

How Central Asian Salafi-Jihadi Groups are Exploiting the Covid-19 Pandemic: New Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

The global coronavirus pandemic crisis not only poses serious additional risks, challenges and threats to the security of the modern world, but also creates new opportunities and prospects for the global Salafi-Jihadi-Movement. This report seeks to analyze the actions of both Central Asian Salafi-Jihadi groups' view of Covid-19 and its original parent organizations such as the Taliban, al Qaeda and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham during the coronavirus crisis. The reason for this is the small and fragmented Uighur and Uzbek Islamist extremist groups from Chinese Xinjiang region and post-Soviet Central Asia are affiliated precisely with these major players of the Sunni jihadist world, such as ISIS and al Qaeda, which are their military patron and ideological banner.

Keywords: Covid-19, Sunni Islam, Salafism, Global Jihadism, Central Asia, Taliban, Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 outbreak has negatively impacted not only the global economy and financial markets, but has also exacerbated the threat of transnational terrorist organizations, such as ISIS and al Qaeda. Indeed, amid the global panic and socio-economic shock caused around the world by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the Sunni Salafi-Jihadi Movement has tried to extract the maximum dividends from this global threat. The critical situation, accompanied by loss of life, a sharp decline in income, rising unemployment and decimation of trade, has created fertile ground for the activation of radical Islamist organizations around the world.

In early 2020, when the coronavirus hit China's Wuhan hard, Central Asian Salafi-Jihadi groups pioneered the use of Covid-19 as a propaganda tool, presenting the virus as "divine punishment to the Beijing communist regime for persecuting Uighur Muslims." It was the Uighur jihadists of the Turkestan Islam Party (TIP) who gave the new virus the ominous name "invisible warriors of Allah", which later began to be widely used by other terrorist groups in the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

This briefing paper seeks to identify and analyze how Covid-19 has influenced the strategic goals and tactics of Salafi-Jihadi groups in Afghanistan, the five former post-Soviet republics of Central Asia, and the Middle East. With the rise of extremist religious movements all over the world in this pandemic era, describing the particular role that Central Asian Salafist communities are playing in the region is of fundamental importance.

The ultimate aim of this research is to create an accurate picture – utilizing a combination of different sources – of how Islamist terrorist and extremist groups are exploiting various coronavirus cracks in society. Focusing on the Central Asian Salafi-Jihadi movement's views to Covid-19, this report also seeks to analyze the actions of its original parent organizations such as the Taliban, al Qaeda and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) during the coronavirus crisis, because the small and fragmented Uighur and Uzbek Islamists extremist groups from Chinese Xinjiang region and post-Soviet Central Asia are affiliated precisely with these major players of the Sunni jihadist world, who are their military patron and ideological banner.

The global coronavirus pandemic crisis not only created serious additional risks, challenges and threats to the security of the modern world, but also created new opportunities and prospects for Salafi-Jihadi militant groups. Since the problem of Covid-19 entered the forefront of world politics in 2020, it seems to have temporarily overshadowed the threat of Islamist extremism. Meanwhile, this threat has not disappeared and retains its destructive potential.

In accordance with the purpose of this paper, we will analyze in more detail the initial reaction to the coronavirus pandemic, its adaptation and its use by the leading Salafi militant groups for conducting global jihad. However, the harsh reality is that after Covid-19 hit Chinese Wuhan hard, it also hit hard the Sunni extremist organizations located in Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq in April-May 2020. After that happened, their initial enthusiastic position, in which they framed the pandemic as "Divine Retribution" and "warriors of Allah", turned into a defensive posture. They took the same protection measures against the spread Covid-19, which were developed by "Kafir (infidels) nations" and the World Health Organization (WHO), and recommended to their jihadists to abide them.

Today, all across the world, the non-state entities from hard-liner terrorist groups to relatively moderate Salafi rebel movements, who control certain territories, are taking steps to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the perception

and capitalization of the coronavirus pandemic by the Salafi-Jihadi groups differed from each other.

For example, while al Qaeda and ISIS used the coronavirus pandemic crisis to increase its own combat capacity, recruit new followers and to carry out new terror attacks, the Taliban and HTS were more concerned about the health of the population in the controlled territories. According to the UN Security Council¹, at present the Taliban have an available fighting force of 55,000-85,000 jihadists and contests 50-60 percent of Afghan territory with 21 districts under full Taliban control. The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees² (UNHCR) estimates that there are currently over four million civilians in the north-western Syrian province of Idlib, controlled by jihadists of the most powerful Islamist militant group HTS, former al Qaeda's branch in Syria. Therefore, it is not surprising to observe that the Taliban in its controlled Afghan territory and HTS through the local Salvation Government (SG) in parts of northern Idlib and western Aleppo actually tried to cope with the consequences of the pandemic³, in fact, fulfilling the role of a quasi-state.

2. The root of the Central Asian Salafi Jihadism

Salafi Jihadism has become a serious problem in Central Asia that encompasses five former Soviet republics – Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan – collectively known as the “Five Stans”, as well as Afghanistan and western China. Central Asia, which for 3,000 years was a place of revival of many religions such as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Shamanism, Manichaeism, Nestorian Christianity and Judaism, and where the great Sunni Islamic scholars as al-Bukhari, al-Ghazali, and Ahmed Yesevi lived, has become today a target for militant Salafi-Jihadist ideology.

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- 1 Cf. UN Security Council. (2020). 'Letter from the Chair of the Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1988 (2011) Addressed to the President of the Security Council.' May 19, 2020. See: <https://www.undocs.org/S/2020/415>.
 - 2 Cf. UNHCR (2020). 'UN High Commissioner for Refugees Appeals for Safety for Civilians Trapped in Idlib.' UNHCR. February 20. See: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/2/5e4e51d04/un-high-commissioner-refugees-appeals-safety-civilians-trapped-idlib.html>.
 - 3 Muriel Asseburg, Aziz Hamidreza, Dalay Galip and Moritz Pieper (2020). 'The Covid-19 Pandemic and Conflict Dynamics in Syria. Neither a Turning Point Nor an Overall Determinant'. *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. The German Institute for International and Security Affairs*. Berlin. May 21st, p.8. See: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2020C21/>

In Central Asia, the focus of Islamic revival and of Jihadists groups has been the Ferghana Valley⁴, a densely populated and ethnically mainly Uzbek territory divided politically between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The valley has traditionally been a center of Islamic fervor, and was the area where Salafists first established a presence. The mass poverty of the population, the drop in the level of education after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the corrupt and authoritarian rule of political regimes, and the repressive methods of law enforcement have played a role in the radicalization of Islamic groups in Central Asia.

In the early 1990s, the first armed jihadist groups in the region appeared in response to harsh persecution by the authoritarian regimes of communist China and of Karimov's regime in Uzbekistan. In that period, many members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and China's Uyghurs of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement⁵ (now Turkestan Islamic Party – TIP) who adhered to the Salafist ideology, moved to neighboring Afghanistan and fought under the wing of the Taliban. The combination of repressive governments and economic deprivation in Central Asia, particularly China, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, served as an incubator of Salafi Jihadism. After 9/11, Central Asia's jihadists, who are members of IMU and TIP, were the mainstay of Al Qaeda's defense in southern Waziristan as well as participants in the fight against the armies of Afghanistan, Pakistan and NATO.

Central Asian jihadist groups are supporters of Takfirism, a kind of religious extremism that accuses other Muslims of disbelief or apostasy. This ideology became the banner of the caliphate and led to jihad against other Muslims and open disobedience against the authorities. These practices are part of the legacy of the Takfiri instructions and ideas that emerged from the al Qaida environment.

Many of Central Asia's Islamists have been infected with the "virus" of the Salafi ideology from Arab preachers and local theologians who were educated in Saudi Arabia, Syria and Egypt. After the link into al-Qaeda and the Taliban, they laid an accusation of unbelief (takfir) against the rulers of the "Stans". They refused to recognize official state institutions and declared jihad against the armed forces of their respective countries.

In response, the governments of the "Stans" and China have suppressed, and continue to suppress, the activities of more than twenty Islamic groups that are recognized by the court as extremist or terrorist organizations, because they constitute a danger to the state's constitutional order. In particular, the activities of the

4 Cf. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2015). 'Islamic State Militants Target Ferghana Valley'. March 5. See: <https://www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-ferghana-valley-kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-uzbekistan/26883693.html>.

5 Colin Clarke and Paul Rexton Kan (2017). 'Uighur Foreign Fighters: An Underexamined Jihadist Challenge.' *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT)*. November 15, p. 18. See: <https://doi.org/10.19165/2017.2.05>.

following Islamic groups have been suppressed⁶: The Islamic Movement of Eastern Turkestan, Katibat Imam al Bukhari (KIB), TIP, Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad (KTJ), IMU, Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), Jaishul Mahdi, Jund-Al-Khalifa, Ansarullah, Ğannat Oshklari (Fans of Paradise), and others.

The second wave of the outflow of Central Asian Islamists abroad occurred after the start of the Syrian civil war. After the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011 and ISIS emerged as a competing alternative to al-Qaeda three years later, thousands of Central Asian jihadists who had streamed into Syria had to decide between al Qaeda and ISIS.

Some jihadists of IMU and Jund-Al-Khalifa shifted to Syria and joined ISIS⁷. Central Asians, and especially the migrant workers from Russia, who traveled to Syria, independent of any of the main Salafi-Jihadi groups after 2014 tended to join al-Baghdadi's Caliphate. Uyghur's TIP, Uzbek's KTJ and KIB became enmeshed with al Qaeda in Syria and maintained loyalty to the Taliban⁸.

After joining al Qaeda, the Taliban and ISIS, the ideological base of Central Asian militants broadened and was affected by the more-global agenda of transnational Salafi-jihadi networks. Today, the goal of these religious groups from Central Asia has greatly expanded so that now their goal is to develop a world-wide caliphate. They have become an integral part of world-wide terrorism and jihadism. Thus, Central Asian Islamists have expanded their influence and militant activities to the Middle East. Over the past two decades, the locus of Central Asian radicals has moved from the Fergana Valley through Afghanistan into the tribal badlands of Pakistan and toward Syria.

