

ISIS AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: CONTINUATION OF THE PERENNIAL BATTLE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic provided the grounds for extremist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to call the COVID-19 a soldier of God. The present study aims to examine how the Middle Eastern radical Islamists in general, and ISIS in particular, interpret and deal with the pandemic by relying on their own peculiar references to Islamic sources. While previous studies have addressed how ISIS has managed COVID-19 in detail, the association between ISIS' conceptual basis and their disease management has not been explored yet. Findings revealed that the pandemic has been interpreted in different ways by ISIS. In the beginning, ISIS welcomed the pandemic and interpreted COVID-19 as the divine wrath for humiliating and punishing the unbelievers. Emphasising this interpretation, ISIS tried to cover up its continuous failure to control the pandemic while claiming that God protected the community.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, radical Islamism, religion, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Middle East

INTRODUCTION

It has been widely documented that COVID-19 pandemic affected all spheres of life, be it social, economic, or religious (Androutsopoulos 2021; Sulkowski and Ignatowski 2020; Piwko 2021). Muslims faced several restrictions on religious gatherings (such as congregational prayers at the mosques) to prevent the spread of the virus. However, these restrictions resulted in further challenges in Middle East countries. For instance, at the beginning of the pandemic, there was a growing concern over public health since radical Muslims resisted vaccination due to the resurgence of vaccine-preventable diseases in several Muslim-majority countries (Alsuwaidi et al. 2023). Basically, radical Islamists such as the Taliban and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) who understood life, politics and society from a religious perspective, specifically the Sharia jurisprudence (religious law), considered vaccination as a non-religious, unprincipled and immoral act since it was not rooted in Sharia jurisprudence.

However, in less than a year, the COVID-19 disaster had completely transformed the global geopolitical and socioeconomic setting. Consequently, the pandemic had an enormous impact on international terrorism trends, especially among militant Islamist groups such as ISIS. In fact, the analysis of Islamist extremist discourses shows that the COVID-19 pandemic was abused to fuel the founding of an Islamic state based on the strict implementation of Islamic jurisprudence and the religious duty of Jihadist violence against unbelievers (Guhl and Gerster 2020). In other words, not only did terrorist violence intensify dramatically, most notably in areas controlled by ISIS during the COVID-19 pandemic, but there was also an extremist interpretation of the origins and functions of COVID-19 (Burchill 2020). As existing studies have not yet fully addressed the impact of the thinking of radical Islamists, particularly ISIS, on their approach to the COVID-19 pandemic, the present study thus focuses on the evaluation of ISIS strategies in response to COVID-19 disease since ISIS is believed to pose a threat more serious than any other terrorist organisation around the world.

According to Nebehay (2015), no other terrorist organisation than the so-called Islamic State has been able to create such a quasi-state that at its peak had control over 10 million people who lived in a territory of 45,000 square kilometres. Furthermore, Al-Lami (2020) noted that, in contrast to other terrorist groups, ISIS had been vocal about using the pandemic to its advantage by promising followers to step up terror attacks and free ISIS members imprisoned in Syria and Iraq via online propaganda. Therefore, it

is essential to examine the attitude and strategies of ISIS, especially during the pandemic, since extremist groups and organisations such as ISIS have persistently posed several challenges to Middle East stability and will remain as a global threat for the foreseeable future (Norlen 2020; Kasehage 2021).

For instance, it was announced in March 2019 that ISIS had lost its last base in Baghuz, Syria, and that in October 2019, the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed (Centre for International Security and Cooperation 2021). These two incidents represented major failures for ISIS, but the fact is that large territories still remained under the group's control as it continued to maintain and even expand its activities to other regional countries. While most countries were concerned with disease control, ISIS leaders and followers who perceived the pandemic as divine retribution on the world of unbelievers maintain that Muslims should not show mercy on the unbelievers and heretics, but should instead take advantage of this "opportunity" and put pressure on them through Jihad (holy war) (Williams 2020; Burchill 2020: 12). Based on Islamic extremism thought, Jihad is known as the most desirable form of subjugation to God and any contribution to Jihadist activities would eliminate the repercussion of divine wrath. Therefore, unlike the modern or traditionalist Muslims of the region, ISIS followers still considered the excommunication of disbelievers while taking advantage of any opportunity to fight against the West. As Tibi (1998) states, "the fundamentalists use the modernity discourse to contest the evils of modernity, meanwhile their plan is to adopt the modernity measures in order to defeat it at its own game" (68).

