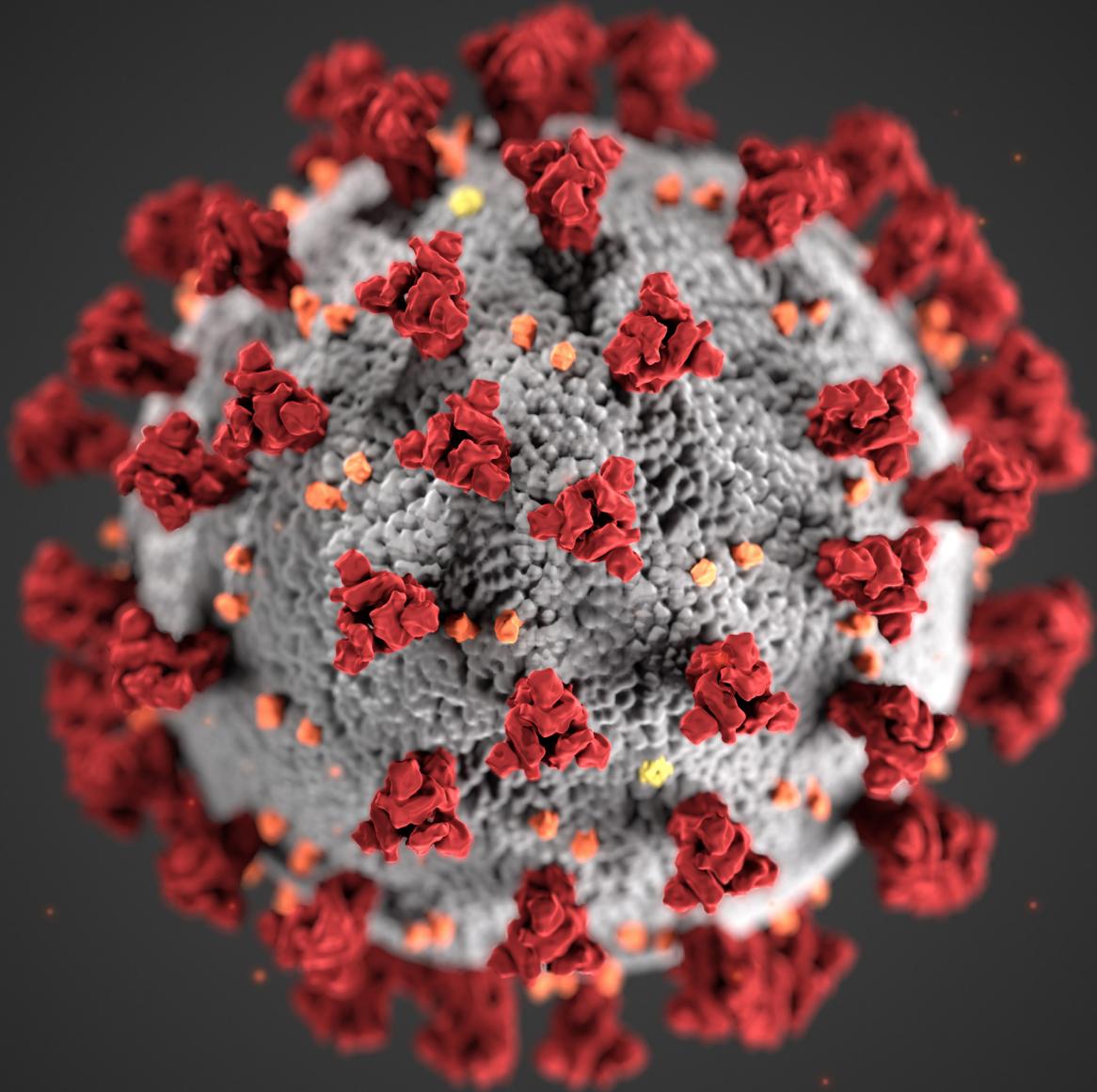




COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

# CTCSENTINEL

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SPECIAL ISSUE

## COVID-19 & Counterterrorism

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE

**Audrey Cronin,  
Michael Nagata,  
Magnus Ranstorp,  
Ali Soufan, and  
Juan Zarate**

on the challenges ahead

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## FROM THE EDITOR

COVID-19 is arguably the biggest crisis the planet has faced since the Second World War and will likely have significant impacts on international security in ways which can and cannot be anticipated. For this special issue on COVID-19 and counterterrorism, we convened five of the best and brightest thinkers in our field for a virtual roundtable on the challenges ahead. In the words of Magnus Ranstorp, "COVID-19 and extremism are the perfect storm." According to another of the panelists, Lieutenant General (Ret) Michael Nagata, "the time has come to acknowledge the stark fact that despite enormous expenditures of blood/treasure to 'kill, capture, arrest' our way to strategic counterterrorism success, there are more terrorists globally today than on 9/11, and COVID-19 will probably lead to the creation of more." Audrey Kurth Cronin put it this way: "COVID-19 is a boost to non-status quo actors of every type. Reactions to the pandemic—or more specifically, reactions to governments' inability to respond to it effectively—are setting off many types of political violence, including riots, hate crimes, inter-communal tensions, and the rise of criminal governance. Terrorism is just one element of the growing political instability as people find themselves suffering economically, unable to recreate their pre-COVID lives." The roundtable identified bioterrorism as a particular concern moving forward, with Juan Zarate noting that "the severity and extreme disruption of a novel coronavirus will likely spur the imagination of the most creative and dangerous groups and individuals to reconsider bioterrorist attacks." Ali Soufan warned that "although the barriers to entry for terrorists to get their hands on bio weapons remain high, they are gradually being lowered due to technological advances and the democratization of science."

The special issue also features five articles. Audrey Alexander examines the security threat COVID-19 poses to the northern Syria detention camps holding Islamic State members, drawing on a wide range of source materials, including recent interviews she conducted with General Mazloum Abdi, the top commander of the SDF, and former U.S. CENTCOM Commander Joseph Votel. Chelsea Daymon and Meili Criezis untangle the pandemic narratives spun by Islamic State supporters online. Christopher Hockey and Michael Jones assess al-Shabaab's response to the spread of COVID-19 in Somalia. Mark Dubowitz and Saeed Ghasseminejad document how the Iranian regime has spread disinformation relating to the pandemic. Finally, Nikita Malik discusses the overlaps between pandemic preparedness and countering terrorism from a U.K. perspective.

Paul Cruickshank, *Editor in Chief*

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Cover: COVID-19 coronavirus molecule, March 24, 2020. (CDC/API/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images)

# A View from the CT Foxhole: A Virtual Roundtable on COVID-19 and Counterterrorism with Audrey Kurth Cronin, Lieutenant General (Ret) Michael Nagata, Magnus Ranstorp, Ali Soufan, and Juan Zarate

By Paul Cruickshank and Don Rassler

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*Magnus Ranstorp is the Research Director at the Centre for Asymmetric Threat Studies at the Swedish Defense University and Special Adviser at the European Union Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN), a practitioner-led network of 7,000 practitioners and policymakers working on CVE issues across the European Union. His research over the last three decades has focused on Hezbollah, al-Qa`ida, and the Islamic State. He previously developed the world-renowned Centre for the Study of Terrorism & Political Violence at the University of St. Andrews. Follow @MagnusRanstorp*

*Ali Soufan is the chief executive officer of the Soufan Group. As an FBI special agent, he served on the frontline against al-Qa`ida and became known as a top counterterrorism operative and interrogator. His most recent book, Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of Bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State, was published in 2017. He is the author of several feature articles for CTC Sentinel, including the authoritative profile of deceased IRGC-Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani. Follow @Ali\_H\_Soufan*

*Juan Zarate is a senior fellow at the Combating Terrorism Center. He served as the Deputy Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor for Combating Terrorism from 2005 to 2009, and was responsible for developing and implementing the U.S. government's counterterrorism strategy and policies related to transnational security threats. Mr. Zarate was the first-ever*

*Assistant Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes where he led domestic and international efforts to attack terrorist financing and leverage Treasury powers in national security. He is the global co-managing partner and chief strategy officer for K2 Intelligence/Financial Integrity Network, the Chairman of the Center on Economic and Financial Power (CEFP) at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, and a senior national security analyst for NBC News. Follow @JCZarate1*

*Editor's note: The virtual roundtable was conducted over email between mid-May and mid-June 2020 and was lightly edited.*

**CTC: COVID-19 has been described as a generation-defining moment, with a scale and impact across various areas (economics, travel, personal interactions) even more profound than 9/11. It has also been suggested that "Covid will permanently change the way every generation lives."<sup>1</sup> As you think about COVID-19 and look toward the near-term future, what do you see as the initial implications for the issues of terrorism and counterterrorism?**

**Cronin:** COVID-19 is a boost to non-status quo actors of every type. Reactions to the pandemic—or more specifically, reactions to governments' inability to respond to it effectively—are setting off many types of political violence, including riots, hate crimes, intercommunal tensions, and the rise of criminal governance. Terrorism is just one element of the growing political instability as people find themselves suffering economically, unable to recreate their pre-COVID lives.

At the same time, traditional forces of order such as navies, armies, police forces, and even border guards are struggling to execute their missions as they face exposure, quarantine, contagion, and infection. This affects the whole pipeline of training, education, and deployment of forces. Skills atrophy, and counterterrorism units miss opportunities to gather key intelligence and gradually tamp down the threat, as in the Sahel, Afghanistan, or Iraq.

Meanwhile, economic and political strengthening of a range of non-state actors is well in train, as people look for scapegoats and alternative sources of economic support. Criminal organizations are investing their gambling- and drug-driven cash into distressed businesses, gradually taking them over. The Afghan Taliban, the Italian mafia, and MS-13 have all gotten into the public health business. Terrorists and criminals are siphoning off government relief funding, online and in person.

And the pandemic is seen as proof of whatever ideology terrorist groups spouted before it. Right-wing groups incite general chaos by deliberately spreading the virus or targeting Chinese, immigrants, Jews, Muslims, Blacks, or others. Islamist groups argue that COVID-19 proves the world is evil and must return to fundamentalist precepts. Name your group and the basic message is "I



*Audrey Kurth Cronin*

told you so.”

The one dimension where the world has joined together is accelerated dependence upon digital technologies—a development with great promise alongside risk of growing polarization and invasion of privacy. On the positive side, tech companies like Google and Apple are developing creative solutions like the contact tracing API (application program interface) they rolled out [this spring].<sup>2</sup> The South African government uses a WhatsApp chatbot to dispel COVID-19 myths.<sup>3</sup> The London-based artificial intelligence startup BenevolentAI scanned millions of scientific documents and identified a promising drug, Baricitinib, now in U.K. clinical trials.<sup>4</sup> Digital solutions could help shorten the pandemic and mitigate its effects, disproving dystopian narratives.

On the negative side, digital media are increasing political divisions in society and providing new attack vectors. Social media increases anxiety and anger, through disinformation, bogus cures, and greater access and susceptibility to fringe messages. Contact-tracing apps play into American right-wing group paranoia about federal government interference.<sup>5</sup> Conspiracy theories about 5G technology spreading COVID-19 have sparked more than 50 arson attacks on U.K. cell phone towers.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, terrorist groups have shown interest in technologies such as armed UAVs, 3D-printed weapons, facial recognition tools, and a wide range of internet-connected devices. Now they have the time and space to develop new skills.

As often happens in history, the terrorist threat will likely be gradually overshadowed by bigger problems as economies fail and we face the prospect of a global depression. The most effective counterterrorism at the moment is to support robust public health efforts to rapidly end the pandemic, and plan how to steadily restore order and economic viability as it wanes.

**Nagata:** Mankind’s record in predicting the long-term effects of

**“The pandemic is seen as proof of whatever ideology terrorist groups spouted before it. [...] Name your group and the basic message is ‘I told you so.’”**

**- Audrey Kurth Cronin**

disaster, whether man-made or naturally occurring, is checked at best. One example was the once-popular designation of World War I as the “war to end all wars.” Of the many strategic consequences of that catastrophe, an end-to-war was not among them.

With this in mind, I nonetheless believe the aftermath of today’s pandemic will be characterized by terrorism finding a more hospitable global environment for recruitment, growth, and action than before.

1. If one believes, as I do, that terrorism flourishes best in arenas where significant mistrust exists or is growing between a government and its population, we should anticipate that these countries are now more vulnerable to the growth of terrorism than previously. Popular dissatisfaction with governmental pandemic performance, at national, state, provincial, and community levels, is common across the globe. Unhappily, this includes the United States, and we had already witnessed a substantial increase in domestic terrorism for many years prior to COVID-19.

2. Some of the international community’s reaction to COVID-19 appears to have also strengthened fear and mistrust among and between both national and ethnic populations in locations around the world. One example has been anti-Chinese backlash, even against ethnic Chinese in their diaspora who were neither born nor raised in China. Another has been the hijacking by unscrupulous actors of obviously prudent travel bans as validation of the need to ‘keep away those not like us.’ Trends like these create the impression of deliberate governmental or societal prejudice/discrimination and constitute a nutrient-rich breeding ground for terrorism.

3. Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, people in many parts of the world found they were able to rely more on the internet, their mobile devices, and privately owned or commercially available services and information than they could their own government’s services or information. This pandemic-based experience only serves to compound the already growing popular belief that government-provided services and information are of decreasing utility and importance in daily life. Terrorists can and will use this weakening “reliance” by populations on their governments for strategic advantage.

4. The global economic damage created by COVID-19 will also likely add nutrients for cultivating terrorism. As people suffer prolonged shortages of both supplies and services because of struggling economies, terrorists can and likely will capitalize on their miseries, psychological and emotional trauma, and frustrations in the manner that they always have and offer them salvation through taking up the sword. Not everyone will heed such a call, but many new adherents likely will.

Accordingly, the time has come to acknowledge the stark fact that despite enormous expenditures of blood/treasure to “kill, capture, arrest” our way to strategic counterterrorism success, there are more terrorists globally today than on 9/11, and COVID-19 will

a Editor’s note: One survey suggested most Americans would not download a contact-tracing app because of privacy concerns. Chandra Steele, “Most Americans Reject COVID-19 Contact-Tracing Apps,” *PC Mag*, June 18, 2020.

probably lead to the creation of more. Certainly, some threats will always require the employment of physical force. However, the world must become more serious about *preventing* the creation of terrorists, though this will require a large and sustained international change in how we resource and implement counterterrorism globally. Without such a shift in emphasis, undoing the terrorism-related consequences that are now flowing from the pandemic will be far too difficult.

**Ranstorp:** COVID-19 and extremism are the perfect storm. Salafi-jihadists have exploited the COVID-19 crisis for multiple purposes and see it occurring within a larger eschatological framework as divine punishment against infidels and destroying the West's societal infrastructure and economy. ISIS has appealed to sympathizers to commit terror against the West and weak states to amplify the chaos. Vulnerability and social distancing may alter terrorist targeting preferences to new sites such as grocery stores and hospitals. COVID-19 is viewed as an opportunity by ISIS in its intense efforts to liberate prisoners held in Syria, Iraq, and other detention facilities. In certain areas, jihadist groups will try to expand their operational footprint and seize territory while their enemies are distracted by dealing with COVID-19. Within the West, jihadi extremists have ought to use the social isolation to target and prey on new recruits and to flood social media with propaganda to sympathizers. Violent extremists are also infiltrating gaming platforms to find new recruits.

Far-right extremists have seized on the COVID-19 crisis, trying to reinforce the sense of imminent state collapse and exploit feelings of fear, suspicion, and uncertainty within populations. Far-right extremists are stepping into the void as community organizers and service providers for local residents. Simultaneously, they are projecting hate, racism, and conspiracy theories about the origins and purpose of COVID-19, blaming particular ethnic or minority groups for the virus. In particular, many right-wing extremists are virulently anti-Semitic and single out COVID-19 as a Jewish-led global conspiracy to create a new world order. This will likely accelerate an increase in digital hate and physical attacks against Jewish targets. Some may even try to mass spread the virus deliberately to their enemies through disguised means. At the same time, right-wing extremists are pointing to the dangers of lockdown and technological surveillance to detect and control the pandemic as proof that governments are deliberately trying to take away their rights through increased control and suppression.

Research has shown that every financial crash over the last 130 years was followed by increased support for extreme right-wing rhetoric. One of the major fallouts from COVID-19 is the loss of millions of jobs, which creates a perfect storm of fear, uncertainty, and anger that far-right extremists will likely be quick to further exploit for recruitment. Extremists alongside organized crime groups are also cashing-in on government support to businesses and in the welfare sector. In a worse-case scenario, accelerationist<sup>b</sup> far-

right extremists may use violence to try to cause social collapse. In the rebuilding of society, these accelerationists advocate a race war. Within the E.U., a possible new refugee crisis from Syria and Turkey would greatly exacerbate the economic fallout from the pandemic and accelerate far-right populism.

The rise of the extreme far right will also likely be accompanied by targeted financial support from foreign governments that seek to capitalize on the COVID-19 situation to sow discord and split between the E.U. countries. Disinformation campaigns and the promotion of conspiracy theories and digital hate by these groups and particularly Russian coordination create further polarization between and within Western societies. Transnational linkages between extreme far-right and the alt-right will likely further increase and act in lockstep.

The COVID-19 pandemic is undermining international efforts to counter ISIS and other jihadist groups. This will likely result in a surge in terrorist attacks locally and internationally. It has also the potential to weaken internal security with rising discontent. It is likely to result in rising inequality, deep social tensions, and polarization conditional on how long this global pandemic will last. Within E.U. states, COVID-19 lockdowns have weakened signal detection of threats, which can be seen by the dramatic drop in violent extremism referrals in the United Kingdom and other states.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, a large number of terrorist convicts are due to be released across E.U. states over the next two years.

The effects of COVID-19 are far-reaching and will cascade across several interlocking dimensions for terrorism and counterterrorism over many years. In the developing world, it is likely millions more children will fall into extreme poverty and UNESCO warns that over 60 percent of the world's students are affected by school closures.<sup>7</sup> This will likely result in increased vulnerability of youth to become radicalized. For counterterrorism, the effects of COVID-19 will likely be mixed. Social distancing and isolation will likely increase the pool of radicalized youth who are interconnected. Surveillance technologies applied to the health sector will likely expand and increase monitoring of general movement in the West. Efforts to curb disinformation risk limiting freedom of expression in some developing states. Human rights gains in less democratic states risk reversal. Censorship of already-curtailed media will likely increase in the developing world. Closure of borders and restriction of travel will likely lead to an increased effort in human trafficking of migrants. Economic stress may lead to reduction on funding international counterterrorism efforts and measures preventing violent extremism.

For Europe, the COVID-19 crisis may herald opportunities to fuse security and public health responses. It is likely that government biosecurity centers will be modeled after terrorism intelligence fusion centers such as JTAC and NCTC,<sup>c</sup> which fuses the combined efforts across different agencies.

**Soufan:** This is the first time in our generation that the world is responding to a global crisis without the United States at the helm. The convergence of the coronavirus pandemic, a lack of global leadership, and the proliferation of disinformation is changing the glob-

b Editor's note: According to the Anti-Defamation League, "Accelerationism is a term white supremacists have assigned to their desire to hasten the collapse of society as we know it. The term is widely used by those on the fringes of the movement, who employ it openly and enthusiastically on mainstream platforms, as well as in the shadows of private, encrypted chat rooms." "White Supremacists Embrace 'Accelerationism,'" ADL, April 16, 2019.

c Editor's note: The Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) is based in MI5's headquarters in London. The U.S. National Counterterrorism Center leads and integrates U.S. counter-terrorism efforts.

al terrorism landscape. The combination of socio-economic, health, and political factors—including a looming recession and pre-existing societal grievances around the world and the rise of China—means entities will likely continue to argue that Western-style democracy is no longer good nor stable enough to underpin the world order. This argument will affect the United States' ability to address major global challenges, including terrorism. People around the world will still look for simple answers that inspire 'hope' and things to believe in as this vacuum widens, which provides a cognitive opening for extremist narratives to take footing.

As governments across the world are grappling with the societal, economic, and political consequences of the pandemic, terrorist organizations are seizing opportunities through their "health-jihad." Terrorist groups, including the Taliban, Hezbollah, and al-Shabaab, are providing services in lieu of governments, which allows militants to acquire and consolidate political legitimacy.<sup>8</sup> Many of these groups view their struggle through a zero-sum lens—where the government is unable or unwilling to respond, these groups can do so, especially since many have specific units dedicated to charity, disaster relief, and humanitarian assistance. Moreover, oil shocks and economic disagreements among Russia, Saudi Arabia, and other major oil producing countries and economic powers will likely only serve to exacerbate the economic fallout of the COVID-19 crisis. Wealthier countries in the MENA region will likely have more difficulty providing aid to their poorer neighbors, who are already in dire need of economic supports. Moreover, fewer employment opportunities for the MENA region's large youth population coupled with protests that persist due to deep political and socio-economic grievances are likely to add fuel to pre-existing extremist narratives in the Middle East and beyond.

In recent months, the Islamic State has been more active in both Iraq and Syria, targeting a mixture of civilians, security forces, and in Iraq, government-affiliated militias. There are also grave concerns over the state of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) detention facilities, given previous prison-break attempts.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, COVID-19 has directly opened up new opportunities for the Islamic State to attack; the U.S.-led global coalition's troops have drawn down following the suspension of training, U.S. troops are consolidating bases, and local security forces are otherwise preoccupied or drawn back to urban areas. While deteriorating political and military conditions in Iraq pre-date the spread of the coronavirus, the pandemic has significantly compounded the security challenges Baghdad faces.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also provided fertile ground for the disinformation-terrorism nexus to take root. With the increased time people are spending online coupled with rampant modern disinformation campaigns spread by state and non-state actors alike, terrorist organizations have increased opportunities to peddle hate, recruit, and promote acts of violence. For example, white supremacists have put forth the idea that COVID-19 is a result of foreigners, Jews, immigrants, and other minorities. U.S. anti-government extremists have seized on the government's stay-at-home orders to stockpile their arsenals and lament the growing role of local, state, and federal agencies in the everyday lives of citizens. Unsurprisingly, adversarial states including China and Russia have piggybacked on these recent developments and have amplified divisive and contradictory messages through sophisticated disinformation campaigns. These state-sponsored disinformation campaigns will likely continue to amplify the fringe and extreme in society, directly or indirectly contributing to extremist narratives and acts.

It is possible that when law enforcement, terrorism analysts, and researchers look back at 2020, it will be a watershed moment in recruitment for a range of extremist non-state actors, chief among them white supremacy extremists.

For the United States, the abdication of global leadership and abandoning of our values will only serve to strengthen the appeal of our traditional and non-state adversaries, including terrorist organizations—both at home and abroad. The United States desperately needs to take concrete steps to repair the country's image globally, which has been deteriorating for the last two decades. With a renewed focus on soft power, diplomacy, and support for multilateral institutions, the United States has the potential to rebound from this catastrophe and restore itself to a position of global leadership, including most notably in the fight against the evolving global terrorism threat we face.

**Zarate:** The COVID-19 crisis presents core challenges to the counterterrorism community globally, beyond the stress of disrupted operations, distracted partners, and diminished resources. The greatest danger lies in the demonstration effect of all that the COVID-19 crisis reveals, amplifies, and enables.

As with any crisis, terrorist groups and networks will take advantage of the weaknesses in governments' overwhelmed capabilities and find the seams in the system, whether from weakened responses, failed international cooperation, or a diminished focus on terrorist operations. The more sophisticated groups and movements with global aspirations will undoubtedly also take long-term lessons from the crisis.

The severity and extreme disruption of a novel coronavirus will likely spur the imagination of the most creative and dangerous groups and individuals to reconsider bioterrorist attacks. The threat of a pathogen unleashed wantonly on the world—or worse yet, a genetically engineered bioweapon designed to maximize transmission and lethality—has always loomed large in the nightmares of every counterterrorism official. With the world now reeling simply from a novel coronavirus with a relatively low lethality rate, some extreme terrorist groups and rogue scientists willing to venture into apocalyptic fields might see this moment as a catalyst for exploring again the possibilities of bioterrorism. The Islamic State and al-Qa`ida have already touted the destructive effects of the virus on the West, and white supremacist groups have called for their adherents to use the virus in spray bottles to infect specific targets.<sup>10</sup>

This is also a moment in which terrorist groups are likely dissecting the weaknesses of national defenses and counterterrorism systems. Faltering responses to the crisis have exposed weak health security infrastructure; failures in bio-defense detection and prevention systems, protocols, and medical supplies; and an overall lack of international coordination. Terrorists hoping to weaken economies, shake confidence in institutions, and create social and political chaos have seen all of this come to pass in just a few months of this virus racing across the globe.

Importantly, this is also a moment of fear, isolation, and tribalism, with the risk that extremists' ranks will be strengthened, and the extremist ecosystem reinforced in ways we have yet to understand. Extremists of all stripes are using this as a moment to drive attraction to their ideologies—stoking fear of the other. The European Union's counterterrorism chief has noted that this crisis would exacerbate extremism on both the right and the left, with people driven to their respective ideological corners during this period.<sup>11</sup>



*Lieutenant General (Ret) Michael Nagata*

The prowess of extremist groups to recruit online and to create digital or anonymous arenas for like-minded voices to congregate is only amplified in a period of physical distancing and social isolation. Furthermore, as fears and uncertainties are combined with a fertile ground for misinformation, extremists are likely to continue to stoke divisions within societies to drive membership and attraction to their ideologies.

The demonstration effects of this moment for terrorists with destructive, global ambitions represent one of the most dangerous externalities of this crisis. This then requires a deliberate focus on countering bioterrorism, as an element of a broader global response to this crisis. It further underscores the need for societies to counter the messaging of violent extremists, and to ensure that their citizens are not tempted by the siren call of division and terrorism. This is all hard to imagine while we are still dealing with an unfolding global pandemic and its aftermath, but we must.

**CTC:** As Juan Zarate just noted, “the demonstration effects of this moment for terrorists with destructive, global ambitions ... requires a deliberate focus on countering bioterrorism, as an element of a broader global response to this crisis.” In April 2020, Microsoft founder Bill Gates, amidst the current global public health crisis, warned that a bioterrorist attack involving a pathogen with a high death rate “is kind of the nightmare scenario” and the next big potential threat the world has not been paying sufficient attention to.<sup>12</sup>

As far as is publicly known, terrorist actors have never come close to having the capability to launch a catastrophic biological attack. But given the rapid advances in biotechnology (for example, gene editing), the increasing numbers of “DIY” bio-labs set up by amateurs and entrepreneurs, and the open-source nature of knowledge in the bio field,<sup>13</sup> to what extent does the counterterrorism community need to revisit the threat

**“The time has come to acknowledge the stark fact that despite enormous expenditures of blood/treasure to ‘kill, capture, arrest’ our way to strategic counterterrorism success, there are more terrorists globally today than on 9/11, and COVID-19 will probably lead to the creation of more.”**

**- Michael Nagata**

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**of a large-scale bioterror attack and how can the international community prevent such an attack from occurring, mitigate its impact, and build resilience?**

**Nagata:** The U.S. counterterrorism community has long held that the use of a biological agent of some kind for a major terrorist attack is not a matter of if, but when. While bioterrorism attacks have certainly happened, we should be grateful that attempts thus far to use substances like anthrax in the mail or ISIS’ adherents’ generally fruitless efforts at biological weaponization have proven to be more tactical nuisances or worries than actual strategic threats.

Yet this should give us only cold comfort. If one considers the interdependencies between human technological advances and the equally impressive progress that biological and health sciences have made, the future should be easy to predict. We should already conclude that the likelihood of a future terrorist using a highly potent, clandestinely produced, difficult to detect/identify/track, easily transportable and dispersible, and quite lethal biological weapon is rising significantly. If someone can 3D-print a firearm in their basement, or build a weaponized drone in their garage, why should anyone believe that a do-it-yourself bio lab cannot produce an effective biological weapon?

That said, we can also operationally assume that terrorists are likely to provide early warning by failing several times in the process, despite improved technologies or capabilities. A useful example is our understanding today, in hindsight, that the failed Twin Towers bombing in 1993 was in many ways a ‘learning laboratory’ leading to AQ’s spectacular strategic success in 2001. The question is whether the CT community can become far more capable of quickly and effectively intervening in the space that could exist between 1) terrorists’ initial bioweapon failure and 2) eventual and spectacular success, and thereby prevent that success?

