Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, service-providing insurgent groups have responded differently, with some initiating more attacks amid ongoing destabilisation while others have immediately veered towards precautionary measures such as initiating public awareness campaigns and setting up quarantine centres. What drives these divergent responses? Relying on publicly available and semi-private sources, this article examines how the Taliban in Afghanistan, Ha’ayt Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria, and Al-Shabaab in Somalia have operationalised their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings reveal that the divergent responses are rooted in the framing of the pandemic discourse. The Taliban and HTS both interpreted it as a calamity that needs responding to and repurposed their activities accordingly by stepping up their attacks against combatants while concomitantly exploiting the humanitarian vacuum created by the pandemic by delivering health services. However, as the pandemic surged, the two groups gradually scaled down their combatant targeting and prioritised delivering health services to bolster their legitimacy and build popular support for their proto-states. By contrast, Al-Shabaab labelled the pandemic as a Western and Chinese ‘problem’, and made no visible changes to their operations in response to the crisis, only belatedly beginning to offer health services as the pandemic worsened.

Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has permeated and caused huge disruption in countries all over the world. It has significantly slowed economies and devastated healthcare systems and societies. As governments globally grapple with and deliberate the societal, economic, and political consequences of the pandemic, insurgent organisations across the ideological spectrum are seizing opportunities to manipulate the global upheaval and uncertainty to serve their interests. Most vocal have been service-providing insurgent groups, who are locked in pre-existing conflicts with regional and international coalitions (Institute for Global Change, 2020). The United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres declared that the pandemic poses ‘a significant threat to the
maintenance of international peace and security’ and urgently called for global ceasefires to aid responses to the coronavirus crisis (United Nations, 2020a). Insurgent groups’ responses to this clarion call and the ongoing crisis were varied. Some groups have ‘weaponised’ the crisis by initiating a fresh wave of attacks amid ongoing destabilisation (Al-Tamimi, 2020; Institute for Global Change, 2020; Jalloh, 2020). In contrast, others have proactively shifted towards the provision of in-demand services such as giving health advice, conducting public health awareness campaigns, and setting up ad hoc quarantine centres to isolate those suspected of carrying the virus (Sieff et al., 2020). Various commentators have highlighted these disparate conflicting responses (Abu Haneyeh, 2020; Bloom, 2020; Burke, 2020). Indeed, primarily regarded as exogenous shocks, disasters often disrupt politics as usual and alter the behaviours of warring parties (Pelling & Dill, 2006).

In a broader context than the specific COVID-19 crisis, there is a growing corpus of studies examining the causal relationship between disasters and conflict duration, termed by some scholars as dual disasters (Hyndman, 2014). Some scholars argue that insurgent groups often – and as part of their tactical agility – exploit situations following disasters. In particular, they have looked at how insurgent organisations use disasters as an opportunity to intensify their attacks against a distracted and overstretched state actor (Berrebi & Ostwald, 2011, 2013; Eastin, 2016) or seek to bolster their credibility and legitimacy as an emerging ‘state actor’ by declaring ceasefires and engaging in public relief efforts, or for instrumental benefits related to recruitment and control of their members (Berman & Laitin, 2008; Weinstein, 2006). However, the extant literature that identifies how disasters alter the dynamics of armed conflict and the motivations of insurgent groups has almost exclusively focused on natural disasters and, more importantly, lack ‘operational analyses’ of why and how violent non-state actors respond to disasters (Xu et al., 2016). Moreover, some of the scant literature on this tropic treat disaster responses by insurgent organisations as dichotomies, with a reductionist focus on a sole factor (e.g. increased or reduced conflict, facilitation or obstruction of relief efforts). The predominant understanding is that insurgent groups that employ terrorist tactics are rational actors and are thus adept at deploying or repurposing their existing strategies in order to achieve their political goals (Heger, 2015; Marcus, 2009; Shapiro, 2013).

To date, there has been limited coverage and a surprising lack of in-depth analysis on exactly how and why the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered divergent behavioural responses by insurgent groups engaged in a protracted civil war, with some groups carrying out increased attacks and thus exacerbating conflict while others have launched public health campaigns and set up quarantine centres. By drawing on the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) conflict dataset, existing scholarship, plus media reports, this article aims to fill this gap in the literature by examining how service-providing insurgent organisations are leveraging the COVID-19 crisis. More importantly, it looks at how such groups have operationalised their response to the coronavirus pandemic in the context of violent operations and the delivery of public health services. To do so, this article utilises a comparative case study between three distinct but broadly similar insurgent groups: the Taliban in Afghanistan, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria, and Harakat Al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (henceforth, Al-Shabaab) in Somalia.
The Taliban, HTS, and Al-Shabaab have similarities, even if their origins are very different. All three are considered the most powerful non-state actors operating in their respective active conflict zones, are designated as terrorist organisations by a host of countries, are engaged in a violent insurgency against regional and international coalitions, and control a large number of territories. More specific to the context of this article, all three groups are recognised to have a governance system in place and have, for years, delivered basic but essential services to those under their rule, including education, public health and medical services, as well ‘justice’ alongside the imposition of ‘coercive security’ (Jackson, 2018; Marchal, 2018).

