

EXPERT PAPER

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JIHADI REACTIONS TO COVID-19

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Introduction

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted life all over the planet and impacted nearly every aspect of human life. With national governments thrown into confusion as how to best react to the spread of the virus while keeping up its most central functions, Islamist terrorist militias have taken advantage of the situation.

Terrorist militias around the world (be it the Islamic State, Al Qaeda in East Africa or Al Qaeda Central Command) visibly capitalized on how the pandemic affected the combat readiness of Western security forces. The Islamic State (IS) thus reacted quite early to reports of an outbreak of a disease in China both with increased military and online communication activities.

Rüdiger Lohlker and Nico Prucha examine the communicational ecosystem of jihadists in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the first part of this publication, Nico Prucha meticulously documents the chronological news reports of IS' official newsletter *Al-Naba*, starting from the first mention of Covid-19 in its 219th issue on 23 January 2020. Focusing on jihadist activities in Africa, Prucha recounts how jihadists were able to achieve considerable military successes in Somalia, Nigeria, Mozambique and the Sahel region as local authorities were weakened by the pandemic. Covid-19 thus facilitated the spread of IS activities which the terrorist militia portrayed as evidence that the virus is a godsend to punish their enemies and unfaithful Muslims alike.

Lohlker subsequently criticizes the lacking scholarly analysis of religious approaches to the pandemic. With most analysts focusing on how the pandemic impacted foreign anti-IS troops' military effectivity in countries like Iraq and Syria, the theological arguments of jihadists on Covid-19 have often been overlooked.

By discussing the theological arguments and the interpretation of Qur'anic verses, Lohlker sheds light on how the global health crisis is being incorporated into the ideology of jihadists. Apart from only discussing the notorious IS newsletter *Al-Naba*, which comments IS activities on a global scale, he also includes regional journals such as the multilingual *Voice of Hind*, which is produced in Pakistan and circulated from Afghanistan. Dealing primarily with the narrative of repression against Muslims in India the journal concludes that Muslims should not help Hindus against the Islamic State which is the only solution in the face of the pandemic and the oppression by Western forces.

However, Lohlker goes beyond the classical examinations of top-down media like *Al-Naba* or the *Voice of Hind* and equally draws on chatgroups like *techhaven*, where jihadists communicate with one other openly. In doing so, it becomes clear that IS communication on the pandemic should be examined on a variety of levels and within certain contexts like the global movement against vaccination and measures against the spread of the virus.

Reaction of jihadist groups and actors to the Covid-19 pandemic

by Dr. Nico Prucha

Islamic State

The Islamic State (IS) is very meticulous in preparing news for its followers or readership worldwide. The basic attitude is that the IS is at war - partly it is a defensive struggle (e.g. Syria/Iraq) and partly it is about conquest (especially in Africa). The collection, evaluation and documentation of relevant events and current affairs is part of IS' OSINT operations, especially when it concerns countries that are either part of the coalition against IS or are classified as "classic enemies", such as China. With the start of the 219th issue of the IS magazine al-Naba, which is published weekly, Covid-19 was mentioned for the first time and subsequently documented weekly. For the IS, Covid-19 is a punishment from God for the enemies of God - whereby the IS sees itself as a human representative of God, fighting jihad in the way of God. This concerns, among other things, news that, for example, the German Bundeswehr is stopping training in central Iraq¹ because of the Covid situation, or general gloating about social fault lines within Western societies.²

On 20.01.2020, the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)³ reported the first laboratory-detected Covid-19 case⁴, and in Europe, the first three cases were confirmed in France on 24.01.2020.⁵ On 23.01.2020, the Islamic State (IS) mentioned Covid-19 for the first time in its weekly magazine, al-Naba. Under the headline "a new virus spreads death and panic in China"⁶, the IS announced that 12 regions of China were affected by the outbreak. A week later, in the 219th issue of the IS magazine al-Naba, Chinese "communist government agencies"⁷ are quoted giving the number of people who have died from Covid-19 as 132 and warning of a global spread. For the readership of the IS publication, it highlights, "more than 40 million people could be infected, all tourist travel to Beijing has been halted to contain the virus." The WHO (World Health Organisation) warns of Covid-19 "while the tyrannical regime in China tries to play down the virus", despite the measures that have become known. According to the WHO, the virus has already been detected in several countries. Among them countries that are active in the fight against IS: America, France, Canada, Germany.

In the 220th issue of al-Naba magazine, the IS again referred to data from China: "563 people have died and more than 30,000 Chinese have fallen ill, according to the infidel Chinese government." Two Chinese metropolises are in lockdown and the Chinese government's cover-up attempts are blatant, he said.

