

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on radicalization and terrorism

The COVID-19¹ pandemic has a huge impact on all areas of human life, including social sentiment, ideas, behaviour, crime and political violence, including terrorism. The scale of the latter phenomenon is difficult to assess because this text was written in April and May this year², i.e. in the months when the pandemic was developing rapidly in some regions of the world, while in others, for example in Africa, it was only in development. What is noticeable, however, is the decline in media interest in acts of terrorism. Even if such events occur, it is difficult for information about them to get through to international media, including social networks. Reports of terrorist incidents are delayed. The exception is the Arabic television station Al-Jazeera. However, information about the pandemic does not come off the front pages of newspapers, fill in all the news, and even most political events take place with the coronavirus in the background.

The SARS-CoV-2 virus can affect anyone and eliminate terrorist groups, regardless of their ideology and religious affiliation. The rigours of the pandemic have also engulfed the Islamic world. Ramadan began on April 23, the month in which, Muslims fast according to tradition. The ban on eating and drinking is valid from dawn to dusk for 30 days and is only interrupted by the evening feast (Arabic *iftar*), eaten in a large group of relatives or in mosques, combined with prayer. Family gatherings often last until the morning.

However, the pandemic has overturned this tradition. Of course, those infected with the coronavirus, like all other sick people, are exempt from fasting, but the pandemic, the governments of Muslim countries have adopted many restrictions during Ramadan. Almost all Muslim countries have banned the collective evening prayers (Arabic *salat al-maghrib*), characteristic of this month and mosques have also been closed. In Egypt, which is famous for its hours-long and public celebration of the night meal, the government has introduced a curfew (8:00 pm to 6:00 am). The Saudis have indefinitely closed Mecca, Islam's holiest site, for foreign pilgrims. In Jerusalem, the Al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount has been closed since mid-March. In Indonesia, the government has banned all travel during Ramadan. Even

¹ An infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (editor's note).

² Most of the information relates to the current year, therefore it is not mentioned when recalling dates (editor's note).

in Iran, the authorities have called for a halt to joint prayers. The exception is Pakistan, where religious authorities have managed to block the closure of mosques, but prayers must keep a distance of 2 meters and bring their own prayer rugs.

These circumstances are completely new for the followers of Islam, as well as for all other circles, but in the case of terrorist organizations they do not have to be passive and wait for the pandemic to end. Even before the virus appeared, some groups sought access to biological weapon. Al-Qaeda even conducted research on it, fortunately with negative results. It is too early to predict how the pandemic will affect the phenomenon of terrorism, but one might be tempted to formulate certain hypotheses that will be confirmed or refuted in the near future.

Certainly many organizations will not stand the test of time. They will disappear irretrievably, leaving the territory previously controlled by them free of violence, or they may be replaced by new organizations. It can also be argued that after the pandemic, terrorism may be activated with double force, and in countries where this phenomenon has not occurred until now. Such a turn of events may occur in countries that will be affected by a deep recession, economic collapse, unemployment, scarcity of provisions and high prices. This may be favoured by the breakaway of the political elite from society and keeping it under the control of the state of emergency for too long, which in itself causes rebellion, first of individuals, and then of the entire community. So what is the attitude of terrorist organizations to the pandemic and what impact it has on attitude radicalisation. To these questions, the reader should find the answer in this article.

Warnings against radicalisation and terrorism in the era of the coronavirus

In March 2020, reports of coronavirus outbreaks in regions under the control of terrorist organizations appeared in the Israeli media. Among others, Somalia, largely ruled by Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin (Young Mujahideen Movement), an organization linked to al-Qaeda. The spreading disease may limit the group's activity and eliminate an unspecified number of fighters. This will be favoured by insufficiently organized health care, or rather its lack in many areas. Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin may be more affected by the coronavirus and its fatal consequences than other Islamist groups, also due to the drastic limitations in the ability to help by international institutions and Western countries which have to deal with the consequences of the pandemic themselves.

According to the Jerusalem Post, top Hezbollah officials have been infected, including its leader Hassan Nasrallah. The organization's activists were allegedly infected during a visit of representatives of the Iranian Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Eslami (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps)³ in Lebanon.

³ Corps commander Gen. Hossein Salami made an accusation against the United States that they may have used the coronavirus as a biological weapon to attack China first and then Iran. Subsequently,

Therefore, there were suggestions that even the Supreme Leader of Iran (Persian *rahbar*) Ali Khamenei could be infected, which due to his old age and other diseases would pose a serious threat to his life. Already in February, the vice president of the country, Masumeh Ektebar and the deputy minister of health, as well as many other important politicians were infected. Khamenei's adviser Mohammad Mirmohammadi died at the beginning of March. Hamas has worked to limit the spread of the coronavirus and the possibility of contracting it in the Gaza Strip. These are undoubtedly favourable circumstances for Israel, as Hezbollah and Hamas have little time to implement their aggressive intentions⁴.

Extremist groups are in a much better situation, which due to self-isolation in the jungle (Abu Sajaf in the Philippines, Pertubuhan Pembebasan Bersatu Patani – Pattani's United Liberation Organization in Thailand or Ejército de Liberación Nacional – National Liberation Army in Colombia) or in the desert (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wa al-Muslimin – Islamic and Muslim Support Group in Mali) limit the possibility of contracting SARS-CoV-2 or deliberately postpone the moment when their members will be forced to come into contact with people already carrying this virus (for example during their stay in settlements to replenish food and water supplies or when recruiting new members).

John Demers, head of the Department of National Security at the Department of Justice, spoke about the perception of terrorism through the prism of the coronavirus pandemic. According to him, the pandemic may induce some terrorists to accelerate their attack plans. As an example, he cited Timothy Wilson, 36, a white supremacist driven by religious and anti-government animosities, who planned to launch an attack similar to the famous Oklahoma City attack in 1995⁵. The coup was to take place in

Heszmattollah Falahatpiszeh, a member of the parliamentary Committee on National Security and Foreign Policy, said the COVID-19 epidemic was not an ordinary disease but an attack of biological terrorism on Iran and China. He called on the authorities to treat the epidemic as a military problem and a reason to create an organization to defend the population against bioterrorism. Another MP, Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi, said that all the misfortunes of the epidemic, including political and social tensions, were evidence of a bioterrorist attack. Opponents of conspiracy theories, including Sadik Dżawadihesar, a reformist activist, said politicians attributed the epidemic to a bioterrorist attack in order to distract the public from its own ineptitude and to justify its ineffectiveness in fighting and containing the epidemic. He meant, *inter alia*, refraining from isolating the epidemic outbreaks, especially the city of Kum, which was opposed by the Shiite clergy of the local religious center, which is most important in the country. Authorities did not cancel Mahan Airlines flights to China associated with the Guardian Corps, and did not purchase personal protective equipment, including face masks, gloves and sanitizing fluids, but acted as if everything was in perfect order and under control. See <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-accusing-us-of-bio-terrorism-to-justify-coronavirus-crisis/30479347.html> [access: 10 III 2020].

⁴ <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Coronavirus-hits-terrorists-hardest-from-ISIS-toIran-analysis-621336> [access: 17 III 2020].

⁵ On April 19, 1995, Timothy McVeigh, inspired by Christian Identity, detonated a car filled with explosives outside a federal building in Oklahoma City. A bomb, weighing nearly 2.5 tons,

April or June. A school for black students, a mosque or a synagogue was to be the target. The extremist collected substances used in the production of explosives and remained in contact with William Smith, a Marine, who posted material on the production of explosives in cyberspace. When the coronavirus reached Missouri, his home state, Wilson, frustrated by the actions of federal authorities, chose the Kansas City University Hospital where patients infected with COVID-19 were treated. During an attempted arrest on March 24, he was wounded and died from his injuries. A week later, 44-year-old driver Eduardo Moreno intended to carry out an attack on the U.S. Navy's Mercy hospital ship, moored in the port of Los Angeles. There, too, it was planned to treat patients with COVID-19. For this purpose, he accelerated the Pacific Harbor Line train, slid off the end of the tracks and tried to hit the ship's side with the train. After breaking through several barriers, the locomotive stopped in the car park, about 250 meters from the attack target. The would-be bomber fled the scene but was arrested by the police. During the preliminary hearing, he stated that he had doubts about the intentions of the ship's crew.

Another case involved a Pakistani doctor working temporarily in the US suspected of helping Islamic State. Initially, he planned to get by air to Syria via Amman. However, due to Jordan's border closure due to the pandemic, he decided to go to Los Angeles to board a cargo ship bound for Syria. He was arrested on March 19 at a Minneapolis airport. Following this incident, John Demers suggested the need to monitor changes in the way extremists move so far and the impact of the spread of the coronavirus on their travel plans, including the possibility of accelerating or delaying departures depending on flight suspension and border closure⁶.

In March, the Federal Bureau of Investigation issued a warning to various types of police against the possible use of the coronavirus by neo-Nazi organizations to attack law enforcement and Jews. It was based on the increased activity of members of these organizations and supporters of the ideology of white supremacy (who are also the opponents of the federal authorities), who exchange comments on this subject on social media. Extremists encourage their members to spread the coronavirus to policemen and followers of Judaism.

However, the most important goal is to infect all those responsible for state security, and so in addition to police officers, also FBI agents and officials of various

exploded in the vehicle. The explosion resulted in the collapse of the facility and the death of 168 people (over 500 were injured). The investigation showed that the perpetrator blamed the federal forces for the siege of the Mont Carmel Center in Waco, which was occupied by the David's Branch sect (during the 51-day siege of the farm, which ended on April 19, 1993, 80 people were killed: men, women and children). McVeigh believed that the Waco operation was another proof of government interference in the lives of US citizens. McVeigh was also associated with the Michigan far-right militia, many of which are still active in the United States.

