



TONY BLAIR
INSTITUTE
FOR GLOBAL
CHANGE

Snapshot

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



24 March 2020

How extremist groups are responding to Covid-19

While the world rallies to respond to the challenge posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, extremist actors from across the ideological spectrum have sought to use upheaval and uncertainty for their own ends.

Though the picture is still emerging, and the response of different actors is dependent on the extent of the outbreak in the geographies in which they operate, groups are adapting their narratives and strategies. Recurring themes we are observing include:

- Conspiracy theories about the virus's origins, including suggestions that it was deliberately manufactured as a bioweapon and attribution of blame to Jews and Zionists, China, and immigrants for transmitting it.
- Suggestions that Covid-19 is a divine punishment against non-believers and Europeans.
- Suggestions governments will cynically use the virus as a pretense for increased surveillance.
- Groups seeking to fill vacuums in government responses in order to garner support.
- Groups encouraging followers to take advantage of diverted government attention to commit acts of violence.

This insight and analysis has been prepared on the basis of a rapid assessment of material published by groups through their official media platforms as well as monitoring of internal communication channels used by their members. As the virus continues to spread, the number of cases and deaths grow, and the nature of government response evolves, we expect the volume of messaging related to Covid-19 to increase and for more affiliated groups to use and contextualise the lines adopted by their parent organisations. Over the coming weeks, we will continue to monitor these groups.

Islamist Extremist Groups

Islamic State and affiliates

- ISIS has included directives on responding to the pandemic, grounded in hadith, in its newsletter *al-Naba*. This includes practical steps that its supporters can take to avoid contracting the virus. ISIS has prohibited its followers who are not currently in Europe from leaving or entering what it describes the “land of the epidemic”. (*Al-Naba*, Issue 225)
- ISIS has called on supporters already in the West to take advantage of governments’ focus on addressing the coronavirus pandemic to carry out attacks. The group has urged jihadis to be prepared to exploit gaps created by the redeployment of military, security and medical resources and personnel. The group’s messaging focuses on the situation facing Western governments, but some of the calls for action, such as freeing prisoners and detainees, appears to be more targeted towards audiences in the Middle East. It has described Western powers affected by coronavirus as being in a “state of paralysis”. (*Al-Naba*, Issue 226)
- ISIS says the outbreak is “harsh punishment from God” against enemies and retribution for sieges against ISIS at Baghuz, Sirte and Mosul. It tells its followers that the pandemic will cause economic catastrophe similar to the 2008 crash, leading to public disorder and attacks on property. The group reminds supporters that they should not take pity on or show mercy towards disbelievers who are affected by the virus. (*Al-Naba*, Issue 226)
- Though references by affiliated organisations to Covid-19 are thus far very limited, it is expected that other groups will leverage the narrative used by the parent faction.

Al-Qaeda and affiliates

- Al-Qaeda affiliates around the world continue to remain active in their respective regions, most of which have been relatively unaffected by the Covid-19 pandemic. While statements and

propaganda content have been published in recent weeks by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, no coronavirus-related messaging has yet been observed.

- Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, an al-Qaeda-affiliated group in Syria, is an exception, publishing several items related to the pandemic in its newsletter, *Iba*. In a commentary, it criticised global interest in the deaths caused by Covid-19, the number of which it says are tiny compared to the number who have died in the Syrian conflict. (*Iba*, Issue 91)

Hamas

- Hamas has [pledged](#) to play a role in addressing the Covid-19 pandemic in the Palestinian territories by mobilising and dedicating all of its capacity and resources in spite of a lack of medical equipment. It says it will act responsibly and not discriminate in providing services to people based on political opinions.
- Hamas says it will hold Israel directly responsible for the wellbeing of Palestinian detainees in its prisons, including any medical negligence.

