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CHANGE

# Snapshot

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



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# How extremist groups are responding to Covid-19

## Introduction

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

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

Trends in this briefing include:

- Salafi-jihadi groups are welcoming the impact Covid-19 is having on Western countries, with both ISIS and al-Qaeda discussing the significant economic impact of the pandemic in the US.
- Shia militia members from Hizbullah in Lebanon and Harakat al-Nujaba in Iraq have travelled to Iran to support its efforts in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic in the holy city of Qom.
- Counter-terrorism police in the UK have expressed concerns about the risk of increased radicalisation under the lockdown measures, with extended periods of isolation and limited engagement a key concern.
- A new wave of conspiracy theories are emerging on the far-right targeting hospitals using the hashtag “#FilmYourHospital,” claiming that the scale of the pandemic is being exaggerated for political purposes.
- Beyond Covid-19, German authorities foiled an ISIS-linked plot to attack a US air base in the country, while the IRGC has claimed that it has successfully launched a military satellite into orbit.

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

- ISIS celebrates the impact of Covid-19 on Western militaries in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, eyeing opportunities to exploit the withdrawal of international troops to carry out operations.
- Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent describes the Covid-19 pandemic as a plague and a divine punishment against the disbelievers, while also being a source of mercy and a blessing for Muslims.
- A Boko Haram leader in Nigeria released an audio message responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, claiming that the virus is a ploy to prohibit Muslims practicing their faith.
- In Iran, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) has claimed to have developed a handheld electromagnetic device capable of detecting the presence of Covid-19 in humans and infected places.
- There is a new wave of conspiracy theories in the US targeting hospitals, claiming the scale of the pandemic is being exaggerated by Democrats for political purposes.

## Our approach

The insight and analysis presented has been prepared on the basis of a rapid assessment of materials published by extremist groups and organisations through their media platforms, by monitoring communication channels used by their members and supporters, and from local and regional news sources from around the world. As the virus continues to spread, the numbers of cases and deaths grow, and government responses evolve, we expect shifts in the

nature of Covid-19-related propaganda, messaging and activities by extremist groups, with more coherent ideas and narratives developing over time.

## Sunni Islamist Extremist Groups

### Islamic State and affiliates

In ISIS's weekly Arabic-language newsletter published on 2 April, the group discussed the withdrawal of Western troops from two bases in Iraq, specifically in Nineveh and Kirkuk, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The newsletter highlighted that American, French and Czech forces, described as being from the "Crusader coalition," had withdrawn from the country and handed the control of the bases over to the local Iraqi army.

Elsewhere in the newsletter, the group discussed the impact of the pandemic on Israel, referencing the increasing number of cases and death count in the country. The newsletter described the steps being taken by Israeli authorities in maintaining the lockdown being akin to how the "Jewish army" imposed measures on Muslims in the Palestinian territories<sup>1</sup>.

In an issue of the group's weekly Arabic-language newsletter published on 9 April, the group focused on the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic was having on Western nations, describing Europe and the US as bearing the brunt of the health crisis with the highest number of recorded cases and deaths. The article discussed the impact the pandemic was having on Western militaries currently occupied with activities supporting the fight against the virus and the substantial economic consequences on countries, including how residents are having to queue up at food banks.

The newsletter referenced an article published in a US newspaper warning about the potential return of ISIS activity in Iraq. The newsletter said that the withdrawal of US troops from the al-Asad airbase in Anbar province, as well as decisions by British, French and other coalition forces on account of the spread of Covid-19, were leading to widespread reports in Arab and international media outlets about a return of ISIS to the region<sup>2</sup>.

An editorial piece published in ISIS's weekly Arabic-language newsletter circulated on 16 April focused on the situation in the Lake Chad Basin in West Africa. The article suggests that the Covid-19 outbreak in the region could help ISIS's activities, as the resources of governments engaged in fighting the group will be re-allocated to efforts to combat the pandemic, while the economic downturn brought on by the outbreak will also have implications for government capabilities<sup>3</sup>.

