

# Terrorism and Coronavirus: Hyperbole, Idealism, and Ignorance

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Brief Analysis

Marked variously by idealism, hyperbole, factionalism, and ignorance, Islamist **extremist and terrorist groups** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-making-of-female-extremism>)' views of the coronavirus pandemic, along with their preparations to exploit it on a global scale, boil down to an attempt to create more propaganda and gain new recruits. In certain cases, leaders are prioritizing conducting of terrorist operations or claiming political space. However, two major terrorist groups—ISIS and Al-Qaeda—are taking different tacks in their approach to what it presents as the 'lessons learned' from the virus. While both agree that the virus is a punishment from God, the question of leveraging conspiracy theories or mourning the threat of the pandemic marks a split between the **two groups' messaging**.

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/branding-terrorism>

After the repeated defeats **ISIS has sustained in Syria and Iraq**

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/disentangling-the-legacies-of-isis>, which have been

followed by floundering within the organization after the killing of its leader, **Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi**

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/ideology-and-education-in-baghdadis-caliphate>, the

current global focus on the coronavirus pandemic has been beneficial for the terrorist organization. ISIS—never completely defeated though pushed underground in most areas—has also seen the pandemic as an opportunity to exploit through its propaganda to attract attention.

From the outset, ISIS publications have demonstrated an interest in the spread of coronavirus and the resulting developments. In an editorial in its newspaper *Al-Naba*, ISIS sent a message to its members that their all-out war against their enemies would continue even during the global pandemic. The organization also reported that since the national and international security systems formed to combat ISIS were taking a step back amid the pandemic's spread, the organization must maximize its benefit from those circumstances. Indeed, the spread of coronavirus prompted the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS to announce on March 20 that it would withdraw and reposition some of its forces in Iraq due to concern about the coronavirus outbreak.

ISIS has also promoted an explanation for the virus in line with their apocalyptic narratives; ISIS publications have

characterized the coronavirus pandemic as a manifestation of God's wrath. In Issue 220 of its newspaper, the organization published an article bearing Quran verse 85:12—"Indeed, the vengeance of your Lord is severe"—and a headline implying that the pandemic is God's punishment for anyone who goes against their interpretation of the Prophet and his teachings. The article also cited the pandemic's initial spread in China as divine punishment for China's persecution of Uighur Muslims. Ironically, the presentation of the virus as divine wrath has negated another conspiracy theory that the virus was intentionally designed as biological warfare—ISIS rejected this idea in its editorial of *Al-Naba* Issue 227.

In the following issue, ISIS developed the 'divine wrath' theory further by publishing an editorial with the headline "The Crusaders' Worst Nightmare." This article discussed the economic losses caused by the curfews and stay-home orders in Western countries. The editorial stressed that Western "Crusader" countries are hoping that followers of ISIS and similar organizations will stop conducting operations targeting them or their allies abroad during this period. The organization also called for the release of the ISIS prisoners sitting abandoned in the idolaters' prisons and degradation camps.

ISIS is not just talking about the opportunities of the coronavirus. The terrorist group has begun launching more frequent attacks in an attempt to re-expand its influence, focusing especially on disputed territories in Iraq. Two Peshmerga fighters were killed and another wounded in an ISIS attack on the town of Kolajo in the Kurdistan region on March 7. Then, on March 9, ISIS targeted Popular Mobilization Forces stationed near Haliwa's military airport west of Tuz Khurmatu, killing two PMF troops and injuring three others. In *Al-Naba* on April 9, ISIS also claimed responsibility for launching 29 separate attacks in Iraq in the previous eight days, as well as 11 attacks in Syria during the same period. That same day, ISIS launched a massive campaign against the town of Al-Sukhnah in eastern Syria's Homs Governorate, killing 32 Syrian soldiers and 26 ISIS fighters.

Due to the historical importance of Iraq and Syria as former ISIS strongholds, ISIS will likely seek to grow its insurgent capabilities in these countries. However, the downsizing of the international forces and the possibility of renewed ideological and political conflicts in Iraq presents an opportunity for ISIS to focus specifically on restoring its position in Iraq. The organization may also seek to exploit the current hostile and [xenophobic rhetoric among right-wing extremists in in the West \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/islamophobia-what-isis-really-wants\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/islamophobia-what-isis-really-wants) and therefore expand its terrorist capabilities and reach. However, the mandatory lockdowns and the disappearance of public gatherings in many Western cities due to the spread of Coronavirus may render such operations ineffective and limit its impact.

