

Towards a Covid-Jihad - Millennialism in the field of Jihadism

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Abstract

Since the appearance of Covid-19, various jihadist voices from the environment of the former Islamic State (IS) emerged and invoked their previous combat fellows to resume the battle towards the 'disbelievers'. Self-appointed religious authorities claim to possess the interpretational sovereignty regarding the 'divine signs' visualized by the pandemic: the 'just punishment' for those who have not been true believers.

The narrative of the final battle between the 'good' and the 'evil' indicates a well-known tradition in the field of millennialism. Against the background of a transnational health crisis, this motive is currently revitalized and interlinked by IS affiliated groups and individuals with the fear of some Muslims regarding the end time. With this strategy, IS tries to fuel hatred and violence towards European societies and regain fame again.

Specific vulnerable groups such as (hopeless) former Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) and female inhabitants of detention camps in Syria as well as their children are the main targets of the IS narratives concerning Covid-19. According to their inner assessment, they seem to have nothing to 'lose' in this live but to gain a lot more in the afterlife. Therefore, a discussion of the elements of religious fundamentalism, especially in view of its millennialist and apocalyptic elements, is supposed to visualize possible points of reference regarding a deconstruction of the jihadist misuse of the pandemic. This approach could be helpful in terms of a change of perspective for those who are (still) addicted to the violence promoting ideology of IS.

Keywords: Covid-Jihad, IS, Jihadism, Millennialism, Pandemic, Psychological Warfare, Religious Fundamentalism

1. Introduction

In 2009, Andreas Armbrorst stated: “While religious fundamentalism in general isn’t necessarily related to violent or even terrorist activism this is the case with jihadism.”¹ Armbrorst’s statement indicated the increasing trend to equate religious fundamentalism with violence or terrorism and in addition with Islamic extremism since 9/11. Although voices occurred that considered the rise of the pandemic as a possible opportunity to weakening terrorism in a larger amount², this chapter aims to examine the narratives of actors and groups related to jihadist movements such as the Islamic State (IS) or Al Qaeda (AQ) with regard to the pandemic. With the help of various examples from the field of jihadism, this chapter aims to illustrate how Covid-19 will be misused for new recruitments and the motivation of the present adherents in view of the possible resurrection of jihadist movements that rendered meaningless.

It starts with a short description of basic elements of Islamic fundamentalism as an expression of an *Abrahamic Fundamentalism* and its relation to violent activism. Beside groups as for instance the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, jihadist groups affiliated to AQ and IS as well as former FTFs, can be labelled as millennialist groups with regard to their “apocalyptic interpretation of reality”.³ According to Abdul Basit, the pandemic “feeds into the apocalyptic, end-of-time narratives of ISIS”.⁴ The aforementioned groups use the vulnerability of both, societies and states in terms of the pandemic, for the mobilization of their adherents in terms of Covid-19 that is religiously interpreted as a divine plague for sinners, who are – beside the disbelievers – those Muslims who have joined a ‘Western’ life-style and follow national laws as well as values in Western countries.⁵

The pandemic sows the seeds for fundamentalist tendencies within the field of violent Islamist extremism. The number of new opportunities for adapting or expanding jihadist activities in certain ways, including violent acts, increased since

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- 1 Andreas Armbrorst (2009). A Profile of Religious Fundamentalism and Terrorist Activism. *Defence Against Terrorism Review* Vol. 2, No. 1. Spring, p. 51.
 - 2 Cf. Dylan Nicholson (2020). ‘COVID-19 an opportunity for terrorists or a threat to their existence’. *Defence Connect*. April 29. See: <https://www.defenceconnect.com.au/key-enablers/5995-global-terror-and-covid-19>
 - 3 G. A. Almond, R. Scott Appleby and Emmanuel Sivan (2003) (Eds.). *Strong Religion. The Rise of Fundamentalism around the World*. Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, p. 104.
 - 4 Abdul Basit (2020). ‘The COVID-19 Pandemic: An Opportunity for Terrorist Groups?’ *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 12, 3, 8.
 - 5 Cf. MEMRI (2020/1). ‘The way forward - A word of advice on the coronavirus pandemic’. In Al-Qaeda Central: *COVID-19 Is Divine Punishment For Sins Of Mankind; Muslims Must Repent, West Must Embrace Islam*. March 31. See: <https://www.memri.org/reports/al-qaeda-central-covid-19-divine-punishment-sins-mankind-muslims-must-repent-west-must>

the rise of Covid-19. In certain circumstances the fear for the ‘invisible’ divine punishment could even act as a motivation for action. This development will be discussed in a second step with regard to *major forms of jihadist interpretations regarding the pandemic* in the field of jihadist movements, with a specific regard to IS.

This discussion is followed by a reflection of the future socio-political consequences *in the age of pandemic* that might shape the terrorism landscape in both the short and long term.

2. Elements of religious fundamentalism in the field of Jihadism

With regard to Almond et al. “nine characteristics of fundamentalism, five ideological and four organizational characteristics of fundamentalism”⁶ can be identified:

“Ideological characteristics:

- Reactivity to the Marginalized of Religion
- Selectivity
- Moral Manichaeism
- Absolutism and Inerrancy and
- Millennialism and Messianism.

Organizational characteristics:

- Elect, Chosen Membership
- Sharp Boundaries
- Authoritarian Organization and
- Behavioural Requirements.”⁷

By discussing elements of religious fundamentalism, for instance with regard to IS affiliated groups and actors, some of the typical patterns of behaviour of these jihadists are described, that could be predictive for their future performance concerning Covid-19 and the further development of the pandemic.⁸

6 Almond et al., 2003, pp. 93; 90-115.

7 *Ib.*, pp. 93-98. Due to the fact that only some of these characteristics will be part of this chapter, not all of them are discussed in detail.

8 Although the discussion of the origins and development of (religious) fundamentalism could be debated at a larger amount, this chapter concentrates on a short discussion of this topic, mostly based on the research of Almond, Appleby and Sivan (2003).

