



# ISIS in the Age of COVID-19 – From Islamizing the Pandemic to Implementing the Jihadist Strategy

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The COVID-19 pandemic currently engulfing the world has been claiming over 228,000 human lives to date, significantly slowed down global economy, and introduced social, governmental, and security-related uncertainties in various countries. The pandemic, rather how to best handle it, is now occupying every government in the world. That said, the question of how to properly respond to the pandemic has not been ignored by terrorist organizations or guerrillas, Islamic State (ISIS) included. In various media publications by ISIS, the argument made was that the pandemic was critical, destructive, and of epic proportions<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, the pandemic is perceived by ISIS as a global threat, a divine command, and as an opportunity for the organization to renew its attacks – especially against the West.

Since March 2020, an article or a feature discussing the pandemic has been published in the organization's weekly Arabic-language publication, *Al-Naba*. From these articles and features, we can learn about the narrative that is developing within the organization regarding the pandemic and how the group frames it in a way that serves its needs and conducive to achieving its goals. An analysis of these articles reveals three key narratives that have emerged over the past two months:

- Framing the discourse: Islamization of the pandemic
- Humanization of the believers in the Caliphate and demonization of the West
- Exploitation of the crisis in order to implement the ISIS strategy.

### **Framing the Discourse: the Islamization of the Pandemic**

On March 10, the organization published an entire page dealing with Islamic legal guidelines to protect one's self from the "pandemic"<sup>2</sup> without mentioning its name, but accompanied by an infographic reminiscent of those now widely used by official international bodies in relation to the COVID-19.

The narrative that began with these guidelines and continued throughout the rest of the publications focused around the disease being a divine command (see expansion below). At the same time, the Islamic legal guidelines are no different from the ones we see around the world in that they deal with the need to maintain personal health and hygiene in order to avoid infection – with two key differences: In its guidelines, the organization did not mention the Western origin of

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<sup>1</sup>Al-Naba, 227

<sup>2</sup>الأوبئة مع للتعامل شرعية توجيهات<sup>2</sup>, Al-Naba, 225

the guidelines, namely from international bodies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States, thereby framing the guidelines in religious discourse as based on the actions and words of the Prophet Muhammad. For example, the organization published what the believers are required to do: cover their mouth when sneezing or yawning. This guideline, even if it does not explain why it is needed, links in well with the cause of the human-to-human spread of the pandemic through droplets. In addition, the guidelines deal with the need to seal food and drink, prohibit travel to places in which the disease has erupted with full force, etc. In doing so, ISIS adopted the global narrative of governments and health organizations around the world and with it, the need to maintain personal hygiene as a means of preventing infection and diseases in general.

The guidelines are backed up with quotes from the Hadith (the deeds and words of the Prophet Muhammad) in which Muhammad's companions (Sahaba) talk about how he dealt with the issue of personal hygiene, illnesses, imposing their love on Allah, etc. For example, 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. In ISIS' and other Salafist jihadists view, the words and deeds of the Prophet are to be followed as closely as possible, and they are valid anywhere and anytime. The instructions that have been published for current ISIS fighters pertain to the behavior of the believers in the times of the pandemic and serve as a way to raise awareness of the fight against the disease. The instructions have been published through the various digital channels of the organization, ISIS Telegram groups as well as groups and pages of ISIS supporters on Facebook and Twitter. A closer look at the way in which information and messages are disseminated, as well as the level of engagement during the first publication wave of the instructions between March 13th and March 24th on various social networking sites shows that the use of social networking sites increased dissemination and exposure of wider target audiences to the content, as well as the sparked the wider discourse that developed as a result, through shares, likes, retweets, comments, and hashtags based on the instructions and the quotes from the Hadith.

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<sup>3</sup>Between March 13th and March 24th, the instructions received 90 likes, 41 retweets, 9 comments, and 13 shares on Twitter. On Facebook, the post about the instructions received 406 likes, 62 people loved it, 67 shared in, and 48 commented on it between March 13th and March 22nd. In addition,, the instructions had nine different versions of infographic dedicated to them. Furthermore, videos were published in which the instructions were visualized. One such example is a video of Sheikh Awad Ar-Rahman Abu Saad Karisha who published the content of the instructions on his Facebook page on March 19th, 2020 at 06:51 pm and, as at March 17th, 2020, received

According to the first message of the Islamic legal guidelines on the protection against the pandemic, the disease had come from Allah and not occurred naturally, therefore people must strengthen their faith in Allah who is the refuge from all diseases. As a source of all events and everything stemming from him, including diseases, refuge also stems from him.<sup>4</sup> In its subsequent issues, too, the organization continued to deal with the pandemic as a command from Allah, claiming that Allah had sent the mortal pandemic, and fear became the central motif influencing countries, especially Christian nations and their citizens.<sup>5</sup>

On March 27, the pandemic-related page opened with Verse 16 from Surah Ar-Ra'd:

"Say: 'Who is the Lord and Sustainer of the heavens and the earth?'