ISIS' efforts at establishing an ideal order and a pure universal political-religious system represent a significant difference from other radical groups such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban (Arosoaie 2015; Moheq 2019). ISIS directed all its efforts to control every facet of personal and daily life in its territory through extremist and most radical forms of Islamic jurisprudence, which was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to several violent extremist practices such as the beheading of hundreds of residents and even mass executions, ISIS also attempted to demonstrate the perceived limitations of democratic countries in responding to COVID-19 by emphasising on the efficacy of an "Islamic response" to the virus. According to Boussel (2020), Esen (2022) and Stalinsky (2020), numerous Salafi-jihadi groups including ISIS and al-Qaeda have used official propaganda networks to highlight their governance, state-building authorisations and the effectiveness of their respective "Ministries of Health" measures within their pseudo-states. In propaganda communiques, both ISIS and al-Qaeda claimed that the highly contagious and deadly virus was God's wrath upon the West, and the disease

itself was a “soldier of Allah” while relying on a quote from Quran: “Indeed, The vengeance of your Lord is severe” (Quran 85: 12).

Furthermore, the terrorist organisation called on supporters to take advantage of the global chaos caused by the pandemic by becoming united in their protests (Schaefer 2022). ISIS leaders urged that “every brother and sister, even children, can contribute to Allah’s cause by becoming the carriers of this disease and striking the colonies of the unbelievers because ISIS supporters would not face any risk as no disease can harm even a hair of a believer” (Schaefer 2022: 92). Probably the most concerning logic given was that by killing “infidels”, believers might be protected against the virus (Schaefer 2022). Such a perspective on the pandemic accords with the binary attitude towards the Sharia and the necessity of jihad against the infidels, which necessitates a thorough examination of ISIS’ strategies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most recent studies about the approach of radical groups, whether ISIS or other extremist groups, have agreed that the pandemic has created an ideal situation for radicalisation across the world. Clarke (2020) even uses the interesting term “Remember Us?” when referring to the revivalism efforts of groups like ISIS in the era of the pandemic. The majority of these studies also show that ISIS has taken advantage of the pandemic while pointing out the need for international cooperation of the governments and security forces to deal with this situation (International Crisis Group 2020; Rodde 2020; Flint 2022). Some studies have also investigated the possibility that ISIS may have evolved in the refugee camps in Iraq and Syria. Alexander (2020) warns security risk and challenges to managing these camps and prisons: “as COVID-19 adds urgency to ISIS detainees’ desires to change their situation in the camps and prisons, and makes the environment more permissive to criminal activity, violence, and low-level corruption, it allows the illicit networks facilitating the ISIS detainees’ objectives to expand” (16). Hurley (2020) also warns: “If left unaddressed”, these camps could “easily serve as the breeding ground for the next generation of ISIS”.

Pollard et al. (2022) address the connection between the ISIS activities during the pandemic and the group’s attempts in relation to nation-building and identity-building. They conclude that the psychological impacts of the pandemic may have led to enhancing ISIS’s appeal and broadening the

caliphate's citizenry. Meanwhile, other studies have compared the capabilities and activities of ISIS with other Islamic groups and countries during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ong and Azman 2020; Piwko 2021). For instance, while comparing ISIS and Al-Qaeda, Kasehage (2021) concludes that these groups have apocalyptic and millennialist visions. Citing various examples from Jihadi groups, Kasehage tries to show how these groups misused the COVID-19 to attract new supporters and inspire their current supporters.

Similarly, by examining the impact of COVID-19 on terrorism, Esen (2022) shows that terrorist groups have taken advantage of the anguish created by pandemic. She concludes that "it is also obvious that the concern among the population is used and led by terrorist organisations" (Esen 2022: 73). In her article, Norlen (2020) poses the question of what the impacts of pandemic on Salafi-Jihadi terrorism are. She argues that, while the pandemic has given the terrorist groups an opportunity to reinforce their activities, they will face three challenges in the future. These challenges include strategic mission, tactics and capabilities; religious doctrine and political constraints; and the crisis of identity in relation to belonging, recruitment, and messaging.

The more concerning issue is that ISIS used this opportunity to spread its propaganda messages, especially false and divisive narratives (Burchill 2020; Ojha 2020; Tony Blair Institute for Global Change 2020). The activity of ISIS in social networks and its statements about the pandemic has been the focus of numerous researchers. For example, Daymon and Criezis (2020) examine unofficial pro-ISIS media responses to the global pandemic during the early months and provided a content analysis of various themes and narratives. They collected data from Telegram, Twitter, and Rocket Chat. They identified eleven dominant themes and narratives including conspiracies, divine punishment and vindictive. Ayad (2020) and Lee and Colautti (2022) analysed messages posted by ISIS supporters on Facebook and Twitter. Based on analysis of ISIS propaganda and tactics, Hernandez (2022) concludes that "propaganda from the Islamic State must be taken seriously" (68).

