment stronger when specific information on capability and intent is unknown. Strachan-Morris' approach, based upon the work of Richard Siebert for use in Iraq, is here expanded as follows:

Table 2. Threat components in a terrorist context

Capability	Intent	Structural vulnerabilities
Sophisticated	*Extreme*	*Extreme*
The threat group is capable of organising and executing **multiple coordinated complex attacks**.	The threat group has shown **specific and extreme intent** in public statements and attacks.	The threat group can exploit extreme vulnerabilities in the area of operations to **attack in complete freedom**.
High	*High*	*High*
The threat group is capable of **deliberate coordinated attacks**.	The threat group has shown **demonstrated consistent intent** in public statements and attacks.	The threat group can exploit high vulnerabilities in the area of operations to **attack easily**.
Medium	*Medium*	*Medium*
The threat group is capable of **deliberate action**.	The threat group has displayed an aggressive response involving **threats and intimidation**.	The threat group can exploit medium vulnerabilities in the area of operations to **target vulnerable groups** and/or **attack targets of opportunity**.
Low	*Low*	*Low*
The threat group is capable of **low-level intimidation and extortion**.	The threat group has displayed **some aggression**.	The threat group can exploit low vulnerabilities to **build up opportunities** for targeting vulnerable groups and/or attacking targets of opportunity.

Source: Adapted from Strachan-Morris, "Threat and Risk", 176.

Intelligence producers will have assessed the risks when formulating estimates including warnings. According to Strachan-Morris, they will have asked: how likely is it that the threat group will engage in one of those actions and what would be likely consequences?[43] Based on the third threat component and interview findings, the IC will also have asked: how likely is it that structural vulnerabilities deteriorate and what would be likely consequences? Risks can be assessed in terms of probability (either estimated likelihood or known frequency) and harm. However, the intelligence output and policy outcome do not only depend on those indicators but also on an organisation's risk tolerance.[44] Risk rather than threat assessments

are therefore decisive for an organisation's awareness and response. While the responsibility of how to treat risks lies with policymakers, the IC provides them with iterative estimates.[45]

2.3 Surprise

My research benefits from a fine-grained conceptualisation of surprise by IGM. The authors define surprise as 'the degree to which a given individual, group or organisational unit in government recognises that recent or current events of substantial consequence to high-value interests contradict pre-existing assumptions, analytical judgements, and expectations'.[46] IGM' taxonomy of surprise allows us to distinguish between perfect, significant and partial surprises that intelligence producers and decision-makers may have experienced across three dimensions.[47] While IGM look at the extent to which threats were considered and deemed likely (*dissonance*, first dimension) or to which threat characteristics were surprising (*scope*, second dimension), I argue that we need to include risk perceptions and the extent to which the consequences of a threat were surprising (Table 3). This is especially relevant for the case under study: intelligence producers had agreed early on that ISIS posed a threat, but the risks were harder to assess. The consequences of ISIS' actions were surprising – even more so than the materialisation of the threat. On a third dimension (*spread*), IGM's taxonomy allows us to investigate who was surprised: only some intelligence producers and decision-makers, or most of them, or all of them.

Table 3. Towards a taxonomy of surprise regarding threats and risks within government

Degree / ***Dimensions***	**Perfect surprise**	**Significant surprise**	**Partial surprise**
Dissonance *in terms of the recognised gap between event and previous beliefs*	Threat and risk not even considered, implies cognitive shock and *belief transformation*	Threat and potential consequences considered, but deemed impossible or very unlikely, implies major *Bayesian belief adaptation*	Threat and potential consequences considered possible, but deemed unlikely, implies slight to moderate *Bayesian belief updating*
Scope *in terms of the range of surprising substantive threat characteristics and risks*	Threat and consequences both strategically and operationally surprising	All the most relevant operational features of threat and consequences are surprising, but strategic notice was available	Some important features of threat and consequences are surprising; strategic notice was available
Spread *in terms of who has been most affected among relevant officials*	Entirety of government, analysts and decision-makers	Most analysts and decision-makers	Only some analysts and decision-makers

Source: Adapted from Ikani, Guttmann and Meyer, "An Analytical Framework for Postmortems of European Foreign Policy", 6.

IGM are predominantly interested in discussions of degree of surprise and, in contrast to the strategic surprise literature, less in the reasons for surprise.[48] Yet, their framework could add even more value by theorising the latter and discussing how performance shortcomings and surprise are linked. More attention to this could facilitate investigations of whether experiences of surprise were equally excusable given contextual constraints or whether they could have been avoided, linking the discussion back to performance.

The theoretical framework discussed here provides nuanced guidance, with an emphasis on contextualised, realistic performance expectations and a look beyond strategic surprises.[49] While the scope of this article limits the depth of my answers, the empirical discussion can nonetheless demonstrate the value of the postmortem review adopted here.

3. Methods

The fine-grained conceptualisation of surprise is highly relevant for the case under study as ISIS' rise to power was far from sudden. Extant discussions (from a strategic surprise perspective) of ISIS' emergence as a powerful and destructive actor are overly focused on the Iraqi army's withdrawal from Mosul and the fall of the city to ISIS in June 2014.[50] While this was a remarkable development whose ease reportedly even took ISIS by surprise, Mosul did not fall out of the blue.[51] For instance, Kurdish officials had warned the Iraqi and US governments as early as January 2014 that ISIS was planning to seize Mosul. US intelligence subsequently anticipated that ISIS would seek to break Mosul's main prison rather than overrun the city.[52] Various warning signals about an ISIS offensive on Mosul were available in expert open sources.[53] However, it proved challenging to assess the actual weakness of the Iraqi security forces and the combined consequences of structural vulnerabilities and ISIS' capability and intent.[54] Paying attention to earlier surprises, or the sum of surprises experts had experienced at a turning point of a crisis, allows for a more nuanced discussion. As such, when evaluating whether German intelligence producers were caught off guard and what could have been expected of them in terms of forward-looking intelligence assessments, I focus on the period preceding four key events:

- the beginning of ISIS' Anbar campaign with its surge into Fallujah and Ramadi on 31 December 2013,
- ISIS seizing complete control of Raqqa and the road to the Iraqi border in mid-January 2014,
- the ISIS-inspired attack at the Jewish museum in Brussels on 24 May 2014,
- the fall of Mosul on 10 June 2014.