The structure of the article is as follows. The first two sections will provide brief histories of the Taliban, HTS, and Al-Shabaab and briefly look at how their communication channels have responded to the coronavirus crisis. The third section will highlight previous research on the divergent responses by insurgent groups (conflict and service provision) following a disaster, and herein I will present empirical propositions related to attacks and public health delivery following the coronavirus pandemic. In the third section, I will discuss the data and methods employed in this study, and in the fourth, I will present the results. In the fifth and sixth sections, I will discuss the findings and present the conclusions of this research.

Background on the Taliban, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, and Al-Shabaab

The Taliban, HTS, and Al-Shabaab are different in many respects; however, all three groups have proven to be markedly resilient, with a demonstrable degree of success as insurgent organisations in their respective countries. Originally, the Taliban was a group of young religious students that mobilised themselves in the early 1990s as a force to rid Afghanistan of corruption and violence. The group took control of the capital city, Kabul, in 1996 and won immense support among the local populace. Many saw the group as a better alternative to the tribal warlords and a host of warring insurgent groups seeking to establish their writ in Afghanistan. The group virtually ruled Afghanistan until 2001, when it was ultimately toppled from power by the United States (US) and allied military forces (Rashid, 2011). Taliban fighters fled to neighbouring Pakistan and restricted themselves to the tribal borderlands of Pakistan until their eventual resurgence in 2003. After 13 years of occupation and hundreds of billions in aid to sustain a costly counter-insurgency campaign, the vast majority of the US-led coalition forces pulled out of Afghanistan in 2014 (Constable, 2014). This reduction in foreign military support made the Afghan security forces susceptible to increased Taliban attacks. The Taliban, which had proven to be highly resilient and visibly defiant against the US-led coalition forces, rapidly expanded the territories under their control after 2014. Presently, the Taliban is in control of or contesting more territory today than at any point since they were overthrown in 2001 (Bezhan, 2020).

HTS is the result of several processes of transformation and rebranding. Its precursor organisation, Jabhat al-Nusra (later Jabhat Fatah al-Sham), formed as an offshoot of Al-Qaeda in Syria. In 2016, Jabhat al-Nusra announced that it had split from Al-Qaeda (BBC, 2016) and began absorbing likeminded armed factions, eliminating rivals, and eventually formed the HTS in early 2017 to administer the opposition-held territory in northwest Syria. The group has fought in every governorate of Syria and has increasingly
sought to portray itself as a purely Syrian initiative. It carries out attacks against the Syrian government while providing services in areas under its control. Presently, HTS actively controls much of the Idlib province, and silvers of territory in the neighbouring provinces of Hama, Latakia, and Aleppo (BBC, 2020a).

Al-Shabaab was formed as the youth wing and radical offshoot of the Union of Islamic Courts (ICU), which controlled most of south-central Somalia until 2006. In 2006, the ICU was defeated by troops from Somalia’s Transitional Federal Government (TFG) backed by Ethiopian military forces and splintered into different groups. One of these, Al-Shabaab, re-emerged and reinvented itself as an Islamist-nationalist insurgency group. A power struggle in the early 2010s led to a violent purge of dissidents within the movement, enabling its most militant members to take over and engage in a more aggressive complex campaign against successive Somali governments such as the Somali Federal Government (SFG) (Ibrahim Shire & Hersi, 2019). By 2012, faced with a strengthened SFG backed by African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) troops and US air support, Al-Shabaab vacated its major city strongholds in southern Somalia and was forced to retreat into rural areas in southern Somalia. Despite this, Al-Shabaab has proven markedly resilient and continues to operate as a shadow government while controlling vast swathes of territory throughout rural Somalia in the country’s southern and central areas (Mueller, 2018).

**Framing COVID-19**

Since January 2020, COVID-19 disease has spread rapidly worldwide, representing a significant global threat. The WHO officially characterised COVID-19 infections as a pandemic on 11 March 2020. At the time of writing, cases have been confirmed in 227 countries, including Afghanistan, Somalia, and Syria (Johns Hopkins University, 2020) (see Table 1). Although insurgent groups such as the Taliban, HTS, and Al-Shabaab exhibit ideological differences, they all situated the COVID-19 pandemic as occurring within a larger eschatological view of ‘divine punishment’. They issued formal public statements on the pandemic through their respective media channels (Hanna, 2020). On 18 March 2020, the Taliban released a statement claiming that God had sent the virus in response to the ‘disobedience’ and ‘sins of mankind’ (Voice of Jihad, 2020b). This was repeated on 20 May 2020 by the Taliban leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, who claimed that God sends humankind tribulations when ‘moral decadence’ has peaked globally (Voice of Jihad, 2020c). On 28 March 2020, HTS acknowledged in their weekly Iba’ newsletter that this the pandemic was a ‘trial’ from God and that ‘it will disappear sooner or later’ and that people must ‘put reliance in God, to keep hope bound in the promise of God Almighty for deliverance and the disappearance of the anxiety’. Similar to the Taliban’s statement, and supported by a senior HTS official, the group stressed the need for introspection and ‘sincere repentance’. Initially, a tiny fraction within HTS opposed such measures of introspection, claiming that the coronavirus was exaggerated by Western propaganda. Those individuals, however, appear to have been silenced by the group (Extreme Watch Desk, 2020). Al-Shabaab, on the other hand, presented the pandemic as a conspiracy theory, incorporating it into their broader anti-Western narrative and blaming the spread of the virus on the ‘the crusader forces who have invaded the country and the disbelieving countries that support them’ (BBC, 2020b). Thus, the group argued that the best way to
contain the outbreak in Somalia was the expulsion of foreign forces from Somalia (Jowhar News, 2020). Notably, the group’s conspiracy theory and the call for further violence challenges the example set by its umbrella organisation, Al-Qaeda, who instead centred their narrative on providing health guidance and condemning the immorality they argue caused the pandemic (Joscelyn, 2020).

