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WASH YOUR HANDS AND DON'T TRAVEL TO EUROPE

How the Islamic State has Framed and Leveraged the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely disrupted global operations in 2020 and 2021. The pandemic has also presented the Islamic State (IS) with unprecedented opportunities to regain its strength as a terrorist organization as it works to recover from its formal military defeat in 2019.

Key points

- While the pandemic ravaged Europe, IS directed its members to focus on freeing imprisoned IS fighters in the Middle East rather than carry out attacks in Europe
- The global preoccupation with the pandemic has diverted security and counterterrorism resources from their normal operations, which has been ideal for IS

Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic wreaked havoc across the globe in 2020 and 2021. The global pandemic created international as well as regional environments which proved to be advantageous for extremist organizations, namely the Islamic State (IS). Governments and their security forces shifted focus from their usual operations to pandemic containment and relief efforts; prisons holding IS fighters became more and more of a humanitarian crisis, and individuals across the world dramatically increased their time online. IS has been actively capitalizing on these developments. Indeed, IS' formal defeat in 2019 has by no means rendered the terrorist network a non-threat. While most of the world has been focused on surviving the pandemic, IS has steadily been moving to exploit the global chaos.

This paper will first offer a brief overview of the history of the Islamic State, followed by an analysis of how IS' strategy has evolved within the context of the pandemic. Then attacks perpetrated by IS in 2020 and 2021, and what these attacks have indicated about the threat posed by IS in conflict zones vs. non-conflict zones will be examined. This paper concludes with what actions IS is expected to take in the near future. The conclusions drawn in this paper are based upon analyses of IS' newspaper publication, *al-Naba* and interviews and statements given by security officials and experts around the world.

A Brief History of the Rise and Fall of the Islamic State

The Islamic State is a terrorist organization that was founded in 1999 by Jordanian Salafi jihadist, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. IS gained global prominence in 2014 following its defeat of Iraqi forces in its Western Iraq offensive, and its capture of the city of Mosul. IS is known for its gruesome videos of executions (mostly beheadings) of soldiers and civilians, and for its systematic destruction of cultural heritage sites (*A Short History of ISIS Propaganda Videos*, 2015). In June 2014, IS declared itself a worldwide caliphate and began referring to itself as the Islamic State (it was formerly called *Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad*). IS' statehood has been refuted by the United Nations, various governments, and mainstream Muslims worldwide. At its height in 2015, IS controlled an area extending from western Iraq to eastern Syria, where IS imposed sharia law (Shinkman, 2017). This region under IS' control contained an estimated eight to twelve million people. At this point, IS was estimated to have an annual budget of more than 1 billion USD and a force of more than 30,000 fighters (Gerges, 2016, pp. 21-22).

In mid-2014, an international coalition led by the United States carried out airstrikes against IS in Syria and Iraq. The coalition also supplied advisors, weapons, and training to Iraqi Security Forces and Syrian Democratic Forces. By December of 2017, IS lost control of 95 percent of its territory, including Mosul, its largest city, and Raqqa, its de facto capital. By 2018, international intervention efforts were focused on eastern Syria where the U.S.-backed coalition of Syrian Kurds and Arabs, known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), captured key IS holdings. On December 19, 2018, President Trump announced plans to withdraw all 2,000 U.S. troops supporting the SDF in Syria. The SDF continued its offensive against the Islamic State. In February 2019, the SDF launched the final siege on IS forces in Baghouz. Baghouz fell on March 23, 2019, formally ending the caliphate's claim to any territory. IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed in a U.S. raid in northern Syria on October 26, 2019. As of January 2020, intelligence services have confirmed that IS is now being led by Amir Muhammad Said Abdal Rahman al-Mawla.

Since the formal military defeat of IS in 2019, its members have been forced to operate underground. However, the terror network still has an estimated total of anywhere between 8,000 and 16,000 active fighters in Iraq and Syria. In addition, there are currently between 1,000 and 2,200 IS fighters in Afghanistan (*ISIS could regain capacity to orchestrate attacks in 2021: UN official, 2021*). IS has also extended its reach to Africa. Its presence has been growing in Mozambique, Somalia, and Libya. IS has also made headway in the Philippines.