As the experience of combating religious extremism has shown, it is small Islamic terrorist groups associated with ISIS or al Qaeda, such as the Central Asian jihadists that, due to the difficulty to triangulate on them, can pose the greatest danger to global stability. Indeed, Central Asian Salafi-Jihadi groups pose a significant threat to the security of not only the "Five Stans" but to the security of the EU and the U.S. Over the past decade, they have carried out more than ten high-profile

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- 6 Cf. Kabar News Agency. (2018). 'List of Officially Banned Extremist and Terrorist Organizations in Kyrgyzstan'. December 26. See: <http://en.kabar.kg/news/list-of-officially-banned-extremist-and-terrorist-organizations-in-kyrgyzstan/>.
 - 7 USAID (2015). 'Central Asian Involvement in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Drivers and Responses'. *United States Agency for International Development*. ed., Noah Tucker, Arlington. May 4. See: https://2012-2017.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/CVE_CentralAsiansSyriatraaq.pdf, p. 31.
 - 8 Uran Botobekov (2018). 'Central Asian Jihadists under Al Qaeda's & Taliban's Strategic Ties.' *Modern Diplomacy*, August 23rd. See: <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2018/08/23/central-asian-jihadists-under-al-qaedas-talibans-strategic-ties/>.

terrorist attacks in New York⁹, St. Petersburg¹⁰, Istanbul¹¹, Stockholm¹², and even tried to assassinate US President Barack Obama¹³.

3. Turkestan Islamic Party: Covid-19 is the Divine Punishment of China

Uighur militants TIP were one of the first Central Asian Salafi-Jihadi groups to respond to the coronavirus outbreak in the city of Wuhan, where, according to Chinese authorities¹⁴, 3,869 people died, and a curfew was imposed in the city. Their early reaction was related to the fact that China's Xinjiang is the historical homeland of more than 12 million Uighurs, the Turkic-speaking Muslim ethnic group, who are subjected to constant religious persecution by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)¹⁵.

According to Human Rights Watch (HRW)¹⁶, the Chinese government has detained more than a million Uighur Muslims in so-called "political re-education" camps. Their religious, linguistic, and cultural differences are deemed evidence of disloyalty to the CCP.

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- 9 Cf. Corey Kilgannon and Joseph Goldstein (2017). 'Sayfullo Saipov, the Suspect in the New York Terror Attack, and His Past.' *The New York Times*. October 31. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/31/nyregion/sayfullo-saipov-manhattan-truck-attack.html>.
- 10 Cf. Ivan Nechepurenko and Neil MacFarquhar (2017). 'St. Petersburg Bomber Said to Be Man From Kyrgyzstan; Death Toll Rises.' *The New York Times*. April 4. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/04/world/europe/st-petersburg-russia-explosion-suspect.html>.
- 11 Cf. Hürriyet Daily News (n. d.). 'Turkish Police Identify Reina Attacker as Abdulkadir Masharipov - Turkey News'. See: <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-police-identify-reina-attacker-as-abdulkadir-masharipov-108266>, accessed on August 6, 2020.
- 12 Cf. New Europe (2017). 'Rahmat Akilov Confesses to Stockholm Attack.' *Blog*. April 11. See: <https://www.neweurope.eu/article/rahmat-akilov-confesses-stockholm-attack/>.
- 13 Cf. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) (2012). Uzbek National Sentenced to Nearly 16 Years in Prison for Threatening to Kill the President and Providing Material Support to Terrorism. *Federal Bureau of Investigation*. July 13. See: <https://www.fbi.gov/birmingham/press-releases/2012/uzbek-national-sentenced-to-nearly-16-years-in-prison-for-threatening-to-kill-the-president-and-providing-material-support-to-terrorism>.
- 14 Cf. Xinhuanet (2020). 'Full Text of Wuhan's Notification on Revising Numbers of Confirmed COVID-19 Cases, Deaths.' *Xinhua News Agency*. April 17. See: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-04/17/c_138984653.htm.
- 15 Cf. Elanor Albert, Beina Xu, and Lindsey Maizland. (2020). The Chinese Communist Party. In *Council on Foreign Relations*. June 9. See: <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinese-communist-party>.
- 16 Cf. Maya Wang, (2020). 'More Evidence of China's Horrific Abuses in Xinjiang'. *Human Rights Watch*. February 20, See: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/20/more-evidence-chinas-horrific-abuses-xinjiang>.

Ironically, only the US is the ardent¹⁷ and consistent defender of the religious¹⁸ and cultural rights of the Uighurs, while many Muslim nations remain silent. Prioritizing their economic ties and strategic relationships with China, many Central Asian, Middle Eastern and Arab governments have defended China's repression of Uighur¹⁹ and other Muslim minorities in the Xinjiang region, instead of defending their rights.

Uighur's TIP refers to the region as East Turkestan and wages jihad for the liberation of it from China. The Chinese government has come to characterize any expression of Islam in Xinjiang as extremist, a reaction to past independence movements. Beijing has blamed TIP for domestic terrorist attacks and occasional outbursts of violence. The government also fears that thousands of Uighur jihadists of TIP could return from Syria and Afghanistan to China and spark violence.

On February 29, 2020, the TIP's Media Center "Islam Awazi" published a video that was titled "The Perspective of the Mujahedeen Regarding the Corona Outbreak in China."²⁰

According to the TIP's video, Covid-19 is the divine punishment for China's brutal persecution of Uighur Muslims, banning Islam and the result of their committing to Haram (anything that is prohibited by the Quran, for example, eating pork, drinking alcohol, having sex outside of marriage).

TIP's media product is accompanied by video clips of sick people in China, of natural disasters, and of Chinese people eating and preparing various animals for consumption. The narrator said that Chinese people are the most impure of all people because they eat every impurity and do not show mercy to humans or animals. He further continued that due to the deadly outbreak the Chinese people are experiencing sleeplessness and continual fear. A Uighur TV news anchor concluded that it is due to the coronavirus, which the Chinese communists do not know how to treat and for which they cannot find a cure.

17 Cf. Congress. Government (2020). 'Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act. 2020.' *The Library of the U.S. Congress*. June 17. See: <https://www.congress.gov/116/plaws/publ145/PLAW-116publ145.pdf>.

18 Cf. U.S. Department of State. (2019). 'U.S. Department of State Imposes Visa Restrictions on Chinese Officials for Repression in Xinjiang'. October 8, 2019. See: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-department-of-state-imposes-visa-restrictions-on-chinese-officials-for-repression-in-xinjiang/>.

19 Cf. Human Rights Watch. (2013). 'Joint Letter to the President of the United Nations Human Rights Council.' *Human Rights Watch*. July 12, 2019. See: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting_resources/190712_joint_counterstatement_xinjiang.pdf.

20 Cf. MEMRI TV. (2020). 'Turkestan Islamic Party: Covid-19 Is a Divine Punishment for China's Treatment of Uyghurs and the Result of Eating Meats Prohibited by the Quran - Warning: Graphic.' *MEMRI*. March 1st. See: <https://www.memri.org/tv/turkestan-islamic-party-perspective-mujahideen-coronavirus-china>.

Then he inquired who will save you from the dark recesses of land and sea, when you call upon Him in humility and silent terror? The narrator answers himself that all affairs are in the hands of Allah the most exalted, and He is able to punish those that go against His command, at any time He wills, however He wills. The TIP's media output reiterates that this small virus Covid-19 is a Divine Punishment, which transformed the commercial, very populous China's Wuhan, in which 11 million people reside, into a ghost city.

The narrator recalled that the source of the coronavirus was a marine animal market in Wuhan, where many different kinds of birds and land animals were sold, that have been prohibited in the Qur'an. Then the Uighur Media Center directed its anger at the Chinese, calling them the most impure and dirty among the peoples of the world, for they eat every impurity and filth, and they do not show mercy to either human or animal.

"Islam Awazi" expressed the firm belief of the Uighur Mujahedeen (Holy warriors who engage in jihad for their Muslim beliefs) that the coronavirus is a punishment from Allah for the oppression and persecution that the Chinese Kafirs have committed and continue to commit against the Uighur Muslims. Then the Surah Al-Anfal of the Quran appeared on the screen: "Remember how the Unbelievers plotted against thee, to keep thee in bonds, or slay thee, or get thee out (of thy home). They plot and plan, and Allah too plans; but the best of planners is Allah."

Then Jihadi's media output raised the most painful problem of Uighur Muslims about China's occupation of the Eastern Turkistan, which has long been transformed by TIP's ideological doctrine. The narrator said: "The atheist communist nation of China has occupied Eastern Turkistan since 1949, and exercised against the Muslims the worst kinds of oppression, tyranny, and torture, and they ignored that these Muslims have a Lord who is able to avenge them at any time He wishes, and today we witness the punishment of Allah with this virus. Allah the Exalted, the owner of Sovereignty, and He is the supporter of the weak, and thus we ask Him the Exalted, to make this outbreak a reason for the destruction of the atheist Chinese, and to preserve all Muslims around the globe, especially our people in Eastern Turkistan."

The "Islam Awazi" Media Center mocked the president of communist China, who recently boasted that nobody can stand in the face of his country and its superior development. According to Uighur Mujahedeen's conclusion, Allah the Most Exalted by sending a small deadly virus has progressively lead China toward destruction in this world and the next. Now his (Xi Jinping) situation is like all other tyrants, who are mired in sin, and Allah Almighty has quickly sent them his punishment, the narrator concluded.

TIP's Media Center described in detail "the atrocities of the Chinese infidels" against Uighur Muslims. "Tyrannical atheistic China made apparent their enmity towards Allah and His Messenger and the believers, destroyed the mosques and

changed them to places of dancing, vices and insolence, they trampled upon the Qur'an and burned them, they transgressed upon the honor and raped the women, and made permissible the impermissible. They killed the scholars and the preachers that teach the people their religion, and tortured our Muslim Uighur brothers with the worst kinds of torture, oppression, and subjugation. They separated the sons from their fathers, they did not have mercy upon the young and did not respect the elders, not a single woman was safe from their tyranny, tyranny and their torture, they removed the Hijabs (Muslim women's head-coverings) from the pure Muslim women, and their prisons were filled with Muslims under the false name of (re-education camps) thinking that they will be able to hide this reality from the world and from the Muslims outside China. But the entire world, especially the Muslims, know that these centers are prisons in which the Muslims are forced to become atheist communists. Thus, the revenge from Allah for His servants came against these criminals, and He sent upon them the deadly coronavirus and thus became isolated from the world, as if they are imprisoned."

