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Covid-19's operational and propaganda effects on extremist groups

Covid-19 has had an undeniable effect on all aspects of life including work, school, and recreational activities. Another area that the pandemic has had an outsized effect is on groups with extremist motivations and agendas. This effect has run the spectrum from Islamic radicalism in the Middle East and North Africa to white nationalistic militia groups in Europe, Russia, and the United States. These groups are determined to reach out to their constituents and to take advantage in word and deed during this time of change and confusion. However, since the pandemic is affecting national governments it is forcing them to relocate resources to "fight" the pandemic which could just be the wiggle room that allows militant operatives to operate more freely or with justification because they are seen as service providers where the government is not present. This situation is fluid and complex and I intended to show how these groups are leveraging it to their benefit. No place presents this complex problem as well as Somalia and Al-Shabab.

Al-Shabab is a Sunni Islamist radical group that was founded under the name Islamic Courts Union in 1991 during the Somali civil war. This group was founded to try and bring some order to the country under a Sharia system of rule of law during the crisis. In regards to the COVID 19 pandemic Somalia has largely been spared from mass infection rates and death as of mid year. However, this could only appear to be the case because the testing capacity of the central government is almost non-existent. There are increased reports of burials and the government does not report or have the surveillance infrastructure to be able to report accurate mortality and morbidity statistics. COVID-19 has also had an economic effect in that it has had a severe effect on remittances from relatives working abroad. That revenue stream and general extortion of local business constitutes the main sources of money for the group to carry out its activities. In regards to propaganda about the virus the group has stayed most quiet. However, their division for policy and state has issued statements to the effect that the virus being in Somalia is the result of the "Crusaders" who "invade" the country which is a dangerous proposition trying to tie virology to religion to a uneducated population. The same group also continues to call for violence during the pandemic by issuing statements to drive the crusaders out of the country. Al-Shabab spokesperson Ali Dheere made statements during a speech in which he implied foreign forces in the country intentionally spread the virus and that Muslims should not accept treatment from non-Muslims. This is dangerous because Al-Shabab is ill equipped to deal with the issue lacking scientific understanding, testing, and treatment options which mostly come from foreign NGOs. However, Al-Shabab has reportedly established a quarantine facility in its heart land of Jilib, Middle Juba and they also urged people to live healthy lifestyles and that business not raise their prices to prohibitively expensive prices.

Al-Shabab for all its faults is effective in providing day to day services to the populations under its control. It does this by exploiting local grievances and using brutality and fear to

suppress any dissent. They operate a string of shadow ministries to allocate these resources most importantly the justice that is administered by local custom rather than federal law called “Xeer.” Another way that the group maintains control is by operating checkpoints. It historically has not abused the local population as other clan militias giving it a sense of normalcy. However it is known to impose strict zakat tax and high levies on harvests on bantu peoples. During the famine of 2010-2011 the group “outsourced” responsibilities to NGO’s because they are not equipped to handle large scale problems so individual commanders issued “registration fees” further benefiting from the suffering in the country. Eventually driven by US counter-terrorism legislation and concerns about spying from Al-Shabab the aid was cut off. Another past example where the group tried to exert its control during a crisis was in 2017 when there was a drought with concurrent outbreaks of cholera and measles. During that time period the group banned foreign intervention on the premise that foreign aid distorts local economies. They over promised a logistics program to distribute livestock, food, water and even money but the effort was not tenable. This crisis is distinct from past incidents because they were set off by conflict in the form of civil war that doesn’t currently exist in the country. Also, it coincides with consequences from the locust swarms that devastated crops which has the potential to inflame health outcomes. Like all organizations Al-Shabab is subjected to leadership struggle which is currently leading to perceived lack of leadership along with loss of towns along the River Shabelle to Somalian federal forces. However, the group could leverage to virus because federal forces are deployed in less dense formations and deployed elsewhere. In this regard the groups operations have been stifled however they executed a vehicle bombing assassinating a the governor of Mudug and three bodyguards in the northern town of Galkayo. They also carried out mortar attacks the airport in the capital. These groups depend on the implicit support of the public however this support has waned from panned famine relief and high civilian attacks in the capital so this pandemic could serve as a inflection point for the groups future. Another issue is the financial problems because Al-Shabab relies on extortion, racketeering, imposing land and crop levies. These revenue sources are a main reason why the group has had the longevity it has enjoyed over the past 20 years. These money problems present the most realistic chances of more break up of the group over debates about expenditure of scarce resources. Also, the group’s strategy of appropriation, patronage, and violence will do little if anything to stop the spread because they do not have the capability to provide ventilators or intensive care units.

COVID-19 presents unique problems across the world. However arguably Somalia presents the most complicated and challenging set of problems because of its environmental problems and armed groups that deliver day to day solutions but can’t respond to complex problems. Also Al-Shabab has demonstrated incredible longevity over ten years of war however the virus could serve as catalyst to break it up over financial differences.