⁶ <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/27/coronavirus-terrorism-justice-department-150870> [access: 27 III 2020]; <https://ktul.com/news/local/fbi-governments-response-to-virus-spurred-would-be-bomber> [access: 15 IV 2020].

federal agencies. Potential bioterrorists were to come into physical contact with specific people or spray body fluids previously collected in spray bottles, indoors, on the walls of elevators or on door handles. They indicated shopping centers, offices of politicians and political parties, business centers, places of prayer, FBI offices, as well as entire districts of large cities inhabited by African Americans⁷ as the best places for bioattacks. American services have seriously approached this threat, having had experience of attacks using microbes: anthrax, sent in letters in the autumn of 2001, and the salmonella bacterium, which members of the Rajnisza sect infected food in a chain of salad bars and restaurants in the United States in 1984⁸.

The FBI also warned of a potential increase in hate crimes against Americans with Asian, especially Chinese roots. The virus, which has been dubbed the ‘Wuhan flu’, is used both by far-right US extremists, regardless of their affiliation, and by jihadists. Radicals are using the pandemic to spread disinformation, fear, and sow hatred among the people of the United States, leading to acts of violence.

According to the FBI, the COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst for white supremacist groups to propagate the accelerator theory (literally: particle accelerator; in this case, it is a matter of working towards rapid race mixing), alien siege, Great Replacement (white Americans will be replaced by ‘colored’ and immigrants)⁹.

⁷ <https://www.infosecurity24.pl/neonazisci-chca-wykorzystac-koronawirusa> [access: 24 III 2020].

⁸ The sect was founded in India by Bhagwan Shri Rajnish (real name Rajnish Chandra Mohan Jain), known as Osho. It is known as the Neo-Sannyas movement and its followers are referred to as sannyasins. In 1981, Osho came to the US for treatment, and his students bought a ranch in Oregon, where they established a commune. The ranch was turned into a permanent settlement called Rajnspuram. Residents gained political control over the nearby city of Antelope. In order to ensure that their two candidates won the elections to the Wasco County District Court, sannyasins decided to limit the number of voters as much as possible. For this, they poisoned the food. As a result, 751 people became infected with salmonella, 45 of them were hospitalized, fortunately there were no fatalities. It was the largest bioterrorist attack in US history. The sect’s involvement in the attack was confirmed in 1985. Osho was arrested. He was charged with 34 charges. He agreed to a suspended sentence, which was a condition of leaving the United States. After a trip around Europe, he returned to India, where he died in Pune in 1990.

⁹ For the first time, the term great replacement, or the equivalent – great exchange, was used by the French writer and essayist Renaud Camus in a book of the same title (*Le Grand Remplacement*) published in 2011. Camus writes in it about the planned and systematic replacement of ethnic French by people from the Middle East and Africa, mainly Muslims. He also gave many examples that are difficult to argue with. He was considered a racist for expressing these views and was punished several times. In July 2017, Luc Ravel, Archbishop of Strasbourg, shared his opinion. In an interview with the daily newspaper “Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace”, he spoke about the great threats that France and Europe had faced. He stated, among other things, that “Muslims know well that their fertility today is so great that they already call it ‘The Great Replacement’. They tell us very calmly: ‘Someday it will all be ours’. Earlier, the archbishop provoked a great public debate in France when he published an essay in which he wrote: ‘Christians in Europe are found between two powerful forces. One is terror, bombs and a vengeful prophet, and the other is ‘thought terrorists’ who love the Republic so much”. See <https://wolnosc24.pl/2017/07/20/arcybiskup-strasburga-nie-bedzie-francji-muzulmanie-przejma-europe-dojdzie-do-wielkiego-zastapienia/> [access: 20 VII 2017].

This is to motivate individuals to act against the new world order imposed by the political elite and Action Programme – Agenda 21¹⁰, George Soros, the Chinese government, and other entities seeking to eliminate the white race. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned that extremist groups are using pandemic-related restrictions to spread hatred, and are also stepping up their social media activity to recruit young people who spend a large part of their time online.

In a similar vein, the statement issued on 20 April by the think tank SITE Intelligence Group highlighting the possibility of an increase in the risk posed by the Islamic State during the Ramadan period was also maintained¹¹. The UK's National Counter Terrorism Security Office (NCTSO) warned British hospitals of possible attacks by Islamic extremists. During a pandemic hospitals may be the most vulnerable facilities due to the large number of people in them, unlike other deserted soft targets. Scotland Yard's chief inspector and the UK's national program coordinator for the prevention of extremism said Islamic State supporters encouraged attacks that seem to be the most vulnerable. They are now hospitals¹².

Rhetoric of extremists, terrorist organizations and media

The statements by Salafi ideologists regarding the pandemic and the position on the same issue taken by the most well-known Islamic terrorist organizations are interesting. Recognized as a pioneer of the modern ideology of Salafi jihad, Jordanian Isam Muhammad al-Barkawi, better known as Abu Muhammad al-Makdisi, the mentor of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founder of Iraqi al-Qaeda, issued an opinion that the spreading epidemic was having positive effects on the Islamic world. They involve the closure of nightclubs and bars, limiting meetings and having to stay in the privacy of the home, as well as Muslim women covering their face with a niqab instead of a protective mask. Muslims can also fulfill religious duties in their own homes and nothing prevents them from praying that the coronavirus may affect as many "infidels" as possible, and the disease caused by it would result in their death.

Asif Abd ar-Rahman, one of the jihadist leaders in Syria, suggested on 10 March, 2020 on his Telegram channel that Iran may use COVID-19 patients as a biological weapon. These people may be sent to territories hostile to Iran and infect the population there. Abd ar-Rahman is convinced that the Iranian invader in Syria will send people

¹⁰ The programme to save the planet through the application of the principle of sustainable development, adopted by the United Nations in 1992, implemented by local communities. The document is approximately 500 pages long. The cost of the programme amounted to more than 600 million dollars.

¹¹ <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Chatter/as-ramadan-approaches-pro-is-group-redistributes-advice-to-fighters-and-supporters-to-increase-activity.html> [access: 20 IV 2020].

¹² <https://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2020/apr/22/isis-other-terror-groups-might-target-uk-hospitals-during-coronavirus-lockdown-security-official-2133840.html> [access: 22 IV 2020].

infected with the virus to attack the inhabitants in line with the idea that martyrdom in the way of Allah (if a sick Shiite infects a Sunni before his death) is more profitable than “unproductive” death due to coronavirus. He added that even the bodies of those who died from COVID-19 could be a biological weapon. In this context, he cited the story of Kaffa (now Theodosia), a city that was the largest Genoese colony in Crimea in the 14th century. In 1345, during the siege of the city by the Djanibek Khan, a Khan of the Golden Horde, the bodies of Mongolian soldiers who died of the plague were thrown over the walls¹³.

Many Salafi authors welcomed the pandemic with enthusiasm. In the monthly ‘Balagh’, published in the Syrian city of Idlib by religious guides affiliated with the Hajat Tahrir al-Sham (Levant Liberation Organization), the coronavirus was dubbed ‘one of Allah’s soldiers’ or ‘corona-soldier’. Khalid al-Sibai warned that the true soldiers of Allah could soon join the ‘little soldier’ ravaging the United States and its allies. Imam Jamil al-Mutawa stated on a programme of Al-Aqsa television, owned by Palestinian Hamas, that Allah only sent one soldier – the virus. It struck all 50 states in America and forced Israel to close the country, while the Palestinians were hardly affected by the disease. Syrian Mufti Abd al-Razak al-Mahdi thanked God for the coronavirus because it affects Allah’s enemies: *Increase their suffering and anxiety until they stop fighting your followers and their religion*. He also issued a fatwa (a ruling on compliance with Islamic standards), in which he ordered Muslims to pray for the annihilation of Allah’s Chinese enemies who kill, imprison and oppress the Uighurs, a Muslim minority in Sinciang Province¹⁴.

His Egyptian colleague in turn is glad that (...) *the power of Allah hits Buddhist, communist China. China began a war with our Muslim Uyghur brothers, and Allah sent his soldier there* (the coronavirus – author’s note). *Allah is not unfair to his followers*¹⁵. Bahgat Saber, an activist for the Al-Ichwan al-Muslimin (Muslim Brothers) movement in New York, has threatened in the video that if he became infected with

¹³ The plague was spread in Mongolia by bobak marmots. Sailors and merchants who reached Kaffa after its siege brought the plague to Southern and Western Europe in 1347. In five years, the plague killed 30% of our continent’s population. The plague pandemic happened several more times in Europe and the Middle East, but never caused as many casualties as in the mid-14th century.

¹⁴ The Uyghurs are the largest national minority out of 56 living in China. The number of Uighurs in the Middle Kingdom is estimated at about 9 million. The Uyghurs live mainly in the Xinjiang Province of Xinjiang in northwest China, which is part of historic Turkestan. In this province, Uyghurs constitute about 40% of the population of over 20 million. Most of the inhabitants are ethnic Chinese (Han people). Administratively, this area forms the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, whose Uyghur residents emphasize their national identity and distinctiveness. The region covers an area of over 1.6 million km² and covers one sixth of the territory of China. Urumqi is the capital city with 2.5 million inhabitants, of which the Uyghurs are a minority. Xinjiang is rich in oil and gas. The Uighurs are among the oldest Turkish peoples in Central Asia. They are followers of Islam. They differ from ethnic Chinese in their language, religion, culture, and physical structure.

¹⁵ <https://www.memri.org/reports/conspiracy-theories-arab-media-coronavirus-part-american-plot-ruin-chinese-economy-and> [access: 20 III 2020].

COVID-19, he would go to the Egyptian consulate and infect its staff in retaliation for the actions of the Egyptian government. He also urged other Muslims to follow in his footsteps. Other propagandists triumphed and expressed enthusiasm for the obligation imposed by the authorities of Western countries to cover the face (wearing masks) while previously Muslim women were prohibited from covering their faces in public places¹⁶.

