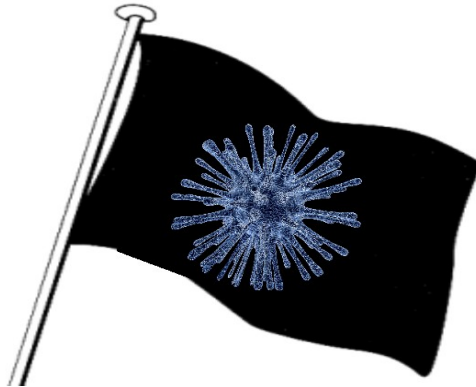


# The CREOGN Research Notes

French Gendarmerie Officers Academy Research Centre

Issue 48 – April 2020

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## COVID-19 AND TERRORISM : THREAT ASSESSMENT IN A PANDEMIC CONTEXT

While the global Covid-19 pandemic has afflicted more than two million people worldwide<sup>1</sup>, the western security situation remains a concern. In France, domestic security forces are engaged in multiple fronts : crisis management within institutions, enforcing the lockdown rules, issuing fines to offenders<sup>2</sup> and carrying out their daily missions...While they have to deal with lockdown-related issues (domestic violence, riots in detention facilities in particular), they must face every situation with a reduced number of personnel while taking into account the risks of infection. In this difficult context, the terrorist threat remains high, as shown by the attack in Romans-sur-Isère in which a radicalized individual killed two people with a knife and injured five others<sup>3</sup>. The arrest of four Tajik nationals in Germany on April 15, in possession of heavy weapons and preparing attacks in the name of ISIS, is another example. Over the past few weeks, jihadist groups (I), but also far-right (II) and far-left (III) movements have capitalised on the opportunities created by this global health crisis. The spread of Covid-19 has become a propaganda tool to justify their ideology, but also an element to be taken into account in their modus operandi. A comparative approach to the threat in this specific context could help to anticipate, or even prevent, any potential attack.

### I) Jihadists, divine justification and opportunity in the Iraqi-Syrian area

The Islamic State group's strategy regarding the pandemic has evolved in recent weeks. As early as January 2020, ISIS propagandists were rejoicing the spread of the virus in China, considering it as punishment for the Chinese government's treatment of the Uyghur minority. The same arguments were repeated when the health crisis affected Shiite Iran. With the spread of Covid-19 in Europe, the terrorist rhetoric has evolved. In the March 2020 issue of the propaganda newspaper Al-Naba, ISIS encouraged its affiliates to avoid "the land of the epidemic," namely Europe, and listed a series of recommendations (wash hands, limit contact), as the first cases were detected in Iraq<sup>4</sup>. Online, the virus is described as a "punishment from God" against the "Crusaders", a "soldier of Allah" to help the jihad<sup>5</sup>. With the pandemic coming a year after the loss of their stronghold in Baghuz, ISIS propaganda describes it as divine vengeance. When the British Prime Minister became infected, they released pictures of him shaking hands with the US President, predicting that all Western leaders would soon be infected.

1 Figures on April 16th, 2020.

2 Over 700,000 tickets were recorded in four weeks of lockdown.

3 LE MONDE with FPA, « Attaque au couteau de Romans-sur-Isère : trois Soudanais en garde à vue » *lemonde.fr*; April 5th, 2020. [https://www.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2020/04/05/attaque-au-couteau-de-romans-sur-isere-trois-soudanais-en-garde-a-vue\\_6035631\\_1653578.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/police-justice/article/2020/04/05/attaque-au-couteau-de-romans-sur-isere-trois-soudanais-en-garde-a-vue_6035631_1653578.html)

4 HERNANDEZ-MORALES, Aitor, ISIS tells terrorists to steer clear of coronavirus-stricken Europe , March, 15th, 2020, *politico.eu*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-isis-terrorists-europe/>

