



The Impact of COVID-19 on Salafi-Jihadi Terrorism

Tova C. Norlen

George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies,
<http://www.marshallcenter.org>

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to evaluate how COVID-19 might impact the future threat posed by Salafi-Jihadi groups and to explain how the current crisis might re-shape the Salafi-Jihadi central message and strategy and in turn impact recruitment, tactics, capability, and leadership, and even doctrine. Salafi-Jihadi groups have found themselves in a dilemma as they have to reckon with the fact that Muslims are not spared from infection despite fervent prayer. If the Coronavirus is the wrath of God against the infidels, why is it also killing the *Mujahedeen*, and how do you explain it while still maintaining credibility to potential recruits? How do you maintain the *Jihad* during a global lockdown, where movement is curtailed and resources dry up?

To better understand what we should expect from Salafi-Jihadist groups in the future, the analysis explores three challenges that Jihadi groups will most likely have to overcome as a result of the current crisis: First, the challenge to their strategic mission and capabilities, especially relating to the operationalization of motivations for martyrdom and revenge. Second, the challenge to their ideology, faith, and religious interpretation of scriptures, with impacts on the consistency of their doctrine and “brand.” And third, the challenge to their unity and ability to provide members with a shared group identity, which may influence recruitment. How Jihadi groups and their leaders address these multi-level challenges will impact their cohesion and effectiveness, and the credibility of their message. It may also have repercussions on leadership and control, which could determine the relevance of the group as a future global threat. The analysis suggests that Salafi-Jihadi terrorism remains a threat both in the short and long-term.

Keywords: Jihadi terrorism, religious doctrine, Al-Qaeda, ISIS, COVID-19

Across the world, the staunchest holdouts in the face of COVID-19¹ have been religious radicals, fundamentalists, and militants of just about every faith. While some have latched on to conspiracy theories, miracle cures, or end-of-times theologies, others are using the crisis as an opportunity to spread religious ideology and hate, urging followers to engage in militant or terrorist activity. Salafi-Jihadi groups are no different. There are signs that they have become emboldened by the COVID-19 crisis and are seeking to profit from vulnerabilities exposed to western security.² Evidence suggests that they have stepped up their propaganda and operations significantly in the Middle East and elsewhere, including Asia and Africa.³

This article evaluates the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the future threat posed by Salafi-Jihadi groups by exploring how the crisis might re-shape the Salafi-Jihadi central message and strategy, and in turn impact recruitment, tactics, capability, and leadership, and even doctrine. Most analysts are of the opinion that the current COVID-19 crisis may increase the risk of terrorism both in the short and long-term, as terrorists seek to profit from the vulnerabilities created as governments turn inward to combat the virus.⁴ However, certain elements of the crisis may also have mitigating effects on terrorist activities and operations. Sources of funding may dry up and social distance measures and travel bans make some terrorist tactics, such as bombings and large-scale vehicular rammings, less effective and easier to detect. Further, terrorists are just as much at risk as everyone else from falling ill from the virus.

Sustaining terrorist activity in the long-run thus depends on a groups' ability to weather the upcoming post-pandemic challenges that could end up damaging their operability, legitimacy, and long-term viability. The pandemic could challenge many Salafi-Jihadi groups in significant ways, possibly presenting them

¹ This article uses "Coronavirus" or even "Corona" interchangeably with COVID-19 when referencing Jihadi sources that use those terms, although SARS-Cov-2 is one of several viruses in the Coronavirus family.

² Mina al-Lami, "IS militants step up attacks on Iraqi security forces," *BBC News*, May 5, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-52535842>; Shelly Kittleson, "Islamic State ramps up attacks in Iraq during Ramadan," *Al-Monitor*, May 4, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/05/iraq-isis-terrorism-ramadan.html>.

³ Julie Coleman, "The Impact of Coronavirus on Terrorism in the Sahel," *Publications*, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, April 16, 2020, <https://icct.nl/publication/the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-terrorism-in-the-sahel/>; International Crisis Group, "Contending with ISIS in the Time of Coronavirus," *Commentary*, March 31, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/contending-isis-time-coronavirus>; Abu-Bakarr Jalloh, "Increased Terror Attacks in Africa amid Coronavirus Pandemic," *DW*, April 4, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/increased-terror-attacks-in-africa-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/a-53066398>.