Assuming the foregoing is reasonably accurate, we should confront the question of whether the U.S. counterterrorism community, our policymakers, congressional representatives, and the American people are informed and aware enough of the trajectory we are now on? I believe the answer is a resounding “no.” During my career as a CT operational practitioner, all the way through my final years as the senior CT strategist at NCTC, the amount of energy, focus, and resourcing devoted to bioterrorism is a small fraction of what is still given today to more conventional threats like car bombings, improvised physical attacks, and the like.

Of course, terrorists’ use of other new technologies like weap-

**“For the West’s counterterrorism efforts, the global pandemic and subsequent fallout will undoubtedly provide focus on biological agents, which will likely strengthen the overall detection capabilities, preparedness, and focus on the issue.”**

- Magnus Ranstorp

onized drones does today attract significant policymaker attention. However, the fact that the United States is still struggling to find strategic solutions to this weaponizing of rapidly developing aviation technology (ISIS first began attacking coalition troops with drones in 2014, six years ago) does not inspire confidence that we are seriously preparing to be much more agile and rapid in dealing with a future, highly sophisticated bioterrorist threat.

Like all things in life, we have choices to make about how prepared we wish to be. The question is, will we make them today before a disaster happens or be forced by catastrophe to make them tomorrow?

**Ranstorp:** The recognition of biological warfare agents as an effective weapon system can be traced back to antiquities when infected animals were sent or catapulted over fortress walls to weaken enemies. Similarly, the unfolding COVID-19 crisis will likely inspire some rogue states and terrorists as the pathway to follow to cause anarchy and chaos intended to weaken and destabilize their enemies. So what does the threat look like in theory? Extremely small amounts of deadly bacteria and viruses could be concealed, transported, and dispersed into a population. Emerging biotechnology could enable viruses and microbes to be weaponized through gene-editing and laboratory 3D-printing technology. Genetic modification could not only make the pathogen more resistant to medication and vaccines, but it could also boost transmission and virulence. Advances in drone technologies as a dispersal platform could make it an ultimate terrorist weapon. So why has it not happened before?

The most likely terrorist groups interested in such indiscriminate mass-casualty carnage are groups such as ISIS/AQ and neo-Nazi ‘accelerationists’ elements—groups that seek to destroy society through societal meltdown to rebuild it. Most other groups have more narrowly defined ideological agendas and a range of targets combined with limited ‘imagination’ and ‘talent’ within their ranks. Most terrorist groups also follow ‘the path of least resistance’ principle using low-cost, high-impact attack methods against symbolic targets. Their calculus is driven partly by enemy security measures, available weaponry, and technological-scientific talent. Most terrorist groups have limited biotechnology expertise and lack access to bacteria, viruses, and toxins or effective ways to handle and disperse these. Their calculus is also driven by other tactical trade-offs in terrorist tactics and targeting opportunities.

That is not to say that they have not given the idea of bioterrorism some serious thought. Some have even expended efforts to go down the bioterrorism route such as Aum Shinrikyo (anthrax, Q fe-



*Magnus Ranstorp*

ver bacteria, botulinum toxin, and Ebola virus). My understanding is that ISIS had some bio-terrorism expertise. Separately, in 2014, there was the reported discovery of ISIS files on how to weaponize the bubonic plague from infected animals.<sup>14</sup> Although its biological weapons program was extremely undeveloped and ineffective, ISIS is certainly a group to be concerned about in the future with regard to bioterrorism ambitions. A bioterrorism attack does not have to have global ambition but can serve limited destabilization purposes. As shown by their propaganda, ISIS has sought to capitalize on the current COVID-19 crisis by urging followers to strike at critical infrastructure in the West.<sup>15</sup>

For the West’s counterterrorism efforts, the global pandemic and subsequent fallout will undoubtedly provide focus on biological agents, which will likely strengthen the overall detection capabilities, preparedness, and focus on the issue. The focus needs also to be on securing high-priority organisms or toxins (Category A/B agents)<sup>16</sup> in national stockpiles and laboratories. Keeping tabs on biotechnology companies will likely be prioritized from a security perspective as well alongside more closely monitoring the insider threat. Equally the focus also needs to be on understanding how COVID-19 may have changed the calculus of use of bioterrorism by rogue states (using non-state actors as a delivery mechanism and plausible deniability). The risks to agriculture and food security are equally of increasing concern because of the risks of an economic meltdown and societal chaos. This crisis will invariably lead to counterterrorism efforts that will become more technologically integrated with global health efforts to detect and respond to these kinds of pandemics or catastrophic events in the future. The really good news is that one effort will strengthen the other.

The likelihood that terrorists will go down the route of trying to acquire the technical skills to isolate, synthesize, weaponize, and disperse bio-agents is still pretty small. There are still significant biotechnological barriers and more cost-effective means for these

groups. It will remain beyond the interest and capability of most terrorist groups. Nevertheless, new technology is emerging on multiple fronts, and it is essential to analyze how ideas spread within/between terrorist groups and the mechanisms of their operationalization in this new post-COVID-19 world.

**Cronin:** First, to address the threat of traditional biological attack: I agree with Magnus' conclusion that most terrorist groups do not have the technical skills to isolate, synthesize, weaponize, and disperse traditional bio-agents. The pandemic has not increased my fear of the kinds of classic bioterrorism threats (anthrax, ricin, botulin toxin, *Y. pestis* (plague), smallpox, etc.) or chemical weapons threats (VX, sarin, etc.) that we worried about throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. The traditional chem and bio threat remains about the same as it has been in recent decades.

We learned a lot from Aum Shinrikyo and the 2001 anthrax attacks. Both required sustained access to a lab, a lot of trial-and-error, and agents were still difficult to deliver effectively. Aerosolizing microbes (as they exist in nature) is not easy, and with people practicing social distancing now, it will be that much harder to kill large numbers of them. Plus, once correctly identified, there are antidotes or treatments for most known agents: those who took Cipro after the anthrax crisis already realize this. The insider threat is still the priority, and the best defense against most of these naturally occurring microbes is a robust public health system.

Let's also do a quick reality check of our current biological event: over 100,000 have died from COVID-19 in the United States, over 40,000 in the U.K., over 30,000 in Italy, about 30,000 in both Spain and France, over 40,000 in Brazil.<sup>d</sup> These figures are rounded, not exact, and the crisis continues—but we should keep in mind the magnitude.

A bioterrorist attack deploying COVID-19 might kill a dozen or more, who would die a few weeks later, with hard-to-prove attribution. The event would not accomplish the political effect that most terrorists seek. It is easier to carry out successful terrorist attacks when there is an element of surprise. Right now, people are a) physically inaccessible and b) highly sensitized to the bio threat. The COVID crisis has both an offensive and defensive element, and during social distancing, the two offset each other.

The question's main focus is on synthetic biology, however, which is extremely important because it is a new vector of innovation. With the ability to alter DNA through easily accessible tools like CRISPR/Cas9, individuals can change known bacterial or viral pathogens to make them more dangerous. Far more people have access to the means to do this, much more rapidly than ever before. Synthetic biology can also change human physiology in unpredictable ways, such as by engineering autoimmune disorders or making an operative immune to an agent's effects. Such sophisticated human experimentation is technically much harder to do but still a threat. There's a great deal more to this topic. The bottom line is that we need to work with international partners to develop adaptable treatment approaches and better tracking capabilities, such as via machine-learning through legally protected human databases. Synthetic biology is moving quickly, and we are way behind.

Meanwhile, the kinds of groups that counterterrorism experts mainly focus on—the jihadists, the neo-Nazis, the alt-right, for example—are not at the forefront of synthetic biology and have not, thus far, attracted highly capable scientists to help them. There, the threat is more about clusters of accessible new technologies, as General Nagata explained. For example, small UAVs can carry known agents to be dispersed from the air through small explosives. I have written a lot more about the evolution and interaction of newly democratized technologies, including autonomous vehicles, social media, robotics, UAVs, the Internet of Things, and others, in my book *Power to the People*.

To mitigate a bioterror attack in the United States and build resilience, the counterterrorism community should focus on two things. First, fix the public health system. Juan is right that the pandemic has demonstrated our weaknesses: the floundering U.S. public health system is first among them. We cannot engage in effective population surveillance or treatment without improving it. Second, pay much closer attention to developments in synthetic biology. We should be better prepared to identify groups or individual actors who pose a threat and to work with scientists to identify new pathogens and develop defenses for them. Bioterror is a cross-disciplinary, interagency problem that cuts a new way. The old approach of identifying and keeping track of known agents, alongside following known groups and threats, is outdated and insufficient. We must build teams of synthetic biologists, biotechnology experts, infectious disease experts, public health experts, intelligence experts, and terrorism experts.

To answer the last element of the question, the best way for the international community to mitigate the impact of a bioterror attack is to (re)build and depoliticize institutions of international health cooperation like the World Health Organization. Here, I agree with Ali that the United States' failure to assume global leadership of the pandemic fight is a mistake of historic proportions.

**Soufan:** I echo Mike and Magnus' fears that, indeed, terrorist organizations have long had an interest in bioweapons, chief among them those organizations that believe in the destruction of the current state of the world in order to rebuild theirs according to whatever creed they adhere to.<sup>17</sup> Observing the devastation and destruction—both from a human health/life as well as economic perspective—caused by the COVID-19 pandemic could spur a new desire for terrorists to pursue biological weapons, especially since many Western countries have shown a faltering response and a weakness in preparedness for this type of threat. Even with the COVID-19 pandemic, we have witnessed how white supremacist extremists have encouraged followers online to intentionally spread the disease among minorities, such as the Jewish population. This threat was deemed credible enough that Deputy Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen instructed that individuals who intentionally seek to or threaten to spread the virus can be charged under terrorism statutes.<sup>18</sup>

Although the barriers to entry for terrorists to get their hands on bio weapons remain high, they are gradually being lowered due to technological advances and the democratization of science. The threat of bioterrorism, or even a clandestine, state-sponsored biological attack, has intensified because of miniaturization, proliferation, and the manipulation of genetics, all of which diminish the probability of detection and enhance plausible deniability for potential attackers. There will be also serious challenges posed

<sup>d</sup> Editor's note: These figures were updated shortly before publication with the latest tallies from *The New York Times*. See "Coronavirus Map: Tracking the Global Outbreak," *New York Times*.

by technologies that digitize physical data (e.g., gene sequencing technology and the ability to send genome data by email). This is another area where barriers to entry are being lowered, offering more opportunities for individuals and small groups to do harm. Importantly, as Mike points out, we may witness some trial-and-error attacks at first and although casualties from such failed terrorist attacks may be low, we should not underestimate the psychological impact it could have on a population.<sup>19</sup>

It is important to stress that there is a difference between intent and capability. We have long known that terrorists and terrorist groups have been interested in pursuing weapons that can cause great harm. During his time in Sudan, Usama bin Ladin sent al-Qa`ida operatives as ‘purchasing agents’ looking to acquire nuclear materials, but, fortunately, they were cheated and ended up with red mercury. Jose Padilla, an American citizen and al-Qa`ida recruit, was arrested in 2002 and accused of a plot to detonate a ‘dirty bomb’ in a major U.S. city.<sup>e</sup> So the intent of groups and individuals to use WMD in a terrorist attack is not new, but the intelligence community and law enforcement agencies, including the Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF), have been active in working to disrupt plots and prepare for these kinds of attacks across the interagency. There is a reason we have not seen a WMD attack on U.S. soil in the nearly two decades since 9/11; much of it has to do with the professionalism of those tasked with keeping us safe.

But the threat is real, and terrorist groups will not be deterred easily.<sup>20</sup> Bioterrorism could be planned and carried out anonymously by a relatively small group, either independent or state-affiliated, with catastrophic results, given the difficulty of containing the effects, whether contagion of humans or animals, or contamination of food sources or medicines, among other critical industries and infrastructure. As Audrey has pointed out in her excellent book,<sup>21</sup> we now live in an “age of lethal empowerment,” where individuals and small groups seeking to do harm can have outsized effects unlike most other eras in human history.

This is now. Today. When we take into account the human ability to advance technologically and the difficulty with which governments, legislation, and global governance have keeping up with technological innovations, the future of this threat becomes even more ominous. Emerging technologies could drastically influence the WMD threat space as well as the ability to address this threat because these technologies offer a wide range of actors a set of capabilities previously unattainable. Emerging technologies will lower barriers to effective development and use of WMD; create new pathways for developing and using WMD; reduce the risk of detection of WMD activities; and offer nefarious actors new capabilities to cause mass devastation and destruction.

It is clear that our security priorities must be refocused to include countering future pandemics and other disasters—man-made or natural. Spending the last decades droning or sanctioning our way through the world, the U.S. must reorient its security priorities, including in the counterterrorism space.

**Zarate:** A large-scale bioterror attack is horrifying to imagine, but it must be reimagined in light of the COVID-19 crisis. The concern over bioterrorist threats, of course, is not new. The potential that apocalyptic terrorists or extremists might acquire weapons of mass destruction is a high-consequence, low-probability threat that has remained a fundamental concern for counterterrorism officials around the world.

This explains why the Bush administration placed so much national security focus post-9/11 on preventing and responding to man-made and naturally occurring diseases that could decimate populations. It was a core conclusion of the Graham-Talent Commission on the Prevention of WMD Proliferation and Terrorism in 2008: “terrorists are more likely to be able to obtain and use a biological weapon than a nuclear weapon. The Commission believes that the U.S. government needs to move more aggressively to limit the proliferation of biological weapons and reduce the prospect of a bioterror attack.”<sup>22</sup> And this concern explains in part why the Trump administration published the National Biodefense Strategy in 2018.<sup>23</sup>

As Ali and Audrey rightly note, however, the intent of terrorist groups and apocalyptic extremists to perpetrate these kinds of attacks has not been matched with requisite capabilities to execute them properly or at scale. It is dangerous and difficult to deploy a mass biological attack. And certainly, terrorist networks—especially those under stress—will always resort to simpler means to execute more dramatic, assured, high-impact attacks.

But the barriers to entry for bio attacks are being lowered. The imagination of apocalyptic terrorists and extremists will be reignited with the COVID-19 crisis, witnessing the mass number of deaths along with wholesale economic and social dislocation. With new technologies and open sources allowing for easier access to more sophisticated biotechnology and more widespread bioengineering globally, there are lower technical barriers to entry. And the vectors for attack can now be made more virulent. In the wake of this crisis, imagination and intent may meet with greater access and capability.

Yet, this may not manifest as a biological big-bang attack. The threat may emerge in stages or ways not yet foreseen. As Mike notes, there may be small-scale bio episodes that signal the march toward a more cataclysmic bioterror attack. Loosely tied groups bound only via social media or independent actors (‘lone scientists’) could emerge from within labs or constructed bio labs in basements to unleash a new disease. A committed or greedy bio-expert in the vein of A.Q. Khan could spark a bio-proliferation nightmare, or an anarchist underground bio-expert could instruct a cadre of crazed ‘how-to’ followers. Rogue state actors could decide to grow more aggressive against sworn enemies and provide terrorist proxies with biological agents to inflict massive harm asymmetrically with more difficult attribution.

The human, economic, and psychological consequences of a successful bioterror attack would be horrific, even if not catastrophic.

The good news is that addressing such threats looks much like what we need to do to restore our ability and confidence to respond to and recover from the COVID-19 crisis and prepare for future pandemics. For example, the work of the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority (BARDA), established in 2006, to develop medical countermeasures for biological attacks will likely prove critical to the mass production of a COVID-19 vaccine in the United States.<sup>24</sup>

We will need to repair the tools of prevention and informa-

e Editor’s note: According to Reuters, in 2014 Jose Padilla was re-sentenced “to 21 years for a 2007 terrorism conviction after an appeals court deemed the original 17-year sentence too lenient. ... He was accused of plotting to detonate a radioactive “dirty bomb” in a U.S. city, but was never charged with that.” Zachary Fagenon, “U.S. judge re-sentences Jose Padilla to 21 years on terrorism charges,” Reuters, September 9, 2014.

tion-sharing globally; restock the equipment, supply chains, and medical system upon which we rely for our health and resilience; and restore faith and confidence in the institutions of government critical to our health security and defense. And the long pole in the tent will remain intelligence and data sharing and overall awareness—not only between counterterrorism agencies but also with and between the scientific community, academia, and industry. As Magnus notes, in the wake of the crisis, Western counterterrorism work will benefit from more focus on biological agents, tracking stockpiles, and collaborating with biotech firms.

Ultimately, the United States needs to treat global health security as a core national security imperative, as highlighted in the recommendations from the CSIS Commission on Strengthening America's Health Security, published in November 2019.<sup>25</sup>

This is not easy. There are limits to what can be done to prepare for and respond to a biological attack. Stockpiling for every contingency is not possible. But for two decades, we told ourselves that pandemics were real and that we were prepared. But we weren't. This crisis was not a failure of imagination but a failure of preparation. Even if costly or difficult, we have to keep imagining and preparing to counter a devastating bioterror attack in the future.

**Ranstorp:** Just a few reactions to previous excellent points: 1) Further to the what I was saying earlier about the theoretical versus actual threat, scientists tell me that they do not believe gene modification of viruses is a realistic option for terrorists as it is not an easy process to command to control the desired effect, from cultivation in animals, extraction of organisms, and dispersal methods. Altering a genetic sequence creates huge uncertainty in terms of virus behavior, survivability, and longevity. Gene modification requires pretty major technical laboratory skills and processes that are (for now) outside most terrorist groups' capability. There are too many variables where it can go wrong, and controlling this process is too difficult.

2) The combination of UAVs and bioterrorism is not very likely either as there are too many variables for the effective distribution of organisms (dispersal techniques), and weather conditions will impact as well.

3) A major deterrent for terrorists is achieving the desired attribution in the current COVID-19 environment, especially when people are exercising social distancing and have adopted an emergency mindset. The surprise element is now lost. So, for terrorist groups, how do you ensure attribution? And if you get attribution, how do you ensure survival because states will seek and most likely destroy groups and individuals unleashing bioterrorism weapons. This leads me to conclude that the most likely actors to use bioterrorism will be rogue states if they are skillful enough to conceal that they are the source. What COVID-19 has done is to expose our interconnectedness and major vulnerability, which can be exploited in specific major crisis situations. I worry about the possibility of secret military bio labs by certain states such as Russia and Iran where we have no idea what they are 'cooking' and cultivating in these labs.

4) Preparedness for pandemics will inevitably raise the capability for most states on bioterrorism preparedness in the post-COVID-19 period. There will be cascading effects from intelligence warning and crisis management mechanisms to more preemptive intelligence and military actions to prevent states and non-state actors from acquiring and deploying bio weapons.

**Nagata:** It's hard to match the sophistication and expertise of this group, but I'll dare to respond to a couple of different points. I approach this with all due humility ... retired Army generals are notorious for believing they are experts in arenas where they are rank amateurs!

1. I believe U.S. national security leaders should err on the side of believing terrorists *can* be proficient in bioterrorism. It seems to me far better we assume this and discover that we didn't need to, rather than the other way 'round. Perhaps more practically, I personally think that all one needs to do is examine the astounding attack capabilities of the "tribal militia" called the Houthis in Yemen for an instructive example of how proficient non-state actors (such as terrorists) can become with advanced technology. Today, the Houthis are capable of effectively launching short-range surface-to-surface ballistic missiles, employ (and increasingly fabricate on their own) long-range, weaponized (and increasingly autonomous) drones, and effectively employ precision-guided anti-ship cruise missiles. Of course, we know that much of this is because they are beneficiaries of their state sponsor (Iran), but it seems to me unwise to assume that such a group could not also become operationally proficient in utilizing a biological weapon.

2. Regarding the amount of actual mortality/death that a terrorist use of a bio weapon might create, I would urge caution in assuming there is an important connection between 1) the amount of death it creates, and 2) the downstream political/economic/societal damage it will create. I think it's useful to recall that the classic definition of terrorism (*the use of violence to cause illegitimate political change*) contains no mention of death being a goal, or even being important. An attack on a nursery that kills (or even just threatens) two or three infants will resonate in the public and political mind far more than an attack that kills a dozen or more adults. Similarly, there are tens of thousands of traffic deaths every year in most developed countries, but that generally does not "move the political needle" in any of them. By contrast, the enormous political and legislative changes that have occurred in the United Kingdom, in Germany, in France, etc., as the result of inspired ISIS attacks using knives, rental vans, and other improvised weapons that have killed a relatively small handful of people, are illustrative of the generally *weak* connection between mortality and the political/strategic consequences [of] terrorism. We should therefore expect that the 'novelty' of a future terrorist bio-weapon attack and the public fear that will be stoked by what will surely be massive media coverage, will create strategic effects completely out-of-proportion to how many, if any, actual casualties result from it.

**Cronin:** It seems to me the group largely agrees; but we should clarify key dimensions:

1) What actors exactly? Are we only talking about classic non-state terrorist groups, or are we also including insider threats, proxies, and state-sponsored groups? Agree strongly with General Nagata's point about the Houthis. And that also applies to UAVs.

2) In what time span? Now vs. post-COVID vs. five or 10 years from now? These are evolving threats. Being in the middle of the pandemic alters the political impact of any death toll—large or small. After the pandemic ends, then it will be easier to draw news coverage and leverage shocking events again, even with small numbers.

3) With what future regulatory policies? E.g., synthetic biology is virtually unregulated at the moment. If the answer to #1 is that

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- Ali Soufan

we’re including the insider threat or proxies, then I think the threat is greater than Magnus’s first statement implies; but if we’re talking strictly about classic terrorist groups, then Magnus and I agree. This is also the case with other new or emerging technologies.

**CTC:** In the last two years, the global terrorist threat has ameliorated thanks to the efforts of the international coalition assembled to fight the Islamic State. But there is now cause for concern that COVID-19 could darken the global terrorist threat picture because of the potentially severe economic impact in fragile states, because of the impact it may have on counterterrorism efforts, and for all the other reasons so far discussed.<sup>f</sup> At the same time, the United States and its partners may, because of the bleakest economic outlook in generations and the overwhelming need to get on top of the COVID-19 crisis and its related ramifications, be less able and less willing to allocate resources to counterterrorism. The pressure, or need, to focus on other critical priorities becomes even more apparent when one considers that “inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security”<sup>26</sup> and that many Americans have “changed the channel”<sup>27</sup> nearly 20 years since the United States suffered a catastrophic terrorist attack.

In your view, given the range of global security challenges that exist for the United States and its partners today, (1) how much of a priority should counterterrorism continue to be for the United States and its allies? and (2) given the potential need to do more with less, how should the counterterrorism community approach this new world? And how can it persuade the public to continue their support so that an appropriate level of resources remains available?

<sup>f</sup> The examples of Iraq and Afghanistan may be instructive. As noted by Michael Knights and Alex Almeida in the May 2020 issue of *CTC Sentinel*, the COVID-19 crisis has completed a “perfect storm” for Iraq, which already faced a resurgent threat from the Islamic State and now faces a deep recession because of the collapse in the global oil price and less outside train-and-assist support from its international partners (because many non-U.S. outside trainers have been removed for COVID-19-related reasons). Michael Knights and Alex Almeida, “Remaining and Expanding: The Recovery of Islamic State Operations in Iraq in 2019-2020,” *CTC Sentinel* 13:5 (2020). In late May 2020, *The New York Times* reported, “The Pentagon believes that at least 50 percent of Afghan security forces most likely have the [COVID-19] virus, meaning that any training and joint operations between United States and Afghan forces have been paused, halting a key pillar of the American war effort, especially against Islamic State enclaves in the country’s east.” Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Julian E. Barnes, “Trump Wants Troops in Afghanistan Home by Election Day. The Pentagon Is Drawing Up Plans,” *New York Times*, May 26, 2020.



*Ali Soufan*

**Nagata:** One of the common errors that governments make in pursuing their security is to assume there is a zero-sum game between countering violent extremism (typically against non-state actors) versus all other forms of national security effort (typically against state actors). For the U.S., as interest in great power competition (GPC) has grown, many policymakers have assumed that any increase in policy support, resources, or operational effort for GPC must entail a proportional reduction in counterterrorism.

Certainly, there are commonalities between the two missions. One example is that both require exquisite intelligence collection and analysis. Both require the effective, and hopefully integrated, employment of all applicable instruments of national power. However, I believe the supposition that increased support for either GPC or CT must lead to the other ‘doing more with less’ is inherently flawed. Certainly, there will be people, capabilities, or effort that may require displacement from one to the other, but the nature, timing, volume, and durability of such shifts are subject to a *very* large number of variables.

One variable is the often shifting political and policy priorities that govern both GPC and CT. Since 9/11, the U.S. priority has clearly been on CT. Since approximately 2013 (beginning of the Ukraine crisis), U.S. priority regarding GPC has also risen sharply. Accordingly, the U.S. government has made periodic efforts to ‘shift’ resources from CT to GPC, but the effort has proven strategically frustrating for many reasons. One example was Obama administration efforts to constrain or reduce CT efforts in Africa to support the strategic “Pivot to Asia.” However, in the wake of the 2012 Benghazi attack, not only were our CT efforts fully restored in Africa, they were enhanced *above* the levels that existed prior to the previous reductions. In just the past year, U.S. military resources for the CENTCOM arena have increased, not decreased.

Another set of variables flow from the degree to which a government’s ‘theories of success’ regarding GPC and CT are identical or different. For example, if both theories emphasize the use

of military force to directly contest a GPC or terrorist foe, then the likelihood of a zero-sum relationship in resources is probably high. But what if the GPC theory emphasizes diplomacy and economic incentives? What if the CT theory emphasizes terrorism prevention (vice capturing/killing terrorists)? What if the GPC theory emphasizes the use of the U.S. military to improve the professionalism of an ally's armed forces, thereby instilling public confidence in that allied government, which also hardens our ally against interference by a U.S. competitor? In short, the degree to which our own government, and our allies' governments, approach to GPC and CT can be differentiated, the less likely our own policymakers will be confronted with zero-sum choices.

Finally, when it comes to U.S. public support for government efforts in either GPC or CT, I believe the burden is nearly identical for policymakers. Both require them to effectively communicate the strategic stakes regarding American interests. Both require a strategically sophisticated and describable theory of success. That said, this second requirement has proven to be the most elusive, particularly in the CT arena. For too long, U.S. policymakers have adopted the view that capturing and killing terrorists will lead to ultimate strategic success, instead of the more accurate view that kinetic operations are necessary primarily to save lives, rescue hostages, and similar operational or tactical goals. Meanwhile, the global volume of terrorists and terrorism, including those that threaten U.S. interests, has steadily risen despite our efforts. If someday, U.S. policymakers adopt *terrorism prevention* as the key to strategic CT success, they will have both 1) embraced the most difficult, but also the most important strategic approach to CT, and 2) dramatically reduced the likelihood that CT will be a zero-sum-game problem regarding other important U.S. national security activities. We would be wise to not repeat this theory-of-success mistake when it comes to GPC.

**Cronin:** More than ever, we need a comprehensive strategy that is broad, realistic, balanced, and builds on our strengths. We have not had such an approach for a decade. COVID-19 and the resulting economic crisis bring into sharp relief fundamental weaknesses that the United States can no longer ignore.

Since 9/11, we have relied on military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan and then on targeted killings and special operations. The former imposed massive costs on us and produced diminishing returns over time; the latter were short-term, tactical responses. Our armed forces have been unequalled in their excellence and selfless dedication to their country, but we owe them a better relationship between ends and means. In counterterrorism, we have been doing less with more; it was inevitable that a crisis of one type or another would force us to do more with less.

We must rationalize our goals with our capabilities. As it unfolded, the almost total focus on counterterrorism post-9/11 had no clear strategic end state in mind and was economically unsustainable. Ending terrorist campaigns, engaging in terrorism prevention, and taking a balanced approach to using all of our national tools (diplomacy, economic aid, intelligence cooperation, informational resources, etc.) were successful approaches that had worked in other countries facing terrorist challenges. They were also our publicly stated counterterrorism approach for many years—but very rarely what we did in practice.

Moving forward, we will have to build the ability to surge in response to terrorism, almost certainly accepting more risk. Above all

else, we must work more effectively with allies and confront the fact that they do not see counterterrorism priorities in their own countries and regions in the same way that we see them. We have very often been ignorant of local cultures, histories, and long-standing grievances, insisting that our short-term priorities take precedence, and we are in charge. We must rebuild longer-term relationships with allies and partners, especially in intelligence, information operations, and diplomacy.