The TIP's media output noted that "Allah the Just punished the criminal Chinese regime" for removing the khimar (part of hijab) from Muslim women. He compared the Chinese authorities' directive obliging everyone to wear a medical mask with the khimar. "This is their reward from Allah for them for removing the khimar from our Muslim sisters, and thus Allah forced them to wear the khimar both men and women", Islam Awazi stated.

"This outbreak is just a warning for the Chinese government, so that they may repent from their actions and stop their oppression and tyranny against the Muslims. If they do not refrain, then the punishment from Allah on the Day of Judgment is deserved, and the punishment of Allah is severe", stated in the statement.

In conclusion, TIP perceived the coronavirus as God's assistance for the oppressed Uighur people, who could not defend themselves from the hostility of the Chinese oppressors and criminals. The statement ends with a request to "Allah the Exalted to destroy the oppressors with this virus and to save the Muslims from their oppression and hostility by His causes."

Thus, TIP, as usual, focused entirely on the anti-Chinese topic in its statement on Covid-19. And this is no coincidence.

First of all, the strategic goal of Uighur militants of TIP is to establish their own independent state in East Turkestan, which will be ruled by Sharia law. Indeed, over the past decade, Uighur nationalists have launched several terror attacks at a local government office, train station, and open-air market, as well as Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Nearly two hundred people were killed during Uighur protests against state-incentivized Han Chinese migration in the region and widespread economic and cultural discrimination in Xinjiang's capital, Urumqi, in 2009.

Second, the anti-Chinese doctrine forms the basis of the Salafi-Jihadi and nationalist ideology of TIP. Abdul Haq al-Turkistani²¹, the emir of the TIP, regularly makes anti-Chinese statements that usually receive public support from al Qaeda²² and other globally active jihadist terror groups. He has always harshly criticized China's repressive policies, disguised under the political slogan of fighting "the three evils" – separatism, religious extremism, and international terrorism.

Third, the coronavirus outbreak in China, from where Uighur jihadists were forced to flee by Beijing's bloody repression, caused their natural gloating reactions. Therefore, they maintain a doctrinal line about an "invisible soldier of Allah" who killed thousands upon thousands of Chinese unbelievers. TIP is convinced that God punishes the Chinese kafirs, who persist in defying his authority. Uighur Jihadi group's ideologues have argued that the Chinese repression of Uighur Muslims and its anti-Islamic policies sparked the "wrath of God" which has become the "nightmare of the crusaders".

When TIP claims Covid-19 to be "God's punishment", it does not speak in its own name, but utilizes the Quran's Surah Al-Buruj [85:12], in order to demonstrate the timeless dimension of the prophetic message. The literal translation is therefore: "The onslaught of your Lord is severe." According to the ideological doctrine of Jihadi-Salafism, the keys to all today's problems lie in the roots of "the pious predecessors", since Islam is eternal. What was revealed yesterday remains valid today. The Salafi-Jihad draws its inspiration from primary sources during the time of the "Righteous Ancestors" when the Messenger of Allah and his Companions waged a perennial jihad. That is why, when TIP claims "God's punishment" of the Chinese infidels, it returns to the primary sources of the Quran over and over again.

As is well known, the Uighur jihadists of TIP, Sunni Muslims of Turkic descent from China's northwest province of Xinjiang, have become a prominent cog in the constellation of globally active jihadist terror groups since the 1990s. The organization is a part of al Qaeda's network and is located in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Some of the TIP members are continuing the "holy jihad" in Afghanistan under the command of the Taliban to restore the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan to power. A second group of Uighur jihadists, the TIP, are fighting with the former al Qaeda umbrella group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria.

The Turkestan Islamic Party is adept at using Beijing's heavy hand to recruit new followers and raise money from Uighur entrepreneurs in Turkey and Central

21 Thomas Joscelyn, and Caleb Weiss (2019). 'Turkistan Islamic Party Head Decries Chinese Occupation.' | *FDD's Long War Journal*. March 19. See: <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/03/turkistan-islamic-party-head-decries-chinese-occupation.php>.

22 Thomas Joscelyn (2019). 'Al Qaeda Declares Solidarity with Turkistan Islamic Party in the Face of Chinese Oppression'. *FDD's Long War Journal*. April 17. See: <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/04/al-qaeda-declares-solidarity-with-turkistan-islamic-party-in-the-face-of-chinese-oppression.php>.

Asia under the slogan “participate in holy Jihad with your property.” Abdul Haq himself, the number one Uighur jihadist, continues to constantly emphasize his allegiance to both the al Qaeda’s emir Ayman al-Zawahiri²³ and the Taliban’s top leader Haibatullah Akhundzada. In 2009, the U.S. Treasury Department designated the TIP’s leader Abdul Haq as a terrorist²⁴, noting that he had been a member of al-Qaeda’s elite Shura Council since 2005 and described Abdul Haq’s TIP as a part of al-Qaeda’s “support network.”

The TIP’s anti-Chinese Covid-19 statement was supported by Abd Al-Razzaq Al-Mahdi, a prominent Syrian Jihadi cleric known for his constant ideological backing of the Uighur Jihadists. On January 23, 2020, he issued a fatwa permitting Muslims to celebrate the spread of the coronavirus in China, and further permitting Muslims to pray to Allah to annihilate the people of China. The fatwa²⁵, which was posted on the “Fatwas from the Land of Sham” on his Telegram channel, states that “We should express our joy and pray for their [the Chinese] annihilation. They have declared resounding war and they killed, slaughtered, imprisoned, and oppressed the Uighurs and non-Uighur Muslims. They are the enemies of Allah and are Buddhists and communists.”

The anti-Chinese coronavirus rhetoric and protection of the Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang was also touched upon by the famous Saudi Arabian Salafi cleric Abdallah al-Muhaysini who has close relations with the Turkistan Islamic Party. On January 26, 2020, the pivotal ideologist of the Syrian jihad published a post on his Telegram channel accusing China of “exporting” the coronavirus to Xinjiang, the motherland of the Uighurs. In the post, al-Muhaysini wrote: “China’s criminal policy was aimed at exporting the coronavirus to East Turkestan (Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of China) by canceling all flights to and from the city of Wuhan except the ones heading to East Turkestan. As usual, Communist China, will not waste any opportunity to annihilate the Muslim nation of Uyghurs.” It should be noted that the US Treasury Department identified Abdullah al-Muhaisini²⁶ as a senior al-Qaeda member in Syria and choked off his access to the international financial system in November 2016.

23 Cf. Thomas Joscelyn (2020). ‘How China’s Repressive Policies Could Fuel the Jihad’. *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*. April 29. See: <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/04/29/how-chinas-repressive-policies-could-fuel-the-jihad/>.

24 Cf. U.S. Department of Treasury (2009). ‘Treasury Targets Leader of Group Tied to Al Qaida’. April 20. See: <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg92.aspx>.

25 Cf. Christine Douglass-Williams (2020). ‘Muslim Cleric’s Fatwa Permits Muslims to Celebrate Coronavirus Spread and Pray for ‘Annihilation’ of Chinese People’. *Jihad Watch*. February 1st. See: <https://www.jihadwatch.org/2020/02/muslim-clerics-fatwa-permits-muslims-to-celebrate-coronavirus-spread-and-pray-for-annihilation-of-chinese-people>.

26 Cf. U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office (2016). ‘Treasury Designates Key Al-Nusra Front Leaders’. *The U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control*. October 11. See: <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0605.aspx>.

4. The Taliban and Covid-19

The Taliban, which is the “godfather” of the Uighur militants’ TIP and Uzbek Salafi-Jihadi groups KTJ, KIB, IJU and IMU, have capitalized on the Coronavirus factor to strengthen their political and military potential. The first reports on Covid-19 in China came precisely at a time when the Taliban and the United States signed peaceful cooperation, which allows the insurgent group to legitimize itself as an independent political force in the future and free itself from the UN, US and EU sanctions.

As we noted at the beginning of our article, the Taliban’s response to the spread of the coronavirus has been a stark contrast from other global terrorist groups such as ISIS and al Qaeda, who have called Covid-19 “divine retribution” and have used the opportunity to intensify new attacks and intimidate the “kafir’s world”. The Taliban have long sought to establish that they are a more effective administration than the current Afghan government, and, as a result, they are using the pandemic to further this goal.

The Afghan Ministry of Public Health has predicted²⁷ that at its peak, coronavirus may infect 25 million and kill 110,000 Afghans, which is more than the number of civilian deaths the 19-year-long conflict has caused. There have been 36,829 confirmed cases of the virus in Afghanistan, and approximately 1,294 deaths at the end of July 2020, according to the Johns Hopkins University²⁸, which added that cases were expected to increase.

Regarding Covid-19, the main difference between the Taliban and other transnational terrorist groups ISIS and al Qaeda is that it actually controls more than 50 percent of the country’s territory, which forces them to take care of the health of the population living there.

On March 18, 2020, the Taliban official website, “Voice of Jihad”, published a “Statement concerning the fight against coronavirus”²⁹, which combines their religious views on the virus with practical recommendations to combat it at home. The Taliban’s religious views on the virus have been in tune with their long-term strategic partner al Qaeda. As previously, both groups this time have also pursued a ‘hearts-and-minds’ strategy to win over ordinary Muslims aimed at further penetrating the local audience.

For example, the Taliban believe that

27 Cf. Nathan Paul Southern, Mehrad Ezzatullah, and Lindsey Kennedy (2020). ‘In Afghanistan, the Coronavirus Could Be Deadlier Than War.’ *Foreign Policy*. Blog. April 17. See: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/17/in-afghanistan-coronavirus-could-be-deadlier-than-war/>.