The Islamic State's COVID-19 strategy

On February 24, 2020, Iraqi officials in Najaf confirmed the first case of the coronavirus in a person who had traveled to Iran. Initially, IS blamed Shiite Muslims for the first coronavirus cases in Iraq. However, as the pandemic worsened across Europe, IS altered its narrative, claiming that the pandemic had been sent by God to torment “Crusader nations” (Hanna, 2020). IS’ strategy with regard to the pandemic is perhaps best examined in its propagandic output. Michael S. Smith II, a terrorism analyst and lecturer at Johns Hopkins University’s Global Security Studies Program, explains that a cornerstone of IS’ strategy as a successful terrorist organization has been following through on its publicized threats and directives. According to Smith, IS “propaganda has in fact been a credible source of information about where we can expect to see the terrorist group’s members and supporters attempt to perpetrate terrorist attacks” (Hincks, *What to Know About the Threat of ISIS During Coronavirus 2020*). One of the most important pieces of propaganda disseminated by IS is its weekly Arabic newspaper, *al-Naba*.

As they appeared in *al-Naba* in March 2020, IS framed its pandemic-related hygiene directives as religious directives. The COVID-19 protection and prevention guidelines in *al-Naba*, were essentially no different from pandemic-related health guidelines that were being issued around the world. However, IS framed their guidelines squarely within Qur'anic teachings. Within the *al-Naba* publication, the health guidelines were accentuated by quotes from the Hadith, which is what the majority of Muslims believe to be a record of the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad. For instance, the directive that deals with the commandment of putting one’s trust in Allah and asking him for protection from diseases is backed with the Hadith from Abu Huraira who said of the Prophet: ‘Flee from the leper as you flee from the lion.’ By using quotes from the Hadith, the organization is seeking to emphasize their effect as commandments and the urgency to act as prescribed by the Prophet (Maor-Hirsh, 2020).

In this way, IS leveraged the pandemic to emphasize the primacy of Islam for their followers.

Shariah Directives to Deal with Epidemics
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Abu Hurayra <small>رضي الله عنه</small> reported that the Messenger of Allah <small>صلى الله عليه وسلم</small> said: "There is no contagion, nor evil omen, nor shrieking nightbird, nor pain within the belly." [Narrated by Bukhari]	The requirement to believe that diseases do not infect but by the command and will of Allah
The recommendation to trust in Allah and seek refuge in Him from diseases	Anas <small>رضي الله عنه</small> reported that the Prophet <small>صلى الله عليه وسلم</small> used to say: "O Allah, I seek refuge in You from insanity, leprosy, deformity, and bad sickness." [Narrated by Ahmad]
Abu Hurayra <small>رضي الله عنه</small> reported that the Messenger of Allah <small>صلى الله عليه وسلم</small> said: "Flee from the leper as you flee from the lion." [Narrated by Bukhari]	The requirement to take up the causes for preventing diseases and avoiding them
The recommendation for the healthy not to enter the land of the epidemic and for the infected not to leave from it	'Aisha <small>رضي الله عنها</small> reported: I asked the Messenger of Allah <small>صلى الله عليه وسلم</small> about the plague, and he told me: "It is a torment that Allah descends on whom he wishes, and Allah made it a source of mercy for the muminin, for if one in the time of an epidemic stays in his country patiently hoping for Reward from Allah and believing that nothing will befall him except what Allah has decreed, he will get the reward of a martyr." [Narrated by Bukhari]
Abu Hurayra <small>رضي الله عنه</small> reported: When the Messenger of Allah <small>صلى الله عليه وسلم</small> sneezed, he placed his hand or a garment on his mouth, and stifled the noise." [Narrated by Abu Dawud]	The recommendation to cover the mouth when yawning or sneezing
The recommendation to cover the vessel and tie the waterskin	Jabir bin Abdullah <small>رضي الله عنه</small> narrated: I heard the Messenger of Allah <small>صلى الله عليه وسلم</small> say: "Cover the vessels and tie the waterskin, for there is a night in a year when pestilence descends, and it does not pass an uncovered vessel or an untied waterskin but some of that pestilence descending into it." [Narrated by Muslim]
The Messenger of Allah <small>صلى الله عليه وسلم</small> said: "When one of you wakes up from his sleep, he must not put his hand in a vessel till he washed it three times, for he does not know where his hand was as he slept." [Agreed upon]	The recommendation to wash one's hands before dipping them in vessels