To sum up, most of the above-mentioned studies and reports are focused on reporting or analysing current events without paying enough attention to the relationship between ISIS's thinking and its activities. Hence this study seeks to examine the COVID-19 pandemic from ISIS' point of view to highlight how it controlled the lives of people residing in its territory at the outset of the pandemic. With this aim in mind, the present study is based on the descriptive analysis of relevant data that was gathered from a variety of sources including books, articles, and news reports. Material on ISIS's jihadist thinking was drawn from Sayyid Qutb's works as a leading radical Islamist

thinker. He is one of the few thinkers to whom the Islamist radicals refer in their interpretation of the world by drawing on his analytical framework: the presence of an enemy (the West as a monolithic system), presence of a victim (the Ummah), and the necessity of change (Jihad) (Orofino 2022).

ISIS SOURCES OF MEANING

The major goal of radical Islamists, which does not differ from that of moderate Islamists, involves the establishment of divine sovereignty through the creation of a truly Islamic society. According to the Quran, this utopia is called the Ummah that is meant to transcend national, racial, and class divisions to unite all Muslims regardless of their individual characteristics such as language, race and wealth. Ummah has been interpreted as follows in the Quran: (1) community or a group of people; (2) time; (3) religion and cult; and (4) a unified society (Mirahmadi 2010). All Islamists emphasise the fourth meaning, indicating that belief is the cause of the commonality and cohesion of individuals. Ummah is the most important indicator differentiating Islamic discourse by creating the dichotomy of “abode of Islam” versus “abode of paganism”. Ummah is the basis for defining Islamic identity and provides a cultural and value-based meaning for Muslims. Ummah, as described in the scripts of radical Islamist leaders, plays a fundamental role within a Muslim society and is beyond the regular form of the state and government. In other words, the formation of the Ummah results in creation of a corresponding political entity that serves as an executive body rather than the legislature.¹ According to Sayyid Qutb, who is known as the Father of Salafi jihadism among members of al-Qaeda and ISIS, one should “first form an Islamic society where the Islamic laws and principles rule, then you will see how Islam will rule” (Qutb 1991). Radical Islamists believe that the sources of meaning, including the Quran and Sharia jurisprudence, are Muslims’ means of survival in times of uncertainty and alienation. In their view, these sources relieve Muslims of worldly fears and insecurities. Such a perspective contends that human beings do not need any interpretation of Quran and Sharia jurisprudence if they believe in them.

The Quran is regarded as the most sacred scripture and source of meaning for every Muslim. However, radical Islamists have a particular view on how to refer to and take advantage of the Quran. On the one hand, they have a literal and non-historical understanding of the Quran (Nabavi 2017). On the other hand, they rely on certain Quranic verses to establish a true Islamic society and eliminate the existing barriers in this path. If Sayyid

Qutb's works are considered as turning point in the history of radical Islamism (Kepel 1986), it can be concluded that all the concepts and subjects should be inferred from the Quran directly or indirectly (Nabavi 2017). Moreover, Qutb in his 1964 work, *Ma'alim fi Tariq*, advocated the dichotomy of Islamic/Barbarism society through a radical interpretation of the Quran to pioneer followers for the establishment of divine sovereignty via invitation to Islam or Jihad² and the necessity of the emergence of *Tali'a* (vanguards) to fight against disbelievers.

Sharia jurisprudence, another Quranic source for radical Islamism, is defined as the rules and laws that God has stipulated for each nation through their prophets, such as Abraham's Sharia and Moses' Sharia. Sharia and its relevant terminology have been reiterated three times in the Quran. All Islamists including radicals understand Sharia as a prerequisite for establishing Islamic governance and the sovereignty of God (Tibi 1998). Therefore, Islamic utopia must be achieved by adhering to Sharia jurisprudence. However, the non-observation of Sharia jurisprudence by individuals or governments can also result in their excommunication from Islam. Moreover, Islamists consider Sharia jurisprudence as the major source of legislation. Hence, only the Quran and Sharia jurisprudence can serve as the basis for Muslim conduct. The Muslims' devotion to Quran and Sharia jurisprudence as sources of meaning is not found just in Sayyid Qutb's famous sayings (Qutb 2007). As Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab also notes: "I strive to live my daily life according to Quran and *Sunnah* (*traditional social and legal custom and practice of the Islamic community*) to the best of my ability. I do almost everything, sports, TV, books (of course trying not to cross the limits in the *deen* [religion])" (Jamestown Foundation 2011).³

Practical attempts to reconstruct Ummah in accordance with the era of the Islamic Prophet and establish divine sovereignty would mean that a believer would perceive himself as a defender of God (Lawrence 1989) or a vanguard (Qutb 1990), namely a soldier who is always ready for battle. Belief in the righteousness of the chosen goal and path would lead individuals to contemplate on changing the world rather than interpreting it (Zeidan 2001). Therefore, individuals would devote themselves to the realisation of an ideal condition in the future based an existing past model while believing that the final victory belongs to them because God has promised them the final victory (Zeidan 2001).