## Al-Qaeda and affiliates

The weekly newsletter published by the Syria-based al-Qaeda-affiliated group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) on 11 April featured several articles directly responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Salvation Government, an HTS-backed civilian administration operating in Idlib, closed markets and public spaces to stem the spread of Covid-19, according to the newsletter. The newsletter's editorial page discussed the impact of the pandemic on global travel and movement, with air, land and maritime traffic being significantly affected while curfews and lockdowns have introduced a state of paralysis in countries around the world. The article suggests using this time as an opportunity to reflect and take advantage of the situation. The newsletter also included an interview with the Salvation Government's health minister, discussing details about how the virus is transmitted, preventative measures and advice for the general public<sup>4</sup>.

In the April issue of its Urdu-language magazine, *Nawai Ghazwa Hind*, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent discussed the nature, spread and impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. An editorial article in the magazine referred to the pandemic as a "plague," if not something bigger, that had been sent as a punishment by God against disbelievers and the enemies of Islam. The article highlighted the impact that the virus had already had on the world's leading powers – China, the US, Britain, France, Germany, Spain and Italy. While the group described the pandemic as a punishment for its enemies, it also described Covid-19 as a blessing and a mercy for believers, as well as a sign for all of humanity to return to God. Focusing specifically on the US, the piece highlighted the economic impact of the pandemic, such as the increase in unemployment figures, and that the US had suffered defeats in the diplomatic

and political arena too after its deal with the Taliban in Afghanistan<sup>5</sup>.

## Hamas

Hamas temporarily reopened the Rafah border crossing with Egypt, which had previously been shut due to the Covid-19 outbreak, allowing hundreds of Palestinians to return. Gaza's Hamas-run interior ministry said on 13 April that one-way traffic into the coastal enclave would be permitted for four days.<sup>6</sup> The Hamas government in Gaza closed the Rafah crossing on 14 March to stop the spread of Covid-19<sup>7</sup>.

The head of Hamas's Political Bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, contacted several leaders of Palestinian factions, including Islamic Jihad, to discuss efforts to fight Covid-19. Leaders on the call committed to unifying efforts in the West Bank, Gaza and overseas in tackling Covid-19, protecting Palestinian people and continuing relief efforts.

Haniyeh also issued a statement congratulating Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Chinese people over the country's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Haniyeh called on President Xi to provide medical aid to Palestinians living in Gaza, the West Bank and refugee camps. He also praised China's "tremendous efforts" in addressing the pandemic and urged greater cooperation between Hamas and China in fighting Covid-19.

## Taliban (Afghanistan)

The Taliban held a Covid-19 public awareness event in the Ghormach district of Badghis province in northwest Afghanistan. The group shared information about precautionary measures to prevent catching the virus and distributed face masks and other essential supplies to locals.

In an article on the impact of Covid-19 on prisoners in a recently released edition of its Arabic-language magazine *al-Samood*, the Taliban described the situation as a human catastrophe. Criticising the actions of the Afghan government, the group claimed that while measures were being implemented in markets, mosques and other public spaces to restrict the spread of the pandemic, prisons were being ignored.<sup>8</sup>

In a statement published on the group's website on 20 April, the Taliban appealed to all its fighters, officials and supporters to assist all those in need of help, now more than ever, in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, which is spreading in Afghanistan. Having previously said the group will cooperate with the WHO and health workers in the country, the Taliban statement stated that health-care workers should be protected and that they should be helped in their efforts.

## Boko Haram and other sub-Saharan African groups

Jamaat Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM) issued a statement claiming responsibility for an attack on Malian forces in the town of Bamba in the Gao region of Mali on 6 April. The statement referenced the domestic impact of Covid-19 in France and Spain as impacting their presence in Mali. The statement described the virus as being a soldier of God, exhausting enemy nations part of the "Crusader" alliance, with particular reference to the domestic impact in France and Spain. In saying the virus was sent as a divine punishment against France, JNIM also warned Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita about his reliance on France, which is described as currently being in a state of paralysis.<sup>9</sup>

Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau released an audio message in which he blamed the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic throughout the world on the evil deeds of people. Referencing the Islamic practices of praying five times a day and offering special congregational prayers on Fridays, Shekau claims that he and his followers have God as their defence against Covid-19. On social-distancing measures and restrictions on movement, the Boko Haram leaders insisted that this was the tip of the iceberg and was part of a ploy to close mosques and prohibit Muslims from praying. Citing restrictions on the Hajj and Umrah pilgrimages to Mecca and criticising the presidents of the US, Nigeria, Niger and Chad, Shekau claimed that Muslims were also being prohibited from fasting and observing the holy month of Ramadan. Shekau also described the idea of locking people down in their own homes as being evil<sup>10</sup>.