Nine members of the German IC and seven consumers of intelligence kindly agreed to be interviewed on the condition of anonymity, including institutional affiliation.[55] While

yielding valuable insights, the interviews did not allow for an in-depth, representative evaluation of how intelligence producers performed. In addition, and to address this problem, I tested my initial findings in a confidential workshop with intelligence producers and consumers in April 2021. The workshop participants confirmed the key findings and added complementary insights which improved the validity of the empirical research.

To acknowledge the concern of hindsight bias, I decided to contrast my findings on performance and surprise with an exploration of what the IC could have known at the time. For this, I evaluated a selection of relevant knowledge claims and evidential claims by external experts that were publicly available during the period under study. A knowledge claim can be defined as an assertion which is diagnostic-analytical in nature and which discusses what will likely happen and when, and how this could change a given situation. It can be understood as the lowest common denominator for a warning, as it raises attention to potential future harm.[56] An evidential claim answers questions about *what, when, where and who*, and can as such help build situational awareness.[57]

I systematically reviewed open-source expert claims about ISIS' activities and structural vulnerabilities that were published between 1 July 2013 and 9 June 2014. Choosing this period allowed for a reconstruction of public expert knowledge once ISIS had started activities in Syria and Iraq that were of strategic consequence (e.g. tightening its grip on Raqqa, expanding its footprint in northern Syria, escalating violent attacks against predominantly Shia targets across Iraq) and before a prominent event (fall of Mosul) occurred. The previous key events under study here fall within this period as well. I focused on three groups of external experts:

- journalists reporting for German media organisations: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), *Die Welt*, *Der Spiegel*, *Die Zeit*;
- German think tank analysts: *German Institute for International and Security Affairs* (SWP);[58]
- researchers at international NGOs: *International Crisis Group* (ICG), *Human Rights Watch* (HRW), *Amnesty International* (AI).

I selected these experts as they all produced high-quality reports and shaped policy debates in Germany by writing or being quoted as authoritative sources about the evolving crisis.[59] Outputs by international NGOs were valued by both German governmental and non-

governmental experts due to their in-depth reporting based on first-hand accounts of local conflict dynamics.[60] NGOs were collecting eyewitness accounts face-to-face whenever possible, as well as via phone and email in addition to evaluating videos, social media feeds, other local reports and satellite imagery.[61] ICG and AI interviewed former detainees in ISIS-run detention facilities in Syria.[62] HRW conducted fieldwork in Syria's Latakia province following an ISIS-led military offensive. HRW also interviewed residents in Fallujah and Mosul as well as Syrian refugees who had fled from ISIS-held territories.[63] These three groups of external experts operate under different conditions, address different audiences, and their work is guided by different aims. They are not mandated to produce estimates for the government as the IC does, but some addressed the government in their warnings (for example *Spiegel* journalist Christoph Reuter)[64] and others could also have been a valuable source of expert warning. As such, the knowledge they produced is here discussed as a frame of reference.

Interviews with intelligence analysts confirmed that they were drawing on expert open sources in addition to covert sources – including the selection presented here, but also looking beyond.[65] Based on this, I believe that the public knowledge gathered for this article represents a fair overview of what intelligence producers could have known. This is not to suggest that they could have been expected to consult each source systematically throughout the period under study. Rather, they could have been expected to be aware of claims that corresponded to indicators for change in ISIS' capability, its intent and structural vulnerabilities in Syria, Iraq and Europe. Seeking to avoid hindsight bias in the research parameters, my search was informed by keywords that were considered relevant at the time.[66] For instance, the Arabic acronym *Da'esh* was rarely used in German sources and experts still frequently referred to al-Qaeda in Iraq when discussing ISIS. The search yielded over 400 documents of which 236 contained relevant claims. These have been compiled in an open-access database.[67]

I suggest that the research design employed here is of value to the strategic surprise literature. Extant methods of reconstructing intelligence estimates could be strengthened, prompting more nuanced evaluations of surprise and performance. Two brief examples related to the case under study shall be given. While Eric Dahl discusses how senior US intelligence officials publicly acknowledged failure when confronted with ISIS' rise to power, his analysis of public threat assessments by senior government officials and a patchy overview of knowledge claims by external experts does not offer a sufficiently strong evidential base to judge the performance of intelligence producers and external experts.[68] For

the period July-December 2013, Dahl refers to three statements by external experts in two congressional hearings and one think tank report to compare governmental and non-governmental assessments. Only one media report is mentioned in the margins.[69] This leads to the conclusion that external experts provided 'little appreciation that the greatest threat would come from AQI and then ISIS'.[70] An open-source search finds that at least 30 relevant reports and briefings by leading US think tanks were published on ISIS' activities and structural vulnerabilities in Iraq and Syria in July-December 2013, in addition to eight testimonies by think tank experts in congressional hearings.[71] Further, James Wirtz argues that not only the US IC but also the press failed to anticipate the fall of Mosul, without exploring how the press assessed the evolving crisis prior to this event.[72] *The New York Times* alone published over 100 relevant articles on ISIS' activities and enabling conditions between July 2013 and May 2014.[73]

The subsequent empirical analysis seeks to demonstrate that a nuanced discussion of surprise and performance, together with the techniques for data collection and analysis used here, are well suited to capture the subtleties of intelligence production for German foreign policy. It is up to the reader to ascertain how such an approach could add value in other regional contexts.