Taliban

- A spokesman for President Ashraf Ghani has called on the Taliban to stop attacks in the context of ceasefire negotiations with the United States. The European Union has issued similar calls. Afghanistan’s proximity to Iran, which currently has the third-highest rate of Covid-19 infection globally, has meant potential cross-border transmission is a significant policy concern for the government.
- The Taliban has tweeted that it is [willing to work with health organisations](#) to reduce transmission of the virus and has promised to provide humanitarian workers with safe passage. It has requested that health agencies provide medicine and equipment in areas under their control. Nonetheless, in 2019 the group was responsible for attacks on health-care facilities

that left 51 dead and 142 wounded and prevented the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) from entering areas under their control, citing “suspicious activities”.

- The Taliban claims that the virus [was sent by God](#) in response to the “disobedience” and “sins of mankind”. It has called on “our brotherly businessmen, in line with their Islamic and humanitarian responsibility” to “support their fellow people in a time of crisis”. It has called on businesses to refrain from any bad practices that may impact people’s lives, such as price gouging.

Boko Haram, al-Shabaab and other sub-Saharan African groups

- As of now, sub-Saharan African jihadi groups have not mentioned Covid-19 using their official publication channels, possibly because of the limited outbreak on the continent so far. With the WHO expecting an increase in cases in Africa, it is likely that jihadist narratives will begin to make mention of the virus.

South-East Asian groups

- We are monitoring material published by Abu Sayyaf, Maute Group, Jemaah Islamiyah and ISIS cells in Indonesia. No reference has yet been made to Covid-19.

Shia Islamist Groups

Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

(See article by [Kasra Aarabi here](#))

- The IRGC has viewed Covid-19 as an opportunity to resuscitate its image and Islamist ideology. The Guard’s popularity has reached an all-time low after it killed 1,500 Iranians in the November 2019 protests and after it shot down the Ukrainian passenger plane killing all those on board. The IRGC’s commander, Hossein Salami,

has referred to Covid-19 a “[US biological invasion](#)”. Other [IRGC affiliated platforms](#) have claimed Covid-19 was a “Zionist biological terror attack” and that the reason so many Iranians have died was not because of regime mismanagement but because the Zionists had stolen Iranian genetics and crafted a biological weapon designed to target Iranian DNA. Such conspiracy theories have been supported the IRGC’s own scientists, who have referred to Covid-19 as a “biological ethnic weapon.”

- The [IRGC](#) has sought to position itself as the saviour of the nation, referring to its troops as the “defenders of health”. It has also sought to use ideological, religious language to cover up regime incompetence. It has sought to create martyrs out of those who have died from Covid-19, particularly medical professionals.

Lebanese Hizbullah

- Hizbullah published a pro-China article on its channel al-Manar arguing that the [US was benefiting from China’s downsizing](#), claiming that “it has tried for many years to curb this growth through political pressure to force Beijing to take steps such as raising the value of Chinese Yuan”.
- Lebanon’s Hizbullah Secretary General, Seyed Hassan Nasrallah, has called on Lebanese Hizbullah operatives residing in Iran to take to support of “[jihadi units \[of the IRGC\]](#)” in their fight against Covid-19. Nasrallah asserted that “the Islamic Republic of Iran is the heart of the ‘Resistance Axis’ and the heart of the Islamic world and everyone therefore has a duty to protect this heart.” Again, like the IRGC, Lebanese Hizbullah is seeking to use Iran’s Covid-19 crisis as a propaganda opportunity to improve its appeal and image among the Iranian people, who have been very critical of Tehran’s support for groups like Hizbullah.

Iraqi Shia militias (backed by Iran’s IRGC)

- Kataib Hizbullah (Iraqi Hizbullah), which is an IRGC-backed Shia militia, has been following the IRGC’s line that Covid-19 is a “[US biological](#)

[attack](#)". Support for Kataib reached a new low after it (and other PMU militias) killed more than 500 unarmed Iraqi protesters and injured a further 29,000 in the recent anti-Iranian/anti-establishment demonstrations. It has therefore sought to use coronavirus as a propaganda opportunity to revive its appeal. Abu Ali al-Askari, the group's security leader, released a statement accusing Donald Trump of "spreading coronavirus across the world". Askari has asserted that "the capitalist countries, and above all the United States, are trying their best to surrender the human race".