A week later, the 221st al-Naba edition puts the number of Covid-19 deaths in China at 1355, with over 90 000 sickened. "The true number of victims will be much higher, the Chinese government is covering up the truth and the true extent in their country." The fact that "the faithless Chinese government does not allow foreign health delegations to study the virus in China" is assessed as evidence here.

In the 223rd, 226th and 227th issues of al-Naba magazine, the editorial deals with the beginning of the pandemic and evaluates the concern about spread in the Islamic world as God's punishment for those Muslims who are accused of not following the religion correctly and as the "worst nightmare for the crusaders"⁸ respectively.

In the 229th issue, the significance of Covid-19 is again only worth a newsflash: 100 days of Corona - America and Europe under the burden of the pandemic while its armies suffer from the fight against the virus and the population has to be supplied with food. Again it is emphasised that "the virus from the

Communist East (China) has now spread to more than 190 countries. The crusaders of America and Europe are suffering high death rates and disease, and are suffering heavy economic losses that surpass any previous crisis." More deaths than caused by Pearl Harbor and 9/11 by Corona and the impact on the state of combat-capable units are turning to the advantage of IS. The strike capability of Western armies worldwide and especially in the Middle East is drastically reduced with fewer operational forces in the air, at sea and on land. The challenge is for IS to recover from this Covid-19 enforced pause and restore operational forces in its heartland.

As IS spread across Africa in 2020/21, the pandemic benefited IS strategically. With more regular attacks in Nigeria, Mozambique, and the Sahel in general, and various IS operations in border areas in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, local authorities are less equipped by Covid-19. IS propaganda from Africa with claimed operations, raids on army units (especially in Nigeria), killings of Christians (especially in Congo and Mozambique) has increased sharply in 2020 and is now part of IS operations, where the focus remains on Syria and Iraq. Online and in IS propaganda, Covid-19 is valued as a fortunate circumstance that promotes the spread of IS in regions with weak governments.

The war in Iraq continues unabated. Reports from the Iraqi government of officers and soldiers who have fallen ill or died from Covid-19 feed into the IS understanding that Covid-19 is sent by God to punish its enemies.

In the 242nd al-Naba, Covid-19 is presented as "redemption for Muslims [in Iraq] from oppression by the leaders of Hashad al-Sha'bi" after senior Shia Hashad al-Sha'abi commanders died from Covid-19.

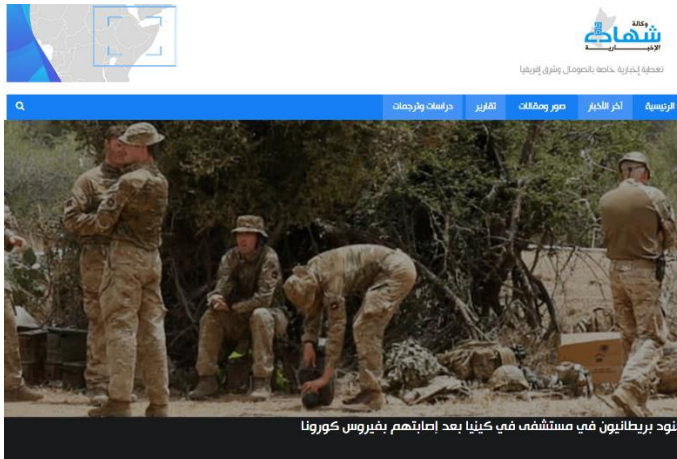
Al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda East Africa

Most notably, al-Qaeda in East Africa, known as Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin (HSM), have taken a stand on the Corona crisis. HSM are militarily very successful and have gained territory and influence in Somalia since the US troop withdrawal in early 2021. At times they have taken control of Somali towns and are fighting mainly against African Union soldiers and units from Somalia's neighbouring countries stationed there. HSM regularly claim to have attacked several units in Somalia, for example from Kenya or Uganda, while in parallel assassin and sleeper cells strike in Mogadishu and other important urban centres.

In Mogadishu, HSM suicide bombers and cells repeatedly carry out attacks on foreign-trained special forces, for example Danab (US-trained) or Gorgor (Turkish-trained).

In early February 2021, HSM warns of Covid-19 after several British soldiers in Kenya had to be hospitalised for their infection. HSM, through its media channels, stated that the West was deliberately spreading the disease as part of the war against Muslims and advised Muslims to stay away from the crusaders and take precautions against Covid-19 seriously (picture below).



In early February, HSM released a multi-part documentary on the corrupt regime of Somali President Farmajo. Farmajo is accused of closing mosques and restricting fundamental rights under the pretext of fighting the pandemic, while the Somali army is accused of war crimes and collaboration with the American army. HSM implores God to judge Farmajo with Covid-19.

