



TONY BLAIR
INSTITUTE
FOR GLOBAL
CHANGE

Snapshot

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



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Introduction

As the global response to the Covid-19 pandemic continues, extremist actors from across the ideological spectrum have sought to use upheaval and uncertainty for their own ends. Extremist groups are recognising the scale of the crisis and 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 it is intended to offer timely and useful insight as dynamics unfold.

Trends in this briefing include:

- Salafi-jihadi groups have released messages coinciding with the end of Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr, reiterating their views on Covid-19 as a divine punishment against their enemies.
- Shia Islamist groups from across the Middle East have been engaging in a coordinated anti-Semitic campaign online against Israel, with the al-Quds Day activities being shifted online this year in light of Covid-19.
- Far-right actors have been observed trying to financially benefit from the pandemic, including through the sale of face masks and health supplements described as stopping people from contracting viruses.
- Elsewhere, beyond Covid-19, Shia militias have called for attacks against Saudi Arabia, Canadian authorities charged a man for “incel”-inspired terrorism, and US President Donald Trump has threatened to ban Antifa.

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 spokesperson Abu Hamza al-Quraishi issued an audio message in which he described the Covid-19 pandemic as a divine punishment for the “Crusaders” that serves as a distraction for the group’s enemies.
- An al-Qaeda video lecture featuring its elusive leader Ayman al-Zawahiri included a segment criticising the Covid-19 response of US President Donald Trump and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson.
- Platforms affiliated with Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp have been orchestrating a global online campaign against Israel on the anniversary of the country’s founding using the hashtag #COVID-1948.
- A popular US far-right website known for its racist and anti-Semitic content has removed sections on “The Race War” and “The Jewish Problem” to concentrate on the “Coronavirus Hoax.”

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, monitoring communication channels used by their members and supporters, and local and regional news sources from around the world.

Sunni Islamist Extremist Groups

Islamic State and affiliates

ISIS’s official spokesperson, Abu Hamza al-Quraishi, issued a rare audio message coinciding with the end of Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr on 28 May, in which he described Covid-19 as a divine punishment for the “Crusader” enemies of Islam, with these enemies now facing tribulations similar to those faced by the group. Threatening a further escalation of violence, al-Quraishi claimed that punishments will be directed towards the group’s enemies once it is victorious. He also claimed that the pandemic had distracted the group’s opponents, who are struggling to deal with the virus. Al-Quraishi also criticised the decision taken by several Muslim countries to close mosques as part of measures to control the spread of the virus. In the concluding part of the audio message, al-Quraishi singled out and threatened Qatar, marking the first instance in which an ISIS leader has directly threatened the country.

In a wide-ranging article in ISIS’s weekly Arabic-language newsletter published on 7 May, the group discussed developments and recent activities in West Africa, including clashes with al-Qaeda affiliates also operational in the region. The article also questioned the long-term presence of French troops in the Sahel in light of the economic and geopolitical impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Elsewhere, the newsletter cited an EU official about how shipments of cocaine from Latin America continue to flood into Europe despite Covid-19-related travel restrictions. The report claimed that the reduction in air traffic had not resulted in a drop in the flow of cocaine coming into Europe, with sea travel described as being unaffected.¹

In the “News from the Week” section of ISIS’s weekly Arabic newsletter published on 14 May, the group highlights the Covid-19 outbreak on board the USS Roosevelt aircraft carrier. Citing comments by Kenneth Braithwaite, nominee for secretary of the US Navy, the group said the outbreak reflected the breakdown in leadership that had affected the Navy for several years.²

Al-Qaeda and affiliates

Al-Qaeda recently released a video recording of the group's elusive leader Ayman al-Zawahiri discussing the moral failures of what he described as the atheistic, materialistic Western way of thinking. The video features a segment that breaks from Zawahiri talking to another unidentified individual discussing the Covid-19 pandemic. The segment begins with a discussion of the policies of Adolf Hitler and Winston Churchill, claiming that both pursued identical racist political agendas that continue to dominate the global political landscape today. The segment also featured criticism of how US President Donald Trump and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson have handled the Covid-19 pandemic, with references made to comments about the potential use of disinfectants for combating coronavirus and the policy of herd immunity.

