


BRAVE INSIGHT

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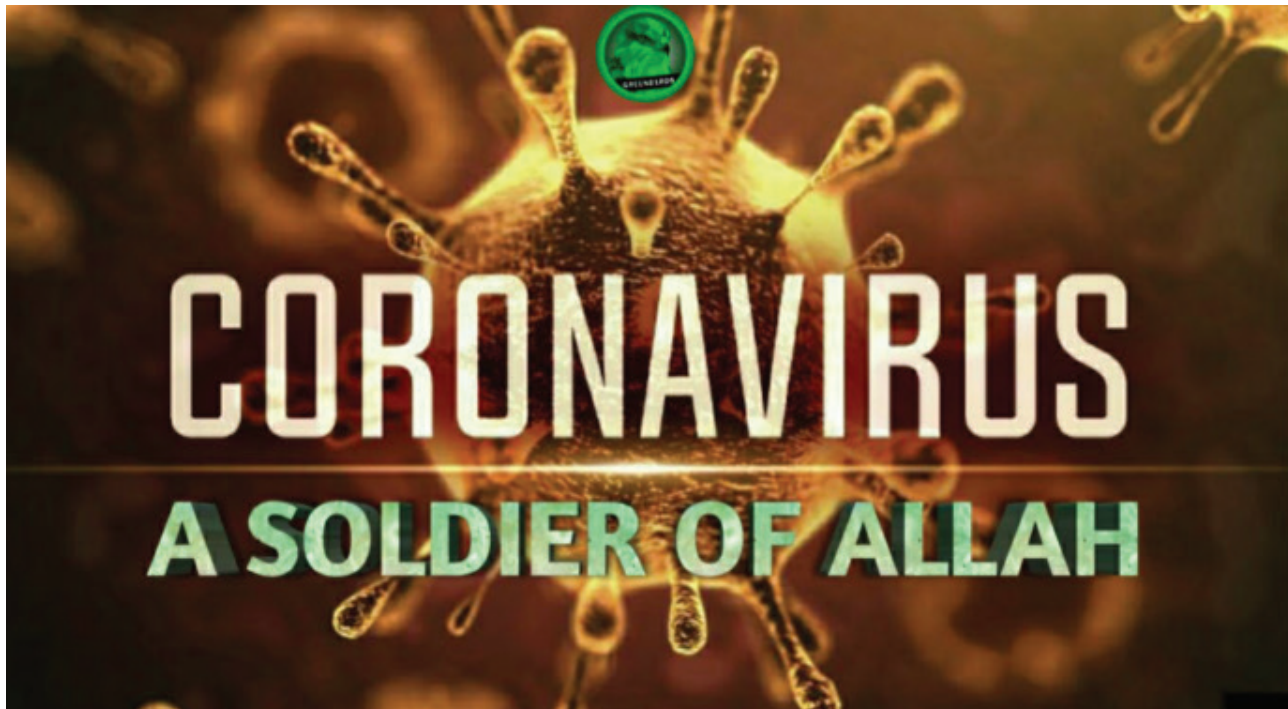


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COVID -19 Pandemic and Al Shabab's Operations

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has brought the world to a standstill from the time it was discovered in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. There is no cure or vaccine yet that has been discovered by the world epidemiologists. Violent extremists, however, have not only downplayed the COVID-19 and disregarded the WHO guidelines for prevention from the virus but they have taken advantage of it to mount terrorist attacks on their targets. *Harakat al Shabab al Mujahidin* (HSM) or al Shabab, the Somalia-based terror group and al Qaida affiliate in East Africa, has bolstered attacks as global attention focuses on fighting the deadly Coronavirus (COVID-19).

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ISIS infographic on coronavirus (Al Naba)

For decades, Somalia has been associated with inter-clan conflicts and al Shabab terrorism, which have derailed efforts to establish a functional state despite efforts to restore normalcy by international partners. Since the first COVID-19 case was reported on April 8, 2020, attention of the authorities in the impoverished Horn of Africa nation suddenly shifted from peace building to fighting COVID-19 pandemic with the rate of infections exponentially rising. As of May 17, 2020, Somalia had recorded 1284 COVID-19 confirmed cases and 53 deaths.