In March 2021, HSM warned against the Somali central government's vaccination campaign. HSM reported on the pandemic and warned its readers about Covid-19, but stated that the government's vaccination campaign posed a greater threat. The warning was issued in a press release by HSM in both English and Somali, which noted that some countries in Europe had stopped using it at that time due to safety concerns. Instead, the militant organisation suggested using black cumin and honey as recommended in the Quran and Hadith. Somalis were told to avoid foreigners in the military bases of Mogadishu.

Also in March, HSM warned of a covid-19-related famine in Somalia - 850 000 children are at risk of starvation, according to a report by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

The infection rate in Somalia increased in March 2021, at the same time that a political crisis over the upcoming elections intensified. As a result, many Somalis travelled home and brought the virus with them, due to lax measures at airports and border crossings, according to HSM.

In mid-March, HSM reported that Tanzania's president, John Magufuli, had died of a heart attack. The article speculated that he had died of Covid-19 (picture below).

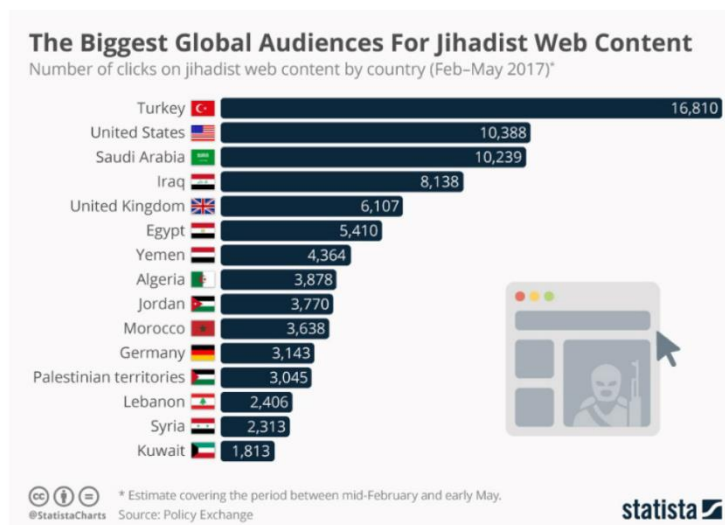


In June 2021, HSM reported that about 100 Cuban doctors would be sent to Kenya to assist in the pandemic response. According to HSM, the danger here, as already indicated, is that infidels from abroad will bring the virus to East Africa: "don't trust infidels, Muslims in Somalia should not expect help or altruism from them or their organisations."

Al-Qaeda Central Command

Commemorating the 19th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, AQ defined Covid-19 as God's punishment to all those countries that would be at war with Muslims. In a lengthy letter titled, "who is victorious?", AQ states, "The human tragedy and economic losses in America, by far the most serious in the world, is a punishment from God for their injustices and oppression of Muslims all over the world. Over 192,000 deaths in six months as well as over \$4 trillion in losses has led to the largest deficit in the history of the United States." AQ cited a number of sources as evidence, also citing the Manhattan Institute, for example.

Data from the Pews Institute is cited to prove that despite Covid-19, most Americans remain the most fearful of terrorism. "The mujahideen continue to terrify Americans and the nightmare of jihadist operations continues to haunt America and the West in general. The promise of bin Laden has come true, America will not enjoy security until it exists in Palestine."



The successes of AQ web/online operations - evidenced by enemy data - do not go unmentioned.

Conclusion

The pandemic was picked up early on by jihadist groups. In the IS media, China was accused of covering up the true extent in advance like reports from the US CDC. Updates on Covid-19 also followed weekly in this regard.

Jihadist groups are opportunistic, and their worldview is ordered by their belief in God. Jihad serves the cause of God with the claim to establish divine law as absolute order, thus enabling a 'true' Islamic society. This remains the main claim of the Islamic State's 'statehood'. Covid-19 is therefore seen as a godsend to the advantage of IS and to the detriment of its enemies. The outbreak in China is simply a punishment from God to China, which is defined as an enemy of God due to its treatment of the Muslim minority in the Xianjing Province and due to its atheist-communist form of government. Thanks to the pressure of Covid-19 on Western societies, economies, and military capabilities (i.e. impact on counterterrorism activities in Iraq), IS sees itself at an advantage and follows its divine plan to successfully continue its activities in Central Africa and the Sahel, where local authorities are weakened by the pandemic.

