
Radicalization in the Age of COVID-19: An Analysis of IS Propaganda

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Abstract: This research project sought to explore the utilization of propaganda by the Islamic State and its affiliate organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Propaganda has been a medium through which the Islamic State, as well as other terrorist organizations, have been utilizing to effectively recruit new members and retain current ones around the world. By analyzing recent Islamic State propaganda and past research on the Islamic State's propaganda machine, this project develops upon existing research to establish what the known tactics of the Islamic State are at this current day and age, in addition to analyzing theories on the matter. Furthermore, this project seeks to understand and explain the current efforts by governments and non-governmental organizations to combat the Islamic State's propaganda machine during the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal of this paper is to analyze and indicate current trends in both propaganda and the counter measures to propaganda stemming from the Islamic State.

Keywords: COVID-19, divine intervention, Islamic State, media sensationalism, propaganda

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was largely unforeseen by everyone around the world. While the virus poses a threat to public health and safety, the other effects of the virus are equally as dangerous. One of these effects has been the growing numbers of people who have become radicalized by propaganda stemming from terrorist organizations around the world. In this paper, I will explore the current propaganda tactics stemming from the Islamic State to radicalize individuals around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. My hypothesis for this part of my paper is that the Islamic State has utilized propaganda surrounding the idea of divine intervention to radicalize individuals because of the lack of knowledge and conflicting interests surrounding the COVID-19 virus throughout 2020. In addition to this, I will also examine what is being done by governments and non-governmental organizations to prevent IS propaganda and radicalization. I utilize information compiled from various scholarly and news sources that have a focus both on the Islamic State and the efforts to prevent the Islamic State from committing acts of violence and radicalizing individuals. By analyzing the propaganda utilized before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as looking at what governments and non-governmental organizations are currently doing to combat IS propaganda and radicalization, further research can be done to ultimately devise more efficient methods of preventing terrorist propaganda and radicalization during times of economic disasters and social unrest.

Before going in depth about the research I conducted, it is essential to first provide background and context. The Islamic State (IS), also referred to as ISIS or ISIL, is just one of the many transnational terrorist organizations that has taken advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic in order to radicalize people around the world. According to extremism researcher Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil, "...Islamist extremist and terrorist groups' views of the coronavirus pandemic, along with their preparations to exploit it on a global scale, boil down to an attempt to create more propaganda and gain new recruits."¹⁰³ Since before the COVID-19 pandemic started, the Islamic State was sowing seeds of hate and violence throughout the world. Now that the virus is upon the world, they have utilized those seeds of hate and violence to do significant damage to the world. As reported by Joseph Hincks from *Time*, "on April 17, a month after Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte imposed quarantine orders across the southeast Asian country, ISIS-linked gunmen opened fire on a military convoy in the remote province of Sulu."¹⁰⁴ Being that the Islamic State is a transnational terrorist organization, it was not surprising that on October 28th, 2020, Claire Meyer reported, "Europol and the Spanish National Police arrested three suspects linked to a terrorist cell actively recruiting and indoctrinating young people....Authorities believe the network was created to carry out ISIS-supported jihadist terrorism."¹⁰⁵ The list of incidents that have occurred goes on and on, and this is precisely why research on this propaganda and radicalization in the age of COVID-19 is necessary. Although research has been conducted in the past on the Islamic State, their main objective as of right now, according to Mia Bloom, "is to sow the seeds of mistrust of government while simultaneously using unfolding events to substantiate their view of the world and validate their predictions."¹⁰⁶ The COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented, but the propaganda that spurred out of it from the Islamic State is not.

Literature Review

In reviewing prior research on the Islamic State's propaganda machine, it is quite evident that their tactics of radicalization are much more complex than how it appears on the surface. While my

¹⁰³ Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil, "Terrorism and Coronavirus: Hyperbole, Idealism, and Ignorance," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Terrorism-Extremism-Coronavirus-ISIS-Al-Qaeda-Resurgence-COVID-19>.

¹⁰⁴ Joseph Hincks, "With the World Busy Fighting COVID-19, Could ISIS Mount a Resurgence," *Time*, April 29, 2020, <https://time.com/5828630/isis-coronavirus/>.

¹⁰⁵ Claire Meyer, "Terrorists Ramping Up Recruitment and Propaganda Efforts," *American Society for Industrial Security*, November 4, 2020, <https://www.asisonline.org/security-management-magazine/latest-news/today-in-security/2020/november/terrorists-ramp-up-recruitment-propaganda-efforts/>.

¹⁰⁶ Mia Bloom, "How Terrorist Groups Will Try to Capitalize on the Coronavirus Crisis," *Just Security*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/69508/how-terrorist-groups-will-try-to-capitalize-on-the-coronavirus-crisis/>.

research is primarily on the propaganda efforts of the Islamic State during the COVID-19 pandemic, understanding terrorism is crucial. According to Doosje et al., “terrorism is an act of violence (domestic or international), usually committed against non-combatants, and aimed to achieve behavioral change and political objectives by creating fear in a larger population.”¹⁰⁷ The reason why studying terrorism and the propaganda used to radicalize individuals is important is because, as noted by Doosje et al., “terrorism poses a serious physical threat to the security of citizens.... Indirectly, the induction of fear can have further deleterious effects increasing polarization along ethnic, religious, and national lines, promoting conflict among different segments of society.”¹⁰⁸ In today’s society, terrorism expands beyond just one nation’s border, which is more commonly referred to as transnational terrorism. With rising efforts to prevent transnational terrorism around the world, there has been much more done by terrorist organizations to ensure their strategies are preserved and are increasingly effective. Kabir Taneja wrote, “...terror groups have managed to gain the upper hand in both strategy and tactical operations, making sure to not only safeguard their own existence, but in many cases force states and the global community to the negotiating table.”¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, he noted, “terrorists’ tools have evolved faster than their state adversaries, as they adapt to new technologies such as the internet, social media, and even crypto currency (as a method to move around finances).”¹¹⁰ When it comes to transnational terrorism, it is quite clear that the Islamic State is the dominating force driving this hate and violence around the world.