Say: '(It is) Allah.' Say: 'Do ye then take (for worship) protectors other than Him, such as have no power either for good or for to themselves?' Say: 'Are the blind equal with those who see? Or the depths or darkness equal with Light?'"

The organization later claimed again that everything that happens does so solely because Allah wants it this way, meaning that neither the good things nor the bad things happening to humanity can be prevented by anything or anyone – not by a tyrant, a powerful man or a flag or even a nation like the United States. None of these have the power to create fateful and destructive events that hit them in the way that a disease of this kind does.<sup>6</sup> The official messages in the official organizational Telegram groups were also echoed in videos filmed on the ground, which showed female ISIS supporters in the Al-Hawl refugee camp in Syria who claimed that coronavirus did not harm them [ISIS members] because they “were fasting, praying, adhering to Islam and the ways of Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.” As far as these women are concerned, the virus did not affect real Muslims while Muslims who died of the disease were infidels. Furthermore, per them virus “is one among the soldiers sent by Allah”<sup>7</sup> to beat the infidels. This indicates that the group's official messages, trickle down to ISIS followers, and are echoed by them in real life. In doing so, the organization heavily criticizes Muslims yearning for America and blinded by its might more than they yearn for

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60 likes, 18 hearts, and eight comments. It was also noted that some of the pages on which the instructions were published have an audience ranging from thousands to tens of thousands, such as the [الشعفة لمدينة الرسمي الموقع](#) page. This was more than 19,000 followers on Facebook, or the [مفيدة نصائح](#) page which has more than 14,000 followers. The [#الوباء\\_عنا\\_اصرف\\_اللهم](#) hashtag (Oh Lord, keep the disease away from us) showed in some of the publications and was frequently used on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Additionally, the instructions and the quotes from the Hadith themselves have become hashtags.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Naba, 225

<sup>5</sup> Al-Naba, 226, March 19, 2020

<sup>6</sup> Al-Naba, 227, March 27, 2020

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.memri.org/tv/isis-women-at-hawl-refugee-camp-coronavirus-does-not-infect-true-muslims>

Allah and therefore wish to please America: “And so we see that those Muslims straying off the right path follow the United States more than they follow Allah. And so, they put their effort into achieving America’s goals before they are even asked by her to do so. This is because they believe that they cannot achieve any goal at all without American approval.<sup>8</sup> These misguided Muslims think that this crisis will be resolved as a result of government's action, mostly that of the United States.

### **Humanization of the Believers in the Caliphate and Demonization of the West**

In its publications, the organization provides an analysis of what is happening in Western countries, first and foremost the United States, due to the pandemic. By doing so, the organization has been promoting two internal narratives: (i) the United States and its allies knew about the existence of the virus prior to the outbreak and even agreed with the European countries to let the virus spread in order to reduce the size of the ageing population, which is a burden on these nations. In keeping with this narrative ISIS also claimed that the Chinese government circulated rumours according to which the United States caused the disease in order to hurt the Chinese economy, thereby misleading its citizens.<sup>9</sup>

(ii) security wise there is a security that is a source of concern and vulnerability for Western governments, namely, the worsening economic situation and the deterioration of the personal security of the citizens spreads fear of general deterioration of the situation into chaos, as well as social and political upheaval within Western states.<sup>10</sup> This vulnerability feeds the concerns that states will not be able to provide complete security, due to fears that ISIS combatants might plan terror attacks such as those in Paris, London, Brussels, and similar events. This is in addition to the fear of infection of their soldiers on the front lines in the fight against ISIS abroad. That said, despite the vulnerability of Western governments, ISIS argues that they continue to attack and hurt Islamic State's supporters: Tens of thousands of them are locked up in crowded prisons in miserable conditions. News of these conditions were published already at the end of 2019, when it was revealed that the prisons under the control of Kurdish forces in northern Syria (SDF), where thousands of children, young adults, and men are imprisoned in crowded conditions;<sup>11</sup> camps where women, children, and old people die from starvation, cold, and are affected by depression; the siege