Now we are facing a pandemic, an economic recession, and severe domestic strife. It is time to return to first principles. Effective counterterrorism depends above all on presenting a just alternative to the political argument presented by terrorist leaders. Our counterargument was predicated on the rule of law, rights, responsibilities, and opportunity for all—ideals expressed in the Bill of Rights and U.S. Constitution. The first step in effective U.S. counterterrorism is to reunite around those ideals to restore and rebuild our image in the eyes of the world.

**Soufan:** Mike puts it eloquently and approaches this question in a way that I agree with. There is a false narrative that frames the issue as binary—you either support a robust CT capability or you pursue the ends and means necessary to engage in great power competition (GPC). But the United States can “walk and chew gum” at the same time. And indeed, there are numerous seams where CT and GPC overlap and reinforce each other. Indeed, geopolitics and CT go hand in hand. Success in dealing with the former will breed success in enabling the latter and facilitate stronger partnerships in the process. One area in particular is security cooperation and building partner capacity with allies overseas, which Mike also alluded to. By working by, with, and through partners and host-nation forces, the United States can leverage key intelligence capabilities that are critical to countering both great powers like Russia and China, but also regional heavyweights like Iran and North Korea. In addition, there are numerous areas in the world where our CT and GPC goals overlap, including in Libya, Syria, Afghanistan, and the Sahel, to name a few. Many of our adversaries do not view the world through such a black-and-white lens, which is one of the reasons why there has been increased attention devoted to analyzing the so-called “gray zone,” an area where many U.S. adversaries are comfortable operating.

Counterterrorism should remain a significant priority for the United States now and into the foreseeable future, and I would like to provide two comments on how to enhance our capabilities going forward in a world with a changing geopolitical landscape:

First, “doing more with less” doesn't call for tearing down the counterterrorism architecture that the U.S. has constructed over the past two decades, but instead looking for areas of redundancy and waste, where CT efforts can be streamlined and made leaner, without allowing high-level capabilities to atrophy. One example is relying less on a physical presence but more on world-class intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, including advances made over the past several years in sensor networks. And while technology is not a silver bullet and should not be viewed as one—the United States is fairly unique in its ability to leverage certain technological capabilities as a force multiplier—oftentimes, ISR can have a dual usage in CT and GPC, like, for example, in Libya.

Second, and this is long overdue, we need a robust CT strategy in which we lead with our values. In the so-called Global War

on Terror, we have proven that, operationally, there is nothing the U.S. cannot accomplish: most of al-Qa`ida's leadership, including Usama bin Ladin, has been neutralized and nearly all the territory taken by the so-called Islamic State has been recaptured. Strategically, however, we have failed. Globally, al-Qa`ida's membership stands at about 40,000. This number does not include the so-called Islamic State, [and]—although the territorial caliphate no longer exists—the ideology that fueled it in the first place is resurging across the globe. In addition, we have a rising threat posed by white supremacy and other right-wing extremists and lack a comprehensive approach to dealing with this threat, especially its transnational manifestations.

I have said this before, so excuse me for sounding like a broken record but I think this is so important that it bears repeating—where we have failed is in the battlefield of narratives and diplomacy. We do not need the full force of the U.S. military and boots on the ground in order to win on this battlefield. When tasked with clear objectives and properly resourced, the military can create a minimally stable and conducive environment for diplomacy to take hold, not to provide a holistic solution to the underlying issues that produced and exacerbated the conflict in the first place. Precision-guided munitions can destroy a terrorist training camp, but they do nothing in terms of improving governance and ameliorating sectarianism. By engaging diplomatically, with our friends and perhaps even more importantly with our adversaries, the United States can reduce the oxygen necessary for terrorist organizations to thrive. Accordingly, we will not only succeed in limiting the vacuum these organizations exploit, but also limit the influence of our GPC adversaries along the way. What we need is smart aid, robust diplomacy, investment in education, and—above all else—we need to lead with our values. Coincidentally, such a holistic CT strategy will help us tackle traditional and non-traditional security threats in the future, whether it is GPC, climate change, or pandemics.

In terms of maintaining public support for CT efforts, I believe that transparency is key. This means avoiding the fearmongering and threat inflation that can creep into politics and media coverage of terrorism. Being honest with the public about what the threats are, and what they are not, can lead to a healthy view on risk and how to prepare for and adjust to risk. Transparency might include frequent public hearings and briefings on the topic of counterterrorism, especially if the threat level changes as organizations evolve and certain ideologies assume a more extreme form. Part of this transparency is also for policymakers and the administration to acknowledge the threat white supremacy extremism poses to the [U.S.] homeland, while calling for action to designate more white supremacy organizations overseas that have ties to individuals and groups here in the United States. Moving forward, we cannot afford to keep politicizing the terrorism threat; we must remain agnostic to the ideologies motivating political violence while at the same time working to gain an intimate understanding of how they incite violence. By making terrorism a partisan or political issue, it distracts from the strategies crafted to counter these lethal organizations and alienates the public's trust in the crucial work the men and women in law enforcement, the intelligence community, and the military do every day to keep us safe.

**Ranstorp:** The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an unexpected pause in the U.S.-led Global War on Terrorism that has raged continuously and on multiple fronts over the last two decades. From a

European perspective, the U.S. global counterterrorism leadership role has been absolutely essential in galvanizing and directing international support for intelligence and military actions against key jihadi leaders and cadres. Without it, the overall counterterrorism efforts would not have been so effective as witnessed by the killing of bin Ladin and al-Qa`ida leadership in AFPAK as well as the pushback against ISIL and locating al-Baghdadi and many other senior leaders. U.S. counterterrorism efforts in Syria and Iraq, leading the anti-ISIL coalition forward, cannot be underestimated. But it did not solve all problems; it certainly created anger and pushback on targeted killings and some human rights transgressions; and there are significant challenges ahead. The fact that the United States is exercising troop drawdown in Syria/Iraq and parts of Africa sends the wrong signals to allies and enemies.

The global coalition on counterterrorism, under U.S. leadership, needs to be executed with sharper focus and smarter prioritization. It would be smarter to rethink U.S. military contributions to peace and security as part of a broader, more integrated parallel effort to non-counterterrorism missions. U.S. security-sector assistance and humanitarian assistance together with European allies can be key to reduction of political conflict. Leveraging the military presence to support developing countries when these are struck by natural disasters and viruses should be part of a broader package with development assistance and human rights monitoring. Signaling and exercising hard power opens up space for effective promotion of softer measures in developing areas around the world. This carrot/stick approach reinforces U.S. values, leadership, and partnerships and one that sets it apart from authoritarian regimes and rivals. There are too many conflicts and flashpoints around the world that need to be dealt with to avoid more terrorist surges. The international community needs to put pressure on terrorist structures and capabilities to prevent them from plotting and planning undisturbed against the West.

Counterterrorism is inextricably intertwined with geopolitical calculations. In many ways, in the Middle East, it is like playing three-dimensional chess under water with all the pieces moving simultaneously. From a European perspective, there are a number of priorities in the counterterrorism arena:

Firstly, there needs to be justice for all the human rights transgressions committed in Syria and specifically by ISIL. There need to be some kind of mechanism for establishing an international criminal tribunal or hybrid tribunal in the region. There needs to be measures dealing with returning foreign terrorist fighters.

Secondly, counterterrorism efforts need to focus on developing rehabilitation/exit programs as there are thousands of terror convicts and radicalized violent extremists to be released from prisons across the E.U. states in the next few years. Thirdly, migration waves from Turkey and regional conflicts will likely further spur xenophobia and far-right extremism.

The rise of far-right extremism needs to be further prioritized by both E.U. states and the U.S. government as the transnational interlinkages are multiple. Links between neo-Nazi groups are forged across countries, and there is significant interaction between neo-Nazi groups and the alt-right milieus, which share metanarratives about “the great replacement,” “white genocide,” and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. In the mix of these multiple linkages are Russian attempts to split NATO countries through polarization and influence operations. Russians operate through a range of proxies such as Systema martial arts clubs,<sup>28</sup> MC [motorcycle] clubs and

**“The severity and extreme disruption of a novel coronavirus will likely spur the imagination of the most creative and dangerous groups and individuals to reconsider bioterrorist attacks.”**

- Juan Zarate

football [soccer] hooligans<sup>29</sup> and the Russian Imperial Movement<sup>g</sup> and their “Partizan” training courses.<sup>30</sup> Simultaneously, Russia hosts, trains, and funds various extreme far-right groups while these groups cooperate more closely between themselves by courtesy of their host/sponsor. Significantly, the financing of extreme far-right groups and other violent extremists operates increasingly through cryptocurrency as their regular bank accounts are shut down in various countries.

Fourthly, E.U. states need to confront the financing and export of salafism from the Gulf States to E.U. states that greatly influences integration efforts, polarization dynamics, and violent extremism.

Finally, the E.U. states will need to accelerate the use of biometrics and further intelligence-sharing technologies to curtail the nexus between organized crime, terrorists and human trafficking, and movement across borders.

Both the United States and E.U. states will be forced to continue to focus on counterterrorism in a much more complex global environment. The intelligence-sharing mechanisms function well, and the counterterrorism partnership between the U.S. and E.U. states will continue and will deepen. It is essential that the United States does not withdraw from its leadership role in counterterrorism but instead forges closer relations through the Five Eyes partnership<sup>h</sup> and the other bilateral relationships with European states. While there is an absence of [major] terrorist attacks for now, the public support for closer counterterrorism collaboration will likely always return with every major perpetrated attack in the West.

**Zarate:** Though the reality of terrorist threats may recede from our collective memory, counterterrorism should remain a priority for U.S. national security, complementing evolving security challenges and our view of global threats and vulnerabilities.

It is easy to forget the threats that global terrorist movements pose, especially as the world grapples with a pandemic crisis, economic collapse, and a shifting geo-political landscape. Counterterrorism success has often bred a luxurious forgetfulness of the threats countered. It is also commonplace to evaluate the risks from terrorism through a myopic lens of past experience without anticipation of innovation.

In the first instance, history teaches us that organized terrorist



Juan Zarate

movements adapt, often when they are given time, space, and resources to operate. Since 9/11, there has been a fervent wish for the war on terror to be over—without consideration for how violent extremist groups have adapted or reformed in the wake of counterterrorism pressure and when afforded opportunities. After the death of Usama bin Ladin and the apparent sidelining of al-Qa`ida’s ideology amidst the Arab revolutions, there was a desire to see the post-9/11 era at an end. With a U.S. troop withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, policymakers appeared blindsided by the rise of the Islamic State and the establishment of a notional caliphate that ultimately stoked instability in the Middle East, birthed new terrorist footholds globally, and launched and inspired successful terrorist attacks in Europe, Asia, and North America.

Indeed, even now as chronicled by *CTC Sentinel*,<sup>31</sup> we are witnessing a resurrection of the Islamic State in Iraq, with active branches and a terrorist diaspora throughout the world. Al-Qa`ida remains active and even resurgent in places like West Africa and Yemen. And the Iranian-supported Shi`a proxies remain as active and relevant as before, with Hezbollah serving as a strategic player in Lebanon and Syria.

These terrorist groups or those inspired by them can launch terrorist attacks that can have strategic impact, exacerbate conflict, and even bring states to the brink of war. The 2008 Mumbai attacks remain seared into my memory when I sat in the White House as two nuclear-armed neighbors were brought to the brink of war. The 9/11 attacks, of course, drew the United States into conflict in Afghanistan, where thousands of U.S. and NATO troops remain on the ground nearly 20 years later.

Terrorist groups can serve as shock troops in larger proxy battles between state forces, exacerbating conflict and raising the stakes for broader war. The ongoing conflicts in Syria, Libya, and Yemen represent an expanded form of state-on-state proxy battles relying on terrorist groups and militant forces to influence the course of conflicts and broader state competition. In Lebanon and Iraq, for-

<sup>g</sup> Editor’s note: The Russian Imperial Movement and its leaders were designated as global terrorists by the U.S. State Department in April 2020. “United States Designates Russian Imperial Movement and Leaders as Global Terrorists,” Press Statement by Michael R. Pompeo, U.S. Secretary of State, April 7, 2020.

<sup>h</sup> Editor’s note: The Five Eyes (FVEY) is an intelligence alliance of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

oreign-sponsored terrorist groups have been accepted as legitimate political actors, graduating former proxy forces into positions of power.

Independent of state actors, terrorist groups and movements can gain strength and adapt within growing extremist ecosystems, where ideologies of different political stripes mirror each other and raise the stakes for stoking violence, inspiring madmen, and deepening social cleavages. The 2011 Breivik attack in Norway represented a political terrorist attack ideologically countering violent Islamic extremism.

The rise of transnational extremist groups on the right and left of the political spectrum suggests a more complicated and globalized terrorist landscape in the years to come. With enough time and resources, terrorist groups can also gain new capabilities, as with the use of drones or cyberattacks, and form alliances of convenience, as with criminal syndicates and cybercriminals.

It is difficult to maintain national focus on notional terrorist threats, especially when they are not obviously manifesting at home and may feel like a vestige of a past era. Terrorism still has the potential to disrupt society, economies, and geopolitics.

Our counterterrorism response, however, should not be driven by eternal dread or despair at the Hydra-like forms of terrorism. It is critical to understand that terrorist enemies of whatever brand can only succeed strategically by exacerbating internal social or economic turmoil and baiting the United States further into conflict internally and externally. Thus, there is a need to remain practical in a counterterrorism approach, blending tactics and sharing resources to address a multitude of threats and vulnerabilities, while doing everything possible to undermine the global and strategic reach of sophisticated terrorist movements.

This means that defending against terrorist actors should form part of a broader effort to defend the nation's key infrastructure and systems, defending core systems regardless of the actor or group. As this discussion group has already explored, the defense against bioterrorist attacks will likely follow the tracks of defending against future pandemics. Protecting the global financial system and the nation's energy grid needs to be a priority regardless of who might attack.

Countering influence operations from Russia, China, and Iran will also allow the United States and allies to counter violent extremism and non-state proxies online. Stopping the trafficking of

people, wildlife, narcotics, arms, and illegal goods will undermine the ability of terrorist groups to profit and pilfer. Preventing illicit capital, corruption, and money launderers from threatening the integrity of the financial system will make it harder, costlier, and riskier for terrorist networks to raise and move money around the world.

Counterterrorism will always resolve back to the physical need to disrupt and dismantle terrorist networks, safe havens, resources, and leadership. This does not mean that the United States should be the world's policeman or remain in perpetual war, but it also cannot mean that we lose sight of where terrorism threatens our allies and stability.

We need to support partner capacity in key countries and regions to suppress the rise of terrorist groups with global ambition. The abandonment of our Kurdish allies in northern Syria was a major mistake in this regard. We need to continue to support our leading allies like the French in West Africa and the Australians in Southeast Asia to enable regions to counter recurrent terrorist threats. We need to consider new basing opportunities—as in Irbil—and small footprint operations to address the threats of the future. And we need to forge better counterterrorism alliances, as with India, that allow us to partner in key regions of the world and address new terrorist threats. All of this counterterrorism cooperation will enable greater trust building and coordination on other threats and vulnerabilities beyond the terrorism domain.

Conceptually, the global community must continue to isolate those willing to use terrorism to advance political interests as enemies of humanity—and counter the ideologies that stoke a sense of heroism, legitimacy, and allure to the cause of terrorism. We have lost the strategic thread that targeted the concept of terrorism as anathema to the global community—to be outlawed and shunned as with slavery, piracy, and hostage-taking. That argument must be reasserted and won.

Finally, America and her allies must realize that the greatest defense against terrorist threats lies in the strength of our social and political resilience and the capacity of individuals, communities, and civic society to counter corrosive ideologies and divisions. This is a project that goes well beyond countering terrorism. In the United States, it requires the renewal of the American dream and faith and confidence in American democracy, community, and institutions—especially now. **CTC**

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# The Security Threat COVID-19 Poses to the Northern Syria Detention Camps Holding Islamic State Members

By Audrey Alexander

**Not only could COVID-19 worsen the already acute humanitarian crisis within detention facilities holding Islamic State-affiliated individuals in northeastern Syria, but the pandemic's indirect effects may create security risks in the camps and prisons managed by the Syrian Democratic Forces. Preventing the transmission of COVID-19 among detainees, security forces, aid workers, and other personnel who maintain detention sites must remain a priority among key stakeholders. The already apparent indirect effects of COVID-19 also demand attention because of the challenges these pressures bring to managing these sites, such as stoking uncertainty among detainees, disrupting humanitarian assistance, and limiting security forces' ability to operate in these facilities. In the past, bad conditions arguably contributed to heightened levels of discontent among detainees that culminated in breakout attempts, riots, the proliferation of smuggling networks, and attacks on guards. Today, a similar dynamic is unfolding: as COVID-19 adds urgency to Islamic State detainees' desires to change their situation in the camps and prisons, and makes the environment more permissive to criminal activity, violence, and low-level corruption, it allows the illicit networks facilitating the Islamic State detainees' objectives to expand.**

**E**ven without a single confirmed case of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in detention facilities holding alleged Islamic State affiliates in northeastern Syria, the pandemic is complicating a range of humanitarian and security challenges within the prisons and camps.<sup>1</sup> The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and its military arm, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—a Kurd-

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*The author would like to thank General Mazloum Abdi and General (Ret) Joseph Votel for their time and willingness to share their perspectives and discuss the challenges described in this article.*

ish-led alliance of militias and partner to the U.S.-led Coalition to Defeat the Islamic State—control much of this part of the country.<sup>2</sup> The SDF is largely responsible for maintaining and securing Islamic State detainees<sup>a</sup> in a range of detention sites, including prisons<sup>b</sup> and camps.<sup>c</sup> Several factors make this task daunting, particularly as the pandemic increases uncertainty while constraining resources, and SDF officials continue to call on the international community for more support.<sup>3</sup>

While some humanitarian groups and members of the coalition against the Islamic State have responded to these calls, providing monetary support and other resources to the SDF, insights from SDF officials, counterterrorism analysts, and a variety of sources suggest that circumstances in some facilities remain precarious.<sup>4</sup> The SDF takes preventative measures against COVID-19 in the prisons and camps, but it lacks adequate resources and infrastructure.<sup>5</sup> In an interview with the author in June 2020, General Mazloum Abdi, the top commander of the SDF, explained, “We are depending on international support to be able to manage and control all these facilities. So far, the assistance and the support that is provided from the coalition and the international community is not enough.”<sup>6</sup>

It is hard to gauge the COVID-19 situation in Syria, the country's northeast, and SDF-run detention sites because factors including

- a In this context, the term “detainee(s)” refers to the population of alleged Islamic State affiliates, including adults and children, held under guard in SDF-run camps and prisons. The word “detainee” is not universally adopted by stakeholders working on this topic, but this article uses a similar conceptualization about what constitutes a “detainee” in the current situation as the International Crisis Group and the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency. For more on differing definitions, see “Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019,” released February 4, 2020, p. 48.
- b As a point of clarity, there are generally important distinctions between the terms “jail” and “prison” since they are usually associated with different stages and methods of incarceration. Though imprecise, this article uses the term “prison” to refer to sites where Islamic State detainees are held under lock and key. To offer more context on the various types of facilities, a *New York Times* report explained that the SDF “has operated an archipelago of about half a dozen ad hoc wartime detention sites for captive ISIS fighters, ranging from former schoolhouses in towns like Ain Issa and Kobani to a former Syrian government prison at Hasaka.” The same article offered estimates on the number of detainees, including approximately 9,000 Syrian or Iraqi men, and 2,000 men from 50 other countries. For more, see Charlie Savage, “The Kurds’ Prisons and Detention Camps for ISIS Members, Explained,” *New York Times*, October 22, 2019. For a useful resource and map of the sites in northeastern Syria, see Myriam Francois and Azeem Ibrahim, “The Children of ISIS Detainees: Europe’s Dilemma,” Center for Global Policy, June 2020, p. 7.
- c The same *New York Times* report as cited in footnote B explains, “The Kurds also operate more than a dozen camps for families displaced by conflict that hold tens of thousands of people, many of them non-Syrian wives and children of Islamic State fighters.” See Savage.

**“We are depending on international support to be able to manage and control all these facilities. So far, the assistance and the support that is provided from the coalition and the international community is not enough.”**

**- General Mazloum Abdi, Commander, Syrian Democratic Forces**

drastically limited testing capabilities, disparate medical services, inconsistencies in reporting, and transparency issues can influence the figures that are recorded.<sup>7</sup> As of June 28, 2020, Johns Hopkins University’s COVID-19 dashboard showed 242 total confirmed cases, and seven related deaths, in Syria.<sup>8</sup> In northeastern Syria, updated figures on the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases are hard to find, but “only a handful of deaths have been reported.”<sup>9</sup> At the time of writing (late June 2020), there are no reported confirmed cases in sites holding Islamic State detainees in northeastern Syria.<sup>d</sup> However, fears that the pandemic could have grave effects on these facilities have not subsided.<sup>10</sup> General Mazloum explained, “Unfortunately, if we have any [cases of COVID-19] in the future, the situation will not be good at all ... our capabilities to control [COVID-19 in the prisons and camps] are very weak.”<sup>11</sup> A May 2020 report by the Rojava Information Center notes that “widespread tuberculosis in Hol and other camps and detention facilities mean medical staff fear a 10%+ death rate if the disease enters these facilities.”<sup>12</sup> As this article will show, with or without COVID-19 transmission among populations within these sites, the pandemic is set to impact the camps and prisons in significant ways.

Some problems affecting the prisons and camps today include overcrowding, poor sanitation, limited humanitarian assistance, and a range of security challenges involving activities like ideologically motivated violence, rioting, and the smuggling of money, goods, and people.<sup>13</sup> In recent months, researchers and practitioners have delineated which of these issues COVID-19 could make more acute. After touching on a few of these factors in the following section, this article examines how the pandemic risks further fostering an environment vulnerable to criminal activity, violence, and corrupt behavior within the detention facilities. In short, circumstances surrounding COVID-19 add urgency to Islamic State detainees’ desires to change their situation in SDF-run camps and prisons. Whether that change involves improving access to goods, challenging power dynamics, or escaping from detention facilities, illicit networks may expand to meet these demands. This could

d There are few indications that the SDF has the capacity to test the detainee population for COVID-19, so please note that the absence of confirmed cases in detention facilities is not a complete assurance that COVID-19 has not spread in SDF-run prisons and camps holding Islamic State detainees. To see the latest COVID-19 humanitarian update on the Syrian Arab Republic, see United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the World Health Organization.

progressively erode security at the camps and prisons. If the personnel maintaining, servicing, and guarding the detention facilities also continue to experience a variety of pressures associated with COVID-19, which would be significantly amplified if there is an outbreak in the facilities, it could exacerbate security vulnerabilities and create additional opportunities for illicit networks, criminal activity, and low-level corruption.

Although it is hard to anticipate the precise effects of COVID-19 on detention facilities, mounting evidence suggests the pandemic could impact health and safety in both direct and indirect ways. COVID-19 transmission among populations in these sites remains a distinct possibility, and might directly affect detainees, guards, and other people who maintain detention facilities. Meanwhile, the pandemic’s indirect effects, which this article investigates, are already making bad problems worse within the prisons and camps. Minimizing the impact of COVID-19 on detention facilities, and improving their conditions writ large, could help curb the demand for criminal activity and reduce the incentives for corrupt behaviors in the camps and prisons. In turn, slowing growth of networks supplying detainees with money, goods, and services may also prevent the Islamic State and possibly other violent extremist groups operating in Syria, from leveraging such contacts in the weeks, months, and years ahead.

### Backdrop

Despite longstanding reservations among stakeholders about the suitability and sustainability of detention of Islamic State members in northeastern Syria, supplemental measures and alternatives to the current configuration are slow to come to fruition.<sup>14 e</sup> This response, or lack thereof, leaves the SDF with the unenviable but essential task of managing a humanitarian and security crisis under the shadow of a global pandemic.

With or without COVID-19, it is hard to disentangle all the factors influencing dynamics within SDF detention facilities, but overstretched resources, logistical issues, and uncertainty about

e Syrian Kurdish officials have repeatedly indicated that their force’s capacity to process and manage thousands of supposed Islamic State detainees is strained in a variety of interviews and statements. Liz Sly and Louisa Loveluck, “Kurdish-led forces put down revolt by ISIS detainees at prison in Syria,” *Washington Post*, March 30, 2020; “SDF: Not enough guards at Syria camp holding Islamic State Families,” Reuters, October 13, 2019; Eric Schmitt, “Pentagon Wades Deeper into Detainee Operations in Syria,” *New York Times*, April 5, 2018. A variety of government documents, research products, and news reports validate such claims, indicating that critical stakeholders in the region, namely the SDF, lack the necessary resources and capabilities to manage Islamic State detainees. John Dunford and Jennifer Cafarella, “ISIS’s Opportunity in Northern Syria’s Detention Facilities and Camps,” Institute for the Study of War, May 13, 2019; Elizabeth Dent, “The Unsuitability of ISIS Detentions in Syria,” Middle East Institute, Policy Paper 2018-5, March 2019; “Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2019-October 25, 2019,” released November 19, 2019.

the future<sup>f</sup> make the system sensitive to pressures.<sup>5</sup> Events and policies beyond the perimeters of detention sites can have spin-off effects that influence the lives of detainees and people working in the prisons and camps.<sup>15</sup> The United States' drawdown from Syria and Turkey's subsequent incursion into Syria in October 2019, for example, notably affected the health, security, and disposition of the populations in several facilities.<sup>16</sup> Albeit to varying degrees, as some locations faced more direct problems than others due to their proximity to armed forces involved in the Turkish offensive,<sup>17</sup> these events shaped staffing considerations for security forces and

f In the author's interview with him, General Mazloum also emphasized the effects of political uncertainty on the SDF's ability to uphold morale and manage detention facilities in the longer term: "In our fight against ISIS, the most helpful support for us is to admire our current relations. Because the people here still don't know what the political future is going to be in the region, that makes them feel weaker for the future. Because of the American withdrawal decision for two times, that gave less hope to the people that the bright political future will be reached." Author interview, SDF Commander General Mazloum Abdi, June 21, 2020.

g Some rudimentary problems, like overcrowding and poor sanitation, stem from the physical unsuitability of facilities holding Islamic State detainees. Though a few detention sites occupy structures designed for the purpose they serve, such as a former government prison in Hasaka, many are makeshift establishments. From schools converted into prisons in Kobane and Ain Issa to a series of emergency and transitional shelters propped up in camps, most sites seem unfit to hold for prolonged periods the populations they do, especially in seasonal weather. Charlie Savage, "The Kurds' Prisons and Detention Camps for ISIS Members, Explained," *New York Times*, October 22, 2019.

NGOs,<sup>18</sup> which reduced security, disrupted essential maintenance work, and diminished humanitarian assistance, particularly with regard to medical care.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, circumstances in and around the detention facilities in northeastern Syria, and efforts to manage COVID-19, are already affecting the camps and prisons in complex ways. Economic, political, and logistical factors hinder the AANES' efforts to prevent and respond to COVID-19 writ large, which trickle down and impact the SDF's capabilities in detention facilities. At a time where humanitarian assistance is vital to the COVID-19 response, reports indicate that COVID-19 aid routed through Damascus, like resources from the World Health Organization, does not reliably reach northeastern Syria and other parts of the country.<sup>20</sup> To make matters worse, restrictions at Yaroubia border crossing, which closed because a U.N. Security Council resolution did not reauthorize its use,<sup>h</sup> and Faysh Khabour (Semalka), which reduced operations because of COVID-19, further limit "the movement of humanitarian aid into these areas."<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, Turkey's recent disruptions to the water supply in a section of northeastern Syria have impacted areas

h In January 2020, the Yaroubia border crossing closed because a U.N. Security Council resolution did not reauthorize its use. Today, this closure affects the movement of aid in northeastern Syria, leading to shortages of medicine and other supplies. Colum Lynch, "Bowling to Russia, U.N. Halts Funding for Pandemic Relief in Northeastern Syria," *Foreign Policy*, May 13, 2020; "Syria: Aid Restrictions Hinder Covid-19 Response: UN Should Reauthorize Assistance from Iraq; Damascus Should Allow Passage," Human Rights Watch, April 28, 2020.