Propaganda is one tool that has been utilized by terrorist organizations in a variety of ways, whether it be through the different social media networks or online chat rooms that are frequented by consumers of this effective form of radicalization. The Islamic State's propaganda machine is one of the most powerful to date, and as written by Baele, Boyd, and Coan., “although the quality and sheer number of communication outputs produced by the group has fallen, IS’s propaganda machine continues to inundate the online and offline worlds at levels never achieved by any terrorist group in the past.”¹¹¹ One of the reasons why the Islamic State’s propaganda has been so effective when it comes to recruiting

¹⁰⁷ Bertjan Doosje, Fathali Moghaddam, Arie Kruglanski, Arjan de Wolf, Liesbeth Mann, and Allard Feddes, “Terrorism, Radicalization and De-radicalization,” *Current Opinion in Psychology* 11, no. 1 (October 2016): 79,

<https://www.sciencedirect-com.libproxy.temple.edu/science/article/pii/S2352250X16300811>.

¹⁰⁸ Doosje, Moghaddam, Kruglanski, de Wolf, Mann, and Feddes, “Terrorism,” 79.

¹⁰⁹ Kabir Taneja, “IS Khorasan, the US-Taliban Deal, and the Future of South Asian Security,” *Observer Research Foundation*, December 15, 2020, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/is-khorasan-the-us-taliban-deal-and-the-future-of-south-asian-security/>.

¹¹⁰ Taneja, “IS Khorasan.”

¹¹¹ Stephane J. Baele, Katharine A. Boyd, and Travis G. Coan, “ISIS Propaganda: A Full-Spectrum Extremist Message,” *Oxford Scholarship Online*, December 2019, <https://oxforduniversitypressscholarshipcom.libproxy.temple.edu/view/10.1093/oso/9780190932459.001.0001/oso-9780190932459-chapter-1>.

people is because of the combination of new means of communication and different social and economic factors that have affected communities around the world. According to Masood Ashraf Raja, “the combination of the historical narratives and the contemporary means of communication enables ISIS to frame and spread its message, recruit its adherents, and replicate itself.”¹¹² It is important to note that the propaganda promoted by the Islamic State is not just the average poster or flyer. The Islamic State effectively promotes their agenda through strategic propaganda, almost in the same fashion as an advertising agency. In a report from the *Counter Extremism Project*, it was written that “these groups have produced propaganda in a myriad of...forms—from music videos to glossy magazines—that have helped to convince individuals around the world to travel abroad to join extremist groups and to conduct deadly attacks in their home countries.”¹¹³ The Islamic State takes advantage of almost every pathway possible when it comes to recruiting people through propaganda. Even though their propaganda often gets thwarted by the different government and non-governmental organizations, the fact is that the Islamic State still finds a way to radicalize people worldwide. According to Andrea Auteri, “the Islamic State operates in each of the most popular social networks as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, VKontakte and Odnoklassniki.”¹¹⁴ Writing of what exactly the propaganda is through examining past literature is important, but there is much more power in displaying just what can happen as a result of the effectiveness of the Islamic State’s propaganda.

The power of the Islamic State’s propaganda machine can be seen in the most recent rise and fall of the Islamic caliphate that was established in Iraq and Syria. According to a report from *The Wilson Center*, “the Islamic State...emerged from the remnants of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)... It faded into obscurity for several years after the surge of U.S. troops to Iraq in 2007. But it began to reemerge in 2011.”¹¹⁵ Additionally, the report detailed that in late June of 2014, “ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi announced the formation of a caliphate stretching from Aleppo in Syria to Diyala in Iraq...Its branches, supporters, and affiliates increasingly carried out attacks beyond the borders of its so-called caliphate.”¹¹⁶ By establishing the caliphate, the Islamic State achieved one of their largest goals, the establishment of their version of an Islamic caliphate. As noted by Shadi Hamid, “...ISIS had a distinctive interest in state-

¹¹² Masood Ashraf Raja, *ISIS: Ideology, Symbolics, and Counter Narratives*, (London: Routledge Advances in Sociology, 2020),

<https://doi.org.libproxy.temple.edu/10.4324/9781351046190>.

¹¹³ Counter Extremism Project, “Extremists & Online Propaganda,” 2021,

<https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists-online-propaganda>.

¹¹⁴ Andrea Auteri, “Propaganda and Technology: ISIS Propaganda and How to Combat It,” *Kore University*, 2021, <https://unikore.it/index.php/it/edizione-11/auteri>.

¹¹⁵ The Wilson Center, “Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State,” October 28, 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>.

¹¹⁶ The Wilson Center. “Timeline.”

building....One 2015 study found that about 45% of ISIS media outreach focused on building and sustaining the caliphate, with messaging on ‘traffic police, charity work, judicial systems, hospitals and agricultural projects.’¹¹⁷ The individuals behind the Islamic State’s establishment of the caliphate were not merely doing something to frighten people around the world, but to set up a homeland for terrorism to stem from.

The Islamic State brought in people from all over the world. Many flocked to the caliphate, increasing its numbers by the day, while some simply carried out attacks to establish caliphates and fear in their parts of the world. According to Les Picker, by the end of 2015, “approximately 30,000 fighters from at least 85 countries had joined the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).”¹¹⁸ While many of the recruits came from the Middle East and parts of Asia, a large number of recruits stemmed from Western countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand.¹¹⁹ Many motivations led people to flock to the caliphate from across the world, which is why it is important to also mention the more recent research on the feelings of individuals who joined the Islamic State’s caliphate in Iraq and Syria. According to Anne Speckhard and Molly Ellenberg, “...it is clear that most [foreign fighters] living far from ISIS territory are motivated more so by a desire to bolster their Islamic identities which are often under attack by Islamophobic sectors of society, as well as the desire to help the greater Muslim community, versus being motivated for economic purposes.”¹²⁰ Additionally, it was discussed that these same recruits were responding to push factors from their respective homes, including marginalization and discrimination.¹²¹ The Islamic State’s appeal to its recruits are not just words. They make appeals to people that they know will support their efforts. As discussed by Alberto Fernandez, “ISIS’s appeal is...that it can be plausibly seen...as an alternative to failed statehood and anarchy. Western converts to ISIS are also attracted to a political entity which seems to be delivering...promises it makes through its

¹¹⁷ Shadi Hamid, “What America Never Understood About ISIS,” *Brookings Institute*, November 1st, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/11/01/what-america-never-understood-about-isis/>.