4. How did intelligence analysts anticipate ISIS' rise to power?

I am starting this overview by evaluating experiences of surprise, followed by a contextualised discussion of performance. Those interviewees and focus group participants[74] who had monitored the emerging crisis mentioned that they had been aware of the following structural vulnerabilities: growing rebel infighting in the Syrian civil war, Sunni-Shia tensions in Iraq and the region, ISIS' appeal to radical Islamists in Europe, and, to a certain degree, the weakness of the Iraqi security forces and Iraqi government. However, due to their limited ability to identify certain risks related to these vulnerabilities, for instance risks to the stability of Iraq, they struggled to connect some dots.

Most interviewees recalled that they found it challenging to fully grasp vulnerabilities which ISIS could exacerbate in its core conflict zone, such as local power structures and a propensity for violence in Iraqi communities. They experienced tactical surprise about the timing of ISIS' Anbar offensive, that Fallujah was also targeted (Ramadi was less surprising)

and how promptly ISIS had been able to exploit Sunni unrest. Further, they were surprised that the coalition of Syrian rebel groups failed to oust ISIS from Raqqa after it had launched a concerted offensive in early January 2014, and after ISIS had suffered losses and lost many of its bases elsewhere in Syria. Intelligence analysts were also surprised that ISIS managed to sustain two major campaigns in Raqqa and Anbar provinces simultaneously. They subsequently experienced surprise about the withdrawal of the Iraqi army from Mosul, the ease with which ISIS captured the city, and ISIS' rapid expansion beyond Mosul. The empirical data suggests that the spread of the surprise within the IC was partial for the surge into Anbar province and the capture of Raqqa, and significant for the fall of Mosul. It seems that these three events were all partially surprising for intelligence analysts in terms of scope and dissonance.

Turning to the first ISIS-inspired terrorist attack in Europe, which occurred at the Jewish Museum in Brussels, intelligence analysts reportedly experienced partial surprise in scope (the exact location of the attacks had been surprising), but not on the dissonance dimension (threat had been deemed possible and likely). The spread of the surprise for the Brussels attacks was at best partial – intelligence producers had repeatedly warned about such a scenario. As became known afterwards, German officials had warned French authorities once the suspect had returned from Syria via Germany two months prior to the attack, but French officials had lost track due to the sheer number of returning foreign fighters to monitor.[75]

Surprise is not per se an indicator of performance shortcomings, but performances and experiences of surprise are interlinked as the above discussion shows. Applying the performance criteria (accuracy, timeliness and convincingness) is not as straightforward as it might seem. Taking the context into account leads to a fairer appraisal. Once again, I need to mention the limitations of empirical evaluation which I encountered here. It was easier to get hold of analysts who had been covering Iraq, than Syria or radicalisation/terrorism in Germany. Specifically, the interviews provided scant insights on how intelligence analysts performed when anticipating an ISIS-inspired terrorist attack in Europe, so this aspect will here be excluded. Some interviewees were outspoken and self-critical, others very cautious. Some had been following ISIS from its very beginnings, others had started monitoring developments during the period under study. For all, irrespective of prior knowledge and expertise, ISIS' rise to power was a real puzzle which required in-depth information collection and careful analysis.

Intelligence analysts provided regular strategic warnings about the possibility of the three events in Syria and Iraq. The interviews suggest that by December 2013, many analysts had considered it likely that ISIS would launch further coordinated complex attacks in its core conflict zone, including in Nineveh and Anbar provinces, and that it would seek to consolidate its presence in eastern Syria. They had anticipated that ISIS would attempt to expand its territorial control and that it was serious about its intention of establishing a transnational caliphate. However, such a scenario was unprecedented and suggested that ISIS had indeed broken away from al-Qaeda which confronted analysts with a high degree of discontinuity and novelty.

Intelligence analysts faced further diagnostic difficulties, such as the speed of parallel developments across Syria and Iraq, the challenge of access for BND officials in Syria (the situation was better in Iraq, also due to the presence of the German consulate in Erbil and German embassy in Baghdad), disinformation by all conflict parties, the degree of inter-institutional cooperation required, and uncertainty about the credibility of sources who reported about local conflict dynamics. Examples for the two latter points shall be given. First, one interviewee mentioned that German journalist Christoph Reuter, who was experienced and well-connected and had conducted interviews with ISIS members,[76] was considered too close to the Syrian opposition and hence too biased. This could explain why some of Reuter's warnings, especially those containing action claims, might have been dismissed. Second, to grasp the unique nature of the crisis with the blurring of boundaries between external and internal implications, intelligence producers had to draw on knowledge of socio-politico-economic developments in Iraq and Syria, political-religious tensions in the region, Islamist terrorism, and radicalisation in the Middle East and Europe. Looking at pre-existing analytical capabilities, some intelligence analysts reflected on the fact that their units lacked Arabic speakers and regional specialists, especially during an early phase of the crisis. They considered this a key limitation when building situational awareness and picking up on weak signals. Intelligence analysts also mentioned that they lacked a "big picture perspective" of what ISIS could mean in the medium-to-long term and that their tools of analysing the region were not sufficiently dynamic to grasp such as complex development as ISIS' rise to power. This also affected their ability to warn policymakers convincingly. Analytical resources had been withdrawn, for instance from the military intelligence unit on Iraq after the security situation had temporarily improved prior to 2012. While an augmentation of resources was authorised during the period under study, the procedures (for instance security clearance) were relatively slow, leading to temporary capacity shortfalls.

Without going into details for confidentiality reasons, some key units were staffed with entry-level analysts without prior experience of the topic, even at the height of the crisis in June 2014.