Exploiting the COVID-19 Crisis

Al Shabab has stepped up attacks against both Somalia government and the African Union peace-enforcement mission AMISOM exploiting COVID-19 pandemic. Al Shabab's persistent attacks are already impacting the COVID-19 response in Somalia. After the first cases were confirmed in Mogadishu, AMISOM and the U.S. military restricted operations in their camps which were partly turned into quarantine centers. This move could have emboldened the terror group.



Al Shabab leadership at a past press conference. The extremist group has intensified attacks at a time when the government is struggling to contain the spread of Coronavirus in the conflict-ridden country

At the beginning of April, they warned Muslims to beware of infectious diseases such as coronavirus when they said the diseases are spread by the crusaders who have invaded Somalia and the infidel allies who support them. Al Shabab militants control much of the countryside as well as several towns in southern and central Somalia, including some areas close to the capital, but surprisingly the group's leaders have made little effort to implement containment

measures including social distancing. The terror group has borrowed from ISIS, who had made a rallying call to its supporters to take advantage of the distraction of international actors and policy makers to radicalize and recruit more followers. ISIS, through its magazine, *al-Naba*, described the virus as a punishment for 'Crusader nations' and that the virus is God's smallest soldier fighting infidels. This narrative may have inspired al Shabab (Barak, 2020).



The scene of a bomb explosion that claimed three people in Mogadishu on January 8, 2020.

Al Shabab took advantage of unfortunate situation of COVID-19 to antagonize innocent civilians besides targeting security forces. For instance, the team detonated VBIEDs outside Barawe airport and a UPDF military base on Friday, April 24, 2020. AU Mission in Somalia claimed that the attack was thwarted by its forces which prevented a more devastating impact on its personnel. Besides the Friday raid, the militants also attacked Somali National Army (SNA) in Lower Shebelle the following Monday, killing six soldiers on the spot while several

others sustained serious wounds. Other attacks against the security forces were reported in Lower Jubba and central parts of the Somalia. Elsewhere, the militants were repulsed in Lower Jubba by a contingent of Kenya Defense Forces (KDF) troops. These escalating offensive operations come even after UN Chief Antonio Guterres asked armed groups across the world to embrace ceasefire, to "allow us to fight Coronavirus pandemic, which is also a danger to all of you" (Garowe Online, 2020).



Barawe Airport was targeted for attack by al Shabab insurgents but was thwarted by the AMISOM

On April 14, unidentified militants detonated an improvised explosive device (IED) targeting a Somali National Army convoy in Karan district of Somalia's capital Mogadishu. The blast injured four civilians. No militant group has claimed responsibility. Between March 26, 2020 and April 1, 2020, al Shabab staged seven IED attacks targeting Somali and African Union forces in Mogadishu (Daily Gulf of Aden Security Review).

These sustained attacks are lending credence to earlier speculations that terror groups such as al Shabab could take advantage of the shifting focus toward the COVID-19 pandemic to launch strikes. Somalia's confirmed coronavirus cases

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are rising every 24 hours. According to the Somalia's Ministry of Health, accurate statistics of infections cannot be achieved probably for lack of sufficient testing kits and inaccessibility of most parts of the country. In addition, the Mayor of Mogadishu was on record saying 500 deaths have been recorded and between 22 and 49 people are buried daily. The country has surpassed its East African counterparts; Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya. Somalia's situation is compounded by low levels of preparedness and ill-equipped hospitals, health centers, and dispensaries. Somalia's healthcare system has been ravaged by al Shabab's 14 year-long violence. The few remaining health care facilities run with the support from humanitarian agencies and foreign troops operating in the country. But still, these facilities are constantly threatened by the militant group.