¹¹⁸ Les Picker, “Where Are ISIS’s Foreign Fighters Coming From,” *National Bureau of Economic Research*, 2016, <https://www.nber.org/digest/jun16/where-are-isis-foreign-fighters-coming>.

¹¹⁹ Picker, “Where Are ISIS’s Foreign Fighters.”

¹²⁰ Anne Speckhard and Molly D. Ellenberg, “ISIS in Their Own Words: Recruitment History, Motivations for Joining, Travel, Experiences in ISIS, and Disillusionment over Time – Analysis of 220 In-depth Interviews of ISIS Returnees, Defectors, and Prisoners,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 13, no. 1 (2020): 119, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26907414?seq=40#metadata_info_tab_contents.

¹²¹ Speckhard, “ISIS in Their Own Words,” 120.

messaging.”¹²² Now that the caliphate in Iraq and Syria is no more, the issue in the modern day is the issue related to repatriating former citizens and prosecuting various individuals. One of the main reasons why this is such a difficult issue is because of the effects of the Islamic State’s propaganda machine. According to Oehlrich, Mulroy, and McHugh,

“thousands of former ISIS fighters and tens of thousands of civilians indoctrinated in the group’s extremist ideology now sit idly in prisons and refugee camps across Iraq and Syria. Harboring resentment and anger and in many cases having practiced violence, these detainees may grow into the next version of ISIS, just as ISIS itself grew out of Jama’at al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad and its many post-9/11 incarnations.”¹²³

Propaganda from the Islamic State must be taken seriously, as it was one of the main factors leading to the development of such a large caliphate in Iraq and Syria, as well as the push for the establishment of caliphates and the furthering of terror in other parts of the world.

The Islamic State may seem to have faded out of the spotlight with a rise in far-right extremism and other issues related to the COVID-19 crisis, but the world must not lose sight on a contributor to transnational terrorism. This study seeks to display just why this area of research is vital to counter-terrorism and international security as a whole.

Methodology

For this research project, I initially started by analyzing news articles and scholarly sources about the propaganda that was published by the Islamic State before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. My hypothesis for my paper is that the Islamic State has utilized propaganda surrounding the idea of divine intervention to radicalize individuals because of the lack of knowledge and conflicting interests surrounding the COVID-19 virus throughout 2020. With this being my hypothesis, I specifically set out to see if this hypothesis is correct through my research. When it came time to analyze the responses of governments and non-governmental organizations to Islamic State propaganda during the COVID-19 pandemic, I analyzed policy briefs, government websites, and news sources about varying developments. Upon collecting the information that was relevant to the topic, which included sources up until January 2021, I was able to compose a project with clarity and meaning. My analysis of IS propaganda and the efforts implemented to counter the propaganda and radicalization during the COVID-19 pandemic is pertinent because of the implications related to the future of international security.

¹²² Alberto M. Fernandez, “Here to Stay and Growing: Combating ISIS Propaganda Networks,” *The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, 2015, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/IS-Propaganda_Web_English.pdf.

¹²³ Eric Oehlerich, Mick Mulroy, and Liam McHugh, “Jannah or Jahannam: Options for Dealing with ISIS Detainees,” *Middle East Institute*, October 13, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/jannah-or-jahannam-options-dealing-isis-detainees>.

Current Islamic State Propaganda

The COVID-19 pandemic has created the ideal situation for radicalization to occur across the world, and the Islamic State's propaganda machine has been determined to do just that. According to Chelsea Daymon and Meili Criezis, "although the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic brought much of the world to a stand-still, the internet has allowed people to remain virtually connected and updated on the latest COVID-19-related news, including violent extremist groups and terrorist organizations."¹²⁴ For the Islamic State, they have exploited the COVID-19 pandemic in various ways, including "unofficial media networks, consisting of decentralized Islamic State supporters online,' which have consistently produced content to radicalize viewers throughout the pandemic."¹²⁵ The danger of the Islamic State during the COVID-19 pandemic is not necessarily as direct because "measures to minimize the spread of COVID-19, such as lockdowns and restrictions on movement, seem to have reduced the risk of terrorist attacks in many countries."¹²⁶ However, the lockdowns were subsequently followed by the ramping up of propaganda efforts by the Islamic State. In an address to the United Nations, Russian's Permanent Representative to International Organizations, Vladimir Voronkov, said, "there is now a continued trend of attacks by individuals inspired online and acting alone or in small groups, which could be fueled by ISIL's opportunistic propaganda efforts during the COVID-19 crisis."¹²⁷ Although the Islamic State is known to use modern day technology, in addition to certain themes and narratives, two prominent propaganda strategies became clear throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. These two main ways are utilizing the theme of divine intervention, as well as the power of media sensationalism. While this research study was not designed to test the effectiveness of these methods to lead to terrorism around the world, understanding the methods and messages will allow for further research to prevent radicalization during global crises.

Divine Intervention

The most apparent theme in the propaganda being produced by the Islamic State during the COVID-19 pandemic is divine intervention. Divine intervention is generally understood at the intervention of a deity or deities in the lives of humans. For the Islamic State, the propaganda they shared with the world expressed the COVID-19 as being a result of the disbelievers and individuals non devoted

¹²⁴ Chelsea Daymon and Meili Criezis, "Pandemic Narratives: Pro-Islamic State Media and the Coronavirus," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 13, no. 6 (June 2020), <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/pandemic-narratives-pro-islamic-state-media-and-the-coronavirus/>.

¹²⁵ Daymon, "Pandemic Narratives."

¹²⁶ Edith Lederer, "Over 10,000 Islamic State Fighters Active in Iraq, Syria as Attacks Increase Significantly: UN," *Military Times*, August 25, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/08/25/over-10000-islamic-state-fighters-active-in-iraq-syria-as-attacks-significantly-increase-un/>.