5 GW Program on Extremism.

Some supporters also claim that those who support jihad won't be infected, as the virus is a divine punishment targeting only infidels. A significant part of the propaganda around Covid-19 takes up a frequent theme of the Islamic State group: the end of the world. A recent *Foreign Policy* article shows a sharp increase in content about the "Madhi", a redemptive figure in Islamic doctrine, which would announce the arrival of the Last Judgement<sup>6</sup>. ISIS is also aware of the economic and other vulnerabilities that may emerge in the Western world and their consequences in the Iraqi-Syrian area. The Islamic State has raised the possibility of taking advantage of the withdrawal of NATO troops from Baghdad<sup>7</sup>, associated with the health crisis in the refugee camps, to free its imprisoned militants. A first escape occurred on March 30, 2020, in Hasakah, Syria<sup>8</sup>, although the link with the humanitarian crisis isn't proven. However, ISIS is not the only jihadist group which communicates about Covid-19 pandemic. One of al-Qaeda's media branches, "Kifah Media," also ironized the presence of French troops in Sahel as the health crisis hits the mainland accusing the French government of targeting the wrong priority. Beyond propaganda actions, the Romans-sur-Isère stabbing attack shows the capacity of the jihadist movement to strike, while law-enforcement is working in harsh conditions. Some extremists have theorized that the attack may have been a diversion organized by the French government to cover up its handling of the health crisis. Others welcomed the implementation of protective measures, arguing that wearing masks to conceal the face, the lack of contact, and closing drinking establishments proved that sharia law was the only method to stop the pandemic.

## II) Far-right groups, conspiracy and voluntary contamination.

If in France, the far-right movement doesn't account for the same importance threat as jihadism, its militants have nevertheless taken into account the Covid-19 pandemic in their actions. Taking a cue from the American radical right groups, which already use the virus as an instrument of propaganda, conspiracy justifications proliferate. As with the jihadists, anti-Semitic explanations blaming Israel or ZOG<sup>9</sup> are common. Some activists also refer to the health crisis as a conspiracy fomented by the New World Order elites against the population. The pandemic is said to have been fabricated by the federal government in order to "enslave the population" through freedom restrictive measures. Finally, the "anti-immigration" fringe of the far-right movement considers the health crisis to stem from migratory movements and the "multicultural society", thereby making a scapegoat. Beyond this distortion of the facts by the ideological prism, far-right militants have also perceived the advantages of such a crisis. The coronavirus outbreak was first used to justify attacks on Asian minorities accused of being responsible for the spread of the virus<sup>10</sup>. As the virus spread and the situation worsened worldwide, propagandists of the Western far-right movement saw the pandemic as an opportunity to test the theory of "accelerationism"<sup>11</sup>. This theory, first promoted by Marxist theorists, is defined by the desire to accelerate the collapse of our societies. Its promoters consider that the Western world (or the "white race") is on the verge of destruction in the face of a series of supposed adversaries (Jews, global finance, immigration) and that the solution is to speed up this downfall in order to start an open conflict which will lead to a takeover by their far-right-wing activists. Despite the importance of law and order in the far right's doctrine, its members now accept this period of anomie as necessary for a social renewal. In the context of the Covid-19 crisis, "accelerationist" actions have taken various forms. In the United Kingdom, the *British National Socialist Movement* recommended that its Covid-19-infected activists "visit their local synagogue and/or mosque," noting that "prolonged exposure to an [ethnically] diverse environment was beneficial in the short and long term". Online calls to infect various targets (elected officials, law enforcement, minorities), either by coughing

6 MALIK, Nikita, Self-Isolation Might Stop Coronavirus, but It Will Speed the Spread of Extremism , March 26th, 2020, *Foreign Policy*: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/26/self-isolation-might-stop-coronavirus-but-spread-extremism/>

7 «Le coronavirus vide l'Irak de ses troupes internationales», *courrierinternational.com*, March 26th, 2020. <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/defense-le-coronavirus-vide-lirak-de-ses-troupes-internationales>

8 MCKERNAN, Bethan, Islamic State prisoners escape from Syrian jail after militants riot , March 30th, 2020, *theguardian.com*: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/30/islamic-state-prisoners-escape-from-syrian-jail-after-militants-riot>