*Women living in al-Hol camp, which houses relatives of Islamic State group members, walk inside the camp in al-Hasakeh governorate in northeastern Syria on March 28, 2019. (Giuseppe Cacace/AFP via Getty Images)*

**“Unfortunately, if we have any [cases of COVID-19] in the future, the situation will not be good at all ... our capabilities to control [COVID-19 in the prisons and camps] are very weak.”**

**- General Mazloum Abdi, Commander, Syrian Democratic Forces**

that encompass detention facilities, making it hard for people to access water and practice basic sanitation measures.<sup>22</sup> In turbulent, overpopulated facilities with poor conditions, limited water supply could diminish the quality of life, stoke discord, and invite numerous health risks, including (given, for example, the importance of hand washing to protect against the disease) the spread of COVID-19.<sup>23</sup>

The SDF, with some support from the coalition and non-governmental organizations, has implemented measures to prevent and counter the spread of COVID-19 in detention facilities.<sup>24</sup> Security forces reportedly receive additional training on sanitation, infection prevention and management procedures, and proper use of personal protective equipment.<sup>25</sup> Changes in day-to-day operations within detention facilities seem to include things like limiting physical contact, reducing staff and staff rotations, restricting the mobility of the population, and providing only essential services.<sup>26</sup> In Al-Hol, for instance, stalls in the markets for detainees temporarily closed.<sup>27</sup> Preventative measures such as these are necessary and commendable. Still, no matter how directly COVID-19 affects the camps and prisons, the resource-strained SDF and its partners will have to contend with the knock-on effects of the pandemic. On this point, General Mazloum told the author that if an outbreak occurs, “it will affect and impact work against [Islamic State],” like the SDF’s counterterrorism operations, “because we will be busy” managing the situation in detention facilities.<sup>28</sup>

Like the impact of the latest U.S. drawdown and Turkey’s October 2019 incursion into Syria, COVID-19 has the potential to affect humanitarian and security conditions directly and indirectly in the SDF-run camps and prisons. Preventing the potential transmission of COVID-19 among detainees, security forces, aid workers, and other personnel who maintain detention sites should remain a top priority for facility administrators, the SDF, and the latter’s partners in the coalition to defeat the Islamic State. However, given the indirect effects COVID-19 could have on the prisons and camps, such as stoking uncertainty among detainees, disrupting humanitarian assistance, and affecting the staffing of security forces in detention facilities, stakeholders ought to also remain vigilant about the dangers associated with these dynamics. To support that objective, this article pivots to discuss how COVID-19 may invite security risks by making camps and prison in northeastern Syria more permissive to illicit networks, criminal activity, and low-level corruption. At various points, it will also discuss how the situation might evolve in the event of an outbreak in a camp, prison, or across multiple sites in the detention system.

## **How COVID-19 Adds Urgency to Detainee’s Desires for Change**

With or without COVID-19 transmission in detention facilities, circumstances surrounding the pandemic add urgency to Islamic State detainees’ desires to change their situation in SDF-run camps and prisons. In an interview with the author on June 22, 2020, General (Ret) Joseph Votel, who served as commander of U.S. Central Command from March 2016 to March 2019, noted that “a COVID outbreak would act as an accelerant in these detainee camps and prisons—making bad situations worse; making it harder to get support where it is needed; and underscoring the narrative that coalition forces are not focused on or able to take care of the people. This would be a powerful narrative for [the Islamic State] to exploit against the international community—and especially the West.”<sup>29</sup> With that in mind, this section looks at how detainees have been trying, and may in the case of an outbreak, accelerate their efforts, to resist the SDF by challenging power dynamics, rioting or attempting to escape from detention facilities, and making open calls for help.

Defiance of preventative measures implemented by officials in detention facilities is one way that detainees attempt to change their circumstances. One report noted that detainees flouting COVID-19 guidance in the camps argued that “the virus is part of god’s wrath against infidels.”<sup>30</sup> This narrative mimics pandemic-related propaganda produced and distributed by the Islamic State and its sympathizers.<sup>31</sup> To an extent, these propaganda products might help strengthen the resolve of enduring members inside and outside detention facilities by disseminating a narrative of persecution and injustice, and encouraging followers to fight back.<sup>32</sup> If an outbreak ultimately sickens a significant number of detainees, Islamic State media may be opportunistic in highlighting the situation further, using it to draw sympathy, mobilize recruits, and call for retributive attacks.

Runaways, riots, and breakout attempts were issues for detention facilities before the pandemic,<sup>33</sup> and now, uncertainty associated with COVID-19 may create a sense of urgency to escape, motivating some detainees to take matters into their own hands. Historically, “assaulting prisons and inciting prison riots are cornerstones of jihadi operational strategy,” and the Islamic State has leveraged such practices.<sup>34</sup> An early 2020 report to Congress noted that “the longer [Islamic State] prisoners are held in SDF prisons, the greater the potential for them to organize breakouts.”<sup>35</sup> COVID-19, and issues exacerbated by the pandemic, may already serve as a rallying point for Islamic State detainees. Since the end of March 2020, one prison in Hasaka experienced two riots.<sup>36</sup> While speculative, multiple sources raised the idea that stress around COVID-19 played a contributing role in the unrest.<sup>37</sup> As the SDF adapts its security presence within detention facilities to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, the risks of riots and breakout remain high. If an outbreak occurs in the facilities and significantly affects security forces and other administrators in detention sites, further reductions in staffing or substitutions with personnel who have less experience managing camps or prisons, could further amplify these risks.

Detainees with cell phones and internet access, particularly foreign women in the camps, use online platforms to discuss their grievances, make their trying situations known to others, and

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**- General (Ret) Joseph Votel, former Commander, U.S. Central Command**

overtly call for support.<sup>i</sup> A recent report by the International Crisis Group detailed the role of communications technology in spreading rumors and conspiracies related to COVID-19 in the camps.<sup>38</sup> A range of evidence also suggests that detainees use social media and messaging platforms to call on others for support in the form of donating money, carrying out targeted attacks against people accused of spying, or facilitating efforts to smuggle people out of the detention facilities.<sup>39</sup> At least anecdotally, there appear to be more posts of this variety surfacing online during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>40</sup> One researcher from the Rojava Information Center speculates that a reduced guard presence associated with COVID-19 may influence this uptick in online messaging from detention facilities.<sup>41</sup> In the camps especially, if an outbreak occurs and the mobility of detainees is severely restricted within a site to prevent the spread of the virus, online activities like those mentioned above may increase.

### **How COVID-19 Might Bolster Illicit Networks Aiding Detainees**

Numerous accounts suggest that a variety of underground networks already exist to facilitate the exchange of money, goods, and services for at least some detainees,<sup>42</sup> and COVID-19 may see these networks grow in size, scope, and capability if they are left unchecked. Here, it is interesting to note that ideological and personal sympathies may motivate some people to help detainees, while material incentives

might drive others to act. In any case, it is hard to know precisely how many actors are involved in such activities. With this caveat, this section explores how these networks may continue to expand and improve their operations if left unchecked.

Compelling evidence suggests that supportive networks continue to help money flow into, out of, and around detainees in the camps, predominately among foreign women.<sup>43</sup> Given the state of the camps and prisons, the relative wealth of some foreign detainees is paradoxical.<sup>44</sup> A recent report to Congress citing the DIA notes, “female ISIS members continued to conduct operations—such as attacks against camp security personnel—in Al-Hol using funds received via wire transfers.”<sup>45</sup> While some finances sent to the camps hail from inside Syria—evidence of money transfers from Idlib, for instance—other funds come from farther afield.<sup>j</sup> In a media interview, a man working in the “money transfer facility” in Al-Hol illustrates this trend, noting that “some [Islamic State] women are receiving large amounts of money, exceeding \$3,000 monthly, from their relatives and friends in Turkish-backed opposition areas in Idlib and also from abroad, mostly from Turkey and several European countries.”<sup>46</sup> At least anecdotally, online fundraising campaigns geared toward garnering material support for detainees, particularly women, children, and foreigners in the camps, appear to have been especially active online during the pandemic.<sup>47</sup> If an outbreak occurs, sympathetic networks may be more motivated to support the cause, siphoning more money to the numerous financial webs that raise (or at least claim to raise) funds to help detainees.<sup>48</sup>

It is noteworthy that some detainees are capable of amassing resources and acquiring contraband in SDF detention facilities, hinting at varying degrees of logistical coordination to facilitate these activities.<sup>49</sup> Trends likely differ between sites, as the environment in the camps seems to offer more affordances than the prisons, but security vulnerabilities are systemic.<sup>50</sup> As a basic example, the SDF supposedly prohibits cell phones in the annexed section of Al-Hol, where foreign (here meaning non-Syrian and non-Iraqis) Islamic State affiliates are held, and yet, several accounts indicate that people in this area of the camp have phones.<sup>51</sup> Other items reportedly smuggled into the camps include knives, hammers, and firearms.<sup>52</sup> In the current environment, detainees may be even more motivated to hoard supplies or use backchannels to acquire materials.<sup>53</sup> In a media interview, a security officer in Al-Hol explained, “Last month [approximately April 2020], we found a big tent used as a warehouse for dozens of 25-litre kerosene containers, to be used in making explosive devices.”<sup>54</sup> In June 2020, raids in the foreigners annex of Al-Hol upturned “large quantities of inflammable

i The author has observed that networks of social media accounts that appear to be maintained by women in Kurdish-run detention camps manifest on platforms including Telegram, Facebook, and Instagram. These users share a range of content including pictures of their living conditions, meals, and children, as well as commentary about events inside and outside the camps. Even though it is difficult to fact-check every post, some appear to be less founded than others. An article by Elizabeth Tsurkov illustrates this phenomenon with anecdotes about women in Al-Hol, noting, “Supporters of the jihadist organisation also routinely spread false stories inside Al-Hol and on the social media platform Telegram, including of supposed crimes by the camp’s management: tales of organ harvesting, murder, mutilation, even of the kidnapping of children for recruitment into the ranks of the Turkey-based Kurdish PKK militia, which is linked to the SDF.” Elizabeth Tsurkov, “Uncertainty, violence, and the fear of fostering extremism in Syria’s al-Hol camp,” *New Humanitarian*, August 27, 2019.

j A report citing the DIA noted, “residents of the camps have received financial support from external ISIS supporters outside of Syria.” “Operation Inherent Resolve, Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019,” released February 4, 2020, p. 47. For more on this phenomenon, see also “Twenty-fifth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities,” United Nations Security Council, January 20, 2020, pp. 13-14; Hisham Arafat, “Remittances for ISIS women in northeast Syria’s al-Hawl camp trigger imminent resurgence of the jihadist group,” *North Press Agency*, May 31, 2020; Roj Mousa and Mohammad Habash, “Documents – Money orders from Idlib to ISIS familiar in al-Hawl camp, northeastern Syria,” *North Press Agency*, February 26, 2020; Aaron Zelin, “Wilayat al-Hawl: ‘Remaining’ and Incubating the Next Islamic State Generation,” *Washington Institute*, October 2019.

bottles ... consisting of citric acid, alcohol, and other materials.<sup>75k</sup> According to one news report, camp administrators have limited the amount of citric acid coming into the facility as a result of this development.<sup>56</sup> In the event of an outbreak at detention facilities, it is possible smugglers might think twice about coming to these sites. However, if the economic situation in Syria continues to inflate the price of goods,<sup>57</sup> especially within detention facilities, the potential market for smuggled items like medicine, cash, cell phones, false identity documents, and weapons during an outbreak may increase incentives that draw illicit networks to these facilities.

In addition to financial schemes and an underground market for goods, human smuggling networks, and the stakeholders that enable such activities, are an enduring issue in the prisons and camps. There are security challenges associated with monitoring smuggling routes during the pandemic, which receive more attention in the following section, but it is crucial to recognize that smugglers coming into and out of detention facilities may invite COVID-19-related health risks.<sup>58</sup> Despite this reality, the market for human smugglers is unsurprising given that, as has already been noted, there have been numerous reports of breakout attempts, runaways, and riots. A variety of players appear to make these efforts possible, including detainees themselves, financiers, criminal networks, smugglers, and even some security forces, humanitarian workers, and personnel servicing detention facilities.<sup>59</sup> One interesting effort promoted on Telegram titled (“Fukku al-Asirat” [Free the Female Prisoners]), which reportedly claims to raise money to help smuggle women and children out of the camps, has alleged links to al-Qa`ida supporters operating in Idlib.<sup>60</sup> It is hard to know how many Islamic State detainees escape the detention facilities in this manner due to the surreptitious nature of smuggling, but it does not appear to be a rare occurrence.<sup>61</sup> Demonstrating the relevance of this problem, it was reported in mid-June 2020 that three Islamic State-affiliated women had been arrested in northeastern Syria after fleeing SDF custody and moving toward Turkish-occupied areas with the help of “some brokers and ISIS cells in the region.”<sup>62</sup> Like other illicit networks, it is hard to know how human smugglers operations could change if there is an outbreak in the detention facilities. Even so, as is the case with networks bringing in materials to the camps, if either the cost or demand for such services rises, the danger of contracting or spreading COVID-19 may not dissuade people from facilitating such activities altogether.

In recent weeks, the SDF and the coalition made a concerted effort to disrupt Islamic State networks in parts of northeastern Syria. General Mazloum told the author that the SDF-led “Deterrence of Terrorism” campaign,<sup>1</sup> which was launched earlier this month (June 2020), was a response to increased Islamic State activity, partic-

ularly in a “corridor” used by the group to go from Syria to Iraq.<sup>63</sup>

General Mazloum noted, “Because of COVID-19, we limited our movement in this region and [the Islamic State] took advantage of this” by increasing their mobility.<sup>64</sup> In conjunction with counterterrorism operations targeting activities in that corridor, the SDF campaign also involved an operation in the annexed section of the Al-Hol camp, which reportedly included raids and measures to collect biometric data and records of people in this area.<sup>65</sup> When asked about the factors driving the two-pronged approach to the campaign, General Mazloum told the author that there was “cooperation between some of these cells in the desert where we conducted operation and some of [the Islamic State] supporters inside the camp.”<sup>66</sup> According to General Mazloum, the SDF had also received reports that “a group of ISIS fighters are planning to attack Al-Hol camp in order to release some of the important” people inside the facility, and that is why the two operations occurred at approximately the same time.<sup>67</sup> Considering the recent gains made against the Islamic State during the Deterrence of Terrorism campaign,<sup>68</sup> it is important to recall General Mazloum’s point that if a COVID-19 outbreak occurs in detention facilities, “it will affect and impact work against” the Islamic State as security forces’ efforts to manage the situation in prisons and camps will divert attention and resources away from counterterrorism operations.<sup>69</sup>

### How COVID-19 Could Further Undermine Security to Crime and Corruption

As COVID-19 affects dynamics inside and outside detention facilities, guards and other people managing the facilities may be vulnerable to targeted attacks, forced to limit services and patrols in critical areas, and, as explained below, more likely to work in a corrupt manner. Particularly in combination, these dynamics could greatly exacerbate security vulnerabilities and create an environment that is relatively permissive to the Islamic State and networks abetting the group’s adherents. General Votel noted to the author, “The Islamic State and its networks will only gain from these conditions. They’ve been waiting to make the case that ‘nothing has changed’ and will take this opportunity to recruit and grow their capabilities.”<sup>70</sup>

Security forces, humanitarian workers, healthcare providers, maintenance crews, and local vendors, and even detainees themselves, may be increasingly vulnerable to attacks during the COVID-19 pandemic. Attacks perpetrated by detainees, including physical violence and property destruction, are already a problem.<sup>71</sup> Deteriorating conditions, limited services, and diminished security might make the situation even more volatile.<sup>72</sup> In mid-June 2020, hours after security forces in Al-Hol conducted a campaign to search and document foreign detainees living in the annex, officials reportedly discovered the body of an Iraqi refugee “who own[ed] an Internet shop in the camp.”<sup>73</sup> The camp administrators reportedly accused Islamic State-affiliated women of attacking the man, and the supposed motivation for the murder was “that [the shop owner] cut off the internet from the entire camp during the hours of the security campaign.”<sup>74</sup> In the event that COVID-19 affects detainees, individuals might try to leverage it against guards and aid workers with pointed efforts to expose them to the virus.

Reduced staffing, and other dynamics related to managing COVID-19 in detention facilities such as limited contact between guards and detainees, may make it more difficult for guards and other personnel to adequately service and monitor detention sites. Research by the Rojava Information Center (RIC) raised concerns

k Citric acid has many uses, but it is also recognized as a common precursor for creating improvised explosives. “Respond and Mitigate: Bomb Threat Standoff Distances,” Joint Counterterrorism Assessment Team, accessed June 18, 2020.

l According to the official Twitter account of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the first phase of the “Deterrence of Terrorism” campaign against Islamic State cells was completed by June 10, 2020, and resulted in the arrest of 110 members of sleeper cells and the clearing of more than 150 villages and farms in southern Hasaka and the countryside of Deir ez-Zor. The campaign began in early June 2020. See Coordination & Military Ops Center – SDF, “#Deterrence\_of\_Terrorism operations continues for the sixth consecutive day ...,” Twitter, June 9, 2020, and Coordination & Military Ops Center – SDF, “3SDF and the #International\_Coalition complete the first phase of #Deterrence\_of\_Terrorism against #ISIS cells ...,” Twitter, June 10, 2020.

that the understaffed authorities in Al-Hol, who have been “with a skeleton staff and minimizing rotation in and out of the camps” to prevent the spread of COVID-19, may not be able to sufficiently patrol, monitor, and service certain parts of the camp.<sup>75</sup> In turn, this pandemic-prevention measure may further enable smugglers to use clandestine routes to come and go from the facility.<sup>76</sup> A RIC researcher expanded on the impact of this situation, noting in early June 2020 that foreigners from the Netherlands, France, Finland, and Switzerland escaped from the camp “over the last month.”<sup>77</sup>

In terms of the prisons, a quarterly report to Congress by the Pentagon’s inspector general’s office, citing the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, noted that “riots and ongoing small-scale escape attempts underscore the ‘high-impact risk of a mass breakout.’”<sup>78</sup> The report continued, adding, “CJTF-OIR said that if the SDF were to reduce its guard force, as it did following the Turkish incursion into northeastern Syria in October 2019, the risk of a breakout would increase significantly.”<sup>79</sup> If COVID-19 transmission persists in northeastern Syria and reaches detention facilities, or if other issues divert security forces to other locations in northeastern Syria, reducing staff and/or limiting rotations of people working in the facilities, as it has done in the past, may be a measure the SDF takes to protect its forces. Moreover, if guards are significantly affected by the pandemic in the future, the SDF may have no choice other than maintaining facilities with fewer personnel.

Finally, a range of factors associated with COVID-19 could make some stakeholders working in detention facilities more inclined to behave in corrupt or unethical ways. At least anecdotally, past transgressions tend to involve acts like accepting bribes to permit or facilitate the smuggling of people, goods, or money.<sup>80</sup> These problems are not new, but COVID-19’s progressive socio-economic impact on northeastern Syria, “notably in food security and livelihoods,”<sup>81</sup> as well as the dynamic in SDF-run detention facilities, may alter some workers’ calculations concerning risky behavior and activities like bribery. People wanting or desperate for cash, for instance, might find more opportunities in the current environment because there is a market for enabling detainees and criminal networks, and possibly less oversight due to the strain on security forces. Sadly, if conditions in northeastern Syria deteriorate, some people working in detention facilities may feel that the personal, short-term benefits of enabling Islamic State detainees and their networks outweigh the long-term costs of their escape and continuity in operations. If a COVID-19 outbreak occurs in a camp or prison, it could create even more favorable conditions for such activities.

## Conclusion

Not unlike the ripple effects set off by events like the United States’ drawdown from Syria, and Turkey’s subsequent incursion into Syria in October 2019, which exacerbated humanitarian and security challenges in detention facilities, the pandemic invites a host of dangers to SDF-run camps and prisons. Although transmission among detainees would be a direct threat to health and security, the pandemic also has broader effects that undermine security in indirect ways.

Months before the W.H.O. announced the COVID-19 pandemic, a report citing the DIA noted, “overcrowding and poor access to basic services” in detention facilities “created openings for [Islamic State] supporters to exert control, and enabled [Islamic State] recruiting, crime, corruption, and violence.”<sup>82</sup> Similarly, COVID-19 already has, and probably will continue to, limit access to essential

**[The top commander of the SDF] General Mazloum told the author that if an outbreak occurs, “it will affect and impact work against [Islamic State],” like the SDF’s counterterrorism operations, “because we will be busy” managing the situation in detention facilities.**

goods and services in detention facilities. In the event of an outbreak in one or several detention facilities, conditions may quickly go from bad to worse, further increasing detainees’ desires to alter their circumstances. Possibly more than before, various financial and smuggling networks would likely grow to meet detainees’ demands, enhancing infrastructures that enable groups like the Islamic State and its adherents. Personnel maintaining, servicing, and guarding the detention facilities already experience a variety of pressures associated with COVID-19, which could exacerbate security vulnerabilities and create a permissive environment for illicit networks, criminal activities, and low-level corruption. If the pandemic affects these populations directly, spreading within the facilities, conditions may become even more hospitable to activities that enable Islamic State detainees and their contacts, at least in the short term.

When asked how he saw the security situation changing during the pandemic, particularly as the crisis becomes more acute, General Votel told the author, “The changes in the security situation would not be pronounced in the beginning, but the pandemic could progressively normalize the deteriorating situation of refugees and detainees—taking what was hoped to be a temporary situation and making it a permanent condition. It could normalize violence and replace legitimate supply chains with black markets and smuggling networks. In the long term, these effects would be dramatic. As this develops, it is important to understand the changing situation on the ground and make sure that either the SDF has what it needs to address the situation or conditions exist for NGOs to get on the ground.”<sup>83</sup>

For now, in addition to building capacity to prevent, detect, and manage COVID-19, policymakers and practitioners should consider looking for ways to manage the indirect, adverse effects the pandemic has on detention facilities. A recent report by the Rojava Information Center highlights some prospective considerations, including reopening border crossings for aid and delivering supplies like testing materials and medical equipment directly to the areas that need it.<sup>84</sup>

When asked about his outlook on the SDF’s management of sites holding Islamic State detainees in northeastern Syria, General Mazloum told the author, “the current situation regarding [Islamic State] detention facilities and also the camps is going to take a long time to be solved ... We will need to work in order to provide better conditions regarding food, security, and other materials to the prisons and the camps.”<sup>85</sup> General Mazloum highlighted the ongoing economic crisis and reiterated the point that the support the SDF receives to help with the camps and prisons is “not enough,” noting

that the SDF will need additional help from NGOs and other stakeholders to manage and improve the facilities.<sup>86</sup>

In individual camps and prisons, specific security-related, infrastructural, and procedural developments may enhance the SDF's ability to manage different sites, so long as the SDF has the means to implement the measures. Efforts like the recent SDF-led "Deterrence of Terrorism" campaign, which involved the creation of a robust database of detainees in the annex of Al-Hol,<sup>87</sup> may eventually help manage escape attempts, disrupt criminal activity, and enable stakeholders to process the cases of individual detainees and families. Acquiring technologies to help secure camps and prisons while maintaining a reduced presence may improve guards' abilities to patrol and monitor sites if there is an outbreak. Although infrastructure-related improvements are hard to implement in the short-term, relocating some of the detainee population to other facilities, when logistically feasible, may help manage tension and resources while disrupting the formation of networks.<sup>88</sup>

Coherent medium- and long-term responses to the detention of alleged Islamic State-affiliated adults and minors remain necessary.<sup>89</sup> Even amidst the backdrop of COVID-19, coalition members must acknowledge that one other way to reduce the burden on detention facilities involves repatriating foreign nationals. On this point, even in the event of an outbreak in these locations, it would be unwise for states to use the pandemic as a rationale for halting repatriation efforts. Instead, countries should consider developing contingency plans to repatriate citizens and alleviate some of the strain that perpetuates humanitarian and security problems.

Finally, as countries look inward to manage their response to COVID-19, political leaders and their constituencies may not want to devote their resources or sympathies toward improving the situation of the detainees. This sentiment is understandable, but apathy toward the issue will not alter the situation's trajectory nor deliver justice. Instead, it could lead to the proliferation of violent extremist networks. **CTC**

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# Pandemic Narratives: Pro-Islamic State Media and the Coronavirus

By Chelsea Daymon and Meili Criezis

**The coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic marks a unique event in human history—one that has captured the attention of the world, including supporters of violent extremist groups. This article examines unofficial pro-Islamic State media responses to the global pandemic during its early months and provides a content analysis of various themes and narratives. The authors collected and archived data from the online platforms Telegram, Twitter, and Rocket.Chat. In turn, 11 dominant themes and narratives were identified, highlighting the ways in which decentralized online pro-Islamic State networks create content designed to appeal to a diverse audience, capitalize on a current event, as well as provide a space for community engagement and camaraderie in a time of social isolation.**

**A**lthough the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic brought much of the world to a stand-still, the internet has allowed people to remain virtually connected and updated on the latest COVID-19-related news, including violent extremist groups and terrorist organizations. In the case of the Islamic State, unofficial media networks, consisting of decentralized Islamic State supporters online, have produced a wide range of responses to the pandemic. Documenting these narratives offers insights into how a decentralized media ecosystem allows space for supporters to converge and diverge from the viewpoints presented in official propaganda, tailor messages for a global audience, boost morale among supporters, and utilize the momentum of a catastrophic event to expand upon carefully shaped narratives previously developed by the terrorist organization.

The authors' dataset identified 11 themes and narratives in online Islamic State supporter content, which provides a framework for closer analysis on how Islamic State supporters are reacting to COVID-19. The authors argue that Islamic State supporters are

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essential elements in the Islamic State's messaging, helping shape narratives and ideals among the broader Islamic State community. During a global pandemic, this serves a number of purposes, such as developing a stronger sense of community; maintaining and shaping in-groups, out-groups, and notions of the "other;" supporting and advising; and offering opportunities to express anger, fear, and antipathy in an uncertain world. This article provides a detailed explanation of the themes and narratives found in the dataset, offering a comprehensive overview of pro-Islamic State unofficial media responses to the coronavirus. Although a number of official Islamic State media products—including issues of its Al Naba newsletter and an audio message from May 28, 2020, by the Islamic State's official spokesman, Abu Hamza al-Qurashi<sup>1</sup>—make references to the virus, understanding what the Islamic State's central media is saying about COVID-19 is important; knowing what the group's wider community is saying may be even more so.

## Methodology

Between January 20, 2020, and April 11, 2020, 442 items of online Islamic State supporter content were collected on three social networking and messaging platforms: Twitter, Telegram, and Rocket.Chat.<sup>a</sup> All 442 items of Islamic State supporter content are archived from online platforms that were selected due to a significant and stable pro-Islamic State presence, along with the authors' ability to access channels, groups, and chats on these platforms. Content was

<sup>a</sup> The authors monitored the online platforms Twitter, Telegram, and Rocket.Chat\* between the dates of January 20, 2020, and April 11, 2020, for Islamic State supporter content related to the coronavirus. For Telegram and Rocket.Chat, the authors collected everything they could find related to the coronavirus. For Twitter, content was collected from accounts identified as pro-Islamic State based on their tweet history. Since Twitter is less centralized compared to Telegram and Rocket.Chat, which have dedicated pro-Islamic State channels and groups, there could be a selection bias in the Twitter content archived for this study. The decentralized nature of Islamic State supporters on Twitter proved challenging. Although, the authors attempted to collect all Islamic State supporter content related to the coronavirus on Telegram, Rocket.Chat, and Twitter during the collection period, account shutdowns and the banning of user profiles, at times, made the task difficult. Despite these challenges, the authors assume that the dataset provides a large enough sample to infer dominant themes and narratives surrounding the coronavirus. When considering content found on the platforms, Telegram was the platform with the highest amount of content at 39% or 172 items of content, Twitter ranked second at 38% or 168 items, while Rocket.Chat came in third at 23% or 102 items.