## Shia Islamist Extremist Groups

### Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Iran)

The IRGC has claimed to have developed a handheld device that can remotely detect people infected with Covid-19, as well as areas contaminated by the virus within a range of 100 metres. IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami said the state-of-the-art device had been developed by local scientists, claiming that device is 80 per cent accurate in detecting the virus. Salami claimed the device was advantageous because it did not require a blood sample and suggested the device could be upgraded to detect other viruses<sup>11</sup>.

The IRGC has created new headquarters to distribute aid to 3.5 million Iranian households affected by the Covid-19 outbreak. It was also announced that the senior commanders of the IRGC would be donating 20 per cent of their monthly salaries to coronavirus relief efforts, which is part of a nationwide exercise launched by the Basij, a paramilitary volunteer militia and one of the forces of the IRGC, to support those who have lost their jobs<sup>12</sup>.

IRGC commander Brigadier General Abolfazl Shekarchi has said that US President Donald Trump should stop harassing Iran amid the Covid-19 outbreak and concentrate on fighting the spread of the pandemic within its forces. Brigadier General Shakarch said, "Instead of bullying others today, Americans should put their efforts into saving their forces, who have contracted coronavirus."

In his televised speech delivered on 9 April, Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei praised the actions of the "jihadi clergy" and Basij for their "valuable services" throughout the country in supporting efforts to curb the spread of Covid-19. Khamenei also used his speech to criticise the West, saying the crisis has highlighted the ignorance and arrogance of Western civilization, accusing Europe and the US of confiscating medical supplies and suggesting that suicide rates were going up in Western countries due to the pandemic. Khamenei also claimed that the Western world's "individualistic, materialistic and secular" philosophy meant that cases of suicide and panic buying were "logical and natural."<sup>13</sup>

## Hizbullah (Lebanon)

In a speech delivered on 10 April, Hizbullah Secretary General Hasan Nasrallah expressed his gratitude to Lebanon's health-care workers, using the same words to address them as when he addressed the group's fighters during the July 2006 war with Israel. He likened the fight against the life-threatening Covid-19 virus to the fight against Israel. Nasrallah also discussed the global health crisis and the unprecedented lockdown measures in the context of the arrival of the Imam Mahdi, saying that people of all religions believe that the imminent arrival of a global saviour is approaching, but that trying to specify the time of his arrival will have a negative consequence on people's faith.

In a televised address before the start of the holy month of Ramadan, Nasrallah said followers should fast in order to stay healthy amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Nasrallah claimed that "Fasting strengthens patience," and that "[w]ith patience we can beat coronavirus, defeat the Israeli enemy and overcome other major challenges."

## Hashd al-Shaabi (Iraq)

The representative of Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, a pro-Iran armed Shia militia in Iraq, has said that members of his group are actively working inside Iran to help fight the Covid-19 pandemic. Abbas Mousavi confirmed the presence of the militia in the city of Qom where they had been engaged in delivering food supplies to families in need and health-care workers, as well disinfecting vehicles in the city. Reports have indicated that Lebanese Hizbullah members have also been supporting the fight against Covid-19 in Qom, a city with significant religious importance in Shia Islam.<sup>14</sup>

## Houthis (Yemen)

In a Friday sermon delivered on 3 April, Houthi scholar Ibrahim al-Ubeidi claimed that the Covid-19 pandemic was a punishment from God on the Western world for forcing Muslim women to remove veils and head coverings. Al-Ubeidi pointed to the scale of the pandemic in France, Britain, Italy, China and the US

as examples of countries being punished. He ended his sermon with the Houthi rallying chant of "Allah is greater, death to America, death to Israel, curse on the Jews, victory to Islam."<sup>15</sup>

## Far-Right Groups

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

### Far-right media

Prominent American neo-Nazi websites, like *Daily Stormer*, are suggesting not only that the virus is just another flu and that the pandemic is being exaggerated, but that lockdown measures are likely to be contributing to the spread of the virus.

Gates of Vienna, a European far-right blog that was heavily referenced in Anders Breivik's terrorist manifesto, has published an article suggesting that Muslims get preferential treatment from police, because they reportedly failed to disband a group of Muslims congregated in front of a mosque in Berlin while they forbade a group of German far-right protestors in Chemnitz from marching. The idea that minorities get preferential treatment is a common far-right trope.

