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Migration Research Institute

Feeding adversity: Islamic radicalism engages with the pandemic

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1. INTRODUCTION

An Algerian joke told by the journalist Kemal Daoud about the coronavirus goes as follows: people asked the imams not to call God to punish Westerners, at least not before they invented a vaccine.¹ Islamic radicalism thrives on the hatred of many demons such as religious minorities, authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world, secularism, China, India, Myanmar, Israel, etc. but all these “little demons” are envisioned as subsidiary to the West, supposedly the “great demon”.² A recent comparison between jihadist and far-right extremist narratives on COVID-19 by *the Global Network of Extremism and Technology*, published on 27 April 2020, concludes that the jihadist narrative focused on what it called the collapse of the West.³

Indeed, the fall of the West is an old obsession of Islamic radicalism which has historical roots.⁴ What lies behind this obsession is an adversity attitude, a religious-cultural need to exist by virtue of and against something or someone; adversity is the tendency to see any unfavourable event as caused by the other (usually the West), or as a divine punishment for the West or an opportunity to harm the West (and others). The adversity attitude means also rivalry: the pandemic is a test in which Muslims are expected to emerge more powerful while the West is meant to fail this test. After screening and analysing thousands of radical Islamic contents in the period of March and April 2020 (including

¹ DAOUD 2020.

² Hundreds of studies have highlighted this fact. Suffices it here to mention one example: PENNEBAKER AND CHUNG 2009, p. 456.

COMERFORD AND DAVEY 2020. A month earlier, Migration Research Institute drew attention to this posture in its paper: MKI 2020. On Islamic radicalism in Africa, see also: MARSAL 2020.

⁴ DEZSŐ 2020.

ABSZTRAKT

Hasonlóan a radikalizmus más formáihoz, a szélsőséges iszlamista csoportok is komoly lehetőséget látnak a COVID-19 járványban. A dzsihádisták fő narratívája, a Nyugat-ellenes attitűd elsősorban két fontos irányvonalat követ, földrajzi elhelyezkedéstől függően: a közel-keleti és észak-afrikai (MENA) térségben az öröm és az ellenállás volt a jellemző hozzáállás, mivel úgy vélték, hogy a koronavírus csak a nyugati „hitetleneket” sújtja, illetve egy „keresztes” összeesküvés, amely az iszlám közösség elpusztítását célozza, és amelynek ellen kell állni. Az európai radikális körében a járvány inkább lehetőségként jelenik meg, amely biztosítja, hogy csoportok vagy egyének az egészségügyi válság idején a biztonsági erőket és a „puha célpontokat” (civilileket) provokálják, illetve támadják meg.

traditional media and social media) in the MENA region and Europe we found out that the adversity attitude towards the West did not change in the context of the pandemic. On the contrary, Islamic radicalism sees in the pandemic an opportunity for overcoming the West.

In the following paper, we provide a brief account of radical attitudes in the Islamic world and Muslim communities in Europe. Because of the limited space here, we offer selective snapshots of radicalism in various Muslim contexts. This account must be approached with some caution because it cannot be extrapolated, in any case, to attitudes of Muslim individuals or groups in general. It is important to bear in mind that the reason these attitudes are interesting for security and migration studies is that they help us understand the crisis management within radical milieus. Considering that other pandemics and global crises are expected to be with us in the present and the future, the way Islamic radicalism reacts and engages with the pandemic is a growing public concern and academic interest.

2. RADICALISM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

2.1. ISIS

While the attention of the whole world turned to the health and economic consequences of the coronavirus, on March 12, 2020, ISIS published in its newspaper *Sahifat al-Naba'*, a text on the coronavirus which has aroused great interest in the Western media. This text summarizes the traditional Islamic ethics on epidemics: all diseases are predestined by God, there is no infection or contagion unless by God's will, the need to be precautionary (in order to avoid the spread of the disease), to cover the mouth when sneezing, to wash one's hands, to trust God, to warn those who are infected about avoiding the same places visited by the uninfected and to cover the utensils.⁵ All of these religious and hygienic instructions are supported by prophetic traditions and are shared with moderate Islam as they stem from Islamic scripture. However, various media and experts in the West and the Muslim world, unfamiliar with the traditionalist language of the Islamic State, interpreted this text as an appeal from the Islamic State to stop terrorist attacks.⁶

Misunderstood, the Islamic State then clarified its stance. On March 19, 2020, in the same media, *Sahifat al-Naba'*, ISIS published a text entitled "The worst nightmare of the Crusaders" in which it called on its supporters to put pressure on the West and increase its vulnerability. This text had a fairly apocalyptic twist and it was brutal in its rhetoric. At first, it considered that epidemics are sent by God to torture the "infidels", causing fear in them. They (the Westerners) therefore closed their markets, stopped their activities, and are under lockdown and expect an economic disaster. ISIS prayed Allah to increase this torture for Westerners and to

⁵ SAHIFAT AL-NABA' 225 2020, p. 12.

