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Covid-19, jihadism and the challenge of a pandemic

While the world questions the responsibility for the coronavirus epidemic, radical Islam solves the riddle with an assertion: God punishes unbelievers who persist in defying his authority. Punishment of apostates, ordeal inflicted by the Most High: armed groups maintain a doctrinal line without innovation. For the Islamic State (IS) group, we are in the presence of a "wrath of God" which has become the "nightmare of the crusaders"¹, as shown by the health record of the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic uncertainties linked to deconfinement. For Al-Qaeda, it is a divine 'punishment' which cannot divert believers from the final goal: to found an Islamic society.

A warning from God?

Although uncompromising, this declaratory rhetoric contains the clues to a language control. When the IS issues a protective "Directive" to the Muslim community², it does not speak in its own name, but through scholars meeting two criteria: 1. they are not controversial, the Umma recognizes their work; 2. they are native to the 8th century³, in order to demonstrate the timeless dimension of the prophetic message. In the radical imagination, Islam is an invariant. What was revealed *yesterday* remains valid *today*. Like an event wheel that stubbornly keeps

¹ Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "[Islamic State Editorial on the Coronavirus Pandemic](#)", blog, March 19, 2020.

² *Al Nada*, n° 225, March 12, 2020.

³ Al-Bukhari (810-870), Abu Dawud (817-889), Muslim (821-875). The advices are given in the form of hadith-s, words collected by Mohammed's companions, which reproduce his words not contained in the Koran. Except: "Healthy people should not enter the country of the epidemic and the afflicted should not leave it" (Reported by al-Bukhari).

turning as long as the Caliph's objective is not achieved, the past stubbornly keeps on being reborn⁴.

In the jihadist press, the titles of articles related to coronavirus are often based on Koranic verses, which may have led to inaccurate interpretations. Search engines have translated verse 85:12: "The vengeance of your Lord is severe"⁵. However, the original text contains the word *batash*, which refers to oppression, the moving attack, and the adjective *shadid*, which is strong and powerful. The literal translation is therefore: "The assault of your Lord is effective". The IS refers to the Mohammadian era when new converts were persecuted in Mecca. In revenge, this is a call to resistance in the face of a world crisis⁶.

On social networks, the Green Birds, a nickname given to pro-IS Internet users⁷, are careful not to get into the verbal hysteria of the years 2014-2019. The group wants the pain of infected people to be an opportunity to atone (*kafara*) for their sins. On the side of Al-Qaeda, the tone is the same: "Rejoice at their death, be it from us or from the coronavirus," writes the influential Al-Maqdissi, who admits, however, that a non-combatant "infidel" can receive prayers⁸.

These elements do not in any way indicate a doctrinal shift in the IS, which remains a takfirist group⁹ - Al-Qaeda remaining a rigorous organization that provides violence. They express their perception of a crisis which, before being sanitary, is perceived as a theological event; God's wrath. Although these groups are accustomed to conspiracy to "reveal" the hidden meaning of events, they do not venture much in the conspiracy theories. An Egyptian association working to check the facts, Matsda'esh, notes that the cases of disinformation attempts on the Internet are mainly from ordinary Internet users, whereas some radical Islamist activists are satisfied with the barrier gestures: "They [the unbelievers] used to make fun of women wearing the Islamic niqab - now they are doing the same thing¹⁰".

Let us note the absence of two traditional thematic pillars of Islamist propaganda:

- the chaos hour. Sunnism warns believers of signs announcing the end of time (*akhir al zaman*). Those who know the sacred texts will have full knowledge of this fateful hour (sa'a) that may come at any time¹¹. This thetic announcing the kingdom of God speaks to

⁴ According to the radical imagination, Mosul (2016-2017) is a reminiscence of the Battle of the Trench. The Americans in Baghdad (2003) - a retelling of the Mongols ravaging the city a few centuries earlier. The Collapse of the Proto-Caliphate (2019) - an episode from the new Islamic Golden Age; an odyssey of good temporarily defeated by evil (iblis).