\* Rocket.Chat is an open-source platform that allows users to create team chats either on the cloud or through their own servers. It can be used on mobile devices or through a desktop application. Rocket.Chat provides users with file-sharing capabilities, audio, video, LiveChat, and end-to-end encryption (E2E). Users can also customize their experiences on the platform through additional options, plugins, and themes. Similar to al-Qa'ida, the Islamic State has set up its own Rocket.Chat server where propaganda is disseminated, and users chat amongst themselves.

gathered from public and private channels, chats, and groups on Telegram and Rocket.Chat as well as from Twitter accounts identified as pro-Islamic State from their tweet history. It is important to note that due to privacy restrictions, any content related to the coronavirus in Direct Messages (DMs) on Twitter and Rocket.Chat, along with individual one-on-one chats and Secret Chats on Telegram, were inaccessible to the authors.

The authors analyzed the data for dominant themes and narratives in the content. This process was done through qualitative analysis and basic intercoder reliability looking for manifest and latent qualities in the content.<sup>b</sup> Upon completion, data was quantitatively analyzed while bearing in mind the dominant themes and narratives derived from the qualitative breakdown.

It should be emphasized that although the dataset is extensive, it does not capture the full population of Islamic State supporter content related to the coronavirus. Nevertheless, the authors can assume that it provides a large enough sample to therefore extrapolate dominant themes and narratives surrounding the virus. Furthermore, this study is limited to the access that both authors have to online platforms used by the Islamic State and its supporters. This includes pro-Islamic State groups and channels on these platforms. Online pro-Islamic State groups, channels, and user accounts are regularly shut down and removed due to platform terms of service, content regulations, and policies on terrorism and extremism.<sup>c</sup> Ac-

b Basic intercoder reliability consisted of the authors separately and independently going through the data and placing content into categories they deemed appropriate based on manifest and latent qualities. There was 95% agreement when reviewing the initial placement of content into categories, while any remaining discrepancies were reconciled through a second review of the content based on the themes and narratives found within. Manifest qualities refer to themes and narratives that are physically present in the content, while latent qualities refer to underlying meanings which require interpretation. Although some products could potentially be grouped into one category under a religious umbrella, the authors were careful to analyze both the manifest and latent qualities of each post, noting slight differences in semantics, attributions, and meanings. Thus, the Religious Support and Resources category focuses on religious advice, scriptures, and prayers for the ummah, while the Divine Punishment and Vindictive categories differ in that Divine Punishment is an act of God, while Vindictive content focuses on malicious retribution while God is not mentioned. Accordingly, each item of content was placed in an exclusive category based on the overall dominant theme or narrative present. For example, a Rocket.Chat post from March 20, 2020, referring to North America, Europe, and the coronavirus states “they getting [sic] payback for their crimes inash’Allah (God willing). now [sic] they experience some of pain [sic] experienced by the Ummah [sic].” Due to the overall vindictive quality of the post, this post was placed in the Vindictive category. On the other hand, a post on Twitter from March 3, 2020, states “O Allah how perfect are You. Coronavirus is the perfect punishment to bring Your disbelieving arrogants [sic] down to their knees and humility to the believing slaves.” Owing to the overriding narrative that the coronavirus is a punishment from God, this post was placed in the Divine Punishment category. Based on this careful system of analysis, each item of content was placed in one category with no items in the dataset appearing in more than one category.

c It is worth noting that Telegram and Europol have conducted a number of joint Referral Action Days where, through coordinated efforts, many pro-Islamic State channels and groups on Telegram have been disrupted and removed. Despite these actions, a continued Islamic State presence remains on Telegram. See “Referral Action Day with Six EU Member States and Telegram,” Europol, October 5, 2018; “Europol and Telegram Take on Terrorists Propaganda Online,” Europol, November 25, 2019; and Amarnath Amarasingam, “A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with an Official at Europol’s EU Internet Referral Unit,” *CTC Sentinel* 13:3 (2020): pp. 15-19.

cordingly, not every researcher or analyst conducting similar work will have the same experiences or access to identical pro-Islamic State platforms, groups, and channels; thus, replication of this study may produce different results.

Eleven themes and narratives were identified. A 12th category of “other” was noted since this content contained wide-ranging themes and narratives that did not fall into one of the 11 categories. Themes and narratives include:

- **Counting:** content listing the numbers of confirmed cases and deaths in African, Asian, European, South American, and North American countries. This also includes user-created graphs, announcements of prominent individuals becoming ill (for example, the United Kingdom’s Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Prince Charles), and citing the number of infected individuals on U.S. naval ships.
- **Conspiracies:** content about the virus being created or spread by unbelievers, the West, or a Zionist plot and the notion that the virus was created in a lab. Some of these postings contain musings mirroring anti-vaccination conspiracy theories.
- **Defeating Boredom:** content that offers ways of defeating boredom during social isolation. The majority of this content suggests performing religious practices.
- **Divine Punishment:** content that specifically refers to the coronavirus being an act of God, a punishment from God, or a “Soldier of Allah.” Notions of divine punishment are also attached to nations, with examples including China, the United States, and Israel as well as geographical regions such as the West. Additionally, issues like the Chinese government’s oppression of the Uighurs; matters surrounding the group being pushed out of its last territorial holding in Baghouz, Syria; prisons holding Islamic State detainees; and detention camps housing women and children associated with the Islamic State are similarly connected with notions of divine punishment.
- **Humor:** content contains a number of items that sarcastically mock individuals, groups, and religions denounced by the Islamic State and its supporters as nonbelievers (*kuffar*), rejectors (*rafidah*), and apostates (*murtadeen*).
- **Naming Groups:** content that indicates online channels and chats with coronavirus-themed names.
- **Practical Responses:** content offers advice on coronavirus symptoms and detection, along with discussions on wearing face masks. This content reflects similar advice found in the Islamic State’s Al Naba issue 225, which provides “sharia directives” of covering one’s mouth when sneezing or yawning, as well as avoiding “lands of the epidemic,” while those infected should not “leave from it.”<sup>22</sup>
- **Religious Support and Resources:** content includes imploring God to protect Muslims, *anasheed* (vocal *cappella* music), memes with scripture, Islamic remedies for the virus, discussions on mosques being closed, praying at home, reminders of faith, and discussions on divine plagues. It is important to note that the framing of this category is not meant to infer that religion does not have bearing on other themes and narratives in the dataset, including the divine punishment and vindictive categories.
- **Islamic State Coronavirus News:** content that denotes the sharing of Islamic State news on the coronavirus.

- **Socioeconomic Decay:** content includes discussions on what life will look like after the pandemic: social unrest, economic devastation, and the collapse of society.
- **Vindictive:** these narratives compromise rejoicing at perceived enemies becoming ill, wishing affliction as “payback”<sup>3</sup> for crimes against the Muslim community (*ummah*), and jubilation at death tolls and reports of mass graves in Western nations and China.

It is important to note that when considering Islamic State supporter content in the dataset, originally, some items are unassociated with the Islamic State but come from the wider jihadi community. Additionally, some of this content is also used by Islamic State supporters from ‘Islamic’-themed posts online, including content featuring generic religious advice related to the virus. These items are then reused or repurposed by Islamic State supporters, circulated in their online communities, and employed for their own agendas.

## The Data

As the coronavirus became a prominent topic in international news and daily discussions, the authors began noticing virus related content posted in pro-Islamic State channels, groups, and chats on Twitter, Telegram, and Rocket.Chat. Considering the timely nature of these posts and the coronavirus pandemic being a unique time in history, the authors began archiving Islamic State supporter content related to the pandemic. From January 20, 2020, to April 11, 2020, the authors gathered 442 items of online community content related to the coronavirus and associated with Islamic State supporters. Content includes 442 unique posts with text, images, video clips, memes, text with links to news stories or online groups to join, graphs, infographics, PDFs, and *anasheed*.

Content analysis revealed 11 themes and narratives, along with a 12th category of “other.” Figure 1 displays the breakdown of content for dominant coronavirus themes and narratives.

“Counting” made up the most content in the dataset at 23% (or 104 items). “Divine Punishment,” “Religious Support and Resources,” and “Vindictive” content followed at 16% each, with “Divine Punishment” consisting of 71 items of content and “Religious Support and Resources” and “Vindictive” with 70 items each. “Other” ranked third at 9% or 41 items. Languages used in the content—listed in order of frequency—are English, Arabic, content mixing English and Arabic, French, Indonesian, and Dhivehi (an Indo-Aryan language spoken mainly in the Maldives).

## Dominant Theme and Narratives

Scholar Daniel J. O’Keefe<sup>4</sup> argues that messages with narratives are more persuasive than messages that lack narratives, while scholars Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, and Laura Roselle<sup>5</sup> contend that strategic narratives are an approach used by political actors to form shared meaning and influence the actions of domestic and international actors. Themes provide narrative with resonance, while also offering connotations that communicate details to an audience beyond those in the direct message.<sup>6</sup> In the case of this study, 11 themes and narratives are found in the content analyzed, providing insight into how a decentralized, but centrally guided media ecosystem shapes coronavirus messaging among Islamic State supporters online.

Counting was the largest<sup>d</sup> subset of data, consisting of supporters sharing news updates on the number of coronavirus deaths by country, those infected with the disease, and prominent individuals being diagnosed. The countries mentioned in these various posts included Western nations, China, South Korea, Afghanistan, India, Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Algeria, Iraq, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Russia, Brazil, Ecuador, and Turkey.

One Rocket.Chat post<sup>7</sup> includes a graphic of the total number of cases by country where the United States was listed as the leading country in worldwide coronavirus cases. Accompanying this graphic is sarcastic commentary stating, “USA is the World Leader! Make America ‘great’ again, *insha’Allah* (God willing).” Aside from various countries’ coronavirus statistics, content also highlights city and region-specific information, particularly in relation to cities and states within the United States. An outlier within the counting category includes a comment on the coronavirus being present in Roj Camp.<sup>8e</sup>

Sharing statistics on coronavirus numbers does not require much effort or creativity on the part of those posting it. Additionally, the readily available nature of constantly changing information contributes to an environment where supporters are able to provide real-time updates. When considering the numbers posted by Islamic State supporters on coronavirus deaths and infections, some of the statistics cite major news sources, while other posts lack references, therefore the accuracy of the numbers in the counting category are disparate. Although a number of posts consist of tables displaying coronavirus statistics without commentary, the authors documented several supporters responding with comments such as “*Allahu akhbar* (God is great)” and “*Alhamdulillah* (praise be to God) this makes me happy!”<sup>9</sup> when seeing daily increases in reported infections and fatalities. Hypothetically, these counting posts provide an opportunity for supporters to develop a stronger sense of community and bonding by expressing shared feelings of delight over the plight of their perceived enemies.<sup>10</sup>

A number of conspiracy themes surrounding the coronavirus are present in the data. These include the virus being created or spread by unbelievers, the West, or a Zionist plot; that the virus was created in a lab; and anti-vaccination conspiracies.<sup>f</sup> A post on Rocket.Chat<sup>11</sup> from March 24, 2020, proposes a conspiracy theory that “Murta-deen (apostates) and Kuffar (nonbeliever) journalists and so called [sic] analysts” are purposely spreading the virus among the ranks of the “Mujahideen” and Islamic State “brothers” and “sisters” held in camps and prisons. A different user responded by suggesting that the “kuffar (nonbelievers) have already been purposefully leaving Muslims in disgusting conditions and abusing them,” making them

d The authors listed “divine punishment” and “religious support and resources” as two separate categories but if they had been grouped under the same category, this would constitute the largest meta category of data.

e Roj Camp is a refugee/internally displaced person (IDP) camp located in northeast Syria and under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-led militia. It houses a number of women and children associated with the Islamic State, making it, along with other camps holding women and children linked to the group, a topic of interest for Islamic State supporters.

f Anti-vaccination conspiracies spread false information about the dangers and/or the effectiveness of vaccines. Common conspiracies include assertions that vaccinations cause autism, are a part of a government attempt to monitor or infect people, and are simply a way for companies to profit financially at the expense of human lives.

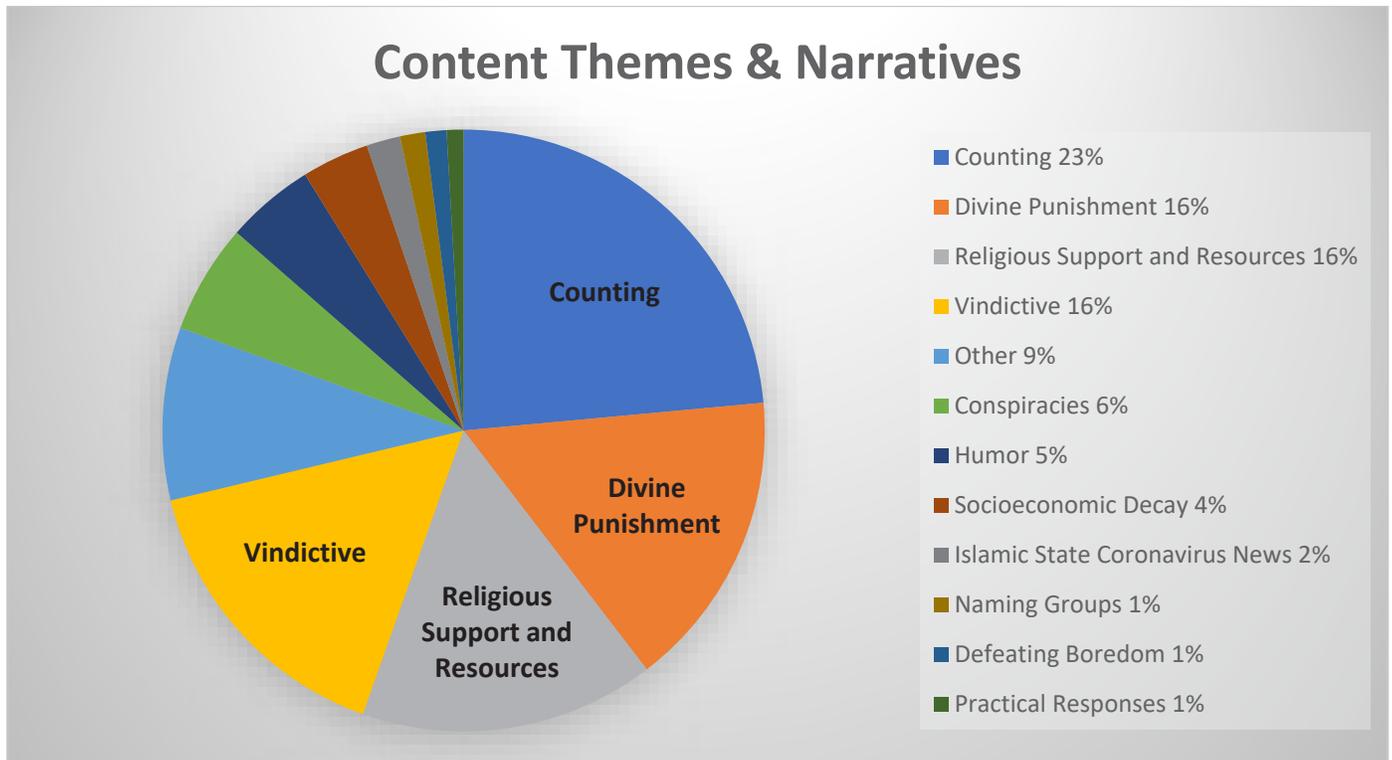


Figure 1: Breakdown of themes and narratives in the Islamic State supporter coronavirus content

more susceptible to disease.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, a lengthy post with an anti-vaccination narrative was posted on Telegram by “Glad Tidings to The Strangers,”<sup>13</sup> on March 26, 2020. The post argues against vaccinations in general, claiming that “the doctor who injects with these vaccines does not even know what they are putting in the person they are injecting ... These kuffar (nonbelievers) don’t [sic] care about anyone.” In their insight on conspiracies surrounding the coronavirus, scholars Marc-André Argentino and Amarnath Amarasingam have noted the harm done by anti-vaccination narratives in relation to trust in science.<sup>14</sup> During a global pandemic, such narratives are highly problematic when trying to control and eradicate a contagious virus.

Although posts about defeating boredom were not numerous, a small amount of content emphasized spiritual growth as a way to pass the time during quarantine. A channel on Telegram shared a message urging “brothers and sisters to make use of this time to gain closeness to the Rabbul’Alaalameen (Lord of the Universe)” and posted a check list of “Things you can do in Quarantine In Order to Use Your Time Wisely *Fi Allah* (for God).” The list encouraged activities such as reading the Qur’an daily, learning Arabic, *dhikr* (ritual prayer), and making *dua* (invocation).<sup>15</sup>

Seventy-one items of content with the divine punishment theme appear in the dataset. A large number of posts relate to what the Islamic State and its supporters perceive as the enemy, encompassing nonbelievers (*kuffar*), rejectors (*rafidah*), and apostates (*mur-tadeen*), including Shi`a, Shi`a militias, Iranians, and the Iranian government. Numerous posts also framed the virus as God’s divine punishment on enemy nations and China for its oppression of Muslims and, more specifically, Uighurs. Although the plight of Uighurs has occasionally been mentioned in official propaganda and by Islamic State supporters, COVID-19 has amplified narratives on the Chinese government’s oppression of the Uighurs, bringing this issue

to the forefront. The scholar Aymenn Al-Tamimi has pointed out conflicting narratives surrounding China and the coronavirus in official Islamic State propaganda, noting that the Islamic State’s Al Naba 220 newsletter cautions supporters against judging the virus as a punishment on China by God, and that the newsletter also expresses delight over the spread of the virus in the country.<sup>16</sup> Issue 226 of Al Naba further details the pandemic as an illustration of God’s punishment on nations, while mentioning the potential economic, security, and social costs of the virus on enemy states.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the editorial highlights “crusader” countries being preoccupied by the virus, while suggesting that the pandemic provides an opportunity to strike Western nations, similar to attacks by the Islamic State in London, Paris, Brussels, and other locations.<sup>18</sup>

The Battle of Baghouz is an additional topic commonly referenced in the divine punishment content found in the dataset. Although the defeat in Baghouz marked the end of the Islamic State’s territorial claims, supporters revisited this event by incorporating a coronavirus-centered narrative, suggesting that the virus is God’s vengeance on those involved in the group’s removal from its last pocket of territory. In a similar vein, one comment mentioned Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s death in October 2019, speculating that “when the blood of the caliph gets shed disaster will hit earth.”<sup>19</sup>

When considering the Islamic State’s official spokesman Abu Hamza al-Qurashi’s May 28, 2020, audio statement titled “And the Disbelievers Will Know to Whom the Final Abode/Home Belongs” (a quote from Qur’anic verse 13:42), parts of the speech make reference to the coronavirus being a punishment of God on the “crusaders,” nonbelievers, and the *Tawagheet* (an idol, tyrant, oppressor) who fought against Muslims, God’s religion, and the Islamic State.<sup>20</sup> The speech also states that, due to the virus, the “crusaders” are now suffering under conditions that Islamic State fighters experienced at the hands of their enemies, such as having their bodies

“thrown in the streets” and living under imposed curfews.<sup>21</sup> Comparable notions are found in Islamic State supporter content within the dataset, particularly in the Divine Punishment and Vindictive categories. This points to Islamic State supporter content reflecting overall themes promoted by the group’s spokesman and central media, while also focusing on topics not touched upon in official propaganda.

Humor comprises 5% of content in the data. This category included jokes about toilet paper shortages, sarcastic comments about the coronavirus spreading in Iran, and anti-Chinese sentiments. Some content also included generic humor about the virus unrelated to pro-Islamic State opinions. For example, one post by an Islamic State supporter on Twitter<sup>22</sup> used the hashtag “#CoronaJihad,” joking that Vladimir Putin will contract the virus. Although Hindu nationalists in India have extensively used “#CoronaJihad” to promote anti-Muslim sentiments,<sup>23</sup> this supporter’s tweet uses the hashtag to imply a different meaning: the virus is fighting against a leader of the “kuffar.”

Many people turn to humor during times of crisis as a coping mechanism.<sup>24</sup> The Islamic State supporter content reflects this with supporters posting content that mocks their perceived enemies while framing their adversaries as being absurd. Much of the content is lighthearted yet with underlying prejudice.

During data collection, the authors identified six newly established pro-Islamic State groups and channels with coronavirus or pandemic names and themes, in both English and Arabic. Examples include the now defunct Telegram channels “The Pandemic,” “korounna,” and “COVID-19,” among others. Naming groups could be undertaken for various reasons to include: supporters exploiting a timely subject, supporters creating groups and channels dedicated to coronavirus news and discussion, or supporters evading pro-Islamic State group and channel shutdowns through the use of non-Islamic State-themed names.<sup>25</sup> When considering the content within these groups and channels, the most plausible reasons are utilizing the newsworthy and global nature of the virus, along with a desire to discuss COVID-19 in environments of shared belief.

Although the religious support and resources category represents 16% (or 70 items) of content in the dataset, it consists mainly of narratives offering prayers of protection to the *ummah* (the greater Muslim community), content referring to plagues mentioned in religious scripture,<sup>g</sup> discussions on prayer due to mosques closures, and content on faith. Some of the more interesting content suggest ‘Islamic’ remedies for the virus, including a Twitter post on February 28, 2020, that suggests “A cure for every disease,” stating a hadith from “Al-Bukhari and Muslim,” noting the use of “Black Seed regularly, because it is a cure for every disease, except death.”<sup>26</sup>

The majority of religious content in the dataset offers advice, along with comfort to the Islamic State community online. While the majority of online content in the dataset is interactive—with users being able to comment and share posts—the religious content provides users with a means of expressing their thoughts and

prayers with other like-minded individuals. Moreover, the content offers insight into a softer side of pro-Islamic State messaging, displaying a more human element of the Islamic State community online than is regularly discussed.

Islamic State coronavirus news is not a dominant theme in the dataset; however, it is important to note from a communications perspective. The data reflects that content with articles and screenshots from mainstream media reports discussing the Islamic State’s response to the coronavirus was shared among pro-Islamic State community members. A Rocket.Chat post from April 9, 2020, includes a tweet that provided a link to an article called “How the Islamic State Feeds on Coronavirus.”<sup>27</sup> Several other Telegram posts feature news articles that directly display images of a coronavirus infographic from the Islamic State’s Al Naba 225 newsletter titled “Sharia Directives to Deal with Epidemics.” Along with the infographic, these posts included supporter commentary pointing out how mainstream media outlets help spread Islamic State propaganda to a wider public audience. Scholar Brigitte L. Nacos<sup>28</sup> has noted the relationship between mainstream media and terrorists’ content, recognizing how the media may unintentionally spread Islamic State propaganda to a wider audience (if precautions are not taken) by highlighting alarming or violent terrorist attacks, videos, and other content.<sup>29</sup> That being said, it is important to note that many news organizations and journalists remain cognizant of this potential issue and take precautions when covering terrorism or referencing terrorist propaganda.

Posts falling under the socioeconomic decay category cited economic collapse and societal decline as being the primary threat, not coronavirus itself. Several posts provided predictions that war would eventually erupt, and one commentary from a Telegram post on March 15, 2020, drew attention to the rise in U.S. gun sales with the added hope that it is a sign that “allies will turn against each other and the believers will take full advantage of it.”<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, one Twitter user seemed to express apprehension at mass civil unrest and advised others to prepare for the chaos.<sup>31</sup>

Seventy items of vindictive content are found in the dataset. Much of the content consists of posts celebrating perceived enemies becoming sick and narratives reflecting the virus as vengeful payback for crimes against the *ummah*. A post on Rocket.Chat<sup>32</sup> from March 19, 2020, states “there is no need to argue with the kuffar (nonbelievers) about the #coronavirus. just [sic] sit back an [sic] enjoy their pain and agony. and [sic] yes we are baqiyah (enduring/everlasting) by permission of allah [sic].”

As Figures 2 and 3 display, a number of images are also found in the vindictive category depicting virus cells alongside malicious narratives. The scholar Paul Messaris explains that images associated with narratives may have a more persuasive effect on their consumers.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, media strategists suggest that posts with images are more appealing to audiences and receive greater engagement.<sup>34</sup> This points to Islamic State supporters using known marketing tactics to promote and persuade fellow supporters online.<sup>35</sup> In the case of the vindictive content, the images used support the narratives associated with this category.

A few posts in the vindictive content category were aimed at well-known researchers in the terrorism studies field discussing issues surrounding the coronavirus on Twitter. Posts from Islamic State supporters include links to or screenshots of these Twitter posts followed by malicious comments directed at the researchers. This demonstrates that just as the authors follow the Islamic State and its supporters online, they similarly keep track of researchers

g In the Religious Support and Resources category, references to plagues originate from religious scripture and offer religious advice for dealing with plagues. Any references to plagues as punishment on non-believers and/or enemies were placed in the Divine Punishment category only if posts referred to the virus being a punishment by God. On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, posts wishing the virus as retribution on various actors yet without mentioning God as the punisher were placed in the Vindictive category.

in the field.

It is noteworthy that during the time of data collection, the authors found only one piece of supporter content related to biological terrorism. This item was placed in the “other” category and is a discussion about using an infected Islamic State supporter to spread the virus to the unbelievers (*kuffar*): A member in a private Telegram group mentions that “one of our brothers” was infected by coronavirus and in reply, another supporter responds “May Allah preserve his health. He should try to go infect others.”<sup>36</sup> Despite there being one post in the dataset on this subject, it is worth mentioning since it promotes using the virus as a weapon.

As researcher Jessica M. Davis suggests, several factors may account for the lack of Islamic State supporters’ posts promoting the



Figure 2: “The small coronavirus destroys the economy of the crusaders,” posted on a Rocket.Chat private group on April 6, 2020



Figure 3: Image posted on a Rocket.Chat private group on March 31, 2020

coronavirus as a biological weapon.<sup>37</sup> The highly contagious nature of the virus means it would be difficult to measure the number of people who contracted COVID-19 as the direct result of a biological terrorist attack. Tracking the number of fatalities would be difficult even if an infected Islamic State supporter were able to spread the disease. Depending on the objectives, these often-ambiguous dynamics may take away from any “immediate ‘glory’”<sup>38</sup> and accompanying ‘flashy’ terrorist attack footage that the Islamic State could use in its official media.

Although the dataset only indicates one discussion related to biological terrorism,<sup>h</sup> it is worth mentioning that a Tunisian arrest report<sup>39</sup> from April 16, 2020, notes that a jihadi recently released from prison was encouraging jihadis with coronavirus symptoms to cough, sneeze, or spit when in the presences of security officials as a means of spreading the virus. Moreover, in late May 2020, the sixth edition of a pro-Islamic State propaganda magazine targeting India—called the Voice of Hind (India) and thought to be associated with the group Junudul Khilafaah Al Hind<sup>40</sup>— encourages Muslims to become infected with the virus in order to spread it to security forces and disbelievers.<sup>41</sup> This indicates that while it is not a common narrative in this dataset, use of COVID-19 as a biological weapon has gained at least some traction in jihadi circles.

## Conclusion

The coronavirus data underpinning this article serves as a case study on the ways in which Islamic State supporters online construct various narratives through unofficial propaganda and individual commentary. As scholars Rosemary Pennington and Michael Krona state, “ISIS’s power also lies in the stories it tells of itself”<sup>42</sup>—stories that maintain an inherent flexibility that allow supporters to continue building on top of older narratives in order to maintain relevancy. These narratives may also veer from the official status quo and conflict with the beliefs of fellow comrades who develop their *own individual* understandings of the world, how it relates to them personally, and how they conceptualize it as Islamic State supporters.

A stark contrast between Islamic State supporter content and official Islamic State propaganda can be seen in the Counting category, which constitutes the largest subset in the data. Whereas some supporters regularly posted updates on the number of coronavirus deaths and infections across countries, this has not been seen in official Islamic State media products. Another area of differing views can be found in the Conspiracies category where some Islamic State supporters promoted conspiratorial theories regarding the coronavirus. Supporters who claim the virus was created in a lab or as part of a Zionist plot contradict and stray away from official Islamic State media narratives, which promote the virus as a form of divine punishment on the *kuffar* and the will of God. Then again, other Islamic State supporters celebrated the virus as a “soldier of Allah,”<sup>43</sup> falling in line with official Islamic State narratives of the virus being a punishment from God.

<sup>h</sup> It is worth noting that discussions on biological terrorism could be taking place in Direct Messages (DMs) on Twitter and Rocket.Chat, or in individual one-on-one chats and Secret Chats on Telegram, which were inaccessible to the authors.

