



## ISIS's Jihad in the Coronavirus Era

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** In an effort to rebound from its military defeats of recent years, the Islamic State (ISIS) is exploiting the coronavirus crisis to considerably step up its terror activity. It is portraying the pandemic as “divine punishment on the Crusaders” and an opportunity to persevere in its holy war.

In 2019, ISIS either perpetrated or inspired dozens of terror attacks around the world, particularly from April to August (when the group lost control of the Euphrates River Valley in Syria) and in December, when it carried out about 60 “revenge attacks” for the killing of leader Abu Bakr Baghdadi and spokesman Abu Hassan Muhajir. These attacks sent a clear message: the group was reorganizing after the death of the caliph and even stepping up its activities.

The outbreak of the coronavirus crisis altered the trajectory of the Islamic State's jihadist mission in two ways. First, it cut into Western countries' investment in the fight against terror and reduced their military pressure on the group, which obviously worked to its advantage. The crisis also gave the group a new spin on its message to potential recruits. In an effort to widen its ranks and renew the jihad, it portrayed the global pandemic as divine punishment upon sinful Western “infidels,” “idol worshipers,” and “betrayers of Islam.”

In recent months, there has indeed been a considerable increase in ISIS's exhortations to return to Islam, and the extent of its terror activity points to a revamping of its tactics and strategy. In May 2020 alone, the Islamic State perpetrated 400 terror attacks worldwide, most of them in a synchronized wave in the middle of the month (the “attrition raids”) that caused hundreds of casualties. The group has also been busily pursuing the drug trade: at the end of June, 14 tons of amphetamines (valued at about €1 million) were seized in Italy that are believed to have been produced by the Islamic State in Syria for terror-financing purposes.

Meanwhile, the group continues to challenge the countries of the region and their allies:

- **Iraq:** ISIS is exploiting the drop in military activity by local security forces and the withdrawal of US and coalition forces to intensify attacks, particularly in the Kirkuk, Diyala, and Saladin provinces. It has been attacking army bases and facilities, mounting ambushes and raids, laying explosive devices, engaging in light-weapon and sniper fire, launching rockets, and burning agricultural fields. The group claims that in May it carried out 226 attacks across Iraq that killed or wounded 426 people.
- **Syria:** ISIS has been active in the Euphrates River Valley (including the regions of Raqqa, Deir ez-Zur, and Mayadin). In the south (the Hauran region) it has been attacking representatives of the regime, seizing and executing captives, blowing up vehicles, setting ambushes, and engaging in light-weapon fire and assassinations.
- **Afghanistan:** The group remains active in the Khorasan region, including multiple deadly attacks such as a suicide bombing in March against a Sikh temple in Kabul (25 dead and wounded), a suicide bombing in May against Afghani security forces in the Nangarhar province (25 dead), and a terror attack in May at a hospital in Kabul (24 dead).
- **Egypt:** The group continues to attack the Egyptian army, which it calls an ally of the Jews and the Christians, in various regions, especially the Sinai Peninsula.
- **In the Islamic State “provinces” worldwide, from Western Africa to the Philippines:** The dynamic of attacks on local “infidel” populations and soldiers continues. In Nigeria and Mozambique, for example, ISIS has attacked military bases and used terror extensively in an effort to take over villages and towns and set up an alternative government.

Along with its numerous attacks, the Islamic State is continuing its vigorous propaganda campaign while making the most of social media platforms, issuing bulletins, and producing videos. Its aims are twofold: to entice supporters to join its ranks and to sow fear among its enemies. For example, one of the videos the group posted on Telegram (“Cut Off the Heads”) highlights its cruel methods, such as beheadings and torture.

Contrary to popular belief, the Salafi-jihadist movement’s ideological power to unify the Muslim community under the black flag of the Islamic caliphate remains unchanged, despite its failures. This is true even after the loss of territory, the assassination of a caliph, and the spread of the pandemic. The Islamic State may have lost its caliphate, but it remains an important jihadist terror organization. In its view, the coronavirus is but a “soldier in the service of Allah” that was sent to help ISIS in its just struggle to vanquish the “infidels” and spread Islam via the sword.

Stopping the Islamic State's renewed expansion in Iraq and Syria will require a deep and committed military involvement by the international coalition in cooperation with local security forces, though such an involvement does not appear likely in the near future.

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