

## **Extremists see global chaos from coronavirus as an opportunity**

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**Johannesburg:** Both the Islamic State group and al-Qaida see the coronavirus as a threat, but some of their fighters also see the upheaval from the pandemic as an opportunity to win over more supporters and strike harder than before.

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Al-Qaida suggested in a statement Tuesday that non-Muslims use their time in quarantine to learn about Islam.

But in a sharp commentary in its al-Naba newsletter in mid-March, IS urged followers to show no mercy and launch attacks in this time of crisis.

In a commentary Tuesday, the International Crisis Group warned that the pandemic threatens the global solidarity that is key to fighting extremists.

It is almost certainly correct that COVID-19 will handicap domestic security efforts and international counter-ISIS cooperation, allowing the jihadists to better prepare spectacular terror attacks, it said.

Though analysts said it was too soon to say which attacks can be blamed on militants exploiting the coronavirus, Islamic extremists in late March carried out their deadliest assault yet against the military of Chad, a significant contributor to Africa's growing counterterrorism efforts, killing at least 92 soldiers near the border with Nigeria and Niger.

In Egypt, two military officials reported a spike in IS attacks in March in the restive northern part of the Sinai Peninsula but security forces foiled at least three other major assaults. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief the media.

While Syria and Iraq have seen no uptick in attacks by IS since the virus spread there, the pandemic has prompted the U.S.-led coalition to halt training activities in Iraq amid a planned pullout from several bases.

There are signs elsewhere that the U.S., British and other militaries are pulling back because of the virus, leaving a possible opening for the extremists.

That's a danger in Africa's hot spots of the Sahel, the Lake Chad region and Somalia, where the U.S. military already worried allies in recent months by contemplating cuts to focus on threats from China and Russia.

Any state that was interested in pulling back in Africa will take the opportunity to do so, said Clionadh Raleigh, executive director of the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, which tracks extremists' activities worldwide. That will be unbelievably bad.

A US Africa Command spokeswoman, Lt. Christina Gibson, told The Associated Press that while the size and scope of some AFRICOM activities have been adjusted to ensure the safety and protection of forces both U.S. and partner nation our commitment to Africa endures.

She did not give details of affected operations but said AFRICOM still has about 5,200 forces on the continent at any given time.

The British army mission in Kenya, which provides counterterrorism training and other skills, this week announced that all army families are returning to the U.K. because of the virus.

But France's largest overseas military mission, Barkhane in West Africa's sprawling Sahel region south of the Sahara Desert, is keeping its 5,100 troops there, the French Defense Ministry said. A pro-al-Qaida French organization issued a statement Tuesday urging French forces to stay home and save lives instead.

African military units, already stretched thin and under attack, are likely to take protective measures as the virus threatens their ranks.

In Nigeria, which has struggled against the Boko Haram extremist group and an assertive IS-linked offshoot, the military has called for suspending much of its activities including large gatherings and training.

- AP