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## COVID-19 AND JIHADIST TERRORIST GROUPS: CHALLENGES OR OPPORTUNITIES?

### Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the world. Many organizations, as well as terrorist groups and terrorists, had to make necessary changes. Islamist organizations such as the so-called Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda published the special issues of their newspapers on the Covid-19 pandemic. Jihadist groups declared that Covid-19 was Allah's arm to punish non-Muslims because of their oppressions against Muslims in the world.

As the Covid-19 pandemic widespread, terrorist organizations' tactics were changed: Jihadist groups called their members to avoid themselves from traveling to Europe – so-called “the Land of Virus” and delay organizing the terrorist attacks for a better time to protect themselves from the virus. So the number of terrorist attacks in European countries decreased since the Covid-19 pandemic emerged. However, Jihadist groups managed to move to conflict zone countries to organize the terrorist attacks there. Before the pandemic, Jihadist terrorist organizations used the public areas to recruit more new members and gain popularity among youths. But lockdowns and closing the borders made this process difficult, and terrorist organizations stood in front of the new challenges. Also Covid-19 pandemic captured the media: since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the top news about terrorism or terrorist attacks were replaced by the news on Covid-19. But according to another opinion in academia, lockdowns created new areas for the activity of terrorist organizations. Such a new area was the Internet which became the best way during the pandemic period for recruitment and fundraising for terrorist organizations.

So the question arose: the new situation formed by the Covid-19 pandemic will be a challenge or a new opportunity for terrorist organizations and terrorist activities?

**Keywords:** Terrorism, pandemic, Covid-19, “Islamic State”, Al-Qaeda.

Since 2019 the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the usual rhythm of everyday life in the world. The changes were done in all spheres and terrorism too. The terrorist organizations' management and tactics were not an exception too. In the 2021 UN Security Council meeting dedicated to the anniversary of the counterterrorism after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, UN counterterrorism chief Mr. Vladimir Voronkov warned the international society that the terrorist organizations were using the situation created by Covid-19 to widespread their ideology among “racist, ethnic and political motivated extremists' groups” (Lederer 2021). Despite the fact that lockdowns and lack of traveling prevent the terrorist organizations from organizing the terrorist attacks, there has not still been evidence on whether the pandemic would prevent them from recruiting new members or fundraising activities. As Mr. Voronkov pointed to the possibility of using cyberspace by the terrorist organizations for recruiting new members, which would increase the cybercriminal activities (Voronkov 2020).

Throughout history, the world witnessed several pandemics. It is difficult to define the impact of any pandemic on terrorism or terrorist tactics because there are no direct empirical data on it. Though if we take into consideration that the pandemic changes the behavior of any human, causes political and social changes, impacts on the psychological behavior of individuals. So there is the probability that the pandemic will impact the deeds and ideology of terrorists.

It is noteworthy that the impact of pandemics on terrorism at different times and on the riots throughout history has not been properly investigated. During Spanish influenza or Espanca virus, in 1918-1920 in the US, Anarchists organized several explosions to protest the First World War. It is true that the series of explosions were organized during the Spanish flu pandemic period, but it is hard to

connect it to the pandemic (Dasgupta 2020, 7). Contrary to it, the examples of the impact of natural catastrophes are much more analyzed. For example, the terrorist organization “Tamil Tigers” in Sri Lanka signed the memorandum with the government exactly after the tsunami in South-East Asia (Basit 2020, 264). After this catastrophe “Free Aceh Movement” also signed the memorandum of understanding with the Indonesian government after 30 years of controversies and fights.

As the pandemic is the main threat to national security, US President Mr. Donald Trump issued the National Security Strategy 2017 report, which recognized the pandemic as the main threat to the US national security system. The United Nations and World Health Organization have been warning the international society about pandemic threats for many years (Pantucci 2020, 2).

The short-term and long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on terrorism differs in conflict zones from non-conflict zones. In conflict zones, it changes according to the level of local government’s control of the towns. The lack of control gives terrorists good conditions for operating in these areas and organizing terrorist attacks. According to the different data, the terrorists’ activity in non-conflict zones decreased when the number of terrorist attacks in some conflict areas increased (Basit 2020, 264; The Straits Times 2020). According to Global Terrorism Index 2020, five of the top ten countries impacted by terrorism in 2019 were countries from conflict zones such as Syria, Somalia, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Nigeria. The other group consists of five countries from small-scaled conflict zones such as the Philippines, Congo, India, Pakistan, and Iraq (Global Terrorism Index 2020) (Appendix 1).