Radical Islamist leaders, including Sayyid Qutb, have maintained that the Quran and Sharia jurisprudence provide answers to all questions and dilemmas. Radical Islamists have elevated the Sharia jurisprudence as the

superior signifier of the various Islamic discourses by defining Islam and its laws to be the sole guide and Saviour in both personal and social life (Kepel 1986; Esposito 1992; Sayyid 1997). Such a definition leads the believers to interpret the sacred scriptures with a particular perspective while observing certain virtues in various aspects of their personal social life as well as judging others based on their deeds. The belief in God being the exclusive lawmaker and that a Muslim must pave the ground for the establishment of an Islamic order and operationalisation of divine laws would cause a radical Muslim to be more concerned with carrying out duties rather than achieving results. In other words, what matters to radical Muslims is to understand one's duty since the final result will be realised sooner or later, as God has promised. This view is, for instance, supported by Abu Mohammad Al-Adnani Al-Shami, former spokesman and a senior leader of ISIS. His motto is that "This is the Promise of Allah", and "Allah has promised those who have believed among you and done righteous deeds that He will surely grant them succession [to authority] upon the earth just as He granted it to those before them and that He will surely establish for them their religion which He has preferred for them and that He will surely substitute for them, after their fear, security, [for] they worship Me, not associating anything with Me. But whoever disbelieves after that – then those are the defiantly disobedient" (Quran 24: 55, as cited in Al-Shami 2014).

Within such a perspective, one's devotion to the performance of duties not only signifies his/her pure belief and undoubted faith but it also justifies certain conduct such as the excommunication of unbelievers. Moreover, the believer does not feel much responsibility for the consequences of his/her decisions and conduct, as he/she believes that the satisfaction derived from the commitment to Sharia jurisprudence is sufficient. Apparently, if the desire to follow the Sharia jurisprudence is more profound, the degree of one's faith and dedication to God's promise will be stronger. Hence a true believer can be placed in the position of someone who judges others for their conduct. In other words, a true believer considers oneself to be an agent of Sharia jurisprudence to enrich the lives of others through religious notions and to reclaim the true meaning of humanity. So, the extreme expectations that the Quran is the sole source of truth and pure obligation-seeking among believers would be mixed with self-righteousness, due to a sense of "possessing exclusive, authentic, vital, saving and superior knowledge" (Moussalli 2001: 236) that justifies the elimination of the others (unbelievers) from any facet of society and politics.

Islamists are often described as proponents of textualism or formalism because they only view the Quran and certain Mohammad's Words (Hadith) as valid while believing that such validity is beyond time and place. For them,

these sacred scriptures are so clear and transparent that they would not need further explanation or interpretation (Hartman 1998). As these scriptures represent the only reliable sources for a Muslim's life, human reasoning will be ruled out.⁴ Although such textualism leads Muslims to view Quran as a sacred, comprehensive and monolithic scripture, in practice they act in a selective manner by simply highlighting the verses concerning war and jihad (Tibi 1998). Undoubtedly, the Quran and Sharia jurisprudence are unique sources of meaning for every Muslim, yet it is interesting that the radical Islamists' version of Islam begins with and ends with Jihad. Such a reduction of the *entire* religion to jihad has been related to the dissatisfaction with socio-economic and political conditions of Arab-Islamic societies (Hartman 1998).