It is similar for Al Qaeda and especially so for its East African offshoot, Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin (HSM), which successfully fights and holds territory primarily in Somalia. HSM regularly attacks troops of neighbouring African states in Somalia, and repeatedly succeeded with heavy attacks in urban centers, especially in Mogadishu. The pandemic is being passed off as a plan by the West to weaken Muslims in East Africa. Accordingly, the virus was primarily introduced and spread by Western army personnel. HSM therefore advises that Muslims stay away from Westerners and warns of the danger of the virus.

AQ Central Command issued a document commemorating the 20th anniversary of September 11, 2001, citing U.S. institutes and researchers to assess the impact on the U.S. economy. Polling institutes encourage AQ, saying the American public remains more fearful of terrorism than Covid-19.

¹ <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/coronavirus-bundeswehr-unterbricht-ausbildung-im-zentralirak-16685172.html>

² For example, the user murafiq al-haqq in the closed forum mawtu bi-ghayzikum on Tech Haven.

³ The CDC, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an agency of the US Department of Health and Human Services.

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/museum/timeline/covid19.html>

⁵ <https://www.euronews.com/2022/01/27/covid-was-in-europe-weeks-before-first-confirmed-cases-claims-norway-study>

⁶ Al-Naba Issue 218.

⁷ This designation underpins China as the enemy and is reminiscent of the jihadi rhetoric of the 1980s when the communist invaders of Afghanistan were portrayed as the ultimate threat to all religious life.

⁸ See Lohlker (2022): #corona_virus_the_soldier_of_allah: IS, Covid 19, and learning terrorism. EICTP Expert Paper.

#corona_virus_the soldier_of_allah: IS, Covid 19, and learning terrorism

by Professor Rüdiger Lohlker

Nightmares are haunting modern societies for a long time. By combining terrorism and viruses we get news like: „A sensational Islamic State's plot to use Covid-19 virus as a jihad tool has been unearthed.“¹ (cf. below) Continuing phantasies of the failure of the Islamic State (IS) have led to stress, continued fighting against IS in the times of pandemics², and even IS attacks in „the West“ are pondered upon (Williams 2020). Al-Tamimi aptly characterised these writings as „clickbait extrapolation“ (Al-Tamimi 2020). Deliberating on „pandemic narratives“ may thus be the most advanced approach yet (Daymon/Criezis 2020).

This indicates the lack of scholarly analysis of fundamentalist and religious approaches to the current pandemic crisis, although a few exceptions may be mentioned. In an edited volume published in 2021, an overview of the responses of several fundamentalist traditions are presented: Jewish, Russian-Orthodox, Jihadism, Salafism, and Buddhist-Lamaist (Käsehage 2021a). One author writes about „a Covid-Jihad“ (Käsehage 2021b). A more general overview of the approaches by several religious traditions is to be found in another edited volume (Lohlker 2021).

A general remark from a commentary of the *International Crisis Group* sets the tone on how IS reacts to the pandemic:

IS' „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.“³

Although the main concern of this commentary of the *International Crisis Group* is the ability of the anti-IS forces to be active in the context of the pandemic, the resilience of IS may be more important. The flexibility and resilience of the IS have emerged again in the pandemic situation. Abu Haneyeh thus wrote in an article of 2020 (Abu Haneyeh 2020):

„The Islamic State outdid itself when dealing with the coronavirus, adapting speedily to the deepening health crisis due to the virus within a small time frame, as well as managing to turn the plight of the pandemic into an opportunity. From the very beginning, the organization took strict measurements and issued obligatory instructions to its fighters. [...]. Furthermore, the Islamic State was able to deal with the pandemic cautiously with obviously categorized steps. On February 27, 2020, the organization's weekly newspaper, *Al-Nabaa*, published an editorial entitled „May Any God You Pray to Except for Allah Be Wrong,“ about coronavirus for the first time in its 223rd issue.“

To be more precise, this editorial discusses in very general terms the beginning pandemic crisis. It is discussed in theological terms quoting and interpreting many Qur'anic verses, an aspect completely missing in the article quoted above, and therefore ignoring the core message of the editorial. The editorial⁴ of the 223rd issue of *al-Nabā'*, an official IS newsletter, does not mention the coronavirus explicitly. It is framing it as a tribulation of God for the ‚polytheist‘ unbelievers, a crisis of (un-)belief and the true believers as the counterpart. This framework allows IS to integrate the beginning pandemic crisis in its theological worldview. The only explicit reference is the illustration showing a person disinfecting gravestones. Abu Haneyeh continues leaving out that the 224th issue did not have any reference to the pandemic, a revealing omission:

„Soon after, on March 12, 2020, the organization issued instructions encompassed in a piece entitled “Islamic Guidance on Dealing With Epidemics” in the 225th issue of Al Nabaa.