⁵ (S-85;12), *Al Naba*, n° 222, February 20, 2020.

⁶ Also this title: "The lost are those whom you invoke apart from Him" (S-17:67). In this issue of *Al Naba* (no. 223, February 27, 2020), IS mocks the holy city of Qom, which was the epicenter of the pandemic in February, and its believers, called the "rafidits polytheists", a pejorative expression from the Middle Ages to designate the Muslims who reject Sunnism and adopt duodecimal Shiism, based on the dogma of the twelve imams; hence the notion of polytheism.

⁷ Alias used by foreign fighters in the years 2012-2013 to designate their dead who have been taken to heaven as "green birds". This refers to a hadith attributed to Muslim: "The souls of the martyrs will live inside green birds that will dwell in lamps designated for them and hung on the Throne of Allah".

⁸ *Telegram*, Al Tawhid 1, channel Al Tawhid Awalan, March 31, 2020.

⁹ The *al-wala wa-l-bara* (allegiance and rupture) is a doctrine developed by Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328), which proclaims the superiority of Islam and makes jihad a *fard 'ayn* (individual obligation). It advocates the application of *takfir* (anathema).

¹⁰ Channel al Tawhid Awalan, *Telegram*, March 17, 2020.

¹¹ The Qur'an says: "They ask you about the Hour: 'When will it come? Say: 'Only my Lord has knowledge of it. He alone will manifest it in its time'".

the fighters. Al Zarqawi, the inspirer of the Islamic State group, said: "We must decide on the zero hour at which we will begin to take control of the land"¹². Reading the current prose of the agents of Islamic influence, Covid-19 does not announce the end of the world. The time has not yet come. This presentation of the health drama allows the groups to silence the reality of the military balance of power. The IS and its affiliated franchise groups are not able anymore to wage a total war against "unbelievers", let alone Al-Qaeda.

- the Caliphate, that great absentee from the health crisis. Apart from mentioning the plague (ta'un) from ancient times¹³, armed groups have always disregarded health issues. Faced with the governance issues related to deconfinement, they do not mention the caliphal option to resolve the crisis. Knowing their stubbornness in explaining that this model of "divine lieutenancy" would solve the world's disorders, the silence is not insignificant. It would tend to confirm the existence of an internal debate, as to the opportunity of crossing the Caliph's Rubicon. Since the Syrian-Iraqi defeat, the IS has been abstaining from it, preferring to de-territorialize the struggle amid the concept of geographical areas¹⁴. One supporter said, "2014 was a mistake. We need to think differently, and affirm that the Caliphate is where we are. It disappears when we leave. It comes back when we come back"¹⁵. With regard to Al-Qaeda, the Jordanians (Abu Qatada, al-Maqqdissi) and the Egyptians (al-Sibaey, Abdel Rahim) who do its strategic thinking still haven't solved this matter brought by Ben Laden. After his failed sanctuarization in the Afghan valleys, the Saudi feared that the proclamation of a caliphate would trigger a Western military intervention and an economic blockade that would starve his men¹⁶. As a result, the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group, a rigorist organization of al-Qaeda inspiration, didn't proclaim the Caliphate in the province of Idlib (Syria), but behaves like a jihadist group in search of normality.



Visit of the "Minister" of Health (HTS) at the Jisr al-Shoghur Quarantine Centre.

(source : "[Coronavirus and The Salvation Government – Hayat Tahrir al-Sham](#)", *Jihadologie*, May 8, 2020)

¹² In 2004, the Asayesh, the intelligence service of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, discovered at the Kalar checkpoint (Iraq), a USB flash drive and two CDs containing a progress report written by Zarqawi. Some excerpts will be made public by the [US Department of State](#).

¹³ In the time of Mohammed, cases of black plague were reported in Medina. Five years later, Caliph Omar launched his troops to conquer Syria and Palestine, then ravaged by a plague known as the Emmaus plague, in reference to the Palestinian village that was its epicenter. 25,000 Muslim soldiers died, but the famine that followed halted the advance of Byzantium.