2.1 Selected religious knowledge

According to Almond et al., religious leaders play a major role in terms of establishing and modelling fundamentalist movements.⁹ Based on their privileged role within the jihadist community, self-declared ‘preachers’ with an affiliation for violence, legitimate individually selected Islamic sacred text passages from the Qur’an and the Ahādīth to identify Covid-19 as a ‘divine punishment’ for those believers who failed in fulfilling their (daily) religious duties and declare the virus as a wake-up sign for those, who still satisfy Allah’s laws appropriately¹⁰. The latter ones should therefore join the fight against the *mushrikūn* (polytheists).¹¹ The use of the term ‘Covid-Jihad’¹², a mixture of the classical interpretation of the concept of militant jihad, interlinked with the virus Covid-19, shall underline the need for each believer to follow Allah’s will to divide the ‘good’ from the ‘evil’ and to establish a pure religiosity that could be practiced in a ‘perfect’ Islamic environment: the caliphate. The victims on the side of the Muslim fighters who might themselves die as a consequence of the pandemic are sacrificed as martyrs who gave their lives for the right Islamic cause and are guaranteed a place in Ğanna (paradise).

The selection of religious knowledge by self-declared religious authorities follows the patterns of religious fundamentalism where some individuals pretend to be the ‘true’ interpreters of God’s own will in order to gain the sovereignty towards religious sources. “A given religious leader inclined to extremism thereby nurtures the characteristic traits and elements of fundamentalism within the sector(s) of the religious community over which he exercises authority.”¹³

2.2 The religious field and the religious capital

According to Bourdieu, the *religious field* is defined by interactions between laypersons and religious actors such as prophets and structured by the consumers and producers of spiritual goods. The producer’s side provides a set of specialists who

9 Almond et al., 2003, p. 118.

10 For instance groups such as “the Taliban reflect the situation by issuing a statement that the Coronavirus is the result of divine wrath and that the “threat” must be faced with measures in accordance with Islamic teachings, such as praying and consulting the Qur’an.” In: Carmelo Galindo (2020). COVID-19, Jihadism and Biological Weapons. *Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism (ITCT)*, p. 2.

11 Cf. Real Instituto elcano (2020). ‘Crisis del coronavirus. La pandemia segun los yihadistas’. See: <https://blog.realinstitutoelcano.org/crisis-del-coronavirus-la-pandemia-segun-los-yihadistas/>

12 Cf. *Corona Jihad* in: Shewta Desai and Amarnath Amarasingam (2020). COVID-19, Misinformation and Anti-Muslim Violence in India. ISD (Ed.). *Strong Cities*. London; Washington DC, Beirut, Tokio, pp. 1-34.

13 Almond et al., 2003, p. 119.

are very competitive to each other because they are struggling about the accumulation of *religious capital*, which can be observed e.g. with regard to AQ and IS in terms of the ‘right’ interpretation of Allah’s will (concerning the pandemic and beyond). Bourdieu defines *religious capital* as a product of this enhanced religious work in order to secure the continued existence of the *religious capital*.¹⁴ On the side of communication, the laypersons are separated from the production as well as from the administration of spiritual goods¹⁵, but must follow the imposed *religious habitus*.¹⁶ As a consequence, a tension of power between the religious specialists and the laypersons can be observed. The specialists determine which kind of performances will be valued. Their own way of living is concerned as valuable for the society. That’s why the *symbolic capital* provides a form of exercise of power that is imagined as (religiously) legitimized and considers the support and the acknowledgment by its adherents as a logical consequence of the superior position of the religious specialists in the *religious field*.¹⁷ With respect to this assumption, the *charismatic leaders* of IS affiliated groups don’t question their own religious authority.

2.3 Apocalyptic and millennialist expectations

Instead of looking for possibilities to make use of Covid-19 with regard to their group, some jihadist actors are inspired by the pandemic’s effects such as *death* that much that they are likely to interpret it as the ‘purge’ of the world. Among those who link the rise of the pandemic with their apocalyptic or millennialist expectations towards the world, two groups can be identified:

“those who believe that they must merely passively prepare for the end and that no other actions on their part are necessary, as well as [those] who believe that when the time is right they must act to facilitate or even initiate their version of Armageddon in order to secure salvation.”¹⁸

The second type of actors could consider Covid-19 as an omen for the forecasted end time or as a sign of Allah’s anger towards humanity: “The pandemic, which is evocative of [...] divine punishments, might then act as a catalyst for these groups

14 Pierre Bourdieu (2001). *Meditationen. Zur Kritik der scholastischen Vernunft*. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, pp. 80; 320.

15 Bourdieu, 2001, pp. 56-57.,78; 304-305.

16 Ib., pp. 77-78, 318.

17 Ib., pp. 66-67; 310.; Cf. Pierre Bourdieu (1993). *Sozialer Sinn. Kritik der theoretischen Vernunft*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, pp. 205-221; Cf. Pierre Bourdieu (1998). *Praktische Vernunft. Zur Theorie des Handelns*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, pp. 173-176.; Cf. David Swartz (1996). Bridging the Study of Culture and Religion: Pierre Bourdieu’s Political Economy of Symbolic Power. *Sociology of Religion* Vol. 57, No. 1, 77.

18 Gary Ackerman and Hayley Peterson (2020). Terrorism and COVID-19: Actual and Potential Impacts. *Perspectives on Terrorism* Vol. 14, iss. 3, June, 63.

to initiate whatever long-term plans they have been hatching, some of which might include violence against the public.”¹⁹

3. Major forms of jihadist interpretations regarding the pandemic

While the numbers of the victims of Covid-19 around the world increased, various jihadist interpretations concerning the reasons for the origin and the targets of the pandemic arose. The following two major IS narratives could be framed in view of Covid-19 and will be discussed in this chapter:

- a) Covid-19 as a divine punishment for disbelievers and
- b) The Impact of Covid-19 on IS Detention Camps.