An-Naba Infographic
Rajab 1441

Source: IS' coronavirus health guidelines¹

An analysis of the *al-Naba* publication also reveals a strategic, albeit predictable, demonization of the West, through the context of the pandemic. The newspaper asserted that the coronavirus pandemic is "an example of God's torment against the nations of His creation, which has (praise be to God) mostly struck the idolatrous nations" (Al-Tamimi, 2020). The publication also advised members against pitying "the disbelievers and apostates," and instead directed members to "use the current opportunities to continue working to free Muslim prisoners from the camps in which they face subjugation and disease" (Al-Tamimi, 2020). As such, IS warned its followers against committing terrorist attacks in Europe in order to avoid contracting the virus, and instead advised them to focus on freeing imprisoned IS fighters.

It is important to note that IS' description of the prisons in which their members are incarcerated are accurate. In 2019, *The New York Times* reported on the inhumane conditions in prisons held by Kurdish forces in northern Syria (Hubbard & Prickett, 2019). Thousands of men and young children are kept in severely overcrowded cells without adequate access to food, water, sanitation, or medical attention. These conditions are especially deplorable in light of the current pandemic. Therefore, the inhumane treatment of captive IS members (and young children) has validated the Islamic States' depiction of Western abuses against Muslims. In other words, "ISIS seeks to demonstrate the cruelty of the West

¹ Source: https://twitter.com/Rita_Katz/status/1239205462509305862.

towards Muslims, as well as to reveal its responsibility for their suffering and the hypocrisy regarding the human rights violations of Sunni Muslims. This is a well-known motif of the organization's propaganda and it is expressed in its media narrative, thereby allowing it to claim the moral high ground vis a vis its enemies” (Maor-Hirsh, 2020).

Clearly, the inhumane prisons and detention centers provide IS with an easy argument against the West (and those allied with the West, namely the Kurds). Indeed, international counterterrorism efforts have often done more harm than good as far as their objective of eradicating IS is concerned. Frequently, “punitive measures such as drone warfare and prisoner abuses at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, have amplified the rhetoric of the ‘aggressive west’ in IS propaganda. Likewise, western domestic counterterrorism measures, such as the UK’s Prevent strategy, have further marginalised young Muslims, and grotesquely, may have led some towards extremism” (MacLean, 2021). Counterterrorism efforts such as these do IS’ anti-West ideological work for them, as these counterterrorism operations look more like human rights violations than security measures.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ العدد ٢٢٦ الخميس ٢٤ رجب ١٤٤١ هـ الافتتاحية



سلط الله تعالى شيئاً من عذابه الأليم على أمم من خلقه، أكثرهم -ولله الحمد- من المشركين. ففعل فيهم الخوف من الوهاب أكثر مما فعله الوهاب نفسه. فأظفقت ديارهم وطمّنت أسواقهم ونشاطاتهم، وخسب كثرٌ منهم في بيوتهم وباتوا على شفا كرامة اقتصادية كبيرة، نسأل الله أن يزيد في عذابهم وينتفي المؤمنين من ذلك كله، إنه شديد العقاب لمن عساه رحيم بمن أمّانه وتوابعه.