28 Cf. Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (2020/2.). ‘Afghanistan’. August 6. See: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/region/afghanistan>, accessed on August 6, 2020.

29 Cf. Official website of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (2020/a). ‘Statement of Islamic Emirate concerning fight against corona virus.’ March 3rd. See: <http://alemarahenglish.net/?p=33722>

«Coronavirus is a disease ordained by the Almighty Allah which has perhaps been sent by Allah (SwT) because of the disobedience and sins of mankind or other reasons. Our Muslim nation must consider this disease a decree of Allah (SwT) and deal with it in accordance with the teachings of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). As per the directives of scholars – people should recite effective prayers and astaghfar (seeking forgiveness) frequently, increase the reading of the Holy Quran, give in alms and charity and turn to Allah (SwT) in repentance for their past sins».³⁰

However, at the end of the statement, the Taliban embarked on the first practical measures to combat the coronavirus. Specifically, they offered three medical proposals:

- The safety guidelines issued by health organizations, doctors and other health experts must be observed and all safety precautions followed to the best of one's abilities.”
- International relief, health and humanitarian organizations should execute their obligation of sending necessary equipment, medicine and aid to areas under our control and we shall lay the groundwork for their secure travel.
- Our brotherly businessmen – in line with their Islamic and humanitarian responsibility – must also support their fellow people in this time of crisis. They must refrain from unlawful profit, price hikes and hoarding and instead show affinity towards the people.”³¹

However, thereafter the Taliban gradually moved away from a religious assessment of the coronavirus to pragmatic measures to combat it. They regularly published coronavirus disease advice for the public, quarantine guidelines, and ways to prevent the infection. Pictures of their militants, medical staff, and local authorities wearing protective masks have been widely circulated on their website³² and on Twitter. The Taliban's seemingly pragmatic steps to combat Covid-19, combined with religious motives, could help them gain the support of local conservative Afghan society.

Since April 2020, on the website Voice of Jihad, the Taliban have been actively reporting on the activity of their officials of the Health Commission (an alternative body of the Ministry of Public Health of Afghan Government) to prevent and

30 Cf. *ib.*

31 Cf. *ib.*

32 Cf. Official website of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (2020/c). 'Photo report of public awareness meeting about Corona virus epidemic in Logar'. March 29. See: <http://alemarahenglish.net/?p=34066>

spread of coronavirus epidemic in their controlled regions³³. “The Islamic Emirate via its Health Commission assures all international health organizations and WHO of its readiness to cooperate and coordinate with them in combating the coronavirus,” Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen said on Twitter³⁴. Thus, they have clearly grasped the dangers posed by the coronavirus pandemic sweeping the rest of the world.

On April 2, the Taliban announced a cease-fire in all areas under their control hit by the coronavirus and launched campaigns to raise awareness about the dangers of the virus. At some critical points, they sent suspected cases to local government hospitals. Thus, amid the escalating coronavirus spread, Taliban’s Health Commission for the first time began to cooperate with government and international institutions, including WHO. Covid-19 has positively changed the Taliban’s attitude towards international medical organizations, as they have historically targeted healthcare workers of WHO, Red Cross and others by claiming to be agents of the West.

This has given cause for cautious optimism to the United States Institute of Peace that the Covid-19 crisis could lead to the start of long-awaited³⁵ peace process between the Afghan government and the Taliban. But the slow progress on prisoner releases³⁶, which is envisaged in the US-Taliban peace agreement³⁷, has pushed the war parties even further apart. A key point of this deal aimed at ending the 19-year-long war was that 5,000 Taliban prisoners would be released by March 10, 2020. Less than 400 Taliban prisoners had been freed as of May 3.

From the early days of the coronavirus, the Taliban began sounding the alarm for their 40,000 jihadist prisoners in Afghan government jails (In our opinion, the

33 Cf. Official website of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (2020/d). ‘Essential awareness materials for Prevention of corona virus disease distributed in Badghis’. March 29. See: <http://alemara.henglish.net/?p=34058>

34 Cf. Suhail Shaheen (2020). ‘(1/2) The Islamic Emirate via Its Health Commission Assures All International Health Organizations and WHO of Its Readiness to Cooperate and Coordinate with Them in Combatting the Corona Virus’. See: <https://twitter.com/suhailshaheen1/status/1239594471576256512>, accessed August 6, 2020.

35 Cf. Belquis Ahmadi and Palwasha L. Kakar (2020). ‘Coronavirus in Afghanistan: An Opportunity to Build Trust with the Taliban?’ *United States Institute of Peace*. April 16. See: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/04/coronavirus-afghanistan-opportunity-build-trust-taliban>, accessed on August 6, 2020.

36 Cf. Al Jazeera (2020). ‘Taliban Set to Release 20 Afghan Government Prisoners’. April 12. See: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/taliban-set-release-20-afghan-government-prisoners-200412085539496.html>.

37 Cf. State Government (2020). ‘Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Which Is Not Recognized by the United States as a State and Is Known as the Taliban and the United States of America’. February 29. See: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.

Taliban claims for 40,000 prisoners are overstated). In a statement³⁸ on 15 March, they urged “international health organizations” to look into their health situation, accused the Afghan government of not taking sufficient measures to ensure their wellbeing. The Taliban described government prisons as “overcrowded and lacking basic health and sanitary facilities, and facing a most serious threat”. The statement ends with the threat that “in the event of a catastrophic tragedy with forty thousand detainees all responsibility shall fall squarely on the shoulders of the KABū l administration and its foreign backers”.

In another statement published on April 29, 2020³⁹, the Taliban accused the Afghan government of “wielding the Covid-19 disease as a weapon of war” against “innocent prisoners” in Afghan jails, thereby seeking to derail the peace agreement. According to them, “the coronavirus is raging in Kabul administration jails and there were identified 46 cases of the disease among prisoners”. This time the Taliban directly blamed the United States for the spread of coronavirus in jails “because if it had shown urgency in the implementation of the agreement, we could have made major progress in all facets including the release of prisoners and detainees would have been saved from this danger of Covid-19”. They promised to take cruel revenge for every coronavirus death and advised their “prisoners to show reliance upon Allah, have patience and follow health precautions to the best of their abilities”.

Another aspect of the Taliban’s efforts to combat Covid-19 has been organizing of seminars and meetings in its controlled territories to educate people on how to use gloves and masks, wash hands with soap, and practice social distancing. To achieve their objectives, they have spread public health information through a very active social media campaign, counteracting a flood of misinformation about Covid-19 on popular networks such as Facebook and WhatsApp. On their Telegram channels, Central Asian jihadists in Afghanistan have widely disseminated videos of the Taliban’s spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid⁴⁰ of how the Taliban are successfully managing the pandemic response.

The Taliban’s Health Commission has distributed medical equipment, including surgical masks and protective gloves, and also brochures listing health precau-

38 Cf. Official website of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (2020/b). ‘Statement by Prisoners Commission concerning spread of corona virus in prisons’. March 15. See: <http://alemarahenglish.net/?p=33682>

39 Cf. Official website of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (2020/e). ‘Statement of Islamic Emirate regarding dire situation of prisoners in KABū l administration jails’. April 29. See: <http://alemarahenglish.net/?p=34603>

40 Cf. Official Twitter Account of the Spokesman of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Zabihullah Mujahid (2020/f). ‘The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Health Commission carried out campaign against Covid-19 in Maidan Wardak province’. *Twitter*. March 30. See: https://twitter.com/Zabehulah_M33/status/1244574450990841856?lang=en

tions. All these processes were accompanied by a wide information campaign. Images and videos of Health Commission workers wearing white gowns and masks distributing⁴¹ soap and surgical masks to local residents were widely shared on WhatsApp and Telegram groups. Thus, the factor of Covid-19 has gradually begun to make changes in the Taliban's Islamist ideology in regard to once-forbidden items such as film and photography.

To combat the spread of Covid-19, the Taliban has set up quarantine centers to isolate those suspected of carrying the virus and testing residents coming from other provinces. As is well known, they have long been very effective at setting standards for public conduct (*layeha*)⁴² and enforcing them, with often brutal methods. The *layeha* – a set of “rules” for the Taliban – helped them take action to combat the pandemic, spreading direction on how to act through religious sermons. During the peak of the coronavirus spread in May, they cancelled public events and instructed people to pray at home instead of visiting mosques.

Taliban's Covid-19 response⁴³ has shown that its shadow administration is less corrupt, more responsive and is better aligned with local conservative values than that of the Afghan government. As a result, the Taliban's shadowy conservative and authoritarian government with parallel constitutional apparatuses has tried to use its coronavirus approach to project itself as a responsible and credible actor. Observers noted the pandemic may end up giving the Taliban a moment of glory, both within Afghanistan and internationally. Remarkably, the U.S. State Department has also acknowledged⁴⁴ the Taliban has done an effective job handling the pandemic.

In May-June 2020, in the midst of the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, the Taliban unexpectedly faced challenges that had a negative impact on their morale. Rumors surfaced that the Taliban leader, Mullah Haibatullah Akhunzada had allegedly died of coronavirus, while his deputy, Sirajuddin Haqqani was seriously ill

41 Cf. Ruchi Kumar (2020). 'Taliban Launches Campaign to Help Afghanistan Fight Coronavirus'. *Al Jazeera*. August 14. See: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/taliban-launches-campaign-afghanistan-fight-coronavirus-200406055113086.html>.

42 Cf. Phil Halton (2018). *The Taliban Layeha*. December 26. See: <https://philhalton.com/2018/12/26/taliban-layeha/>.

43 Cf. Thomas Ruttig (2020). 'Covid-19 in Afghanistan (1): No large outbreak yet in the country'. *Afghanistan Analysts Network*. March 27. See: <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/economy-development-environment/no-large-outbreak-yet-the-coronavirus-situation-in-afghanistan/>.