Beside the major narrative, Covid-19 is partly described as a ‘Western’ construction to threat Muslims and conquer the increase of Islam²⁰. Various Sunni jihadists have “claimed that Covid-19 is a plot by Islam’s enemies”.²¹ According to *Abū Shekau*, one of the leaders of the IS-affiliated group Boko Haram, ‘true’ believer won’t get infected with the virus. Therefore exists no need to combat the pandemic, but to see the virus as a governmental strategy against Islam.²²

3.1 Covid-19 as a divine punishment for disbelievers

With regard to the lockdown and the social distancing, people are becoming more and more mistrustful towards their environment and their periods of internet use

19 Ackerman & Peterson, 2020, 63.

20 This topic is also used in return such as in India where “Hindu nationalist groups began to see the virus not as an entity spreading organically throughout India, but as a sinister plot by Indian Muslims to purposefully infect the population.” In: Desai & Amarasingam, 2020, p. 2.

21 Ackerman & Peterson, 2020, p. 61.

22 Cf. John Campbell (2020). Boko Haram’s Shekau Labels Anti-COVID-19 Measures an Attack on Islam in Nigeria. *Council on Foreign Relations*. April 17. See: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/boko-harams-shekau-labels-anti-covid-19-measures-attack-islam-nigeria> ; Cf. Hesham Shehab (2020). ‘Islamist hate preacher warns Muslims to arm themselves amid coronavirus threats’. *JNS*. April 27. See: <https://www.jns.org/opinion/islamist-hate-preacher-warns-muslims-to-arm-the-mself-amid-coronavirus-threats/>

increased.²³ This provides a perfect breeding ground for jihadist online-recruitment with regard to people at risk for radicalization.²⁴

According to Williams, a movement contains the following elements: a mutual ideology, recognized leadership, shared resources and operational coordination.²⁵ With regard to the concerned movements, it can be stated that this definition is applicable on IS affiliated movements, because they share the same jihadist ideology, followed at first *Abū Bakr al-Baghdadi* as their ‘Khalif Ibrahim’ and his successor at a later time, use the same selected religious and technical sources to exchange and have been (or still are) part of the caliphate’s organizational structure.

With respect to the elements of religious fundamentalism, the search for *selectivity* symbolizes the wish to find a reliable peer group, in a world that seems to be cynical very often.²⁶ This search corresponds with a change in behaviour, when the new adherent of a religious fundamentalist group has found his new reference persons: this new peer group will present the rules of conduct that are of ‘divine origin’ to the new member, for instance related to food custodies, clothes and in view of contact to former friends. Usually, this behavioural change would be recognized by family, friends and neighbours of the radicalized individual. In times of the lockdown, this behavioural change will probably not be observed by the former social environment, because of the social distancing. The boundaries “between the saved and sinful in behaviour as well as in doctrine”²⁷ will be clearly defined by the ‘new’ family. Instead of the former societal contacts of the ‘new-born’ believer, the religious sources and explanations will become the new guideline for the convert. Though, nobody from the former social environment will be able to question the new religious messages, the convert might be at risk for a violent radicalization. According to the Metropolitan Police, “some terrorist groups have adapted their methods and messaging to the new environment, including using the coronavirus crisis.”²⁸ The more time a vulnerable individual spends online, the more he or she might be at risk for adopting the jihadist truth about the ‘real’ origin of the pandemic as a ‘divine punishment’ for disbelievers and could be manipulated in terms of terrorist attacks.

23 Cf. Gordon Corera (2020). ‘Coronavirus: Police warn of lockdown radicalisation threat’. BBC. June 10. See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-52997441>, accessed on June 17, 2020.

24 Cf. Randy Borum (2004). *Psychology of Terrorism*. Tampa: University of South Florida.; Cf. David Ciampi (2005). Developmental and motivational factors of transnational terrorists. *Forensic Examiner* 14 (3), 29-34.

25 Cf. Rhys H. Williams (1994). Movement Dynamics and Social Challenge: Transforming Fundamentalist Ideology and Organization. In Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Eds.). *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements*. Chicago, pp. 785-825.

26 Almond et al., 2003, p. 102.

27 Ib.

28 Cf. Corera (2020).

3.1.1 Online recruitment leading to offline actions

Online and offline recruitment efforts of jihadist groups are strengthened *in the age of pandemic*²⁹, such as through IS's creation of Covid-19 related hashtags that lead users to their propaganda sites.³⁰ The Hashtag#COVID19 of the new IS spokesman *Abū Hamza al-Qurashi* provides his speech *And the Disbelievers Will Know who Gets the Good End*. It contains *Abū Hamza's* framing of the pandemic "as God's justice against the West for their attacks against the so-called caliphate and the killing of Muslims."³¹ In addition, he claims the will of IS to continue the fighting and calls the Doha peace agreement "a "cover" to strengthen an alliance between the "apostate" Taliban and "Crusaders" to fight ISIS in Afghanistan."³² Covid-19 is described as a measure of the local "tyrant" governments to pretend public "health and safety" while putting "hundreds of thousands of Muslims in their prisons" where they are "tormented."³³ The online content of *Abū Hamza* functions as a mental instruction for jihadist recruits with regard to their individual renunciation of 'the' West that could lead to violent acts against it as a last resort.

According to Bourdieu, *Abū Hamza* possesses the *symbolic capital* within the *religious field* (of IS adherents) and expects the laypersons to follow his interpretation of God's will in view of the pandemic. Therefore, his current religious legitimacy be understood as a status quo of the religious balance of power and the result of former battles in relation to the monopol with regard to the legitimate practice of religious force, or better religious authority.³⁴

3.1.2 Using the vulnerability of Western individuals at risk for radicalization

Beside the conflicts abroad, the hashtags and propaganda sites are focussing on Western populations that have been affected by the lockdown and are most vulnerable for radicalization because of "perceived personal losses, frustrations and

29 Cf. General Secretariat of the Council (2020). *Council Conclusions on EU External Action on Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism*. In Council of the European Union (Ed.). June 16. No. prev. doc.: 8742/20 + COR 1, pp. 1-16.; Cf. Edith Lederer (2020). 'UN chief: Extremists using COVID-19 to recruit online youths'. *AP News*. April 27. See: <https://apnews.com/a6cf967c03f7ff00e170949a9eae11a>

30 Cf. Annelies Pauwels (2020). 'How Europe's terrorists take advantage of the pandemic'. *EU Observer*. April 29. See: <https://euobserver.com/opinion/148173>

31 See Rita Katz (2020). Hashtag#ISIS. *SITE Intelligence Group*. May 29. See: <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/>, accessed on May 30, 2020.