Further, interviewees expressed frustration about the lack of receptivity among their superiors when flagging up potentially harmful developments in Iraq and Syria. They explained this with a lack of political interest (especially prior to December 2013) and agenda competition (from January 2014). Some mentioned that they found it difficult to challenge conventional wisdom – among others the perception that Iraq was a low-intensity conflict and that Assad would not stay in power. During the period under study, German policymakers were initially distracted by debates about the use of chemical weapons in Syria, wide-spread belief in a political solution to the Syrian civil war, and by the federal elections which led to a gap in leadership at a critical time. Also, policymakers faced high pressures during the first half of 2014 due to the escalation of other crises (e.g. Ukraine, Central African Republic), calls to do more to address older ones (e.g. Mali), decisions on six mandate extensions for multinational deployments, and the realisation that the situation in Afghanistan and the global refugee crisis would require significant attention and resources. The state of the German armed forces and procedures for authorising military deployments were also under intense scrutiny during this time. As raised in the introduction, the limited receptivity was linked to two broader aspects. First, German intelligence takes many clues from US sources (in this case with a relatively positive narrative on Iraq and its army) from which it rarely dares to differ. Second, German intelligence finds it traditionally challenging to make a case at the highest political level.[77]

The government was not unaware of underlying vulnerabilities in Iraq,[78] but the situation was not high on its priority list. Slightly more attention was paid to Kurdistan where Germany had a consulate and more pronounced economic interests. From May 2014 onwards, a cross-party consensus for stronger support of Kurdistan and the protection of Yazidis emerged in the *Bundestag*.[79] At the decision-making level, Iraq only became a prominent agenda item after the fall of Mosul and specifically after the Sinjar massacre in early August 2014. Similarly, Germany's Syria policy was vague and aloof during the period under study. It initially sought to bring the Assad regime and rebel groups to the negotiating table, followed by Chancellor Angela Merkel's call for a humanitarian corridor in January 2014, followed by a void. Little political attention was paid to "the war within the war", triggered by increased rebel infighting and ISIS' expansion in Syria. Intelligence producers were, at least partly, tailoring their assessments to this political context.

In addition to considering diagnostic challenges and structural constraints, we also need to consider whether reflexivity was at play and which effects this had. Looking at shortcomings at the individual level, some interviewees blamed their professional-cultural biases as well as a lack of resources and expertise for their failure to fully grasp the extent of underlying vulnerabilities in Iraq and Syria and likely consequences. By failing to connect certain dots, intelligence analysts had missed out on risks that should have been on their radar. For instance, while they had known that the Iraqi security forces were stronger on paper than in reality, they struggled to assess the actual weakness. Interviewees said that they were aware of their biases at the time, and had tried to compensate for this, as well as for their lack of Arabic, but that this remained a key limitation when building situational awareness and picking up on weak signals. Interviewees came across as reflective and self-critical. Some structural shortcomings were addressed in the form of intra-crisis learning at the organisational level. However, this only occurred at a later stage, after the fall of Mosul. Examples were the merging of analytical units on Syria and Iraq, and the creation of an intra-agency task force on Syria, Iraq and ISIS.

Overall, it appears that the IC produced largely accurate warnings but that these could have been issued in a timelier and more convincing manner, namely by judging the probability and harm of likely future developments in better terms and thus attaching higher relevance to estimates. However, additional data would be needed to claim this with certainty. In sum, while intelligence analysts could have performed better when assessing the risks related to structural vulnerabilities in Syria and Iraq, which affected their ability to warn about impending events, they faced significant constraints. The next section investigates what could have been expected of them at critical junctions during the emerging crisis.

5. What could have been expected of the intelligence community?

The discussion in this section draws on a reconstruction of public expert knowledge. The sources and short summaries of each knowledge and evidential claim can be accessed in the open-access database.[80] To improve readability (over 200 claims fed into the following analysis), I opted against including references here. Instead, and since preliminary analytical steps were necessary to reconstruct estimates that the IC could have provided, I have drafted an additional summary of what could have been expected of the IC when building situational awareness of ISIS' activities and structural vulnerabilities as well as explaining its rise to power. This document lists all the sources which fed into my reconstruction of what

intelligence producers could have known.[81] I shall here look at two points in time, December 2013 and April 2014, to reconstruct possible threat and risk assessments prior to the occurrence of key events. I then explore whether the IC could have been expected to provide accurate, timely and convincing warnings of how ISIS would consolidate its presence in eastern Syria, surge into western and northern Iraq, and strike against Europe.

5.1 Threat assessments

An assessment of ISIS' activities and structural vulnerabilities in Syria, Iraq and Europe could have arrived at the following judgements in December 2013. ISIS' **capability in Syria and Iraq** was sophisticated. It had already launched multiple coordinated complex attacks. Examples were its Abu Ghraib and Taji prison breaks in July 2013, its almost daily series of car and suicide bombings across Iraq, its attack of Menagh military air base and its offensive on Alawite villages in Latakia in August 2013. Given its strong organisational capability, ISIS had promptly established Sharia courts and new administrative structures in its occupied areas in Syria. It had also started establishing own control posts in Iraq. When reaching into Europe, ISIS benefited from the sophisticated capability it had built in its core conflict zone, especially related to C3I (command, control, communications, intelligence). Its **capability for launching attacks in Europe** could have been assessed as medium to high. Its cooperation with Jihadi Salafist groups such as Millatu Ibrahim in Germany and its use of online networks and social media facilitated the radicalisation of vulnerable individuals and a steady influx of European jihadists into Syria.

ISIS' **intent** was extreme, as evidenced in its public statements and attacks. It had been increasingly clashing with regular Syrian rebels, including Jihadi groups. It had killed a high-ranking Free Syrian Army (FSA) commander and expressed its intent to eliminate the FSA's military council. It had not joined new alliances of rebel groups under an Islamic framework in September and November 2013 as its intent was more extreme than theirs. ISIS proceeded brutally, targeting not only other armed groups but also civilians who stood in its way. It attacked Shia targets in Iraq and terrorised local populations in Syria, e.g. through abductions and summary executions. It had also strengthened its presence in Mosul and was intimidating residents. ISIS encouraged European jihadists to carry out suicide attacks, and many European ISIS members were indeed driven by the resolve to strike against Europe.