Somalia-based al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab announced on 13 May that it had established a seven-member committee to work on combating Covid-19 in Somalia. The group said committee members included doctors, religious scholars and intellectuals who have been tasked with curbing the spread of the virus. The statement by Sheikh Ali Dheer, the de-facto spokesperson for the group, also claimed that the coronavirus was a weapon devised by the West to punish poor people around the world.³

In a statement issued on 23 May by al-Shabaab on the occasion Eid al-Fitr, marking the end of Ramadan, the group claimed that measures introduced by governments to stop the transmission of Covid-19, such as the closure of mosques, did not stop religious activities during the holy month in the Islamic world, with congregational prayers and social projects continuing. The statement described the impact of Covid-19 on "Crusaders" and "Apostates" as being part of the wrath of Allah, with the enemies of Islam facing two immediate threats: attacks by the "mujahideen" and a plague sent by Allah. Meanwhile, the statement also encouraged Muslims to consider the warnings about the pandemic, paying attention to the impact it has had on Western nations and following instructions issued by public-health officials.

In an article in its weekly newsletter published on 9 May, *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) – an al-Qaeda-affiliated group operating in northwest Syria –

discussed some of the measures the group has taken to stop the spread of Covid-19 in territory that it governs. The group claimed to be testing people coming from neighbouring Turkey into Jisr al-Shugur in Idlib Governorate in northwestern Syria. Elsewhere in the newsletter, another article highlighted demonstrations in Israel against the economic difficulties brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic and government countermeasures.⁴

Hamas

In a press release issued on 17 May, Hamas spokesperson Abdel Latif al-Qanou welcomed a joint statement by three UN officials calling for an immediate release of Palestinian children from Israeli prisons amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Al-Qanou said that Israel was fully responsible for the safety of Palestinian detainees.⁵

Taliban (Afghanistan)

In a message from the Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada on 20 May marking the occasion of Eid al-Fitr, he claimed that Allah afflicts mankind with punishments and tribulations when transgressions against religion and human nature have peaked. He said that the Taliban's health commission had been instructed to provide medical assistance and facilities and exert all efforts to help the Afghan people during the current health crisis. Akhundzada encouraged followers and the general public to follow public-health guidelines in order to protect themselves. The leader of the Taliban also called on health organisations and non-governmental organisations to help the people of Afghanistan and pledged that the Taliban will work to support their efforts.⁶

There were several articles referencing the Covid-19 pandemic in the Taliban's monthly Arabic-language magazine published in May. The group has asserted that the pandemic has not prevented it from pursuing its goals, with the Taliban continuing to prepare for the "liberation of Afghanistan". As expressed previously, the Taliban reiterated its concerns about the safety and wellbeing of its members who are currently imprisoned, with the group describing these detainees as being especially vulnerable and fragile due to the overcrowded nature of the prisons.

The group also said that it held the US responsible for any harm to prisoners since they are responsible for maintaining the Afghan government in Kabul. In another article, the Taliban accused the Afghan government of profiteering from the pandemic, as well as all others who are working as part of the Covid-19 response. The Taliban claims that the government in Kabul has taken advantage of the situation and stoked fears about the pandemic to secure funds from international aid agencies and other countries while allocating generous budgets for itself in the fight against Covid-19.