The instructions included “realistic prevention methods and how to avoid the diseases,” which involved instructions such as covering the mouth when yawning and sneezing, washing your hands, and avoiding entering or leaving an area that has housed infections.“ (Abu Haneyeh 2020; cf. The illustration)



Again the author ignores the crucial aspect that all the rules mentioned are supported by quotations from Hadiths, i. e., linked to theological discourse. Abu Haneyeh does not mention the first two points of the list:

- 1) „Believing that diseases do not act hostile by themselves but by the will of God and his power.“
- 2) „The advice to trust in God (*tawakkul*) and to seek protection with him from the diseases.“⁵

After these initial rules the concrete rules Abu Haneyeh mentions follow. Evidently, the author tries to erase the religious, i. e., *Islamic* aspect from the communication of the *Islamic* state. Abu Haneyeh continues:

„In the 226th issue, published on March 19, 2020, the Islamic State considered this pandemic “the Crusader’s Worst Nightmare” in an editorial that held the same title; within the issue the organization called for utilizing the rest of the world’s preoccupation in their favor, the West in particular, to organize attacks [...].“ (Abu Haneyeh 2020)

No surprise, Abu Haneyeh again ignores the religious aspect and the advice to the followers of IS: „It is necessary for the Muslims (=followers of IS) today, notwithstanding their effort to protect themselves and their families from the pandemic and also to free the Muslim captives from the prisons of the polytheists and the humiliating detention camps where they are threatened by the disease.“⁶ In the same editorial the continuation and preparation of attacks is recommended.

The editorial of the 227th issue⁷ describes the USA, claiming to be the superior power on earth, as now weakened by corona and the thousands and thousands of dead. The role of China and Europe is discussed shortly; and again this aspect is framed by a Qur’anic verse. The same topic is presented in the editorial of the 237th issue⁸ with the headline „The American Chaos after the ‘Chinese’ Virus“, criticizing the failure of the policy of the government of the USA.

Chaos in America after the ,China'-Virus

Continuously reporting attacks of IS in all the regions the fighters are operating in proves the ability of the organization to continue attacking their enemies. Further reports about killings, destruction, politico-military reflections, Islamic issues, etc. supplement the communication of IS scanned until issue no. 316. We may say for most issues of *al-Nabā'* that the usual way of reporting continues. COVID-19 is *not* the most central issue of IS communication. Since *al-Nabā'* is looking at the operations of IS from a more global perspective, other journals with a regional focus will complement this view.

الافتتاحية العدد ٣٢٧ بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
الخميس ١٢ شوال ١٤٤١ هـ



فوضى
"أمريكية"
بعد
الفيروس
"الصيني"

عندما بدأت أخبار الوباء تتسرب من الصين، كانت الدول الأخرى تتناول القصة من منطلق السخرية والشماتة والتشفي، حتى ظلَّ بعض الناس أن هذا المرض خاص بأهل الصين لا يصيب غيرهم أبداً، وبلغ الأمر ببعضهم إلى

والاضطرابات، دون وجود أمل بانتهاء هذا الكابوس الذي هيمن على معاشهم في وقت قريب. ولذلك فإن العالم كله معرض -بإذن الله تعالى- لهذا النمط الأمريكي من تلك المناطق، تحميل الحكومات القائمة المسؤولية عما حلَّ بهم، وقناعتهم

الاضطرابات وتهدة الاحتجاجات قليلة. وهذا الكابوس الذي هيمن على معاشهم في وقت قريب. ولذلك فإن العالم كله معرض -بإذن الله تعالى- لهذا النمط الأمريكي من تلك المناطق، تحميل الحكومات القائمة المسؤولية عما حلَّ بهم، وقناعتهم

Voice of Hind

As mentioned above, an Indian news outlet proclaimed its superior knowledge of the plans of IS to attack using the COVID-19 virus – by reading an official online magazine published by the recently proclaimed *wilāyat al-Hind* (province of India) of IS.

Sources close to the Indian security sector claim „that the magazine is being published and circulated from Afghanistan, till a south Kashmir link was established with the help of technical expertise, including help from a foreign investigation agency, the source said. “Till now it was understood that the magazine was being made and circulated from Afghanistan, but the creators were traced to south Kashmir. During the investigation, it was found that the material was being sourced from across counties and only sent to Afghanistan. The magazine, however, was being put together in Pakistan”, the source added. “These are call centre like setups where men and women, who are graduates and know the English language, are working on designing this magazine. These people are also aware of how the digital space works and how the magazine can be circulated for mass outreach,” the source said. The source also said that these people are being paid a sum between Rs 15,000 to Rs 20,000 for the job. According to the source, the handlers who are responsible for collecting the content for the magazine are based in India and Afghanistan. These handlers, the source said, are also responsible for recruiting ‘content creators’ in Maldives and Bangladesh. The job of these handlers is to collect the content from across countries including Maldives and Bangladesh, where they are now recruiting people and send them to their heads based in Afghanistan. Those heads then send the approved material to Pakistan for processing,” the source said. The articles that go into this magazine are edited in Pakistan. The pages of the magazine are also designed there. There is one person who is the head of content and clears all pieces