“Islamic State” uses such conflict zones for its activity. During the pandemic period, the “Islamic State” spread its activity to Africa, and by 2021 it controls parts of Nigeria, Chad, Mali, and Niger. In 2018 West African Centre for Counterterrorism issued a report that when the “Islamic State” was defeated, 6 000 West African fighters who struggled in Syria and Iraq returned to their homelands in Africa. “Islamic State” organized six terrorist attacks in six countries during the period from 11<sup>th</sup> of March till 17<sup>th</sup> of March in 2020. Among these six countries, three are from the conflict zones (Nigeria, Somalia, and Yemen), others are from small-scaled conflict zones or weak states (Philippines, Niger, Egypt). In April 2020 “Islamic State” organized 100 terrorist attacks in Iraq just in one month. As it seems, the Covid-19 pandemic did not prevent the organization from realizing its activities in such countries. The most severe terrorist attack organized by IS happened in Afghanistan in May 2020, when the members of IS attacked the maternity hospital. The attacker killed 16 people (pregnant women and newborn babies) (Kruglanski, Gunaratna, Ellenberg, and Speckhard 2020, 121).

It is worth mentioning that during the pandemic period, the “Islamic State” was not the only terrorist organization actively realizing its aims, but other Jihadist extremist groups also acted in weak countries. For example, the Al-Shabab group carried out 37 terrorist attacks in Somalia and Kenya. During the pandemic, Al-Qaeda affiliated groups carried out terrorist attacks in Syria, Mali, and Yemen (Kruglanski, Gunaratna, Ellenberg, and Speckhard 2020, 121-122).

In weak states such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia, where the local authorities have been unable to deal with the situation created by the Covid-19 pandemic, terrorists are trying to increase the number of their supporters among the population at risk by providing various services. In Afghanistan, for example, the Taliban called on the population to maintain social distance, wear masks and use sanitizer. The Taliban distributed information leaflets to raise awareness and asked health agencies to send medicines and medical equipment to the areas under their control. However, this did not stop the Taliban from attacking the health facilities in 2019. The attacks killed 51 people and injured 142, resulting in the International Committee of the Red Cross and the World Health Organization being prevented from entering Taliban-controlled areas. Hezbollah carried out similar activities in Lebanon and provided health services to areas where public services were inaccessible. The Hezbollah group has set up 100 dispensaries and set up 32 anti-Covid-19 medical centers (Snapshot 2020).

In addition to such activities, terrorist organizations adapt to the new situation created by the pandemic and make good use of the polarization of society and hate speech, which has become more frequent and acquired in extreme forms under the new pandemic. Terrorist groups shifted from real space to cyberspace and, consequently, social media and new technologies have become powerful tools to attract new members. That is why Estonian Defense Minister Yuri Luik said, that the world was facing new challenges, including cyber and hybrid threats, with new tools in the forms of drones being used by terrorists against civilians (Lederer 2021).

During the pandemic period, the active use of the Internet contributed to the technological advancement of terrorists. IS began to use the drones. In 2016 IS launched the drone strike in northern

Syria, killing two Peshmerga soldiers with grenades (Gibbons-Neff 2016). Using such technologies will help terrorists to carry out attacks remotely and thus complicate counterterrorism operations.

The closure of the school and the online mode of learning have made more and more students chained to the Internet. According to the data, since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, Internet consumption in the world has increased from 50% to 70%. Consequently, internet consumption has increased dramatically. Increasing usage of the Internet has allowed terrorists to use more social media to support more people. Their target audience was young people under 30 years old. The Internet has become a good platform for the rapid spread of conspiracy theories (e.g., 5G antennas spread by Corona, Covid-19 spread by Chinese and Americans), which has helped terrorists recruit more people (Basit 2020, 266).

Another threat that is being talked about during the pandemic is the terrorists' plans to return quickly to their planned and delayed actions due to the pandemic. UN reports describe the so-called goal of the "Islamic State" is to move from social media to real space and actively launch a new wave of violence against enemies. For example, in October 2020, IS leader Abu Hamza al-Qurayshi called his supporters to spend less time in social media and lead their efforts to attacks of great influence, such as attacking prisons or other operational activities.

The socio-political changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, such as the closing of state borders, social distancing, the abolition of traveling, have also changed the tactics of the terrorist organizations, making it more complicated to carry arms or other ammunitions cross the borders. Consequently, it was complicated to carry out terrorist acts at a specific location. The pandemic has also affected the psychological state of terrorists, although this impact has had to do with suicidal terrorist acts because suicide bombers are less afraid of infecting and dying from this new virus. As Silke notes, because of Covid-19, the number of terrorist attacks around the world which need pre-preparation decreased. For example, in Great Britain, social distancing caused by the Covid-19 pandemic helped decrease robbery, violence, rape, motorcycle theft (Silke 2020).