وفي ظل هذا الحدث الذي شغل العالم كله، والأمم الصليبية على وجه الخصوص، بات الأمن من أهم الشواغل للحكومات تلك البلدان، في ظل تفريغ شوارع المدن من سكانها، وتكليف أجهزة الأمن والشرطة بل والجيوش بمهام المساعدة على مكافحة انتشار المرض وتزويد الناس بالخدمات وحراستهم، وتزداد المخاوف بالنظر إلى احتمال حدوث صعوبات مالية قد تصيب الناس الأكثر فقراً بشكل مزامن مع غلاء في الأسعار ناتج من شح السلع في الأسواق، مع ما يعنيه ذلك كله من احتمالية زيادة حجم التمرد على الأتوس والمستكبات، وانتشار الفوضى والهرج، كما حدث كثرًا في تلك البلدان أثناء الكوارث الطبيعية والمشاكل السياسية والاجتماعية.

وقد بات الأمن والحروب التي تخوضها الدول الصليبية وانتشارهم العسكري في الخارج من أكثر ما يؤرّقهم اليوم، فأخر ما يتحتمون أن يرسوا المزيد من جنودهم إلى مناطق يُتمثل انتشار المرض فيها، أو يضطروا إلى حشد عناصر الأمن والجنود في داخل البلاد في الوقت الذي يبذلون فيه جهودهم لتقليل المشرد والاحتكاكات بين الناس في مختلف وظائفهم.

ولهاذا كله، فإنهم يسعون جدهم اليوم لتقليل احتمالية غرّ الجاهدين لهجمات عليهم دافع بلدانهم الصليبية، أو تصعيدهم لعملياتهم العسكرية ضد المسلمين. لأن ذلك -وفي الحالات- سيشكل ضغطاً وحماً إضافيين على كامل الحكومات التي تنوء اليوم تحت ضغط توقع المزيد من احتمالات شعوبها، في ظل تراجع كثير في الاقتصاد والواردات -وعجز عن تنسيق الأعمال المشتركة مع الدول الطليقة، ومخاوف من استغلال أعدائهم الآخرين لهذا الظرف العصيب الذي يبرون جميعاً به في تحقيق مكاسب على حسابهم في شتى المجالات.

وأخر ما يتحتمون اليوم، أن يتزامن وقتهم العصيب هذا مع تحديات جنود الخلافة لفرجات جديدة لهم، شبيهة بشربات (باريس) و(لندن) و(بروكسل) وغيرها، وقد وصلت نسبة إشغال مؤسساتهم الأمنية والطبية إلى الحد الأقصى في بعض الأماكن. وأقصى ما يخشونه اليوم أن يُستجهم الجاهدون يوم كُيام الفتح المناهضات في أي صقع من أصقاع الأرض التي يورثها من يدها من عباد، وحيوشهم قد بدأت تنقل في حالة شللٍ بسبب تقييد تحركاتها، والتضييق على ميزانيتها، وانشغالها بالانسحاب إلى أوطانها.

ولذلك كله فهم يُستون أنفسهم اليوم

بغارة تهدأ فيها حركة الجاهدين، وتساكن خلافاً نازٍ الأثر في نفوسهم عن ما أجروهم بحق المسلمين خلال السنوات الماضية، ويملمون بأن يرفأ الوحودن بملهم الذي يزداد سواً يوماً بعد يوم، خاصة مع ظهور بوادر "أزمة مالية" هي أهد من تلك التي أصابتهم قبل عقد من الزمان، وله الفضل من قبل ومن بعد.

ويتناسى أعداء الله أنهم في هذه اللحظات التي يحرسون فيها عن سلامة شعوبهم من الأمراض التي يكثر انتقالها في التجمعات والأماكن المغلقة، يحسرون عشرات الآلاف من المسلمين في سجون شديدة، ويحاربونهم في رتازين لا يكد السجين فيها يستطيع الجلوس أو التنفس إلا بهشفة، ويسرونهم في مخيمات لا تتوفر عن أقل الخدمات التي يحتاجها الإنسان لبقائه عن قيد الحياة، قد مات فيها الكثير من الأطفال والنساء والفتوح، من الجوع والمرض والفقر، وحسبنا الله عليهم ونعم الوكيل.