In response to the spread of COVID-19, the Somalia government in Mogadishu has announced a range of measures to try and curb the

“If the government cares,” they said, “it should provide the mosques with temperature check gadgets for everyone who enters the mosques.”

virus. This include suspension of all international flights arriving or leaving the country, a dusk-to-dawn curfew in Mogadishu and the closure of schools and universities. Citizens are being urged to pray at home, not at mosques.

Troops also moved in to provide essential supplies such as food and water to the population, but the attacks by the militant group have forced the armies to end the humanitarian activities and turn their focus to countering al Shabab, rather than helping fight COVID-19. The speed at which humanitarian aid moves during the COVID-19 pandemic will largely depend on the security of the aid workers. In the past, al Shabab killed or abducted aid workers for ransom or ambushed relief aid convoys for food. In 2011 and 2012, al Shabab resisted the delivery of relief aid during a famine that left at least 250,000 people dead. This makes the fear of al Shabab disrupting campaign against COVID-19 a reality and will likely continue to exploit the outbreak by stepping up its operations, forcing international and regional security forces to focus on reducing the threat of al Shabab instead of ensuring anti-COVID-19 guidelines are adhered to. While teams delivered aid, elsewhere al Shabab fighters would be detonating IEDs, carrying out assassinations, or engaging in battles with security forces.

Al Shabab's Rhetorical Tropes Regarding COVID-19

Al Shabab has openly disregarded public health warnings from the government, which the group

views as illegitimate. The group has resisted closing down the vast networks of crowded mosques and Islamic schools in areas under its control. They addressed this in a press release following a “consultative forum” held in southern Somalia in mid-March where senior al Shabab clerics and ideologues issued fatwas and blamed the virus’ transmission on the presence of forces from Christian-majority nations as they played down measures taken by Governments at a time when most other clerics in the Horn of Africa were closing down their mosques, following official advice. They were reluctant and warned Muslims against rushing to shut down mosques and criticizing some clerics who supported the closures.

“If the government cares,” they said, “it should provide the mosques with temperature check gadgets for everyone who enters the mosques.” They blamed the virus on the “increase in human sins” and what they called rampant “evil” in the world today, including homosexuality and other vices, and said only Allah can halt it. They added that COVID-19 affected only the enemies of Islam as a divine punishment, especially China, which was being punished for its persecution of Uighur Muslims. They held that coronavirus is “a punishment from Allah to the infidels for their evil, and for standing against sharia implementation in Muslim lands.” The “jihadists” prayers have been accepted by Allah,” they claimed, and that “God is taking revenge on the infidels who disobeyed His wishes.”

Among the agenda of the forum included al Shabab leadership and community leaders and as well as the group’s ongoing campaign against the Somali Federal Government (SFG). Among the fatwas issued was denouncing upcoming Somali federal elections and cursing of AFRICOM’s airstrike campaign.

COVID-19: A Violent Extremists' Narrative

As we have seen above, they are theories created and used by violent extremists as narratives to gain sympathy and, subsequently, new recruits. Below is a summary of those narratives and others and how to counter them.

Violent Extremists COVID-19 Narratives, Counter Narratives, and Alternative Narratives