<sup>i</sup> This special “lockdown” edition of Voice of Hind features articles related to the coronavirus with discussions ranging from the suffering of Muslims in India to taking advantage of Western nations that are preoccupied with the virus. “The Voice of Hind,” issue 6, May 29, 2020.

Although there are divergent ideas between the themes and narratives found in Islamic State supporter content and official Islamic State propaganda, the coronavirus provides the Islamic State and its community with a topic that unites supporters and offers opportunities to promote religious messages that serve in unifying its base. The supporter content goes a step further due to its interactive nature, serving as a mechanism to discuss COVID-19-related issues in various ways ranging from helpful to extreme to humorous. It also offers supporters a means of expression and kinship in an uncertain world that is socially isolated.

Themes and narratives in extremists' communications are important, whether in products produced by official media wings or those expressed by community members. Furthermore, identifying possible points of contention within an online ecosystem like that of the Islamic State may present an opportunity for counterterrorism-focused strategies to capitalize on discrepancies found in community content and official products. **CTC**

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# The Limits of ‘Shabaab-CARE’: Militant Governance amid COVID-19

By Christopher Hockey and Michael Jones

**Many terrorist groups have released statements advocating weaponizing COVID-19. Those entities exercising some form of territorial control, such as the Taliban and al-Shabaab, also face wider questions over the capacity and inclination of their administrative systems to effectively respond to the crisis. In Somalia, al-Shabaab has proactively established an isolation center and is issuing health advice, the latest extensions of a long-running experiment in militant governance. Previous humanitarian disasters revealed the group’s largesse to be ad hoc and rather mercurial. While recent strategic setbacks could change how it navigates this latest challenge, the pandemic may nevertheless expose intrinsic limitations in al-Shabaab’s approach to civic administration. The key issue is whether the authorities the group is fighting can do any better.**

**I**nternationally recognized governments are not the only stakeholders that have been deliberating over how to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. Communications released by jihadi organizations and their affiliated media outlets demonstrate a degree of hesitation about how to capitalize on the global crisis.

Transnational networks with little territorial control such as the remnants of the Islamic State inside Syria and Iraq and al-Qa`ida Central deemed COVID-19 a “Soldier of Allah,” sent to weaken the enemies of Islam and punish the disbelievers.<sup>1</sup> While rudimentary health advice has been circulated through these organizations’ official channels, they have also consistently claimed that jihad would itself provide protection and sought to ‘weaponize’ the virus by encouraging attacks against the “Crusader” enemy.<sup>2</sup>

Such propagandizing and proselytizing are expected and well documented, yet there has been little coverage of extremist move-

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ments actually ‘governing’ large populations, where entirely different challenges are presented by the pandemic. Some groups may be starting to display a pragmatic streak in their dealings. The Afghan Taliban, for example, is trying to proactively frame itself as a more proficient responder than the government in Kabul: prescribing health advice, calling for safe passage to humanitarian agencies, and advising businesses against raising prices on essential goods.<sup>3</sup> They have also dispatched “health teams to far flung provinces,” enforced quarantine procedures, and distributed “gloves, soap and masks.”<sup>4</sup> This is likely an exercise in self-preservation as much as self-aggrandizement given ‘supreme leader’ Haibatullah Akhundzada and several members of the group’s Doha office reportedly contracted the virus.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, such maneuvering speaks to the looming challenge COVID-19 creates for insurgent movements and their experiments in jihadi governance.

Whether the Taliban is an outlier or representative of an emerging trend is still unclear, but it is worth considering the past performance and prospective options facing other militant organizations that impose some form of territorial rule as they grapple with this crisis.

This article focuses on the specific case of al-Shabaab—an extremist group that has maintained extensive territorial and semi-territorial control in Somalia for over a decade—to understand how such actors are reacting to COVID-19. Drawing on journalistic accounts and existing scholarship, the article maps al-Shabaab’s response and existing capabilities to tackle the pandemic before identifying (and caveating) lessons from the group’s response to previous humanitarian disasters. It then enumerates incentives and challenges COVID-19 may raise for al-Shabaab, and contextualizes these within the wider management of the outbreak in Somalia.

## Al-Shabaab’s Response

At the time of writing, Somalia is perhaps only just beginning to feel the effects of the pandemic with the curve depicting a steady incline. By June 22, 2020, 2,812 cases and 90 deaths had been confirmed, according to most international sources.<sup>6</sup> These numbers—spread across all of Somalia’s regional states<sup>7</sup>—are relatively low by global comparisons. However, community transmission is well established and many more people have undoubtedly been infected by the virus than official figures suggest; there is simply not enough testing taking place, and many areas are inaccessible.<sup>8</sup> Reports note an increase in burials and challenges in accurately reporting deaths.<sup>9</sup> The economic impacts of COVID-19 are also beginning to be felt with vital remittances from the diaspora dropping significantly and food prices rising.<sup>10</sup>

Al-Shabaab’s official propaganda outlets initially remained relatively quiet. The virus first featured prominently in a Consultative Forum on Jihad in East Africa convened by the group’s Office for Policy and Wilayat (administrative divisions) in March 2020. The group warned Muslims to “take caution against” infectious diseases

like COVID-19 and suggested that its “spread is contributed to by the crusader forces who have invaded the country and the disbelieving countries that support them.”<sup>11</sup> The full statement—“a fatwa of scholars”—illustrates the absurdity of an organization purporting to be concerned with conservation on the one hand (pledging to “cooperate in preventing illegal tree logging and the erosion of pasture grounds”) and encouraging violence against the ‘crusader’ on the other (urging “the mujahideen [to] intensify the obligatory jihad”). Crucially, other resolutions emerging from the forum included a call for expanding public services such as “security, justice, education and health”—provided by the ‘Islamic Wilayat’.

In a speech directly addressing the pandemic at the end of April 2020, the infamous al-Shabaab spokesperson Ali Mahmoud Rage (‘Ali Dheere’) took the message further by suggesting that the virus may have been intentionally spread by foreign forces in Somalia.<sup>12</sup> He urged followers to “be cautious” of medical assistance from non-Muslims, to instead turn to Allah and to be charitable. Reiterating a message delivered by other officials during sermons, Rage argued that Muslims should celebrate because Allah is justly punishing the ‘disbelievers’ for their treatment of Muslims. However, he lamented that Somalis would also be affected due to the fact that the foreigners were in their land and suggested that this was further reason to “expel them from our country.” Measures taken by the international community and Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), most pertinently the closure of mosques, were criticized.

These messages have been repeated through al-Shabaab’s affiliated radio stations and online news sites,<sup>13</sup> as well as during a key sermon delivered in mosques across al-Shabaab-controlled territory in May 2020. The sermon added that those who are “weak in faith” would not be able to use prayer and charity to protect themselves from COVID-19.<sup>14</sup> Practical guidance was provided, including advice on how to live a healthy lifestyle and warnings to businesses not to raise prices or exploit the economic situation. A few days later, a special committee was formed to manage the response to COVID-19 in territories under jihadi control. A statement from al-Shabaab claimed that the committee included doctors and scientists. Local officials were instructed to provide adequate assistance to the committee’s members.<sup>15</sup>

Marking Eid al-Fitr at the end of May 2020, al-Shabaab issued another statement again celebrating the virus as “divine punishment” for disbelievers.<sup>16</sup> However, the group also ordered Muslims within the “Islamic territories” to “follow the directions of the Health Bureau.” Most recently, on June 12, 2020, the group used a radio station to declare that the “coronavirus prevention and treatment committee” had established an isolation facility within its stronghold of Jilib, Middle Juba.<sup>17</sup> Puportedly, the center will be dedicated to treating those with COVID-19 symptoms and is replete with vehicles<sup>18</sup> to transport patients using the center’s “round-the-clock hotline.”<sup>19</sup>

The message from al-Shabaab is that this is a “plague” sent to punish their enemies, but one that also needs to be dealt with pragmatically. In May 2020, al-Shabaab insisted that COVID-19 had not reached areas under its control,<sup>20</sup> and by mid-June 2020, the organization had still not publicly confirmed any cases. However, its actions—setting up a committee, preparing its so-called “Health Bureau,” and establishing an isolation center—certainly indicate that the group is concerned. Rumors on social media suggest<sup>21</sup> that the virus may already be affecting members of the group’s leadership, as it reportedly has with other extremist outfits like the Tal-

iban.<sup>22</sup>

### Al-Shabaab Capabilities

What form, if any, a civic response would take and why al-Shabaab would consider an approach so incongruous with its well-publicized violence requires understanding how the group has previously operated.

Al-Shabaab has long made practical concessions in its navigation of Somali social dynamics: the modalities and maturity of its parastatal experiment at least partially relies on the delivery of (some) incentives, basic institutions, public goods, and ‘justice’ alongside the imposition of “coercive security.”<sup>23</sup> Brutality and fear help the group quash dissent and maintain a “semi-territorial presence” across the Somali interior,<sup>24</sup> but it has also made efforts to appease communal demands and leverage grievances where necessary. While this narrative is usually packaged in an ideological rubric, its appeal derives from helping resolve local problems,<sup>25</sup> such as the appropriation of sharia as a holistic framework for restoring social relations and transcending clan cleavages.

A string of ministries and ‘shadow’ administrations (*Wilaayada-ha*) supply a vital set of services, perhaps none more important than al-Shabaab’s mobile courts, which remain a widely favored mechanism for civil arbitration.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to Somalia’s official justice system or assorted iterations of Xeer—a syncretic, clan-based code largely drawn from customary values, and oral tradition<sup>27</sup>—these outlets are often considered more efficient and less corrupt by many Somalis.<sup>28</sup>

Mimicking the functionality of antecedent organizations like the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), al-Shabaab has also exploited economic pragmatism to consolidate some degree of support, violently imposing order in ways conducive to local commercial transactions.<sup>29</sup> Its checkpoints have historically extorted less than those of clan militias,<sup>30</sup> and the group’s institutional depth helped expedite some semblance of ‘normality’ for the populations under its control. Similarly, al-Shabaab has co-opted popular ethno-nationalist narratives where useful, temporarily blending its religious discourse with pan-Somali tropes and references to mobilize recruits during the Ethiopian occupation of Somalia—a shift otherwise at odds with the exclusivist ‘Islamic’ identity it generally promotes.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, this should not be mistaken for a concerted effort to ‘win hearts and minds,’ and the coverage and dispensation of its regime varies considerably. Al-Shabaab’s egalitarian ‘pan-clan’ pretensions, for instance, often mask the same prejudices and extortive practices that have historically characterized many of Somalia’s local conflicts. Minorities have sometimes benefited from alliances with and protection from al-Shabaab but in regions such as the Jubba Valley al-Shabaab has consistently exploited marginal groups, extracting disproportionately high levies on harvests and zakat (Islamic alms) from rural “Bantu”<sup>a</sup> families.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, during its ‘heyday,’ al-Shabaab’s administrative superstructure was

a Catherine Besteman and Daniel Van Lehman acknowledge that these minority communities are known as Jareer Weyn in Somalia but refer to them as “Somali Bantu,” a term used by the Somali diaspora, to avoid “confusion with nomenclature.” Catherine Besteman and Daniel Van Lehman, “Somalia’s Southern War: The Fight Over Land and Labour” in Michael Keating and Matt Waldman eds., *War and Peace in Somalia: National Grievances, Local Conflict and Al-Shabaab* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

considered “the most extensive and effective” model of Somali governance since the fall of the military dictator Siad Barre in 1991,<sup>33</sup> in part because of this “myth of societal homogeneity” cultivated by the group.<sup>34</sup>

Territorial losses have undoubtedly diminished al-Shabaab’s capacity and inclination to maintain a coherent proto-state,<sup>35</sup> but even now, it continues to successfully arbitrate inter-communal conflicts and offer local clients “paths for social promotion.”<sup>36</sup>

Disparate displays of civic largesse, conservatism, and philanthropic outreach may not be convincing to those under or outside al-Shabaab’s control, but they lend benevolent trappings to an organization that markets itself on competency, drawing a distinction to the inefficiencies and elite complexion it ascribes to the internationally recognized FGS based in Mogadishu.

However, A.H. Salam and Alex de Waal suggest these “little solutions” proposed by such groups to satisfy the “real day-to-day needs of people”<sup>37</sup> are consistently trapped in a “paralytic impasse” when it comes to scalability.<sup>38</sup> The impact of a global pandemic such as COVID-19 may quickly expose their constraints and raise new, existential challenges to al-Shabaab’s authority.

Healthcare, for example, presents a rather intractable problem. During its territorial ‘Golden Age’ (2009-2010), al-Shabaab appointed regional coordinators to manage hospitals in the coastal town of Merka, Lower Shabelle, and other provincial settlements through a centralized ‘health department,’<sup>39</sup> however AMISOM-led offensives have gradually pushed them out into Somalia’s rural peripheries, hampering any systematic access to medical attention.<sup>40</sup> Fighters may still be able to purchase treatment from private clinics or blend in as ‘locals’ to enter government-run facilities in Mogadishu,<sup>b</sup> but the same amenities do not extend to the vast majority of communities in rural Somalia and the riverine valleys. Malnutrition, poor WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) conditions, and low immunization levels are prevalent across the country, but those living under al-Shabaab are even excluded from the meager improvements offered by counterinsurgency stabilization efforts. While the group has previously “sought out” medics in order to cope with outbreaks of diseases such as cholera<sup>41</sup> and despite the purported establishment of the COVID-19 isolation and care facility, the lack of technical expertise, specialist equipment, administrative capabilities, and resources necessary for containing or managing the proliferation of the virus leaves these populations highly vulnerable.

### What Has al-Shabaab Done During Previous Disasters?

During previous complex emergencies like the famine of 2010-2011, al-Shabaab largely outsourced essential services to NGOs and aid agencies, although they tended to be ad hoc arrangements determined by the whims of individual commanders and “Humanitarian Coordination Officers.”<sup>42</sup> These operations were subjected to heavy “registration fees,” and all activities were closely surveilled, with relief workers often being forced to disclose sensitive budgetary and logistical details.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, internationally funded food cor-

ridors were precarious—constrained by U.S.-led counterterrorism legislation,<sup>44</sup> the predation of local militias, and eventually halted by al-Shabaab’s paranoia over Western espionage.<sup>45</sup>

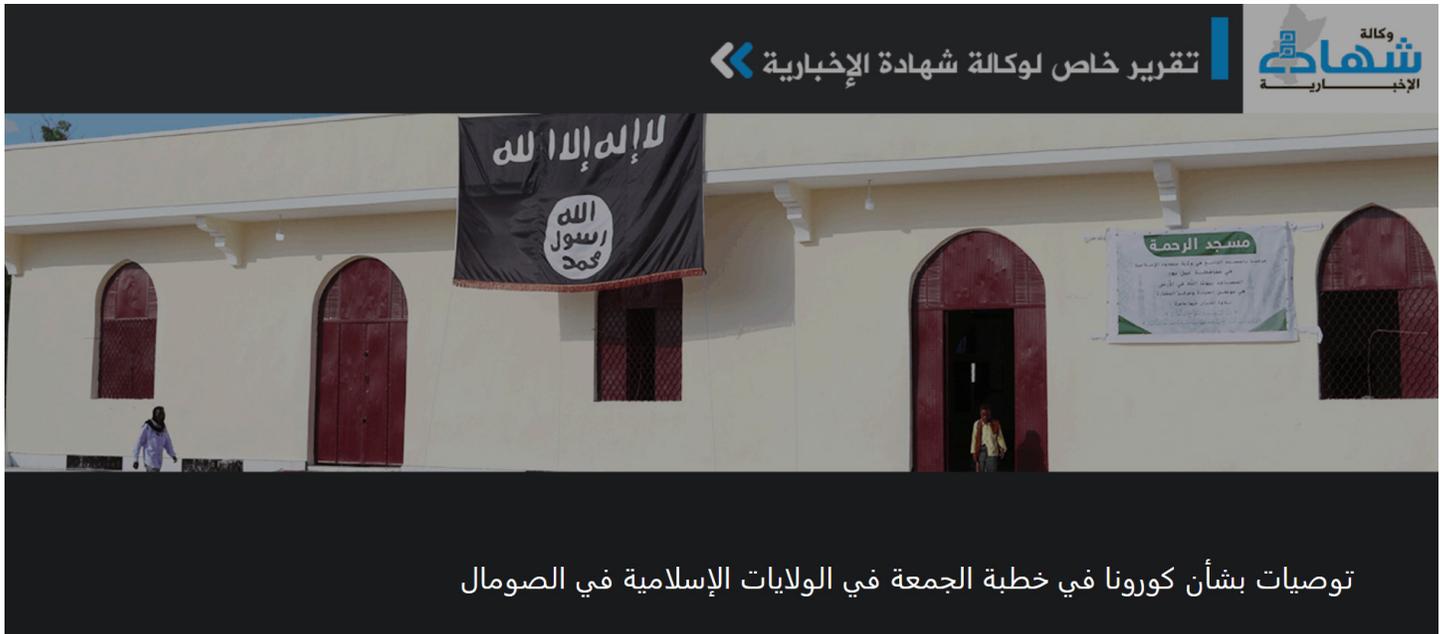
Similar dynamics emerged after a severe drought and concurrent cholera and measles outbreaks in 2017 as the group eventually banned external interventions,<sup>46</sup> preferring instead to launch its own in-house efforts to deliver “livestock, food, water and even money” across afflicted populations.<sup>47</sup> While its messaging referenced wider concerns over the distortive impact of external aid on local markets, the sincerity was dubious and the substitute programming proved insufficient.<sup>48</sup> When al-Shabaab became “overwhelmed by the numbers,” people were temporarily allowed to “seek healthcare elsewhere,”<sup>49</sup> although internal migration was subsequently suppressed in part due to concerns such a mass exodus would leave insurgents vulnerable to aerial bombardment.<sup>50</sup> A somewhat contradictory logic has therefore played out between embryonic forms of militant-managed ‘humanitarianism’ and the more conventional proclivities of “counter-humanitarianism,”<sup>51</sup> with al-Shabaab trying to “mollify [its] critics,”<sup>52</sup> preserve the integrity of its political project, and hold drought-stricken communities hostage for military gain, all at the same time.

### What Makes the COVID-19 Pandemic Different?

Of course, al-Shabaab’s responses to previous disasters are not perfect analogies given the nature and potential scale of the current pandemic. For one, Somalia’s past famines were in large part “man-made” where the distribution of available food was impeded by conflict.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the potential spread of COVID-19 coincides with the legacies of 2019’s erratic weather patterns, and vast locust infestations devastating crops yields across Somalia, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, and South Sudan.<sup>54</sup> Flight restrictions are delaying pesticide imports across the region,<sup>55</sup> capacity-building schemes have been widely suspended or disrupted, and national lockdowns increase pressure on already strained supply chains. The problem has been compounded by floods affecting almost a million people and forcing them to crowd into camps where COVID-19 could spread rapidly.<sup>56</sup> With the locust problem not likely to end anytime soon,<sup>57</sup> the extent of these coalescing disasters could be unprecedented given the 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan for Somalia was still only 31 percent funded by early June 2020.<sup>58</sup>

Under such conditions, it is uncertain how al-Shabaab will respond, especially as it is not on a particularly stable footing after rumored leadership disputes, latent concerns over funding and the loss of several ‘bridge towns’ along the River Shabelle to Somali security forces over the last 12 months. Consequently, the group may leverage the pandemic to strengthen its military position at a time when the resources and attention of AMISOM and the Somali authorities are becoming increasingly consumed elsewhere.<sup>59</sup> Movement of peacekeeping personnel is now minimized,<sup>60</sup> rotations and new deployments are largely postponed, meeting sizes remain heavily regulated, and civilian contractors have mostly been evacuated from Mogadishu.<sup>61</sup> Though the frequency of large-scale al-Shabaab attacks has been relatively low in recent months,<sup>62</sup> incidents are still reported across the country. In mid-May 2020, the group claimed responsibility for the killing of the governor of Mudug and three bodyguards in the northern town of Galkayo using a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED).<sup>63</sup> In April 2020, the militants used two VBIEDs in an attack against AMISOM troops in Barawe, Lower Shabelle.<sup>64</sup> In the capital, a se-

<sup>b</sup> Al-Shabaab militants also used to seek medical services in Yemen, at least before the outbreak of civil war. See Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph, *Inside Al Shabaab: The Secret History of Al-Qaeda’s Most Powerful Ally* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018).



### توصيات بشأن كورونا في خطبة الجمعة في الولايات الإسلامية في الصومال

*An image from a news report released by Shahada News Agency, an unofficial al-Shabaab media outlet that publishes news about the group and the East Africa region. The bottom caption reads: "Recommendations Regarding Corona Delivered During the Friday Prayers in the Islamic Wilayat of Somalia"*

ries of mortar attacks have targeted the fortified airport complex.<sup>65</sup>

Nevertheless, as a relatively strategic, sometime pragmatic "politico-military organization,"<sup>66</sup> elements within al-Shabaab have evidently recognized the serious problems COVID-19 presents. Its popularity—while never overwhelming—has taken a significant hit in recent years, not only from its disastrous response to famines<sup>67</sup> but a series of deadly attacks in Mogadishu resulting in high civilian casualties.<sup>68</sup> While the pandemic may be used as an opportunity to exploit potential frustrations with the FGS's measures to mitigate the spread of the virus,<sup>68</sup> al-Shabaab's own failure to deliver some systematic response could also precipitate a further surge of public discontent against the group itself, sapping its credibility as a 'stabilizing force' and undermining the authority of its brand, particularly if 'out-performed' by its competitors. Similarly, although al-Shabaab includes a nucleus of committed ideologues, exercises stringent internal policing,<sup>69</sup> and has tried to portray itself as detached from clan politics,<sup>70</sup> it does not operate as a monolith. Many recruits join for opportunistic, political, or expedient reasons,<sup>71</sup> and the insurgency's manpower is dependent on numerous alliances: arrangements made in a fluctuating conflict ecosystem that are both convenient and often fleeting.<sup>72</sup> Al-Shabaab abandoning these constituencies or blocking their access to medical support may consequently deplete the group's military capabilities or compromise its remaining territorial control, especially as the group is not in the same position of strength it enjoyed in 2010.

The virus also has broader implications for the insurgency's financial self-sufficiency, an essential ingredient for al-Shabaab's resilience over the last decade. Many of its revenue streams are

drawn from the Somali economy: racketeering and the extortion of local industries; the imposition of crop levies and land taxes; the introduction of fees for business licences and automobile imports;<sup>73</sup> and the tapping of remittance flows and illicit markets.<sup>d</sup> Any COVID-related disruption to this commercial circuitry, or the labor force underpinning it, may therefore increase pressure on the group's funding and, by extension, its decision-making. Internecine spats over cash shortages reportedly created a division between the group's leader Ahmed Diriye and his deputies in early 2020,<sup>74</sup> raising the prospect of further rifts given that al-Shabaab appears to already be facing certain financial constraints.

This leaves al-Shabaab vulnerable given its coercive faculties are going to be little use stemming a virus that crosscuts social, economic, and ethnic boundaries. Reflecting a problem shared across both state and sub-national authoritarianisms, guns may help enforce quarantines, but if and when the disease spreads, the usual recourse for 'strongmen'—appropriation, patronage, and violence—will do little to assuage the need for ventilators and intensive care units. Without a stick and/or carrot commensurate to the scale of this disaster, al-Shabaab's structural weaknesses may be revealed.

### What About the Government?

Unfortunately, many of these challenges are not unique to al-Shabaab. Even if there is not a major outbreak across Somalia, the economic impact of the pandemic elsewhere will have significant resonance,<sup>e</sup> with the fallout potentially becoming more fatal than

c Perhaps the most infamous of these incidents was the attack at Zoobe Junction in Hodan, Mogadishu, on October 14, 2017, killing 587 people. "Managing the Disruptive Aftermath of Somalia's Worst Terror Attack," International Crisis Group, Briefing Number 131, October 20, 2017; Sakariye Cismaan, "Remembering and Responding: Somalia After the Blast," *African Arguments*, October 23, 2017.

d Primarily the smuggling of sugar (and previously charcoal). Ido Levy and Abdi Yusuf, "How Do Terrorist Organisations Make Money? Terrorist Funding and Innovation in the Case of al Shabaab," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (2019).

e Remittances from the Somali diaspora have already dropped significantly. Nisar Majid, Laura Hammond, Khalif Abdirahman, Guhad Adan, and Nauja Kleist, "How Will Remittances Affect the Somali COVID-19 Response?" London School of Economics and Political Science blog, April 7, 2020.

the virus itself.<sup>75</sup>

Suffering from severe institutional and financial constraints, the FGS remains dangerously under-resourced and reliant on financial assistance from the international community. Mogadishu is also in the midst of a protracted dispute with some of Somalia's Federal Member States (FMSs)<sup>76</sup> and COVID-19 has arrived as the country makes arrangements for elections toward the end of the year, with Mogadishu continuing to insist that the polls will embrace universal suffrage for the first time in approximately 50 years.<sup>77</sup> Many doubted whether the FGS was in the position to conduct 'one-person-one-vote' elections before this crisis; preparations will undoubtedly now be further disrupted.<sup>78</sup>

Somalia's healthcare system has been described as "mere scaffolding," with most civilians depending on informal providers.<sup>79</sup> At the start of the pandemic, the country had fewer than 20 beds available in ICUs.<sup>80</sup> International support has ensured that there are now almost 300 beds in isolation facilities,<sup>81</sup> but this number is hardly enough to deal with the expected escalation in COVID-19 cases. Hygiene and social distancing advice is being shared as widely as possible by the FGS, with the support of humanitarian agencies.<sup>82</sup> The extensive network managed by Hormuud—Somalia's largest telecommunications firm—has been leveraged to help disperse public messaging. Educational institutions have been shut, most flights suspended, population movement restricted, and a night-time curfew imposed on Mogadishu.<sup>83</sup> The FGS has also implemented tax-exemption and dropped some import fees.<sup>84</sup> As is the case in most of sub-Saharan Africa, however, a complete lockdown is hardly feasible with the majority of the population dependent on subsistence labor and more concerned about their daily safety than the invisible enemy that is COVID-19. The closure of mosques in some areas has been contentious, and reports suggested that FGS social distancing advice was—at least initially—ignored, across Mogadishu where markets remain crowded.<sup>85</sup> For those lacking access to clean water and residing in cramped conditions, adherence to the recommendations is next to impossible.<sup>86</sup> Internally displaced persons (IDP) living in camps on the edge of Mogadishu are reportedly "waiting for death."<sup>87</sup> Besides, there are vast swathes of the country over which the FGS has no access, let alone control. These include territories controlled by al-Shabaab, but the cooperation of the state authorities in other areas is also uncertain.

Reports suggest that Islamist rhetoric on the virus has begun to take hold among some of the population, with rumors circulating that the pandemic has been sent to punish various foreign nations.<sup>88</sup> The government is keen that its COVID-19 advice is issued by religious leaders and madrasa teachers, stakeholders with social capital, access, and influence to potentially broadcast this narrative more effectively.<sup>89</sup> Such a move could be critical, as al-Shabaab and its sympathizers see the FGS as a puppet for the 'Crusader West.' It would otherwise be easy for the Islamist militant group to dismiss the administration's direct recommendations—along with the virus

itself—as foreign interference.

## Conclusion

For al-Shabaab, a widespread COVID-19 outbreak in Somalia will present an entirely different challenge to that experienced during previous humanitarian emergencies in the country. Food aid alone will not suffice; the coming of the rains will not bring respite. Medical expertise and specialist equipment will be needed. While al-Shabaab is believed to have access to some basic medical facilities,<sup>90</sup> it does not have the capacity to put thousands of people into intensive care units.

Consequently, the pandemic raises challenges not only for al-Shabaab but for wider models of 'jihadi governance' that deliver "little solutions" to day-to-day issues but lack the scale, capacity, or inclination to respond to a seismic challenge like COVID-19. The key question is whether the authorities they are fighting can do any better.

In Somalia, neither side has the funds, equipment, or expertise to limit the spread of the virus or to treat the patients. An economic collapse in Somalia would affect both the FGS and al-Shabaab. The one benefit the FGS has is access to international support. The U.S. government has already pledged USD 7 million to Somalia's efforts against COVID-19,<sup>91</sup> alongside commitments from U.N. agencies, including both the World Health Organization and the World Food Programme.<sup>92</sup> Likewise, the Somali Red Crescent Society and International Committee of the Red Cross are aiming to share disease-prevention information with around 120,000 households and train 500 additional health workers.<sup>93</sup> If the situation gets out of control, patients in al-Shabaab-controlled areas are going to need access to these resources, raising difficult, sensitive questions over the relationship between counterterrorism and the delivery of aid and humanitarian relief.