ISIS exploited **extreme structural vulnerabilities in Syria**. It had complete freedom from regular rebels and al-Qaeda to launch attacks. It benefitted from the demoralisation,

decentralisation and fragmentation of rebel groups and the loss of control by regime forces, especially in northern Syria. It exploited a lack of security, for instance in Aleppo by looting factories and public facilities, or in Deir ez-Zor by seizing oil fields. ISIS exploited the vulnerability of Syria's borders with Iraq and Turkey. **High vulnerabilities in Iraq** allowed ISIS to strike easily. Exploiting Sunni-Shia tensions in Iraq and becoming especially active in the Sunni-dominated provinces of Anbar and Nineveh, ISIS stoked fears of a new civil war. The Iraqi security apparatus faced capability shortfalls and corruption in a rapidly deteriorating security situation. This could be witnessed during the Abu Ghraib prison break or a later attempt by ISIS to instigate a breakout from Baji prison. The Iraqi government's lobbying of its allies for weapons, counterterrorism training and intelligence support highlighted these shortfalls. ISIS exploited **low to medium structural vulnerabilities in Europe**, namely the perceptions of predominantly young Muslims who were susceptible to online propaganda and the idea of individual jihad, or the fact that European security officials were overwhelmed with the monitoring of radical Islamists travelling between Europe and Syria. The IC could have assessed that ISIS was targeting vulnerable groups and was building up opportunities for attacking targets in Europe.

While the December 2013 assessment remained largely valid in April 2014, the following additions would have highlighted how the threat components had developed. ISIS' **capability in Syria and Iraq** continued to be sophisticated as evidenced in multiple coordinated complex attacks. Examples were its surge into Fallujah and Ramadi where it had freed prisoners, and its continuous bombing attacks across Iraq. ISIS successfully used a dam south of Fallujah as a strategic weapon against the Iraqi army. After it had tightened its grip on Fallujah in April, it started providing basic services and operated prisons. While ISIS lost some of its bases in northwestern Syria in January 2014, especially in Aleppo and Idlib provinces, it continued to carry out attacks there. Examples were the killing of al-Nusra's Idlib commander and a bombing attack in Homs in April. ISIS' **capability for launching attacks in Europe** could be assessed as high. One indicator were the rapidly growing numbers of radical European Islamists joining ISIS in Syria and of those returning to Europe. Also, fresh evidence had emerged that German ISIS members were involved in combat operations, among others as unit commanders, and committing atrocities. ISIS had further demonstrated its capability of striking beyond its core conflict zone, by launching attacks in Lebanon and Turkey.

ISIS' **intent** continued to be extreme, also evidenced in its formal split from al-Qaeda. In January and February, it killed senior Islamic Front affiliates, including a senior

commander who had been appointed as a mediator by al-Qaeda. ISIS clashed heavily with Syrian rebel groups in January and continued to target them afterwards. It increasingly executed the hostages it had seized and continuously attacked Shia areas in Iraq. ISIS also emphasised that it intended to engage in jihad against Europe.

ISIS continued to exploit **extreme structural vulnerabilities in Syria** and **high vulnerabilities in Iraq**. The Iraqi government was accused of consciously provoking chaos in Anbar and exaggerating ISIS' control of Fallujah, thereby facilitating ISIS' Anbar campaign and exacerbating Sunni-Shia tensions. ISIS exploited the ongoing security vacuum in northern and eastern Syria by seizing border towns and posts along the Syrian-Turkish border and strengthening its presence in and around Raqqa. The structural vulnerabilities which it could exploit in **Europe** had become more pronounced (medium). For instance, it had become evident that ISIS was especially successful at recruiting young vulnerable Muslims, including many converts and underage girls, and that schools lacked resources to counter this trend. European security officials continued to face significant challenges when monitoring growing numbers of radical Islamists travelling to Syria and back.

5.2 Risk assessments

The following reconstructs what could have been expected of the IC when assessing a) the probability of future complex attacks by ISIS and of a deterioration of structural vulnerabilities and b) the harm this could have caused. Based on available evidence in December 2013, the IC could have judged it as almost certain that ISIS would continue launching complex attacks in Iraq and Syria, seek to expand and consolidate its territorial control and link the battlefields in the two countries further. They would have been able to assess that this would prompt a further deterioration of the security and humanitarian situation in Syria, that a different, transnational war would emerge alongside the Syrian civil war and that neither could be solved at the political level. They could have inferred that the political, security and humanitarian situation in Iraq would deteriorate, that a civil war was highly likely, and that the Iraqi-Syria border would become more vulnerable and might collapse in parts. They could have highlighted that ISIS had established a stronghold in Mosul and that it would likely launch complex attacks there. Analysts could have considered it likely that ISIS was planning coordinated attacks in Europe, including in Germany, and would strike if opportune. They could have judged that such an attack as well as ISIS'

propaganda would inspire other Jihadi cells or lone wolves to launch terrorist attacks in Europe.

These risks would have affected Germany as follows: German authorities faced a high probability of renewed civil war in Iraq including the destabilisation of Kurdistan (where Germany had strong political and economic ties), Syria's civil war morphing into a transnational war with an Islamist agenda, a massive influx of Syrian and Iraqi refugees into Europe, and growing movements of German jihadists between Germany and Syria. They further faced a medium to high probability that ISIS would launch an attack in Germany.

In April 2014, the above assessment would have remained valid with the following changes. Expert observers could have had little doubt that ISIS was seeking to implement its main objective: the establishment of a caliphate. As such, it would use any opportunity to expand and consolidate its territorial control. Having tightened its grip on Fallujah and Raqqa, further complex attacks could have been judged highly likely. The weakness of the Iraqi army became evident in its struggle to counter ISIS in Anbar and it could have been judged that ISIS would exploit these and other vulnerabilities further. It could have been assessed that the consequences of the rapid deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Anbar and eastern Syria would become severe for Kurdistan where many displaced Anbari residents and Syrian Kurds were seeking refuge. The IC could further have considered it highly likely that ISIS would launch an attack in Europe, including in Germany. Overall, analysts could have assessed that the likely consequences were becoming more harmful, that ISIS would embark on another campaign in its core conflict zone and that the risks for Europe were becoming more concrete.