that are finally published,” the source said. “Some Arabic articles that are under circulation are also translated into English,” the source added. According to the source, there is also area-specific material — like articles in Tamil, Bengali, Malayalam, for which translators have been hired.”⁹



Although we are not able to check the information yet, this report, nevertheless, gives an idea of the complex production of this multi-lingual journal. We will present a close re-reading of this source to understand the content on COVID-19 issues produced for *The Voice of Hind*.

Our focus is the special issue of the magazine *The Voice of Hind* or *Sawt al-Hind*, the Arabic version of the title.¹⁰ It is called *Lockdown Special* linking the actions of the government of India to the narrative of the imminent repression against Muslims in India. There are other issues of the journal in other South Asian languages, such as Urdu or Bengali.¹¹ Starting with an editorial about the oppressed situation of Muslims worldwide, a very specific phrase is then used: „Allah has ordained that all Muslims are one body. When there is pain in one part of the body, the whole body feels it and suffers the pain.“ (p. 3) This may be read as a very succinct expression of the exclusivist¹² theology of IS. Several Qur’anic verses and Hadiths provide the theological framework for the articles of the special issue. The geographical framework is defined as „India, Pakistan, Kashmir, Bangladesh, Maldives and Sri Lanka“ (p.3-4) with a focus on India.

The theological framework of the view of COVID-19 by IS is set in the following article. Starting with a quote from Sura 3, *Āl ‘Imrān*, verse 68 (p.6) saying that God will protect the believers, it is closing with quotations from Sura 7, *al-A ‘rāf*, verse 96 and Sura 9, *al-Tawbah*, verse 123 (p.8), thus threatening the so-called unbelievers.

The next article frames the present situation as dominated by extreme repression by what the article calls „blood-thirsty cow-worshippers“ (p. 9). The link to the COVID-19 situation is expressed by statements like „The disbelievers have spread false news about Muslims spitting in food as a strategy to spread COVID-19 in India. The believers are facing persecution, are being attacked by the Hindu infidels and are called names like ‚Corona‘.“ (p. 9) Thus, the followers of IS try to deepen religious divisions in the Indian society. These attempts to blame the alleged unbelievers are repeated, e. g., by writing „While the Kuffar blame the Tablighi Jamaat for spreading Coronavirus in India and hiding the true numbers of Jamaatis in the markaz, thereby flouting lockdown norms, their Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath visits Ayodhya during lockdown to shift the idol of their false god. They have the liberty to move around while the Muslims pray silently in their homes during the holy days of Ramadan since religious gathering is banned under lockdown.“ (p. 10) Using the ‚double standards‘ argument common in Jihadi media discourse, the magazine tries to pit Muslims against Hindus. Although two Qur’anic verses introduce this article, the true savior of Muslims is the Islamic State that came „to the rescue of all believers of Allah in India.“ (p.11) The article weaves together theological narratives, narratives of oppression and double standards, with the pandemic situation presenting IS as the solution.

Although the next article concedes that the Islamic State has lost territory in Syria and Iraq it depicts an ongoing ability to act: „The true believers [=IS] in Maldives and against the Sikhs in Khurasan [...] a part of the fight for the brothers and sisters of Kashmir“ (p. 12). The article proclaims „war against the Kuffar in India“ (p.13). Framed by verses from the Qur‘an and Hadiths, there is no reference to the COVID-19 situation, but only war against the unbelievers. In the same line, some quotations from the first caliph of IS are presented to bolster this call for war (p. 15-16).

The last page of the magazine (p. 17) lists some possible weapons of ‚true believers‘:

„A knife can be a convenient object to keep with oneself. Keep chains, ropes and wires ready to choke them or beat them to death. Tools like scissors and hammers can come in useful to kill the Kuffar. Any sharp object like glass will kill easily. Any long cloth can be used to choke them to death. Spread COVID virus among as many Kuffar as possible to take them down easily and with less effort.“

The virus thus turns out to be a weapon in a list of possible weapons called ‚convenient‘. The apparent contradiction of complaining about accusations against Muslims in India as perpetrators spreading the COVID-19 virus and the call to use it as a weapon to weaken the assumed enemy is not too surprising. Since using memes like the oppressed and falsely accused Muslim victims can easily be decoupled from the practical advice on how to fight so-called unbelievers by putting in the Jihadi mainframe of fighting an oppressive power by any means available. However, the content related to COVID-19 is relatively short since the aspects the followers of IS are interested in are focused on the need to fight – framed in a religious context as seen above.