⁴ James K. Wither, "The COVID-19 Pandemic: A Preliminary Assessment of the Impact on Terrorism in Western States," *Marshall Center Occasional Paper*, no. 33, April 2020, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/occasional-papers/covid-19-pandemic-preliminary-assessment>.

with an existential crisis from which they may not easily recover as they find themselves vulnerable, not just to the virus itself, but also to the strategic and economic implications that follow.

The analysis explores three challenges that Jihadi groups will most likely have to overcome as a result of the current COVID-19 crisis: First, the challenge to their strategic mission and capabilities, especially relating to the operationalization of motivations for martyrdom and revenge. Second, the challenge to their ideology, faith, and religious interpretation of scriptures, with impacts on the consistency of their doctrine and “brand.” And third, the challenge to their unity and ability to provide members with a shared group identity, which may influence recruitment. How Jihadi groups and their leaders address these multi-level challenges will impact their cohesion and effectiveness, and the credibility of their message. It may also have repercussions on leadership and control, which could determine the relevance of the group as a future global threat.

Coronavirus – Destroyer of the Oppressors and Martyrdom for the Believers

To fully understand Jihadi reactions to COVID-19, we need to go beyond the initial analysis of what we think Jihadi groups may do to what they actually say they will do, and also ask whether they have the capabilities to operationalize those plans. The first message about COVID-19 by ISIS media was a warning—very much in line with WHO guidelines but directly sourced from scripture—to stay away from the “area afflicted with the epidemic,” to wash your hands and face, and refrain from infecting others.⁵ This message spread quickly in Western media as a much-welcomed comic relief (“ISIS warns against going to Europe to commit terrorist acts in case they die from Coronavirus”) but proved to be misinterpreted. The more detailed text, and several subsequent declarations from both ISIS and other groups, have been very clear about the Jihadi position: the Coronavirus is a “soldier of Allah” that was sent to afflict the “oppressive Crusaders and their hirelings among the Zionists and apostates” in retribution for their cruel repression of Muslims around the world.⁶

Further, on March 19, an ISIS editorial in the al-Naba’ Magazine called for Muslims to protect themselves through physical precautions and prayer, but also to capitalize on the paralysis of Western governments and their militaries by launching attacks like those in Paris, London, and Brussels, and to conquer new land.⁷ The *Mujahedeen* should show no mercy towards the suffering West, because “the best obedience to Allah the Almighty is in waging Jihad for the sake of Allah, and harming and tormenting His enemies.”⁸ On March 24, an al-Qaeda

⁵ Infographic in Islamic State Al Naba’ Magazine, February 6, 2020.

⁶ Statement of Al-Qaeda Central, As-Sahab Media Foundation, March 31, 2020; Al-Naba’ Editorial # 226, March 19, 2020.

⁷ Al-Naba’ Editorial.

⁸ Al-Naba’ Editorial.

affiliated group issued a declaration on the Media Network Al-Thughur, rejecting the UN Secretary-General Anthony Guterres' appeal for a cease-fire, calling instead for an intensified battle against a crippled West.⁹ Further chatter and infographics followed, encouraging believers to strike in their own communities in any way they could through vehicular or stabbing attacks, suggesting that lone-actor attacks may continue to be the predominant tactic going forward.¹⁰

The number of IS-related attacks in February and March 2020 remained relatively unchanged compared to previous months, but there was a marked increase in operations in Iraq and Syria in April.¹¹ Furthermore, there was a deliberate effort by both ISIS and other Jihadi groups to showcase successes and attribute operations to reduced western preparedness as a result of COVID-19.¹² ISIS-affiliated terrorist groups were also more active around the world. Cells were apprehended in Germany, Spain, and Egypt in late April, and several attacks were carried out by satellite cells in vulnerable regions, such as Africa.¹³

Jihadi groups are also clearly exploiting the current crisis to spread their militant message to their affiliates and supporters globally, which could have significant security effects in the long run. Calls by Asian ISIS-affiliated groups, including in the Philippines, Indonesia, and the Maldives, to exploit the COVID-19 chaos to wage Jihad, led to several attacks in those countries in late March and early April.¹⁴ Similarly, there was a marked increase in attacks attributed to ISIS- and Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in the Sahel (including Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Jamaat al Islam al-Muslimeen) during the same period.¹⁵ In early April, an ISIS-affiliated group massacred 52 villagers in oil-rich northern Mozambique, reportedly because they refused to join the ISIS ranks.¹⁶

ISIS has also stepped up the fomentation of inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions, one of its central long-term strategies. With the closing of borders and the global rise in fear and uncertainty, militant nationalism has intensified along pre-existing sectarian lines, as has the scapegoating of ethnic and religious mi-

⁹ Statement on Al-Thughur Media Network, March 24, 2020.