American conspiracy site Infowars has announced the launch of a new website, [cantcloseamerica.com](http://cantcloseamerica.com), claiming that the lockdown is coordinated by the tyrannical UN and WHO and led by Communist China. The website calls for marches against the lockdown in several US states.

Discussion on the UK-focused group "Brit Fam" on GAB, a social-media platform modelled after Twitter that has become popular with the far right after it was deplatformed from other mainstream platforms, has centred around the conspiracy theory that Bill Gates is funding a new soon-to-be compulsory vaccine against Covid-19 that is aimed at decimating the population.

## Global far-right activity

New conspiracy theories aimed at hospitals have been gaining traction in the US, after users starting sharing videos of quiet hospitals with the hashtag #FilmYourHospital, in an attempt to promote the idea that Democrats are exaggerating the effect of the pandemic. Several of the key instigators of the campaign are followers of QAnon, a far-right conspiracy theory that believes that the deep state is set on destroying Trump to cover up a child sex-trafficking ring by Democrats.<sup>16</sup>

A new report commissioned by members of the UK Parliamentary Anti-Muslim Hatred Working Group warns that anti-Muslim hate crime will increase when lockdown measures are lifted, as a result of to a surge in online Islamophobic and far-right conspiracy theories related to Covid-19 and Muslims. Monitoring organisation Tell MAMA has registered a spike of online anti-Muslim hate crimes.<sup>17</sup>

Nearly 25,000 email addresses and passwords believed to belong to the World Health Organisation, the Gates Foundation and other groups working to address the Covid-19 pandemic were recently posted to 4Chan and other social media platforms, according to a report by the SITE Intelligence Group. According to Rita Katz, Executive Director of the SITE Intelligence Group, far-right extremists, including neo-Nazis and white supremacists, have called for a harassment campaign using the contact details while also sharing conspiracy theories about the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>18</sup>

## Beyond Covid-19

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

**German Police Foil US Air Base Attack Plot.** German police arrested four men on 15 April suspected of having links to ISIS who were plotting to carrying out terror attacks targeting US air force bases in the country. The four men, all originally from Tajikistan, were also suspected of carrying out surveillance of individuals that had been critical of Islam, with prosecutors alleging the suspects were planning to target them in future attacks. While an attack was not believed to be imminent, the men had already obtained firearms and ammunition.<sup>19</sup>

**Pakistan Arrests Suspected al-Qaeda Militants.** Police in the Pakistani city of Karachi have arrested four suspected al-Qaeda militants and seized a cache of weapons and explosives. Authorities said the arrested militants had been trained in neighbouring Afghanistan and were planning to carry out attacks on several targets in the city, including the Pakistan Stock Exchange, the City Court, the Police Training Centre and the offices of the law enforcement agencies.<sup>20</sup>

**ISIS Claims First Attack in Maldives.** ISIS has claimed responsibility for an attack in the Maldives, the first officially claimed attack by the group in the country. In a claim published on 16 April in its weekly Arabic-language newsletter, *al-Naba*, the group said it was behind an attack targeting boats belonging to the Maldivian government. Earlier this year, three people were arrested in the Maldives after two Chinese citizens and an Australian national were stabbed, with a local group claiming the attack in the name of ISIS.<sup>21</sup>

**Military Helicopter Shot Down – ISIS Reports.** In a statement issued via its Amaq news agency on 20 April, ISIS militants in Mozambique have claimed to have downed a helicopter during clashes with the military in Quissanga in Cabo Delgado province. Video footage circulated by the group showed the burning wreckage of a helicopter, with militants standing nearby chanting pro-ISIS slogans and raising the group's black flag.

**Abu Sayyaf Kills 11 Philippine Soldiers.** ISIS-affiliate in the Philippines, Abu Sayyaf, clashed with a Filipino army patrol in the southern province of Sulu, killing 11 soldiers and wounding 14 others. The armed forces were preparing for an operation when they were ambushed by 40 Abu Sayyaf fighters.

The Filipino army has continued its operations to track down Abu Sayyaf leader Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan despite a nationwide lockdown due to Covid-19.<sup>22</sup>

**IRGC Launches Military Satellite Into Orbit.** Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has claimed that it has successfully launched a military satellite into orbit on 22 April for the first time. IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami described the launch as a major step in promoting the scope of Iran's "strategic information capabilities," adding that the move marks "the beginning of the formation of a world power." The Trump administration has previously warned that the technology used in launching satellites could be used by Iran to develop intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs)<sup>23</sup>.