When the pandemic affected Muslim countries, the narrative of Allah's punishment on China in the form of the coronavirus gave way to conspiracy theories. Jews and Americans were cast as the perpetrators of the pandemic. In the media of the Muslim world, there are hypotheses that Americans and Jews have led to a pandemic outbreak in order to be able to earn money from selling a vaccine against the virus. The website of the Algerian news service reads that (...) *a Zionist organization is behind the coronavirus, and Israel as a Zionist state claims that it has found a vaccine*¹⁷. Iranian Mullah Nasser Makarem Shirazi stated that it was forbidden to take any Israeli medications for the virus unless there was no other alternative, and denied that Iran was planning to purchase a vaccine from 'Zionists'. *I'd rather risk the virus than take an Israeli vaccine*, wrote Roshan M. Salih, Iranian journalist 'Press TV' and editor of the British news service for Muslims *Five Pillars*, whose name is supposed to be associated with the five religious duties incumbent on every Muslim. The same portal published the theses of the well-known follower of census theories, Kevin Barrett, who suggested that the virus was another version of the 'biological war' that the United States was leading side by side with Israel. Barrett wrote: *The United States is led by lunatics, by psychopaths who are perfectly capable of starting World War III by attacking China and Iran using biological weapons, the action against Iran probably being led by Israel. This is the most likely explanation for what we can see*¹⁸.

Anti-Semitic content also appears in Turkish media. Fatih Erbakan, son of the late Islamist politician and former Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, who is believed to be the mentor of President Erdoğan, said on 6 March: *Although we have no clear evidence, this virus serves the purposes of Zionism, reducing the number of people and preventing its growth, important studies indicate this*¹⁹. Fatih referred to his father, who, while he was chairman of the Refah party, argued that (...) *Zionism is a five-thousand-year-old bacterium that causes human suffering*. A video appeared on social media showing a Turkish bus driver claiming that all the epidemics in recent history, from AIDS to Ebola, were created by pharmaceutical companies.

¹⁶ <https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-jihadists-are-saying-about-the-coronavirus-11586112043> [access: 6 IV 2020].

¹⁷ https://www.opinion-internationale.com/2020/03/25/coronavirus-oui-il-y-a-un-complot-on-a-trouve-les-complotistes-ledito-de-michel-taube_72336.html [access: 26 III 2020].

¹⁸ <https://cms.frontpagemag.com/fpm/2020/03/anti-israel-fanatic-would-rather-be-infected-hugh-fitzgerald> [access: 26 III 2020].

¹⁹ <https://www.memri.org/reports/turkish-politicians-press-public-react-coronavirus-virus-serves-zionisms-goals-decreasing> [access: 17 III 2020].

Then the driver asked: *And who does most pharmaceutical companies belong to? To the Jews.* The leader of the Shiite movement in Iraq, Muqtad Al-Sadr, on 11 March accused the President of the United States and the United States of (...) *spreading the disease because it mainly strikes US opponents*²⁰. The politician and clergyman also added that Iraq would not accept any help in fighting the virus from the United States. He wrote: *You are not only enemies of God, but also enemies of the people. You are the virus that kills peace and spreads wars and disease.*

When information about the coronavirus epidemic in the Chinese city of Wuhan appeared in the media in December 2019, there were a lot of texts about anti-Chinese rhetoric by extremists associated with the Islamic State on the internet. The titles of some of them require no comment: *May Allah punish China with death because it has brought death to Muslims; As China defeats Uyghur Muslims, the coronavirus is now defeating China; The virus is the army of Allah that destroys the unfaithful Chinese.* A week after news about the numerous coronavirus cases in Iran first emerged in February, Islamic State, in an editorial entitled *And when disaster strikes you at sea, far from you are those you invoke, apart from Him*²¹ included in issue 223 of Al-Naba (*The Report*) weekly, welcomed the news of the pandemic in that country, and Iranian Shiites had become the object of derision. The holy city of Kum, which has always been visited by crowds of pilgrims praying ironically for health and well-being, has been declared the epicentre of COVID-19 and closed to the faithful for fear of disease. The article accuses Shiites of hypocrisy because they only turn to God in times of crisis and return to polytheism (their sanctified imams) in times of peace²².

The main message of the Islamic State's narrative was to draw attention to the pandemic as a divine punishment, which does not mean that the faithful must submit to it. On the contrary, they should take precautions against contracting and transmitting the coronavirus to other members of the community. The virus was presented as Allah's will to punish Iran and Shiites. This is the result of the Islamic State's constant requests and insistence that Allah inflict painful torment on nations that are characterized by idolatrous attitudes. They are not only Shiites but also followers of religions other than Islam. Coronavirus is also Allah's revenge on the unbelievers. Their list starts with the Chinese oppressing the Uyghurs. The January and February issues of the Al-Naba weekly published articles stating that the new virus sowing fear and death in China is a punishment for discrimination and outright violence against the Uyghur community. God's revenge for the destruction of the caliphate will come in ever wider circles until it reaches the United States. Jihadists reported that they prayed to Allah to increase the number of misfortunes and torments of the infidels. Initially,

²⁰ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200312-iraq-sadr-accuses-trump-of-spreading-coronavirus-among-us-opponents/> [access: 12 III 2020].

²¹ The title of the article is a quote from verse 67 of the seventeenth century Koran.

²² <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/divine-retribution-the-islamic-states-covid-19-propaganda/> [access: 24 III 2020].

the organization warned its supporters against traveling to Europe as ‘a pandemic land’. Even graphics on how to behave to avoid contracting the coronavirus have been published in Al-Naba. It was accompanied by hadith, the content of which contains the religious justification for the use of appropriate prevention: *Cover the vessel, tie the water bags because there is one night of the year when the plague descends that enters every vessel when it is not covered and into every unbound water bag*²³.

The next issue states the Islamic State’s position that COVID-19 is a punishment imposed by Allah on the ‘infidels’, while ‘true’ Muslims should not fear Allah, but they are advised to wash their hands and avoid travelling to Europe. However, they must remember to obey Allah, and the Creator’s most beloved form of obedience is jihad, considered the most just of all deeds and most effective in reversing Allah’s wrath. Although the Islamic State advises Muslims to behave sensibly and take precautions against the pandemic, it also states that acts of violence against ‘infidels’ still protect jihadists from the plague. A Muslim who is worried about what will happen to him after death should remember that he can tilt in his favour the scales on which Allah places good and bad deeds if he participates in the deed that is most dear to Allah – jihad. If a jihadist is killed while on a mission, he immediately goes to Paradise.

Jihadists are also trying to spread distrust in the actions of governments trying to contain and combat the pandemic. Therefore, they spread disinformation, publish photos and videos showing the drastic deaths of the elderly, lonely and abandoned people, not necessarily caused by COVID-19, provide overstated statistics on the number of infected and dead people, which is supposed to reveal the lies of the authorities of, for example, Iran, Egypt and Turkey. This type of propaganda attracts new members and supporters to terrorist groups that are seen more credibly than state structures. In Nigeria, the anonymous Islamic State ally, Boko Haram member stated that the virus was a punishment for those who disobey Islam and proposed a return to piety as protection against the epidemic. In turn, the Indonesian ISIS supporter said COVID-19 was revenge for the death of Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and called for attacks on the United Nations. On the websites of the ISIS-linked Abu Sajaf organization in the Philippines, threats have been spread against Muslims who follow government guidelines and protect themselves from infection²⁴.

On 31 March, 2020, al-Qaeda published a six-page proclamation in Arabic and English in cyberspace entitled *The Way Forward: A Word of Advice on the Coronavirus Pandemic*²⁵, in which it accused Western governments of ignoring the health of their citizens. Instead of providing them with proper medical care, they are more focused on the benefits of the death of elderly and handicapped people who no longer need to be paid pensions and social benefits. Al Qaeda says the pandemic exposed the fragility of a US-dominated world economy after President Donald Trump boasted about economic

²³ <https://news.columbia.edu/news/islam-lessons-hadith-plague> [access: 24 IV 2020].

²⁴ <https://time.com/5828630/isis-coronavirus/> [access: 29 IV 2020].

²⁵ <https://twitter.com/thomasjoscelyn/status/1245311851325423616/photo/1> [access: 6 IV 2020].

growth and historically low U.S. unemployment rates a few weeks earlier. Now all economic prosperity has been wiped out by the virus that is a ‘massive tsunami’ that has left millions of people out of work and increased the prospect of a prolonged recession. Al-Qaeda has previously spoken about the US economy. A recurring theme was the reminder that the war on terror, announced by the United States after the attacks of September 11, 2001, cost the United States not only enormous sums of money that could be spent on social purposes, but also the blood and lives of thousands of American soldiers.

However, in the new statement, economic issues only serve as the background of al-Qaeda’s message, namely, a call to convert Westerners to Islam, for an ‘invisible soldier’ has exposed his weakness: *Oh people of the West! You can see with your own eyes the power and might of Allah in the form of this weak, invisible soldier.* The organization’s activists encourage reflection on the phenomenon of the coronavirus pandemic and a deeper consideration of its causes. According to them, whether someone likes it or not, the pandemic is the punishment sent by the Lord of the Worlds for the fact that imperialist governments commit injustice especially to Muslims and oppress them. After calling on Western citizens to adopt Islam, Al-Qaeda stressed that Islam is a hygiene-oriented religion and puts great emphasis on protecting people from all diseases. The organization appealed to Westerners to gain and expand their knowledge about Islam in times of reduced professional activity. In the appeal, accusations against the West were also mentioned, reiterating the thesis that the American and European governments are at war with all of Islam, and COVID-19 is Allah’s revenge for the moral and intellectual decadence of the West²⁶.