¹⁰ Al-Naba' Editorial.

¹¹ Al-Lami, "IS Militants Step up Attacks."

¹² Infographic and report published by Thabaat Media Agency, April 17, 2020.

¹³ Julie Coleman, "Germany Arrests IS Suspects Plotting Attacks on US Bases," *DW*, April 15, 2020, <https://p.dw.com/p/3avQR>; Sam Jones, "Isis Suspect Who Defied Coronavirus Lockdown in Barcelona Arrested," *The Guardian*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/08/isis-suspect-who-defied-coronavirus-lockdown-in-barcelona-arrested-spain>.

¹⁴ SITE Intelligence Special Report: Global Jihadist Reponse to Covid-19 Pandemic, March 2020; Joseph Hincks, "With the World Busy Fighting COVID-19, Could ISIS Mount a Resurgence?," *Time*, April 29, 2020, <https://time.com/5828630/isis-coronavirus>.

¹⁵ Coleman, "The Impact of Coronavirus on Terrorism;" ICG, "Contending with ISIS;" Jalloh, "Increased Terror Attacks in Africa."

¹⁶ Jason Burke, "Islamist group kills 52 in 'cruel and diabolical' Mozambique massacre," *The Guardian*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/22/islamist-group-kills-52-in-cruel-and-diabolical-mozambique-massacre>.

norities. Both Al-Qaeda and ISIS are exploiting this trend by stepping up propaganda to foment grievances among targeted Muslim minorities in regions where they had limited traction in the past, including India, Kashmir, Xinjiang, and the Philippines.¹⁷ The 221st issue of ISIS' al-Naba' newsletter, released on February 13, 2020 was perhaps the first time ISIS dedicated an entire page to India's ethnic tensions, and on February 24, a new journal exclusively focused on the marginalization of Indian Muslims (al-Hind), was published by the pro-ISIS group Jundul Khilafah.¹⁸ Previously, Indian Muslims have been reluctant to embrace Jihadist ideology, a phenomenon attributed to the pluralist social system and the relatively peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Hindus in the country. However, since Modi's election in 2014, and the rapid escalation in Hindu-Muslim tensions, Jihadi propaganda in India has increased. In Afghanistan, an ISIS cell targeted the minority Sikh community when they killed 25 Sikh worshippers at a Kabul temple on March 25, battling the Afghan security forces for several hours.¹⁹

It is important to note that the Jihadi message is rarely unified. The lack of centralized authority gives rise to a storm of messages from second-rate clerics who peddle dangerous conspiracy theories and disinformation that have destructive real-life effects. For instance, the idea that the virus is the wrath of Allah against non-Muslims and that Muslims can protect themselves through prayer, repentance, and Jihad seems to dominate some regions of Pakistan. As a result, authorities have failed to close down mosques and prevent public prayer.²⁰ Al-Qaeda's March 31 Statement gave considerable attention to debunking this thinking, while also addressing non-Muslims and inviting them to embrace Islam.²¹

Finally, while the direct threat of violence is often where Western attention is focused, many deeper conversations are going on between Jihadi ideologues about how the crisis should be understood theologically and what its implications for life and society are. The conversations of interest here relate to doctrinal interpretations and theological explanations for the crisis that may have lasting impacts on the future of Salafi-Jihadi operations. It is clear that Jihadi-Salafi clerics at the leadership level are busy engaging in "message control" to ensure

¹⁷ Samar Halarnkar, "Coronavirus Is Proving to Be Another Excuse to Marginalize India's Muslims," *Quartz India*, April 13, 2020, <https://qz.com/india/1836768/coronavirus-is-another-excuse-to-marginalise-indias-muslims>; Zainul Abid, "Analysis: Jihadists Step Up Efforts to Exploit India Sectarian Violence," *Insight, BBC Monitoring*, March 5, 2020.

¹⁸ *Voice of Hind*, Issue 1, Al-Qitaal Media Center, February 24, 2020.

¹⁹ Sayyed Salahuddin, "Islamic State Claims Kabul Attack on Sikh Minority," *Washington Post*, March 25, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/gunmen-attack-sikh-minority-in-kabul-dozens-trapped-in-temple/2020/03/25/bd452b88-6e58-11ea-a156-0048b62cdb51_story.html.