¹²⁷ Lederer, "Over 10,000."

to the cause of the Islamic State. According to Maywadee Viriyapah, "...ISIS had argued that the onset of the pandemic was an aggressive act by God aimed at disbelievers. In a February edition of the IS newsletter, *al-Naba*, IS said: 'many Muslims rushed to confirm that this epidemic is a punishment from God Almighty for China's oppression of the Muslim Uighur minority.'¹²⁸ In a March newsletter, IS went on to address the virus by producing a public health graphic, as well as a statement to followers that they should "put trust in God and seek refuge in Him from illnesses" and to stay away from "the land of the epidemic," referring to Europe.¹²⁹ In just these two newsletters from *al-Naba*, it is quite clear that the Islamic State wants their followers and possible recruits to see the COVID-19 pandemic as an act of divine intervention to help IS members and destroy their enemies. In addition, Viriyapah wrote, "this narrative has taken hold of IS followers. An IS supporter referred to the disease as 'a soldier of Allah' in an online chatroom, reaffirming the spread of the narrative occurring online."¹³⁰ Because of the Islamic State's function as a terrorist network rather than a structured organization with a strict hierarchy, this same message was promoted in other Islamic State affiliated newsletters. *The Voice of Hind*, an English-language magazine for supporters of ISIS in India, was one of these other media outlets that demonstrated the global reach of the Islamic State. In a special "lockdown edition" release, it was written that supporters "should stay firm and ready to launch a severe attack on the enemies of Allah's religion who are embroiled in a fight against the disease brought about by Allah's rage against them."¹³¹ Furthermore, the magazine claimed, "COVID 19 has plagued the disbelievers and it is time to make it worse... every brother and sister, even children, can contribute to Allah's cause by becoming the carriers of this disease and striking the colonies of the disbelievers, wherever they find them."¹³² One of the most interesting messages interwoven with this particular publication in June was that it also claimed, "no disease can harm even a hair of a believer," which is a statement that would obviously not hold up in hospitals at this time.¹³³ Retired Army Intelligence Officer Colonel Chris Costa stated, "they are opportunistic and taking advantage of a pandemic by suggesting this is divine retribution. If they can't beat us on the battlefield, they can beat us through God's vengeance, they believe."¹³⁴ Divine intervention has been used

¹²⁸ Maywadee Viriyapah, "How COVID-19 has Emboldened the Islamic State Part 2: Ideology and Propaganda," *American Security Project*, April 29th, 2020, <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/how-covid-19-has-emboldened-the-islamic-state-part-2-ideology-and-propaganda/>.

¹²⁹ Viriyapah, "How COVID-19."

¹³⁰ Viriyapah, "How COVID-19."

¹³¹ Bridget Johnson, "ISIS 'Lockdown' Magazine Urges Kids to Spread COVID-19, Attacks with Scissors," *Homeland Security Today*, June 23, 2020, <https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/isis-lockdown-magazine-urges-using-kids-to-spread-covid-19-attacks-with-scissors/>.

¹³² Johnson, "ISIS 'Lockdown' Magazine."

¹³³ Viriyapah, "How COVID-19 has."

¹³⁴ Johnson, "ISIS 'Lockdown' Magazine."

historically by various groups for specific interests, and it is not surprising to see it as the main theme presented in the Islamic State's propaganda during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is vital to note that this theme does not solely appear in the propaganda of the Islamic State, but in the propaganda of other terrorist groups as well. In an article by Mia Bloom, it was written that "Al-Qaeda released a statement on March 31, in which they accused Western governments of ignoring their citizens' health 'instead of ensuring the provision of health facilities and medical supplies they [remain] obsessed with the tools of war and human eradication."¹³⁵ Along with al-Qaeda, other jihadist groups, like the Taliban, have also contributed to the propaganda surrounding the theme of divine intervention. In a press release, the Taliban claimed that coronavirus "is a disease ordained by the Almighty Allah which has perhaps been sent by Allah because of the disobedience and sins of mankind or other reasons."¹³⁶ Africa-based affiliates of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda have also kept consistent with the theme that "the pandemic is God's wrath against the West."¹³⁷ According to Emilia Columbo and Marielle Harris, "[Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin] hailed the pandemic as a 'punishment' on France for supporting counterterrorism operations in Mali, while al-Shabaab warned supporters that Covid-19 was spread by 'crusader forces.'¹³⁸ Out of all the propaganda tactics utilized by the Islamic State, as well as other jihadist groups, the theme of divine intervention has proven to be the most prolific during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Media Sensationalism

It should come as no surprise that media sensationalism is another one of the most utilized methods of propaganda by the Islamic State during the COVID-19 pandemic. While this strategy is not always the easiest to comprehend, it is nonetheless effective. The supremacy over media outlets is a powerful edge for propaganda and gaining support by individuals who witness the propaganda. The Islamic State has not outwardly expressed this as their tactic, but by constantly finding ways to be presented in the media, it is clear that this is on their list of tactics during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This tactic of radicalization and terrorism was noted in 2017 by Charlie Winter, a senior research fellow at the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization at King's College London, when he wrote about the Islamic State being skilled at turning the media's hunger for infamy into a weapon. According to Winter, "for ISIS, provided it's on the propagandists' terms and conveys the group's

¹³⁵ Bloom, "How Terrorist Groups."

¹³⁶ Bloom, "How Terrorist Groups."

¹³⁷ Emilia Columbo and Marielle Harris, "Extremist Groups Stepping Up Operations during the COVID-19 Outbreak in Sub-Saharan Africa," *Center for Strategic & International Relations*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/extremist-groups-stepping-operations-during-covid-19-outbreak-sub-saharan-africa>.