Both IS and al-Qaeda are global organizations, and their regional branches and associated groups have reacted independently to the pandemic in their speeches. Somali Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin (Young Mujahideen Movement) blamed the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) and its Western allies for spreading the coronavirus across Somalia, stating that ‘international crusaders’ were responsible for bringing the pandemic to East Africa. In reports published in cyberspace, the organization presents the scale of the virus spreading in individual countries in this part of the continent but does not provide the sources of this information. In Afghanistan the Taliban are still striving to restore their own Islamic emirate. They are using the pandemic as a propaganda offensive against the government in Kabul and focusing on their own efforts to protect the population from the coronavirus. Videos and photos have been released showing ‘public awareness and quarantine centres’ set up across the country through the efforts of the Health Commission of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, which distributes brochures informing about the coronavirus and how to protect against it, isolating sick people and providing basic treatment. The Taliban also announced a ceasefire in areas under their control that

²⁶ <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/04/06/how-jihadists-are-reacting-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic/> [access: 6 IV 2020].

suffered as a result of the pandemic, and took increased preventive measures there by establishing quarantine centres and conducting information campaigns. They also used the coronavirus to pressure the authorities on to release prisoners, especially those at risk of COVID-19. For Afghan Taliban, coronavirus is a disease sent by Allah for mankind's disobedience and sins²⁷.

Abu Hisham Masud, a mufti associated with the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (Pakistani Taliban Movement) has published a text entitled *Coronavirus or Viral War?* In the text, he stated that COVID-19 is part of the global war waged by Jews for a 'new world order'. It was they who unleashed the 'viral war' to rule the world. The author does not distinguish between Jews and Israel, but the name of this country does not appear in the article. The Jews consider themselves descendants of the prophet Solomon (Suleiman) who, according to the Old Testament tradition, ruled part of the ancient world, so this part of the world should belong to his heirs. The mufti argues that the pandemic is religious and political. The religious sphere should be followed by the dictates of Sharia, i.e. take precautions presented in the media by Muslim scholars, that is, to refrain from travelling to places where the epidemic is spreading, and if you are there, you should not leave them. The political sphere is formed by those factors that do not fall within the religious aspect, although owing to Allah, they were created by man. Only he has the ability to recognize what is right and what is wrong. Humans created an atomic bomb so they could create a coronavirus that spreads on earth and kills people. Just as Jews turned the US from a Christian country into a secular state, they are now responsible for the pandemic that is supposed to make them strong by weakening the United States economically and demographically. The goal of Jews is to build the Temple of Solomon on the site of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, occupy Palestine and build an international power, create a world government, and force humanity to accept their activities. In this struggle, Jews are the enemies of Muslims and Christians, but the followers of Islam are the greatest obstacle on this path. Mufti Masud stated that Jews ruled the White House and the Pentagon, used US military force to overthrow the Caliphate, and induced Washington to sign the aforementioned peace agreement with the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan at the end of February 2020, thus breaking the pride of the Afghan Taliban. When the global economy collapses because of the pandemic, Jews will benefit most from this as masters in the field of economics since the Middle Ages²⁸.

From 13 to 15 March 2020 Tablighi Jamaat organized a meeting of its supporters in Delhi, which was attended by several thousand people, including many foreign guests. This event became one of the outbreaks of the epidemic. On 15 March the Indian government banned public gatherings of more than 50 people, and several days later imposed a complete blockade of the country. However, the recommendations

²⁷ <https://www.justsecurity.org/69508/how-terrorist-groups-will-try-to-capitalize-on-the-coronavirus-crisis/> [access: 3 IV 2020].

²⁸ <https://www2.memri.org/polish/dokument-pakistanskich-talibow-oskarza-zydow-o-rozpetanie-wirusowej-wojny-przeciwko-swiatu-za-tym-wszystkim-jest-reka-zydow/14176> [access: 5 V 2020].

were disregarded. The leader of the Tablighi Jamaat, Muhammad Saad Kandhlavi gave a sermon on 19 March arguing that the coronavirus is God's punishment against the infidels and that it is not to be feared. Shortly thereafter, an inspection carried out by sanitary services showed that around 1,300 people were illegal at the headquarters of the organization without masks or other health protection measures. Some of the participants left the facility earlier, while others used public transport, which contributed to the spread of the virus to more than half of the states in India. Almost everyone who might have come into contact with the congregation participants was placed under quarantine. Some of them behaved aggressively towards representatives of sanitary and medical services. Malaysian missionaries who were attending a congregation and were suspected of being infected were also apprehended at the airport before they boarded the evacuation plane. They were located owing to data from mobile phones. On 31 March the authorities brought a criminal case against Kandhlavi for deliberately and persistently endangering public health. At the same time, the headquarters of Tablighi Jamaat was sealed, and Kandhlavi was stripped of the title of a Muslim scholar. Tahir Iqbal, a graduate of the University of Kashmir, was one of about 4,000 people gathered at Tablighi Jamaat headquarters where he received missionary training at the beginning of March. He admitted that people slept, ate together, and often prayed together, not fearing the coronavirus because no one was taking the threat seriously at the time. Since then, over 30 thousand people who had contact with members of this organization were quarantined. Some nurses complained that Tablighi members were violent when placed in solitary confinement. It was not without tragedy – a Muslim diagnosed with coronavirus committed suicide²⁹.

While for Islamists the target of verbal attacks caused by the coronavirus is the West and China, for Hindu radicals they are Indian Muslims. This wave of hatred has been fuelled by supporters of the ruling far-right Bharatiya Janata Party – BJP (Indian People's Party). These circles believe that the pandemic is a Muslim conspiracy to infect and kill the Hindu majority of citizens. Since the nationalist Narendra Modi took power in 2014, Allah's followers have been the victims of discrimination and even organized pogroms, which have also occurred before. Politicians are calling for a boycott of stores run by Muslims. There are also cases of forcing Muslims to abandon Islam and convert to Hinduism. Now the government has issued an opinion in which it concluded that around one third of all confirmed cases of the coronavirus (i.e. nearly 8,000) were the result of contact with that organization. A government official called the meeting they organized 'viral jihad' and 'the crime of the Taliban'.

Raj Thackeray, the leader of the far-right Maharashtra Navnirman Sena party, told local media that Tablighi Jamaat members 'should be shot', another politician from the group called them 'human bombs'. In the village of Harewali, near Delhi, a young Muslim Mehboob Ali was lynched in public for participating in Tablighi Jamaat events. The incident was filmed. Young Muslims were attacked with cricket bats while

²⁹ <https://euroislam.pl/koronawirus-i-zderzenie-fundamentalizmow/> [access: 16 IV 2020].

distributing food to the poor. Other Muslims were attacked in Islamic neighbourhoods and mosques. In Punjab, messages urging not to buy milk from Muslims because it is infected with the coronavirus were broadcast from loudspeakers on Sikh temple buildings. The internet was full of anti-Muslim slogans. There are messages on the web urging Muslims not to wear face masks, not to keep a safe distance, and not to worry about the virus in general. It may be suspected that these actions were aimed at decimating the Muslim population by the disease.

In Delhi and in cities in the provinces remote from the capital: Karnataka, Talangana and Madhya Pradesh leaflets were distributed and posters were hung stating that Muslims could not enter some districts. There have been reports of Muslims being attacked and lynched. The radicals were followed not only by nationalist politicians and mobs, but also by the opinion-forming national press. The Hindu newspaper published a cartoon showing the world as a coronavirus hostage who was dressed in traditional Muslim attire. Later, the editorial board apologized for the 'totally unintended' connection of the crisis with Muslim terrorists and replaced the previous illustration with a more neutral image. The news channel India Today ran an undercover investigation into so-called madrasa hot spots where coronavirus is allegedly being spread and also posted a graphic on the number of people Tablighi Jamaat-linked cases over an image of a Muslim prayer cap³⁰.

The Islamic preacher Zakir Naik, who has lived in Malaysia since 2016 after fleeing India, responded to the harassment and attacks by Hindus. He called on all Muslim states to gather information about non-Muslims in India who criticize Islam and its followers. Upon arrival in one of the Muslim countries, people on such a list should be arrested. In 2017, Naik was granted Saudi citizenship by King Salman in order to protect him from arrest in Malaysia and deportation to India. The authorities in Kuala Lumpur protested against including the preacher among the eminent Muslim scholars because they thought that he did not respect and protect the harmonious relations of the multiracial, multi-religious and multicultural society of Malaysia³¹.

The Saudis have long sponsored terror, both against Israel and the West, but the now improving relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia are causing Hamas and the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) to distance themselves more and more from the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The long-tense relationship between these organizations and the kingdom has worsened due to the pandemic, as well as the sharp fall in oil prices and many voices of joy over it, both in the Gaza Strip and in the West Bank. In Saudi Arabia, a satirical drawing of an Arab escaping from a barrel of oil flying towards him has sparked a wave of anger. The Palestinians' joy at Saudi Arabia's economic troubles aroused enormous irritation in the kingdom, which immediately recalled that it was the oil profits that brought money to the Palestinians and that they were biting the hand

³⁰ <https://theintercept.com/2020/04/14/coronavirus-muslims-islamophobia/> [access: 14 IV 2020].

³¹ <https://euroislam.pl/kaznodzieja-niech-kraje-islamskie-aresztuja-krytykow-islam/> [access: 14 V 2020].

that feeds them. It was similar when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, and the Palestinians who lived there immediately allied with the invader. On Twitter there were a lot of entries under such hashtags as: ‘Palestine is not my business’, ‘Palestinians are ingrates and traitors’, ‘The Zionist enemy is our brother’. Twitter entries are not polls, but the number of shared opinions that would have been punishable until recently is a real change in the attitude of Saudis towards the Palestinian issue. Notable Saudi journalists admit that they are supporters of Israel and openly proclaim in the domestic and foreign media that the Palestinian cause is dead. One of them recalled that there is nothing like Palestine in the Koran, but Israel is mentioned there. Another journalist, referring to the Palestinians and Syrians, recalled the old Arab proverb that the ignorant is his own worst enemy. While there are more and more calls in the Saudi press to establish normal diplomatic and trade relations with Israel, the reaction is growing hostility on the Palestinian side, which further fuels Saudi aversion to the Palestinians. Young people who recently participated in school fundraising for poor Palestinians discover that the reality is more complicated than that presented by propaganda³².