The 11th issue of *The Voice of India* has an article titled „The Disease that became the Terror of the Apostates, Alhamdulillah“. ¹³ The article starts with the narrative of oppression of Muslims by the Hindu majority in India. Then Corona appears:

„The Coronavirus disease has seeped into the bodies of the Hindus and no amount of urine is able to save them from certain death. They cannot get rid of it despite of all their medicines and technology because it is what Allah wills for them as their punishment for their innumerable crimes that they have committed against humanity.“¹⁴¹⁵

Thus, the pandemic is understood as an outcome of the wrath of God against the wrong believers using in vain medical technology against the virus or other folk medicine like urine as being unclean is a specific horror for Muslims. The article reports some examples of Muslims helping Hindus to fight COVID-19. Nevertheless, the IS authors are advocating the armed fight against Hindus.

The lesson learned according to IS is not to help persons who are not true believers when they are in need but to fight and kill them. Thus, this magazine supports the theology of violence of IS.¹⁶

Reading and analyzing the weekly *al-Naba‘* and regional magazines like *The Voice of Hind* regularly is a step ahead of conventional research on the Islamic State. A further step forward will be done by studying an online chat channel at *techhaven*. Taking notice of the official account of the Islamic State means returning to an evidence-based approach to the analysis of the Islamic State. However, there are other parts of the communicational ecosystem of IS that remain to be studied.

techhaven

A chat group at the platform *chat.techhaven.to* within the IS ecosystem is dedicated to the coronavirus. Why is it important to this part of Jihadi online communication? Since the ‚official‘ communication with followers like *al-Naba‘* or *The Voice of Hind* is top-down, communication produced by a group of media activists with diverse backgrounds, the peer-to-peer communication takes place in chat groups on several platforms. Thus, studying online communication on online platforms allows for deeper insights into the core of Jihadi online communication.

Our case study is a chat group at the platform *techhaven.to*. The name of the group, part of the larger set of IS-related chat groups, is *#corona_virus_the_soldier_of_allah*, arab. *Qanat firus Korona jundiyy*

allah. The channel has 469 members at the time of writing.¹⁷ We may assume that most of them are to be regarded as core members of this part of the Jihadi ecosystem. The title of the group sets the tone for a larger part of the messages. Most of the messages are written in Arabic. We will present an overview of the postings in this group. We will focus on the time from October 2020 to December 2021 to give an idea about the communication.

In November and October 2020, the posts provide data about the fatalities and infections due to corona in many parts of the world, but general news related to corona are also posted. In December 2020 we read many posts about the pandemic situation and some cross-postings referring to other IS-related material. There is a focus on links to the magazine *The Voice of Hind*. Some posts warn against the risk of US authorities breaking into iPhones and investing in Bitcoin.

In January 2021 there are cross-postings from other IS-related media, e. g., *al-Naba'*, not related to corona issues. The usual corona news are provided; even the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran is quoted on the fatalities due to the coronavirus in Iran. Some conspiracy myths point to the vaccinations possibly causing cancer, the millions and millions of US dollar being spent on it, the usual anti-American position in IS circles, and the lack of understanding of the mechanisms of the vaccination. Bill Gates appears with an alleged contract with the CIA to change the religious behavior of humans.

In March and February 2021 we find again corona news. An issue posted again and again are postings about the prominent fatalities in the Arab world killed by the coronavirus, special news about the situation in countries perceived as enemies of IS. Anti-vax statements are disseminated – including videos by persons presented as experts. In April 2021 the channel continues presenting corona news including some conspiracy myths, e. g. the coronavirus is made for killing people (*qatl al-nas*). Videos are disseminated providing discourse from the anti-vaxxer subculture, especially of so-called experts. Cross-postings try to argue theologically against measures taken by Muslims to counter the spread of the virus. In May 2021 there are posts on the current rate of corona fatalities. Prominent cases of persons killed by a coronavirus infection are mentioned again.



Screenshot from corona_virus_the_soldier

In June 2021 there are some usual posts like remembering a killed fighter, warning against fake sites at other platforms like Instagram. Most of these posts in English are published by a user with an English nickname (*stranger.stronger*) who also posts a link to the 11th issue of *The Voice of Hind*.¹⁸ On June 30, 2021, a link to the 12th issue of the online magazine *The Voice of Hind* and a poster for this issue is presented.