32 Ib.

33 Ib.

34 Pierre Bourdieu (2000). Eine Interpretation der Religion nach Max Weber. In Pierre Bourdieu (Ed.). *Das religiöse Feld. Texte zur Ökonomie des Heilsgeschehens*. Konstanz: UVK, p. 25.

reminders of death, all of which can be associated with the pandemic.³⁵ They offer messages that Allah's rage towards the disbelievers can only be interrupted by following the path of 'pure' Islam. Therefore, jihadist groups such as AQ³⁶ and IS who consider the pandemic as a punishment towards the evil, personalized by apostates, atheists and crusaders, "have used their communication channels to send action guidelines to their followers to offer a doctrinal response to the current situation and [...] indications for the mobility of their assets and not be detected by security forces."³⁷ AQ has encouraged adherents to convert to Islam during the lockdown and to stay at home in a recent online publication.³⁸

Another target of IS supporters are the security forces. IS affiliated groups and networks are calling their followers for spreading the virus among them.³⁹

According to Juan Zarate, a senior fellow at the *Combating Terrorism Center* in West Point,

"The severity and extreme disruption of a novel coronavirus will likely spur the imagination of the most creative and dangerous groups and individuals to reconsider bioterrorist attacks. [...] With the world now reeling simply from a novel coronavirus with a relatively low lethality rate, some extreme terrorist groups and rogue scientists willing to venture into apocalyptic fields might see this moment as a catalyst for exploring again the possibilities of bioterrorism. The Islamic State and al-Qa`ida have already touted the destructive effects of the virus on the West, and white supremacist groups have called for their adherents to use the virus in spray bottles to infect specific targets."⁴⁰

3.1.3 New types of terrorism and the threat of bioterrorist attacks

Lockdowns and social distancing measures will prevent various terrorist acts in terms of logistical aspects such as "the movement of operatives within and across borders, the acquisition of vehicles, weapons and equipment."⁴¹ Therefore, the or-

35 Ackerman & Peterson, 2020, p. 61.

36 Cf. MEMRI (2020/1).

37 Galindo, 2020, p. 2.

38 Cf. Julie Coleman (2020). The Impact of Coronavirus on Terrorism in the Sahel. *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*. April 16. See: <https://icct.nl/publication/the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-terrorism-in-the-sahel/>

39 Cf. Kyler Ong and Nur Aziemah Azman (2020). 'Distinguishing Between the Extreme Far-right and IS's Calls to Exploit COVID-19'. *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 12, 18-21.

40 Paul Cruickshank and Don Rassler (2020). A View from the CT Foxhole: A Virtual Roundtable on COVID-19 and Counterterrorism with Audrey Kurth Cronin, Lieutenant General (Ret.) Michael Nagata, Magnus Ranstorp, Ali Soufan, and Juan Zarate. *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 13, iss. 6. June, p.4.

41 Ackerman & Peterson, 2020, 60.

ganization of attacks will be modified, e.g. with regard to a growing number of lone wolf attacks as could be seen in the case of a jihadist who stabbed seven people in Romans-sur-Isère in April 2020.⁴²

With respect to EUROPOL's *EU Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2019 (TE-SAT 2019)* "online discussions of planning Chemical, Biological, Radioactive or other Nuclear (CBRN) attacks increased in 2018."⁴³ The intentions to use such materials with regard to an attack were mainly expressed by jihadists in closed forums. In July and August 2018, the IS-linked group al-Abd Al-Faqir Media (AF Media) launched a campaign titled "*Bio-Terror via Telegram* promoting the use of biological weapons."⁴⁴

The use of chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction, such as the biological toxins abrin and ricin, that have been characterized as "the nuclear weapons of the poor", because they are accessible by any individual or group with terrorist intentions, could be observed in the sarin attack of the millennialist group *Aum Shinrikyo* on the Tokyo subway in 1995.⁴⁵ Three years before this attack, the group has tried to collect samples of the Ebola virus in Zaire.⁴⁶

According to Galindo, the Islamic State made use of chemical weapons in recent years: "From 2014 to 2017, a total of 76 chemical weapons (chlorine and sulphur mustard) attacks occurred in Iraq and Syria."⁴⁷

Several cases of IS-affiliated individuals who tried to make use of CBRN ingredients for terrorist attacks in European cities occurred in 2018. The following three ones are just an example of this development within the European Jihadist milieu:

"In May, a man with Egyptian heritage was arrested in Paris "on suspicion of preparing a terrorist attack" with ricin."⁴⁸

In June, a terrorist plot by a Tunisian citizen using ricin was prevented in Cologne.⁴⁹

42 Cf. Francesco Marone (2020). Terrorism and Counterterrorism in a Time of Pandemic. *Italian Institute for International Political Studies*. May 15. See: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazioni/terrorism-and-counterterrorism-time-pandemic-26165>.

43 EUROPOL (2020). *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend report 2019 (TE-SAT)*. Brussels, p. 20.

44 Ib.

45 Galindo, 2020, p. 2.; Cf. Robert Lifton (1999) *Destroying the World to Save It: Aum Shinrikyo, Apocalyptic Violence, and the New Global Terrorism*. New York: Metropolitan Books.; Cf. Senate Government Affairs Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations (Minority Staff) (1995). *Hearings on Global Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Case Study on the Aum Shinrikyo*. October 31.

46 Cf. David Kaplan (2000). *Aum Shinrikyo (1995)*. In Jonathan Tucker (Ed.) *Toxic Terror: Assessing Terrorist Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

47 Galindo, 2020, pp. 2-3.

48 EUROPOL, 2020, p. 19.

49 Ib.

In November, a Lebanese individual was arrested for the preparation of a chemical-biological plot in Sardinia that was linked with another attack in Lebanon.⁵⁰

According to Nicholas J. Rasmussen, the former director of the *National Center for Counter-Terrorism (NCCT)*, this bio-terrorism warfare practiced by IS adherents can be seen as a result of

“the conflict in Iraq and Syria [that] has been [...] a gaming laboratory for ISIS and other extremist organizations to participate in efforts to refine their ability to use chemicals, toxins [and] other materials that would have a chemical or toxic effect on the battlefield.”⁵¹

Therefore, the CBRN attacks by former IS fighters and groups as well as individuals who are affiliated to IS will probably replace the conventional terrorist attacks within Europe in the future.⁵²

The risk assessment concerning these new terror methods⁵³ depends on various factors such as “technical experience, availability of materials, delivery capacity”⁵⁴ and of course on the effectiveness of the measures of the prevention of violent extremism (PVE) regarding both returnees and vulnerable individuals ‘at home’ who are at risk for violent Islamic radicalization.