In the UK, the anti-terrorist police monitor far-right groups that are using the crisis caused by the pandemic to spark anti-Muslim sentiment. People from the front pages of newspapers help them. Katie Hopkins suggested that the police should break up Muslims who pray in public. Similar scenes can be seen on the streets of many cities in Europe, especially during Ramadan and Eid al-Adha (Feast Offering). It is believed that such gatherings are illegal and disrupt the traffic. English Defense League founder Stephen Christopher Yaxley-Lennon, better known as Tommy Robinson, has released a video showing British Muslims gathered in an undefined mosque. This place was allegedly the source of the coronavirus spread by the Muslim community who visited this place. Tell MAMA (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks), an organization that monitors anti-Muslim hate crimes in the UK, has documented numerous instances of harassment of British Muslims. Their source is the pandemic. A short message posted on 23 March by The Economist on Twitter about the Maldives was accompanied by a commentary: *the arrival of COVID-19 was expected. The spread of radical Islam has been more of a surprise*. The UK and France have warned against violating the assembly ban by Muslims during the Ramadan period, but Christians are also breaking these bans as the pandemic has affected the religious revival of some communities.

In the US, the far right has also mobilized and is trying to use the coronavirus to spread hate and violence. New Jersey Office of Homeland Security said that neo-Nazi groups are encouraging their followers to create an atmosphere of panic caused by the pandemic, while advocating their members to isolate and improve their weapons handling. Radio host Neal Boortz tweeted: *You think COVID-19 is bad? Give me a break. Wait until Muslims hit critical mass in America. You'll look back on these times fondly*³³.

³² <https://euroislam.pl/szepty-i-krzyki-w-arabskojezycznych-mediach/> [access: 9 V 2020].

³³ <https://theintercept.com/2020/04/14/coronavirus-muslims-islamophobia/> [access: 14 IV 2020].

Terrorist activity during the COVID-19 pandemic

After analyzing the statistical data on terrorist attacks listed in the ESRI (Environmental Systems Research Institute) database, conducted from 1 January to 15 May in 2016-2020, a decrease in the number of attacks can be noticed. In 2020, the number of attacks was slightly lower than in 2019 and 2017 (in 2020 – 40 attacks, 762 victims; in 2019 – 43 attacks, 1027 victims; in 2017 – 65 attacks and 1416 victims) and many times less than in 2018 and 2016 (in 2018 – 723 attacks, 3158 victims; in 2016 – 513 attacks, 4979 victims)³⁴. An even greater difference in the number of attacks can be seen when analyzing the information from the French database. There were 64 terrorist attacks in the four and a half months of 2019 and at the same time this year – 46, a difference of 18 terrorist attacks³⁵.

However, the statistical data in both databases is incomplete. This is indicated by the data of the SITE Intelligence Group, especially Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center. The latter institution, which publishes weekly lists of terrorist attacks in selected regions of the Middle East, reported that in the second half of April 2020, in Iraq alone, the Islamic State conducted over 30 operations. In turn, according to the infographics published on 30 April by Islamic State on Telegram, from 23 to 29 April this organization and its subsidiaries carried out 57 attacks in various countries, including 36 in Iraq (63%), with the largest number of victims (67)³⁶.

It follows that the coronavirus in the first four and a half months of 2020 did not have a major impact on terrorist activity compared to the previous year – the number of attacks did not decrease. It is difficult to estimate whether this trend will continue in the coming weeks as the pandemic is growing steadily in many parts of the world, including Africa, and leaky borders facilitate the movement of people and thus the spread of SARS-CoV-2. In most African countries, the poorly developed health care system, difficult access to many areas and incomplete statistics on the number of cases do not allow to determine the actual scale of the pandemic risk. According to official data from 6 May 2020, in Africa, home to almost 1.3 billion people, there were 1,8 thousand deaths from the coronavirus³⁷.

However, the number of deaths may increase dynamically, which may be caused by the rainy season in the Sahel zone from March, April to September, October on average. In Africa, terrorist organizations have not restricted their activities due to the coronavirus. If there is a decline in their activities, it is more due to operations

³⁴ <https://storymaps.esri.com/stories/terrorist-attacks/> [access: 18 V 2020]. There has been an overall decline in the number of terrorist attacks since 2014, when there were over 32,000 attacks.

³⁵ https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terrorisme_en_2019 [access: 15 V 2020]; https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terrorisme_en_2020 [access: 18 V 2020].

³⁶ <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/spotlight-global-jihad-may-1-6-2020/> [access: 7 V 2020].

³⁷ <https://www.rp.pl/Koronawirus-w-Afryce/200509625-W-Namibii-nikt-nie-umarl.html> [access: 7 V 2020].

by security forces than to fear of the pandemic. As the world focuses on fighting the coronavirus and saving the economy, terrorists take advantage of the situation and look for new opportunities to pursue their own goals.

Among the many terrorist organizations currently active in the Dark Continent, special attention should be paid to the Mozambique group Ansar as-Sunna (Supporters/Defenders of Tradition), one of the youngest groups founded in 2017. It is also known as Ansar asz-Sharia, Ahl as-Sunna (People of Tradition), Swahili Sunna and Al-Shabab (the Youth). The organization operates in the northernmost province of Cabo Delgado, bordering Tanzania. This region is rich in oil. Ansar asz-Sharia aims to create an Islamic state in this area. The organization's first terrorist act was an attack on three police stations in Mocimboa da Praia in 2017, then the attacks intensified, and in 2019 they turned into a regional rebellion. The Islamic State confessed to some of the attacks of this group. Despite the announcement of President Filipe Nyusi to crack down on terrorists and to deploy additional military forces in the dangerous province, supported by Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group, the violence continues. It turned out that the Wagner Group underestimated the enemy, and the Russian helicopters failed in a humid climate. The Russians withdrew, and 200 thousand people were relocated from the threatened areas. Mozambique terrorists killed over 700 people: civilians, soldiers and policemen. On 23 March 2020, militants re-entered the city of Mocimboa da Praia and fired the airbase, port and police stations. They also set up barricades on the road to prevent reinforcements from reaching. They destroyed many buildings, including the seat of the government representative, a town hall, several banks, military installations and company vehicles. The attack proves better operational abilities of the group and the great motivation of its fighters.

The UN emphasized that the situation in Cabo Delgado may threaten the security of the entire region and destabilize southern Tanzania. President Filipe Nyusi stated that Mozambique was the victim of a camouflaged invasion of the development of the country. Despite the government's willingness to talk to the rebels, they do not occur. The situation is not improved by strengthening the armed forces in the endangered province, as the army is not welcome in every region. For example, residents of two villages armed with bows, machetes and sticks, drove out the soldiers stationed there because they decided that they wanted to take matters into their own hands. It turned out that the extremist attacks that had taken place two days earlier in neighbouring villages did not cause any reaction from the military.

There are also opinions that especially the towns where troops are located are being attacked. In one of them, in Xitaxi, 52 residents were killed in an attack on 24 April. The Islamic State took responsibility for it. After the Russians withdrew, the authorities in Maputo had to recruit several times more expensive mercenaries led by Colonel Lionel Dyck, Zimbabwean veteran, who had previously fought against

poachers in Mozambique. This time it paid off, and on 29 April the mercenaries drove Islamic extremists out of Nacoba, one of the dozens of localities they controlled³⁸.

Boko Haram (Western Civilization is Evil³⁹) is still active in Nigeria. On 24 March, extremists attacked a convoy of Nigerian soldiers near Goneri village, in Borno state, killing over 70 soldiers. On the night of March 22–23 they attacked Bomo, a Chadian army base on Lake Chad. The siege lasted about seven hours. Ninety-eight Chadian soldiers were killed and 47 wounded. The attackers also attacked the incoming reinforcements. They destroyed 24 vehicles, including armoured cars, and obtained large amounts of weapons that they loaded onto motor boats, then, they fled to Nigeria across Lake Chad, which is shared by Chad, Nigeria, Niger and Cameroon. President of Chad, Idriss Deby, arrived at the scene. It was one of the most spectacular attacks by Boko Haram in recent times (it killed the largest number of soldiers in this country at one time).

After the attack, the Chadian army launched ‘Operation Wrath of Bomo’, which lasted from 31 March to 8 April. Its purpose was to destroy the structures of the Boko Haram organization. The troops drove the organization’s militias out of the lake’s islands, destroyed its numerous bunkers, and entered the Nigerian province of Borno, where they released several Nigerian soldiers held by terrorists in Magumeri.

According to the information provided, the leader of Boko Haram in Chad was to die during the last offensive. However, his name was not given. In a recording posted in cyberspace, Chad’s president Idris Deby stated that leader Boko Haram Abubakar Szekau had to flee to the city of Dikoa. He advised him to surrender or die in his hideout. During the ‘Operation Wrath of Bomo’, over a thousand Islamists were killed and several dozen members of Boko Haram were captured. The terrorists were transported to the prison in N’Djamena, where they awaited interrogation. On 16 April the prison service found the bodies of 44 terrorists. Toxicological studies showed that they were poisoned⁴⁰.

According to the alarmist reports of the international organization Open Doors, the coronavirus epidemic is worsening the already dramatic situation of Christians in Africa. In the first quarter of 2020, more than 200 incidents were recorded, in which at least 766 people in total were affected. The terrorists from Boko Haram and the militias of the Fulani tribe are the most dangerous for Christians. During that period, Boko Haram killed from 115 to 286 people and the Fulani killed 180 people (mainly in Burkina Faso and northern Nigeria). While the terrorist acts committed by Boko Haram are condemned by both the government and the international community, the awareness of

³⁸ <https://theworldbreakingnews.com/mozambique-is-cabo-delgado-the-latest-islamic-state-outpost/> [access: 5 V 2020].

³⁹ In another translation: Western Civilization is Forbidden. See K. Izak, *Leksykon organizacji i ruchów islamistycznych*, Warszawa 2014, p. 69 (editor’s note).