In July the news presented are related to corona issues again. In August and in September further corona news are presented. On September 10, 2021, a longer piece in Indonesian is presented discussing Southeast Asian and South Asian affairs as well as a small note in English on August 3, 2021. In October 2021 the news reported the number of dead and infected people. In November the focus is on infections with Omikron. A small number of other news on corona are published.

For December 2021 the team¹⁹ of the chat group reports the number of infected persons with the Omikron variant of corona, the number of infected persons, and the death toll in several states. The danger of Omikron is stressed. We see the Jihadis who are running this chat group counting and enjoying the number of casualties by the pandemic.

A cross-posting from another chat group warns fellow Jihadis against the products of the forensic research company *Cellebrite* breaking into cellphones (December 18, 2021).

From an analytic perspective, the use of *one* nickname in around 90% of the postings in this chat group is revealing. Maybe just one person is running the group or a small group using this nickname.

Conclusion

The communication of IS related to corona is to be analyzed at several levels. The first level is the analysis of content. The coronavirus is understood as a threat to the unbelievers not being able to fight it with their medical and technological means – and even some ‘alternative’ treatments – which is regarded as the appropriate method by non-followers of IS. There are influences from the anti-vaxxer movements and conspiracy theories in general. Theological arguments are presented to support these positions. There is a similarity to other non-IS positions in the anti-vaxxer movement and the groups fighting against measures to contain the pandemic.

The second level is the ecosystem of the communication of IS online. At best, the weekly *al-Naba* is regarded as the official voice of IS and some articles are taken to demonstrate the worldview of IS. If we are looking further into this ecosystem we will find specific journals like *The Voice of Hind* with a focus on South Asia. Probing further into the eco-system we will find chat groups who allow for insights not to be gained from ‘official’ IS sources. Thus, these levels allow for a better understanding of the dynamics of IS online communication.

The third level is the interplay of the linguistic aspects of IS communication. It is dominated by Arabic language communication, to a smaller extent in English (especially in South Asia), with other languages playing only a minor role. Arabic is the source for IS communication in other languages.

The fourth level is the intersection of the diverse media outlets of IS with each other. However, references to sources regarded as ‘unbelieving’, e. g., anti-vaxxer statements, are used if there is a need for the information provided.

Hence, the communication of IS on the coronavirus is to be regarded as part of the global movement against vaccination and measures taken to contain the pandemic.

¹ <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/video/watch-islamic-state-s-plot-to-use-coronavirus-as-jihad-tool-exposed-1704648-2020-07-26> (accessed November 20, 2011).

² <https://besacenter.org/isis-jihad-coronavirus/> (accessed November 20, 2011).

³ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/contending-isis-time-coronavirus> (accessed January 16, 2022)

⁴ *Al-Nabā'* 223 (Rajab 3, 1441 hijri/February 27, 2020), p. 3.

⁵ *Al-Nabā'* 225 (Rajab 17, 1441 hijri/March 12, 1220), p. 12.

⁶ *Al-Nabā'* 226 (Rajab 24, 1441 hijri/March 19, 2120). p. 3. Abu Haneyeh 2020 misreads this passage.

⁷ *Al-Nabā'* 227 (Sha'ban 2, 1441 hijri/March 27, 2020), p. 3.

⁸ *Al-Nabā'* 237 (Shawwal 16, 1441 hijri/June 8, 2020), p. 3.

⁹ <https://theprint.in/india/isis-voice-of-hind-designed-in-pakistan-has-content-creators-in-maldives-bangladesh-nia/727974/> (accessed December 12, 2021)

¹⁰ *The Voice of Hind Lockdown Special* Shawwal 1443h (April/May 2020)

¹¹ Leaving aside the journal dedicated to propaganda among Rohingya with the English title *Arkan* that is part of the South Asian communication network of IS.

¹² Cf. Lohlker 2017.

¹³ *The Voice of Hind* No. 11 (Shawwal 1442 hijri/May/June 2021) , p.12-14

¹⁴ *The Voice of Hind* No. 11 (Shawwal 1442 hijri/May/June 2021), p. 12-14: 13.

¹⁵ Indeed, there are some indicators that cow dung and urine are used as a cure among others against COVID-IS. That is what the IS authors are referring to. Cf. Daria/Islam 2021.

¹⁶ Cf. Lohlker 2021 and 2016.

¹⁷ This article was researched in December 2021. Date December 9, 2021. The number includes the author of this study.

¹⁸ Cf. the paragraph on this online magazine above.

¹⁹ 'Team' is the usual terminology of the platform for users running the chat group.

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