In contrast to the rhetoric of ISIS, [Al-Qaeda has taken a different tack \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/aqap-in-south-yemen-past-and-present\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/aqap-in-south-yemen-past-and-present) in its attempt to take advantage of the pandemic. The terrorist group's messaging has turned to religious rhetoric aimed at gaining Muslims' sympathies in adopting a message of communal support. The organization issued a statement headlined "How Humanity Can Escape the Belly of the Whale: Recommendations and Revelations About the Coronavirus Pandemic." Al-Qaeda's opportunistic rhetoric acknowledged the challenges for Muslims during this period while pointing toward their vision of a post-coronavirus phase.

Unlike its counterpart ISIS, Al-Qaeda rhetoric has not called on its followers to carry out terrorist operations during this period. Instead, it has taken to portraying its followers' circumstances as the current circumstances of all peoples, emphasizing the shared experiences of bad economic conditions and the inability to pray in mosques or make the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages. As a response, Al-Qaeda is calling upon businessmen to donate to the organization and its followers.

However, like ISIS, the Al-Qaeda rhetoric also defines coronavirus as a result of God's wrath and calls for Western countries to turn to Islam in response. It justifies this argument by, for example, asserting that the economic impacts

of global shut-downs are the result of permitting usury, and suggesting that the current countermeasures are the very actions called for by the Prophet long before the pandemic.

Al-Qaeda's stance—particularly in contrast with that of ISIS—can be read from two angles. First, the organization has no real capacity at this time to make an impact or conduct operations commensurate with the size of the organization's previous operations in the West. The second is that the group is trying to draw as many sympathizers as possible during this period by airing a message of tolerance in the face of hate speech by some extremist right-wing groups, thus playing off of these groups to facilitate recruitment. The latter interpretation can be seen as an attempt to sustain bin Laden's pre-9/11 approach, which was focused primarily on garnering sympathy among potential recruits and local communities—a tactic essentially made irrelevant when Al-Qaeda carried out the September 11 attacks.

And while the two terrorist groups in question have adopted different messaging strategies, both groups are clearly operating according to the principle of “exploiting circumstances.” This principle is contingent on balancing the organization's ideas and the segment of society it addresses and seeks to recruit. In other words, these organizations' exploitation of circumstances is inextricably linked to the rule of balancing interests. There are some terrorists prioritizing gaining sympathizers with the belief that they can be won by avoiding terrorist operations and adopting idealist rhetoric. This is evident in Al-Qaeda's public stance, its efforts to obtain funding, and its emphasis that it is an organization aiming to propagate Islam rather than attacks per se. Then there are those who believe that this unprecedented time is an opportunity to attack prisons, release followers, and return to the path of jihad—as is ISIS's position. Either way, these efforts to take advantage of the pandemic to build strength are a serious potential consequence of the need to respond to coronavirus and these groups cannot be ignored during this crucial time.

Al-Qaeda's idealist discourse, which seeks to attract more recruits and sympathizers, must be challenged by a parallel and solid media discourse that exposes the contradictions between the ideals expressed in the organization's statements and their actions on the ground. For example, Al Qaeda's statements have not highlighted the position of its branches in other countries, which have adopted a violent discourse contrary to the mainstream discourse. The most prominent example of this was the announcement by the Somali Mujahideen Youth Movement (MYM) to resume its operations and even intensify its attacks. Thus, effective confrontation of Al Qaeda's rhetoric entails a coherent media discourse that discredits the organization's false idealist rhetoric that aims to recruiting more members.

While the international community is focused on addressing the coronavirus outbreak, the countries of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS must maintain their presence in the areas where ISIS is rebounding as much as is possible. International stakeholders should continue to provide military, intelligence, and logistical assistance to military forces and local governments that played a key role in defeating ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Likewise, adversaries such as the United States and Iran that share common interests in eradicating extremism, should put their differences aside and act swiftly to prevent a resurgence. Otherwise, those organizations may be able to reconstitute its ranks and exploit the current crisis to attract countless volunteers, especially amid the economic crisis the world will undergo in the period ahead as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. ❖

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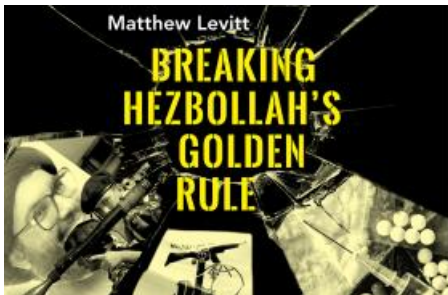
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