In an article published on 1 May, the Taliban accused the Afghan government of deliberately introducing the Covid-19 virus into the country's prisons. The Taliban has also accused the Afghan government of using the pandemic as a "weapon of war" and putting the lives of ordinary Afghans at risk.⁷

Boko Haram

On 15 May, Abubakar Shekau, leader of one of Boko Haram's two main factions, released a 24-minute audio message. For several minutes, he discussed his group's previously stated position on the Covid-19 pandemic. He claimed that the fact that his group members have not been infected by the virus despite not maintaining social distancing (by praying in congregation and holding other religious events) shows that it is Allah's punishment for the sins of a world that defied divine command and the only solution is to repent. He condemned prescribed government health measures to contain the pandemic, claiming that they are a scheme to stop Muslims from practicing their faith, and concluded by inviting Muslims to repent to Allah and turn to his group's version of Islam.

Shia Islamist Extremist Groups

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Iran)

IRGC-linked platforms have been running an online campaign against Israel, which they have described as an "international virus" and called on supporters to use the hashtag #COVID-1948 on the anniversary of the birth of the modern state of Israel.⁸

The IRGC has been consistently using the Covid-19 pandemic to vilify Israel and engage in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about the origins of the outbreak.

The Basij, the IRGC's voluntary paramilitary force, has announced that it has sent boxes of personal protective equipment, such as face masks and hand sanitiser, to Palestinian refugee camps in Syria. These boxes also included IRGC propaganda leaflets showing the armed "liberation" of Jerusalem. The head of the student Basij unit at the University of Gilan announced that the unit had sent 2,000 masks to Palestinian camps in Syria to help defeat the coronavirus.

Hizbullah (Lebanon)

In his annual al-Quds Day speech delivered on 22 May, Hizbullah chief Hassan Nasrallah suggested that Israel was behind the outbreak of Covid-19, declaring that "Israel had counted on coronavirus and a widespread outbreak in Iran". Nasrallah suggested that these Israeli efforts had failed, claiming that "Iran will come out of this test as much more powerful". In the same speech, Nasrallah again renewed his commitment to the destruction of the state of Israel.

Hashd al-Shaabi (Iraq)

The official media channel of Harakat al-Nujaba, an Iranian-backed Shia militia, stated that the group had distributed "Ramadan gift boxes", which included medical and food supplies, to Palestinian families in need during the Covid-19 crisis. Harakat al-Nujaba, which is part of the Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation Forces), asserted that the militia "continues to provide assistance to families in need" and continues to "serve the families of the mujahideen (holy warriors) in Iraq, Iran and Syria" and had now extended this to a "God pleasing act in Palestine."

Houthis (Yemen)

According a news report by an Iranian state-run media outlet, a senior Houthi official, Yahya Ali al-Ra'i, has written to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres claiming that the "aggressor coalition" under Saudi

Arabia and the UAE supports the opening of Yemeni airports not because it wants to end the siege against the Houthis, but “to encourage passengers, especially those suspected of having coronavirus, to travel to Yemen to spread the virus among Yemenis.”

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

American neo-Nazi website *The Daily Stormer* has claimed that all of the measures of social distancing that are being discussed in a post-lockdown scenario are being designed to take away freedoms and that the reason the population has not built immunity to the disease is because of the lockdown measures introduced by governments. The site also warned about a “forced vaccination programme” being implemented down the line.

The Daily Stormer website has also undergone a rebranding exercise that has seen racial slurs removed in an attempt to market itself as an anti-government, pro-freedom site. The founder of the website, Andrew Anglin, claimed that he is removing the sections of the website focused on “Race War” and “the Jewish Problem” not because he does not believe in the slurs anymore or does not find them funny, but because he does not want them to distract from his new mission of denouncing the “new” oppressive society being built on the back of the “Coronavirus hoax”.

Gates of Vienna, a European far-right blog that was heavily referenced in Anders Breivik’s terrorist manifesto, has published several videos in support of anti-lockdown protests that have taken place in Spain and Germany that denounce alleged police brutality against demonstrators.

The popular American conspiracy-theory website Infowars has published several articles recently claiming that President Donald Trump is right in promoting hydroxychloroquine as a treatment for Covid-19 and suggested that several doctors have supported this claim. In multiple articles discussing the use of hydroxychloroquine, *Infowars* has shared links for supporters to purchase its own brand of dietary supplements that can help “eliminate unwanted invaders from your body”.