ويتناسون أيضاً أنهم عندما حصروا المسلمين في الباغوز والوصل وسرت وغيرها حتى فكت بهم المرض والجوع، استغلوا ضعفهم وقلة حيلهم بإيادتهم بالنفس المذمّر ودفنهم وهم أحياء في التنازل الذي تزويهم، وأمرقهم "بالفوسفور" حتى داخل الحناق التي تمسّنتوا بها من جرائمهم، فلم يرحموا عاجزاً ولا طفلًا ولا امرأة ولا مصلياً، نسأل الله أن ينتقم منهم ويسلطنا عن رقابهم أجمعين.

ويتناسون أيضاً هم ومن يتخندق بدعاتهم، أن الصليبيين اليوم وهم في أوج محتهم لم ينتصروا عن ارتكاب أبغح الجرائم بحق المسلمين في كل مكان، بل هم مسترون حتى الساعة في نصف بيوتهم وقتل أبنائهم في خراسان ووسط إفريقيا والسومال وغيرها، فطقت عن تقديمهم الدعم لأوليائهم من المشركين لفعل ذلك في أماكن أخرى، فهم وكما قال تعالى في المشركين: «لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ إِلَّا بِلَا وَبِئْسَ مَا أُورِثَتْ لِمَنْ أُفْتَنُوا» [التوبة: ١٠٠]. قال الإمام الطبري رحمه الله: «يا يفتي هؤلاء المشركون الذين أمرتكم أيها المؤمنون بقتلهم حيث وجدتموهم، في قتل مؤمن أو قديراً عليه إلا ولا لمة، فلا تُبقوا عليهم أيها المؤمنون، كما أنهم لا يبقون عليكم لو ظهروا عليكم».

فالواجب على المسلمين اليوم مع سعيهم في حماية أنفسهم وأهلهم من الداء المنتشر، السعي أيضاً لفكك أسرى المسلمين في سجون المشركين ومخيمات اللذ التي يتهددهم فيها المرض بالإضافة لما يتعرضون له من إلال وفقر وجوع وعذوان عن أنفسهم ودينهم من قبل المشركين، ولا تأخذهم رافة بالكفار والمرتدين حتى وهم في أوج محتهم، وأن يسلطوا الرحمة عليهم ليزدادوا ضعفاً وعجزاً عن إتيان المسلمين بإن الله رب العالمين، وأن يسعوا في حسيبتهم أن خسائر الصليبيين والطواغيت التالية ولنشاطاتهم بتحصين بلدانهم من أنفسهم وأعدائهم الآخرين سيكون لها أثر كبير في الفترة القادمة على إضعاف قدراتهم على حرب الجاهدين، وأن يتكفروا أن مما يدفع به عنان الله وغضبه العام عن الناس؛ طاعة سيئاته، ولحن الطغاة إلى الله تعالى جهلاً في سبيله، وتكليل بأعدائهم، ولينصرن الله من ينصره إن الله لقوي عزيز.

Source: An article entitled “The Crusaders’ Worst Nightmare” in the IS newsletter, *al-Naba*, published in the week of March 19, 2020 (Source: Al-Tamimi, 2020).

In *al-Naba*, IS also encouraged its members to take advantage of the current preoccupation of Western governments.

The last thing they [Western nations] want is for their current tribulations with the pandemic to coincide with the attacks in their own countries like the attacks in Paris, London and Brussels, or for the 'mujahideen' to conquer parts of the Earth as occurred in the past. The 'Crusaders' hope the 'mujahideen' will be calm and pity their current sufferings, but they pretend to forget their own crimes against the Muslims they continue to commit to this day (Al-Tamimi, 2020).