Addressing the dissatisfaction of radical Muslims, Sayyid Qutb's categorisation of Muslim countries and the division between divine and non-divine societies (mostly influenced by Ibn Taymiyyah, a traditionalist theologian from 1263–1328) arises from his perception of the regional and global circumstances. He polarises the society into two extreme points of black-and-white without a concrete religious origin. For example, he refers to the "real war" as the war between good and evil and the worldwide conspiracy of Crusading Christian West as well as communists and Jews against true Islam several times (Qutb 1990). Furthermore, in Bin Laden's statement known as "Declaration of Jihad against the United States" (September 1996), the "real war" was directed at several events: the presence of American troops on Saudi soil near holy Islamic cities, the US invasion of Iraq in 1991, the Israeli control over Jerusalem, and even the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate (Hall 2004: 269). According to Jeff Goodwin, radical Muslims interpret the political and geopolitical issues through religious discourse and framework (cited in Hall 2004). For example, the Madrid train bombers who organised the 2004 bombing of the Cercanías commuter train system (which killed 193 people and injured around 2,000 people) relied on the first section of Surah An-Nahl which called for revenge from the disbelievers to justify their attack. They completely neglected the remainder of the same verse that urged the believers to be patient (Lahoud and Johns 2010). In fact, Quran sheds light on the issue of revenge: "If you take retribution, then do so in proportion to the wrong done to you. But if you can bear such conduct with patience, indeed that is best for the steadfast" (Quran 16: 126).

With this context in mind, it might be easier to understand why the ISIS leaders and followers reiterated in their publications and social networks that the COVID-19 pandemic had nothing to do with the abode of Islam and its devout members, and that it was sent by God to punish the pagans and non-believers.

ISIS' PERSPECTIVE ON COVID-19

After the outbreak of COVID-19, various interpretations on the origins and consequences of the disease emerged. The first perspective considered COVID-19 as a viral disease that naturally appeared as a result of the infections spread to humans. The second perspective was based on bioterrorism, meaning that COVID-19 was made in the lab and later spread for specific purposes. The third perspective considered COVID-19 as the aggrandised product of media propaganda (Mohapatra 2021).

ISIS' interpretation of the situation may also form the fourth perspective. This view seeks to interpret COVID-19 through an ideological standpoint, drawing upon dual Islamic concepts of *Dar al-Islam* (abode of Islam) and *Dar al-Harb* (abode of war), considering COVID-19 a "soldier of God". In other words, ISIS believe that COVID-19 was inflicted on human beings by God as a punishment. ISIS refuted the perspective on the artificial and lab-made nature of the virus while claiming that the spread of the virus was in fact God's response to disbelievers (Azman 2020; Kruglanski et al. 2020). Therefore, it is not surprising that ISIS issues statements such as "Dear God! This virus is a creation of Yours, so make it a punishment on Your enemies and heal the chests of Your supporters" (Ayad 2020: 15). In fact, the ISIS spokesperson Abu Hamzah Al-Quraishi released a recorded statement on 28 May 2020 titled "And the unbelievers will know who gets the good end". In the statement, he suggested that the pandemic was a punishment on the part of God for the Crusaders, pagans and devils (the ruthless and idolaters) who fought against Muslims, God's religion and ISIS. Such statements are based on the belief that COVID-19 led the Crusaders to suffer from the same conditions which ISIS fighters did as inflicted on them by their enemies (Kruglanski et al. 2020).

Interestingly enough, certain notions related to conspiracy theory concerning the COVID-19 were also observed in social media messages exchanged among ISIS followers. In other words, while many ISIS members and sympathisers consider COVID-19 as a divine punishment and retribution, the messages also reveal the contradictory notion that the virus has been created and disseminated by the western pagans or "it is a plot by Islam's enemies" (Kasehage 2021: 85). Posting a comment against the COVID-19 vaccine, an ISIS follower stated: "The doctors who injects these vaccines do not even know what they are putting in the person they are injecting... These kuffar (nonbelievers) don't care about anyone". Thus, it may be concluded

that there was a paradox between the official position taken by ISIS towards the pandemic and the comments made by its followers (Daymon and Criezis 2020).

Furthermore, ISIS believed that Muslims, nonetheless, should not have mercy on the pagans and heretics, i.e., the western governments, who must remember their past treatments of the Muslims. According to this viewpoint, Muslims should exploit the opportunity to put an increasing pressure on the western governments, particularly as the Crusader armies were forced to return to their countries due to the spread of the disease to fight the pandemic (Norlen 2020). An online magazine titled *Voice of India* had called on its supporters to take advantage of the opportunity caused by the COVID-19 to attack India through the carriers of the virus. The English language magazine had recommended ISIS followers to murder the pagans, particularly the police officers, during the lockdown. “They can be sure that no disease will harm even a believer’s hair: Keep yourselves armed at all times to never miss a chance to kill as many Kuffars (nonbelievers) as you can. Keep chains, ropes, and wires ready to choke them or beat them to death...any sharp object like glass will kill easily” (Hernandez 2022: 70; Ojha 2020). This might explain why numerous cities, including Chicago and London, witnessed the spread of slogans such as “Hit them when they least expect” or “COVID-19 virus; a soldier of Allah” (Knox 2020).