5.3 Warnings

Having reconstructed possible threat and risk assessments, I will discuss whether the IC could have warned about the occurrence of harmful events during an early phase of the crisis.

5.3.1 The beginning of ISIS' Anbar campaign (31 December 2013)

When exploring whether the IC could have been able to forecast ISIS' surge into Fallujah and Ramadi, it is noteworthy that the selected open-source knowledge made few mentions of developments in Anbar prior to January 2014. The IC could nonetheless have been expected

to assess that ISIS was fully capable of launching multiple coordinated complex attacks on Anbar's cities, that its intent was extreme and that Iraqi security forces were struggling with capability shortfalls and corruption. Analysts could have been aware of ISIS' activities across the Syria-Iraqi border, that it had established bases and control posts in western Iraq, and that ISIS had been exploiting grievances in the Sunni-dominated provinces of Anbar and Niniveh – especially since the Hawija incident in April 2013. It is probably unrealistic to assume that intelligence analysts were also relying on local reporting and/or gathering some social media intelligence as certain NGOs did.[82] If they had, the escalation of tensions in Anbar would not have been unexpected. At best, the IC could have been expected to give strategic notice about future harmful developments in Anbar province, including unrest in Ramadi and other cities where Sunni protest camps had been set up, which ISIS would exploit. Yet, it would not necessarily have been able to forecast the events prior to 28 December 2013 when Iraqi security forces started anti-Sunni operations in Anbar. Also, given that ISIS was launching coordinated attacks across Iraq on an almost daily basis and had also developed strongholds elsewhere (e.g. in Mosul), it would have been challenging to pick up that ISIS was focusing its efforts on Anbar and to forecast the beginning of its campaign in a timely, accurate and convincing manner.

5.3.2 ISIS gaining full control of Raqqa, surrounding villages and the road to Iraq (mid-January 2014)

Intelligence analysts could have drawn on open-source evidence that ISIS had been tightening its grip on Raqqa since the summer of 2013 when reports emerged about its strong presence in the town and that residents were unable to oust ISIS. By December 2013, it was reported that ISIS was terrorising Raqqa residents. The IC could have been able to assess that Raqqa had become ISIS' main stronghold in Syria and that it would use it to seize further territory. That ISIS would attempt to link its battlefields in Syria and Iraq and focus on eastern Syria and western Iraq could have been judged highly likely. As such, the IC could not only have estimated that ISIS would seek to control the road to the Iraqi border but also that it would attempt to expand deeper into Raqqa province as well as Al-Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor provinces. Between August and December 2013, ISIS had already tried capturing oil fields and seized some territory in those easternmost provinces. However, building situational awareness became more challenging in early January 2014 which could have affected intelligence estimates: ISIS was not only experiencing setbacks in northwestern Syria but also

clashing with rebel groups in Raqqa where it was entrenching itself. Also, analysts faced significant uncertainty regarding developments across the border in Anbar. While the IC could have been expected to provide timely, accurate and convincing forecasts by December 2013 of how ISIS would consolidate its presence in Raqqa and expand eastwards, analysts would likely have been more hesitant to warn about these developments during the first half of January.

5.3.3 ISIS-inspired terrorism reaching Europe (24 May 2014)

The IC could have drawn on open-source evidence to forecast that ISIS would organise, or inspire, a terrorist attack in Europe as soon as opportune. Between January and March 2014, ISIS had demonstrated its capability of launching deadly attacks beyond its core conflict zone (in Lebanon and Turkey) and expressed its intent of harming Europe. Intelligence analysts could have judged it as almost certain that ISIS would use the return of radicalised foreign fighters to carry out attacks in Europe and that many of those who had joined ISIS in Syria from Europe intended to do so. They could have estimated that ISIS' propaganda could easily inspire other Jihadi cells or lone wolves in Europe to attack European targets. By April 2014, the structural vulnerabilities in Europe had become more pronounced and the risks more concrete. The IC could have been able to produce accurate and convincing warnings each time a foreign fighter returned to Europe via Germany. But they could not have been expected to anticipate where and when exactly a first ISIS-inspired attack would take place.

5.3.4 Mosul falling to ISIS (10 June 2014)

The IC could have gathered open-source knowledge that ISIS had targeted Mosul residents in car bombings, had launched a suicide attack on a military convoy in Mosul in July 2013 and had killed members of the Sahwa tribal militia in targeted shootings in Mosul in September 2013. ISIS fighters in Mosul had been suspected of having carried out the Erbil attacks in September 2013. In November 2013, reports had emerged about the rising incidence of killings of journalists in Mosul and ISIS' strong presence. In February 2014, the speaker of the Iraqi parliament had narrowly escaped an assassination while visiting Mosul. The IC could have estimated that ISIS would seek to consolidate its presence in Mosul and build upon the success of the Anbar campaign after tightening its grip on Fallujah in April 2014. ISIS had also expanded into Abu Ghraib city by then. It had launched a major attack at a

control point in Mosul on 28 May, killing 12 security forces and 7 civilians. On 4 June, ISIS had begun its advance on Mosul. On 6 and 7 June, at least 95 had been killed in heavy clashes between ISIS and Iraqi security forces in Mosul. There could have been little doubt that ISIS would be capable of launching further complex attacks. The IC could have been expected to judge that the Iraqi security forces were overwhelmed and lacking morale, given the fighting in Anbar, Sulayman Beg, and ongoing bombing and suicide attacks across the country. By connecting these dots, the IC could have been able to provide accurate and convincing warnings that ISIS would seek to control Mosul as early as April and no later than late May.