¹⁴ Examples: the Islamic State in the Great Sahara (EIGS), in West Africa (ISWAP), in Central Africa (ISCAP).

¹⁵ Interview on condition of anonymity.

¹⁶ On March 1, 2016, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) declassifies one hundred and thirteen [documents written in Bin Laden's handwriting](#) seized during the operation to neutralize him, particularly in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

Finally, let us mention the case of Boko Haram, which is living a kind of de facto caliphate¹⁷. Where its fighters operate, God's governance is. After having thanked the Most High for the pandemic that is weakening "the reign of Trump", its leader, Aboubakar Shekau, denigrates the barrier gestures. "We embrace each other, we shake hands, we are fine, very fine.", he declares. At the most, if the crisis worsens, a tactical withdrawal is planned towards the camps in the Sambissa forest, an area that the Nigerian army regularly bombs, with video support¹⁸.

China, a rhetorical enemy

The armed groups denounce the Chinese origin of the virus, believing that the communist regime is doubly at fault. On the one hand, for being secular and usurious. On the other hand, to be an oppressor of the Muslim populations in the province of Xinjiang¹⁹.

This dispute dates back to the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, when U.S. forces chasing al-Qaeda in the valleys of Afghanistan discovered squads of ethnic Uighur jihadists²⁰. This presence confirms what was rustling in the intelligence hinterland at the time, as to the existence of contacts between Bin Laden and the Chinese rebels. A punctual financial support was granted to them, far below the minimum required to hope to worry Beijing. Radical Islam is a minority in Xinjiang. However, Al-Qaeda has not succeeded in opening a new front²¹.

Starting in 2011, hundreds of Uighur fighters join the Syrian front, mainly recruits from the Istanbul diaspora²². The engagement suggests the existence of a jihadist center in China, and the media resonance is strong. It will have proved to be short-lived. Not only that. Not only is the Xinjiang province not rising, but its jihadist fighters are adapting badly to the Syrian pandemonium. The use of hyper-violence, wasteful tactics of human life do not suit them. In the theatre of military operations, there are also common problems, such as mastering the language. Classical Arabic of the Koranic narrative is very different from the slang of the Iraqi-Syrian katibas.

The Islamic State group also wants to believe in a Chinese front, declared a priority target by Al-Baghdadi²³. The IS's threats - "We will come to you to clarify things by making our weapons speak" - never go beyond the rhetorical stage. The Uighur army numbered three hundred men at the beginning of the conflict. Following calls for jihad²⁴, it reached one thousand men, who were staged in a propaganda video that has remained famous.

¹⁷ In 2014, Boko Haram pledges allegiance to Daesh and places the city of Gwoza (Nigeria) under the authority of a pseudo proto-caliphate.

¹⁸ "[Armed Forces of Nigeria Sustains Onslaught on Terrorists – DHQ](#)", *The Guardian Nigeria*, April 26, 2020.

¹⁹ Xinjiang, the "new frontier", is a region populated by Uighurs who gained independence from 1933 to 1934 as the Turkish Islamic Republic of East Turkestan, before it was absorbed by communist China.

²⁰ Twenty-two fighters sent to Guantanamo Bay.

²¹ After a meeting with Bin Laden in 1999, Hasan Mahsum, the leader of the Islamic Party of Turkistan (PIT), received funding from Al-Qaeda. The PIT, formerly known as the Islamic Movement of East Turkestan (MITO), demands the creation of a Greater Turkestan. Beijing exaggerates its dangerousness to circumscribe any other form of dissidence.

²² The Uyghur diaspora in Istanbul numbers 25,000 nationals. In 1995, Erdogan, then mayor of the city, named a section of the park of the Blue Mosque after Isa Yusuf Alptekin, a figure of the East Turkestan Independence Movement.

²³ *Resurgence*, Daesh's English-language magazine, publishes in 2014 an article, "Ten Facts about East Turkestan", which targets China as one of its twenty priority objectives

²⁴ Jacob Steinblatt, Amit Weiss, "[ISIS Calls On China's Muslim Uighurs to Join Its Fight](#)", *vocative.com*, July 28, 2015.