Similarly, with the lack of a long-term military solution to al-Shabaab after more than a decade of international effort, there are growing—if often hushed—calls for dialogue with the group.<sup>94</sup> Might it be possible that an existential, and entirely exogenous, crisis of the nature of COVID-19 provides the catalyst for cooperation? If dialogue with al-Shabaab is still considered a pipe dream, surely the pandemic will at least bring together Mogadishu and the FMSs against a common foe.<sup>95</sup>

Perhaps this is wishful thinking. In the event of a complete COVID-driven meltdown in Somalia, it is likely that al-Shabaab's propaganda machine will churn out messages insisting that the disaster is further evidence of the FGS' inability to look after Somalis. It will be easy enough to blame its own governance failings on the military operations against it. FMSs may also see the pandemic as an opportunity to further cement their own authority vis-à-vis Mogadishu. In reality, the status quo is unlikely to change. It will be the civilians who suffer the most. **CTC**

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# Iran's COVID-19 Disinformation Campaign

By Mark Dubowitz and Saeed Ghasseminejad

**In the Middle East, the Islamic Republic of Iran is the epicenter of the COVID-19 crisis. While governments throughout the world have struggled to address the health crisis, the clerical regime in Iran made a bad situation worse by initially concealing the virus from its population, lying about its gravity and consequences, and holding large-scale public events that inadvertently spread the malady throughout the country and region. Faced with this crisis, Tehran launched a global COVID-19 disinformation campaign to deflect attention from its own malpractice. The regime accused the United States of conducting biological warfare, published distorted public-health data, exaggerated its achievements, and falsely blamed sanctions for its own mismanagement of the pandemic. In response, the world's democracies should strive to identify, react to, and neutralize more effectively Tehran's disinformation campaigns and offer counter-narratives.**

**I**n the Middle East, the Islamic Republic of Iran quickly became the epicenter of the COVID-19 crisis. According to Iranian authorities, the virus has infected over 207,000 Iranians and killed more than 9,700 as of June 22, 2020.<sup>1</sup> The actual numbers are likely much higher, as Tehran has underreported the extent of the outbreak.<sup>2</sup> While governments throughout the world have struggled to address the health crisis, the clerical regime in Iran made a bad situation worse by initially concealing the virus from its population, lying about its gravity and consequences, and holding large-scale public events that, in fact, spread the malady throughout the country and region.

The regime brought massive crowds to the streets for the 41st anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution on February 11, 2020, and for parliamentary elections on February 21, 2020. Iranian officials reportedly knew of the threat imposed by the virus by December 2019,<sup>3</sup> but it took them until February 19, two days before the election, to acknowledge the country's first two COVID-19 deaths.<sup>4</sup> With the pandemic spreading and Iranians suffering, Tehran launched a global disinformation campaign directed at both domestic and international audiences to deflect attention from its own malpractice. Tehran blamed the United States for creating the virus and for imposing sanctions that allegedly undermined Iran's public health response. The campaign's goals were to intensify dis-

agreements between the United States and its allies and pressure Washington to suspend its sanctions.

The clerical regime's reliance on disinformation is rooted in its ideology. The Islamic Republic is a revolutionary theocracy based on radicalized Shiism. Its supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, sees himself as God's representative on Earth. Accordingly, he has a mission. Like other revolutionary states, the Islamic Republic has sought to export its creed to the broader Muslim world and confront what are depicted as satanic forces—the United States, Israel, and Western culture in general—that threaten Islam. Propagating these 'big lies' requires a persistent bending of reality to fit this narrative.

Senior members of the regime rarely acknowledge the theocracy's shortcomings; Khamenei, the ruling clerical elite, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the regime's praetorians, have crushed all attempts at fundamental change and reform. The Islamic Republic promises its followers a prosperous and just society, superior to any other in the world. So far, it has failed. When the reality does not match the promise, the regime inevitably attempts to bend reality to its world view, not infrequently inverting disasters into successes and proffering wild conspiracies as fact. The regime's anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial, for example, represent a fundamental pillar of the regime's propaganda and are frequently invoked to mask its failures.<sup>5</sup>

As the U.S. State Department and the E.U. External Action Service separately reported in April 2020, Iran, Russia, and China have waged coordinated disinformation campaigns pushing the narrative that Washington created the coronavirus to weaken the three countries. According to this narrative, Iran, Russia, and China have actually managed the pandemic better than the United States has.<sup>6</sup> If containing the spread of the virus inside the country is the measure of success, China may indeed have done a better job than the United States, though Beijing's initial handling of the crisis, shrouded in secrecy and the silencing of medical professionals, contributed to the global spread of the pandemic.<sup>7</sup>

The record is clear: Tehran lied to the world and its own people about the COVID-19 outbreak. The regime accused Washington of conducting biological warfare, published distorted public-health data, exaggerated its own achievements, and falsely blamed sanctions for its mismanagement. In response, the United States and other democracies should strive to identify, react to, and neutralize more effectively Tehran's disinformation campaigns and offer counter-narratives.

This article will proceed as follows: First, it will examine the COVID-19 crisis in Iran and Tehran's response. Next, it will explain the institutional architecture of Iran's disinformation operations, providing examples of how the clerical regime spreads disinformation on social media. The article will then describe how Tehran used disinformation to publicly exonerate China and blame the United States for the outbreak, and to deflect from the dismal state of Iran's economy. Next, the essay will examine the reach of these

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campaigns into the Arab world to support Tehran's image. Finally, it will analyze Iran's use of disinformation to undermine international support for U.S. sanctions, a key instrument of the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign against the clerical regime.

### COVID-19 in Iran and the Failings in Tehran's Response

The first reports of COVID-19 infections in Iran emerged in January 2020 in the holy city of Qom.<sup>8</sup> However, Iran only acknowledged the first victims in February 2020. According to Iranian health officials, the virus most likely came from China, either through Chinese students at the Qom seminaries and Al-Mustafa International University or from Chinese workers involved in infrastructure projects around Qom.<sup>9</sup>

Based on this narrative, the authors assess Iran's patient zero likely traveled from China to Qom in late December 2019 or early January 2020. In late December 2019, Iran's former health minister warned regime officials about the severity of China's outbreak.<sup>10</sup> By mid-January 2020, Iranian officials were likely confident that the virus had entered the country, because on January 17, 2020, health officials requested a ban on flights from China. Their request was apparently rejected.<sup>11</sup> Even in late February 2020, Mahan Air, an airline sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department for providing assistance to the IRGC,<sup>12</sup> was still operating flights to and from China.<sup>13</sup>

Tehran denied the existence of an outbreak until February 19, 2020. On January 31, 2020, regime officials claimed the country had no COVID-19 patients.<sup>14</sup> The government mobilized its security and intelligence forces to aggressively target and arrest<sup>15</sup> whistleblowers warning about Iran's outbreak.<sup>16</sup> In late April 2020, the regime announced it had arrested 3,600 Iranians for spreading rumors about the coronavirus.<sup>17</sup>

There were surely many reasons why senior Iranian officials concealed the outbreak.<sup>18</sup> Among the most likely was the regime's desire to avoid depressing turnout for the 41st anniversary of the Islamic Revolution on February 11 and for parliamentary elections on February 21. The regime undoubtedly hoped these events would bolster its legitimacy following massive protests from mid-November 2019 into January 2020, which were sparked by the government's decision to cut fuel subsidies. These demonstrations spooked Iran's leaders, who reportedly responded by killing 1,500 protesters.<sup>19</sup>

As the outbreak worsened, Iranian officials finally relented. On February 19, 2020, facing a flood of information about the severity of the spread in Qom, local officials acknowledged two cases in the city but continued their disinformation campaign, rejecting "rumors" about a larger outbreak.<sup>20</sup> Less than a week later, Qom's representative in parliament announced that 50 Qom residents had died from COVID-19.<sup>21</sup> Mohammad Reza Ghadir, the head of Qom's Medical Science University, said on live television that he had been asked not to reveal the city's true statistics.<sup>22</sup> He was quarantined a few days later.<sup>23</sup>

Tehran presumably downplayed Qom's outbreak to avoid having to quarantine the city, which Shi'a consider holy. Qom is also an important seat of political power. Home to the Qom Seminary and Masoumeh Shrine, the city hosts influential ayatollahs and attracts hundreds of thousands of worshippers every year. Seyed Mohammad Saeedi, Khamenei's representative in Qom and the custodian of Masoumeh, refused<sup>24</sup> to shut the shrine down. It was only in mid-

March 2020 that the government finally shuttered it.<sup>25</sup>

The state-run news agency Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) understated the severity of the outbreak.<sup>26</sup> For example, in February 2020, Atefe Mirseyedi, an IRIB television host and longtime health commentator, compared the virus to a cold and claimed she probably had caught it earlier but fully recovered.<sup>27</sup> Denial and downplaying replaced preparation. Hospitals lacked the necessary protective equipment.<sup>28</sup> Tehran failed to quarantine infected cities<sup>29</sup> and did not shut down non-essential businesses on time, leading to an epidemic and horrific reports of mass burials.<sup>30</sup> The number of new daily cases reached a temporary peak on March 30, 2020, and then consistently dropped until May 2. Since then, the number of new daily cases has been increasing and in early June 2020 surpassed the previous peak.<sup>31</sup>

The regime has tried to use conspiracy theories<sup>32</sup> to deflect blame. In March 2020, Khamenei tasked Iranian officials with finding evidence of a potential biological attack. Iran's military started an investigation but has not to date published the results.<sup>33</sup> Later that same month, Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and an army of civil society organizations and scholars adopted a different tack: They blamed U.S. sanctions, launching a large-scale disinformation campaign to pressure Washington to lift sanctions. They ignored the fact that U.S. law exempts medical supplies and other humanitarian goods and that the regime had tens of billions of dollars available to support healthcare and economic stimulus.<sup>34</sup>

### Iran's Network of Disinformation Operations

Iran's leaders lie to their own people, in international forums and through traditional and social media to a global audience. Since its founding, the clerical regime has invested heavily in building a disinformation machine at home and abroad. The key institutions that conduct Tehran's disinformation and influence operations are the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG), the MFA, IRIB, the IRGC, and missionary organizations such as the Islamic Development Organization, Al-Mustafa International University, and the Islamic Propaganda Office of Qom Seminary.<sup>35</sup>

The MCIG plays a critical role in imposing censorship inside the Islamic Republic, responsible for granting the regime's imprimatur to journals, newspapers, books, movies, music, and culture centers. Since the Islamic Revolution, the regime has been very sensitive to cultural matters, which it tends to see through a security lens. As a result, the MCIG and the Ministry of Intelligence cooperate extensively,<sup>36</sup> including by coordinating the approval and surveillance of foreign reporters in Iran in an effort to ensure the regime is covered favorably. Articles written by foreign journalists are monitored closely; critical reportage almost inevitably leads to visa denials or revocations.<sup>37</sup> The regime frequently harasses, even arrests, disobedient foreign journalists.<sup>38</sup> In March 2020, citing the need to reduce the spread of COVID-19, the MCIG banned the printing and distribution of all newspapers and magazines.<sup>39</sup>

It is the authors' understanding based on their tracking of the issue that compliant journalists, however, get rewarded by tips, leaks, or exclusive interviews with top officials. Nevertheless, even those who cooperate with Iran's executive branch are not safe. The IRGC's intelligence branch runs its own operations independent of the Intelligence Ministry and MCIG and has its own red lines concerning what Iranian and foreign journalists may publish.<sup>40</sup>

The MFA and its Public Diplomacy Division comprise another pillar of Tehran's disinformation network and have played a crucial

role in Iran's COVID-19 disinformation efforts.<sup>41</sup> The MFA is the first gatekeeper for determining whether foreigners, including journalists, may visit Iran and the conditions of their stay. Iran's foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif,<sup>42</sup> casts himself as a reasonable diplomat who is different from the regime's religious zealots.<sup>43</sup> Zarif has spent decades establishing personal connections with Western journalists, think-tankers, policymakers, and business executives, especially in the United States, where he spent two decades, first as a student and then as an MFA official at the United Nations.<sup>44</sup>

Seyyed Abbas Mousavi, the MFA's spokesman, runs the Public Diplomacy Division, which plays an important role in running Iran's global propaganda campaigns.<sup>45</sup> As one example, on March 23, 2020, MFA tweeted, "If @StateDept claims the mounting global questions about US role in #COVID19 pandemic are mere 'Iran-made conspiracy theories', then US must answer some of these questions asked by the Global Research."<sup>46</sup> The tweet included a link to an article published by a website called Global Research, which had republished a piece by the Chinese state media outlet China Global Television Network. The article implied an American origin for the virus.<sup>47</sup>

Another key player in Tehran's propaganda machine is Hossein Jaber Ansari, who heads the MFA's Iranian Expatriates Division,<sup>48</sup> which seeks to persuade millions of Iranian expatriates to support the Islamic Republic. Most Iranian expatriates live in Western Europe, North America, the United Arab Emirates, or Turkey. Regime officials regularly meet with Iranian expatriates across the globe.<sup>49</sup>

Many Iranian expatriates oppose the Islamic regime in Iran. Yet over the last few years, it is the authors' understanding based on their tracking of the issue that some Iranian expatriates have founded organizations that promote a more conciliatory approach to the clerical regime and demand an end to international sanctions against the Islamic Republic. Iran's 2020-2021 budget allocates \$105 million for "supporting Iranian expatriates and increasing their participation in national development projects," nearly tripling the previous year's funding. This remarkable increase despite the regime's financial woes indicates how much it values influencing the diaspora.<sup>50</sup>

The Islamic Development Organization, Al-Mustafa International University, and the Islamic Propaganda Office of Qom Seminary chiefly focus on training Shi'a clerics, sending missionaries across the globe, and disseminating a revolutionary interpretation of Shi'a teaching.<sup>51</sup> Al-Mustafa has trained 50,000 students from 122 nations.<sup>52</sup> Mohsen Rabbani, a cleric who for decades was Iran's top intelligence officer in Latin America, is a teacher and advisor at Al-Mustafa. He is wanted by Interpol for his alleged role in a 1994 terrorist attack against a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, Argentina, that killed 85 people and wounded hundreds. Rabbani's top disciple and a graduate of Al-Mustafa, Edgardo Ruben Suhail Assad, is active in Latin America and runs more than 20 centers in the region.<sup>53</sup> Al-Mustafa got dragged into the debate over the source of Iran's outbreak after Iranian public health officials announced Chinese seminary students in Qom might have brought the virus to Iran. Molavi Abdulhamid, the prayer leader of Sunnis in the town of Zahedan, said the Chinese students at Al-Mustafa, which he accused of brainwashing its students and harming the unity of the Muslim world, brought the disease to Iran.<sup>54</sup> Al-Mustafa strongly denied that its students were the source of the virus.<sup>55</sup>

The regime is set to spend at least \$269 million in 2020-2021 on religious entities in charge of disseminating global revolution-

ary Islamist teaching and propaganda, with \$80 million going to Al-Mustafa, \$153 million to the Islamic Development Organization, and \$36 million to the Islamic Propaganda Office of Qom Seminary.<sup>56</sup> Khamenei directly appoints the directors of Al-Mustafa and the Islamic Development Organization, which are currently led by Ali Abbasi and Mohammad Qomi, respectively. Khamenei also appoints the Islamic Propaganda Office's board of directors, which, in turn, selects the director, currently Ahmad Vaezi.

These organizations have actively disseminated disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. In May 2020, for example, an Islamic Development Organization official claimed that COVID-19 "showed the weakness and impotence of the West" but that "the Islamic system, despite the draconian sanctions, even sanctions on medicine, created an unforgettable saga with the help of people and has done many good deeds in fighting the virus."<sup>57</sup> Such commentary is typical and continuous.

IRIB, with its monopoly over broadcasting in Iran, is Tehran's primary tool for domestic propaganda. However, IRIB also has several non-Persian channels, designed to broadcast Tehran-approved narratives and infiltrate foreign media and policy circles.<sup>58</sup> High-profile Western politicians, such as former U.K. Labor Party leader Jeremy Corbyn and Spain's Second Deputy Prime Minister Pablo Iglesias,<sup>59</sup> have worked for, or appeared on, IRIB foreign-language television services such as Press TV and Hispan TV.<sup>60</sup> Iglesias hosted a show on Hispan TV called Fort Apache. Corbyn appeared on Press TV "as an occasional host and commentator" between 2009 and 2012 and received up to £20,000.<sup>61</sup> The U.K. communications regulator, Ofcom, revoked Press TV's license for breaching the United Kingdom's Communications Act.<sup>62</sup> The decision came after Ofcom sided with the tortured Iranian-Canadian journalist Maziar Bahari, who filed a complaint against Press TV for filming and airing his forced confessions.<sup>63</sup>

IRIB has been allocated \$1 billion this year—more than twice last year's budget—along with almost \$165 million from the National Development Fund, Iran's sovereign wealth fund, on top of hundreds of millions of dollars in advertising revenue.<sup>64</sup> IRIB allocates almost one-sixth of its budget to foreign broadcasting. However, the planned budget may not be realized as the clerical regime struggles with the impact of sanctions on its economy and government budgets. In June 2020, IRIB stated that it may close some of its foreign channels, including its flagship channels Press TV and Al-Alam, due to lack of foreign currency and inability to pay satellite fees. IRIB has already closed down its Kabul-based Dari-language program for the same reason.<sup>65</sup>

IRIB has played a key role in downplaying Iran's epidemic and spreading lies about Washington's role in creating COVID-19. In August 2018, Facebook removed 652 pages, accounts, and groups originating in Iran and connected to IRIB's Press TV. The removed network focused on the Middle East, the United Kingdom, and the United States.<sup>66</sup> Between January and March 2019, Facebook removed a total of 1,296 pages connected to the Iranian state media, likely referring to IRIB and IRNA (the Islamic Republic News Agency), which amplified content related to sanctions, terrorism, and Syria, among other issues.<sup>67</sup>

In April 2020, Facebook suspended a network of IRIB-controlled accounts that were disseminating pro-Tehran disinformation.<sup>68</sup> In addition to attacking opposition groups, the network focused on the United Kingdom, the United States, and several African countries.<sup>69</sup> According to the social network analysis firm



*A view of empty Azadi Square following the coronavirus pandemic in Tehran, Iran, on March 31, 2020.  
(Fatemeh Bahrami/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)*

Graphika, the main language used on the Facebook pages taken down in April 2020 was Arabic. Of these pages, 66 of were publishing materials in Arabic, 22 in English, and nine in Farsi. The Arabic pages were involved in promoting Ayatollah Khamenei's sayings and teachings.<sup>70</sup>

Covering statements from Iranian officials, Press TV published a series of reports and articles attacking the United States. On March 12, 2020, for example, Press TV published a report stating that the United States was the “main factor behind biological warfare” and “coronavirus cover-up.”<sup>71</sup> On March 23, 2020, Press TV reported that Iranian scientists and intelligence officials were “examining [the] possibility of coronavirus being biowarfare.” Press TV went further, reporting that there was even speculation that “this virus has been created to specifically target the Iranian population given their genetic traits.”<sup>72</sup>

Key news agencies in Iran, including IRGC-controlled Fars News and Tasnim News, amplify anti-American voices through their English-language operations. Fars and Tasnim publish interviews with American pundits, writers, and analysts whose views align with Tehran's.<sup>73</sup> Both outlets have actively disseminated disinformation during the pandemic. Fars News published a series of interviews and articles making claims such as “US aims Coronavirus at China [and] Iran.”<sup>74</sup> Tasnim published similar reports. For example, in March 2020, Tasnim published an interview with the title “COVID-19 A Bio-Weapon, Iran Should Be Suspicious of US Aid Offer.” According to the piece, the United States “had outsourced its bioweapons development program in part to China” and the outbreak of the virus “was born out of a global bioweapons smuggling ring which involves Winnipeg in Canada, Harvard University in the United States and Wuhan in China.”<sup>75</sup>

IRGC media personalities contributed to these efforts. Nader Talebzadeh, a regime propagandist whom the U.S. Treasury Department designated<sup>76</sup> for facilitating recruitment for the IRGC-Quds Force, hosted Ali Karami, a professor at the IRGC Baghiat-Allah University, on his show. Claiming COVID-19 disproportionately affects Iranians and Italians because they have similar genes, Karami said it was possible that the United States had created a “racial weapon.”<sup>77</sup> Three years earlier, Karami and Talebzadeh had accused the Pentagon of contaminating Mecca's holy Zamzam Well with “Funvax virus” to weaken Muslims' belief in Islam.<sup>78</sup>

In one surreal example, not atypical for senior officials in the Islamic Republic, the IRGC's top commander, Major General Hossein Salami, on April 15, 2020, credited scientists working for the Basij paramilitary force with inventing a coronavirus test device. It was an absurd claim, as revealed by the unveiling ceremony. Salami reportedly said, “[U]sing a magnetic field and a bipolar virus inside the device, any point within a radius of 100 meters that is infected will be detected by the antenna of this device, which is placed in front of that point and the infected point is defined within five seconds.”<sup>79</sup>

Tehran also uses an influence operation called the International Union of Virtual Media (IUVM). In August 2018, the U.S.-based cyber security firm FireEye exposed IUVM as an Iranian operation that used a network of fake social media accounts to distribute Iranian government propaganda.<sup>80</sup> According to Reuters, IUVM “has quietly fed propaganda through at least 70 websites to 15 countries from Afghanistan to Russia.”<sup>81</sup> Reuters reported that the sites are “visited by more than half a million people a month, and have been promoted by social media accounts with more than a million followers.”<sup>82</sup> In late February 2020, Iran unleashed its IUVM dis-

information network to blame the United States for COVID-19. As one example, IUVM published an article titled “Is coronavirus an American creation?” on its social media sites.<sup>83</sup>

### Iran’s Disinformation Campaign to Exonerate China and Blame the United States

Iran’s disinformation network was mobilized in the COVID-19 disinformation campaign to not only undermine its adversaries but also to protect key allies. The clerical regime depends on China as its main trading partner and source of foreign direct investment.<sup>84</sup> Chinese influence in Iran’s economy has only grown as U.S. sanctions have dramatically decreased investment and trade with Tehran’s traditional economic partners in Europe and Asia.<sup>85</sup>

The Chinese ambassador enjoys significant influence in the Islamic Republic. On January 31, 2020, after Iran’s health ministry had already tried unsuccessfully to stop flights between Iran and China, Iran’s cabinet spokesperson announced that all flights to China would be canceled.<sup>86</sup> Chinese Ambassador Chang Hua had other plans, however. He went directly to Mahan Air’s CEO, Hamid Arabnejad, and asked him to continue the flights. On February 2, Hua tweeted a picture of his meeting with Arabnejad and announced Mahan would “continue cooperation with China.”<sup>87</sup> An investigation by U.S.-funded Radio Farda revealed that between February 4 and February 23, 2020, Mahan Air conducted 55 flights to China.<sup>88</sup> Many Iranians, including health ministry officials, blame Mahan Air for Iran’s epidemic.<sup>89</sup>

In a similar episode, Ambassador Hua condemned Iran’s health ministry spokesperson after the latter expressed doubts about China’s official COVID-19 statistics, a concern expressed by many foreign officials. The IRGC, whose business interests are closely tied to China, called for an investigation into the spokesperson’s statement.<sup>90</sup>

These episodes demonstrate the extent of China’s influence and underscore how far regime officials will go to protect this vital relationship. For nationalistic Iranians, this evokes painful memories of foreign ambassadors brazenly interfering in Iran’s internal affairs.

Acutely sensitive to criticisms that it is bowing to another imperial power, Tehran resorted to its familiar disinformation tactics, presumably to divert attention from the regime’s close relationship with Beijing and malpractice in permitting flights from China to continue. Tehran decided to blame the United States. In early March 2020, Khamenei suggested that the COVID-19 outbreak might have been a biological attack.<sup>91</sup> Following Khamenei’s lead, the IRGC’s Student News Network raised doubt that China was the origin of the virus and implied that the CIA could be behind the outbreak.<sup>92</sup> On the same day, the IRGC’s Tasnim News repeated Russian disinformation suggesting the Pentagon created the virus to target China. Tasnim asked why the United States had 25 bio labs in countries around China.<sup>93</sup> IRGC’s Javan Online followed up a day later and amplified Chinese propaganda. It claimed that Chinese officials had revealed new details showing the United States might be behind the COVID-19 outbreak.<sup>94</sup> On March 14, 2020, in a letter addressed to Major General Mohamad Bagheri, the chief of staff of Iran’s armed forces, Khamenei described Iran’s coronavirus response as “an exercise in biological defense,” citing unspecified “evidence that raises the possibility of this event being a biological attack.”<sup>95</sup> That same month, IRGC commander Hossein Salami went further, directly accusing the United States of perpetrating a biological attack against the Islamic Republic.<sup>96</sup>

### COVID-19 Disinformation to Deflect from Economic Pressures and Incompetence

The COVID-19 disinformation campaign is designed to protect key economic and security partners such as China while also deflecting attention from the Islamic Republic’s economic troubles. These economic problems are exacerbated not only by U.S. sanctions, but also by regime corruption<sup>a</sup> and state intervention that undermines the private sector.<sup>97</sup> While Tehran’s mishandling of the COVID-19 epidemic threatened the security and safety of millions of Iranians, including the clerical regime’s own supporters, the dismal state of the Iranian economy had already undermined the regime’s legitimacy.