²⁰ Kathy Gannon, Associated Press, "Mosques Stay Open in Pakistan Even as Virus Death Toll Rises," April 3, 2020, *ABC News*, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/mosques-stay-open-pakistan-virus-death-toll-rises-69953780>.

²¹ Statement of Al-Qaeda Central, As-Sahab Media Foundation, March 31, 2020.

that the Coronavirus does not undermine their main mission and ability to survive beyond the crisis. These issues will be explored in more detail in the following sections.

Strategic Mission, Tactics, and Capabilities

Research on radicalization and recruitment shows that individuals join militant—and terrorist—groups for a variety of reasons. However, for Jihadists a few factors often dominate – a sense of grievance and social marginalization; a desire for revenge against injustice committed against Muslims around the world; a personal need for belonging, recognition, status, heroism, and adventure; and a religious obligation/doctrinal appeal, including the lure of future rewards through martyrdom.²²

Motivations, as well as push and pull factors that impact individual decision-making, may shift over time to reflect the context, and also slightly vary for western foreign fighters and those recruited from Muslim majority countries, as well as for those recruited outside the Middle East. Western recruits were more often lured by the promise of status and identity, while Middle Eastern recruits seem to be more influenced by piety and religious identity as well as political repression.²³ The desire for revenge, when confronted with Muslim suffering, was often found to be a central “tipping point” for all recruits, regardless of origin.²⁴

Salafi-Jihadi groups have spent decades successfully exploiting those grievances and frustrations to spread a virulent militant ideology that explains the purpose of Islam in very narrow terms. Speckhart and Ellenberg note that Jihadists have managed to convince many that “suicide terrorism is a type of Is-

²² Edwin Bakker and Roel de Bont, “Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 5 (2016): 837-857; James Wither and Sam Mullins, eds., *Combating Transnational Terrorism* (Sofia, Bulgaria: Procon Ltd., 2016); Martha Crenshaw, “An Organizational Approach to the Analysis of Political Terrorism,” *Orbis* 29, no. 3 (Fall 1985): 465-89; Colonel John M. “Matt” Venhaus, U.S. Army, “Why Youth Join al-Qaeda,” *Special Report 236* (United States Institute of Peace, 2010), www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/SR236Venhaus.pdf.

²³ A caveat should be introduced: many Jihadi groups in conflict zones use economic incentives or coercion to recruit foot soldiers. This is especially common in Sub-Saharan Africa and Sahel, where recruitment can provide a secure income and a ticket out of poverty. Because focus here is on the radicalization process, these issues remain outside of the scope of this article.

²⁴ Evidence shows that foreign fighters are often lured by status, identity, or adventure, and recruits from Muslim societies – more by piety and religious identity. Research on Kuwaiti militants showed political repression and suppression of civil liberties as push factor. See Nafees Hameed, “What Makes a Terrorist,” *New York Review Daily*, November 11, 2018; Nicholas C. Scull, Othman Alkhadher, and Salman Al-Awadhi, “Why People Join Terrorist Groups in Kuwait: A Qualitative Examination,” *Political Psychology* 41, no. 2 (September 2019): 231-247, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12622>; Alan Krueger, “What Makes a Terrorist?” American Enterprise Institute, November 7, 2007.

lamic martyrdom, that building a Caliphate is a goal to be strived after, and that making *hijrah*—traveling to lands ruled by *Sharia* law—and participating in militant jihad are obligations incumbent on all Muslims.”²⁵ Central to this ideology is also the *Shari’a* doctrine of *Qisas* (retribution in kind, or “an eye for an eye”), which legitimizes punishment in equal proportion to the crime for those who have inflicted suffering on Muslims around the world.²⁶

For many radical Muslims, the virus represents the triumph of this ideology. That the virus—the “weakest of the weak” of the “soldiers of Allah”—managed to devastate the world of “infidels and apostates” (China, Italy and the US) more than all previous combined efforts of the *Mujahedeen* is exhilarating to many Islamic Scholars.²⁷ The claim that it represents the divine retribution they had waited for is widely celebrated as it quickly spread across the globe in the Salafi-Jihadi online “chatter.” The apocalyptic euphoria, together with the widespread belief that Muslims are immune from the virus through prayer and Jihad, has instilled a sense of invincibility among some radical Muslim communities.²⁸