NARRATIVE	COUNTER NARRATIVE	ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE
The virus' transmission is caused by the presence of forces from Christian-majority nations	Muslims and Muslim Countries are affected, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, UAE to name but a few	1. Muslim physicians and other scientists should join hands with others to find cure for COVID-19.
Al Shabab has labeled Somali Federal Government (SFG) officials apostates in the past and argued that the government is leading Muslims astray	It is haram to label Muslim with infidelity in Islam	2. One of the companions of the Prophet, Usama Ibn Sharik, said, I was with Prophet Muhammad when a Bedouin came to ask him, do we need to take treatment of illnesses? He answered "Yes, oh servants of God, take medicine, for God Almighty has not created a disease without having created its remedy except for one," when he was asked what that disease was, he replied, "old age".
Denouncing upcoming Somali federal elections illegitimate	Electing leaders is allowed in Sharia and the practice of <i>Khulafa al Rashidun</i>	3. Obedience of the rules of cleanliness in Islam (which are not different from what WHO is encouraging) is the beginning of repulsing COVID-19
Virus is on the rise because of the "increase of human sins" and rampant "evil" in the world today, including homosexuality and other vices	During Prophet Muhammad's time calamities befell Muslims. Allah may bring the pandemics as test of <i>iman</i> . Allah says: "Do men think that they will be left alone on saying, "We believe", and that they will not be tested? Indeed, We did test those before them, and Allah will certainly know those who are true from those who are false." Quran 29:1-2	4. Working for government, involving everyone, is commendable in Islam for success of human development emulating the Prophet when he was establishing Madinah State
COVID-19 affected only the enemies of Islam, specifically referring to China, which he argued was being punished for its persecution of Uighur Muslims	Muslim countries are affected including the holiest cities of Makkah and Madinah	
The coronavirus is "a punishment from Allah to the infidels for their evil, and for standing against sharia implementation in Muslim lands." He added that "jihadists' prayers have been accepted by Allah," and that "God is taking revenge on the infidels who disobeyed his wishes."	Muslims and Muslim Countries are affected, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, UAE among others	

NARRATIVE	COUNTER NARRATIVE	ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE
The coronavirus and other diseases are spread by the crusaders who have invaded Somalia and the infidel allies who support them	The holiest mosques are closed, Kaaba in Makkah and the prophet's mosque in Madinah	
Malls and markets are operational as well as public transport, but mosques are closed allegedly they may spread COVID -19	It is allowed in Islam to distance people from any location that may cause harm, whatever that place maybe	
The lockdown of Eastleigh Location in Nairobi, and Mombasa's Old Town (both Muslim dominated areas) due to COVID-19 is a conspiracy to antagonize Muslim in this region of Africa	"When you hear that [a plague] is in a land, do not go to it and if it occurs in a land that you are already in, then do not leave it, fleeing from it," Sahih al Bukhari	

Involvement of Religious Leaders in the War against COVID-19 and Extremism

At the beginning of May 2020, a group of religious leaders led by the senior cleric in Somalia, Sheikh Ali Dheere, offered to partner with the government

in order to contain both al Shabab militants and coronavirus pandemic through a major campaign for public awareness. Resources will be made



Somalia's most senior cleric Sheikh Ali Dheere. The cleric has issued a warning about the dangers of Coronavirus

available including car-mounted loud speakers to move to all parts of Mogadishu for this purpose. The government officials are optimistic of the involvement of religious leaders in this programme. The messages will include religious elements, a move which is aimed at dispelling propaganda. COVID-19 prevention methods will be one of the topics to be discussed, including hand-washing and social distancing, but also speak of how Islam encourages cleanliness such as ablutions before prayers, and how dangerous diseases are at the life time of Prophet Muhammad.

New Normal: Post-COVID-19 Fight against Violent Extremism

But perhaps the greatest mid- to long-term consequences may be the destabilization of state. Failing economies brought about by stay-at-home orders, falling oil prices, and the limited and thorough checks at countries' entry points and probably check on COVID-19 inoculation will be the norm. Anti-government protests will likely emerge as the pandemic wanes as more recruitment to violent extremism escalate.

Some states will attempt to use the lockdowns and curfews flex their muscles, as complaints of police brutality are already on the rise. This, however, will likely cause more backlash when restrictions are lifted while some government may use the aftermath of the crisis to muzzle their opposition and even independent media. This will increase grievances and vulnerabilities which al Shabab and other violent extremist groups can exploit at will.

Further collapse of Somalia will increase pressure on its neighbors in the Horn of Africa region as the citizens of Somalia with dual citizenship have already started departing their motherland, Somalia. The economies of the countries in the region have already been weakened by the effects of COVID-19. It may be difficult to sustain the influx from any of the neighbors without further support.

The government officials are optimistic of the involvement of religious leaders in this programme

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