⁶ HALTIWANGER 2020.

save Muslims from it. Next, ISIS claimed that the coronavirus is of concern to the Crusaders (the Westerners) who have made security the top priority of Western governments. Thus, the armies and the police forces are mobilized, and the fear of poverty increased, and with it the probability of attacks against people and property, and chaos, as has already happened in Western countries during climatic disasters and political and social unrest. The message went on to say that Westerners are unable to send soldiers to where the coronavirus spread, nor can they effectively mobilize the police and soldiers inside their country while trying to minimize gatherings of people. For this reason, ISIS concluded that the Crusaders are trying to minimize the likelihood of jihadist attacks against them in the West or in the Middle East, as this would put additional pressure on the Western security forces, when they already had difficulties in meeting the needs of their own people.

The message added that the last thing the Crusaders should face, now that they are in trouble because of the coronavirus, would be to have terrorist attacks like those in Paris, London and Brussels. Their economies and armies are now paralyzed. They therefore hope that the attacks against them in the West will stop and hope that the jihadists will show compassion towards them, because in addition to the coronavirus, a financial crisis is coming. ISIS asked its supporters to show no mercy: the enemies of Allah, as ISIS calls the West, forget that although they care about their peoples now threatened by the coronavirus, many ISIS fighters are in prison or mistreated in the camps, and forget the meaning of suffering when they attacked ISIS in the first place. ISIS added that it should not be forgotten that the Crusaders showed no mercy towards Muslims in Afghanistan, Somalia and the Central African Republic. Finally, the Islamic State launched a general appeal affirming that the duty of the Muslims, while protecting themselves and their families from the coronavirus, is to try to free the prisoners of the Islamic State from the infidels, not to show compassion for the infidels even if they suffer and to put pressure on them (this therefore constitutes a very clear call to attacks in the West) to weaken them even more and render them incapable of harming Muslims, bearing in mind that the financial losses of the Westerners will have a significant impact in the future as they will be less able to fight the jihadists. The text concluded that the best act of worship to God is jihad.⁷

On April 3, 2020, ISIS published in its number *Sahifat al-Naba'* 229 an inventory of Western losses due to the coronavirus in lives and economy.⁸ Meanwhile, ISIS continued to operate in the Middle East and Africa, carrying several terrorist attacks.⁹

⁷ SAHIFAT AL-NABA' 226. 2020, p. 3.

⁸ SAHIFAT AL-NABA' 229. 2020, p. 11.

⁹ THE GUARDIAN 2020.

2.2. Other radical attitudes in the MENA region (from Tunisia to Pakistan)

In Tunisia, on 16 April 2020, The Tunisian Ministry of Interior announced that a jihadist terrorist plan to spread the coronavirus in the Kebili Governorate (south of Tunisia) has failed. The Ministry said that the suspect had exploited his moral authority among radical elements, particularly those showing symptoms of the coronavirus, and encouraged them to spread the disease and deliberately sneeze and cough at security forces inspectors. The Ministry added that the terrorists aimed to infect members of the security forces.¹⁰ This seems to be the first case to be reported by official sources throughout the Muslim world about the use of COVID 19 as a biological weapon by radicals.

In Egypt, on April 8, 2020, Sheikh ‘Abbud al-Zumar, a jihadist leader of the movement *al-Jama‘a al-Islamiyya* said: “I looked at the preparations of the Egyptian state to face the coronavirus, and I found them reassuring with regard to the material causes for dealing with the virus; otherwise the most important preparations remain missing, that is the moral aspect and that is reconciliation with Allah (for the government and for the people). I ask Allah for the security of our dear Egypt, from all evil and misfortune. The government’s reconciliation with God requires raising the word of Almighty Allah, establishing justice, restoring rights and resisting corruption, and releasing detainees because of political disagreement. And the reconciliation of the people with Allah requires repentance of sins, desertion of sins and wrongdoing, and frequent supplications at times when Allah promised the answer, especially at the time before dawn”.¹¹ It is well-known that Islamic radicalism associates material solutions for problems with the Western states and civilisation while it claims to deal with the problem at a much more profound level, that of religion.

