Snapshot

How extremist groups are responding to **Covid-19**

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As the world rallies to meet the challenge posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, extremist actors from across the ideological spectrum have sought to use upheaval and uncertainty for their own ends. Extremist groups are beginning to recognise the scale of the Covid-19 pandemic, seeing opportunities to exploit fears, exacerbate tensions and mobilise supporters while governments are occupied with trying to address Covid-19.

This Snapshot briefing provides a rapid assessment of extremist attacks, activities and messaging amid the global response to Covid-19. This includes tracking how different extremist actors are engaging with the Covid-19 crisis and a summary of major extremism-related incidents and developments from around the world. The insight we provide is not exhaustive and should not be viewed as such, but is intended to offer timely and useful insight as dynamics unfold.

Trends in this briefing include:

- Salafi-jihadi groups are celebrating the human and economic impact of Covid-19 on Western countries.

- West African jihadi groups are continuing to carry out large-scale attacks and conduct cross-border activities.

- Shia Islamists continue to carry out unchecked cross-border activities, despite risk of further spread of coronavirus.

- Far-right conspiracy theories circulating online are beginning to translate into offline violence.

- Beyond Covid-19: Jihadi violence continues, including significant attacks by al-Shabaab in Somalia, ISIS elements in Mozambique and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

How Extremist Groups Are Responding to Covid-19

Governments around the world are rallying to respond to the pandemic, taking robust measures to protect citizens and save lives. Meanwhile, extremist actors are exploiting the global crisis to pursue their own ideological agendas and objectives. From propaganda and disinformation campaigns to providing health and social services, extremists are directly and indirectly responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. Top lines about recent extremist activity around Covid-19 include:

- ISIS welcomes the impact of Covid-19 on its enemies but cautions against too many conspiracy theories.

- With Ramadan approaching, al-Qaeda calls on Muslims to use periods of isolation to self-reflect and support jihad.

- Jihadi groups in West Africa continue activity across borders, a potential risk for the transmission of the virus.

- A US man with neo-Nazi connections was killed in a shootout with the FBI after targeting a coronavirus hospital for attack.

The insight and analysis presented has been prepared on the basis of a rapid assessment of materials published by extremist groups and organisations through their media platforms, monitoring communication channels used by their members and supporters, and analysis of local and regional news sources from around the world. As the virus continues to spread, the number of cases and deaths grow, and the nature of government response evolves, we expect shifts in the nature of Covid-19-related propaganda, messaging and activities by extremist groups, with more coherent ideas and narratives developing over time.

Sunni Islamist Extremist Groups

ISIS and affiliates

- In a recently published edition of its Arabic-language newsletter, ISIS focused on Covid-19-related developments in its section on updates from around the world. This included stories about the impact of the pandemic on US military preparedness, senior Egyptian military figures being struck by the virus, and the disruption to coalition training exercises with the Iraqi military. ISIS celebrating the fact that Western countries are being affected by coronavirus was a running theme. An editorial piece in the newsletter called on supporters not to describe the Covid-19 pandemic as a US-manufactured plot, but rather a manifestation of divine will. The newsletter also included the biography of a British-Sudanese doctor who joined ISIS in 2015 and was killed in 2017. The end of the biography calls for more doctors to join ISIS.[1]

- ISIS Jammu and Kashmir Province published the second edition of its English-language magazine, *Sawt al-Hind* (Voice of India). The group described Covid-19 as a divine punishment and a torment for disbelievers, evoking the events of Mosul, Sirte, Baghuz and Marawi to draw comparison with the levels of suffering in Western countries. The magazine also described Western cities as easy targets for attacks because law-enforcement and security authorities are occupied with the pandemic.[2]

Al-Qaeda and affiliates

- Al-Qaeda released a lengthy official statement regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, titled "A Word of Advice on the Coronavirus Pandemic." It addressed a number of aspects relating to the pandemic, including the impact on the US economy, which the group describes as being in an "ICU". The group also described Western economies being in a state of ruin, with state apparatus, including military and security forces, being pinned down by an invisible enemy. The statement referenced the US government's $6 trillion financial stimulus package, which it says is the equivalent of the cost of two wars against the "Muslim ummah." The group also described the arrival of the pandemic in the Muslim world as part of God's wrath and a consequence of the sins of Muslims themselves, admonishing them to use this as an opportunity to correct their behaviour.