44 Cf. State_SCA on Twitter (2020.). 'We Join the Afghan Ministry of Public Health in Welcoming the Taliban's Efforts to Raise Awareness against #COVID19 and Their Offer of Safe Passage to Health Workers & International Organizations Working to Prevent the Spread of the Virus. AGW <https://t.co/ETyU08ZWY>'. *Twitter*. April 10. See: https://twitter.com/State_SCA/status/1248731243287662593, accessed August 6, 2020.

in a Pakistani military hospital. On June 1, *Foreign Policy* magazine⁴⁵, adding fuel to the fire, reported that the Taliban emir had contracted Covid-19 and died while receiving medical treatment abroad.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid on June 2 denied that Mullah Akhundzada or any other senior leaders had contracted the disease or had died. In a tweet⁴⁶, Mujahid accused *Foreign Policy* of spreading “propaganda” and said Mullah Akhundzada was well and “busy with his daily activities.” While the Taliban have denied that their leader has died, it is important to note that they have a history of concealing the death of prominent emirs, including the deaths of the founding leader Mullah Omar and Jalaluddin Haqqani, the top leader of the Haqqani network. These deceptions created serious schisms within the group in the past. However, it is unclear how these rumors will impact the Taliban’s efforts to curb the spread of coronavirus.

But despite fighting Covid-19, the Taliban haven’t ceased their attacks during the pandemic, blaming KABū l for forcing their hand. Indeed, it is ironic that, while the coronavirus has ground much of life to a halt in this war-torn country, the civil war continues to devour more and more victims. In the practical realm, the Taliban have been responding to the coronavirus while continuing to wage “holy jihad” against the government.

Throughout 2020, Afghanistan, one of the poorest countries in Central Asia, is experiencing the double burden of the ongoing civil war and the Covid-19 epidemic. The warring sides, chiefly the Afghan government and Taliban, have appeared to be unshaken when thousands and thousands of ordinary citizens caught the coronavirus infection and died quietly. The Covid-19 epidemic has failed to dent their mutual deep distrust.

5. ISIS, Al Qaeda, HTS and Central Asian Jihadi Groups: Common Perspectives on Covid-19

“Global players of Sunni Jihadism” such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, as well as its affiliated fragmentary Central Asian extremist groups have much in common in their views of the Covid-19 outbreak, which indicates that they are adept at exploiting confusion and chaos to further their ideological goals. Their views on the coronavirus pandemic boil down to trying to create more propaganda, lure more recruits and

45 Cf. Mirwais Khan and Lynne O’Donnell (2020). ‘Leader of Afghan Taliban Said to Be Gravely Ill With the Coronavirus’. *Foreign Policy*. Blog. June 1st. See: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/01/afghan-taliban-coronavirus-pandemic-akhunzada/>.

46 Cf. Official Twitter Account of the Spokesman of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Zabihullah Mujahid (2020/2). *Twitter*. June 2nd. See: https://twitter.com/Zabehulah_M33/status/1267703509681651714.

plot new attacks. Despite the tactical differences in the use of the Covid-19 pandemic, the strategic vision of all these Sunni extremist groups is the same: they agree that the virus is a punishment from God.

5.1 ISIS view on the coronavirus

ISIS has followed the coronavirus outbreak since its early detection in Wuhan in February 2019, regularly including updates in the news briefs section of the al-Naba weekly newsletter. In one of its first reports of the virus on 'al-Naba' on February 5, 2020⁴⁷, ISIS lauded the spread of the deadly coronavirus. "A new virus spreads death and terror in China," al-Naba reports, adding that "communist China is panicking after a new virus has spread".

The Islamic State has adapted speedily to the deepening Covid-19 crisis within a small-time frame and managed to turn the plight of the pandemic into an opportunity. ISIS issued medical guidelines for its jihadists in the following article on March 12, 2020, entitled "Islamic guidance on dealing with Epidemics" in the 225th issue of 'al Naba'⁴⁸. The guidelines included realistic prevention methods and ways of avoiding the disease," which included instructions such as covering the mouth when yawning and sneezing, washing hands, and avoiding entering or exiting an area where infections are found.

Also in the next editorial, published on March 19, 2020, in the 226th issue of 'al Naba'⁴⁹, the Islamic State considered this pandemic the worst nightmare of the Crusader. ISIS ideologues called for utilizing the rest of the world's preoccupation in their favor, orchestrating new attacks and freeing its jihadist prisoners.

In one of its most recent editorials, published on May 28, 2020, in 'Al Naba'⁵⁰, the Islamic State tried, again and again, to energize fighters and followers to instigate bolder attacks again and again. "We advise you to be harsh upon the disbeliever enemies of God," Abū Hamza al Qurashi, the ISIS spokesman. "Address them with

47 Cf. MEMRI (2020/1). 'ISIS Article Describes Coronavirus as Allah's 'Epidemic' Visited On Chinese 'Unbelievers', Disagrees With Those Calling It Allah's Punishment For China's Persecution Of Muslims.' *The MEMRI Jihad and Terrorism Threat Monitor*. February 7. See: <https://www.memri.org/jttm/isis-article-describes-coronavirus-allahs-epidemic-visited-chinese-unbelievers-disagrees-those>.

48 Cf. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi (2020/1). 'Islamic State Advice on Coronavirus Pandemic.' March 12. See: <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/03/islamic-state-advice-on-coronavirus-pandemic>.

49 Cf. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi (2020/b). 'Coronavirus and Official Islamic State Output: An Analysis'. April 15. See: <http://www.aymennjawad.org/24046/coronavirus-and-official-islamic-state-output>.

50 Cf. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi (2020/2). 'New Speech by the Islamic State's Official Spokesman: Translation and Analysis.' June 1st. See: <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/06/new-speech-by-the-islamic-state-official>.

sharp swords and ignite the expeditions and do not stop the raids. And do not let a day pass for the apostates and their Crusader masters without disturbing their life. Ambush them on the roads, burn their convoys with IEDs, destroy their checkpoints and barracks.” And ISIS jihadists heard their leader’s call and took advantage of the reduced pressure from the coalition. In April, ISIS launched 151 attacks⁵¹ in Syria and Iraq, up 50 percent from the previous month. In May, it claimed 193 attacks.

Ideologues of ISIS, al Qaeda, Taliban and HTS, as well as Central Asian Salafi-Jihadi terror groups have successfully promoted an explanation for the virus in line with their apocalyptic narratives. For example, according to ISIS, the pandemic is God’s punishment for anyone who goes against their interpretation of the Prophet and his teachings. The organization crystallized this idea in issue 220 of its al Naba newspaper⁵², which contains Quran Surah Al-Buruj 85:12: “Indeed, the vengeance of your Lord is severe.”

5.2 Al-Qaeda’s view on the coronavirus

Like the Islamic State, al Qaeda discusses Covid-19 and its global impact quite intensively. While both agree that the coronavirus is a punishment from God, they have different approaches in their tactics of its exploitation. If ISIS has taken a totalitarian view of the pandemic, asking its supporters to step up their violent attacks on infidels, al Qaeda has opted for the milder route of exploiting Covid-19. Unlike its counterpart ISIS, al Qaeda rhetoric has not called on its followers to carry out terrorist operations during this period.

Instead of a violent approach, Ayman al Zawahiri’s organization used softer religious rhetoric aimed at gaining broad sympathy of Muslims in adopting a message of communal support. In its numerous statements, al Qaeda called upon businessmen to donate to the organization, its followers and invited Western citizens to convert to Islam by studying the holy Quran during the quarantine.

Of the numerous messages on Covid-19, we analyzed al Qaeda’s main statement titled in “The Way Forward – A word of Advice on the Coronavirus Pandemic”⁵³, which was published on March 31, 2020, in its Central’s media outlet, the Al-Sahab Foundation.

51 Cf. Andrew Hanna (2020). ‘ISIS Offensive Exploits Pandemic.’ *Wilson Center*. June 8. See: <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isis-offensive-exploits-pandemic>.

52 Cf. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi (2020/b).

53 Cf. MEMRI (2020/2). ‘Al-Qaeda Central: COVID-19 Is Divine Punishment For Sins Of Mankind; Muslims Must Repent, West Must Embrace Islam.’ *The MEMRI Jihad and Terrorism Threat Monitor*. April 1st. See: <https://www.memri.org/reports/al-qaeda-central-covid-19-divine-punishment-sins-mankind-muslims-must-repent-west-must>.

The document stresses that it is forbidden to flee infected areas, stating that “The Prophet issued strict orders that anyone who finds himself in an area infected by a viral disease must not leave that area or travel to any other region, town, or village, lest the infection spread to new localities. The Prophet taught us that the one who patiently remains in his locality when a viral disease spreads, his reward will equal that of a martyr because of his choice to preserve and protect human life and prosperity in other localities.”

Further al Qaeda addresses the West and the US, accusing it of waging war against Islam and of angering God through the widespread practice of usury. It exhorts non-Muslims to use the time in quarantine to study and embrace Islam, and castigates Western governments, which it says devote vital resources to warfare and the spread of atheism instead of to healthcare and welfare services. An “invisible soldier of Allah” has supposedly exposed the inherent weakness of the West’s materialistic ways, says al Qaeda.

Al Qaeda praises Covid-19, God’s invisible soldier: “O’ people of the Western World! You have seen with your own eyes the power and might of Allah exhibited in this weak, invisible soldier. This is a God-gifted opportunity for you to reflect on the wisdom hidden in the havoc wrecked by a weak intruder. Your governments and armies are helpless, utterly confused in the face of this weak creature. Allah, the Creator, has revealed the brittleness and vulnerability of your material strength. It is now clear for all to see that it was but a deception that could not stand the test of the smallest soldier of God on the face of the earth. The very technological advancement and globalization that man took immense pride in has become his undoing. Today, if someone sneezes in China, those in New York suffer from its consequences.”

According to this transnational terrorist group, Covid-19 is a punishment from the Lord of the Worlds for the injustice and oppression committed against Muslims. At the same time, Al Qaeda recognizes the role of hygiene during the coronavirus crisis, and connects this, again, with the Islamic religion. “Islam is a hygiene-oriented Religion. It lays great stress on principles of prevention so as to protect one from all forms of disease. This it implements through a system of personal hygiene that takes the form of a regular routine that is repeated several times throughout the day”, claims al Qaeda.

Al Qaeda ends his message to “Crusaders, Zionists and apostates” with the following wishes: “The fear and panic that has struck you is a good omen for us, and we ask Allah to demonstrate His powers in your suffering and hasten your doom.”