⁴⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/92-chad-soldiers-killed-deadliest-boko-haram-attack-200325010212370.html> [access: 25 March 2020]; <https://www.dw.com/en/44-suspected-boko-haram-jihadis-found-dead-in-chad-prison/a-53176232> [access: 18 IV 2020].

the Fulani threat is much less. The unstable situation in the north of Burkina Faso and the marginalization of the Fulani, dominant in this part of the country, by the central government, as well as the underfunding and lack of investment in the region despite the development of mining make the slogans and activities of an organization called Ansar al-Islam⁴¹ in Burkina Faso, established in December 2016, are well received by local Muslim communities.

Islamist missionaries argue that there are theological grounds for depriving infidels and apostates of their wealth. In this way, the struggle for access to limited natural goods, such as food or water (so-called eco-terrorism), is intertwined with the Islamist ideology. The presence of Western companies and the exploitation of mineral resources is treated as theft of national resources and a symbol of exploitation. The poor socio-economic status is compounded by the corruption of the administration in the region and the brutal anti-terrorist actions carried out by the military and the police. The members of the organization listen to complaints from the population and, through the local radio, provide advice with the help of religious reasoning, and also deliver sermons. This mobilizes local communities, not only the Fulani. Thanks to such activities, the group has taken over the hearts and minds of many inhabitants and, by the way, undermines the authority of local religious elites. Such actions are to help achieve the organization's aim, which is the creation of the Fulani emirate and opposition to the Mossi state (Burkina Faso's most numerous ethnic group).

The situation in the northern part of Burkina Faso is so serious that the parliament passed a law allowing the recruitment of volunteers to support the defense of the local population because the government army supported by French units cannot ensure the security of residents. In addition to the 4,5000 French soldiers in West Africa, there are several thousand Americans present, military contingents of Canada, Great Britain and Denmark, as well as the international MINUSMA mission (over 15,000 soldiers and almost 2,000 policemen) and the Joint Military Forces G5 Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger) with 5,000 soldiers. Despite such significant forces and resources (in 2017–2018 alone, Washington provided USD 5.5 billion to support stability and security in West Africa, and the EU co-finances the training and operations of G5 troops), terrorist attacks continue.

After the attack on 2 February, Paris decided to strengthen its forces in the region to 5,200 soldiers and announced a new military task force, Takuba (meaning 'sabre' in Tuareg), which will start in autumn 2020 with the participation of EU special forces. It is hard to expect such announcements to stop the terrorists. It didn't take long for them to respond. On 16 February, they attacked the faithful gathered for a service at a Protestant church in Pansi, Jagha Province, in the northeast of the country. Twenty-four people were killed, including the pastor, and 18 people were injured. Moreover, the attackers abducted 20 peasants.

⁴¹ www.worldterror.pl, *Leksykon organizacji* tab→Ansar al-Islam→Ansar al-Islam w Burkina Faso.

On 6 April 2020, at least 25 Malian soldiers were killed in an attack by Islamic extremists on a military camp in Bamba on Niger River (east of Timbuktu). The attackers stole a considerable amount of weapons and destroyed the camp. No organization has admitted to this attack. It is known, however, that the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wa al-Muslimin (Islamic and Muslim Support Group), which was established in March 2017 as a result of the unification of Tanzim al-Qaida bi Bilad al-Maghrib al-Islami (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb countries) of the Sahel zone, Ansar ad-Din (Defenders of the Faith), Al-Murabitun (Guardians) and Front de libération du Macina (Macina Liberation Front), is active in this area.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the coronavirus pandemic is increasing. It poses a threat to hundreds of millions of inhabitants of the region. These extraordinary circumstances put the Christian minority in a difficult position in Muslim countries. The Centre for Africa, operating within the structures of the US Department of Defence, identified Sudan, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Somalia as particularly vulnerable countries during the pandemic. Christians are persecuted regularly in these countries. Muslims converted to Christianity were deprived of social support, without which they are in danger of starving. Their closest relatives often refuse to help them because they believe that apostasy is dishonourable to the whole family. As a result of social isolation, Christians cannot count on Muslims today, neither can they meet with their co-religionists. In addition, Somali militias Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin (Young Mujahideen Movement) stir up hatred towards Christians, saying that (...) *the coronavirus is being spread by the troops of the crusaders who invaded the country*⁴². The Christians have been made a scapegoat by the Islamists, this time being guilty of the pandemic.

In Iraq, the coronavirus pandemic does not prevent Shiite militias and the Islamic State from attacking mainly Western soldiers and representatives of Western companies. They intensified after the death of Gen *Qasem Soleimani*, who died on the night of January 2–3, 2020 as a result of an American airstrike. Apart from *Soleimani*, eight Shiite dignitaries were killed at that time, including Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, founder of Kataib al-Hezbollah (Battalions of the Party of God) and former commander of the Shiite forces of Al-Hash-Shaabi (People's Mobilization), which played a vital role in the overthrow of the Islamic State in Iraq, and Naim Kasim, deputy head of the Lebanese Hezbollah.

In retaliation the US embassy in Baghdad located in a safe zone (also known as the Green Zone) came under missile attack for the second time in January. On the evening of February 13, a missile attack was carried out on the US-Kurdish base in Kirkuk, which was also attacked on 27 December 2019. In return for the latter attack, the Americans attacked the Kataib Hezbollah Shiite militia bases, killing 25 militants. No one admitted to the attack of February 13, but it should be assumed that it was committed by the Shiites because at that time there was the end of Arba'een, that is, the 40-day mourning after the death of Gen *Soleimani*. In February, Shiite rebels fired

⁴² <https://euroislam.pl/nasilenie-przesladowan-chrzescijan-w-czasie-pandemii/> [access: 24 IV 2020].

at the Green Zone in Baghdad three times. At the same time, Hashd al-Shaabi members issued a statement saying that they were counting down the time to oust Americans from Iraq. On 11 March, ten ‘Katyusha’ Rockets hit an international military base in At-Taji near Baghdad. Two American and one British soldiers were killed, and 12 soldiers were injured, including a Pole. No one admitted to the attack, however, it is highly likely that the shelling was carried out by one of the many Shiite militias. On 6 April, an unknown group carried out rocket fire on the site occupied by the representatives of foreign oil companies and domestic companies near Basra. Three rockets fell near Burjesia, where workers employed by oil companies lived. Fortunately, no one was injured as this area is currently deserted due to the evacuation of personnel due to the COVID-19 epidemic. Police forces found a launcher and 11 missiles near Basra.

It is still anxious in neighboring Syria, where in addition to the Islamic State rebels from the former Free Syrian Army, jihadists linked to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are fighting. On 5 March the presidents of Russia, Vladimir Putin, and Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan signed an agreement in Moscow regarding a ceasefire in the Syrian province of Idlib. Under the agreement, a buffer zone was created in the areas that the rebels were to leave. The so-called a 12-kilometre-wide safety corridor, with a road connecting the coastal city of Latakia and Aleppo. The agreement did not apply to the cities of Aleppo and Hama, as government forces are shelling rebel positions there.

In Egypt, the COVID-19 pandemic did not prevent the militant group *Sinai Province* subordinate to the Islamic State from carrying out an attack on Egyptian soldiers. On 30 April in the northern part of the peninsula there was an explosion of an explosive under an armoured car, resulting in the killing or wounding a total of 10 soldiers. The Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack through its media agency Al-Amaq⁴³. The attack was a retaliation for the death of Hisham Ashmawi alias Abu Omar al-Muhajir alias Abu Muhenned executed on 24 February under a conviction for terrorist activities. Over the past 10 years, Ashmawi has been recognized as the most dangerous terrorist by the Cairo authorities.

On 25 March, a terrorist belonging to Ad-Dawla al-Islamijja fi Wilajet Khorasan (Khorasan Province of the Islamic State) stormed a Sikh temple in Kabul, threw a grenade and started shooting at the faithful. Twenty-five people were killed and eight were injured in the attack. This was the third attack by the jihadists in March. Earlier that month, Islamic State attackers killed 30 Shiite participants in Kabul. On 17 April near Patikul in Sulu Province (Mindanao Island), more than 40 Islamic extremists led by Radulan Sahiron and Hatib Hajan Sawajan, known for their hostage kidnapping and decapitation, clashed with the government army. Eleven soldiers were killed while 14 others were wounded. The number of casualties on the opposite side

⁴³ The name refers to the Amak Valley near Antakya in southern Turkey. Together with Dabiq in Syria, it is recognized as the place of Malhama, or Armageddon in Islamic eschatology.

is unknown as jihadists managed to remove the bodies of the dead and the wounded from the battlefield⁴⁴.

Under the aforementioned agreement concluded on 29 February 2020 with the United States, the Taliban stopped attacking US forces and their coalition partners. However, government forces and the police have become the targets of intensified attacks, although random civilians are also victims. Twenty-four soldiers and policemen were killed in attacks carried out by the Taliban on 20 March in various localities in Zabul Province. On 1 April, in Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan, a car bomb killed eight members of one family, including six children. Two more people were injured. No group admitted to the attack, but it is known that there are active Taliban and militants of the Khorasan Province of the Islamic State in Helmand.

The incident described above was related to the arrival of a three-person delegation of Taliban negotiators who began talks with the authorities about a prisoner exchange. It was the first official visit of the Taliban to the capital since the overthrow of their regime in 2001. The exchange is expected to affect 5,000 prisoners and more than 1,000 administration personnel, policemen and soldiers held captive by the Taliban. It is to take place in a 5 to 1 system. It was agreed that 100 prisoners would be released in the first phase, and 100 prisoners per day for several days in the second phase. The parties will then assess the course of the entire process, since the disputed matter is the identification of prisoners by the Taliban and their transport. It may happen that the authorities in Kabul will release prisoners that the Taliban does not care about. On 2 April 100 Taliban left prison, and 20 soldiers were released in return. Due to the threat of COVID-19, the prisoner exchange process is clearly delayed, and in the second decade of May it was stopped due to mutual accusations and a wave of violence. One thousand people have left government prisons, and the Taliban are expected to release 200 hostages, while only 105 policemen have been freed. According to unofficial information, there are between 12 and 15 thousand people in prisons controlled by the authorities in Kabul, including militants from Pakistan, Central Asia and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf⁴⁵.