A particular challenge in terms of the pandemic and the related lockdown is

“the isolation from others and alienation from normal social intercourse itself [that] means that there is a lower chance that behaviors associated with radicalization will be noticed by others who might otherwise be able to intervene.”⁵⁵

As a consequence of the possible threat of CBRN attacks by violent Islamic extremists, national catastrophe plans – with regard to a Covid-19 linked bio-warfare caused by jihadists – have to be developed immediately at this stage for enabling for instance European countries to be prepared for this worst case scenario as possible targets.⁵⁶

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51 Nicholas Rasmussen in January 2018, cited from Galindo, 2020, p. 3.

52 Cf. European Institute for Counter Terrorism and Conflict Prevention (2020).; Cf. Gary Ackerman & Kevin Moran (2005). Bioterrorism and Threat Assessment. Paper #22. *Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission*. Stockholm, pp. 1-18. See: <http://docshare01.docshare.tips/files/2791/27919768.pdf>; Cf. Cheryl Loeb (2009). Jihadists and Biological and Toxin Weapons. In Gary Ackerman and Jeremy Tamsett (Eds.). *Jihadists and Weapons of Mass Destruction*. Boca Raton, Florida: CRC Press.

53 Cf. Jessica Stern (1999). *The Ultimate Terrorists*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

54 Galindo, 2020, p. 4.

55 Ackerman & Peterson, 2020, p. 62.

56 Cf. Richard Pilch (2020). ‘How to keep the new coronavirus from being used as a terrorist weapon’. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. March 27. See: <https://thebulletin.org/2020/03/how-to-keep-the-new-coronavirus-from-being-used-as-a-terrorist-weapon/#> ; Cf. Law and Crime

4. The Impact of Covid-19 on IS Detention⁵⁷ Camps

Since the decline of IS, its members have tried to flee the former occupied territories in Syria and other regions but were caught by Kurdish groups such as the *Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)*. According to Savage, the *SDF* has installed several detention camps for former IS fighters in Ain Issa, Hasaka and Kobani.⁵⁸ The information about the number of the detainees, vary widely and were quantified by Savage “on approximately 9,000 Syrian or Iraqi men, and 2,000 men from 50 other countries”⁵⁹ in the year 2019.

The *SDF* is responsible for the hygienic measures against Covid-19 within the detention camps and prisons. They call for more international support because adequate resources and infrastructure are needed in a greater extent.⁶⁰

The longer the former IS members will be imprisoned the more realistic seems their will to organize breakouts.⁶¹ This assumption corresponds with the fear of an outbreak of Covid-19 within the camps and its use for terrorist recruitment by the media centers of IS in view of possible attacks in Western cities on the so called disbelievers. Accordingly, several riot attempts within prisons and detention camps have been reported so far.⁶²

(2020). ‘DOJ Just Warned That Intentional Spread of COVID-19 Could Be Terrorism - What It Means’. March 26. See: <https://lawandcrime.com/covid-19-pandemic/doj-just-warned-that-intentional-spread-of-covid-19-could-be-terrorism-what-it-means>

- 57 The use of the terms ‘detention camp’ as well as word the ‘imprisoned’ applied on individuals that might not be ‘guilty’ in terms of criminal offences in the name of the former Islamic State such as children of (former) IS affiliated individuals, is difficult from an academic perspective. Therefore, it is not used in its common understanding but as a reference to the publications on that topic. Similar difficulties appeared in terms of the use of the word ‘prison’ in this context. A comparable discussion on this issue can be found by Audrey Alexander (2020/1). *The Security Threat COVID-19 Poses to the Northern Syria Detention Camps Holding Islamic State Members*. *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 13, iss. 6, June, p.16.
- 58 Cf. Charlie Savage (2020/1). ‘The Kurds’ Prisons and Detention Camps for ISIS Members, Explained’. *New York Times*. October 22nd. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/22/world/middleeast/the-kurds-prisons-and-detention-camps-for-isis-members-explained.html>
- 59 Savage cited from Alexander, 2020/1, p. 16.
- 60 Cf. Ibrahim and Christou Kajjo (2019). ‘Virus Fears Spread at Camps for ISIS Families in Syria’s North East’. *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*. United Nations Human Rights Council. September.
- 61 Cf. Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress (2020). *Operation Inherent Resolve*, January 1, 2020 - March 31, 2020’. May 13, pp. 57-59.; Cf. John Dunford and Brandon Wallace (2019). ‘ISIS Prepares for Breakout in Prisons and Camps’. *Institute for the Study of War*. September 23rd. See: <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/isis-prepares-for-breakout-in-prisons-and-camps>
- 62 Cf. Rojava Information Center (2020/1). ‘Coronavirus crisis in North and East Syria: 22 April Update’. April 22nd. See: <https://rojvainformationcenter.com/2020/04/coronavirus-crisis-in-north-and-east-syria-22-april-update/> / Cf. John Dunford and Jennifer Cafarella (2019). ‘ISIS’s

With respect to the examinations of Alexander, both the risks of riots as well as breakouts remain high. As a consequence,

“the SDF adapts its security presence within detention facilities to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 [...because if] an outbreak occurs in the facilities and significantly affects security forces and other administrators in detention sites, further reductions in staffing or substitutions with personnel who have less experience managing camps or prisons, could further amplify these risks”.⁶³

4.1 The influence of IS narratives on Covid-19 on female detainees

According to the estimate of Arafat, “approximately 11,000 foreign women and children of ISIS militants from about 54 countries are held in a separate part of the camp known as the ISIS Foreigners’ Section.”⁶⁴