The pandemic challenges the Salafi-Jihadi operational strategy significantly as freedom of movement has been curtailed, international travel has ceased, and large gatherings (including Friday prayers) have been banned. The closure of all Saudi religious sites, including the Kabaa, has drawn especially strong reactions.²⁹ But it is also clear that disobeying government bans has already had disastrous consequences. In Pakistan, a religious conference led by defiant clerics became a “super-spreader” event that created pockets of a global outbreak.³⁰ The consequences of a COVID-19 spread into Syria’s war-torn Idlib province—the last rebel-held area—would be catastrophic for the already destitute civilian population, a million of whom are in refugee camps.³¹ As the virus spreads further through Syria and Iraq, it might also severely impact Salafi-Jihadi ranks. Alt-

²⁵ Anne Speckhart and Molly Ellenberg, “Is Internet Recruitment Enough to Seduce a Vulnerable Individual into Terrorism?,” *Homeland Security Today*, April 15, 2020.

²⁶ Sahih al-Bukhari, Chapter 87 of The Book of Blood Money.

²⁷ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Jihadist Perspectives on Coronavirus Pandemic: Primary Sources,” personal webpage, March 25, 2020, <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/03/jihadist-perspectives-on-coronavirus-pandemic>.

²⁸ See media and writing by Muhammed al-Muhaysi, whose lecture series “Soldiers of Allah” was released on April 24, 2020. Episode 1 was called “How the World Surrendered.”

²⁹ Usaid Siddiqui, “Epidemics, War Have Impacted Muslim Worship Throughout History,” *Al Jazeera*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/epidemics-war-impacted-muslim-worship-history-200420210254391.html>.

³⁰ Michael Kugelman, “Pakistan’s Government Is Caught Between a Mosque and a Hard Place,” *Foreign Policy*, April 24, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/24/pakistan-ramadan-coronavirus-pandemic-mosques>.

³¹ “Coronavirus: Saudi Arabia confirms first death as cases spike,” *Middle East Eye*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-saudi-arabia-confirms-first-death-medina-cases-spike>. For Syria and the Idlib Province, see OCHA, *Recent Developments in Northwest Syria – Situation Report*, No. 11, March 27, 2020.

though Middle Eastern terrorist groups are agile and accustomed to operating under conditions of insecurity and uncertainty, they often live in squalid conditions without access to modern healthcare, which makes them particularly vulnerable to infection.

In the short-term, as security forces are re-deployed to assist with field hospitals and crowd control, we have to stay vigilant to the possibility that terrorists will exploit vulnerabilities. When travel ceased and lockdowns became global, Jihadi rhetoric shifted further to almost exclusively promote lone-actor martyrdom operations against Western targets or local political authorities. While this should remain a central security concern, it is important also to recognize that lockdowns provide new opportunities for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to track down and arrest suspected terrorists, with such arrests already carried out in Cairo, Brussels, Germany, and Barcelona.³²

Religious Doctrine and Political Constraints

Religious fundamentalists who engage in militant activities—whether Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu, or other—often share important characteristics: They almost always call for a combination of spiritual, nationalist, and/or political ends. The survival of fundamentalist religious groups depends on the extent to which followers continue to adhere to the uncompromising—or absolute—injunctions based on their specific ideological doctrine. Such doctrines represent unchanging truth, the will of the divine, and requires unwavering commitment. It clearly divides the world into “good vs evil” and “us vs them,” and terrorist tactics, militancy, or violent extremism are easily justified to defend the ‘truth.’ However, even absolutist doctrines shift over time as they are confronted with political constraints and changing realities. Salafi-Jihadi doctrines are no different. Scholars constantly engage in “*Ihtihad*,” or Islamic interpretation, elevating certain Surahs or Quranic verses over others and “retooling” central theological concepts—such as martyrdom and Jihad—to serve their own political goals. Salafi-Jihadi scholars present their hardline, militant interpretation, as the absolute and unaltered truth, and everything else as heresy.

Both moderate and extreme Muslims believe that nothing can happen in life, good or bad, if it is not God’s plan. Like in other religions, this creates a theological dilemma, because if God is responsible for the emergence of a virus, there has to be a larger purpose with it, valid for all human suffering. A popular belief among extremist Muslims is that “Corona” was created to warn and punish humanity for consumerism, destruction of the environment, and personal ex-

³² “‘Je l’ai fait pour l’Etat Islamique’: un suspect de terrorisme écrase deux motards de la police à Paris,” *FR24 News*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.fr24news.com/fr/a/2020/04/je-lai-fait-pour-letat-islamique-un-suspect-de-terrorisme-ecrase-deux-motards-de-la-police-a-paris.html>; Mohammed Abdo Hasanein and Walid Abdulrahman, “Egypt Police Neutralize Terrorist Cell,” *ASharq Al-Awsat*, Wednesday, April 15, 2020, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/2234841/egypt-police-neutralize-terrorist-cell-cairo-suburb>.