Accordingly, there are fears among national security forces around the globe that IS will exploit the global preoccupation with the pandemic to radicalize and recruit new members, as well as to wage terrorist attacks while governments are distracted. As a senior officer of the international coalition to defeat IS told Politico in 2020, "Any conditions that are adverse, be it the pandemic or access to essential services, are always going to be things that Daesh [Arabic acronym for the Islamic State] could use for recruitment to try to bring people into their ideology" (Seligman, 2020). The current pandemic presents the perfect environment for radicalization by IS forces.

Moreover, the diversion of national resources across the globe from normal security and law enforcement measures to pandemic relief has been ideal for IS. As of March 29, 2020, coalition members including France and the UK, as well as NATO training missions, had withdrawn most of their training troops in Iraq because of COVID-19. In fact, the U.S. had already decreased its troops in frontline bases, "but the onset of coronavirus has expedited the withdrawal, impairing local security forces sooner than expected. With the Iraqi armed forces prioritizing the enforcement of measures that will stifle the spread of the virus—such as the nationwide curfew—regularly scheduled counter-terrorist operations have been pushed aside" (Knights, 2020).

As Michael Knights, Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, writes, "[f]or the Islamic State, this is all a godsend" (2020). Indeed, security officials have acknowledged that the reduced capacity of security forces provides IS with a unique opportunity to wage terrorist attacks. In April 2020, Rita Katz, director of the SITE Intelligence Group, which tracks online networks affiliated with jihadist and white supremacist organizations, told TIME, "Since the pandemic started, and weakened the capacity of law or security enforcement around the world, ISIS has persisted in operations across Afghanistan, West Africa, Central Africa, the Sahel, Egypt, and Yemen," and IS has "specifically exploited the pandemic with attacks in Iraq, the Maldives, and the Philippines" (Hincks, *With the World Busy Fighting COVID-19, Could ISIS Mount a Resurgence?* 2020).

These areas, which are most vulnerable to religious extremism, are areas poorly equipped to face the health challenges posed by the pandemic. Since "[f]ew countries hit badly by extremism have effective health systems," there are valid "concerns [that] the Coronavirus crisis could provide an opportunity for Islamic militants to win support as corrupt, inefficient and poorly resourced governments across Africa and the Middle East fail to provide adequate care for already distrustful populations" (Burke, 2020). Since Islamic fundamentalist groups have exploited national and/or regional crises in the past, there is no reason to believe that IS would approach the COVID-19 crisis any differently.

