



Commentary

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By International Crisis Group

Contending with ISIS in the Time of Coronavirus

Even as COVID-19's toll mounts, the world should brace itself for attacks by ISIS, which believes it can exploit the disorder the contagion is causing. This continuing jihadist threat requires the sort of international cooperation that militants hope the virus will sap.

As the COVID-19 pandemic swiftly reorders the priorities of policymakers and the public worldwide, conflicts that only recently occupied centre stage in the global policy and media debate are receding into the background. The fight against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere is no exception.

But while UN Secretary-General António Guterres has argued that mankind faces a common enemy in COVID-19, and thus appealed for a “global ceasefire”, ISIS has made clear that it sees things differently. In a new editorial in its weekly newsletter, ISIS has told its membership that their globe-spanning war is to go on, even as the virus spreads. Moreover, it has told them that the national and international security regimes that help keep the group in check are about to be overloaded, and that they should take maximum advantage.

In Crisis Group's recent briefing on COVID-19's likely implications for politics and conflict globally, we warned that this public

health crisis could afford jihadists the opportunity to attack pandemic-weakened states already combating insurgencies, as militants opportunistically “exploit disorder”. ISIS has now instructed its affiliates worldwide to do just that.

Even as the world is understandably focused on confronting the pandemic, countries should nonetheless take steps to guard against the danger ISIS poses. Though some members of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS have already announced that they will pull troops out of Iraq due to fears of COVID-19's spread, countries should, as much as possible, maintain the international counter-ISIS cooperation that has been vital to curtailing the organisation's operations. That includes leading military contributions like those from the U.S. in Iraq and France in West Africa, but also lateral cooperation among regional countries battling the group, which has taken root in areas like the Mali-Niger frontier and made the most of local states' failure to coordinate effectively.

Moreover, ISIS's adversaries should heed UN chief Guterres and put off their own conflicts and score settling, as they face not only the common foe of COVID-19 but also the continuing jihadist threat. That means – unlikely as it may now seem – de-escalating tensions like those between the U.S. and Iran, which inevitably undermine the fight to stop ISIS.

“ISIS has told its membership that their globe-spanning war is to go on, even as the virus spreads.”



This image, downloaded from ISIS's messaging network and provided to Crisis Group by researcher Aaron Zelin, shows what ISIS says is the distribution of its newsletter *al-Naba* in *al-Bayda*, Yemen. Crisis Group cannot vouch for the accuracy of this.

“Crusaders’ Worst Nightmare”

ISIS published its editorial on COVID-19 in the 19 March edition of its weekly newsletter *Al-Naba* (the Dispatch). *Al-Naba* is part of the group's suite of regular media outputs, which also include photos, videos and lengthy speeches by its top leaders. The newsletter offers a compendium of the organisation's operations worldwide, as well as a front-of-book editorial, articles highlighting model “provinces”, religious essays, summaries of world news and infographics. *Al-Naba*'s significance to the transnational organisation is not perfectly clear, but the newsletter seems intended to update even far-flung provinces about the group's global campaign of violence and to broadcast a common programmatic line to ISIS affiliates that are otherwise dispersed and isolated. ISIS has used other media outputs to publicise the distribution of *Al-Naba* to the local rank and file, and national militaries have recovered copies of the newsletter during raids on ISIS units.

The editorial, titled “The Crusaders’ Worst Nightmare”, reports approvingly on

COVID-19's effect on the many enemies whom ISIS collectively terms “polytheists”. “Fear of this contagion has affected them more than the contagion itself”, says *Al-Naba*, referring to how people across the world are shutting themselves in their homes as commerce grinds to a halt. Security forces are deploying in the streets to halt the virus's spread, and imminent economic crisis seems likely to spark crime and social unrest.

COVID-19's effect is paralysing Western “Crusader” nations in particular, according to the editorial. As these countries worry about public health and safety, “the last thing they want is to send more of their soldiers to regions in which this disease is likely to spread, or to have to mass their security forces and soldiers at home when they're working to minimise

“Western countries hardly need new burdens as they struggle to care for their populations and to mitigate economic recession.”



أسوأ كوابيس المليبيين

بفترة تهدأ فيها حركة المجاهدين، أبشع الجرائم بحق المسلمين في كل مكان، وتسكن خلالها ناز الثأر في نفوسهم على ما أجمروه بحق المسلمين خلال السنوات الماضية، ويحلمون بأن يرأف الموحدون بحالهم الذي يزداد سوءاً يوماً بعد يوم، خاصة مع ظهور بوادر "أزمة مالية" هي أشد من تلك التي أصابتهم قبل عقد من الزمان، ولله الفضل من قبل ومن بعد.