6. Conclusion

This article contributed theoretical, methodological and empirical knowledge to the literature on foreign policy surprises and warning intelligence. It applied a new framework for postmortem evaluations of surprise and performance and developed it further, by including different elements of estimative intelligence and paying attention to threat components, risks, and additional contextual factors affecting performance. Drawing on a nuanced conceptualisation of surprise and looking at four key events, it found that German intelligence analysts experienced partial surprise on the dissonance and scope dimension for the three events in Iraq and Syria. The spread of the surprise was partial for the surge into Anbar province and the capture of Raqqa, and significant for the fall of Mosul. While less data was available for the anticipation of the Brussels attack, a tentative finding is that the IC experienced partial surprise at the scope and spread dimension, but that the event was unsurprising at the dissonance dimension.

The postmortem evaluation found that the performance of intelligence producers regarding developments in Syria and Iraq was hampered by diagnostic difficulties and structural constraints, but that their ability to identify risks was also compromised by individual shortcomings, such as struggles to overcome professional-cultural biases. While it seems that the IC issued largely accurate warnings, these were not always produced in a timely and convincing manner. However, more research would need to be carried out (which may prove difficult given the challenges of gaining access) to validate these tentative findings.

In an attempt to open up a new debate on what could have been expected of the IC and to navigate the research context, this article reconstructed what German intelligence

producers could have known had they considered qualitatively solid public knowledge. It found that they could, in some instances, have been expected to do better. They should, for example, have been able to warn about the fall of Mosul based on available open-source evidence. This article only referred to external experts as a frame of reference. One worthwhile avenue of future enquiry would be to evaluate experiences of surprise and performances of external experts in Germany. While they do not have a mandate to produce knowledge for the government, they can be valuable sources of situational awareness, explanations, threat/risk assessments and warnings.

This article has suggested that its theoretical and methodological approach could add value to the strategic surprise literature, by referring to the example of US-centred discussions of ISIS' rise to power. Future research could indeed investigate how the analytical framework developed by IGM is also applicable beyond the European context.

Without having been able to explore the role of estimative intelligence in German foreign policymaking in adequate depth, this article offers a starting point for those who are interested in the performance of the German IC or discussions of the intelligence-policy interface. Berlin rarely faces calls for postmortems of foreign policy processes, given that any output is carefully circumscribed and generally launched in response to pleas by its international partners. German governments are not volunteering much retrospective transparency either, making it hard to find out what worked well and what could have been done better.[83] As a third-tier player in international security, Germany embarked on an unusual course in response to the crisis discussed here: it shifted significant resources and broke a political taboo by arming the Peshmerga in Kurdistan. This transformed Germany's engagement in Iraq and its broader Middle East policy, and it remains surprising that this case has generated little scholarly research. Berlin's status as an influential player within the EU also warrants more attention to how it anticipated and handled recent foreign policy crises. The findings can feed into discussions of how German foreign policy can become more anticipatory, knowledge-sensitive and reflexive, and what not only Germany but also other countries can learn from the experience to better prepare for similar crises and mitigate the effects of future surprises.

Notes

[1] The acronym ISIS is here used throughout, given that a later name change to Islamic State (IS) occurred after the period under study.
[2] Kadercan, "Making Sense of the Islamic State"; Anonymous, "The Mystery of ISIS".

[3] For example, for a discussion of the structural challenges that French intelligence analysts encountered when warning about ISIS' rise to power, see: Dubois and Pelletier, *Où sont passés nos espions?*, 11.
[4] See also: Meyer et al., "What Lessons to Learn for Intelligence Production and Use in German Foreign Policy".
[5] Interviews, Berlin, 03.09.2019, 04.09.2019, 05.09.2019, 18.09.2019, 04.11.2019, 06.11.2019.
[6] Interviews, Berlin, 27.08.2019, 30.08.2019, 03.09.2019, 10.09.2019.
[7] Interview, Berlin, 06.11.2019.
[8] Interviews, Berlin, 03.09.2019, 27.09.2019, 04.11.2019.
[9] IC might not be the most suitable term but is used for want of a better one. "Estimative intelligence producers" is too cumbersome to use as an alternative throughout this article.
[10] The lack of attention is striking, especially when compared to the scholarship on German foreign intelligence from World War II to the end of the Cold War.
[11] Daun, "Entwicklungen und Herausforderungen der deutschen Intelligence Community im letzten Jahrzehnt", "Germany"; Krieger, "Whither German Intelligence", "The German Bundesnachrichtendienst"; Erxleben, *Agenten zwischen den Fronten*.
[12] For an older exception, which would benefit from an update to include developments since 2011, see: Daun, "Nachrichtendienste in der deutschen Außenpolitik".
[13] Heisbourg, "A View from France", 161.
[14] Krieger, "German Intelligence History".
[15] Scheffler Corvaja, Jeraj, and Borghoff, "The Rise of Intelligence Studies".
[16] See, for instance, the work of the Metis Institute for Strategy and Foresight, also hosted by the Bundeswehr University in Munich.
[17] Oppermann, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place?".
[18] Interviews, Berlin, 26.08.2019, 27.08.2019, 30.08.2019, 03.09.2019.
[19] Many thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for helping me to strengthen these points.
[20] De Goede, Bosma, Pallister-Wilkins, *Secrecy and Methods in Security Research*.
[21] Dover, "Adding Value to the Intelligence Community".
[22] A reticence vis-à-vis think tank advice could be noted among members of parliament and their staffers when discussing foreign policy options for the case under study. Further, governmental analysts reportedly trusted assessments by international NGOs more than by German think tanks (interviews, Berlin, 26.08.2019, 27.08.2019, 30.08.2019, 19.09.2019).
[23] Ikani, Guttmann and Meyer, "An Analytical Framework for Postmortems of European Foreign Policy".
[24] Farson and Phythian, *Commissions of Inquiry and National Security*, 3-4.
[25] Ikani, Guttmann and Meyer, "An Analytical Framework for Postmortems of European Foreign Policy", 2.
[26] IGM's framework is applicable to intelligence producers and external experts such as journalists, think tank analysts or staff at non-governmental organisations.
[27] This has been adapted from: Strachan-Morris, "Threat and Risk", 174-180.
[28] Meyer, De Franco and Otto, *Warning about War*, 28-29.
[29] Omand, "Reflections on Intelligence Analysts and Policymakers", 476.
[30] Ibid., 475-76.
[31] For a discussion of these criteria: Ikani, Guttmann and Meyer, "An Analytical Framework for Postmortems of European Foreign Policy", 9-11.
[32] Ibid., 10.
[33] Dahl, "Why Won't They Listen?"; Meyer, De Franco and Otto, *Warning about War*, 28-29; Omand, "Reflections on Intelligence Analysts and Policymakers", 477.
[34] Ikani, Guttmann and Meyer, "An Analytical Framework for Postmortems of European Foreign Policy", 12-14.
[35] This latter point should not only include learning from own past performances but also from those of others.
[36] Intra-crisis learning is evidenced in changing beliefs, attitudes, practices and/or policies.
[37] Strachan-Morris, "Threat and Risk".
[38] Ibid., 174, 179.