cesses. Extremists quickly adopted this perspective and argued that fighting the pandemic would be futile and that righteous Muslims should instead rely on God to protect them by deepening their faith or engaging in Jihad.³³ In contrast, moderate Muslims argue that even if the virus has divine origins, everything possible should be done to stop its spread in order to preserve life, a central theme in the Quran.³⁴ In fact, the prescription for how to protect communities from illness and the “travel warnings” during the virus come directly from the Book of Medicine, the Sahih a-Bukhari, in which Muhammed warns about a plague during his time.³⁵ But rather than focusing on these sections of the Sunna, Jihadi groups are elevating the hadiths on Jihad and Qisas, and the need to exploit the heightened opportunity to fight against the disbelievers.³⁶

Despite the risk that it might backfire—once their own followers get sick—Salafi-Jihadi scholars have stuck mainly to the original message that the virus is God’s wrath on the infidels, but have also provided “remedial” explanations for the suffering of Muslims. They argue that if Muslims fall ill, it is not a punishment but a test of faith—a tribulation—that should be borne with humility and prayers for mercy.³⁷ This, again, is directly sourced from the Book of Medicine. The fact that the city of Medina confirmed Saudi-Arabia’s first death to the virus also caused some theological scrambling, since Muhammed clearly stated that “no plague would touch Medina.” Scholars suddenly had to explain why COVID-19 did not fit into the category of “plague.”

One of the starkest examples that even apocalyptic and absolutist doctrines can readjust to align with political constraints comes from Jordanian Jihadi Ideologue Muhammad al-Maqdisi. While most Jihadi clerics seem to oppose the closure of mosques and bans on public prayer, al-Maqdisi argued that the closing of the large mosques was actually one of the benefits of Corona. He pointed out that Jihadi clerics could now teach their own sermons, rather than delivering the obligatory unified sermons imposed by the governments. In addition, he claimed, women are now going back to wearing the niqab, and sinful nightclubs and bars have been shut, while private mosques where the “true” message is being preached, are still open.³⁸

Will the ban of public prayer and the lack of the communal experience of Ramadan have an effect on the credibility of the Jihadi doctrine? Might the ab-

³³ Mehmet Ozalp, “How Coronavirus Challenges Muslims’ Faith and Changes Their Lives,” *The Conversation*, April 2, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/how-coronavirus-challenges-muslims-faith-and-changes-their-lives-133925>.

³⁴ Hocine Drouiche, “French Muslim Leader: Coronavirus is a Chance for Solidarity, Not ‘Punishment,’” *AsiaNews.it*, March 23, 2020, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/French-Muslim-leader:-Coronavirus-is-a-chance-for-solidarity,-not-%E2%80%98punishment%E2%80%99-49632.html>.

³⁵ The Sahi Buhari contains hadiths (or sayings) of Muhammed.

³⁶ Sahi al-Buhari Sunna, Books 56 & 87.

³⁷ From al-Naba’ Newsletter, February 6, 2020.

³⁸ Post on Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi’s Telegram channel, March 23, 2020.

sence of Friday sermons have a de-radicalizing effect on vulnerable youth? Will they continue to listen as radical clerics pick new explanations to suit their militant politics? These are some of the questions we will be looking for answers to in the next few weeks and months.

Crisis of Identity and Belonging – Recruitment and Messaging

One of the strongest “pull factors” for individuals who join extremist militant groups is what some psychologists call “social belongingness.”³⁹ As discussed above, radicalization occurs more frequently in communities where individuals feel alienated or out of place and where their freedom to express their unique religious or cultural identity is suppressed, curtailed, or even threatened.⁴⁰ Militant groups—whether Jihadi white nationalists or other—offer the possibility to actively participate in the process to correct a perceived injustice, while also providing recruits with a sense of prestige and purpose. Jihadi recruiters are well aware that European youth from immigrant communities are facing an uncertain future due to discrimination in housing, education, and employment and are therefore particularly vulnerable. During the height of its campaign, ISIS convincingly offered a solid structure with a black-and-white world view, the promise of restored dignity, and a holy cause. The fact that the rewards were still far from coming and recruits risked being martyred was insignificant for those for whom the ISIS message resonated.