<sup>8</sup> Al-Naba, 227

<sup>9</sup> Al-Naba, 227, March 27, 2020

<sup>10</sup> Al-Naba, 226, 227

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/23/world/middleeast/what-is-going-to-happen-to-us-inside-isis-prison-children-ask-their-fate.html>

of various Muslim cities (Al-Baghuz, Mosul, Sirte) where many perish by diseases and starvation; and the shelling of Khorasan (Afghanistan), central Africa, Somalia, and elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> This way, while highlighting the vulnerability of Western states due to the pandemic, ISIS seeks to demonstrate the cruelty of the West 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.<sup>13</sup> For example, following the end of the Battle of Mosul in July 2017, ISIS highlighted the fact that many civilians were killed due to airstrikes by international coalition forces which targeted the organization. This was done with the goal of reminding the Sunni community in the world that the “real victims” of the war on ISIS have always been Iraqi Sunnis.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the goal of highlighting the suffering of ISIS members imprisoned in northern Syria is to show ISIS supporters that the organization has not forgotten the fate of these people, while at the same time highlighting the ongoing cruelty of Western forces fighting the organization, which according to ISIS, are actually fighting all Sunni Muslims, and not just ISIS.

### **Exploitation of the Crisis in Order to Implement the ISIS Strategy**

This narrative is centered around the considerable vulnerability of Western nations to the point of stating that they fear a wave of terror attacks like those perpetrated by ISIS in Paris, London, and elsewhere. This might point to the organization’s intentions to plan attacks of this proportion once again. In addition, an investigation by Politico argued that due to the humanitarian crisis in the prison camps in northern Syria since the defeat of ISIS in Baghuz in March 2019, the West fears that these events may be an opportunity for ISIS to recruit new members: “Any condition negative in nature, be it a disease or essential services, may turn into something that ISIS will exploit in order to recruit and attract people to its ideology.”<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that the situation of imprisoned ISIS members is not new. However, the spread of the pandemic since the beginning of 2020 and its impact on governments and militaries around the world, represents an opportunity for ISIS to emphasize the weakness of its enemies.

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<sup>12</sup> Al-Naba, 226, March 19, 2020

<sup>13</sup> <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/ICCT-Schmid-Challenging-the-Narrative-of-the-Islamic-State-June2015.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> <https://icct.nl/publication/winning-the-blame-game-the-caliphate-of-complete-disaster/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/02/us-military-fears-isis-resurgence-coronavirus-pandemic-162046>

In vol. 226 of *Al-Naba*, ISIS states that the organization specifically says now it must carry out jihad given that obedience to Allah is the only thing that can prevent His anger and wrath. As far as the organization is concerned, carrying out jihad in the name of Allah is a duty in order to hurt their enemies.<sup>16</sup> The organization essentially views this moment in time and the global crisis as a window of opportunity and as an opportunity to reach its goals: fear is rampant, the states are not fully prepared, ISIS members continue to be persecuted and harmed, and given that the pandemic was created by Allah in whom trust must be placed, the commandment of jihad especially in these times is more urgent and significant than ever. Indeed, at this stage of the pandemic, an increase in the number of attacks perpetrated by the organization around the world has been noted: In Khorasan (Afghanistan), Yemen, Iraq, Africa, and most recently in the Maldives on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020, and in the Philippines on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020 where 17 people were killed.<sup>17</sup>

As the pandemic continues, ISIS will work on planning and carrying out terror attacks, including on European soil as the latter is an ambitious goal for them. While many states have diverted their resources and military forces from security missions and counter-terrorism towards fighting the pandemic, ISIS is acting as if “business as usual”: The duty of jihad (which in its view is a condition for practicing "real" Islam) persists, and is gaining even more importance at this point in time due to the growing vulnerability of states around the globe as a result of the war on the pandemic. The above, presents an operational opportunity for the organization to carry out terror attacks.

In summary, an analysis of the ISIS narrative in the time of the pandemic illustrates the exploitation of the latter to echo messages that strengthen the faith among the believers and increase the antagonistic feelings against the West, all to implement the key principles of ISIS’ strategy: recruiting new followers to its cause around the world as well as plan and perpetrate in the name of jihad.

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<sup>16</sup> Al-Naba, 226, 29 March, 2020

<sup>17</sup> Al-Naba, 230, 17 April, 2020

A'amaq Al-Akhbaria, 17 April, 2020;

[https://twitter.com/Rita\\_Katz/status/1251207481017106434](https://twitter.com/Rita_Katz/status/1251207481017106434)

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