¹³⁸ Columbo, "Extremist Groups Stepping Up."

purported strength and omnipresence, any coverage is good coverage... ISIS terrorism doesn't end when a bomb detonates. Rather, it continues for hours, days, and weeks after, living on through the media."¹³⁹ In writing on this same topic, Murtaza Hussain noted that the Islamic State has turned "the media's hunger for infamy into a weapon."¹⁴⁰ In fact, the country of France has been the one part of the world that has been a place for the Islamic State to receive coverage about their attacks. Throughout 2020, various attacks by Islamic State members and people pledging allegiance to the Islamic State occurred. Regarding an attack in April 2020, Ropina McGuinness wrote, "the driver who deliberately rammed into two police motorcyclists in a Paris suburb on Monday had pledged allegiance to the militant group Islamic State (ISIS)...."¹⁴¹ This was only the beginning, with more attacks occurring later on in the year. According to Bridget Johnson, "just hours after three people were killed this morning in a knife attack in Nice, France, ISIS published a full-page article in its regularly scheduled weekly newsletter featuring a photo from the attack scene and a call to threaten France."¹⁴² It was also on the same day, October 29th, 2020, that "a Saudi citizen was arrested after stabbing a security guard at the French consulate in Jeddah."¹⁴³ Earlier that October, "an assailant shouting 'Allahu akbar' decapitated history teacher Samuel Paty in the Paris suburb of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine. Paty had recently received death threats after showing caricatures of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad in class as part of a lesson on freedom of speech."¹⁴⁴ France has very much been a place for the Islamic State to draw attention from the media, but other regions of the world have also felt the impact of this drive to capture attention in the media.

In the Philippines, there was a two-pronged attack in the latter half of August conducted by Abu Sayyaf, an affiliate of the Islamic State that has the goal of establishing a caliphate in the Philippines and Southeast Asia. According to Enrico Dela Cruz, "twin blasts including a suicide bombing killed 15 people and wounded 75 others on a restive southern Philippine island on Monday, among them security forces

¹³⁹ Charlie Winter, "ISIS is Using the Media Against Itself," *The Atlantic*, March 23, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/isis-propaganda-brussels/475002/>.

¹⁴⁰ Murtaza Hussain, "Journalists Promoted ISIS Coronavirus Propaganda. They Should Stop," *The Intercept*, April 19, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/04/19/coronavirus-isis-advice/>.

¹⁴¹ Romina McGuinness, "France Attacker Who Rammed Police Motorcyclists Thought to Have Pledged Allegiance to ISIS," *Express*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1274899/France-news-attack-car-hit-police-motorcyclists-isis-terror-latest>.

¹⁴² Bridget Johnson, "ISIS Spotlights France Stabbings, Calls for Attacks to Force Enactment of Blasphemy Laws," *Homeland Security Today*, October 29, 2020, <https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/isis-spotlights-france-stabbings-calls-for-attacks-to-force-enactment-of-blasphemy-laws/>.

¹⁴³ Johnson, "ISIS Spotlights France."

¹⁴⁴ Counter Extremism Project, "France: Extremism and Counter-extremism," 2021, <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/france>.

and civilians, with Islamist militants suspected of being behind the attack.”¹⁴⁵ In another part of Southeast Asia, an Islamic State affiliate group based in Indonesia, East Indonesia Mujahideen, launched an attack during November of 2020. In a report by Andreas Harsono, Harsono wrote, “. . . Islamist militants attacked the Christian-majority village of Lembantongoa in Sulawesi, Indonesia, killing the village elder and three other Christian farmers. The attackers burned a Salvation Army church and six houses, prompting about 750 villagers to flee their homes.”¹⁴⁶ Since 2012, the group has killed at least 20 people, and the victims have been Muslim, Christian, and Hindu farmers the group has accused of helping police.¹⁴⁷ Regarding an attack in Austria, Mark Katkov and Jaclyn Diaz reported, “the Islamic State has claimed credit for the shooting spree in the city center of Vienna, Austria. . . . At least four people were killed and 14 others wounded, seven with life-threatening injuries, in the attack.”¹⁴⁸ Since the Islamic State is not constrained to one part of the world because of the amount of affiliate groups and possible lone wolves, it comes as no surprise that these attacks occurred in many more regions of the world. According to a news report written by Joby Warrick, Souad Mekhennet, and Danielle Paquette,

“on Aug. 5, militants carrying the black flag of the Islamic State launched a daring land-and-sea assault on the strategic port city of Mocimboa da Praia in northern Mozambique. . . . declaring it the capital of a new Islamic province. Days later, a different band of Islamist gunmen rampaged through a famous wildlife park for giraffes in Koure, Niger, just 35 miles from the country’s capital. Firing from motorbikes, they killed eight people, including six French humanitarian workers.”¹⁴⁹

Each of these attacks brought forth local attention on the Islamic State and its affiliates, as well as the additional international attention. This can be seen in the various media outlets that reported on the incidents, in addition to the subsequent research analyses like this project.

¹⁴⁵ Enrico Dela Cruz, “Twin Bombings Kill 15, Wound Scores in Philippine South,” *Reuters*, August 24, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-security/twin-bombings-kill-15-wound-scores-in-philippine-south-idUSKBN25K0QP>.

¹⁴⁶ Andreas Harsono, “Brutal Attack in Indonesia Targets Christian Farmers,” *Human Rights Watch*, December 2, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/02/brutal-attack-indonesia-targets-christian-farmers>.

¹⁴⁷ Harsono, “Brutal Attack in Indonesia.”

¹⁴⁸ Mark Katkov and Jaclyn Diaz, “ISIS Claims Credit in Vienna, Austria ‘Terror Attack,’” *National Public Radio*, November 3, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/11/03/930721562/at-least-4-killed-by-gunman-in-vienna-austria-in-terror-attack>.

¹⁴⁹ Joby Warrick, Souad Mekhennet, and Danielle Paquette, “ISIS Attacks Surge Even as Trump Boasts of a ‘100%’ Defeated Caliphate,” *Seattle Times*, October 18, 2020, <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/isis-attacks-surge-even-as-trump-boasts-of-a-100-defeated-caliphate/>.