Propaganda video of the Uighur fighters of the Islamic State of the Wilayat al-Furat group (2017)

Facing Covid-19, the new chief of the Islamic State group, Amir al Mawla, keeps a vengeful line against Beijing²⁵, but still without any operational capacity. As far as Al-Qaeda is concerned, apart from a video of the Islamic party of Turkestan, which presents the virus as a warning to the authorities in Beijing, nothing foreshadows the outbreak of hostilities.

Impact zones

It is certainly too early to assess the impact of coronavirus on the radical underground. Researchers residing in the Sahelo-Saharan region were consulted for this note²⁶. All of them showed great reserve. One of them, benefiting from contacts in an area controlled by the katiba Macina (Mali), commented: "In fact, terrorists do not really believe in the pandemic..."

The conflict in the Sahara is currently dominated by a quarrel of *shuras* (councils) opposing the Group in Support of Islam and Muslims (GNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (EIGS); a leadership war, without any consideration for the public health issues. Their agendas focus on the distribution of *zakat* (alms) subsidies, pastoral disputes or even combatant defections between the different groups²⁷.

At the regional level, the feared scenario of a drop in vigilance as a result of the Covid-19 monitoring devices did not occur. In January, President Macron brought together his counterparts from the G5 Sahel. It was decided to send six hundred additional soldiers to the zone and to establish a joint Barkhane/G5 Sahel command. Two hundred and fifty British will soon join the UN mission in Bamako. There has been no loosening of the arrangements.

However, at a time of deconfinement, the outlook is worrying. Boko Haram recently launched an assault on the island of Bohoma by hundreds of assailants²⁸. It is feared that economical weakening of the states bordering Lake Chad will favor the recruitment of

²⁵ Amir al Mawla, 53 years old, born in Tal Afar (Iraq), graduate in religious sciences (Mosul), former lieutenant colonel of the Iraqi army. He grew up in a Turkmen family, originating, therefore, from the Oghuz nomads, who border the Uighurs, who are also of Turkish (eastern) ethnicity.

²⁶ Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad.

²⁷ Thomas Joscelyn, Caleb Weiss, "[Analysis: Islamic State Claims al-Qaeda Started a War in West Africa](#)", *FDD's Long War Journal*, May 8, 2020.

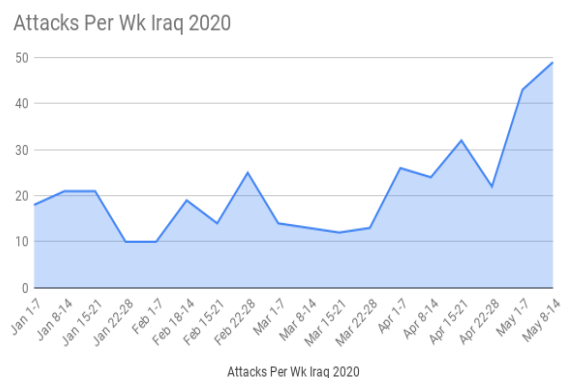
²⁸ On March 23, 2020, Boko Haram leads a massive assault on the island of Bohoma, Fouli department (Lake Chad). Result: 92 dead, 47 wounded. In response, N'djamena launched the operation "The Wrath of Bohoma", which cost the lives of a thousand jihadists.

underprivileged young people who will become jihadists to feed their families. As for the decline of the state presence, it is an urgent issue in Mozambique. In Cabo Delgado province, not a week goes by without an IS hit and run operation²⁹. In the Sahel, tens of thousands of hectares, huge spaces abandoned by the authorities, are given to radical predation.

The post-Covid-19 health shock is likely to be absorbed by the States of the region. Although classified as poor-middle-income countries, they have the moral resource, the will to not bend in the face of the threat. On the other hand, if the hypothesis of a second viral wave were to be confirmed, the field of all possibilities would open up.