Ironically, during the first stages of the pandemic, politicians and military commanders of member countries of international coalition against ISIS were concerned that the spread of the COVID-19 might provide ISIS with a good chance to increase its attacks. After all, ISIS members operated individually and lived in remote areas, so the risk of being infected with the virus remained low among them. This perception was not baseless as ISIS, despite its continued failures in Iraq and Syria, was able to take utmost advantage of the chaos arising from the spread of COVID-19 (Knights 2020; Stewart 2020). Between 11 and 17 March 2020, ISIS staged bloody attacks in Egypt, Niger, Nigeria, the Philippines, Somalia and Yemen. In April 2020, ISIS organised 100 attacks in Iraq while fatal attacks were carried out in Afghanistan in May 2020 (Kruglanski et al. 2020). ISIS has in fact claimed responsibility for more than 2,000 attacks since March 2019 when it lost its last base. Although not all these attacks can be attributed to the spread of COVID-19, there is no doubt that the pandemic has provided this group with ample opportunities to reconstruct and activate its networks (Clarke 2020; Cherif et al. 2020). Along similar lines, another study has revealed a positive

statistical correlation between the spread of COVID-19 and rising tensions in Syria, Iraq and Yemen that accounts for the increasing number of attacks by ISIS, which were aimed at shifting the balance of power to its advantage (Heydari and Noormohammadi 2020).

Secondly, ISIS members and followers believed that COVID-19 virus was unable to harm them as believers. An interview with a news network in Al-Hol refugee (Syria's Haska region), in which the female members of ISIS were based, clearly demonstrates such a view. "We will not get entangled with COVID-19; we fear God, we say prayers and we fast; we follow Abubakr Al-Baghdadi (former ISIS leader). Have you seen a Muslim dying from COVID-19?", a female ISIS member said during this interview. Another female ISIS member added, "A Muslim will not catch COVID-19 and only the pagans will suffer from the disease; this is God who has sent COVID-19 as it is a soldier of God" (*per.euronews* 2020). As mentioned earlier, some statements issued by ISIS assured its followers that this virus could not harm the believers and Muslims. Obviously, such remarks signify that the pandemic is viewed within the context of ideological demarcation and division of the world into "good" and "evil", with ISIS identified as "good".

Espousing this divisive stance, not to mention a sense of superiority, the ISIS followers thus took the opportunity to ridicule the "evil" western states and politicians: "We ridicule you like you ridiculed us" (Stalinsky 2020). Indeed, ISIS ridiculed the US for its high number of virus infections, as can be seen in comments such as "God is great" and "Thank God; this makes me happy", which were posted by ISIS followers. Another ISIS-affiliated user wrote: "There is no need to argue with the kuffar (non-believers) about the coronavirus. Just sit back and enjoy their pain and agony. And yes we are *baqiyah* (enduring/everlasting) by permission of Allah" (Daymon and Criezis 2020: 28, 30). While calling COVID-19 "God's retribution", the Boko Haram leader, Abubakar Shekau, praised God for the pandemic and stated that this disease would undermine "the reign of Trump". Additionally, he said, "We embrace each other, we shake hands, we are fine, very fine...and if the crisis worsens, a tactical withdrawal is planned towards the camps in the Sambissa forest" (Boussel 2020).

ISIS adopted a somewhat different view about the Chinese Muslims. As a global jihadist group, ISIS has been interested in the policies and activities of the Chinese government, which is viewed as an infidel government and considered as part of the "evil" world. On the one hand, ISIS maintained that the Chinese government was punished for the persecution of Uyghur Muslim. Statements such as "it (COVID-19) is the divine retribution for China" and

prayers like “O’ God, please cast plagues and diseases upon the disbelievers, exterminate their crops and exhaust their powers, so that they are distracted from assaulting Muslims” (Azman 2020) are instances of such a position. On the other hand, despite calls for an attack on Chinese interests in March 2019, ISIS refrained from taking action against China and only confined itself to verbal attacks by issuing statements such as “May God punish China with death, as they had brought death to Muslims” (Azman 2020). ISIS continued to warn that the spread of the disease might also affect the Chinese Muslims and extend to majority of Muslim neighbouring countries. Therefore, Muslims were asked to refrain from entering or leaving the infected areas and to seek urgent medical care if infected while distancing themselves from others (Stubbley 2020).