9 Zionist Occupied Government is a recurring theory among ultra-right activists.

10 Op-Ed: Trump's racist comments are fueling hate crim against Asian Americans. Time for sate leaders to step in, R. Jeung, M. Kulkarni, C. Choi, *latimes.com (Los Angeles Times)*, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-04-01/coronavirus-anti-asian-discrimination-threats>

11 White Supremacists Embrace "Accelerationism", *homelandsecuritynewswire.com (Homeland Security News Wire)*, April 26th, 2020. <http://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20200226-white-supremacists-embrace-accelerationism>

on them or by using "spray bottles<sup>12</sup>", have increased in recent weeks. The far-right threat can also take more violent forms. On last March 24, Timothy Wilson, 36, was shot and killed by the FBI during a counter-terrorist operation in Belton, Missouri. After months of plotting an attack on a synagogue, a mosque or an African-American high school, he finally chose to carry out a car bombing on a hospital because of the number of potential victims during this health crisis. In his final online posts, he stated, "this whole thing was created by the Jews ... we are the only ones standing in their way<sup>13</sup>".

### III) Ultra-left groups, anarchists and environmental terrorists: an evolving threat.

The ultra-left and anarchist movement also seems to be radicalizing on the French territory. Ever since a parcel bomb was sent to the Paris headquarters of the IMF by the Greek anarchist group "Conspiracy of Fire Cells<sup>14</sup>", a series of arson attacks on institutions in the Grenoble area have been claimed by the "independent" branch of the movement. The lockdown measures put in place on March 17, 2020 seem to have put French anarchist groups under pressure. If some of them stick to a classic protest approach, by planning demonstrations once the lockdown measures are lifted, others break the law. As a matter of fact, some groups have called for civil disobedience, refusing to present the required exemption certificate<sup>15</sup> or preferring a "revolutionary certificate". Some have already called for violence. On March 25, 2020, damage in the town of Bouguenais (Loire-Atlantique), inscriptions announcing "Save a life, cough on a cop", "also hang the pigs" were thus attributed to the ultra-left<sup>16</sup>. Some groups have already opposed to the potential use of applications to track the spread of the virus during the upcoming decontamination phase, and have accused Linky meters or 5G antennas<sup>17</sup> of weakening the immune system<sup>18</sup>. The phantasmal specter of a "Big Brother" state which takes advantage of the crisis to "militarize the public space" and strengthens its hold on the population is often brandished by these activists. Calls for social protest for the "day after" create a conducive climate for rioting<sup>19</sup>. An upsurge in violence, targeting police forces, is therefore a possibility. Extremist environmental groups also promote a radical ideology, aiming at the reduction<sup>20</sup> or even annihilation of the human species<sup>21</sup> for the sake of environmental protection. The "eco-extremist" group *Individualistas Tendiendo a lo Salvaje*, for example, committed parcel bomb attacks in Mexico (Monterrey and Mexico City) in 2011, before shooting a biotechnology researcher. Then, they extended their actions to Brazil, targeting security forces in 2013, 2014 and 2016, and then to Chile, striking a university in 2018. For these individuals, the ecological benefits of the virus (reduction of carbon dioxide production in particular) outweigh the human losses and this pandemic - regarded as nature's work - can legitimize their rhetoric, facilitate recruitment and intensify their action.

As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to spread, terrorism remains a threat. Jihadist and radical movements have taken the current health and security crisis on board and are considering opportunities for possible actions.

12 A plastic bottle filled with body fluids (mainly saliva), with a pierced cap, that can be used to contaminate someone.

13 FBI Foils Neo-Nazi Plot to Blow Up Missouri Hospital, *homelandsecuritynewswire.com* (Homeland Security News Wire), March 27th, 2020 <http://www.homelandsecuritynewswire.com/dr20200327-fbi-foils-neo-nazi-plot-to-blow-up-missouri-hospital>

14 « Explosion d'un colis piégé au siège du FMI à Paris : Hollande dénonce un attentat », *lemonde.fr*, March 16th, 2017. [https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2017/03/16/une-personne-blessee-au-siege-du-fmi-a-paris-lors-de-l-ouverture-d-un-courrier-piege\\_5095546\\_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2017/03/16/une-personne-blessee-au-siege-du-fmi-a-paris-lors-de-l-ouverture-d-un-courrier-piege_5095546_3224.html)