- One of the [commanders of Hashd al-Shaabi](#) (an Iraqi Shia militia backed by the IRGC) based in Anbar province has asserted that US forces are spreading fake news about Covid-19 with the goal of expelling the Hashd al-Shaabi from the streets of this province and "reinstating" ISIS. The Hashd commander asserted that "the spread of such news is merely to expand US influence in Iraq, and US forces intend to create security vacuum for ISIS [to fill] in al-Anbar by removing the Hashd al-Shaabi". A report published by the Tony Blair Institute in February, which exposed the [internal training manuals](#) used by the IRGC to radicalise its recruits, revealed how official IRGC documents that have been sanctioned by the office of the supreme leader promote conspiracy theories that claim ISIS and al-Qaeda were created, and are supported, by the US, Britain and Israel. This theory has been repeated by the militant groups supported and backed by the IRGC, such as the Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq.

Houthis

- Houthi rebels have used [the suspension of classes](#) in Sanaa and other cities under their control in northern Yemen because of Covid-19 to brainwash young fighters, according to local sources. They are bringing students of primary and secondary schools together and telling them that Covid-19 is a biological war launched by America and Israel to destroy Muslim countries.
- Mohammed Ali al-Houthi, the president of the Houthi revolutionary committee, recently asserted that "[coronavirus was made by the US.](#)" In an attempt to take a swipe at its other

ideological enemy, the Saudi coalition, al-Houthi added "the Saudi aggressor coalition will be responsible for any outbreak of coronavirus in Yemen".

Far-Right Groups

Far-right media

- Significant attention is being paid to the Covid-19 outbreak by far-right and alt-right media outlets.
- [Breitbart](#) is celebrating the knock-on effects of Covid-19, such as closing borders, enforcing travel bans and stopping (illegal) migration, as "wins" for the far-right. Conversely, the dedicated [news section on coronavirus on the Gab website](#) claims that state measures intended to control the spread of the infection will turn democracies into "police states" that suppress freedom of speech.
- Other activists, such as alt-right vlogger Paul Joseph Watson, who has 1.8 million YouTube subscribers, [have blamed political correctness and left-wing](#) ideology for states failing to take measures to stop the spread, such as closing borders, out of fear of appearing racist. [Coverage](#) has also recurrently blamed immigrants for the global transmission of the virus, including claims that patient zero in Italy was a "Pakistani migrant who refused to self-isolate".

Global and UK far-right groups

- The far-right response to Covid-19 reflects the decentralised nature of that movement. White supremacists are using online forums in order to develop and propagate conspiracy theories, incite hatred against minorities and in some cases call for violent action. Recurrent [themes](#) point to fears about globalisation, multiculturalism and government cover-ups. [This](#) has included suggestions that government and/or political institutions in China and the United States are responsible for engineering the virus to achieve their own domestic or international objectives. [Others](#) have argued that the Democratic Party has manufactured the outbreak of the virus in order to prevent Donald Trump's re-election.

- News about Covid-19 has been integrated into long-standing [antisemitic conspiracy theories](#), including blaming Israel and Jews for manufacturing the outbreak.
- [Militant/accelerationist factions](#), which belong to the same sphere as groups such as The Base and Atomwaffen, have argued through Telegram messages that the current chaos presents the opportunity to bring about civil war.
- [US federal investigators](#) have warned that white supremacist chats on Telegram have discussed using Covid-19 as a bioweapon, encouraging members to go out and try to infect Jews and non-white people with saliva-filled spray bottles.
- Nonviolent far-right groups active in the UK (Britain First, Tommy Robinson) have recently pivoted towards Covid-19 and announced that they will [shift all their offline activities](#) to mainstream online channels like YouTube. They have equated the fight against Covid-19 to the fight to deport immigrants, by [using dehumanising language](#) depicting illegal immigrants as “criminal parasites” that are invading Britain and employing hashtags such as #CoronaCriminals and #GermJihad. This type of dehumanising language is a departure from the more subdued language they were previously using.
- The founder of National Action has [suggested](#) that the UK government will use the outbreak in order to justify increased state surveillance, a [claim](#) echoed by other nonviolent far-right figures.

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