Such harsh propaganda was not limited to China as ISIS adopted a similar stance towards Iran, a country with a Shia majority and a Shia government. According to ISIS, which considers itself to be the only true Islamic group, the Shia people are infidels. While noting this point, Fuller (2014) states that part of the problem goes back to ISIS’s competition with the Shia for power in the Middle East. ISIS welcomed the spread of COVID-19 in Iran and shamed the Iranian government for its poor management of the situation (Hassan and Azman 2020; Azman 2020). Based on the Quranic verse of “Lost are those you invoke except for Him” (Quran 17: 67), the Iranian Shias were called heretic pagans. ISIS ridiculed Iranians Shias for the fact that the virus had spread widely in one of its holy cities (i.e., Qom) and the holy shrines were closed to the people for pilgrimage. Furthermore, ISIS accused the Iranian Shia of hypocrisy while claiming that they would only resort to God at times of crisis and that they would go back to paganism under normal conditions. ISIS not only hoped that the spread of the COVID-19 proved a sign and warning from God concerning the myopia of the Iranian Shia, but that they would also repent and put aside their paganist convictions (Hassan and Azman 2020; Azman 2020).

Reviewing the statements issued by the ISIS leaders published in the group’s publications like *Al-Naba* reveals that ISIS gradually became concerned about COVID-19. While encouraging ISIS activists and followers to intensify pressures and fight against the enemies of God, ISIS leaders advised them to avoid travelling to European cities. *Al-Naba* magazine urged ISIS activists to distance themselves from the land of the plague to minimise exposure to the extremely dangerous COVID-19 (Hernández-Morales 2020; Simons and Bianca 2020). Regardless of such an advice, it is indispensable for an organisation that claims the establishment of a new political and

administrative order to project capability and take action for the resolution of the problems in a region where governments lack the power or motive required to reduce adversity. Therefore, the ISIS orders for combatting contagious diseases referred to the Prophet's sayings in calling its followers to trust in God and comply with guidelines such as distancing from the sick, covering mouth when yawning and coughing and washing hands. ISIS also advised people to seek immediate medical care if infected with the virus and called upon Muslim physicians and scientists to work together to find a cure for the disease (Azman 2020). At the same time, the Muslims were also urged to pray for their own protection and the recovery of the sick while some ISIS supporters said that this crisis should serve as an opportunity for Muslims to realise the importance of prayers (Kruglanski et al. 2020). Interestingly, a wide range of content posted by ISIS followers on Telegram, Twitter and Rocket. Chat called for believers to make efforts for spiritual growth as a way to spend time under the lockdown. A Telegram channel affiliated with ISIS posted the message, "Brothers and Sisters, make use of this time and gain closeness to the *Rabbul'Alaalameen* (Lord of the Universe)", while offering a checklist of "Things you can do in quarantine in order to use your time wisely *Fi Allah* (for God)". This list included activities such as the daily recital of the Quran, learning the Arabic language, and saying prayers (Daymon and Criezis 2020: 29). To sympathise with the Muslims who suffered from COVID-19, other posts referred to the disciples of the Prophet who passed away in the famous Levant plague. Prayers were offered for Muslims suffering from COVID-19 while ISIS claimed that the suffering would clear their sins and that they would be martyrs if they died just as Prophet had said about the people dying from the plague (Azman 2020; Norlen 2020).

It is also interesting to note that the *Voice of India* Magazine called upon infected Muslims to act as carriers of COVID-19 and spread it among the infidels (Daymon and Criezis 2020; Hernandez 2022). In the ISIS-related networks in Indonesia, the followers were requested to spread the virus to law enforcement officials within the country (Ong and Azman 2020). Similarly, a Syrian jihadist commander noted that "Iran could use 'alive or dead' coronavirus patients as a biological weapon, similar to what the Mongols did in the 14th century when they catapulted the bodies of plague victims into the city of Kaffa (now Feodosia, Ukraine)" (Stalinsky 2020).

The striking examples above reveal a new dimension to ISIS' approach to COVID-19 as it sought a different way to confront COVID-19, even though it was initially considered a sign of divine retribution against the pagans and infidels. Such a change in ISIS' approach might be explained in light of the fact that ISIS lacked any precise knowledge about how the disease appeared

at the outset of the pandemic. However, when the pandemic began spreading around the world, ISIS became concerned about the effects of the virus on the believers and God's soldiers. Hence, ISIS called upon its followers to comply with the health guidelines while claiming that its members were enjoying divine invisible support to compensate for the shortage of their resources to fight the disease: "If we are currently unable to fight extensively, His unseen army will do the job".⁵

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has been interpreted in several ways by ISIS leaders and members. While they welcomed and viewed the pandemic as a sign of divine support for humiliating and punishing the infidels initially, they changed their position with the spread of COVID-19. Thus, it issued certain health guidelines for containing and controlling the disease. Furthermore, given the weakness of most Middle Eastern governments in managing the crises and hardships, ISIS took this opportunity to promote its ideology. Meanwhile, some ISIS activists and followers embraced conspiracy theories or even used the opportunity to ridicule the measures of governments and politicians of the "Infidel Countries".