Al Qaeda’s statement has become a kind of guide and ideological instruction for Uighur and Uzbek jihadists supporting its religious views on Covid-19. This is especially true for TIP, KIB and KTJ in their numerous online propaganda messages, in which they used fragments and thoughts from al Qaeda’s document.

5.3 HTS' Islamic view on the Covid-19 pandemic

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the most powerful jihadist group in the last province held by rebels in Syria, has two different approaches to Covid-19. Its first approach was developed by prominent HTS ideologues and other Salafi-Jihadi thinkers, who viewed the coronavirus pandemic from a religious point of view. This approach is close to al Qaeda's position and aims to glorify the global and exclusive role of Islam throughout the world.

HTS's second approach to the Covid-19 crisis is related to the practical policies that it is promoting to combat the coronavirus in its controlled territory. Although HTS continues to pursue a jihadist agenda, it formally split from al Qaeda in 2016, prompting harsh criticism from al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri and defections by al Qaeda loyalists.

While the HTS-backed Salvation-Government worked closely with the local population to combat Covid-19, prominent HTS ideologies were leading a religious discourse on the coronavirus online. On March 28, the Ebaa newsletter⁵⁴, HTS' propaganda mouthpiece, published an editorial outlining the group's religious vision for Covid-19. HTS claimed that the virus had been sent by God to kill disbelievers who "shed the blood of Muslims all over the world." It also told followers "not to be preoccupied with tracking the news and reports" of the virus. The HTS ideologists assure that "a virus, which only seen by the microscopes, was sent by Almighty God to destroy modern Nimrods, who have tyrannized and killed thousands of Muslims." HTS once again taunted Iran, "which has killed Syrians for 10 years and is now stretching out its hand to the International Monetary Fund to borrow money to fight the coronavirus." At the end of its message, HTS asked its followers to rely only on God, not to worry about the coronavirus or exaggerate its matter, but rather to be concerned about the relationship with the Lord Almighty.

On March 17, 2020, a well-known Salafi cleric Abdullah al-Muhaysini⁵⁵, a former controversial HTS ideologue, has opposed the closure of mosques due to the coronavirus. He recalled that the West looks at the coronavirus through a materialist perspective only. "And in our religion, the solution to any problem (including coronavirus) lies in prayer, then prayer, then prayer," he wrote. He has close relations with Uighur's Turkistan Islamic Party. It is known that he regularly visited Central Asian jihadist's ribat (front line) before important battles and performed dua (prayer) for them, inspiring them to the "holy jihad."

54 Cf. Al-Tamimi (2020/a). 'Jihadist Perspectives on Coronavirus Pandemic': Primary Sources.' March 25. See: <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/03/jihadist-perspectives-on-coronavirus-pandemic>.

55 Cf. Ib.

Al-Zubair al-Ghazi, one of the HTS faithful ideologues⁵⁶, praised Muslims of al-Sham because, despite the Covid-19 threat and Russian aerial bombardments, all mosques were crowded with His followers. “In their prayers, Muslims in Al-Sham ask Allah Almighty to rid them of human viruses, Russians, Rafidi (the derogatory term applied by the Sunnis to describe Shia’s Iran) and Nusayra (Alawites), and to protect them from coronavirus,” he wrote in his post on 20 March 2020.

Abū Mariya al-Qahtani, the notorious ideologue of the Syrian Jihad, tweeted on 24 March 2020, where he noted that the coronavirus is a dangerous epidemic, but even worse when people rebel against God. “We need sincere repentance as Muslim societies because materialism has drowned the minds and distracted them. The coronavirus has come to make clear that this materialism and practical development are impotent before the grandeur of the Creator in Whose hands are the keys to everything”, said al-Qahtani.

On March 23, 2020, al-Idrissi, HTS’ Islamic scholar, wrote: “Because of the coronavirus, the earth today is less sinful and full of the hope for God’s mercy and an answer to prayer.” Thus, in his short message, he unequivocally made it clear that the coronavirus was sent by Allah himself so that through its suffering unbelievers could turn to religion and worship Him, the only Creator of the world.

Dr. Mudhir al-Weis⁵⁷, another spiritual mentor of HTS, believes Covid-19 has provided an opportunity for people to return to their religious origins. As he wrote on 22 March 2020, “Coronavirus has not only exposed the weakness of the bodies of modern humans but also it has exposed the weakness of the new systems and revealed their defects and clarified the hidden element of the deceit of this transitory materialist civilization.” Like other ideologues of HTS, al-Weis also believes that people can find their salvation in Allah Almighty.

Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisi⁵⁸, an ideological mastermind of Uighur militants, a Jihadi cleric in Sham, on March 23, 2020, on his Telegram channel, listed several benefits of the coronavirus. In his opinion, Covid-19 has helped people return to their Lord, strengthened their dependency on Him, covered the faces of women and isolated people from Taghut (idols or demons who worship another God). “And among the benefits of coronavirus is that those who praised West civilization yesterday, today have resulted in advice to beware of Italy, France, Britain and China,” he writes. According to him, the coronavirus helped “the West clean up its dirt, because they started gargling and washing their hands four times a day, while a Muslim praying repeats it five times a day. In conclusion, he advised: “So do not curse coronavirus and be patient, and be hopeful. Perhaps God will bring us more benefits and blessings and glad tidings from it.” Abū Muḥammad al-Maqdisi is

56 Cf. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi (2020/a).

57 Cf. Ib.

58 Cf. Ib.

also known for being an ideological opponent of ISIS and a supporter of the Al Qaeda-lined Central Asian Salafi-Jihadi groups TIP and KTJ. The Combating Terrorism Center of the US Military Academy⁵⁹ concluded that Maqdisi “is the most influential living Jihadi Theorist” and that “by all measures, Maqdisi is the key contemporary ideologue in the Jihadi intellectual universe”.

5.4 HTS's Salvation Government and fight against Covid-19 in Northwest Syria

As we noted at the beginning of the paper, in north-western Syria's province of Idlib, under the HTS' military leadership Uighur jihadists of TIP, Uzbek groups KTJ and KIB are waging “holy jihad” against the Bashar al-Assad's regime. Therefore, the Central-Asian Salafi-Jihadi Movement's coronavirus policy in Sham is in many respects harmonious and identical with the HTS.

Given that HTS controls the last stronghold of the Syrian opposition in Sham, its tactics and strategy for combating Covid-19 are in many ways similar to the Taliban, which also control more than 50 percent of Afghan soil. In order to analyze the coronavirus policy of HTS and its-affiliated Central Asian Salafi-Jihadi groups, it was necessary to benchmark and analyze their social media messages in Arabic, Russian, Uzbek, Tajik, Kyrgyz, Uyghur and Turkish. Due to the fact that TIP, KTJ and KIB have branches in Afghanistan and Syria, their messages on social media are sometimes inconsistent. In addition, during their long stay in Syria and Afghanistan, many Uzbek jihadists abandoned the use of Russian, preferring Arabic and Pashtun instead of it.

The Covid-19 pandemic is testing the authority and antivirus capabilities of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the most powerful jihadist group in Syria, which has ruled Idlib province since 2016 with Sharia law. HTS, which backs the local Salvation Government (SG) in the last rebel-held enclave in northwest Syria, took first preventive measures in early March to deal with the consequences of the pandemic since there are more than 4 million people living under its control. Almost half of the population has been displaced from other parts of the country and more than two-thirds depend on humanitarian assistance.

The epidemiological and humanitarian situation in the region was further complicated by the Assad regime, Russian, Iranian, and Shia militia's offensive⁶⁰ to return the Idlib governorate to regime control in March-June 2020. In particular, the

59 Cf. William McCants and Jarret Brachman (2006). 'Militant Ideology Atlas. Executive Report'. *Combating Terrorism Center, U.S. Military Academy*. November, p. 22. See: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Atlas-ExecutiveReport.pdf>.

60 Cf. Fabrice Balanche (2020). 'Idlib May Become the Next Gaza Strip'. *Washington Institute*. March 26. See: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/idlib-may-become-the-next-gaza-strip>.

regime's and Russian air attacks destroyed 70 percent of the local health/medical infrastructure, and conditions in "Greater Idlib" became extremely poor, especially in displaced informal camps (IDP) in Idlib. Many IDPs are simply living rough out in the open. Thus, the coronavirus pandemic exacerbated an already highly precarious humanitarian situation in northern Idlib and western Aleppo mixing ailments and injuries caused by the war and the dire consequences of coronavirus.

Despite these challenges, the HTS' Salvation Government began taking preventive measures in early March. The Ebaa news agency⁶¹, an HTS-linked media outlet, has systematically reported on SG's disease prevention efforts in Idlib. SG authorities created an emergency response committee⁶² on March 23 to coordinate across the whole administration, chaired by Abdullah al-Shawi on behalf of the SG president. In early April, the SG set up medical control centers⁶³ at the Bab al-Hawa border crossing with Turkey to check returnees or deportees from Turkey. Suspected virus carriers have been quarantined for 14 days at this medical control center, so as not to spread the virus from Turkey. According to the Ebaa news agency, 200 to 300 people were quarantined daily in this center in April-May. Also, the SG opened quarantine centers and isolation tents in Sarmada, Jisr al-Shughour, and Kafr Karmin for suspected virus carriers until they could get proper testing.

The SG's Ministry of Health on March 17 provided guidance for those in its territory on preventative measures to deal with the virus based on international medical understandings of it. This was both an online and real-world campaign to get the message out. Indeed, the HTS' Salvation Government held a number of awareness campaigns and conducted preventative measures to prepare those in its territory for the potential outbreak of the virus.

The Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) Foundation opened the first hospital "Ziraat"⁶⁴ specializing in the treatment and isolation of coronavirus patients in Idlib on 9 June. This greatly facilitated the work of SG's medical facilities in HTS-controlled areas. Prior to that, the opposition forces in northwestern Syria had only one coronavirus PCR kit in the epidemiological monitoring laboratory in Idlib.