This radical Islamic movement, opposed to the Egyptian regime, reminds the government of the moral dimension here, knowing that the three religious institutions of Egypt: al-Azhar, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and *Dar al-Ifta’* assume the religious function, mobilising their efforts rather well. However, the reminder of the “divine test” of this epidemic remains a way of criticizing the whole of society and the State believed to be westernized.

In Syria, Abu Shu‘ayb al-Misri, a dissident from *Hay‘at Tabrir al-Sham* (initially Al-Nusra Front-al-Qaeda in Syria) called for “the establishment of prayers in mosques, ignoring the decision of the government of *Hay‘at Tabrir al-Sham* in Idlib to stop prayers in the mosques to prevent the spread of the virus”.¹²

¹⁰ AL-HURRA 2020.

¹¹ AL-JAMA‘A AL-ISLAMIYYA 2020.

¹² AL-ARABY 2020.

One of the most outspoken and authoritative Salafis in Kuwait (with some influence among religious leaders in Europe and the Middle East) opposed the instruction of lockdown in his country and in the Muslim world in general, especially the decision to shut down the mosques. His famous and controversial tweet on 24 April 2020 went as follows:

“Discarding prayers in the mosques, Friday prayers and collective prayers, and stopping the religious collective obligations out of fear of infection by disease or abandoning jihad in the way of Allah, out of fear from the enemy or death or injury in the battle, all this is idolatry which contradicts the belief in Allah as the only divinity, and this is the way of the disbelievers and hypocrites, which the Quran warns the believers against.”



1. Figure: Hakim al-Mutayri's controversial Twitter message¹³

In Iran, attention was initially focused on Shi‘ite religious seminars in Qom attended by dozens of Chinese students who according to some Iranian sources appeared to have caused the wide spread of the coronavirus in the country.¹⁴ The Iranian clergy had to make efforts to reformulate the whole crisis as that of resistance/martyrdom against the coronavirus and the United States as being two sides of the same coin. Khamenei said of the coronavirus epidemic that: “It is a conspiracy of humans and demons helping one another with intelligence services from several countries against us.”¹⁵ Hujjatallah Mehdi Manadgari, a prominent Iranian cleric, said in a messianic tone, “we hope that the coronavirus is the latest sign of the emergence of Imam Mahdi and I hope that Imam Mahdi will come as soon as possible.”¹⁶ He also said that “for

¹³ Source: <https://twitter.com/DrHAKEM/status/1253522207407517696>

¹⁴ RADIOFARDA 2020.

¹⁵ KHABARFOORI 2020.

¹⁶ BULTANNEWS 2020.

those who disbelieve in Allah and these people are not a few in the world, this virus and disease is divine torment for them”.¹⁷

Researchers and analysts agree that ideology played a role in the early ineffective management of coronavirus in Iran although the health sector showed some resilience later, knowing that Iran is under economic sanctions. Maysam Behravesht, writing for *Foreign Policy*, noted how “ideological and religious commitments among some government officials and parts of society clearly interfered with the public health response”.¹⁸ Eric Davis noted in *The New Middle East* that: “the first fatality of the virus was reported in the holy city of Qom on February 19th, local clerics, with the support of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, successfully argued against a Ministry of Health request that local shrines should not be closed to the public thus spreading the disease”.¹⁹

In South Asia, some Sunni authorities defied several times the lockdown measures. For example, on 13 April, 2020, Aljazeera reported that thousands of people refused the lockdown instructions by the government of Pakistan and went to mosques. Some of them claimed “if one respects the lockdown rules, we will have to believe that mosques are abandoned under America's instructions. We are ready to give our lives but we are not ready to abandon our mosques while another said that the imam told us that the virus cannot infect us as it affects Westerners. He said that we wash our hands and faces five times every day before performing our prayers, while the infidels do not and therefore, we do not have to worry”.²⁰

¹⁷ BULTANNEWS 2020.

¹⁸ BEHRAVESH 2020.

¹⁹ DAVIS 2020.

²⁰ ALJAZEERA 2020.



“Allah is with us and the virus will not infect us as it did with the Westerners” says Pakistanis who defy the decision to stop prayers in the mosques.