Global far-right activity

A man in the US state of Colorado who was arrested on his way to join an anti-lockdown protest had built four pipe-bomb devices at home and told investigators that he had prepared to “fight to the death” anyone who tried to disarm him and that he was “gearing up” for an upcoming war. According to investigators, some associates of the man belonged to a white supremacist group that had urged its followers to target FBI agents and police officers. Prosecutors are deliberating on whether the man’s mental-health issues determine whether he is a “real threat” to the public.⁹

Far-right extremists have been infiltrating anti-lockdown protests in Germany, according to an interior ministry spokesperson. Alternative for Germany politicians and members of the far-right Identarian movement have asked supporters to join the protests, with the former even organising their own rallies. The president of the Federal Criminal Police Office has claimed that extremist groups are trying to “hijack” these protests.¹⁰

A white supremacist merchandising company based in Germany has been selling coronavirus-themed clothing, including face masks, displaying a range of white supremacist logos and common slogans along with images mocking Asian people. One slogan that appears on T-shirts and masks reads, “Gib Gates keine chance. Don’t pay the Bill” (which translates to English as “Don’t give [Bill] Gates a chance...”), an allusion to a popular conspiracy theory among far-right groups that Bill Gates is currently engineering a vaccine against coronavirus as part of a longer-term plan to sterilise people and, as a result, depopulate the world.¹¹

Beyond Covid-19

While extremist actors are engaging with the Covid-19 pandemic directly and indirectly, their actions during this period have unfortunately not been limited to disinformation campaigns and propaganda activities. There continue to be 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:

Al-Shabaab Militants Raid Police Station and Destroy Communication Mast in Somalia.

Al-Shabaab militants carried out a raid on a police station in Khorof Kharar in Wajir Country in northeastern Kenya early on 16 May. The group also destroyed a mobile-phone mast belonging to Kenyan telecommunications company Safaricom. All officers at the police station were reported as being safe. The unknown number of militants are believed to have crossed over from neighbouring Somalia.¹²

FBI Identifies Pensacola Attacker's al-Qaeda Links in Florida, USA.

The FBI and US Justice Department announced on 18 May that the Saudi military trainee who killed three US sailors and wounded several others at a military base in Pensacola, Florida, in 2019 was a longtime associate of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The link was discovered after the FBI broke through the encryption protecting Mohammed Alshamrani's iPhone, who said the attack was "the brutal culmination of years of planning and preparation."¹³

Suspected Boko Haram Militants Die in Chad Prison.

Dozens of suspected Boko Haram militants who had been detained in a prison in Chad have died from apparent poisoning, according to the country's public prosecutor. The men were part of a group of 58 suspects captured during a recent major military operation against the group in the Lake Chad region. An investigation has been launched after four autopsies showed a lethal substance had led to their deaths.¹⁴

ISIS Militants Attack Shia Militias in Iraq. At least 10 members of the Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation Forces) were killed in a coordinated attack carried out by ISIS in Iraq's Salahaddin province. In a statement issued on 2 May, the Hashd al-Shaabi said that its forces had managed to kill and wound several ISIS militants and were able to push them back with the support of reinforcements. According to a Hashd statement, nine members of the Tigris Regiment were killed in Mekeeshfah, while one member of Brigade 41 was killed in the Tal al-Dahab area.¹⁵

Al-Quds Day in Iran Highlights State's Anti-Semitic Ideology.