**Shia Militias Seize Land Close to US Embassy in Baghdad.** Armed members of several Iranian-backed Shia militias entered into Baghdad's secure Green Zone and seized two areas located in close proximity to the US Embassy on 21 April. The move, which involved members of Kataib Hizbullah, Sayed al-Shuhada, Saraya al-Khurasani and Kataib Ansar Allah, was reportedly facilitated by caretaker Prime Minister Adel Abul Mehdi's special advisor on the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMUs), Iranian proxy Tahseen Abdul Matar, who assumed responsibility for the Green Zone in March 2020<sup>24</sup>.

**IRGC Commander Threatens Action Against US Vessels.** IRGC Commander Major General Salami issued a warning to the US against pursuing any threatening behavior against Iranian vessels in the Persian Gulf, insisting that Iran remains committed to protecting its security, territorial integrity and maritime borders. Salami said, "We have also ordered our military units at sea that if a vessel or military unit of the navy of the US's terrorist military seeks to threaten the security of our civilian ships or combat vessels, they should target that (enemy) vessel or military unit."<sup>25</sup>

**DHS Announces \$10 Million Fund for Terrorism-Prevention Efforts.** The US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced on 21 April that it would be making \$10 million available to support local communities across the United States to more effectively combat terrorism and targeted violence. Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Chad F. Wolf said, "These grants will improve local communities'

ability to prevent individuals from mobilizing or radicalizing to violence and create locally-based prevention frameworks to address these emerging threats."<sup>26</sup>

**Counter-Terror Police Warn of Increased Radicalisation Risk.** Counter Terrorism Policing UK issued a statement on 22 April warning about the increased risk of radicalisation during the lockdown period introduced by the government to slow the spread of Covid-19, with increased periods of isolation potentially having an impact on those most vulnerable in society. Chief Superintendent Nik Adams, national coordinator for Prevent, acknowledged that extremists and radicalisers will look to exploit any opportunity and use topical issues to attract new recruits<sup>27</sup>.

**US Navy Expels Serviceman With Neo-Nazi Terror Links.** The US Navy has expelled one of its officers after the revelation that he was a recruiter for neo-Nazi group Atomwaffen Division, which has been linked to several murders and terrorist plots in the US. The man has tried to recruit 12 members through the now defunct neo-Nazi website Iron March. He was also in contact with a member of the British proscribed neo-Nazi group National Action who has been jailed for plotting terror attacks.<sup>28</sup>

**TikTok Takes Action on Hate Speech.** Hate speech is proliferating on TikTok, the short-video app popular with younger generations, as several far-right activists have moved to the app following bans from mainstream tech platforms YouTube, Twitter and Facebook.<sup>29</sup> After their combined videos racked up almost a million views, TikTok has permanently banned the accounts of British far-right group Britain First and British far-right activist Tommy Robinson for hate speech violations on 23 April.<sup>30</sup>

**Man Charged With Planting Bomb at Jewish Nursing Home.** A man has been arrested in Massachusetts on 15 April after placing an explosive device outside of a Jewish care facility, located closely to a Jewish community centre, a Jewish school and several Jewish temples. The man belonged to a white supremacist group who had engaged in discussions online about acts of terrorism, including creating a calendar listing dates and times to strike against minority groups such as "Jew killing day," which mentioned the event location as "Jew Nursery Home".<sup>31</sup>

**UN Special Rapporteur Concerned About Rise of Antisemitism Amid Pandemic.** The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief has expressed his concerns at the alarming rise of anti-Semitism since the Covid-19 outbreak and has called for social-media companies to impose stricter measures, including taking down posts that incite violence and flagging disinformation.<sup>32</sup>

## Endnotes

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- 2 Al-Naba, Issue 229
- 3 Al-Naba, Issue 230
- 4 Iba, Issue 93
- 5 Nawai Ghazwa Hind, April 2020
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As the global response to Covid-19 continues to develop, the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change will continue to monitor and analyse the major incidents, trends and developments in extremist activity around the world.

To learn more about the Institute's work and how we are supporting governments in responding to Covid-19, please visit [Institute.Global](https://Institute.Global).

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