On the night of April 30 to May 1, the Taliban attacked the city of Balkh in the province of the same name, killing 13 soldiers. A group of Taliban fighters also attacked a military base in the outskirts of Gardez in Paktia Province. Attacks escalated in many provinces of northern Afghanistan. The Taliban rejected President Ashraf Ghani's call for a ceasefire during the fasting period starting this year on April 23. On the evening of May 3, the Taliban attacked a military base of Afghan government forces in Helmand Province in the south of the country (more than 150 soldiers were stationed

⁴⁴ <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/artykuly/1463702,afganistan-25-osob-zabitych-w-zamachupanstwa-islamskiego-na-swiatynie.html> [access: 25 III 2020]; www.worldterror.pl, *Leksykon organizacji* tab→Abu Sajaf.

⁴⁵ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/fragile-afghan-peace-deal-hinges-on-prisoner-swap/1839111> [access: 13 V 2020].

there). A spokesman for the Taliban, Qari Yousuf Ahmedi, reported that several dozen members of the enemy forces had been killed and injured. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Defence announced that only one soldier was injured, admitting that Afghan forces had suffered heavy losses across the country since the signing of the peace agreement between the US and the Taliban. An intelligence officer who survived the attack in Helmand said the attackers detonated a truck filled with explosives near the facility of National Security Directorate (NDS) building, from where he helped remove about 20 bodies. On the same day, 20 people were injured in south-eastern Paktika Province after throwing a grenade into a mosque in Khajerkot. In the first week of May, 42 members of the security forces were killed in Afghanistan⁴⁶.

In May, the Khorasan Province of the Islamic State joined the offensive in Afghanistan. On 12 May, the organization carried out three terrorist attacks. The first one occurred in the Hazar district of Kabul. Three attackers in police uniforms attacked a maternity hospital run by the Doctors Without Borders organization. Terrorists threw grenades and shot people in the building. Over 80 women and children were evacuated, and 24 people died: children, their mothers and nurses. As a result of an hour-long shootout with the police, the terrorists were killed. The next attack took place in Khewa, Nangarhar Province in eastern Pakistan. A suicide terrorist blew himself up in the crowd of participants in the funeral ceremonies of a local leader, who also led the local pro-government militia. Thirty-two people were killed and over 130 injured. The Islamic State also took responsibility for the third attack in Khost Province. A child was killed then and 10 people were injured. The day before the attack, four bombs exploded along a road in the northern part of Kabul, injuring four people, including a child. On 11 May, Afghan security forces informed of the detention of the Islamic State regional leader Zia-ul Haka, also known as Sheikh Abu Omar al-Khorasani. On 14 May, the Taliban detonated a car filled with explosives near a military court in Gardez, the capital of Paktia Province in eastern Afghanistan. Five civilians were killed and 14 were injured in the attack⁴⁷.

Terrorist attacks also took place in Europe. On the evening of April 27 in Colombes, a suburb of Paris, two policemen were rammed by 29-year-old Youssef T., an Islamic extremist, a French citizen. The incident took place when the police tried to stop him for a roadside check. He was driving a scooter that he had abandoned during his escape. Then he stole the car and drove into the policemen chasing him on motorcycles at high speed. One of the motorbikes was rammed and the other was crushed as a result of a stolen vehicle colliding with a police car. Both officers were taken to hospital with severe injuries. The attacker was arrested. He was not known

⁴⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/07/magazine/afghan-war-casualty-report-may-2020.html> [access: 7 V 2020].

⁴⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/afghanistan-gunmen-storm-kabul-hospital-200512071439807.html> [access: 12 V 2020]; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/taliban-claim-deadly-attack-court-afghanistan-paktia-200514070025362.html> [access: 14 V 2020].

to the security services for his radical views. He pleaded guilty and stated that he had done so on purpose. He justified the desire to kill the policemen by his support for the Islamic State and the plight of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

This is not the first time Islamic extremists have attacked in France during the pandemic that is taking a deadly toll in the country. In April, three illegal immigrants from Sudan were arrested. One of them was 33-year-old Abdallah Ahmed Osman, who stabbed two people and injured another seven people on 4 April in an attack in the city of Romans-sur-Isère south of Lyon. In April, riots broke out in the suburbs of Paris and other cities dominated by Muslim minorities over the restrictions placed on citizens. Despite a strong policy of reducing people-to-people contacts, the suburbs of Paris remain an area where bans are generally not applied. The prefect of the Paris Police Department has admitted that enforcing travel bans or operation of certain companies bans, such as shisha bars in 'no-go areas' is not a priority. Protests broke out in Béziers, southern France, following the death of a 33-year-old Muslim who died during an arrest in connection with the violation of the ban on leaving the house. During his detention, the man resisted and suffered a heart attack. The situation was exacerbated after 18 April, when further riots broke out in the suburbs of the French capital due to the death of a motorcyclist who collided with an unmarked police vehicle. Young Muslims threw stones at police stations and police vehicles. There were numerous acts of vandalism and arson. By the way, French Muslims again demanded the lifting of the restrictions related to the coronavirus pandemic, which was related to the fast beginning on 23 April. The coronavirus crisis has exposed the weakness of a French state, which is struggling to enforce strict sanitary regulations in immigrant neighbourhoods. The President of France said that (...) *the lost territory of the Republic should be recovered*. However, these announcements remain merely a declaration⁴⁸.

Riots similar to those in Paris also occurred in Anderlecht, a district of Brussels. They broke out in the evening of April 10 due to the death of a 19-year-old man who did not stop for a roadside check while riding a scooter. He hit head-on into a police car while escaping and died on the spot. After this incident, young people of immigrant origin took to the streets and attacked the police with stones and bottles. A masked crowd stormed a police car from which a gun was stolen and the vehicle was destroyed. An unknown person fired the shots, probably from the stolen gun, which, however, was not found. The next day, people began flocking to the streets again,

⁴⁸ <https://actupenit.com/2020/04/27/urgent-colombes-deux-motards-de-la-police-grievement-blesses-apres-avoir-ete-percute-volontairement/> [access: 27 IV 2020]; <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/auvergne-rhone-alpes/drome/valence/drome-2-morts-5-blesses-urgence-absolue-apres-attaque-au-couteau-romans-isere-1811596.html> [access: 5 IV 2020]; <https://euroislam.pl/francja-dzielnice-imigranckie-pozna-prawem/> [access: 10 IV 2020]; <https://www.o2.pl/arttykul/francja-zamieszki-pod-paryzem-chca-zakonczenia-narodowej-kwarantanny-6501846788577409a> [access: 20 IV 2020].

despite the pandemic ban. They also convened via social media. The crowd attacked the police station. The riots lasted until 12 April. Fifty-seven people were arrested⁴⁹.

In Germany, on 15 April, four citizens of Tajikistan were arrested in the Essen and Düsseldorf area, preparing a terrorist attack on American facilities and people known for their critical comments about Islam, inter alia, the Iranian born Amir Masoud Arabpour. The extremists kept in touch with members of the Islamic State, from whom they received instructions on how to conduct attacks. They had already gathered the weapons, ammunition and ingredients needed to prepare the explosive. On 30 April, the German Ministry of the Interior banned the Lebanese Hezbollah from operating in the country.

In this way, the whole Party of God was banned in the Federal Republic of Germany, not just its armed arm, i.e. Al-Mukawama al-Islamijja (Islamic Resistance). Politicians from the SPD and FDP asked the government to ban Hezbollah from operating in Germany in 2019. The relevant request was approved by the Bundestag in December 2019, inter alia, due to the particular historical responsibility of Germany towards Israel.

According to the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV), there are approximately 1050 active members and supporters of Hezbollah in Germany. They work to support organizations financially, including organizing smuggling and trafficking in drugs, gemstones and used trucks. The announcement of the ban on Hizbullah's activities in Germany was combined with a search of several mosques and the Imam Mahdi Centre in Münster, an educational institution in Berlin's Neukölln district, the Muslim-dominated Al-Mustafa Association in Bremen, and a Lebanese immigration centre in Dortmund.

Hezbollah's outlawing will make it impossible to organize anti-Israel marches held every year on the last Friday or Saturday of Ramadan on the occasion of Jerusalem Day, established by Ayatollah Khomeini. During these demonstrations, participants displayed the flags of Hezbollah and raised anti-Semitic slogans. This year, such a march was planned in Berlin on 16 May but it was cancelled.

On 8 May, a 25-year-old Turkish man was arrested in Upper Bavaria while traveling by local train. In his luggage, homemade explosives, constructed as pipe bombs, and a gun were found. More explosives were found in a man's apartment in Waldkraiburg. By 10 May, the police had seized more than 20 pipe bombs and 10 kilograms of explosives. It turned out that the accidentally arrested man was wanted by a special police group in Munich. He was the perpetrator of several attacks in April on shops and establishments belonging to Turkish citizens. He threw stones at them or set them on fire. A fire started in one of them threatened the health and life of people living above the premises, several of whom were injured. He told the police that he hated the Turks, while sympathizing with the Islamic State and he also wanted to be

⁴⁹ <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/monde/videos-de-violentes-emeutes-eclatent-en-banlieue-de-bruxelles-en-plein-confinement-118108> [access: 12 IV 2020].

in the spotlight. The bomber was arrested before he embarked on another series of attacks, this time prepared at a higher level of terrorist craft.