Nevertheless, the common denominator of all interpretations was simplicity. In fact, ISIS activists and followers are used to understanding and interpreting various phenomena within a black-and-white framework. For them, the world is a place where the perennial battle between good and evil takes place and as such, individuals must choose the right side in this battle. Consequently, the Mujahedin are entitled to use any instrument to defeat enemies of God and even interpret any phenomenon based on this simplistic viewpoint. Not only do they intensify their terrorist acts in certain areas, but they also sought to further exploit social networks to disseminate their messages and to recruit followers (Tobi 2021; Lee and Colautti 2022).

To understand ISIS' position about the spread of COVID-19, one needs appreciate the concept of divine will. It is not possible to scientifically examine the causes or use existing research to realise what relationship exists between the pandemic phenomena and the principle of jihad and struggle for the crystallisation of the Islamic utopia. Radical Islamists, including ISIS members, believe that significant world developments are based on a materialistic view of the world in which the divine power of God has been neglected. Therefore, they believe that it is their duty to establish God's sovereignty in the world by taking actions in which they will surely be assisted

by God. Thus, it is no surprise that they consider the pandemic as a positive incident since the pandemic is perceived as a soldier of God, serving as a weapon to punish the pagans whether in the West, China or elsewhere. Such a perception is based on the understanding that ISIS enjoys divine support and jihad is “the best guarantee of protecting yourself from the epidemic” (Sold and Sub 2020). Within this framework, any deficiency in resources and capacity will be partly compensated by God’s assistance.

ISIS members have always emphasised their aim to realise divine will and that the question “What does God want from us?” matters to them; but, in practice, a more significant question has been raised: “What do we want from God?” Any natural and human phenomenon is also interpreted within this context as they perceive themselves as the audiences of sacred scriptures. Meanwhile, they also offer their own interpretation of these scriptures to justify their conduct. In other words, a review of the response of radical Islamists to the pandemic reveals that the slogan “Islam is the solution” is “both a presumption and a hypothesis; both a starting point and an endpoint; both a preface and a conclusion” (Nabavi 2010: 290). If these two points are accepted, a more precise picture of the inner world of radical Islamists and their evaluation criteria emerges.

NOTES

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- ¹ Sayyid Qutb and his followers believe that all laws are enshrined in the Quran and human beings do not need any laws. Therefore, they neither accept the legislature, nor they accept any legislator (i.e., a person). From their perspective, human beings should follow just Sharia, no other laws.
- ² A preliminary comparison of the concept of jihad among the radical Islamist ideologues indicates that the significance and extent of the concept has expanded gradually to include new forms of violent acts (Hall 2004). That might be the reason why the term “Jihadism” has become commonplace as an alternative to “radical Islamism” and “Islamic fundamentalism” among scholars since it denotes the tendency to asymmetrical borderless warfare, the reliance on a variety of weapons and devices, and, most importantly, religious legitimacy and terrorism (Tibi 2007). For more information on the meanings of jihad and different interpretations of the concept of jihad in the history of Muslim societies, please see Peters (1995).

- ³ Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, popularly referred to as the “Underwear Bomber”, was the 23-year-old young Nigerian who attempted to blow up an airplane enroute from Amsterdam to Detroit, Michigan, on 25 December 2009. Apart from the leader of al-Qaeda bin Laden’s famous remarks and statements, the Madrid train bombers in March 2004 also drew on two Quranic verses to justify their action. See Lahoud and John (2010: 48–49).
- ⁴ Shukri Mustafa (1942–1978), the leader of *Jama’at al-Muslimin* (The Muslim Community) in Egypt, argued that the “Quran was given in plain Arabic and is absolutely clear for every Muslim” (Zeidan 2001: 41). Therefore, resolving any problem in Islamic society should not be done by referring to *Ijtihad* (individual initiative in reinterpreting Islamic principles) in which the role of human rationality is highlighted. It is because of this particular view of Quran that Yusuf al-Qaradawi (1926–2022) calls radical Islamists as *Nosousiye Jadidah* (new textualists) (al-Qaradawi 1997).
- ⁵ Interestingly, ISIS supporters claimed that “the virus is God’s vengeance on those involved in the group’s removal from its last pocket of territory” (Daymon and Criezis 2020: 29; Clarke 2020).

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