The statement said that moral corruption has reached Muslim lands, including the holy sites in Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. The group called on all Muslims to use the month of Ramadan and periods of isolation to increase efforts in spreading Islam, self-reflection and supporting jihad.

- In a recent edition of its Arabic-language weekly newsletter, the al-Qaeda-affiliated group in Syria, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), published a number of articles and stories relating to the Covid-19 outbreak. This included discussion of the Crown Prince of the United Arab Emirates and his pledge of support to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the economic impact of the virus on Russia, and the rise in unemployment in Israel.[3]

- Somalia-based jihadi group al-Shabaab issued a communique following a gathering of more than 100 scholars, elders and tribal leaders discussing the future of jihad in East Africa. The communique stated that efforts for jihad in East Africa should be intensified and that Muslims should take caution over the spread of diseases like coronavirus and HIV, which the group attributed to Western militaries.[4]

Hamas

- In a press statement released to mark the 44th anniversary of "Palestinian Land Day," Hamas accused Israel of taking advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak to "continue its assaults on Palestinian territory and people." The group also announced that activities and protests to commemorate the anniversary would not take place due to the outbreak, and instead encouraged Palestinians to raise the Palestinian flag over their homes.

- Yahya al-Sinwar, head of the Hamas office in Gaza, threatened Israel's defence minister, Naftali Bennet, that if ventilators for Covid-19 patients are not sent to the coastal enclave, then his group will "take them by force". "If respirators are not brought to Gaza, we will take them by force from Israel and stop the breathing of 6 million Israelis," asserted Yahya al-Sinwar.[5]

Taliban (Afghanistan)

- In line with the group's strategy to present itself as a viable and responsible political actor in Afghanistan, the Taliban released a video discussing the opening of health centres in the city of Kunduz for the purpose of preventing the spread of Covid-19 and raising public awareness. The video featured men wearing protective clothing carrying out temperature checks on members of the public and showed groups of men wearing hazmat suits and disinfecting equipment.

- Trying to demonstrate its credentials as a responsible actor in Afghanistan, the Taliban published a photo report on its official website showing a public-awareness event on the Covid-19 pandemic in Logar Province. The report showed attendees maintaining social distancing and wearing face masks, as well as individuals wearing hazmat suits and disinfecting equipment.

Abu Sayyaf (Philippines)

- Security forces in the Philippines clashed with members of the Abu Sayyaf group as they were enforcing lockdown measures introduced by the national government in response to Covid-19.[6] Police and military forces were also able to free a local doctor who had been kidnapped by militants and held for several weeks.

Shia Islamist Extremist Groups

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Iran)

- Doctors Without Borders / Médecins Sans Frontières has been expelled from Iran after the regime spread false claims that the humanitarian organisation was spying for Iran's enemies. The decision came following pressure from the IRGC and a speech by Ayatollah Khamenei in which he described the pandemic as a biological war.[7]

- The IRGC's ground forces[8] and Basij paramilitary units have started nationwide "biological defence exercises" across 3,000 locations in Iran, including

100 locations in the capital Tehran, with activities including military parades. In contradiction to the guidance issued by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and despite calls on Iran to implement stricter social distancing measures to contain the spread of Covid-19, footage circulating on social media shows crowds gathering along streets to watch the military processions.