2. Figure: “Allah is with us and the virus will not infect us as it did with the Westerners.”²¹

3. RADICAL ATTITUDES IN EUROPE

Muhammad al-‘Isa, the director of the Muslim World League, the Saudi-funded and most important transnational Islamic organization, declared on 28 April, 2020 that half of the ISIS fighters came from the Western Muslims, who are infiltrated by Islamism.²² Whether it is an Islamic *mea culpa* or a warning of the next wave of radicalised youth by this Muslim leader, it remains a fact that Islamic radicalism is deeply rooted in the social and religious settings of a minority (within Muslim communities in Western Europe). Here, the attitude of adversity is accompanied with a constant provocation of the authorities and a quest to arouse a strong response from European states. Moreover, in Europe, Islamic radicalism nurtures its adversity to the West with the contestation (shaped by the far left), and adds to the religious hatred of the West a bit of Marxist hatred of capitalism, and a defiance which entails usually to break the law and social cohesion.

Let us look at few examples of expressions of this form of radicalism during the pandemic in Europe. In Germany, few cases sparked polemics. The most mediatised is that of the violation of confinement rules at Dar as-Salam mosque in Berlin-Neukölln after a publicly authorised

²¹ Source: www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2020/4/13/باكستانيون-يتحدون-قرار-منع-الصلاة-في-المساجد-بسبب-فيروس-كورونا

²² AL-‘ISA 2020.

call for prayer turned into a gathering.²³ One can see in the video of the event that the muezzin called to prayer with the authorization of the police, but that the event degenerated because people started to gather in front of the mosque, breaking the rules of social distancing and lockdown. Furthermore, people started to shout Allah Akbar, which turned a call to prayer into a public defiance and someone in his fifties also shouted “May God give victory to Islam and Muslims”.²⁴ Such rhetoric is indeed to be taken seriously. The police in Berlin decided to open an investigation and not authorise other calls in the future. It is noteworthy that the number of 300 people given in the German press is exaggerated as the video shows a number rather around 30 people.

In Great Britain, Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, wrote a controversial piece for *the Guardian* (leftist) on April 19 in which he stated that “more BAME people are dying from coronavirus. We have to know why. The government must collect the data and publish it, so that this injustice can be ended”.²⁵ This created a debate in the UK because his statement implies there is a conspiracy against ethnic minorities in the UK who for some mysterious reason die more than white people, and also implying that the government does not protect the BAME people the same it does with other people. Considering that the USA and France also had a rather high rate of people admitted to critical care units among the ethnic minorities,²⁶ and that Prime Minister B. Johnson was also infected, the explanation is not political; it has a lot to do with the respect of social distancing and general health conditions. This statement by Khan also plays on victimhood to justify adversity and defiance of the state authorities.

²³ FOCUS 2020.

²⁴ MUSLIME 2020.

²⁵ KHAN 2020.

²⁶ FT 2020.



3. Figure: Sadiq Khan's Twitter message²⁷

Although the British government has advised Londoners to avoid unnecessary social contact, the Whitechapel's East London Mosque was open to the public on 17 March for the collective prayers, knowing that it is the busiest of London's mosques.²⁸ Some media exaggerated the number of people who attended this mosque on a normal day, estimating it to some 10,000 worshippers.²⁹ This could be the case on Friday, but it was a Tuesday and the collective prayers on such day could realistically attract 3000 people in all five prayers bearing in mind that usually less than a hundred people would show up for the early morning, noon and late evening prayers. However, on 17 March London was affected by coronavirus. In Birmingham, the police dispersed around 20 people "gathered at Washwood Heath for a prayer meeting on the basketball courts of Ward End Park Road. Officers explained strict social distance guidelines before dispersing the group".³⁰ The group gathered on Friday, 3 April to perform the congregational prayer at noon which is a religious obligation performed in normal times in the mosques, but these were closed in Birmingham.

In Italy, the "Giulio Cesare" stronghold of African immigrants, led by Moroccans in the Italian city of Turin, witnessed violent clashes on 19 April 2020 with the police and the military, after the intervention of the security forces to arrest thieves. The immigrants protested against what

²⁷ Source: <https://twitter.com/sadiqkhan/status/1251893005520384000>

²⁸ MYLONDON 2020.

²⁹ MYLONDON 2020.