61 Cf. Ebaa News Agency (2020/1). 'انوروك ضربتة في رعتة وودن ميقي ةأرملا نوؤش بتكدم'. *Blog*. July 22. See: <https://ebaa.news/news/news-details/2020/07/70173/>.

62 Cf. Aaron Y. Zelin (2020). 'The Jihadi-Backed Salvation Government and Covid-19 in Northwest Syria'. *Washington Institute*. May 15. See: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-jihadi-backed-salvation-government-and-covid-19-in-northwest-syria>.

63 Cf. Obaida Al Nabwani (2020). 'Salvation Government Establishes Center in Idlib to Quarantine Syrians Who Return from Turkey'. *SMART News Agency*. April 28. See: <https://smartnews-agency.com/en/wires/2020-04-28-salvation-government-establishes-center-in-idlib-to-quarantin>.

64 Cf. Enab Baladi (2020/2). 'Idlib Opens First Hospital to Fight COVID-19'. June 18. See: <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2020/06/idlib-opens-first-hospital-to-fight-covid-19/>.

Indeed, the HTS-backed SG has implemented an extensive effort of measures to prevent coronavirus, so that Covid-19 has hit Idlib less than Damascus. In particular, local officials sterilized schools, mosques, government buildings and other infrastructure. Especially the SG's Minister of Health Dr. Ayman Jibis regularly appeared in local media and explained coronavirus and its preventive measures. The Women Affairs Bureau of the Culture Directorate⁶⁵ under the Salvation Government organized nursing courses and workshops to explain Covid-19 prevention measures in Idlib.

Local entrepreneurs opened a factory for making⁶⁶ masks for the local population, supported by the SG. The local Salvation Government officials organized press conferences, passed out guidance notices to local passersby and to drivers. They also hung up banners, released an informational video and a series of essays explaining coronavirus and preventive measures. Despite its difficult economic state, the Salvation Government, through its Department of Humanitarian Affairs, has launched a campaign 'To protect our people from coronavirus' and has distributed face masks, hand sanitizer and medicine to Idlib refugee camps.

However, some of HTS's anti-coronavirus measures have been challenged by the rival Turkish-backed Syrian Interim Government (SIG) and its Jaish al-Watani⁶⁷ (the Syrian National Army). Also, the HTS-affiliated Salvation Government's order to close mosques, shops and street markets was largely ignored. Videos from Idlib show that jihadists of Huras ad-Din, al Qaeda's official branch in Syria, openly demonstrated their defiance against closing mosques. Central Asian jihadists posted videos on Telegram that they continued to attend and conduct sermons at their mosques. Indeed, all mosques in Greater Idlib remained full during Ramadan prayers with people standing shoulder to shoulder.

Sheikhs and imams publicly defied the order in the name of Sharia law and several ex-HTS commanders and jihadi leaders challenged the group's authority and their religious legitimacy⁶⁸. The coronavirus crisis has shown that HTS cannot rely solely on brutal means to impose social preventive measures. Sometimes, not

65 Cf. Ebaa News Agency (2020/2). 'قطانم يف انوروك تاباصل ةمداص تايئاصح!'. *أبإ ةكبش*. 2020. "ضرملا نع فشكلا لباقم ةيلايخ غلابمو دسأل تايئاصح يليلم ةي رابإ إلاب". *Blog*. July 23rd. See: <https://ebaa.news/news/news-details/2020/07/70183/>.

66 Cf. Reuters (2020). 'Syrians Sew Masks as Idlib Prepares for Coronavirus'. *YouTube*. April 1st. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k84aBoVKEzk>.

67 Cf. Fehim Tastekin (2019). 'Who Are Turkish-Backed Forces in Latest Syria Incursion?' *Al-Monitor*. October 13. See: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/10/turkey-syria-kurds-militias-in-operation-peace-spring.html>.

68 Cf. Enab Baladi (2020/1). 'Coronavirus and Sharia law: Divide over closure of mosques and ban of Friday prayers in Idlib'. *Enab Baladi*, Syrian media organization. April 16. See: <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2020/04/coronavirus-and-sharia-law-divide-over-r-closure-of-mosques-and-ban-of-friday-prayers-in-idlib/#ixzz6KO7Bvoym>.

only tough rivals such as al Qaeda's Huras ad-Din resisted SG's orders, but HTS-affiliated Uzbek and Uighur jihadists also openly defied it.

Due to ideological differences, the well-known Uzbek jihadist Abū Saloh, along with his 50 militants, left the HTS and joined al Qaeda, for which he was arrested by HTS⁶⁹. Extreme coercion could jeopardize the legitimacy the group enjoys among Central Asian Muhajireen (foreign fighters) and undermine its ability to control them. Therefore, HTS began resorting to a limited use of force that however proved insufficient to produce the kind of outcomes needed to effectively wage jihad during the pandemic.

As early as mid-February, there were rumors circulating in Central Asian Salafi-Jihadi groups' social media that the coronavirus arrived in Syria via Iran and its Shia militia proxies, since Iran was the first major vector of the disease in the Middle East.

Particularly, KTJ and TIP on its Telegram channels reported in detail and regularly information on the coronavirus crisis in Iran, providing photos of the funerals of those who died from the Covid-19 pandemic. They made no secret of their pleasure that Covid-19 had severely hit and continued to mow down the military and religious leadership of Iran's Islamic revolutionaries.

Uzbek and Uighur Sunni Jihadi groups attempted to weave Iran's and Bashar al-Assad's regime's failures to control the virus into their own propaganda narratives. They openly gloated over the Iranian losses and prayed to Allah to destroy even more the enemies of the Muslim Ummah – the Russian military, Tehran's proxy Shia militias and “Bashar al-Assad's bandits”.

The HTS' Ebaa news Agency⁷⁰ and Central Asia jihadists Telegram channels mocked that the number of coronavirus cases in the Bashar al-Assad's army and among Shia militia forces is very high, and that the regime was hiding it. They gleefully described the extremely critical coronavirus situation in the Syrian government-controlled territories, calling it “Shocking Crown casualties among Assad's army.”

The Uzbek jihadists wrote that the Syrian government army soldiers, fearing of being infected Covid-19, do not want to jointly fight the Shia fighters Kataib al-Imam al-Hussein, Quwat al-Ridha, and Liwa Fatemiyoun. According to KTJ, many Iranian-backed fighters were quarantined near the frontlines in Idlib and Aleppo. Uzbek jihadists on the hidden Telegram channels joked about not taking prisoner

69 Cf. Uran Botobekov (2020). ‘Top Uzbek Jihadist Leader Suffers for Loyalty to Al Qaeda’. *Modern Diplomacy*. July 20. See: <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2020/07/10/top-uzbek-jihadist-leader-suffers-for-loyalty-to-al-qaeda/>

70 Cf. Ebaa News Agency (2020/2). قطانم ي ف انوروك تاباصل دمداص تايئاصح! ااب لكبش 2020. “ضرمال نع فشكلا لباقم ةيلايخ غلابمو دسأل تايئاصح ليليم ااب لكبش. *Blog*. The Ebaa News Agency. July 23. See: <https://ebaa.news/news/news-details/2020/07/0183/>.

Shia militia member, saying, it is better to kill them on the spot so that the coronavirus infection does not penetrate into Greater Idlib. According to Abū Mariya al Qahtani, an HTS commander, “the heavy Iranian and foreign Shia militia presence has corrupted the religion of the people and their earthly life.” Thus, HTS and Central Asian Salafi-Jihadi groups have come out in a united front, blaming predominantly Shiite Iran and its proxy militias in the Middle East for infecting Greater Idlib.

Despite rumors that the coronavirus entered Syria back in mid-February through Iranian and foreign Shia militia, Syrian health minister Nizar Yazigi acknowledged the country’s first official case of coronavirus⁷¹ on state television only on March 22. Since then, the coronavirus pandemic has severely hit the Syrian population living in government-controlled territories. On August 6, 2020, according to Johns Hopkins University⁷², 944 coronavirus cases were officially registered in Syria, including 48 deaths in regime-held areas.

Indeed, when compared across the country, prior to July 2020, the coronavirus situation in Greater Idlib was more favorable than the Bashar al-Assad’s regime-held territories. The first Covid-19 case was confirmed in HTS-controlled Idlib province on July 9⁷³. The head of the World Health Organization (WHO)’s office in Turkey’s southeastern Gaziantep, Mahmoud Daher, said the patient was a male Syrian doctor in his 30s who had been working in a hospital in the town of Bab al-Hawa on the Syrian-Turkish border. The registration of the first case of Covid-19 in Idlib Governorate raised the anticipated concerns of HTS, its Salvation Government and the Central Asian Salafi-Jihadi groups.

Because, during the two-year-long offensive of the Syrian-Russian military alliance critical civilian infrastructure was repeatedly attacked across Idlib, including hospitals and healthcare centers⁷⁴. Many of the displaced are now living in camps in northern Idlib and along the Turkish border, where most barely have access to basic necessities, including health care, water, and food, making social distancing and basic hygiene almost impossible.

71 Cf. Khaled Al-Khateb (2020). ‘Coronavirus in Syria: A Catastrophe in the Making.’ *Al-Monitor*. March 27. See: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/syria-coronavirus-who-pandemic-denial-cases-detention-camps.html>.

72 Cf. Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (2020/1.). ‘Syria - COVID New Cases, Deaths, Testing Data’. August 6. See: <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/region/syria>, accessed on August 6, 2020

73 Cf. AFP, French Press Agency (2020). ‘Syria’s Idlib Announces First Case of Coronavirus.’ *Daily Sabah*. July 9. See: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/syrias-idlib-announces-first-case-of-coronavirus/news>.

74 Cf. Physicians for Human Rights (2020). ‘Medical Personnel Are Targeted in Syria.’ *Blog*. Accessed on August 6. See: <http://phr.org/our-work/resources/medical-personnel-are-targeted-in-syria/>.