- The head of the Basij – the IRGC's voluntary paramilitary units – has claimed that until now, they have made "more than 40 million masks … under the supervision of the Food and Drug Administration and the Ministry of Health," and that the group has also "been involved in making disinfectants."[9] These claims come amid concerns about the lack of personal protective equipment[10] (PPE) for health workers in Iran, and after the country recently received PPE shipments from both UNICEF[11] and the UNHCR[12].

Hizbullah (Lebanon)

- Despite efforts to position itself as being on the frontline of Lebanon's fight against Covid-19, Hizbullah has been accused of being the "main cause of the transmission [of] coronavirus from Iran to Lebanon,"[13] driving hostility towards the militia. Lebanon's first recorded Covid-19 case was a person who had recently returned from Iran.

- Hizbullah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, responsible for overseeing the group's political and paramilitary activities, announced[14] that all Hizbullah-affiliated hospitals and 24,000 medical staff would be ready to serve the people of Lebanon in the fight against Covid-19 and would be at the disposal of the Lebanese government.

Hashd al-Shaabi (Iraq)

- Kataib Hizbullah[15], an Iraqi paramilitary group affiliated with the IRGC, held a press conference outlining their efforts to combat Covid-19, which included the distribution of PPE to cities across Iraq and informative leaflets to raise public awareness about the pandemic among Iraqis.

- Iran's IRGC and their affiliated Iraqi militias have been circulating propaganda materials describing the Iranian-backed militias as "serving on the health frontline to counter the outbreak of Covid-19" in Iraq. Reported activities included "sanitizing operations,"[16] which have most recently taken place in the cities of Basra and al-Diwaniyah, according to IRGC and militia-linked news outlets.

- According to reports[17], Iraq's Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation Units) have travelled to Qom, Iran – the epicentre of the Covid-19 pandemic in Iran – to aid the IRGC and regime's "sanitizing operations" and to "disinfect the city." Such cross-border activities between Iran's IRGC and its affiliated Shia militias in Iraq threaten to escalate the outbreak of the virus.

Houthis (Yemen)

- The Houthis have actively been spreading anti-US conspiracy theories, blaming the outbreak of Covid-19 on an American "biological weapon". A spokesperson for the Houthis recently asserted that it is possible that "coronavirus was [an] American product that got out of control."[18]

- Pro-Houthi and Iranian-regime news outlets have claimed that Saudi Arabia was trying to "accelerate" the outbreak of Covid-19 in neighbouring Yemen by "airdropping contaminated facemasks"[19] in the residential areas of al-Hudaydah and al-Mahwit province in an attempt to "spread the virus as much as possible."

Far-Right Groups

The far right as a movement is more decentralised than its jihadi counterparts, as individuals do not necessarily gravitate towards group structures but rather organise themselves loosely around different networks, alt media platforms or even vloggers.

Far-right media

- US-based neo-Nazi websites the *Daily Stormer* and *Renegade Tribune* have described Covid-19 as a hoax and that emergency measures have been taken only so that certain entities can profit from the situation. They include the medical establishment gaining financially, the media using the outbreak to attack President Donald Trump's election campaign, and governments across the world that are using the pandemic to take citizens' freedoms away.

- The *Daily Stormer* has also celebrated the death of famous Jews from coronavirus, claiming that "where Hitler failed, Coronavirus will deliver".

- Infighting within different far-right circles continues: Neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic websites have decried alt-media platforms such as *Breitbart*, and populist leaders including Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán for seemingly being too close to Israel and not "acknowledging the Jewish problem" in their response to Covid-19.

Far-right activity

- A US man with ties to neo-Nazi groups (National Socialist Movement and Vorherrschaft Division) was killed by the FBI before he was able to carry out an attack on a hospital treating Covid-19 patients.[20] The 36-year-old man, who had been the subject of a domestic-terrorism investigation for months for his racist, anti-government views, had been planning an attack but only settled on targeting the hospital recently[21] in light of the Covid-19 outbreak.