Complexity in the Middle East

In the first quarter of 2020, the coronavirus epidemic breaks out in Iraq as the Islamic State group is in the midst of an operational resurgence³⁰. While the regular forces monitor containment, the IS resumes tactical audacity by carrying out attacks in Baghdad and attacks on paramilitary posts³¹. Under cover of anonymity, Iraqi officers are concerned about the reassignment of staff, which is playing into the hands of the armed group. The security arrangements linked to Covid-19 mobilizes personnel that should be allocated to the fight against terrorism. As a result, according to them, the losses of the Iraqi army have fallen by 50% since the beginning of the epidemic³².



Graph of IS attacks in Iraq since January 1st, 2020 (Joel Wing, [Musings on Iraq](#), blog, May 19, 2020)

²⁹ In the province of Cabo Delgado (Mozambique), the towns of Mocimboa da Praia and Quissanga have been briefly [besieged](#) by the IJCS and government buildings under control. Maputo acknowledges that the attacks are backed by the Islamic State (AFP, April 24, 2020). This "is reminiscent of the initial growth of Boko Haram", says researcher Alex Vines "[Insurgência: Há riscos de Moçambique se transformar numa pequena Nigéria?](#)", *Deutsche Welle*, May 11, 2020).

³⁰ According to intelligence agency reports read by the PA office in Baghdad, the IS group numbers between 500 and 3,000 men ("[IS Extremists Step up as Iraq, Syria, Grapple with Virus](#)", Associated Press (Bagdad), May 3, 2020).

³¹ The IS targeted the Popular Mobilization Unit (al-Hashd al-Shaabi), a paramilitary militia composed of Shiites. The attack took place south of Salahuddin (Tikrit), by river and on the ground, along four simultaneous axes of advance. Assessment: [10 dead](#).

³² This numerical estimate has not been confirmed by official Iraqi sources.

Iraqi concern is about the telescoping of two agendas. The first is health. The new Al-Kazimi government inherits an economy that has been greatly weakened by confinement; impoverishment, combined with Sunni-Shiite antagonism, could encourage radical recruitment. The second is security. The first effects of the lightening of the American military apparatus are being felt³³. The 5th division of the Iraqi army deployed in Diyala, a stronghold of the IS, lacks equipment; about three hundred of its vehicles are out of service. Snipers from the Islamic State group shoot at the thermal imaging cameras that are supposed to monitor them, but they are not replaced³⁴.

Donald Trump's promise to disengage the United States from "endless wars" has not been forgotten in Baghdad. Although the US President has since tempered - a withdrawal "would be the worst thing that could happen to Iraq"³⁵ - there has been a debate over the notions of withdrawal, phasing out or easing off. Pragmatically, a former Pentagon special operations boss said: "The [coronavirus] crisis is a good opportunity to review our priorities and the value and opportunity costs of all our efforts"³⁶.

Events could prove him right. While the Pentagon has reduced the mobility of its forces, it is maintaining its full response capabilities³⁷. After the elimination of General Suleimani, 3,000 paratroopers of the 82nd Combat Team Brigade are urgently pre-positioned in Kuwait³⁸. In Syria, the forces west of Deir ez-Zor and Bukamal are carrying out their mission with occasional firing incidents in the presence of Russian elements³⁹. Counter-terrorism support and training programs are operating in Jordan, Somalia and Kenya.

For its part, France has adjusted operation Chammal⁴⁰. The hundred personnel assigned to the Iraqi army's training program are being repatriated "until further notice", a formula that will bring about a return to normalcy as soon as the crisis is over. The French remain present at the Combined Joint Task Force Headquarters of the operation Inherent Resolve in Kuwait and Qatar. In March, their Rafales were equipped with new-generation recognition pods (RECO-NG) aimed at optimizing the collection of images of Islamist groups. The fight against terrorism continues.

Identification of evolutionary signals

Covid-19 is not a trigger for conflict⁴¹. Its dangerousness in terms of security lies in the political

³³ According to the [New York Times](#), 70,000 American soldiers are currently stationed in the Middle East. 14,000 have been reassigned to the United States. 5,000 are in Iraq. The Pentagon is considering a reduction of 2,500 troops.

³⁴ Interview with historian Stéphane Mantoux, April 22, 2020.