Attacks Perpetrated by the Islamic State in 2020 and 2021

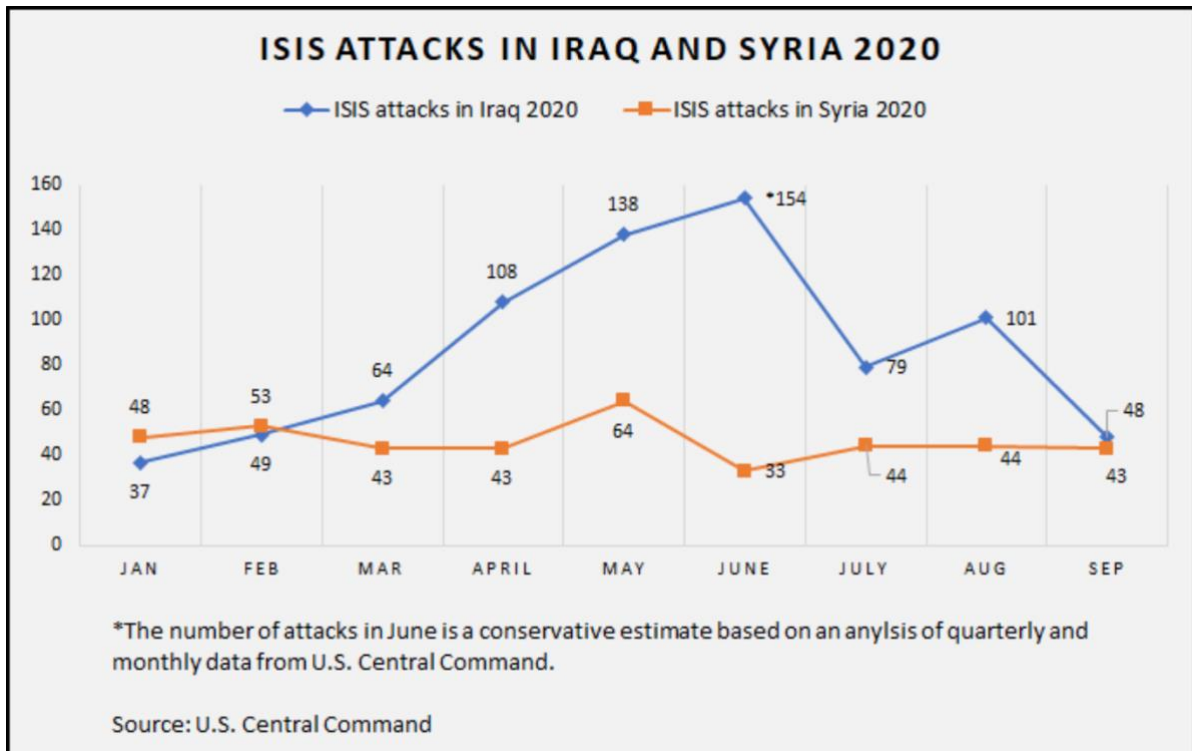
Even with its limited operational capacity throughout the pandemic, and its directives to its members to refrain from traveling to Europe to commit terrorist attacks, IS still managed to commit several deadly terrorist attacks in 2020 and 2021. This is because IS is actually well-suited for operating under pandemic-related restrictions.

Its cells are isolated, avoiding the risk of contamination by performing extreme social distancing long before the rest of us... IS are somewhat self-contained, living in remote hideouts and underground shelters, drawing on independent food and water caches, and powering electronic devices with solar battery chargers. In every sense of the phrase, the thousands of members of this millenarian terrorist cult are the ultimate doomsday preppers. On the ground, there have been small signs of Islamic State recovery at the tactical level, probably due to the cessation of counterinsurgency operations targeting them (Knights, 2020).

For example, IS committed several terrorist attacks in Iraq over the course of 2020 and into 2021. On April 28, 2020, Iraqi officials blamed a suicide bombing, which killed three security officials, on the Islamic State (Abdul-zahra, *Iraq officials say IS targets intelligence bureau; 3 wounded* 2020). On May 2, 2020, IS fighters killed ten Iraqi militiamen in a coordinated attack (Abdul-zahra, *Iraq officials: IS militants kill 10 in coordinated attack*, 2020). On January 21, 2021, in a Shia-targeted operation, 32 were killed and 110 were injured in a series of bombings in Tayaran Square, Baghdad.

IS was also active in Afghanistan. On March 6, 2020, IS gunmen killed 32 people and injured over 80 people at a ceremony in Kabul. On March 25, IS killed 25 people in a gurdwara in Kabul. On May 12, three gunmen executed a mass shooting at a hospital's maternity ward, killing 24 victims, including newborn babies, mothers, and nurses. An hour later, a suicide bombing took place in Kuz Kunar, Nangarhar Province at the funeral of a police commander, killing 32 mourners and injuring 133 others. On August 3, IS launched an attack on an Afghan prison that left at least 29 dead.

There were also two IS attacks in Europe in 2020. On February 2, 2020, two people were stabbed in London, and one more had minor injuries. The perpetrator was an IS fighter.



Source: Nada, 2020

In 2020, IS also executed attacks in countries that never officially recorded attacks perpetrated by IS before. In the Maldives, in April 2020, IS fighters set several boats on fire. According to *al-Naba*, this attack was a warning to the Maldives' "apostate" government (Hincks, *What to Know About the Threat of ISIS During Coronavirus 2020*). The same month, Mozambique officially reported an attack by IS for the first time. Although the Islamist violence in Mozambique dates back to 2017, the April 2020 attack was the first attack to be officially attributed to IS by authorities in Mozambique. Officials in the country reported that IS forces massacred 52 villagers in the Cabo Delgado region who refused to join the organization. Clearly, IS is strong enough to pose a threat even beyond Iraq and Syria.