- Far-right extremists on the 4chan online messaging board have been sharing links[22] to university classes taking place on the Zoom video-conferencing platform, urging users to join classes and to harass educators. Those targeted were disproportionately members of minority religious groups or were discussing topics such as race and gender.

- After the UK announced a lockdown in an attempt to control the spread of the Covid-19 virus, Gab users in the UK started making claims that the media is exaggerating the extent of the pandemic and that the government is authoritarian for enforcing lockdown measures.

- Police[23] in the UK are investigating far-right groups for circulating fake news about Muslim communities ignoring the government's social-distancing instructions and congregating in mosques to offer prayers.

Beyond Covid-19

While extremist actors are engaging with the Covid-19 outbreak directly and indirectly, their actions during this period have unfortunately not been limited to disinformation campaigns and propaganda activities. There continue to be large-scale terrorist attacks carried out by extremist groups in a number of countries. The Tony Blair Institute is continuing to follow non-Covid-19 extremist activities and developments from around the world, as well as state and non-state responses. Some of the significant recent developments observed include:

Puntland Governor Killed in Al-Shabaab Attack. A governor in Somalia's Puntland was killed on 29 March in a suicide attack claimed by al-Shabaab.[24] Abdisalan Hassan Hersi, governor of the Nugaal region, was killed after a militant ran at the vehicle he was travelling in before detonating his vest. Two days later, al-Shabaab executed six men[25] accused of spying for the Somali intelligence agencies. Al-Shabaab also continued its offensive in Kenya's north-eastern and coastal territories, including an attack on Kenyan forces[26] near the H-Young Construction Camp in Milhoi, Lamu on 21 March. This is the second attempt by the militants to attack the camp in 2020.

Taliban Targets Afghan Forces Despite Peace Efforts. Violence continued in Afghanistan as the peace effort brokered by the United States struggles to gain momentum. On 29 March, at least 28 members of the Afghan security forces were killed after clashes with Taliban[27] insurgents in Takhar, Zabul, Helmand and Baghlan. Although the Taliban has not announced a spring offensive for the first time since it was launched in 2016, militants have not agreed to a ceasefire with government forces and fighting has not ended.

25 Killed in Kabul Gurdwara Attack. A militant opened fire at a Sikh Gurdwara[28] in Kabul on 25 March, killing 25 worshippers and injuring several others. ISIS in Khorasan Province (IS-KP) claimed responsibility for the attack, releasing a statement that said it was "revenge for the Muslims in Kashmir". IS-KP has attacked minority religious communities in the past, including in 2018 when a suicide bomber targeted a convoy carrying Hindus and Sikhs.

ISIS Prisoners Escape Following Riot. ISIS militants imprisoned in north-east Syria started a riot on 29 March, according to Syrian Kurdish officials. The prisoners fought guards for control of the facility[29], with several prisoners managing to escape. The prison was believed to house mostly foreign ISIS militants. Officials have claimed that there is no link between the riot and fears of coronavirus spreading.

ISIS Militants Attack Security Forces in Mozambique. On 25 March, ISIS claimed responsibility for an attack in northern Mozambique[30] near the site of gas projects worth $60 billion. Militants attacked several army and police barracks in the town of Mocimboa da Praia, which left a "trail of destruction and dead bodies" according to government spokesman Filimao Suaze. Mozambique's northern territory of Cabo Delgado continues to suffer at the hands of Islamist extremists including Ansar al-Sunna and, more recently, ISIS.

ISWAP Continues Cross-Border Activities Around Lake Chad Basin. Images released by ISIS's West Africa Province (ISWAP) showed proselytisation and missionary activities being carried out by the group in the Lake Chad Basin region. The images showed fighters and supporters receiving group educational sessions, as well as two individuals purportedly converting to Islam. The group continues to engage in cross-border activities in the region as governments begin to enforce lockdown measures.