On 22 May, Iran marked al-Quds Day – an initiative created by the Islamic Republic's first supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, to rally against Zionism and the state of Israel. Iran's current supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, published an illustration depicting the armed "liberation" of Jerusalem, with the heading "Final Solution."¹⁶ In his annual al-Quds Day speech, Khamenei referred to Israel as a "Cancerous Zionist tumor", and vowed to continue to arm any Gaza-based group that sought to attack Israel. Khamenei's threats against Israel and his use of anti-Semitic language resulted in international condemnation, including by the UK and the EU.^{17 18}

IRGC: Liberation of Jerusalem is Imminent. In a statement issued on the eve of the al-Quds Day on 22 May, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) claimed that the liberation of al-Quds, a reference to the city of Jerusalem, is near. The statement suggested that recent steps by the US and Israel, namely President Trump's "Deal of the Century" and Israel's annexation plans in the West Bank, will hasten the death of the Zionist entity. The IRGC also hailed the efforts of its former commander, Qassem Soleimani, in preparing the ground for the elimination of the "cancerous tumor" of Israel from the heart of the Islamic world.¹⁹

Shia Militias Call for Attacks Against Saudi Arabia.

Two prominent Iraqi Shia militia groups, part of the Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation Forces), have called for "jihadi operations" to be waged against Saudi Arabia. Kataib Hizbullah and Harakat al-Nujaba, both of whom are backed by neighbouring Iran, have encouraged attacks on civilian and industrial targets in the Kingdom.

Kataib Hizbullah was suspected as being responsible for the attack on a Saudi oil facility in 2019 and has been designated a foreign terrorist organisation by the US government.²⁰

Anti-Semitic Incidents in the US Reached Highest on Record in 2019. According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), the number of recorded anti-Semitic incidents in the US in 2019 reached the highest level on record since the organisation began recording incidents in 1979. More than 2,000 acts of assault, vandalism and harassment were reported last year, representing “a year of unprecedented anti-Semitic activity,” according to ADL CEO Jonathan Greenblatt. The ADL’s audit of anti-Semitic incidents published on 11 May showed a 12 per cent increase in incidents and a 56 per cent increase in assaults.²¹

Toronto Attack was “Incel” Terrorism, Police Claim.

Canadian authorities have claimed that an attack that took place in February 2020 at an erotic massage parlor in Toronto, in which a man killed one woman and injured another, was inspired by “incel” (a portmanteau of “involuntary celibate”) ideology and is now being treated as a terrorism case. This marks the first time that terror charges have been applied to a suspect in Canada not connected to Islamist extremism.²²

President Trump Threatens to Designate Antifa as Terror Group. President Donald Trump has threatened to designate Antifa, a loose network of far-left anti-fascism activists, as a terrorist organisation for allegedly being behind the violence during protests that have swept the US in response to the killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis. Critics have noted that the designation of Antifa may not be possible under current domestic terrorism legislation, with the loose network’s lack of formal leadership or membership structures making proscription difficult in practice.²³

White Supremacists Call for Race War Following George Floyd’s Murder. According to an internal intelligence note produced by the Department of Homeland Security, a white supremacist group has used its channel on the Telegram encrypted messaging app to urge its followers to start shooting at crowds gathering in cities across the US to protest against the murder of George Floyd, who was killed by a police officer on 25 May.²⁴

Ku Klux Klan “Leader” Drives Car Into Black Lives Matter Protesters in the US. A self-described local leader of the Ku Klux Klan, a pro-Confederate, white-supremacist US extremist group, has been charged with assault after driving his car into demonstrators at a Black Lives Matter protest in Virginia. Prosecutors say Harry Rogers, 36, drove “recklessly” towards protesters and “revved the engine” before driving into the crowd. A hate crime investigation is underway.²⁵

Endnotes

- 1 Al Naba 233, via Jihadology.net
- 2 Al Naba 234, via Jihadology.net
- 3 <https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/somalia/somalia-al-shabaab-appoints-covid-19-committee-amid-calls-for-ceasefire>
- 4 lba 95, via Jihadology.net
- 5 <https://hamas.ps/en/post/2768/hamas-hails-un-call-to-release-palestinian-children-from-israeli-jails>
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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.

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