15 « Il sort plusieurs fois sans attestation : deux mois ferme et 800 euros d'amende », *nouvelobs.com*, March 31st, 2020. <https://www.nouvelobs.com/coronavirus-de-wuhan/20200331.OBS26844/il-sort-plusieurs-fois-sans-attestation-deux-mois-ferme-et-800-euros-d-amende.html>

16 « Coronavirus. À Nantes, il crache sur un policier pour le « contaminer » », *ouest-france.fr*, March 26th, 2020. <https://www.ouest-france.fr/pays-de-la-loire/nantes-44000/coronavirus-a-nantes-il-crache-sur-un-policier-pour-le-contaminer-8935e220-6e93-11ea-b58a-1b529c4a1942>

17 In the UK, several 5G phone antennas have been destroyed by arson for the same reasons.

18 « L'urgence c'est la santé, la solidarité, pas la 5G, ni de nous pister », *lenumerozero.lautre.net* (NumerO zero), April 8th, 2020. <https://lenumerozero.lautre.net/L-urgence-c-est-la-sante-la-solidarite-pas-la-5G-ni-de-nous-pister>

19 « Coronavirus: les policiers des services de renseignement redoutent l'embrasement après le confinement », *actupenit.com*, April 12th, 2020. <https://actupenit.com/2020/04/12/coronavirus-les-policiers-des-services-de-renseignement-redoutent-lembasement-apres-le-confinement/>

20 Voluntary Human Extinction Movement, for example.

21 Church of Euthanasia, for example.



Their attacks also trigger a phenomenon of mutual radicalization, as the responses of the far-right movement to the jihadist attack in Romans-sur-Isère have shown. It is interesting to note that the progression of their respective propaganda follows similar stages: first an explanation of the nature of the pandemic ("divine will" on the one hand, "global conspiracy", "replica of nature", "work of capitalism" on the other), followed by fanciful anti-Semitic, anti-American, anti-system accusations, and then an alarmist discourse on the collapse of the current world. These announcements are mostly followed by a discussion of the crisis as a strategic opportunity to be exploited. It is therefore relevant to anticipate their potential modes of action in order to counter them. A strong criminal response against intentional contamination actions is required. The U.S. Justice Department recently drafted a memorandum indicating that cases of intentional contamination could be prosecuted as terrorist offenses, adding that "threats or attempts to use COVID-19 virus against the American people won't be tolerated<sup>22</sup>". In Australia, the punishment is life imprisonment. The possibility of an attack on a crowded hospital should also be considered. The failed attack in Belton, Missouri, proves that the threat is real. Beyond the usual adversaries mentioned above, it is also important to note that this crisis situation can generate actions by individuals who are not affiliated to extremist groups. On March 28, 2020, Eduardo Moreno attempted to throw the locomotive he was driving against a U.S. Navy hospital ship in San Pedro, California. Without any affiliation, the 34-year-old man said he wanted to "wake people up" because "[the government] is organizing segregation" and the ship is not there "for announced reasons<sup>23</sup>". This type of violent acts, committed by an individual with no criminal record, triggered by a series of factors linked to the coronavirus outbreak, is bound to be repeated and should encourage the domestic security forces to be particularly vigilant. In this crisis situation, and despite the degraded conditions, radical movements seek any possible way to exploit the surrounding chaos for their own ends.

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*Translated by ASP Delphine CORREARD and the French Gendarmerie Officers Academy Language Department*

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22 Memorandum « Department of Justice Enforcement Actions Related to COVID-19 », *politico.com*, March 24th, 2020. <https://www.politico.com/f/?id=00000171-128a-d911-aff1-becb9b530000>

23 FLYNN, Meagan, « Engineer intentionally crashes train near hospital ship Mercy, believing in weird coronavirus conspiracy, feds say », April 2nd, 2020, *washingtonpost.com (The Washington Post)*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/04/02/train-derails-usns-mercy-coronavirus/>