The weakening of ISIS may have slowed the recruitment of foreign fighters into Iraq and Syria, but there is no indication that it has lessened the enthusiasm of those who already subscribed to the ISIS ideology – it certainly did not slow the spread of militant Jihadi messages around the world. However, COVID-19 has done what the world’s most powerful armies could not do: by curtailing travel, it has prevented foreign fighters from physically joining terrorist groups in the Middle East or elsewhere. While it is too early to say how it is going to affect terrorist recruitment, it is important to note that it could create conditions more favorable for de-radicalization. De-radicalization of extremist militants often mirrors the radicalization process in the opposite direction. Conditions that might make terrorists more susceptible to de-radicalization are life-changing events, the heightened exposure to alternative viewpoints, and detachment due to intra-group conflict and/or dissent.⁴¹

The continued tactical emphasis on lone-actor attacks might be appealing for more seasoned terrorists who are already hardened in Jihadi ideology. However, new recruits may find that their needs for community and group identity unful-

³⁹ See Bertjan Doosje *et al.*, “Terrorism, Radicalization and De-radicalization,” *Current Opinions in Psychology* 11 (June 2016): 79-84.

⁴⁰ Chris Meserole, “Radicalization, Laïcité, and the Islamic Veil,” *Religion*, April 25, 2016, <https://religion.org/2016/04/25/french-connection-part-ii-radicalization-laicite-and-the-islamic-veil>.

⁴¹ Doosje *et al.*, “Terrorism, Radicalization.”

filled, especially as they are also isolated from their mosques and comrades. Thus, rather than increasing their alienation, the COVID-19 crisis might have the opposite effect of drawing communities closer together, while also increasing solidarity in host countries for immigrant communities hard hit by the virus.⁴² As potential recruits to Jihadi groups experience the consequences of the virus with their closest kin and communities, their personal ties to their own communities may be strengthened, possibly increasing the likelihood that they are exposed to alternative viewpoints.

We are also likely to see growing competition for resources (both human and material) between Salafi-Jihadi groups in the Muslim world as numbers of incoming recruits dwindle and groups face increasingly difficult conditions. There are signs that the long-standing rivalry between ISIS and Al-Qaeda has intensified in the Levant and Yemen. At the end of April, the messaging app Rocketchat ran a new religious lecture series by current AQAP (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) leader Khalid Batarfi, where he warned against espionage and infiltration, and lauded success in clamping down on ISIS spying networks. Similarly, on April 29, ISIS' Yemeni branch released a new video with accusations against Al-Qaeda. It included interviews with Al-Qaeda dissidents who blamed their leadership for falsely charging members with espionage.⁴³ Although the two groups have never been on speaking terms, more attention to these squabbles may be a sign of weakness and could dissuade potential recruits.

Finally, beyond the short-term effects on tactics, the current crisis may have set off a paradigmatic shift for Jihadi groups that could have security implications far into the future. On March 26, an introspective editorial in *al-Naba'* magazine claimed that the Coronavirus had changed the balance of power in favor of the Salafi-Jihadist cause. It argues that Muslims need to change their understanding of the enemy, in particular the United States. It explains that the habit of attributing to the US all things evil has gone to such proportions that it is believed that the reach of the US is almost limitless, that "nothing happens without their knowledge [...] and nothing in this world [is] inaccessible to their power and capabilities."⁴⁴ The editorial argues that the pandemic allows Salafi-Jihadists to change the rhetoric to tell a different story, one in which America is no longer the omnipotent "Great Satan" but much more like the Emperor in New Clothes. Such a realization holds the potential to infuse the Jihadi cause with new energy as groups begin to understand that the enemy is more vulnerable than previously thought.

⁴² Doosje *et al.*, "Terrorism, Radicalization."

⁴³ Lecture Series with Khalid Bin Umar Batarfi, *al-Malahem Media Foundation*, Episode 1, April 24, 2020.

⁴⁴ Islamic State *Al-Naba'* Editorial, March 26, 2020.

Conclusion

So what are the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Salafi-Jihadi terrorism in the short and mid-term and how might Islamic scholars and Jihadi leaders deal with the challenges it presents to their “brand” and effectiveness in the long-term? As the analysis suggests, the verdict is still mixed. The early warnings of an onslaught in terrorist attacks in the West due to a pre-occupation with the crisis and the re-assignment of security forces to help with the effort have yet to materialize. Most likely, as illicit sources of funding have dried out, recruitment slowed, and movement curtailed, the capabilities of Salafi-Jihadi groups in the Middle East (and to some degree also in North Africa) have been significantly affected. Although the evidence is still mostly anecdotal, it may explain why the “promised” surge in terrorist attacks against the US and its allies has not taken place.