³⁵ AFP, January 7, 2020.

³⁶ Colonel Mark E. Mitchell is a recently retired former Green Beret, responsible for special operations and low intensity conflict policy at the Pentagon. Interview by Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Commanders Cite Pandemic as They Pull Back Elite Units Around the World," *The New York Times*, April 3, 2020.

³⁷ Sam La Grone, "[Pentagon, Navy Issue Sweeping 'Stop Movement' Order to Limit Coronavirus Spread](#)", USNI News, March 16, 2020. Note that in Afghanistan, half a dozen special forces teams were eliminated in February 2020.

³⁸ Corey Dickstein, "82nd Airborne Soldiers who Rapidly Deployed to Middle East in January Return to Fort Bragg", *Stars and Stripes*, February 20, 2020.

³⁹ Jenan Moussa, "[Chaos & Shooting at a Syrian Checkpoint](#)", Twitter, February 2, 2020.

⁴⁰ "Adaptation of apparatus to the Chammal operation." Ministry of Armies, March 25, 2020.

⁴¹ Besides Iraq and maybe Yemen, the sequences showing a clear link between the pandemic and the threshold of violence are rare. Russian sources in Yemen state that the Houthi rebels have recorded a clear decrease in the air strikes of the Arab coalition. (Nikolay Surkov, "Yemen Facing the Corona Crisis", Russian Council of International Affairs, May 8, 2020).

and social shockwave it propagates. It accelerates already existing crises and impacts the evolutionary signals of armed groups.

Signals of weakening of armed groups

⇒ Radical Islam and Health

For groups aspiring to lead the world, the lack of content on health issues is a source of discredit. Already in 2014, Daesh paid little attention to this, apart from managing the day-to-day business of hospitals in Mosul and Raqqa. In contrast to traditional Asian medicine, which is very eloquent about the virus, *tabib a'ashab* (herbalists) in Arab-Muslim countries do not participate in the debate on health care.

⇒ Away from the media

For several months, the international media devoted all their editions to Covid-19 and its consequences. The closing of this window of visibility relegated the hashtag "jihad" to the Twitter feeds of a few enthusiasts. On Telegram, a pro-IS Net surfer reacted: "Even if Kuffars keep their eyes blindfolded as they look at the screens of their devices to fight us on the media front, their strength is destroyed on the physical front".

⇒ Post-Covid-19 geopolitics

Born in the interstice between the Eastern and Western blocs, which challenged each other in Afghanistan by proxy, armed jihadism will have to adapt to the new situation: a de-Westernization, or even, who knows? de-globalization of international relations. In which case, for how much longer will the Crusader be the jihadists' priority adversary? Could the Chinese communist be preferred to him? What will digital proselytism be, when the Russians and Chinese have erected their giant intranets that will eventually marginalize an open world that has fallen into disuse? And the citadel of Europe? After the Siegfried and Maginot lines, will it retreat behind the Schengen borders? What will the jihad be in tomorrow's cyber world, with its human communities spied on, watched and tagged?

Signals of consolidation of armed groups

⇒ Propaganda and recruitment

The argument of divine punishment is often heard with a touch of irony in the West. Let's suggest that this point should not be overlooked. In Somalia, Al-Shabab met for five days before adopting a common position on the epidemic, a long time for an unsurprisingly declaratory, crusader punishment, but a delay indicator of the complexity of the pandemic case for its *shura*. Indeed, if God has decided to punish the unbelievers, what does he expect from the armed groups fighting in his name? What is their mission? It strengthens faith. Energies are catalyzed as "God sends a message". The groups use this situation to seduce and win the support of the local people, to encourage new vocations. Their arguments are both mystical and fiercely anti-Western:

- Covid-19 is the virus of the rich countries. Over 380,000 dead. \$4 trillion to save the economy. The "unbelievers" spend without counting when they didn't have a penny for Ebola, the virus of the poor countries.
- Proof that the dominant economic model is in perdition, the banks that rescue the

planet are prospering on the *riba* (interest-bearing loan) forbidden in Islam.

