



REBEL GOVERNANCE DURING COVID-19:
DESCRIBING AND EXPLAINING ARMED GROUPS' RESPONSES TO THE PANDEMIC
IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Topic Under Investigation

- As Covid-19 has been spreading worldwide, not only governments but also armed groups (especially those that rule over territories and people) have been inevitably called to face the crisis. However, still very little is known with respect to the responses implemented by armed groups to address the pandemic.
- While a body of scholarly literature has been developing in recent years that studies how armed groups provide governance in those territories that fall outside the control of the state, academic knowledge is limited when it comes to how armed groups respond to external shocks such as famines, droughts, natural calamities, and health emergencies
- Thus, while over the past two years studies have been devoted to states' responses to the coronavirus pandemic, much less attention has been paid to non-states' responses

Research Aims

- *Describe* the different responses that different armed groups throughout the Middle East have been implementing to address the pandemic
- *Explain* why armed groups have responded to the pandemic as they have
- Academic Relevance: address the lacuna currently existing in the scholarly knowledge on the relationship between shocks unrelated to the conflict dynamics and rebel governance and, more specifically, the effect that those external shocks might have on the decisions that rebels take in their function as rulers
- Policy Relevance: inform effective approaches to violent non-state actors in times of crisis as well as inform realistic strategies of humanitarian intervention in the territories under the control of rebel groups

Covid-19 Response Continuum

Null

No action
Disinformation

Minimal

Preventive measures

Intermediate

Preventive measures
Proactive joint measures

Extensive

Preventive measures
Proactive joint measures
Proactive independent measures

Possible Explanatory Factors

- **Ultimate goals** - secessionist and ethno-nationalist armed groups are more likely to engage in extensive emergency governance; non-secessionist and non-ethno-nationalist armed groups are less likely to invest in extensive governance responses in times of emergency
- **Financial resources** – armed groups who depend on civilians to access financial resources are more likely to engage in extensive governance efforts when faced with a crisis; armed groups who do not depend on civilians to access financial resources are more likely to refrain from extensive governance efforts even in times of crisis
- **Conflict intensity** – armed groups engaged in high-intensity conflicts are unlikely to engage in governance efforts, even when faced with emergencies; armed groups engaged in low-intensity conflicts are more likely to engage in emergency governance efforts
- **Governance experience** – armed groups with poor governance experience (in the area affected by the crisis) are likely to lack the capacity to address emergencies; armed groups with significant governance experience are likely to have the capacity to respond to emergencies in somewhat extensive ways

Methodology

- Case studies

- ❖ Hayat Tahrir al-Sham – Syria

- ❖ Hamas - Gaza

- ❖ Houthis - Yemen

- Armed groups engaged in some form of (at least minimal) governance
- Different responses to the Covid-19 pandemic
- Some relevant differences with respect to the potential explanatory factors

- Data

- ❖ Primary sources

- ❖ Secondary sources

- Administrative documents, newsletters, speeches and audio messages, videos and images
- Reports by humanitarian organizations, aid agencies, and humanitarian personnel
- Scholarly and journalistic articles

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

- Instructions to civilians on how to behave
- Cooperation with humanitarian organizations (e.g. vaccination)
- Medical checks on all in-bound travelers
- Opening of quarantine centers
- Distribution of food to people in quarantine
- Sterilization of public places
- Closure of public places (e.g. schools)
- Controls on respect of regulations in markets

Houthis

- Disinformation campaign (promotion of conspiracy theories)
- Intimidation of journalists and healthcare workers to suppress information
- Military recruitment campaigns as “antidote” against the virus
- Establishment of a Higher Ministerial Committee for Combating Epidemics
- Organization of big mass events
- Refusal to distribute vaccines to the population
- Obstruction of humanitarian organizations

Hamas

- Closure of public spaces (e.g. markets)
- Prohibition of large gatherings
- Imposition of a 10-day general lockdown
- Imposition of compulsory quarantine on in-bound travellers
- Opening of quarantine centers
- Sterilization of public places
- Specialized training of medical personnel]
- Campaigns of public awareness
- Cooperation with Israel and humanitarian organizations in anti-Covid-19 logic

HTS, Houthis, Hamas & Covid-19 Governance

Null

Houthis

Minimal

Intermediate

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham

Extensive

HTS

Armed Groups and Humanitarian Actors

- Armed groups that depend on international recognition to reach their goals tend to engage in extensive governance efforts in times of emergency, in order to better address the crisis and prove their governance capacity to the international community. Armed groups that do not depend on international recognition to reach their goals do not tend to invest in emergency governance, as they are free(er) from the need to prove their governance credentials.
- Armed groups that depend on civilians to access financial resources tend to engage in governance responses to address crises, as an endangered population cannot engage in those productive activities on which the armed group's financial survival depends. Armed groups that do not depend on civilians to access financial resources do not tend to invest in governance in times of emergency, as the armed group's financial survival is unrelated to the people's well-being.

- Armed groups engaged in low-intensity conflict seem prone to invest resources in governance when confronted with an emergency. However, also armed groups engaged in high-intensity conflicts might feel incentivized to divert some of their resources to governance during times of emergency.
- Armed groups with a poor governance experience are not capable of engaging in extensive governance responses. Armed groups with some degree of governance experience have a greater capacity (in terms of facilities, personnel, and know-how) to address emergencies.

Armed Group	Ultimate Goal	Financial Resources	Conflict Intensity	Governance Experience	Covid-19 Response
HTS	Internationally recognized Islamic statelet	Dependent on civilians	High	Discrete	Intermediate/ Extensive
Houthis	Central power in Yemen	Not dependent on civilians	High	Very poor	Null/Minimal
Hamas	Islamic state in north-west Syria, internationally recognized	Dependent on civilians	Low	Significant	Extensive

Thank you

- Thank you for your time and for any comments you might want to share
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