Maintaining the media's attention is what keeps the Islamic State relevant and credible as the most powerful and ruthless terrorist organization in the world. Their capability to launch attacks around the world is what has secured their foothold in the modern day, and what continuously draws movements to continue with IS terrorist efforts. In a way, the consistency of the Islamic State serves as a form of information overload, which is its own propaganda technique. Although media sensationalism is not always recognized as a formal propaganda technique, it is certainly apparent with what the Islamic state continues to do with propaganda and physical attacks even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Combating Islamic State Propaganda

Since well before the COVID-19 pandemic, governments and non-governmental organizations have worked diligently to combat the Islamic State's propaganda machine. In a 2018 report on the Islamic State's fall from power in Iraq and Syria, Michael Munoz wrote, "as the Islamic State's self-declared caliphate crumbles, it is reverting to insurgency in Iraq and Syria and refocusing its media narrative from its triumphs to its commitment to a 'long war' against its enemies in which it will ultimately prevail."¹⁵⁰ While the Islamic State's power has declined from when it was at its peak in 2015, "the Islamic State media network remains dangerous, continuing to spread its message to sympathizers across the internet and among Sunnis in territories where it maintains a presence."¹⁵¹ The efforts made by governments and non-governmental organizations are important to analyze because now more than ever is when the Islamic State's propaganda can be most effective. In a March 2020 article from the *International Crisis Group*, it was written that "even as COVID-19's toll mounts, the world should brace itself for attacks by ISIS, which believes it can exploit the disorder the contagion is causing. This continuing jihadist threat requires the sort of international cooperation that militants hope the virus will sap."¹⁵² Through analyzing the current efforts made by governments and non-governmental organizations to combat the Islamic State and their propaganda machine, the world can understand which tactics will be most useful in the future.

Government Responses

As it is generally understood, governmental organizations around the world have been working tirelessly to combat both the COVID-19 pandemic and the spread of propaganda by terrorist organizations, like the Islamic State, during this time. However, responses by governments towards propaganda from the Islamic State specifically has been minimal, with much more of the focus being on combating false information surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the safety of people around

¹⁵⁰ Michael Munoz, "Selling the Long War: Islamic State Propaganda after the Caliphate," *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* 11, no. 10 (November 2018), <https://ctc.usma.edu/selling-long-war-islamic-state-propaganda-caliphate/>.

¹⁵¹ Munoz, "Selling the Long War."

¹⁵² International Crisis Group, "Contending with ISIS in the Time of Coronavirus," March 31, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/contending-isis-time-coronavirus/>.

the world. With that being said, there are still many cases shown throughout the pandemic that present the work of governments fighting the Islamic State propaganda machine during the on-going crisis.

The United States, even with internal government strife as a result of the 2020 presidential election, has contributed to fighting disinformation both domestically and around the world from various groups, including the Islamic State. In an October 2020 homeland threat assessment report, the Department of Homeland Security wrote that for the duration of the pandemic, “the primary terrorist threat inside the United States will stem from lone offenders and small cells of individuals, including Domestic Violent Extremists (DVEs) and foreign terrorist-inspired Homegrown Violent Extremists (HVEs).”¹⁵³ The DHS also noted, “violent extremist media almost certainly will spread violent extremist ideologies, especially via social media, that encourage violence and influence action within the United States.”¹⁵⁴ To combat what the DHS made clear as an environment of growing radicalization and extremism, the United States has restored to various measures to ensure that misinformation and terrorism would not increase, especially regarding the Islamic State.

One way the United States went about combating the Islamic State was through the extradition and prosecution of ISIS fighters Alexanda Kotey and El Shafee Elsheikh, who both had British citizenship and were captured in Iraq during the fall of the Islamic State’s caliphate. According to Garret Nada, “they were charged with an ISIS hostage scheme that resulted in the deaths of four Americans— James Foley (2014), Steven Sotloff (2014), Peter Kassig (2014) and Kayla Mueller (2015) —as well as two British citizens and two Japanese.”¹⁵⁵ Nada noted that they appeared in a Virginia court on October 7th, 2020, and subsequently, Attorney General William Barr released a statement saying, “our message to other terrorists around the world is this — if you harm Americans, you will face American arms on the battlefield or American law in our courtrooms. Either way, you will be pursued to the ends of the earth until justice is done.”¹⁵⁶ The prosecution of these two ISIS fighters was a direct threat to the Islamic State and any other groups that have been associated with terrorism around the world. Barr’s statement served as a way to disrupt the ambitions of the Islamic State and its affiliates because of the consequences for their actions, regardless of where the terrorists are in the world. In addition, the United States has also worked alongside its numerous allies, most notably through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United Nations (UN), to combat propaganda and false information during the pandemic. NATO made clear through a recent report that their communications are “based on real actions and

¹⁵³ United States Department of Homeland Security, “Homeland Threat Assessment,” 2020, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/2020_10_06_homeland-threat-assessment.pdf.

¹⁵⁴ United States Department of Homeland Security, “Homeland Threat Assessment.”

¹⁵⁵ Garrett Nada, “The U.S. and the Aftermath of ISIS,” *The Wilson Center*, December 17, 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/us-and-aftermath-isis>.

¹⁵⁶ Nada, “The U.S. and the Aftermath of ISIS.”

facts.”¹⁵⁷ NATO also reported that “NATO and Allied armed forces have played a key role in supporting civilian efforts to fight COVID-19, with some 350 flights delivering hundreds of tons of critical supplies, the construction of almost 100 field hospitals, and almost half a million troops across the Alliance securing borders, transporting patients and helping with testing.”¹⁵⁸ NATO’s response has been very strategic, and while it is hard to tell if their efforts have paid off as of now, it is obvious that they have been diligently working to combat propaganda and dilemmas stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Outside of the U.S. and any specific U.S. involved governmental cooperation groups, many similar actions have also taken place to combat ISIS propaganda and overall COVID-19 disinformation. The U.S. may be more at risk of far-right terrorism than terrorism stemming from groups like ISIS, but in other parts of the world, especially in Europe, it is a different story.¹⁵⁹ In a report by the European Commission, it was stated that, “the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) will keep monitoring false or misleading narratives and influence operations by foreign actors.”¹⁶⁰ The reported added, “a dedicated coronavirus disinformation section features regular rebuttals – in all EU languages – of the most prominent coronavirus myths. The Commission promotes content from the World Health Organization, national health authorities and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.”¹⁶¹ In some cases, in particular France, there has been direct action taken by the government to combat extremism within the country. However, it has been this same action that has also put France on the wire. Upon the recent republishing of Charli Hebdo’s Prophet Mohammed caricatures, President Emmanuel Macron reiterated his support for the republishing. However, his remarks about Islam needing to be reformed and the French government allowing the republishing of the Mohammed caricatures spurred significant backlash.¹⁶² In response to the backlash from non-state and state actors, Macron did an interview with Al Jazeera to defend his point of view while also demonstrating his understanding of the current sentiments within the Muslim world.¹⁶³ As it has been shown, combating ISIS propaganda and disinformation is not an easy task, especially for governments during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is vital