Foreign female IS adherents have organized their own court as well as they have installed their own religious police in comparison to the female religious police units such as the *Al-Khanssa Brigade* of the former Islamic State. The religious court of IS related detainees set penalties for ‘irreligious’ behavior, “including killing Iraqi refugees and Syrian IDPs on the other side of the camp [and] even killing children when they disobey orders of the ISIS council.”⁶⁵

IS’s weekly magazine *Al-Naba* published an article dealing with the Islamic principles to protect believers in view of Covid-19 in March 2020.⁶⁶ In comparison to the first three generations of followers of the Islamic prophet Muḥammad, the *Ṣaḥāba*, quotes from Ahādīth, e.g. *Abū Huraira*, were taken that distributed to their individual hygienic in order to avoid sickness. According to some IS related propaganda groups on *Facebook* or *Twitter*, the virus was supposed to be sent by Allah. Therefore, it was said that those believers who put their trust in Allah and pray for support would be protected from illness by his shelter.

Although the IS guideline towards the pandemic that had been published in *Al-Naba* never referred to other organizations such as the *World Health Organization*

Opportunity in Northern Syria’s Detention Facilities and Camps’. *Institute for the Study of War*. May 13. See: <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/isiss-opportunity-in-northern-syria>

63 Alexander, 2020/1, p. 19.

64 Cf. Hisham Arafat (2020). ‘Remittances for ISIS women in northeast Syria’s al-Hawl camp trigger imminent resurgence of the jihadist group’. *North Press Agency*. May 31st. See: https://npasyria.com/en/blog.php?id_blog=2695&sub_blog=4%20&name_blog=Remittances%20of%20ISIS%20women%20in%20northeast%20Syria%E2%80%99s%20al-Hawl%20camp%20trigger%20imminent%20resurgence%20of%20the%20jihadist%20group

65 Cf. Ib.

66 Cf. ةئبوالأ عم لماعتلل ةيعرش تادهيوت, *Al-Naba*, 225.

(WHO) as sources in view of health security, they provided WHO's and other organization's hygienic requirements, e.g. the cover of the mouth in view of avoiding and spreading infections and the necessity for saving and covering water and food. IS used the expertise of the organizations and nations whom they generally marked as 'disbelievers' with regard to the prevention of the disease, while simultaneously referring to Allah and the Ahādīth as the origins of their preventive recommendations.⁶⁷

Messages on *Telegram* included videos of female IS adherents who are located in refugee camps, such as Al-Hawl in Syria, and said that they will not be infected with Covid-19 because *Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī* would guide them and their 'true' Islamic religious practice would save them from falling ill. In addition, they claimed that Muslims, who would die of Covid-19, would be 'unmasked' as disbelievers.⁶⁸ In their opinion, Covid-19 was sent above from Allah to serve as his soldier in a war against the so called 'infidels'.⁶⁹

Predominately female⁷⁰ detainees from Turkey⁷¹ and Western countries receive a lot of financial support from their relatives outside the camps.⁷² In 2019, five female IS adherents tried to bribe security guards with \$2,000 per person to get them out of the camp, but were discovered before they could reach Idlib province.⁷³ The detained women financed specific attacks on the camp's security personnel with the help of the money transfers.⁷⁴ When *Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī* died, the new caliph

67 Sigalit Maor-Hirsh (2020). ISIS in the Age of COVID-19 - From Islamizing the Pandemic to Implementing the Jihadist Strategy. *International Institute for Counterterrorism* (ICT). April, pp. 2-3.

68 Cf. MEMRI (2020/2). 'ISIS Women at Hawl Refugee Camp: Coronavirus does not infect true Muslims; Only Infidels and Oppressors Die of the Virus.' April 9. See: <https://www.memri.org/tv/isis-women-at-hawl-refugee-camp-coronavirus-does-not-infect-true-muslims>

69 Cf. Al-Naba, 227.

70 Cf. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi (2019). 'Free the Female Prisoners: A Campaign to Free Women Held in SDF Camps'. *Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi blog*. October 15. See: <https://www.aymenn-jawad.org/free-the-female-prisoners-a-campaign-to-free>

71 Cf. Aaron Zelin (2019/1). 'Turkish Woman Promotes Fundraising Effort for Widows of 'Martyrs,' Children, Prisoners in Turkey and in Al-Hol Camp in Syria.' *MEMRI*. January 28.

72 Cf. James Longman (2020). 'Caliphate Wives share their stories year after ISIS defeat: Reporter's Notebook'. *ABC News*. February 19. See: <https://www.abcnews.go/International/caliphate-wives-share-stories-year-isis-defeat-reporter/story?id=69055474> ; Cf. Richard Hall (2019/1). 'ISIS Suspects in Syrian camp raise thousand through online crowdfunding campaign'. *Independent*. July 25. See: <https://www.independent.co/uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-s-syria-camp-hol-paypal-telegram-online-crowdfunding-a9021006.html>

73 Cf. Arafat (2020).

74 Cf. Ib.; Cf. Richard Hall (2019/2). 'Tunnels, knives and riots: This Syrian camp holding thousands of ISIS wives is at a breaking point'. *Independent*. December 9. See: <https://www.independent.co/uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-wives-al-hol-camp-syria-islamic-state-terror-uk-a9236221.html>

called for the death of anyone cooperating with camp authorities. As a consequence of several knives attacks by Russian and Turkish female IS members on security guards within the main market of the camp in 2019, the camp authorities established a separate market for the IS foreign section where a money transfer is only possible once a month.⁷⁵

Especially during the rise of the pandemic the online activities of (foreign) females and children increased. On the one hand, the reasons for this increased internet use could be seen as a result of the fear of families that their detained relatives could fall ill with Covid-19. On the other hand, this could be a sign for the attempt of some detainees to use the weakened administrative situation of the camp concerning the pandemic for breakouts.⁷⁶