- God punishes personalities who try to escape his authority, anyone who wants to influence the future of mankind. In the first place, presidents infected with the virus (Botswana, South Sudan), a vice-president (Iran), prime ministers (Côte d'Ivoire, England), ministers (Spain), a vice-president of the National Assembly (Burkina Faso), deputies (Italy), famous sportsmen, Hollywood actors, musicians, writers, etc., have been punished.
- The great powers don't control anything. Neither their populations, nor their borders, nor their civilizational destiny.

⇒ Digital Recruitment

Confinement has increased the rate of use of social networks. A recent study confirms the massive use of the Web by radical recruiters. Out of 236 members of the Islamic State group, 49% of men and 52.6% of women are recruited digitally⁴².

⇒ Islam, a timeless force

From the Golden Age to the decline of the second millennium, the Umma has never ceased to grow and strengthen, insensitive to crises, epidemics and other tragedies. Unlike the Jews, the chosen people, radical Islam believes that it is the chosen people, missioned by God in the heart of a fatally vulnerable humanity.

⇒ A human-epidemiological bomb?

The idea dates back to 1346, when the Tatars laid siege to the city of Kaffa, now Theodosia (Crimea). Decimated by the plague, the attacking troops are preparing to break camp. Before leaving, they catapult infected bodies over the fortifications. The spreading plague will be fatal to a third of the European population.



Engraving of the Siege of Kaffa : the first bacteriological assault in the history of war.

Covid-19 reactivated that old pattern. A Syrian jihadist whose identity could not be verified is asking the Iranian government to use the sick 'alive or dead' as biological weapons. He advocates sending them, through deconfinement, to spread the viral strain throughout the world⁴³. The existence of these calls for an "epidemiological-human bomb" is confirmed by researcher Mady Ibrahim Kanté, who works on intercommunity violence in Mali. "There is a high risk, he says, that terrorists will try to exploit the vulnerability of states, especially African states, by distributing the disease through infected people who will blend in with the supposedly enemy populations".⁴⁴

⁴² Anne Speckhard, Molly Ellenberg, "[Is Internet Recruitment Enough to Seduce a Vulnerable Individual Into Terrorism?](#)", International Centre for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE), April 19, 2020.

⁴³ Steven Stalinsky, "What Jihadists are Saying about the Coronavirus", *The Wall Street Journal*, April 5, 2020.

⁴⁴ Interview, May 16, 2020.

⇒ Degradation of the socio-economic fabric

Public deficits, declining GDP, unemployment and social anger, the economic impact of the pandemic is worrying. On the African continent, 325 million workers are likely to be affected, mainly in the informal sector. Arab countries are not spared, like Algeria, which is forced to halve its state budget⁴⁵. All this in a deleterious climate. The mass release of prisoners in order to curb the epidemic has not taken into account the risks of recidivism⁴⁶. At sea, the kidnapping of seamen has increased by 50% off the West African coast⁴⁷.

⇒ Strengthening Islamic Finance

As a compensatory effect, the global economic freeze has revitalized Islamic finance. HTS thus carries out operations to distribute "aid" to families in the province of Idlib (Syria), probably financed by the *zakat*, the usual alibi for ideological compensation in the grey zone. Organized crime is also involved. Luxembourg's Financial Sector Supervisory Commission has issued a circular dealing with threats linked to coronavirus, money laundering and terrorist financing, threats confirmed by the Financial Intelligence Unit⁴⁸.

At the risk of good governance

Since the health emergency was declared, radical Islam has been questioning the profound nature of Covid-19.

Although suspecting the pandemic to be a pretext for a divine message, the Islamic State group is trapped by its percussive approach to Islam. Faced with the public health challenge, it remains inert, unable to conceptualize a scenario for a way out of the crisis. The IS "historical channel" only knows how to "re-act", to be the opposite of the crises that are making the world's news. It has only one strategy: to wait for the recession to deepen social inequalities and throw a new generation of fighters into its ranks.