In Spain, too, during the pandemic, there were arrests of terrorists preparing attacks. On 8 May, a Moroccan citizen was arrested preparing a terrorist attack in Barcelona on sites visited by tourists. It was due to occur within the next two days, despite the current epidemiological emergency. The deeply radicalized Moroccan acted as a lone wolf. On his computer there were found photos and videos of tourist regions of Barcelona that the detainee had taken despite being banned from travel due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Islamic extremists were also arrested in Poland. Firstly, on 16 April, officers of the Border Guard and the Internal Security Agency arrested a citizen of Lebanon who intended to create a terrorist cell in our country as part of a larger European network. Then, on 7 May, officers of the same services arrested four Tajik nationals, supporters of the Islamic State, who planned to radicalise and recruit Muslim converts to terrorist activities⁵⁰.

Conclusions

A huge number of fake coronavirus messages have appeared in cyberspace. Extremist messages find a broad response on alternative online platforms, for example, on Telegram, where they go to social networks of the so-called mainstream, such as Facebook or YouTube. Opponents of government restrictions and blockades use online platforms to organize protests. Rumors linking the virus to 5G technology have led to the arson of telecommunications masts in Europe and Canada.

The COVID-19 pandemic has sharpened the rhetoric of extremists and terrorist organizations towards communities that are ethnically, culturally and religiously alien to them. Muslim extremists consider the pandemic to be a divine punishment against China, the United States, Jews, Shiites, and Christians (Crusaders). There are numerous opinions included in the conspiracy theory of history that the pandemic was triggered by the Jews in order to take over the world. Hindu nationalists blame Muslims, while Arab journalists accuse Americans of using the virus as a biological weapon to paralyze the Chinese economy and maintain American hegemony on global markets. The Chinese blame the Africans in Guangzhou. The latter, numbering around 300,000 residents are openly stigmatized and discriminated against. African Americans have also experienced similar behavior. The racist incidents are linked in part to false information accusing foreigners of the second wave of the coronavirus infections

⁵⁰ <https://www.wnp.pl/rynki-zagraniczne/hispania-tv-zatrzymano-podejrzanego-o-planowanie-zamachu-terrorystycznego,392760.html> [access: 10 V 2020]; [http://centrumprasowe.pap.pl/cp/pl/news/info/158783,,komunikat-rzecznika-prasowego-ministra-koordynatora-sluzb-specjalnych-\(komunikat\)](http://centrumprasowe.pap.pl/cp/pl/news/info/158783,,komunikat-rzecznika-prasowego-ministra-koordynatora-sluzb-specjalnych-(komunikat)) [access: 11 V 2020].

in China⁵¹. In retaliation, anti-Chinese riots and arson of Chinese plants are taking place in Africa. Acts of aggression against Asians suspected of Chinese citizenship and spreading the coronavirus have been reported in many countries, including Poland. COVID-19 is also considered a biological weapon. Neo-Nazis and white supremacists in the US are calling for infected supporters of these movements to contact police officers, federal officials and Jews directly to transmit the coronavirus to them.

To contain the spread of the pandemic, many countries have introduced social restrictions and isolation, and this, in turn, has directed people's attention to social media, where disinformation, hatred, aggression and contempt are rampant. It is observed, inter alia, increased interest in videos posted on YouTube on extermination, crusades, jihadism with the participation of the Mahdi, i.e. the messianic liberator who is to appear before the Judgment Day and free the world from evil. This is compounded by the deterioration of young sentiment in Muslim countries and Muslim minorities in Europe. Due to the closure of mosques, interest in Islamic educational websites dominated by the radical Salafi movement is growing, and these popularize the thesis that the coronavirus is a divine punishment for harm suffered by Muslims.

The coronavirus did not reduce the scale of the terrorist threat in Europe, despite the Islamic State's appeal not to travel to the Old Continent. After all, sympathizers of the overthrown caliphate live in Europe as well as former fighters who have returned to their countries of residence. Those who remained in the Middle East have been dormant for a long time. Now the process of their activation is underway. There has been an increase in the power of the Islamic State's propaganda message to addressed to Europeans. A special role in these activities is played by the media agency 'Amaq' and the weekly 'Al-Naba' ('Report'), published electronically. The Islamic State is trying to show itself as an international structure through disinformation activities on social media and thus strengthen its message to potential recruits. Despite the loss of the last piece of land in the Middle East, there may still be up to 20,000 fighters in the ranks of organizations in Iraq and Syria. They operate mainly in the sparsely populated areas of the Hamrin Mountains in northeast Iraq and in the Syrian Desert. In many regions of the world, The Islamic State has the power and means to conduct guerrilla warfare and terrorist activities, primarily in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia and Africa. It uses regional destabilization and local extremist organizations to prepare and carry out further attacks. There may be an increase in terrorist activity, but it is not as large as it was a year ago, although, for example, in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan or Mozambique, their activities are very intense, despite the coronavirus pandemic.

The Islamic State expects the pandemic to divide its enemies and weaken the West's willingness and ability to fight the jihadists. The International Crisis Group (ICG) called on governments to make peace efforts during the coronavirus

⁵¹ <https://gpcodziennie.pl/129334-nasilajasiezachowaniarasistowskie.html> [access: 14 IV 2020]; <https://idzpodrad.pl/aktualnosci/w-afryce-pala-chinskie-fabryki-sprzeciwiajac-sie-rasizmowi-chin-wobec-czarnoskorych/> [access: 17 IV 2020].

pandemic, prevent conflict and create channels for the rapid exchange of information to counter the escalation of tensions. The ICG argues that the coronavirus may even be an opportunity to defuse conflicts between the US and Iran and for humanitarian aid. However, in real terms, the pandemic has disrupted already existing international cooperation. The world's attention is now focused on the fight against the pandemic, and other threats have receded into the background, which jihadists are well aware of and are trying to use for their own aims through militant rhetoric or terrorist attacks.

As the coronavirus spreads in the Sahel zone, the number of terrorist attacks is increasing, possibly linked to the need for extremist groups to stockpile supplies of equipment and food. They take into account the possibility of supply problems in the event of isolation of the population in the regions most endangered by COVID-19. On 9 May, among others, militants belonging to the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wa al-Muslimin (Islamic and Muslim Support Group) attacked three villages in western Niger, near the border with Mali. They looted goods in stores and took food and cattle from the residents. They killed more than 20 people and retreated to the territory of the Republic of Mali⁵².

COVID-19 is threatening the international solidarity and cooperation, which have been the basis for the fight against terrorist organizations in the Sahel zone, where local forces and their international partners have tried to contain the jihadists. Operations by mobile groups on the border of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso and around Lake Chad require the joint commitment of these countries with the support of France, the United States and other countries, although these efforts are not always the result of a common strategy. The pandemic can make local terrorist groups even more dangerous as it further weakens the local governments and armed forces that are involved in containing the pandemic. In the event of a breakdown of cooperation between the countries in the region struggling with a public health crisis or withdrawal of foreign allies, the consequences may be extremely dangerous for the security of the Sahel states.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the rhetoric of extremists and terrorist organizations towards communities that are ethnically, culturally and religiously alien to them. Muslim extremists see the pandemic as a divine punishment against China, the United States, Jews, Shiites, and Christians (Crusaders). There are also opinions from the category of conspiracy theory of history that the pandemic was caused by the Jews in order to take over the world. Hindu nationalists blame the Muslims for the pandemic in India, and the Chinese blame the Africans in Guangzhou. The latter, numbering around 300,000 residents are openly stigmatized and discriminated against. African Americans also experienced similar behavior.

⁵² <https://apnews.com/ba19b7dae10fe1b77a12309e91a8cbc5> [access: 11 V 2020].

COVID-19 has also been treated as a biological weapon. Neo-Nazis and white supremacists in the United States are calling on those infected supporters to contact police officers, federal officials, and Jews directly to transmit the coronavirus to them. Isolation and restricted contacts in order to contain the spread of the pandemic drew the attention of many people to social media. They are spreading disinformation, hatred, aggression and contempt. It is observed, inter alia, increased interest in videos published on YouTube on the subject of extermination, crusades, and jihadism with the participation of the Mahdi, i.e. the messianic liberator, who is to appear before the Judgment Day and free the world from evil. This is compounded by the deterioration of sentiment among young people in Muslim countries and Muslim minorities in Europe. Due to the closure of mosques, there is growing interest in Islamic educational websites dominated by the radical Salafī movement, which popularize the thesis that the coronavirus is a divine punishment for harm suffered by Muslims.

The coronavirus has not reduced the scale of the terrorist threat in Europe, despite the calls of the Islamic State not to travel to the Old Continent. After all, there are supporters of the overthrown caliphate and former militants in the EU who have returned to their countries of residence. Those who remained in the Middle East have been dormant for a long time. The process of their activation is underway. There is an increase in the power of propaganda message addressed to Europeans. The media agency 'Amaq' and the electronic weekly magazine 'Al-Naba' ('Report') play a special role in these activities. The Islamic State is trying to show itself as an international structure through disinformation activities on social media and thus strengthen its message to potential recruits. In many regions of the world, The Islamic State has the strength and means to conduct guerrilla warfare and terrorist activities, primarily in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia and Africa. It uses regional destabilization and local extremist organizations for further attacks.

One can speak of an increase in terrorist activity but it is not as large as a year ago, although there are regions where their activities are very intense, for example in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Mozambique. COVID-19 threatens international solidarity and cooperation, which is key to the fight against terrorist organizations in the Sahel zone, where local forces and their international partners are trying to stop jihadists. The highly mobile operations of terrorist organizations on the border of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso and around Lake Chad require a joint effort of these countries with the support of France, the United States and other countries, although this involvement is not always subordinated to a common strategy. The pandemic can make a local terrorist group even more dangerous because it further absorbs and weakens local governments and armed forces. In the event of a breakdown of cooperation between the countries in the region struggling with the public health crisis, or the withdrawal of foreign allies, the consequences may be extremely dangerous for the security of the Sahel states.

Keywords: terrorist attacks, coronavirus, COVID-19, Islamic State, jihadists, pandemic, radicalization, terrorism.