¹⁵⁷ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “NATO’s Approach to Countering Disinformation: A Focus on COVID-19,” July 17, 2020, <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/177273.htm>.

¹⁵⁸ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “NATO’s Approach.”

¹⁵⁹ Hincks, “With the World.”

¹⁶⁰ European Commission, “Talking Coronavirus Disinformation,” 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation/tackling-coronavirus-disinformation_en.

¹⁶¹ European Commission, “Talking Coronavirus Disinformation.”

¹⁶² Anne Speckhard, Mona Thakkar, and Molly D. Ellenberg, “European Attack and the Uproar Over Hate Speech as ISIS Virtual Caliphate Continues to Reign,” *Homeland Security Today*, November 9, 2020, <https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/european-attacks-and-the-uproar-over-hate-speech-as-isis-virtual-caliphate-continues-to-reign/>.

¹⁶³ Speckhard, “European Attack and the Uproar.”

that governments carefully go about their responses so their own words are not used against them, and it is equally important that they support non-governmental responses to stopping ISIS propaganda and disinformation during the on-going COVID-19 pandemic as well.

Non-governmental Responses

While governmental institutions are at the forefront of operations to combat the spread of both COVID-19 and the propaganda stemming from terrorist organizations, like the Islamic State, non-governmental institutions have also had a hand in putting both to an end. According to an article written by Erin Simpson and Adam Conner, “misinformation about the coronavirus has plagued effective public health response from the start. As public health officials urged the public to stay home and flatten the curve, experts raised the alarm that their messages were competing with a tide of misinformation and disinformation online.”¹⁶⁴ In addition to the high levels of misinformation, inadequate access to scientific information about the COVID-19 pandemic allows for the proliferation of misinformation to mislead individuals to develop and cling to inaccurate views on the pandemic.¹⁶⁵ As noted by James Kimble and Michael Ricciardelli, “messaging is important any time there is a group effort. We know from studying even small work teams that they function much more effectively when everyone is working in concert and not at cross purposes. Clear messaging among the group members makes that possible.”¹⁶⁶ From social media applications to more general non-governmental organizations, propaganda stemming from ISIS and others contributing to misinforming the public has been fought.

Social media and other internet driven applications and technology companies have directly aided in combating ISIS propaganda during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a report from the European Commission, “Google Search has given prominence to articles published by EU fact-checking organisations, which generated over 155 million impressions over the first half of 2020. Facebook and Instagram COVID-19 ‘Information Center’ directed over 2 billion people globally to resources from the WHO and other health authorities.”¹⁶⁷ Additionally, the report claimed, “Over 160 million people have visited the Twitter’s COVID-19 curated pages, over 2 billion times. Such pages bring together the latest Tweets from a number of authoritative and trustworthy government, media and civil society sources in

¹⁶⁴ Erin Simpson and Adam Conner, “Fighting Coronavirus Misinformation and Disinformation,” *Center for American Progress*, August 18, 2020, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/technology-policy/reports/2020/08/18/488714/fighting-coronavirus-misinformation-disinformation/>.

¹⁶⁵ Accessnow, “Fighting Misinformation and Defending Free Expression During COVID-19: Recommendation for States,” 2020, <https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2020/04/Fighting-misinformation-and-defending-free-expression-during-COVID-19-recommendations-for-states-1.pdf>.

¹⁶⁶ James Kimble and Michael Ricciardelli, “The Role of Government Messaging in the COVID-19 Battle,” *Seton Hall University*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.shu.edu/communication-arts/news/the-role-of-government-messaging-in-the-covid-19-battle.cfm>.

¹⁶⁷ European Commission, “Talking Coronavirus Disinformation.”

local languages.”¹⁶⁸ Facebook, Twitter, and other well-known platforms using machine-run algorithms to takedown terrorist propaganda videos have worked in conjunction with police and militaries across the world to destroy terrorist abilities to continue broadcasting their messages of hate.¹⁶⁹ In a July 2020 report from the Federation of American Scientists, it was stated that “Twitter and other social media platforms have increased their monitoring and surveillance of conspiracy theories and disinformation, resulting in an observable suspension of accounts and deletion of tweets spreading disinformation.”¹⁷⁰ While social media and other internet driven applications and technological companies play a large part of the role in non-governmental work to stop ISIS propaganda during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also important to highlight the many other contributors in the fight against this issue.

Non-governmental organizations all over the world have worked to combat this propaganda machine of the Islamic State, primarily in conjunction with the governmental institutions. The International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism has created over 175 counternarrative videos, taken from interviews with 239 ISIS prisoners, returnees and defectors, translated and subtitled in 27 languages, each of which features a speaker who actually lived in ISIS and either returned to their home countries, defected from ISIS, or were imprisoned.¹⁷¹ In writing more on the works of the ICSVE, Anne Speckhard and Molly Ellenberg wrote,

“ICSVE’s project, called Breaking the ISIS Brand – the ISIS Defectors Interviews Project, focuses on capturing the voices and emotions of credible defectors and imprisoned cadres. The footage used in the videos, other than the film of the speakers themselves, is taken from actual ISIS propaganda to illustrate the speaker’s story, which makes a direct contradiction to the terrorist narrative, effectively turning ISIS propaganda back on itself.”¹⁷²

They added, “ICSVE’s counternarrative videos have been used by law enforcement professionals, religious leaders, and non-governmental organizations in face-to-face interactions in Kyrgyzstan, the Netherlands, Belgium, Jordan, Iraq and elsewhere as part of robust countering violent extremism

¹⁶⁸ European Commission, “Talking Coronavirus Disinformation.”