The use of the vulnerability and the bad conditions of the imprisoned IS supporters⁷⁷ in detention camps and prisons led by for instance the Kurdish forces⁷⁸, was used in the form of a psychological warfare of IS towards its own adherents.⁷⁹ The jihadist movement manipulated the women, men and children⁸⁰ who have already been weakened by their individual fears for the future⁸¹, loneliness and bad physical as well as psychological conditions, in terms of the pandemic as a 'divine punishment' for those who might have quit the 'true' faith and tried to mobilize their last will to survive in view of a fight towards the disbelievers.⁸² This strategy was also used by Joseph Goebbels, minister of propaganda during the Nazi-regime, to mobilize the masses with his 'Sportpalast'-speech on February 18, 1943⁸³. The victory of the Anti-IS alliances towards IS territories – associated with the loss of IS

75 Cf. Arafat (2020).

76 Cf. Audrey Alexander (2020/2). 'Help for Sisters': A Look at Crowdfunding Campaigns with Potential Links to Terrorist and Criminal Networks'. *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*. June 11. See: <https://www.gnet-research.org/2020/06/11/help-for-sisters-a-look-at-crowdfunding-campaigns-with-potential-links-to-terrorist-and-criminal-networks/> Cf. Gina Vale (2019). 'Women in Islamic State: From Caliphate to Camps'. *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*. October, p. 6.; Cf. Dunford & Wallace (2019).

77 Cf. Eric Schmitt (2020). 'Virus Fears Spread at Camps for ISIS Families in Syria's North East'. *International Crisis Group*. April 7.

78 Cf. Charlie Savage (2020/1).

79 Cf. Asia-Pacific Foundation (2020). 'APF Analysis: The Coronavirus (COVID-19) Impact on the ISIS Detention Camps in Syria'. April 27.

80 Cf. Myriam Francois and Azeem Ibrahim (2020). 'The Children of ISIS Detainees: Europe's Dilemma'. *Center for Global Policy*. June 18. See: <https://www.foreignpolicy.com>

81 Cf. Charlie Savage (2020/2). 'What is going to happen to us? Inside ISIS Prison Children ask their Fate'. *New York Times*. October 23rd. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/23/world/middleeast/what-is-going-to-happen-to-us-inside-isis-prison-children-ask-their-fate.html>

82 Cf. Asia-Pacific Foundation (2020).

83 Uwe Backes (2006). *Eine Wort- und Begriffsgeschichte von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*. Here: Extrembegriffe in der politischen Sprache deutscher Idiokratie. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, p. 174.

affiliated relatives by the camp inhabitants – could probably support the IS strategy of mobilizing the ‘imprisoned’ for a ‘Covid-Jihad’ towards the disbelievers.⁸⁴

At the same time, it is a successful recruitment strategy in terms of new adherents with regard to IS objectives who live abroad, e.g. in Europe. The wish of the new recruits to solidarize with the detained ‘brothers and sisters’, the so called ‘true believers’, could be used for virus-attacks within Europe in the name of detention camps such as Al-Hawl.⁸⁵

4.2 Training the next generation of IS

According to various reports, IS related women are training their children as ‘cubs of the caliphate’ within the detention camp.⁸⁶ The next generation of IS is forced “to slaughter chicken and goats first as practice to behead humans and become suicide bombers”⁸⁷ at a later time.⁸⁸ If they were not allowed to leave the camp, they should be able to fight within and – in the end – die for God’s sake.⁸⁹

As a consequence of various defeated attempts to escape the camps, some of the female IS detainees believe that it is their ‘fate’ to stay in the camp and follow God’s plan to help the Islamic State rise again from the camps.⁹⁰ The emergence of the pandemic is graded as a divine sign to hold out the multiple bad circumstances in detention.

The religious education of the imprisoned children follows the same patterns: the kids have been told that “they will go to paradise”⁹¹, if they would stay in the camps and suffer everything in silence. Another narrative of these lessons are the remembrance of Islamic ancestors who “fought against ‘kuffār’ (infidels) bravely in the last 1,400 years”⁹² – they represent the role models especially for the young boys whose fathers have died on the battlefield or are still missing.

84 Cf. Politico (2020). ‘US military fears ISIS resurgence coronavirus Pandemic’. April 2nd. See: <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/02/us-military-fears-isis-resurgence-coronavirus-pandemic-162046>

85 Cf. Rojava Information Center (2020/2). ‘Briefing: Coronavirus risks and preventative measures in Hol camp’. May 21st. See: <https://rojavainformationcenter.com/2020/05/briefing-coronavirus-risks-and-preventative-measures-in-hol-camp/>

86 Cf. Arafat (2020).

87 Cf. Ib.

88 Cf. Joseph Hincks (2020). ‘With the World Busy Fighting COVID-19, Could ISIS Mount a Resurgence?’ *Time*, April 29. See: <https://time.com/5828630/isis-coronavirus/>

89 Cf. Aaron Zelin (2019/2). ‘Wilayat al-Hawl: ‘Remaining’ and Incubating the Next Islamic State Generation’. *Washington Institute*. October. See: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/wilayat-al-hawl-remaining-and-incubating-the-next-islamic-state-generation>

90 Cf. Arafat (2020).

91 Cf. Ib.

92 Ib.

Religion functions in this specific situation as a broker between the desperate former IS members who are beached at a camp – often far away from their original home countries and left behind with broken dreams of a ‘perfect live’ in the caliphate – and the jihadist recruiters who are trying to reactivate their ‘belief’ in Allah and its secular representative, the caliph of the Islamic State (although its regional existence has passed away, its digital presence is unbroken).