According to Global Terrorism Index 2020, in 2019, less than 1000 people were killed in terrorist attacks, and it happened the first time since 2014 when IS appeared (Reed 2021). As it seems, the decrease in terrorist attacks is connected to the failure of IS in Iraq. Although IS became more active in the African continent, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (Deutsche Welle 2021).

"Islamic State" called its members through its own media channels to avoid themselves from traveling to Europe and to leave the region till the end of the pandemic. The organization spread its calls through its media sources. This opinion was published in its own newspaper "An-Naba" based on the Hadith ("An-Naba", № 225) (Snapshot 2020). "An-Naba" is the Arabic language newspaper of IS, which was published in 2015-2018 for the fighters living in Syria and Iraq (Mahlouly 2018, 14). In spite of the fact that the newspaper "An-Naba" was an online newspaper, several hundred issues were printed and delivered in Syria and Iraq. "An-Naba" first appeared in 2010 and was mainly a platform for IS news and statements. Since 2011 the newspaper has been published once per month. Together with the organization's rebranding, the content and format of "An-Naba" has been changing, and in 2015 it has been finally formed. In 2015-2018, 135 issues of the newspaper were published, and the number of pages in each issue varied between 12-16 pages.

The relations of terrorist organizations with the Covid-19 virus is another item to discuss. Terrorist groups used the pandemic very well and developed it in their eschatological and national narratives. Jihadist groups have resorted to divine law to explain the causes of the pandemic; right-wing radical groups have found the racial explanation of the pandemic.

The so-called Islamic State narrative about the geographical area of virus spread varied. When the first case of Covid-19 appeared in China, Wuhan, the so-called Islamic State, declared that this was punishment for "Communist China" because of torturing Uighurs in China. The spreading of the virus in Iran was explained as Iranians were Shiite Muslims, and because they did not follow the right path of Islam, Allah punished them by Covid-19 (International Crisis Group 2020; Azman 2021, 108). In Iran, Islamic Revolutionary Guards argued that it was the biological terrorist attack organized by Zionists. After the Covid-19 pandemic was spread in Europe, IS published the special issue to explain that it was punishment for Crusade Nations and would not affect Muslims. IS published the article on the Covid-19 pandemic in its newspaper "An-Naba", where it described Covid-19 as punishment for "Crusaders nations", and therefore a true Muslim would not be infected by this virus. IS dedicated several articles to research the Covid-19 virus. The organization was trying to weaponize the virus, so in 2020 IS called its

members to use this virus in the fighting against their enemies. But this offer had no practical realization (The Guardian 2021).

Unlike “Islamic State”, al-Qaeda has published a six-page article on the advice and recommendations, arguing that the new virus is affecting the entire world and that the spread of the virus in the Muslim world was blamed on the sins of Muslims. The virus is the result of the spread of “our own sins and moral corruption”. Al-Qaeda invited non-Muslim scholars to research Islam during the pandemic lockdown period and analyze how the pandemics defeated in the struggle the strongest nations in the world.

Al-Qaeda affiliated Hayat Tahrir Ash-Sham group has published several reports condemning the global pandemic death toll. The group believed that the number of deaths caused by the pandemic was significantly different from the number of people killed during the war in Syria.

Taliban movement stated that the Covid-19 pandemic was the answer from God to “Humans sins”. They called businessmen to help Muslims during the pandemic crisis period.

Far-right-wing extremist groups blamed especially Chinese and Jewish migrants on spreading the virus to Europe. According to this narrative, calls for border protection and anti-immigration laws have become more frequent in European countries (Summa 2020).

Ackerman and Peterson write that the Covid-19 pandemic became the new opportunity for terrorists to adapt their activities to the new environment. They offer ten examples of adapted activities by terrorist organizations, including social activism (Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, Jaysh-e-Muhammad), raising anti-government sentiment (far-right-wing groups), spreading their narratives in the media, and recruiting the new members (IS), critics of local governments because of not managing the pandemic well (Ackerman, Peterson 2020, 59-73).

Jihadist Islamist organizations have adapted very fast to the Covid-19 pandemic and have changed their tactics. The expectations that the lockdowns and control of the borders would decrease the number of terrorist attacks were not fully justified. The number of terrorist attacks in European countries, where more attention was paid to control the Covid-19 regulations, decreased. However, terrorist organizations such as IS and al-Qaeda affiliated groups moved to the conflict zone countries in Africa and South Asia, where the number of terrorist attacks increased accordingly during the Covid-19 pandemic (Noren 2020, 22).

At the same time, Jihadist groups actively used the Internet during the pandemic period. Social media was the best tool for terrorists to recruit new members and spread their ideology and calls even before the pandemic. Though during the pandemic period, when the Internet use has vastly increased, the audience of terrorist organizations also increased, and the extremist groups were successfully spreading their narratives, helping the weaponization of the Covid-19 virus.

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Appendix 1