[39] Ibid., 174.
[40] Ibid., 175.
[41] Ibid., 175.
[42] Interviews, Berlin, 03.09.2019.
[43] Strachan-Morris, "Threat and Risk", 180.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid., 184.
[46] Ikani, Guttmann and Meyer, "An Analytical Framework for Postmortems of European Foreign Policy", 5.
[47] Ibid., 6.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., 2.
[50] Dahl, "Not Your Father's Intelligence Failure", 43; Wirtz, "When Do You Give It a Name?", 69; Kam, "The Islamic State Surprise: The Intelligence Perspective", 28.
[51] Hanieh and Rumman, "*The 'Islamic State' Organization*", 178; Abdulrazaq and Stansfield, "The Enemy Within".
[52] Smith and Hirsch, "The Rise of ISIS".
[53] For instance: Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: Wave of Journalist Killings*; Cordesman and Khazai, "Iraq in Crisis".
[54] For a discussion in the US context, see: Warrick, *Black Flags*, 411-12.
[55] Ethical Clearance Reference Number: LRS-18/19-10370 (King's College London).
[56] Meyer, De Franco and Otto, *Warning about War*, 28.
[57] Omand, "Reflections on Intelligence Analysts and Policymakers", 475.
[58] Outputs by other German think tanks were negligible, for instance by the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA).
[59] This conclusion is based on a perusal of parliamentary and governmental publications and news reports published during this time.
[60] Interviews, Berlin, 26.08.2019, 27.09.2019.
[61] See also: Meyer, Sangar, Michaels, "How Do Non-Governmental Organizations Influence Media Coverage of Conflict".
[62] International Crisis Group, *Anything But Politics*; Amnesty International, *Rule of Fear*.
[63] Human Rights Watch, *You Can Still See Their Blood*, *Iraq*, *Syria*.
[64] Reuter, "Der Preis des Zögerns"; "Die schwarze Macht".
[65] Some mentioned that they valued the reporting of *The New York Times* which had roughly 15 field reporters deployed across Iraq at the time. Some also read outputs by US think tanks (e.g. the Washington Institute for Near East Policy or Brookings). These choices were informed by perceptions that US media organisations and think tanks were better resourced and quicker to pick up on weak signals. Interviews, Berlin, 03.09.2019, 27.09.2019, 01.10.2019.
[66] The keyword search for NGO outputs focused on 'Syria' and 'Iraq'. The keyword search for all other (German-language) documents focused on 'Syrien', 'Irak', 'Islamischer Staat', 'ISIS', 'Al-Qaida/Al-Kaida im Irak'.
[67] Michaels, *Germany's Anticipation of and Response to ISIS' Rise to Power*.
[68] Dahl, "Not Your Father's Intelligence Failure", 43-47.
[69] Ibid., 61.
[70] Ibid., 42.
[71] Search results can be provided by the author.
[72] Wirtz, "When Do You Give It a Name?", 69.
[73] Search results can be provided by the author.
[74] This section is based on interviews with intelligence producers (Berlin, 03.09.2019, 06.09.2019, 18.09.2019, 27.09.2019, 01.10.2019, 04.11.2019, 06.11.2019, 29.11.2019), intelligence consumers (Berlin, 27.08.2019, 30.08.2019, 04.09.2019, 05.09.2019, 10.09.2019, 06.11.2019) as well as a focus group discussion with intelligence producers and consumers (online, 26.04.2021).
[75] Wiegel, "Ein Fahndungserfolg aus purem Zufall".
[76] Reuter, "Disneyland für Dschihadisten".

[77] The limited interest among German policymakers was also obvious when looking at policy responses to the emerging crisis at the time. The database of open-source expert claims prepared for this study also includes a column on policy responses: Michaels, *Germany's Anticipation of and Response to ISIS' Rise to Power*.
[78] In a March 2014 report on disarmament, the government briefed the *Bundestag* about the capability of the Iraqi security forces and identified key challenges (for example capability shortfalls, corruption, infiltration by militant groups, limited loyalty to central government). Deutscher Bundestag, *Unterrichtung durch die Bundesregierung*, 76.
[79] Deutscher Bundestag, *Kleine Anfrage 18/1335*; *Kleine Anfrage 18/1541*.
[80] Michaels, *Germany's Anticipation of and Response to ISIS' Rise to Power*.
[81] This document can be obtained from the author.
[82] Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: Investigate Violence at Protest Camps*. https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/01/03/iraq-investigate-violence-protest-camp.
[83] For a recent discussion, see: Meyer et al., "What Lessons to Learn for Intelligence Production and Use in German Foreign Policy?".

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