According to Almond et al., “fundamentalist movements tend to have an “elect”, a chosen, divinely called membership, described variously as “the faithful”, “the remnant”, “the last outpost”, the “Covenant keepers”, those who “bear witness”, who “walk with the Lord”⁹³ and so on. Applied on the situation of the detained women and their children, the only escape of their hopeless situation is to believe that they are the faithful remainders and will finally be saved by Allah or rather the ‘new born’ IS, whenever it will rise again; maybe with the help of their own children. Therefore, they truly believe in the narrative of the chosen members of God, obey under authoritarian organizational rules and structures of the former IS that are represented by IS camp courts and the religious police and distance themselves from other groups or ‘false’ believers.⁹⁴ If they would quit these belief systems they would lose their footings and probably break down.⁹⁵

4.3 Various roles regarding the symbolic capital of female detainees

With regard to the IS messages of *Al Naba* concerning the pandemic, the female detainees interpreted the content in view of the religious leader *Abū Hamza al-Qurashi*. In relation to their own teaching of religious education or better religious knowledge with regard to the children, the control of the IS court and the religious police within the detention camps, they possess the *symbolic capital* themselves. This is an exercise of power that is obviously not seen as such but in reality a legitimized demand of recognition.⁹⁶

With respect to Riesebrodt, the typology of religious fundamentalism includes two forms: the *escapism* and the *world domination*.⁹⁷ While *escapism* offers two forms, the *symbolic segregation (subculture)* and the *aerial segregation (community)*, the *world domination* provides four possibilities:

93 Almond et al., 2003, p. 97.

94 Cf. lb., pp. 97-98.

95 In view of this development, it might be helpful to increase the number of polyglot psychologists within the camps.

96 Bourdieu, 2001, pp. 66-67; 310.

97 Martin Riesebrodt (1990). *Fundamentalismus als patriarchalische Protestbewegung, Amerikanische Protestanten (1910-1928) und iranische Schiiten (1961-1979) im Vergleich*. Tübingen, p. 23.

- a) "A religious movement
- b) A social protest-/movement
- c) A secret society and
- d) A party."⁹⁸

Whereas IS could be defined as religious movement that strives to obtain the *world domination* with the support of its adherents, the female detainees who have unsuccessfully tried to *escape* the camps in *reality*, abandoned their plans and *escaped symbolically* within the camps by remaining among their religious peer group, the other female IS members. In addition, the security guards *segregated* them *aerially* in the IS foreign section in order to protect others in terms of their (religious) influence and violence and to keep an eye on their activities. In this sense, the female IS detainees support IS's wish regarding the *world domination* paradoxically through *escapism*.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, *the age of pandemic* has just begun and the rise of Covid-19 is the first sign for other lethal virus to come. Religious fundamentalists have used pandemics, plagues and natural disasters at all times, because it is part of their religious self-conception and manichaeist world view that mankind is divided in 'good' and 'evil', believers and disbelievers. Based on their religious understanding, after a period of blossoming, the world must perish in order to raise again, renewed and 'purified' from transgressions and unbelief.

In view of this present chapter and its discussion of the IS related groups and actors, we could speak about one form of the so called *Abrahamic Fundamentalism*. The common heritage of the Abrahamic religions Judaism, Christianity and Islam and their share of specific religious elements such as the belief in one God make some of their members most likely to 'defend' these specific religious doctrines towards worshippers of other religions or new religious movements.⁹⁹ Obviously, this anthology shows that other types of religious fundamentalism (might) exist as well. But the search for a strong leadership and the heartfelt wish to belong to a chosen community of 'true' believers are responsible for the following of the path of the Islamic State by some Muslims who are most vulnerable for its fundamentalist religious narratives. As we have seen before, beside religious motives exist certainly other reasons for IS adherents – regardless of their gender – to follow the jihadist pathway such as a search for love, a thirst of adventure, a lack of individual

98 Riesebrodt, 1990, p. 23.

99 Almond et al., 2003, pp. 105-106.

and professional perspectives, an individual disposition towards narcissism and sadism¹⁰⁰ and the like, that could not be discussed in this chapter.

The chapter *Towards a Covid-Jihad – Millennialism in the field of Jihadism* can therefore only be seen as a snapshot with regard to the further misuse of (the) pandemic(s) by jihadist movements such as IS or AQ in the short term. As indicated, the increased attempts of the use of biological weapons for terrorist attacks by jihadist groups and actors seems to mark just the beginning of an era of bio-warfare that will be fought by various fundamentalist and extremist groups in the upcoming years.

Religious fundamentalism is no new phenomenon, but its use of modern technology in order to restore old times and preferred lifestyles will nevertheless pose a challenge for the world community – today and tomorrow. The misuse of Islam and the misuse of a pandemic, both visualized in the term ‘Covid-Jihad’ by some misguided actors who are glorifying violence instead of peace, should clearly underline their ‘true’ intentions towards the believers who are still belonging to their ideology.

In addition, it is now up to all of us, to deconstruct apocalyptic and millennialist narratives of jihadist movements such as IS for the sake of all mankind. It must be demonstrated towards IS adherents – in and outside the detention camps – that a decision for *life* is much more valuable than a decision for *death*.

According to the statement of Michelle Obama during the 2020 US Election Campaign:

“Going high is the only thing that works! Because when we go low, when we use the same tactics of degrading and de-humanizing others, we just become part of the ugly noise that’s drowning out everything else.”¹⁰¹

With regard to the attempt of IS and other jihadist movements to misuse the pandemic for a ‘Covid-Jihad’ by othering and de-humanizing possible enemies, we

100 Narcissism as well as sadism can certainly not diagnosed by remote diagnosis, but need to be determined by experts such as psychologists. In context of a possible interlinking between mental disorders and an increased interest or rather participation in violent extremism or in view of religious fundamentalism, some recent publications are mentioned in the following that deal with these research areas as well as topics: Cf. Franziska Wolf (2020). *The relationship between narcissism and sadism: is general, grandiose and vulnerable trait narcissism differentially related to self-reported and state-level sadism?* Master-Thesis. University of Maastricht. July 12.; Cf. Makkonen et al. (2020). Fear-triggering effects of terrorism threats: Cross-country comparison in a terrorism news scenario experiment. *Personality and Individual Differences* 161, Article 109992.; Cf. Johann Brink (2015). Crime and Mental Health. *Encyclopedia of Forensic and Legal Medicine*. 2nd ed. December, pp. 1-13.

101 Cf. Michelle Obama (2020). ‘Full Speech At The 2020 DNC’. *NBC News*. August 17. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch=VZwfEWpG_wA, accessed on August 22nd, 2020.

should join the aforementioned statement and go high in view of our P/CVE¹⁰² strategies and narratives. The only reasonable way to meet these religious fundamentalists is to explain Covid-19 with the help of rational numbers and arguments presented by virologists who don't care about the religion of their patients.

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