ولهذا كله، فإنهم يسعون جهدهم اليوم لتقليل احتمالية شرّ المجاهدين لهجمات عليهم داخل بلدانهم الصليبية، أم

لأن الله تعالى شيئاً من عذابه الأليم على من خلقه، أكثرهم -ولله الحمد- من شركين، ففعل فيهم الخوف من الوباء أثر مما فعله الوباء نفسه، فأغلقت يارهم وعطلت أسواقهم ونشاطاتهم، حُبس كثيرٌ منهم في بيوتهم وباتوا على نفا كارثة اقتصادية كبيرة، نسأل الله أن يبد في عذابهم وينجّي المؤمنين من ذلك له، أنه شديد العقاب لمن عصاه، رحمه

An article entitled "The Crusaders' Worst Nightmare" in the ISIS newsletter al-Naba. Crisis Group downloaded the newsletter from the website Jihadology. The newsletter was originally distributed by ISIS's messaging network.

mass gatherings and contacts between people of all professions". These countries fret, the editorial continues, that ISIS's fighters might "escalate their military operations against [the West's] apostate helpers in Muslim countries" or repeat past terror attacks in Paris, London and Brussels at a time "when [these countries'] security and medical institutions have reached the limits of their capacity in some areas". These countries hardly need new burdens as they struggle to care for their populations and to mitigate economic recession. In this moment, the editorial says, the "Crusader" powers cannot coordinate with their allies and fear that "other enemies" – presumably Russia and China – could realise gains at their collective expense.

Still, even as the West hopes for respite from "mujahideen" attacks, according to ISIS, it forgets that its aggression toward Muslims has not ceased. Muslim prisoners languish in

overcrowded prisons, and women and children suffer in inhumane detention camps. The West forgets how the last inhabitants of ISIS-controlled Baghouz in Syria, Mosul in Iraq and Sirte in Libya starved and fell sick, only to be bombed and buried alive under rubble. And it forgets that it continues to intervene militarily in places like Afghanistan and West Africa, and to support local allies as they wage counter-insurgent war.

Al-Naba concludes from the foregoing that Muslims have a "duty" to protect themselves and their loved ones from COVID-19's spread, but also to act. The editorial enjoins ISIS supporters to liberate Muslim captives from prisons and camps; to show no mercy to the "infidels" and "apostates" in their moment of crisis, and instead to attack and weaken them, rendering them less able to harm Muslims; and to bear in mind that the calamity befalling the West and its allies "will substantially undercut

their ability to wage war on the mujahideen in the coming period”. The editorial closes by reminding readers that the best way to avoid God’s punishment – including coronavirus – is through obedience to Him, and that the act of obedience most beloved to God is “jihad” and inflicting pain on His enemies.

ISIS’s rhetorical line on COVID-19 has evolved as the virus’s geographic scope and human toll has become clearer. In January, *Al-Naba* reported that “a new disease spreads death and panic” in “communist China”. Then, as Iran suffered an outbreak, the newsletter

gloated that the contagion was an exemplary punishment from God for Shiite Muslim “idolatry”. Now the group has apparently reconciled itself to the virus’s global spread, even as it hopes that God will specially afflict “polytheist” nations.

All this is unsurprising. ISIS’s philosophy, after all, is the antithesis of the values underpinning UN chief Guterres’s humanistic appeal. ISIS’s doctrine extends solidarity only to an exclusive community of Muslims, as the group itself narrowly defines them. Universal humanitarianism does not figure into ISIS’s worldview.

Weakened States and Fractured International Cooperation

Buried in this latest editorial’s bellicose rhetoric and incitement to violence, however, is some truth: it is almost certainly correct that COVID-19 will handicap domestic security efforts and international counter-ISIS cooperation, allowing the jihadists to better prepare spectacular terror attacks and escalate campaigns of insurgent warfare on battlefields worldwide.