Conversely, Wahhabi jihadism adds a societal approach to its military activism. After the customary declarations on the punishment of God, the Taliban set up an institutional communication to the WHO⁴⁹, international organizations and its Iranian neighbor, which received its condolences for the pandemic. In an Afghanistan with deficient health infrastructures⁵⁰, the Islamists imposed barrier gestures and banned gatherings in its controlled areas (Musa Qala, Naw Zar). Prisoner releases were staged on the grounds of "protecting them from the pandemic"⁵¹, and Kabul was accused of using the Covid-19 as a "weapon of war" against the Afghan population⁵².

⁴⁵ AFP, May 3, 2020.

⁴⁶ In Hasakah prison, controlled by Kurdish forces (Syria), detainees suspected of connivance with the IS organized nights of rioting (Zhelwan Z. Wali, "[ISIS Inmates Riot a Second Time at Hasakah Prison](#)", *Rûdaw*, March 31, 2020).

⁴⁷ Figure for the year 2019 ("[50% increase in piracy in the Gulf of Guinea in 2019](#)", AFP, January 14, 2020).

⁴⁸ "[Typologies COVID-19](#)", Financial Intelligence Unit (CRF), Public Prosecutor's Office of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, April 2, 2020.

⁴⁹ In Doha, Suhail Shaheen, spokesperson for the movement, wrote: "The Islamic Emirate through its health commission assures all international organizations and the WHO of its willingness to cooperate and coordinate with them in the fight against the coronavirus," Twitter, March 16, 2020.

⁵⁰ "Coronavirus could Kill 110,000 People in Afghanistan, Warns Public Health Minister", Khaama Press, March 24, 2020.

⁵¹ "36 Enemy Prisoners Released in Faryab", *Voice of Jihad*, May 11, 2020.

⁵² "[Using Covid-19 as a Weapon of War](#)", *Voice of Jihad*, May 1, 2020.



Release of thirty-six prisoners in the district of Chigazy (Faryab province) on May 11, 2020.

Ultimately, governance issues could become a marker of radical Islam. Let us recall that Al-Qaeda was rife in the governorate of Hadramaout (Yemen) in 2015, the year in which two cyclones struck⁵³. The local populations still believe today that the group and its relays⁵⁴ were able to manage the situation as well, if not better, than the current authorities⁵⁵. The same is true in the rural areas controlled by the katiba Macina (Mali), where the virtues of decentralization are practiced daily; each *amir markaz*, head of the center, is assisted by a military officer and a judge to oversee the management of daily affairs⁵⁶.

Even the unpredictable Boko Haram grasped the value of organizing the company - here the dried fish and red pepper trade - if only to differentiate itself from the rival organization, ISWAP, which provides community-based services to the people. Roads are secured to promote trade and fuel supply. As a group affiliated to IS, but above all an organization rooted in African realities, it understands the opportunity to make up for the shortcomings of states. A parody of tax administration has been introduced. 13.8 dollars are levied to obtain a fishing permit on Lake Chad, 2.8 dollars for each carton of dried fish. The profits contribute to the war effort.

It is to be feared that in the light of the pandemic, radical Islam understands the challenges of good governance and appropriates the old saying of Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, who believed that action from below, social and economic action, offers the most direct access to the foundation of an Islamic society.

That would be the divine message. The throwing weapon of armed jihadism, its true line of force, is what it should have started with: political Islam.

⁵³ Al-Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula (AQPA).

⁵⁴ Here is the organization chart model of an al-Qaeda administrative presence in an average region. The emir manages the military affairs, justice (the application of the sharia) and finances (taxes, ransoms, internal/external financing). The Council of notables controls his management and his political behavior. If necessary it can ask for his eviction. Then come Committees that are split by themes (economy, security, communication, administration of the population etc.). An advisory Council helps the emir in his decisions, and the latter can at his own desire be surrounded by scholars, wise men or experts.

⁵⁵ Dominique Thomas, EHESS. Interview May 2, 2020.

⁵⁶ "Speaking with the 'Bad Guys': Toward Dialogue with Central Mali's Jihadists", ICG, May 28, 2019.

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