5.5 Uzbek jihadists view on the coronavirus

On March 16, 2020, Ahluddin Navqotiy, an ardent ideologue of the Uzbek extremist group *Katibat Tawhid wal Jihad*, posted a video on Telegram channel, entitled “Allah Almighty supports his faithful followers.” In the *Jumma Khutbah* (Friday Sermon), he said that “today Allah Almighty is destroying China and Iran through an invisible virus. The economy of these infidels is collapsing in front of our eyes. They are stranded and cannot find a cure for the coronavirus. This is God’s punishment for their sins! Kafirs are powerless before the invisible warriors of the Lord. Therefore, we must vigorously continue our holy jihad.” Ahluddin Navqotiy’s description of Covid-19 is closely aligned with al Qaeda’s religious propaganda on the concept of “soldier of Alla”.

On July 14, 2020, the Uzbek group KTJ posted on its Telegram channel a message entitled “Coronavirus is like the plague” and a short quote from famous Islamic scholar Muḥammad al-Bukhari’s Hadith collection ‘Sahih’. KTJ claims that Islamic guidelines on epidemics, going back to the time of the Prophet Muḥammad, can help them cope with Covid-19. “If you hear of an outbreak of plague in a land, do not enter it; if the plague breaks out in a place while you are in it, do not leave that place,” according to Sahih al-Bukhari. According to the Uzbek Jihadi group, the outbreak is a threat to all jihadists, and Hadith of al-Bukhari recommends how to minimize its spread and encouraging people to avoid it.

Abū Yusuf Muhojir, the famous leader of the Uzbek group *Katibat Imam al Bukhari*, on his Telegram channel often praised the exceptional role of the coronavirus as a “soldier of Allah”. On March 28, 2020, he posted that “if yesterday the Shia Shaitans killed the Sunni Muslims of Sham, today the smallest and invisible soldier of Allah is destroying them in Iran itself. You are the fairest and most protective of the innocent, o Allah.”

The KIB top leader also appealed to Western infidel regimes, where school students are prohibited from wearing the hijab. “Yesterday these infidels forbade Muslim women to wear hijab. However, today, when the invisible soldier of Allah Almighty came to their land, they are not saved even by the mask, which they have to wear instead of the hijab. Because Allah punishes them for their sins before Islam”, said he. Further, the Uzbek jihadist concluded that “Almighty Allah has revealed the brittleness and vulnerability of the West’s material strength. It is now clear for all to see that it was but a deception that could not stand the test of the smallest soldier of Allah on the face of the earth.”

Abū Yusuf Muhojir’s statement proved once again the basic commonality of the Central Asian Salafi-Jihadi groups and their parent organizations – al Qaeda, the Taliban and HTS. Uighur militants of TIP and Uzbek terrorists of KTJ and KIB accepted and reflected the view the Al-Qaeda leadership that the Covid-19 pandemic as an “invisible soldier of Allah”, sent to weaken the enemies of Islam and punish

the disbelievers. Thus, the coronavirus pandemic has provided an additional platform and an excellent opportunity for Central Asian terrorist groups to articulate and disseminate their violent Salafi-Jihadi ideologies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be noted that the Covid-19 pandemic offers the Central Asian Salafi-Jihadi movement and its parent organizations such as al Qaeda, the Taliban and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham new opportunities. This study underlines that the Salafi-Jihadi movements from across the political spectrum have been fully exploiting coronavirus opportunities. These events open up political space for jihadist organizations to advance their operational goals and re-declare their extremist ideology.

Review of their online statements in multiple languages disclosed that Central-Asian Salafi-Jihadi groups have capitalized on the coronavirus factor for their ideological purposes in three ways:

- a) The Taliban are exploiting Covid-19 to once again demonstrate their advantages over the Afghan government and pressure it to release their prisoners from Afghan prisons. The Taliban aim to withdraw the United States-led foreign forces from Afghanistan and rebuild their Islamic Emirate. At the same time, they want to rule the country alone, without sharing power with anyone. Therefore, they are not sincere in conducting peace negotiations with the current Afghan government of Ashraf Ghani, considering it to be a US puppy.
- b) Central Asian militants of TIP, KIB, KTJ and IJU conducting jihad alongside the main insurgent group in Afghanistan fully support the Taliban's coronavirus ideology. They regularly report in Uzbek and Tajik on successful Taliban attacks on the "corrupt Kabūl administration's troops." The Uzbek KIB's website "Galaba Shabodasi" on Telegram has become a successful conductor of the Taliban ideology in Central Asia.
- c) Uighur jihadists of the Turkestan Islamic Party exploited Covid-19 as "divine punishment" against the government of communist China for its brutal repression against the ethnic Muslim Uighur minority. Additionally, the extremist group taps on such individuals' sentiments, as it indirectly puts the blame for the virus on China's "impure" dietary practices, capitalizing on growing anti-Chinese sentiments around the world. TIP understands very well that such derogatory nicknames as "Wuhan virus" or "China virus" raise negative sentiments in many people. And Uighur extremists are trying to bring grist to someone's mill with these nicknames

d) Uzbek jihadists of KTJ and KIB in Syria directed their “coronavirus anger” against the “criminal regime” of Bashar al-Assad and his main “terrorist sponsors”, Putin’s Russia and “chief Shia Shaitan (evil)” Khamenei’s Iran.” They have widely shared the Dua (prayer) on social networks that Allah Almighty will severely punish these three political crime regimes “for the destruction of peaceful Sunni Muslims in Syria.” Also, Uzbek, Tajik and Kyrgyz extremists on Telegram channel published their prayers for Covid-19 to punish Central Asian “Taghut” (idols) states. The essence of their wishes is that the virus helps the release of Muslims from prisons.

An analysis of the reaction of Central Asian extremist movements to Covid-19 revealed that they sought to exploit the coronavirus crisis to reinforce their violent ideologies in two ways. Firstly, at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, when it spread to non-Muslim China, Western Europe and the United States, they portrayed the virus as “divine retribution against infidels and crusaders” for waging a war against Islam with an ecstatic note.

Secondly, however, when the pandemic began to spread to Muslim-majority areas, particularly those controlled by the Salafi-Jihadi groups, they put forward a conspiracy theory about its origins, blaming the West, Chinese and Zionist enemies who have united against Islam.

Either way, violent Salafi-Jihadi groups claiming to fight for Islam in Central Asia and the Middle East will continue to use the virus outbreak to recruit and radicalize militants and justify their narratives of hate, division, and enmity. We have already seen examples of this from al Qaeda, the Taliban, HTS and its Central Asian subsidiaries TIP, KIB and KTJ in their coronavirus messaging.

Strategically, the Taliban and HTS increased their efforts to exploit the humanitarian situation created by the widespread coronavirus outbreak. Our studies have found that both rebel groups sought to deliver governance services in their controlled territories such as health and infrastructure to recruit members and build credibility with sympathizers even in normal times.

However, after the coronavirus outbreak, they are now trying to control the activities of Western international humanitarian organizations. For example, the Taliban recently announced⁷⁵ that all private companies and aid organizations operating in Afghanistan must register with them. Last year, the Taliban briefly banned the International Committee of the Red Cross and the World Health Organization from operating in the country and accused them of conducting activities against Islam. The Afghan government said the Taliban was making desperate attempts to assert control over government functions during the coronavirus outbreak.

75 Cf. Abdul Qadir Sediqi (2020). ‘Taliban Push to Control Private Companies, Aid Agencies in Afghanistan.’ *Reuters*. July 27. See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-taliban-idUSKCN24S197>.

Currently during this coronavirus outbreak, the Taliban and HTS have increased service provision in their controlled areas, while the weak Afghan government and the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad are failing in medical, water, and food provisions, in order to build popular support for their cause and proto-states. Thus, both jihadist groups were able to display their pragmatic streak in their dealings during the coronavirus pandemic and reap political dividends at the international level. To some extent, the Taliban and HTS have managed to turn themselves into a more proficient responder to the Covid-19 challenges than the Afghan and Syrian governments.

The fight against this crisis has even more clearly revealed the authoritarian and overly tough management style of the Taliban and HTS, which are trying to impose a conservative form of Islamic rule in their controlled area. Both jihadi groups are using this pandemic to portray themselves as the only military and religious-political force in the region, caring for the health of Muslims in “Islamic territories”. Accordingly, Central Asian Uighur and Uzbek Salafi-Jihadi groups actively praised the efforts of their “parent organizations” to combat Covid-19. But in parallel with this, TIP, KTJ and KIB, at the same time, tried to adhere to the messaging of al Qaeda on Covid-19.

In conclusion, it is clear that Covid-19 has established itself as a phenomenon of the greatest importance that has managed to inspire Islamist extremist groups around the globe to new goals. The post-soviet Central Asian five governments already face a tall task in responding to Covid-19, but they should remain hyper vigilant of the now greater threat posed by Islamists extremist groups. After gaining strong energy through Covid-19, violent extremism and terrorism, associated with Salafi-Takfiri ideologies, could have huge implications and effects on the security of the world in the medium and long term.

Images:

Image 1: *Abdul Aziz Uzbeki, the amir of Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad*



Image posted by Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad on its *Telegram* channel, May 25, 2019.

Image 2: *Abū Yusuf Muhojir, the amir of Katibat Imam al Bukhar*



Image posted by Katibat Imam al Bukhari on its *Telegram* channel, February 2018.

Image 3: Ahluddin Navqotiy, the new imam of Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad, during the Jummah Khutbah tells the Uzbek jihadists about the “invisible soldiers of God”



Screenshot from the video of Katibat al Tawhid wal Jihad, March 16, 2020, Telegram channel.

Image 4: Taliban doctors distribute masks and drugs for Covid-19



Official website of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (2020/d). 'Essential awareness materials for Prevention of corona virus disease distributed in Badghis'. March 29, 2020. See: <http://alemarahenglish.net/?p=34058>

Image 5: *The Turkistan Islamic Party's Media Center "Islam Awazi" promoted Covid-19 as "God's punishment" for China*



Screenshot from the video of the Turkistan Islamic Party's Media Center "Islam Awazi", February 29, 2020.

Image 6: *Turkistan Islamic Party believes that Coronavirus is a soldier of God*



Joscelyn, Thomas (2019). 'Turkistan Islamic Party musters large force for battles in Syria.' | *FDD's Long War Journal*. June 29. URL: <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/06/turkistan-islamic-party-musters-large-force-for-battles-in-syria.php>

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