³⁰ BIRMINGHAMMAIL 2020.

they perceive to be violent dealings with immigrants, who claimed all the more to be vulnerable, living in extreme conditions without employment or a source of livelihood, and thus are forced to illegally find a livelihood.³¹ According to the police, it had surrounded two young men who stole a necklace from an old woman on the same street, which prompted some neighbourhood residents to intervene in order to help the thieves to escape the grip of the security men. This necessitated the use of the military forces, resulting in a protest and a violation of the quarantine rules after dozens of young people came to the street, blocking traffic and chanting against state policy.³² Furthermore, the Italian authorities have fined ten Moroccan immigrants who have been caught while they were performing a collective prayer in the Islamic Centre of the city of Catanzaro, in the Calabria region.³³ According to Moroccan and Italian media sources, “the ten Moroccans were caught inside the centre performing the congregational prayer, which was considered by the city authorities as violation of the quarantine measures imposed to face the repercussions of the Corona pandemic, as it banned all gatherings, including praying in mosques and churches. Within this group, nine persons were fined while the tenth was taken to the police station because he had no authorization to move, and he was previously forced to quarantine after the police arrested him earlier”.³⁴

In Spain, some imams and communities were subject to criticism as well. In particular, the imam of Vendrell (Tarragona) held an authorized call to prayer for the Muslim community, with a megaphone but “attracted people who did not respect the lockdown rules. The imam did not interrupt the act when people came out to the street neither did the local police in the town stop him in front of fifty people causing the citizens of El Vendrell to feel uneasy about these people break the rules of lockdown”.³⁵ The video shows few people who did not respect the rules of lockdown. The imam admitted that a spontaneous mistake was made, but that people did not intend to break the rules.³⁶ Another similar case of non-respect of the lockdown was reported in Lérida.³⁷

In France, the respect of lockdown rules in the immigrant neighbourhoods and calls to prayers also became subjects of apprehensive public reactions.³⁸ More seriously, two terrorist attacks have taken place in France in April 2020. The first terrorist attack was executed on 4 April by Abdallah Ahmed-Osman, a 33 year old Sudanese refugee who stabbed two people to death in

³¹ ASSAHIFA 2020.

³² ASSAHIFA 2020.

See also the video here:

NUOVASOCIETA 2020.

³³ MAGHRESS 2020.

STRETTOWEB 2020.

³⁴ MAGHRESS 2020.

STRETTOWEB 2020.

³⁵ EL NACIONAL 2020.

³⁶ EL MUNDO 2020.

³⁷ LIBERTAD DIGITAL 2020

³⁸ LCI 2020.

Romans-sur-Isère (Drôme).³⁹ This terrorist, who obtained previously the status of refugee, asked first his victims whether they were Muslims or not.⁴⁰ Moreover, the investigation showed that “handwritten documents with religious overtones were found in his home in which complaints are made of living in a country of unbelievers”.⁴¹ Another attack took place in Colombes and was carried out by Youssef T., who had sworn allegiance to the Islamic State and who attempted to assassinate two police officers on 25 April 2020.⁴² The investigators indicated that Youssef, 29 years old, “watched videos on the situation in the Gaza Strip and wanted to impose sharia law on the whole Earth”.⁴³

4. CONCLUSION

Like many other types of radicalism, Islamic radicalism was at work during the pandemic. Islamic radicalism displayed its chief narrative, the adversity attitude towards the West, in two major ways, depending on the region: in the MENA region, the attitude was that of rejoicing and resistance, as COVID 19 was believed to strike only the Westerners or to be a Western attack to be resisted. In Europe, the adversity attitude appears more as defiance and opportunism since some groups or individuals provoked or attacked security forces and civilians during the health crisis. In general, Islamic radicalism engaged with COVID 19 as a test or a competition, in which the one who loses less, wins. From their point of view, the West is collapsing, and Muslims should emerge stronger out of the crisis.

What is next? The coronavirus was proved to be a massive killer, of mostly Western victims (out of 250.000 deaths, over 200.000 are Westerners). This should alert security experts in particular to the risks of bio-terrorism in the future, transmitted by agents of Islamist terrorist organizations in the MENA region or Europe. Policy-makers, in general, should pursue legal and political solutions, including at the level of migration policies, to address the adversity attitude, the ultimate cause of terrorism; this adversity is not just a radical idea but a narrative of war that keeps Islamic radicalism alive.

³⁹ LE MONDE 2020.

⁴⁰ LE PARISIEN 2020.

⁴¹ LE MONDE 2020.

⁴² LE FIGARO 2020.

⁴³ LE FIGARO 2020.

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