Even before the health crisis, a combination of economic malpractice, corruption, and U.S. sanctions was battering the Iranian economy. In 2018 and 2019, Iran’s real GDP shrank by 5.4 and 7.6 percent, respectively, while its average annual inflation rate was 31.2 and 41.4 percent.<sup>98</sup> Iran’s currency, which was trading at 37,000 rials per U.S. dollar immediately before Rouhani’s June 2013 election, has since fallen to 198,000 rials as of June 22, 2020—an 80 percent depreciation.<sup>99</sup> On the eve of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the exchange rate was 70 rials per U.S. dollar.<sup>100</sup>

In April 2018, the Islamic Republic exported 2.5 million barrels of oil per day right before the re-imposition of U.S. sanctions.<sup>101</sup> Iran’s oil exports to customers in Europe, South Korea, Japan, and India now stand at zero. Only China continued to import Iranian crude in violation of U.S. sanctions, and even those imports are minimal, at an estimated 70,000 to 200,000 barrels per day during April 2020.<sup>102</sup> Tehran has provided its Syrian ally Bashar al-Assad with free oil as part of an estimated \$20 to \$30 billion that the clerical regime has reportedly spent since 2011 to prop up the Syrian regime.<sup>103</sup>

COVID-19 exacerbated the regime’s economic challenges. The latest trade data released by Tehran, covering January to April 2020, shows a significant drop in Iran’s exports and an increase in its trade deficit.<sup>104</sup>

Concerned about the economic impact of large-scale lockdowns, the clerical regime failed to shut down the economy and impose social distancing measures in a timely manner. In a revealing episode in late February 2020, Iran’s deputy health minister, Iraj Harirchi, spoke at a press conference to assure Iranians that the situation was under control, even as he was sweating and coughing and not wearing a mask. Harirchi had contracted COVID-19, and he went into quarantine a few days later.<sup>105</sup> The resultant epidemic struck Iran’s population hard, turned the country into a regional proliferator of the virus, and further battered the regime’s legitimacy.<sup>106</sup>

### Disinformation on COVID-19 to Salvage Iran’s Image in the Arab World

While COVID-19 battered the legitimacy of the clerical regime at home, it also further challenged the regime’s image in Lebanon and Iraq, where Tehran has tried hard to dominate the Shi’a population, as well as in the broader Middle East. Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Iraq, and Oman all reported that their first COVID-19 cases were either Iranians or passengers traveling from Iran.<sup>107</sup> Iraq and Lebanon, which in 2019 and early 2020 witnessed protests against their Iran-backed governments, were infected as a result of travel to and

a Iran was ranked 146th out of 180 countries in relative level of corruption in 2019 (with 180th being the worst ranking), according to Transparency International. “Iran,” Transparency International, accessed June 16, 2020.

from Iran, among other vectors.<sup>108</sup> As a result, Iraq closed its border with Iran on March 8, 2020,<sup>109</sup> and has yet to fully reopen it.<sup>110</sup> On March 11, Lebanon announced it would ban flights from 11 countries, including Iran.<sup>111</sup> Even in New York City, while many of the early cases were linked to travel from Europe,<sup>112</sup> the first confirmed case involved travel from Iran.<sup>113</sup>

To counter its problems in the Arab world, the Islamic Republic resorted to its usual playbook. Through Al-Alam,<sup>114</sup> IRIB's main Arabic-language television channel, and through Hezbollah's Al-Manar, which broadcasts from Lebanon via satellite to the broader Arabic-speaking world, the clerical regime has tried to blame the virus on the United States and pinpoint American sanctions as the primary culprit preventing Tehran from handling the crisis. For example, in March 2020, Al-Alam interviewed an Iranian scientist who cited three reasons why COVID-19 could be a U.S.-made biological weapon.<sup>115</sup> Iran supports this propaganda through a continuous effort to manipulate Arabic-language social media. For example, as already noted, Graphika reported that Arabic was the main language used by the IRIB-connected disinformation network that Facebook removed in April 2020. The network focused on countries in North Africa and amplified contents from IRIB's Al-Alam.<sup>116</sup>

### Disinformation on COVID-19 to Discredit U.S. Sanctions

The COVID-19 disinformation campaign was designed to defend the clerical regime's legitimacy at home and in the Arab world, deflect from its incompetence in managing the health crisis and its economy, and defend allies such as China while attacking enemies such as the United States and Israel. The regime also took direct aim at U.S. sanctions on Iran. In 2018, the Trump administration withdrew from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and re-imposed sanctions on the Islamic Republic, against the advice of most of the United States' European and Asian allies but with the support of many of Washington's Arab partners and Israel. Tehran saw this as an opportunity to intensify political divisions between the United States and its allies and between American supporters and opponents of the nuclear agreement. Iranian president Hassan Rouhani bragged that the MFA "initiated a concentrated effort to influence public opinion and say 'no' to sanctions."<sup>117</sup> Led by Foreign Minister Zarif, Tehran deployed its spokespeople around the world to argue that sanctions prevented Iran from fighting the pandemic. Some global policymakers publicly urged Washington to provide sanc-

tions relief to Iran because of the crisis.<sup>118 b</sup>

In response, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo blamed Rouhani for using the Islamic Republic's COVID-19 crisis to push a "concerted effort to lift U.S. sanctions" in order to generate "cash for the regime's leaders."<sup>119</sup> Pompeo added: "We offered humanitarian assistance, real humanitarian assistance to the Iranian people, but we're not about to send cash to the Ayatollahs ... It'll be funneled, siphoned off; it'll be used for corrupt purposes. And so that is the wrong approach to assistance inside of Iran."<sup>120</sup>

This claim of the clerical regime's disinformation campaign was false. U.S. sanctions on Iran have always provided an exception for humanitarian aid.<sup>121</sup> A recent analysis of pharmaceutical trade between Europe and Iran shows little change between 2011 and 2019 despite periods of imposition, suspension, and return of sanctions.<sup>122</sup>

In October 2019, the U.S. Treasury Department and the Swiss government announced their efforts to establish a humanitarian banking channel backed by rigorous oversight to prevent the regime from diverting money and goods away from the Iranian people.<sup>123</sup> On January 30, 2020, Treasury announced the completion of the first financial transaction through this channel, benefitting Iranian cancer and transplant patients.<sup>124</sup> Tehran acknowledged its first COVID-19 patients three weeks later. Iran has tens of billions of dollars in oil export revenue sitting in foreign escrow accounts, available to fund imports of humanitarian goods, and some Iranian banks remain connected to the SWIFT financial messaging system to facilitate humanitarian trade.<sup>125</sup> Indeed, that is how Iran imported \$15 billion in essential goods and medicine in the past year, according to the governor of Iran's Central Bank.<sup>126</sup> If global banks are reluctant to process transactions, they have ample reason—namely, the international community's concern about the clerical regime's illicit financial practices<sup>127</sup> and its record of diverting humanitarian goods to fund its terrorist operations.<sup>128</sup>

Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei controls more than \$200 billion in off-the-books assets in holding companies and foundations.<sup>129</sup> He could easily use tens of billions of dollars from this corporate empire to support Iran's \$400 billion economy and pay for economic stimulus and healthcare relief, as many other governments have done. Instead, Khamenei uses this money to fund his revolutionary agenda at home and abroad.

In the second wave of its disinformation operation, Tehran demanded a \$5 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), pointing to COVID-19 and U.S. sanctions to justify the loan.

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b Some of those supporting sanctions relief did not call for the suspension of sanctions but encouraged the Trump administration to provide greater guidance and take additional policy and technical steps to assure international companies and financial institutions that they could export humanitarian goods to Iran without fear of penalties. See "Statement from Vice President Joe Biden on Sanctions Relief During Covid-19," Medium, April 2, 2020, and "Menendez and Engel Propose Policies for Addressing COVID-19 in Iran," Office of Senator Bob Menendez press release, April 3, 2020. Also see this analysis from sanctions experts Katherine Bauer and Dana Stroul who argue that "Iran is still struggling to obtain [humanitarian] supplies" and argue that "there are actions that the United States could take — short of lifting sanctions — to aid the humanitarian response in Iran. Without fundamentally altering the sanctions infrastructure, the administration could provide greater clarity on allowable humanitarian trade and authorizations for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to expand their work in Iran." Katherine Bauer and Dana Stroul, "Sanctions relief isn't necessary to assist Iran's coronavirus response," The Hill, March 31, 2020.

Yet the IMF estimates that Iran's central bank has \$75 to \$80 billion in foreign currency reserves available for humanitarian trade.<sup>130</sup> According to an analysis by one of the authors, Tehran's National Development Fund has an estimated \$15 to \$20 billion in liquid assets.<sup>131</sup> Tehran therefore has \$90 to \$100 billion in combined foreign currency reserves available to pay for imports of food, medicine, and medical equipment.<sup>132</sup> It remains unclear whether Tehran will receive the IMF loan.

Iran's disinformation campaign was undoubtedly designed to muddy the waters when it came to these facts, to try to create divisions between Washington and key U.S. allies and put the Trump administration on the defensive. In 2004, Rouhani described Iran's nuclear policy as a twin strategy of "confidence-building and ... build[ing] up our technical capability," with the goal of "cooperating with Europe" in order to divide Europe from the United States.<sup>133</sup> By leveraging the COVID-19 crisis, Iran's disinformation campaigns furthered that objective.

## Conclusion

The Islamic Republic of Iran has significantly expanded the depth, reach, and sophistication of its disinformation activities. Having

invested heavily in its broadcast, internet, and social media operations, Tehran can now quickly create waves of disinformation across the globe. The goal is to deflect domestic criticism of the regime, attack adversaries such as the United States and Israel, and sow dissension among Western nations. In these efforts, the clerical regime is not alone. The E.U. Commission recently called out China and Russia for having "engaged in targeted influence operations and COVID-related disinformation campaigns in the EU, its neighbourhood and globally."<sup>134</sup>

To combat Iranian disinformation as well as campaigns from China and Russia, the world's democracies should modernize and equip their anti-disinformation operations. The goal should be to identify quickly and dismantle these disinformation efforts and provide a counter-narrative. Speed is essential, as is accuracy. As Mark Twain is widely believed to have remarked, "A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes." That this quote is apocryphal only demonstrates the power of a 'good' line repeated over and over again.<sup>135</sup> **CTC**

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# Pandemic Preparedness: A U.K. Perspective on Overlaps with Countering Terrorism

By Nikita Malik

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**The United Kingdom has developed a large and intricate counterterrorism infrastructure in the face of a persistent and evolving terrorist threat. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a government-in-crisis mode has drawn on the counterterrorism playbook. The severity of the crisis, however, was partly explained by the United Kingdom's failure to treat national health as a top-tier national security concern. Linking national health and national security issues, however, carries both risks (to civil liberties, for example), as well as potential rewards (by enabling better resourcing and coordination efforts to counter pandemics and bioterrorism simultaneously).**

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**T**he last two decades have made clear that terrorist attacks can be high-impact events with the potential to significantly change the ways in which societies function. And yet, a single event in 2020—a global pandemic—has been able to produce these effects in a greater order of magnitude. Both terrorism events and public health emergencies require high levels of planning and resource distribution to manage risk. This article examines this overlap in greater detail.

Based on the scale of terrorist attacks that the United Kingdom has faced in recent years, this article begins by examining the bolstering of systems, processes, and budgets as a response to countering terrorism on a national scale. An internally focused decision-making system and resource distribution framework has allowed for the use of mechanisms originally developed to counter terrorism, such as the national threat level system and protection of critical infrastructure and civilians ('Protect' under the United Kingdom's counterterrorism strategy), to be employed in the response to other national emergencies, such as COVID-19. As such, the strengthened national security apparatus has led to significant overlaps between countering terrorism and COVID-19.

Despite these potential overlaps, current pandemic preparedness and response plans are dwarfed in comparison to security apparatuses, particularly when it comes to budgetary allocation, which has tended to focus on more traditional forms of defense spending rather than health threats, even though the latter may have a higher impact on society in terms of casualties. This brings up the question, therefore, of whether it is time to define national health as a top-tier national security priority. This article examines the potential risks as well as the rewards of this approach, with one

of the risks relating to the issue of civil liberties. One potential reward in treating national health as a key national security concern is that it could lead to a more coordinated and better-funded effort to counter both future pandemics and bioterrorism, with steps taken to improve preparedness for the former benefiting readiness for the latter.

## **The Bolstering of National Counterterrorism Infrastructure in the United Kingdom**

The United Kingdom has been unique in its 'homegrown' threat due to the history of its own extremist groups, such as Al-Muhajiroun, which pre-dated the growth of the Islamic State. According to the security and terrorism analyst Hannah Stuart, between the beginning of 1998 and the end of 2015, for example, 72% of Islamist-inspired terrorism offenses in the United Kingdom "were committed by UK nationals or individuals holding dual British nationality."<sup>1</sup> Between the beginning of 1998 and 2015, 56% of individuals linked to one or more proscribed terrorist organizations were directly linked to the U.K.-based group al-Muhajiroun, 24% were linked to al-Qa`ida, and only 11% were linked to the Islamic State.<sup>2</sup>

The frequency of 'homegrown' threats often added to growing risk concerns on national soil and therefore required greater protective resources within national borders. The scale of the threat means that systems and processes in the United Kingdom need to focus inwardly to prevent terrorist incidents; this was often implemented through measures such as Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures (TPIMs), increased use of stop and search powers, and making terrorism sentencing longer to deter attacks.<sup>4</sup>

An inward focus has also meant altering systems and processes to protect critical infrastructure. For example, temporary physical security barriers were installed on eight central London bridges by the Metropolitan Police Service, following the 2017 terrorist attacks on Westminster Bridge and London Bridge.<sup>3</sup> These were intended to stop cars from mounting the pavement and thus disrupt attacks that sought to use vehicles in pedestrian areas. Similarly, following the nerve agent attack in Salisbury, plans to establish a chemical weapons defense center in the United Kingdom were announced in 2018 to protect against the risk of further occurrences.<sup>4</sup> To protect against the use of a weapon of mass destruction within the country's borders, the United Kingdom relies on its Reserve National Stock, a chain of warehouses housing antidotes and drugs to address this risk.<sup>5</sup>

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a The sentence for dangerous terrorist offenders would be increased to a 14-year minimum jail term and up to 25 years spent on licence (supervision under parole) for terrorists, under the new Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Bill introduced in 2020. "CTP Welcomes New Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Bill," Counter Terrorism Policing, May 20, 2020.

## Overlaps between U.K. Counterterrorism and Pandemic Response Structures

The model to address COVID-19 has followed a similar framework to the U.K. counterterrorism strategy. Three similarities are outlined below.

First, in May 2020, the British government announced the introduction of a five-level, color-coded alert system, similar to JTAC's<sup>b</sup> terrorism threat levels, to help increase awareness of the virus's impact on the British public. The National Health Service (NHS), which had already been operating its preparedness for an imminent terrorist attack under JTAC's five threat levels, could therefore pivot its response similarly for the pandemic.<sup>6</sup> A second similarity between the security and public health space was the appointment of Tom Hurd, the director general of the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism (OSCT), to head a new Joint Biosecurity Centre, about which very little information is publicly available.<sup>7</sup> Third, in its response to COVID-19, the British government followed a similar course of action to its counterterrorism strategy CONTEST, which relies on 4 Ps: Protect, Prevent, Pursue, and Prepare.<sup>8</sup> The CONTEST strategy makes numerous references to "resilience," focusing specifically on strengthening security and the resilience of transport networks, critical national infrastructure, aviation, and amongst local communities. The Resilience Capabilities Programme, part of CONTEST's multi-agency response plan, ensures the key generic capabilities are in place to "respond to and recover from emergencies of all kinds, including terrorist attacks."<sup>9</sup> The United Kingdom's Coronavirus Action Plan, published in March 2020, also consists of four elements: Contain, Delay, Research, and Mitigate, with the latter in particular focusing on preventing, preparing, and building resilience to future risks of disease, including through its Local Resilience Forums and Local Health Resilience Partnerships.<sup>10</sup> Such similarities indicated that crossovers between existing apparatuses of security—which operate on the foundation that intervention in the present for an event that may occur in the future is anticipated through pre-emption, preparedness, precaution, and deterrence—was applied to preparing for a public health emergency.

Two additional areas of overlap between responses to terrorism and to COVID-19 in the United Kingdom have been in messaging to the public and in legislation to address risks. First, extraordinary measures to contain the pandemic taken by the British government have included closing schools, stopping unnecessary travel, advising people to limit contact, and running public interest campaigns to increase knowledge.<sup>11</sup> This included the use of public health campaign messaging on staying at home, keeping a safe distance from others, and washing hands, similar to the CONTEST 'See it, Say it, Sorted' counterterrorism communications strategy disseminated on public transport networks.<sup>12</sup> The second overlap is in the use of emergency legislation, employed as a result of terrorism (for example, with counterterrorism legislation following the 7/7 bombings in the United Kingdom in the form of the Terrorism Bill introduced during the 2005-2006 parliamentary session)<sup>13</sup> and more recently employed to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>14</sup> The need for emergency legislation is seen as largely performative and employed to manage risk. Political scientist Dr. Andrew Blick and legal scholar Professor Clive Walker, for example, have argued that the Coro-

navirus Act 2020 lacks the protections and precautions built into the already existing Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (CCA).<sup>15</sup> They argue that Parliament's power to review the Coronavirus Act is "extraordinarily confined" and that the framework set down in the CCA would have provided the powers needed to manage the pandemic, but with much stronger constitutional oversight.<sup>16</sup> Unlike counterterrorism legislation, moreover, regulations by the government have been introduced with Parliament in recess, and the Joint Committee on Human Rights, for example, has argued that they have not been subject to sufficient scrutiny.<sup>17</sup>

## Time to Define Public Health as a National Security Priority? Risks and Rewards

The 2019 Global Health Security Index, which is released annually by Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, found that the average score of 195 countries on their pandemic preparedness was 40 out of a possible 100.<sup>18</sup> While the United Kingdom's overall score on preparedness was high (it ranked second globally), it ranked 11th in the category of having a sufficient and robust health system to treat the sick and protect health workers. This results from several gaps in resource distribution. While defense establishments within countries often have existing frameworks and processes to facilitate policy decisions for extreme risks, these resources tend to be used on present issues rather than future concerns, due to resource and budget constraints.<sup>19</sup> A traditional focus on investment to prepare for situations of global warfare was recently criticized in light of revelations that the United Kingdom ignored warnings about the potential scale and impacts of pandemics, and failed to invest in the health security dimensions of national defense, such as extra capacity in the health system, beds, training, ventilators, and protective equipment.<sup>20</sup> For example, the Ministry of Defence's 2018-2019 report illustrated that it spent £38.0 billion, of which £15.9 billion was allocated to Defence Equipment and Support.<sup>21</sup> The report announced an additional investment of £2.2 billion over the next two years, to be spent on submarines, information systems and services, land equipment, and ships. While the United Kingdom is a world leader in applying an all-hazard national risk assessment process, Exercise Cygnus (run in October 2016) exposed the gaps in Britain's pandemic response plan, including a shortage of critical care beds and personal protective equipment.<sup>22</sup> The exercise's findings are yet to be made publicly available. This lack of transparency has meant that it is impossible to discern whether the recommendations contained in a resultant report were acted upon.

The COVID-19 crisis, therefore, has exposed many gaps in response mechanisms to pandemics. Resource allocation priorities and budgetary constraints have meant that the United Kingdom's response to pandemics is stronger than its response to traditional security concerns is stronger than its response to pandemics. How political leaders frame issues helps determine which issues are seen as strategic priorities and which are not. As of writing, the total number of COVID-19 related deaths in the United Kingdom (at over 50,000) was more than 14 times the total number of deaths as a result of terrorism in the United

b The Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) is based in MI5's headquarters in London.



*A British Transport Police officer wears a face mask on the London Underground Central line during what would normally be the evening rush hour on May 11, 2020, as the United Kingdom continued in lockdown to help curb the spread of the coronavirus. (Victoria Jones/PA Images via Getty Images)*

Kingdom since 1970.<sup>c</sup> The pandemic has also had a large impact on the economy: while the United Kingdom recorded £38.3 billion loss in GDP terms due to terrorism between 2004–2016, business bailouts alone due to COVID-19 have cost the U.K. economy more than £100 billion.<sup>23</sup> This means there may be a case for framing national health issues as a top-tier national security concern. There are, however, several potential risks as well as potential rewards in taking this approach.

### Risks

In order to shift strategic priorities to manage the crisis, and to enable buy-in from civilian populations, elected leaders have framed the fight against COVID-19 through the lens of war. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Matt Hancock, has often described the fight against COVID-19 as a war against “an invisible killer” and stressed that civilians must do “everything we can to

stop it.”<sup>24 d</sup> Similar examples were made in the past with natural disasters.<sup>25</sup>

Framing further impacts the public’s perception of risks. Following the 7/7 London bombings in 2005, a *Guardian*/ICM poll illustrated that 73% of Britons would trade civil liberties for security, with only 17% rejecting it outright.<sup>26</sup> A more recent survey by YouGov in May 2018 found that Britons would still be willing to trade civil liberties for the purposes of countering terrorism: 67% were in favor of monitoring all public spaces in the United Kingdom with CCTV cameras, 63% were in favor of making it compulsory for every person in the United Kingdom to carry an ID card, 64% supported keeping a record of every British citizen’s fingerprints, and 59% supported a DNA database.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, a poll by Ipsos Mori in April 2020 found that almost 66% of British people were supportive of the government using their mobile phones to track those who suffered from COVID-19, and inform people that they may be at risk of contact and transmission.<sup>28</sup> Security resources are also likely to be diverted to what are perceived as the greatest threats, often impacted by previous framing efforts, so that politicians can be seen to be doing something during a crisis. This creates the risk that re-

c From 1970 to 2017, the United Kingdom suffered 3,395 deaths as a result of terrorism, according to the Global Terrorism Database. For more, see Ashley Kirk, “How many people are killed by terrorist attacks in the UK?” *Telegraph*, October 17, 2017. Since 1970, Northern Ireland has seen the most terrorism-related deaths in the United Kingdom. Statistics on COVID-19 related deaths are taken from the NHS and the Office for National Statistics (ONS). For more, see “COVID-19 Daily Deaths,” NHS Website. See also Robert Booth and Pamela Duncan, “UK coronavirus death toll nears 50,000, latest official figures show,” *Guardian*, June 2, 2020.

d Similarly, U.S. President Donald Trump has referred to himself as a “wartime president” and labeled the virus an “invisible enemy,” as if referring to insurgents. See “‘Invisible enemy’: Trump says he is a ‘wartime president’ in coronavirus battle – video,” *Guardian*, March 23, 2020.

sources are devoted to meeting threats in the here and now, rather than dedicated to preventative approaches in the future. Moreover, the framing of health concerns as security issues could lead to privacy issues being overlooked in the interests of public safety.

Like terrorism attacks, it is in the interest of governments to restore public confidence and increase safety after public health emergencies. This is often done through three mechanisms, which are common to both incidents: emergency legislation, increased policing powers, and the use of surveillance infrastructure to further protect against threats. Following COVID-19, in the few days after government announcements were made in the United Kingdom regarding changes to police powers in March 2020, phone lines were inundated with calls from the public.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, a risk exists that police officers will be overstretched when it comes to policing lower-order offenses (such as civilians flouting government-issued guidance and continuing to socialize in large numbers), or that resources will be wasted on policing minor threats. This is coupled with an increased risk of infection. Unfortunately, there have been a number of incidents in the United Kingdom where civilians have attempted to cough on officers and infect them with the virus, and a number of videos circulating online where malicious actors have advised civilians to infect individuals who work at public institutions in order to add stress to those operating at maximum capacity.<sup>30</sup> In the United States, this risk has been met with the decision to potentially prosecute those who intentionally spread COVID-19 under counterterrorism legislation, as the virus “appears to meet the statutory definition of a ‘biological agent.’”<sup>31</sup> There are issues with this approach, however, including lack of political motive. Previous cases covered under such legislation have included the deliberate use of anthrax as a biological weapon in order to target particular groups (such as politicians) for specific purposes.<sup>32</sup> Expanding the law beyond common-law assault has implications for the punishment being proportionate to the offense. Unlike many federal terrorism statutes, the criminalization of the use of a weapon of mass destruction does not require the government to prove that the offense contains a transnational or foreign element.<sup>33</sup> As a result, an infected person who maliciously coughs on someone may be charged as a terrorist, even if they have no links to a terrorist organization.<sup>34</sup>

Managing impending threats often requires some use of existing security apparatuses. Where logistical preparedness is at risk, existing defense and policing apparatuses often step in to fill the gaps. In the United Kingdom, 20,000 military personnel have been on standby as part of the COVID Support Force.<sup>35</sup> Where public health investigations have occurred in the past—such as the use of the Novichok nerve agent in Salisbury in 2018—these have been carried out by Counter Terrorism Policing.<sup>36</sup>

Yet the overlap between different agencies, and the stepping in of security and intelligence services to deal with public health emergencies, can come with issues. For instance, national security and law enforcement agencies are often known for their secrecy and tend to limit the involvement of other groups in their efforts.<sup>37</sup> Non-governmental agencies (NGOs) and other disaster agencies tend to have comparatively porous borders: they use volunteers, ask external agencies to participate in decision making, and also share information with outside agencies. Research by Aslak Eide et al., for example, reveals that even with collaborative sharing of information, further challenges include communication within and across agencies, especially regarding the lack of a common language, or-

ganizational jargon, and shared terminology across agencies.<sup>38</sup> As such, oversight mechanisms will need to be in place to ensure that the involvement of security and intelligence apparatuses are temporary, and in line with civil liberties. Two examples of this are in the retention of DNA of terrorist suspects during a time of emergency (when the retention of such material is often extended), and in increased powers given to the police to monitor civilians.

As countries ease lockdown restrictions imposed in response to COVID-19, a trade-off for the liberty of free movement may be greater accessibility of civilian data. In at least 23 countries, dozens of ‘digital contact tracing’ apps have been downloaded more than 50 million times. Authorities in the United Kingdom and other countries, meanwhile, have deployed drones with video equipment and temperature sensors to track those who have broken lockdown restrictions by being outside their homes.<sup>39</sup> The United Kingdom has also decided to break with growing international consensus; its pending coronavirus contact tracing app is intended to be run through centralized British servers rather than a decentralized server from an existing technology company such as Apple or Google.<sup>40</sup> Unlike a decentralized approach where such data would be anonymized and protected (through an opt-in privacy option, where the phone periodically changes its ID), the NHS has been keen to stress that it will protect people’s privacy, despite granting itself real-time location tracking. Other ideas being considered include geo-location tracking of people using data from their phones, and facial recognition systems to determine who has come into contact with individuals later tested positive for the virus.<sup>41</sup> Such methods have raised concerns around ‘surveillance creep,’ where intrusive powers are expanded or data is used to prosecute for a range of crimes. Data used to build predictive or preventative computer models around the COVID-19 outbreak, therefore, comes with various issues, the most important of which surround privacy and accuracy. Here, past experiences with collection of data around prevention of terrorism can offer some lessons learned.

## Rewards

One potential reward in treating public health as a national security issue is improving biological security. The threat can take the form of bioterrorism, as was the case with the anthrax threats that followed the 9/11 attacks in the United States, or white powder contents that have been sent to MPs in the United Kingdom on many occasions.<sup>42</sup> Elevating health to a top-tier national security concern, and the national-security concern over bio-terrorism to a top-tier national health concern, could lead to a more coordinated and better-funded effort to counter both future pandemics and bioterrorism. There has already, to some degree, been a joined-up approach between protecting against natural and nefarious biological threats. To counter this risk, pandemic preparedness departments in the United States and the United Kingdom, such as bio preparedness within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, and Explosive materials (CBR-NE) within U.K. policing, work to understand the employment of bioweapons as security risks. While it is difficult to predict whether a nation-state, a state-sponsored terrorist, or an autonomous group would use a biological weapon, experts have argued that such an event “is both feasible and becoming more likely,” and preparedness is an essential component in both deterrence and management.<sup>43</sup> Preparation for a bioterrorist attack, therefore, can mirror the preparation required to combat and respond to public health

emergencies resulting from infectious diseases. Moreover, it is possible that measures taken to protect and mitigate against the impact of naturally occurring infectious viruses could reduce vulnerabilities to lab-engineered pathogens, and vice versa. In April 2020, when discussing the next pandemic that could follow COVID-19, Bill Gates stated, “Most of the work we are going to do to be ready for Pandemic Two ... are also the things we need to do to minimize the threat of bioterrorism.”<sup>44</sup>

The overlap between biological security and terrorism takes two forms, as acknowledged in the 2018 U.K. Biological Security Strategy. The first is the importance of preparing for high-impact terrorist risks, including those using biological agents, something which is covered extensively in the United Kingdom’s counterterrorism strategy CONTEST.<sup>45</sup> The second is the risk that disease outbreaks and pandemics, which may begin overseas, can affect national security by creating ungoverned spaces in which terrorism and criminality can flourish.<sup>46</sup> For accidental and deliberate biological risks, a critical element in preparedness is therefore the work undertaken by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and the National Counter Terrorism Security Office (NaCTSO) to control access to hazardous biological substances in the United Kingdom. More overlap between preparedness against a deadly pathogen and preparedness for a pandemic is included in the vision set out in the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review, the Global Health Security and U.K. Antimicrobial Resistance Strategy, the National Counter-Proliferation Strategy to 2020, and the U.K. Influenza Preparedness Strategy.<sup>47</sup> Security strategies have focused on reducing the vulnerability of systems that are vital, including interlinked critical infrastructure such as transportation, electricity, and water. A number of ‘pandemic preparedness’ initiatives that employ proactive tools include disease surveillance programs to detect the

onset of unanticipated diseases, the smallpox vaccination program (developed to immunize first responders against a bioterrorist attack), investment in biotechnology to develop drugs and vaccines against anthrax and other select agents, and contracts between governments and drug companies to guarantee adequate vaccine supplies in the case of deadly outbreaks.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has illustrated how the COVID-19 crisis has exposed gaps in pandemic response mechanisms, some of which are filled by existing national security apparatuses and defense systems: either through creating a model for preparedness that can then be employed in responding to a public health emergency, or by meeting resource constraints directly. The current priority of defense budgets on preparing for inter-state war, rather than meeting a more holistic definition of national security to include health security, has meant that certain areas of risk management and pandemic preparedness on a national level can still be improved. Nonetheless, this article has examined how certain counterterrorism mechanisms, such as the United Kingdom’s recently announced threat level system and broader protection of critical infrastructure and crowds (‘Protect’ under the national counterterrorism CONTEST strategy), have been employed to respond to COVID-19. It has also highlighted the broader implications of defense and health priorities overlapping, creating a synergy between public health and national security comes with a unique risk/reward matrix. On one end, there could be risks to civil liberties. On the other, potential rewards in overlapping health and security frameworks include potential feedback loops in preparing for combined public health emergencies and security issues in the form of pandemics and bio-terrorism. **CTC**

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