However, there are no indications that Salafi-Jihadi groups have lost their support and enthusiasm. There has been a significant rise in Jihadist activity elsewhere, including Iraq and Syria, Sahel, Mozambique, and Somalia. The international community needs to stay united in counterterrorism efforts, while also remaining vigilant for gaps in both local and global security. The first priority should be increased preparedness for the types of attacks that Jihadi ideologues encourage and that their cadres have the capacity to carry out. Preventing lone-actor attacks is difficult, if not almost impossible, but it should also be reiterated that the restriction on travel continues to provide opportunities for tracking down and neutralizing terrorist groups.⁴⁵

The analysis shows that Jihadi leaders are adapting their strategy and tactics to the operational constraints that the coronavirus has placed on them, while also continuing to engage in a serious scholarly debate over how Islamic doctrine and religious texts remain the most valid sources for answers. Jihadi groups are agile networks accustomed to constraints and hardships. They are also patient; Jihadi goals to expand the Caliphate are not restricted by troop surges or election cycles. Rather, their work may bear fruit in decades or centuries and is only assured through apocalyptic promises. Many clerics are fanning the excitement about the Coronavirus with claims that it is the beginning of the “end of times.” On March 28, Sheikh Abu al-Fatah al-Farghali of Gaza asked if “Corona [is] the wind of our age that will save Islam and restructure the world anew so that the age of might and enabling of the Muslims and Mujahideen can begin?”⁴⁶ Similarly, ISIS argues that now is the time when Muslims should join in their efforts to retake the Caliphate as Jihad during Ramadan is doubly rewarded in heaven.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Hasanein and Abdulrahman, “Egypt Police Neutralize Terrorist Cell.”

⁴⁶ Article in *Iba’ Magazine* by Sheikh Abu al-Fatah al-Farghali, published on March 28, 2020.

⁴⁷ See Mina al-Lami, “What to Expect from Islamic State in Ramadan 2020,” *Insight, BBC Monitoring*, April 24, 2020.

If Islamic militant groups survive beyond the dip in recruitment and the constraints on movement and resources, the long-term effects of this historical time may be far more serious and difficult to counteract. As discussed, the most lucrative recruiting grounds for Jihadi groups are when they can exploit the grievances of Muslims who feel alienated and repressed in their home (or host) communities. If militant Jihadi propaganda and apocalyptic ideology are left to strengthen in some of the world's most vulnerable Muslim communities, like India or Xinjian, it could have devastating effects on international security. We have to be prepared to counter not only the spread of Jihadi ideology in those societies but also to help governments understand the catastrophic consequences of divisive and repressive policies against these minorities. We, therefore, need to continue to work collectively to counter terrorist networks and disrupt their operations, while also investing resources and efforts to support global partners that may have communities vulnerable to radicalization.

How Jihadi groups weather the COVID-19 pandemic and continue to pose a threat to global security will depend on how they respond to some of these competing forces. Messaging is central as they attempt to appeal to potential recruits and energize their more seasoned members to adapt their tactics without impacting the group's broader mission. We should expect Jihadi messages to showcase strength, victory, and the continued obligation for Muslims to engage in Jihad. Most of the rhetoric from the Jihadi leadership (as well as online chatter) has followed that pattern. They have exaggerated achievements, such as numbers of operations conducted, enemy aircraft downed, military equipment confiscated, and casualties inflicted – ascribing their “victories” to perceived western security gaps.⁴⁸ They furthermore stressed the religious imperative to return to the Caliphate, and the extra blessings promised when engaging in Jihad during Ramadan. While we can hope that inconsistencies in messaging and doctrine will persuade some to seek more moderate alternative viewpoints, those effects may be insignificant in comparison to the Salafi-Jihadi enthusiasm over the COVID-19 predicament.

Disclaimer

The views expressed are solely those of the contributing author and do not represent official views of the PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes, participating organizations, or the Consortium's editors.

About the Author

Tova C. Norlen, PhD, is a Professor of Counterterrorism and International Security at the George C. Marshall European Center for International Security Studies. She is also the academic advisor to the GCMC's Program for Terrorism and Security Studies.

⁴⁸ Infographic and report published by Thabaat Media Agency, April 17, 2020.

Acknowledgment

Connections: The Quarterly Journal, Vol. 19, 2020 is supported by the United States government.