The Islamic State in Non-Conflict Zones and Conflict Zones

The coronavirus pandemic has significantly impacted IS' strategic operations. According to a report released by the U.N. in February 2021, which assessed the effect of the pandemic on the threat posed by IS, there was a significant difference in the threat posed by IS between conflict zones and non-conflict zones (Heimerback, 2021).² In non-conflict zones, the threat remained comparatively low, notwithstanding several terrorist attacks carried out in Europe (as mentioned above). This is because travel restrictions and lockdowns have significantly reduced the mobility of IS in non-conflict zones. As such, IS operations (meetings, fundraising, traveling, etc.) have largely halted in these areas. As a result, IS members have not been able to carry out high-casualty attacks in non-conflict zones during the pandemic. However, movement restrictions and lockdowns have resulted in an increase in IS' online presence. While the world spent more time online during the pandemic, IS had access to a wider online audience, thereby increasing its radicalization potential. Accordingly, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio

² The report also analyzes the threat posed by Al-Qaida during the pandemic.

Guterres issued a warning in 2020 that extremist groups have been taking advantage of the global pandemic in order to reach and recruit vulnerable individuals online (Viriyapah, 2020).

In conflict zones, on the other hand, the threat level posed by IS has risen, where the pandemic severely reduced the capacities of security forces and inhibited the rule of law. Indeed, “the pandemic inhibited forces of law and order more than terrorists” (Viriyapah, 2020). In these areas, where movement restrictions are impossible to enforce, terrorists move freely. In fact, IS has dramatically increased its attacks in conflict zones since the start of the pandemic. In March 2020, IS quadrupled its average number of mortar and rocket attacks, combined with machine-gun fire and ground assaults on security forces along the Iran-Iraq border (Viriyapah, 2020). These types of attacks have not been executed by IS in over two years (Knights, 2020). The continuing pandemic-related economic and political challenges faced by the governments and international intervention efforts within conflict zones will likely continue to exacerbate the rising threat posed by IS in these regions (Heimerback, 2021).

Future Attacks

Looking to the future, security and government officials around the world predict a surge in IS attacks once pandemic restrictions ease. U.N. Member States anticipate that IS “intends to end its marginalization from the news and that, as restrictions ease in various locations, a rash of pre-planned attacks may occur” (Heimerback, 2021). The U.N. also concluded that the resulting “economic and political toll of the pandemic, its aggravation of underlying drivers of violent extremism and its expected impact on counter-terrorism efforts are likely to increase the long-term threat [of terrorism] everywhere” (Heimerback, 2021). In fact, if these predictions are correct, IS can be expected to reconstruct its control in the Middle East, beginning first by gaining control of rural areas, village by village. Knights predicts that IS will increase rural assassination raids on local village leaders—so-called mukhtars—and use intimidation to increase its ability to raise funds. Disruption to security force clearance operations will increase IS’ ability to make advanced roadside bombs in its hideouts and use these weapons, and other harassment tactics, to keep the security forces buttoned down in their bases (2020).

If unchecked, IS will become a “local power broker” and will soon be able to “knit the caliphate back together” (Knights, 2020). In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic has not devastated IS like it has devastated the rest of the world. Much of IS’ normal operations have proven to be conducive to the global pandemic landscape. Indeed, while the pandemic ravaged Europe, IS directed its members to focus on freeing imprisoned IS fighters in the Middle East rather than carry out attacks in Europe. In addition, the global preoccupation with the pandemic has diverted security and counterterrorism resources from their normal operations, which has been ideal for IS. The pandemic has offered IS opportunities to continue to validate its religious extremism, radicalize and recruit members, and exploit the current global distraction. IS is still a terrorist network and will continue to get stronger if counterterrorism efforts are neglected.

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