¹⁶⁹ Anne Speckhard and Molly D. Ellenberg, “PERSPECTIVE: Deligitimizing ISIS and Militant Jihadist Ideologies May Also Require Addressing Anti-Western Biases,” *Homeland Security Today*, April 21, 2020,

<https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/perspective-delegitimizing-isis-and-militant-jihadist-ideologies-may-also-require-addressing-anti-western-biases/>.

¹⁷⁰ Federation of American Scientists, “Weekly COVID-19 Disinformation and False Propaganda Report,” July 23, 2020,

<https://fas.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/COVID-19-Disinformation-Report-for-July-20.pdf>.

¹⁷¹ Speckhard, “PERSPECTIVE.”

¹⁷² Speckhard, “PERSPECTIVE.”

programs.”¹⁷³ In addition to the work of the ICSVE and usage of counter-narratives, there have also been non-governmental organizations who directly searched for propaganda in order to have it removed. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue recently had researchers that found a digital library collection of more than 90,000 ISIS related items, with about 10,000 visitors monthly.¹⁷⁴ Following this, the ISD said Facebook's automated and manual detection systems need to be updated, with proactive investigations into repeat offending accounts and their connections to other accounts on the platform.¹⁷⁵ In reporting on Facebook's response to this, Gordon Corera wrote, “a Facebook spokesperson said: ‘We had already removed more than 250 accounts referenced in ISD's research prior to it being reported to us and have also removed the remaining 30 accounts.’ ‘We have no tolerance for terrorist propaganda on our platform....”¹⁷⁶ These are only a few examples of the many non-governmental responses to the evolving ISIS propaganda and general disinformation during the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. The information does not fully encapsulate the actions of non-state actors to combat ISIS propaganda and disinformation, which is important to note because individuals are just as powerful as the state actors and large scale non-governmental organizations.

Conclusion

This project aimed to analyze the current propaganda stemming from the Islamic State during the age of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was found that the main ways the Islamic State goes about radicalizing individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic is through messages about divine intervention and continuously finding ways to be in the media spotlight as a result of attacks and threats. The first part of this finding confirms my original hypothesis, and expands upon it with a relevant additional propaganda technique. The effects of the Islamic State's propaganda are far reaching and have only been that much more impactful during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Anthony H. Cordesman, they also have an impact on the potential rise of extremist and terrorist threats that could attack U.S. strategic partners, as well as the United States.¹⁷⁷ While this project only touches the surface of ISIS propaganda during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is a limitation in itself, it does aid in furthering literature about this topic.

In this project, I also uncovered the responses by non-governmental and governmental institutions. All in all, it is quite clear that work is being done to combat ISIS propaganda during the

¹⁷³ Speckhard, “PERSPECTIVE.”

¹⁷⁴ Shiroma Silva, “Islamic State: Giant Library of Group's Online Propaganda Discovered,” *British Broadcasting Corporation*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-54011034>.

¹⁷⁵ Silva, “Islamic State: Giant Library.”

¹⁷⁶ Gordon Corera, “ISIS ‘still evading detection Facebook’, report says,” *British Broadcasting Corporation*, July 13, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-53389657>.

¹⁷⁷ Anthony H. Cordesman, “The Real World Capabilities of ISIS: The Threat Continues,” *Center for Strategic & International Relations*, September 9, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/real-world-capabilities-isis-threat-continues>.

ongoing pandemic, as well as other disinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, researchers have noted the importance of certain changes that could be made by governments and non-governmental actors in responding to the propaganda and disinformation. As reported by Chelsea Daymon and Meili Criezis, “identifying possible points of contention within an online ecosystem like that of the Islamic State may present an opportunity for counterterrorism-focused strategies to capitalize on discrepancies found in community content and official products.”¹⁷⁸ In discussing this further, Maywadee Viriyapah, wrote, “the US should continue to monitor online chatter for indications of attacks, and work with partners to strengthen counter-narratives and properly educate vulnerable populations about the disease.”¹⁷⁹ Again, the responses by both governments and non-governmental actors has been significant, but many researchers believe more can be done.

A significant amount of knowledge can be gained from everything occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially as related to countering Islamic State propaganda. As written in a recent United Nations report, “it is essential to ensure that government counter-narrative strategies are consistent with their obligations pursuant to international human rights law. Measures aimed at censoring or removing online content must comply with the right to freedom of expression.”¹⁸⁰ In a similar report, it was expressed that, “the fight against terror should neither cease nor waver in the face of the pandemic. COVID-19 should in no way hinder the combat against terrorism. It is necessary to stay attuned to how ISIL threats continue to evolve...so that responses can be adjusted.”¹⁸¹ The United Nations point is significant, and reflects sentiments of many individuals focused on the field of international security. In an article from *International Crisis Group*, it was written that “if this pandemic disrupts existing international cooperation – or even sparks new conflict – ISIS is poised to capitalise.”¹⁸² My research project is just one small part of highlighting the ongoing terrorist propaganda and disinformation happening during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the fight against it by governments and non-governmental institutions around the world.

¹⁷⁸ Daymon, “Pandemic Narratives.”

¹⁷⁹ Viriyapah, “How COVID-19 has Emboldened.”

¹⁸⁰ United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee, “CTED Analytical Brief: Countering Terrorist Narratives Online and Offline,” April 29, 2020, <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/news/2020/04/29/cted-publishes-analytical-brief-countering-terrorist-narratives-online-offline/>.

¹⁸¹ United Nations Security Council, “Repatriating Detained Foreign Fighters, Their Families Key to Combating Threat Posed by Islamic State, Counter-Terrorism Officials Warn Security Council,” August 24, 2020, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14282.doc.htm>.

¹⁸² International Crisis Group, “Contending with ISIS.”

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