It is not as if ISIS will only now reveal some capability it has kept in reserve, of course. As Thomas Hegghammer pointed out after the October 2019 killing of leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and chief spokesman Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir, ISIS and similar groups “are already maxed out on intentions”. They do not need some special motivation to commit violence; instead, what matters are their inherent capabilities and the space in which they are allowed to operate. Within that space, they can typically be counted on to use those capabilities to the maximum. This is why ISIS’s operations were not supercharged by some desire for revenge after Baghdadi and Abu al-Hassan’s deaths, even as the group attempted to claim that its standard insurgent attacks were some global campaign of “vengeance”. Despite the organisation’s decapitation, the capabilities of its mostly autonomous constituent units around the world were unchanged. They just continued their deadly work.

In that sense, the *Al-Naba* editorial’s exhortation to violence is not news; for ISIS, it is always time for violence. What matters instead is what the group is capable of and what its operating context allows. If that context becomes more permissive – as this editorial anticipates – ISIS can better organise and execute resource-intensive, complex attacks, at substantial human cost.

This was the essential message of Crisis Group’s 2016 report, “Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State”: the growth of jihadist groups in recent years has more often been the result of war and chaos than its primary cause. ISIS, for one, became a global threat largely by taking advantage of local conflict and state failure in Syria, only to then rampage through Iraq and attempt to export its model globally.

By contrast, local Syrian and Iraqi forces and their international partners managed to beat back ISIS through joint effort and unity of purpose, if only incompletely and temporarily. Since then, preventing the group’s resurgence in both countries has depended on continuing international cooperation and on avoiding destructive new conflict that could relieve pressure on ISIS’s insurgent remnants.

Take the case of Iraq, the original epicentre of what became ISIS’s transnational campaign.

There, it is local forces that have done most of the fighting and dying against ISIS on the ground. But those Iraqi forces have also relied on the U.S.-led international Coalition to provide key technical capabilities such as air support and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) to enable their continuing fight against ISIS insurgents. More recently, broader tensions between the U.S. and Iran have threatened the viability of Coalition support for Iraqi counter-ISIS operations, as the U.S. and local Iran-aligned paramilitary factions have become embroiled in a deadly tit-for-tat of rocket attacks and airstrikes. That violence has lent new momentum to some Iraqi political blocs' efforts to press the government to push the U.S. and other foreign forces out of the country.

Add to that COVID-19. Coalition members

strategy. The pandemic seems likely to make these agile insurgents more dangerous still, as it further slows and weakens local governments and militaries. If cooperation breaks down among regional countries contending with public health crises locally, or if coronavirus prompts international partners to disengage as some seem to be doing in Iraq, the consequences could be costly.

ISIS recognises this prospect, per its editorial: it expects that COVID-19 will preoccupy its enemies; atomise and divide them; and thus weaken their ability and willingness to “wage war on the mujahideen”, both individually and collectively.

In addition to the internationally coordinated public health response to the COVID-19 outbreak, Crisis Group has urged governments

“If this pandemic disrupts existing international cooperation – or even sparks new conflict – ISIS is poised to capitalise.”

including the UK, France and Spain have all announced that they will withdraw troops from Iraq, citing the risk of contagion and a related pause in the training of Iraqi forces. If international Coalition support, already destabilised by U.S.-Iran tensions, is further endangered by coronavirus and Coalition member countries' understandable tendency to retrench, an Iraqi state that is itself grappling with an outbreak will likely struggle to contain ISIS insurgents as well.

COVID-19 now threatens the international solidarity and cooperation that has been crucial to fighting ISIS elsewhere, as well, in places like the Sahel, the Lake Chad basin and Afghanistan, where local forces and their international partners have attempted to contain ISIS “provinces”. In West Africa, ISIS's highly mobile operations across national borders in the Sahel and around Lake Chad have necessitated joint counter-insurgent efforts by regional states, with support from France, the U.S. and others – although those efforts have not always been subordinated usefully to a coordinated political

to keep peace efforts and conflict prevention efforts alive and to maintain back channels in order to manage the risk of escalation in tense regions. Crisis Group has argued that coronavirus could even be a chance for “humanitarian de-escalation”, between the U.S. and Iran in particular. The flip side, though, is that if this pandemic disrupts existing international cooperation – or even sparks new conflict – ISIS is poised to capitalise.

ISIS is likely to benefit in any case, as COVID-19 saps its enemies' strength. Even as the world's attention is rightly trained on the pandemic response, then, we should additionally brace ourselves for ISIS's local insurgent violence and international terrorism to get worse. Mitigating that harm will require continued international counter-ISIS cooperation and support for the front-line countries that have suffered most at the hands of an enemy whose chauvinist, intolerant ideology is the opposite of the sort of humanitarianism this moment demands.