JNIM Vows to Extend Operations Across Africa. Mali-based al-Qaeda affiliate Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM), which operates across the Sahel region, released a statement detailing recent attacks carried out by the group in Mali and Burkina Faso. According to the group's statement, JNIM is committed to uprooting borders and removing barriers to achieve the core goal of reaching Jerusalem, from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger in the west of Africa to Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia on the east of the continent.

Shia Militia Tells Iraqi Forces to Leave US Bases. The recently formed Iranian-backed Shia militia in Iraq, Usbat al-Thairen, released a statement[31] asserting that it was planning to carry out a rocket attack targeting senior US commanders at the al-Asad airbase, but that this was not carried out due to the presence of Iraqi troops at the facility. The militia has called on Iraqi forces to leave all bases with a US presence. The announcement came as Iran-US tensions continued to rise in Iraq, following a Kataib Hizbullah[32] rocket attack on 11 March, which killed two US troops and a British soldier.

Soleimani Successor Travels to Baghdad. On Monday 30 March, Esmail Ghaani, the recently appointed commander of the IRGC's Quds Force and Qassim Soleimani's successor, made a surprise visit[33] to the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, to meet with senior government officials. The unannounced trip was part of efforts to lobby against a prime ministerial candidate opposed by Iraqi political factions with close ties to Tehran.

US Designates White Supremacist as Foreign Terrorist Organisation. The United States has designated[34] an ultranationalist, white-supremacist group based in Russia as a foreign terrorist group, marking the first time that such a designation has been applied to a far-right entity. The Russian Imperial Movement has recruited fighters for the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and has collaborated with neo-Nazi organisations in Scandinavian countries. Nathan Sales, the US State Department's counter-terrorism coordinator, said the move illustrated how seriously the administration takes the threat from white-supremacist terrorism.

YouTube Cracks Down on 5G Conspiracy Theories. YouTube will restrict[35] the spread of videos pushing conspiracy theories linking 5G communication networks to the spread of Covid-19, after a number of recent attacks on phone masts. While conspiracy theories do not fall under the list of prohibited content covered in YouTube's guidelines, the company announced on 6 April that it will suppress and demonetise such "borderline content".

Endnotes

1   Al Naba, Issue 227

2   Sawt al-Hind, Issue 2

3   Iba, Issue 92

4   Accessed via https://jihadology.net/

5   Javan News; Times of Israel: https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-chief-threatens-israel-over-ventilators-for-coronavirus-patients/

6   https://www.philstar.com/nation/2020/03/25/2003379/doctor-rescued-after-being-held-captive-abu-sayyaf-sulu

7   https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-expels-medical-team-sent-by-doctors-without-borders-to-fight-coronavirus/30505858.html

8   https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1399/01/06/2230152

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10   https://time.com/5804706/iran-coronavirus/

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13   https://www.dw.com/fa-ir/a-52901785

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15   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4qdZ9LU75U

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24   https://www.thedefensepost.com/2020/03/30/somalia-puntland-governor-al-shabaab-suicide-attack/

25   https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-31/al-shabaab-says-it-executed-six-people-in-somalia-for-spying

26   https://africa.cgtn.com/2020/03/22/kenyan-soldiers-foil-al-shabaab-attack-on-construction-camp/

27   https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2020/03/30/world/asia/30reuters-afghanistan-taliban-attacks.html

28   https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/the-islamic-states-increasing-focus-on-india/

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30   https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/2198206/isis-claims-attack-killed-dozens-mozambique

31   https://twitter.com/KasraAarabi/status/1244921018642092032

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33   https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/8ceb604e-90a8-44cc-8fac-a2b9b90a1a9a

34   https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/us/politics/terrorist-label-white-supremacy-Russian-Imperial-Movement.html

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As the geopolitical landscape adjusts to Covid-19, the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change will continue to provide analysis on how extremist groups and movements respond globally.

To learn more about the Insitute's work and how we are supporting governments in responding to Covid-19, please visit Institute.Global.