The core narrative espoused by the Taliban and HTS at the outset of the pandemic outlined practical and preventive measures for responding to the pandemic. The Taliban stated that ‘the safety guidelines issued by health organisations, doctors and other health experts must be observed and all safety precautions followed to the best of one’s abilities’ while sending a stern directive to businesses not to engage in ‘unlawful profit, price hikes and hoarding and instead show a fnity towards people’ (Voice of Jihad, 2020b). HTS communicated that ‘protection is necessary as the epidemic does not distinguish between Muslim and disbeliever and mujahid and one sitting, but God has ordered us to take up the causes and precaution’ (Jawad Al-Tamimi, 2020). Al-Shabaab, by contrast, criticised the Somali authorities’ lockdown measures intended to contain the pandemic and described the closure of mosques and restrictions against movements of citizens as ‘sinister’ and ‘double standards’, implying that no such restrictions had been applied to the ‘spreader of the virus’ (i.e. the Halane compound). ²

Conflict and service provision

Conflict

Existing literature is ambivalent on whether disasters increase the likelihood of conflict or peace. Some studies suggest that disasters can increase the risk of conflict and violence. For instance, natural disasters may heighten the risk of civil conflict in the short and medium-term in low- and middle-income countries (Nel & Righarts, 2008). Conversely, other studies argue that disasters can have a pacifying effect, creating opportunities for rapprochement and peace, often referred to as ‘disaster diplomacy’. There is also a growing corpus of studies that examine insurgents and state dynamics following a major disaster.

Within the conflict–peace dichotomy of the disaster and civil conflict literature, there is a growing strand of studies that look at how pre-existing conlicts (i.e. armed conlicts) can function as an exacerbating factor in conflict duration in disaster-stricken countries. For example, Brancati (2007) conducted a statistical analysis of 185 countries from 1975 to 2002 and revealed that earthquakes led to a higher risk of intrastate conflict, especially when combined with low GDP and some form of pre-existing conflict. In Sri Lanka and Kashmir, insurgent groups exploited crises by recruiting soldiers, including children, from disaster-displaced populations (Rajagopalan, 2006). Similarly, there is documented

Table 1. The Taliban, HTS, and Al-Shabaab’s level of influence and the arrival date of COVID-19 in their respective countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>COVID-19 arrival date (country)</th>
<th>Population under their control (estimate)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taliban</td>
<td>24 February 2020</td>
<td>15 million people (Sharifi &amp; Amadamou, 2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Shabaab</td>
<td>16 March 2020</td>
<td>Two to three million people (Wesangula, 2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HTS</td>
<td>22 March 2020</td>
<td>Four million (United Nations, 2020)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
evidence of non-insurgent groups, such as organised criminal groups, exploiting crises, with increased money laundering and trafficking activities as well as engaging in relief efforts (UNODC, 2020). Relatively recent research also demonstrates that disasters coupled with higher disaster vulnerability can extend civil conflicts by diminishing states’ capacity to suppress insurgent groups (Eastin, 2016; Keels, 2019).

However, virtually all existing literature analysing the intersection of disasters and conflict duration focus solely on climatological and geophysical disasters. Scant research exists on biological disasters, such as epidemic and pandemics, though some exist, focusing on how conflict can increase infection rates (Singh et al., 2005) or intensify the risk of outbreaks following a natural disaster (Watson et al., 2007).

Although a disaster may seem to provide a perfect opportunity for insurgent groups to intensify their existing operations against governments targets, research focusing on the causal link between disasters and increased violence and terrorism remains markedly scarce. In an important study, Berrebi and Ostwald (2011) found evidence that terrorism increases after a natural disaster, but the authors did not discern between domestic and transnational terrorism. The driving factors for domestic and transnational attacks are varied, and it is not easily apparent whether a natural disaster would lead to a surge in both types of attacks. This gap was addressed in a subsequent study by the authors (2013), and they found that a natural disaster tends to lead to an immediate surge in transnational terrorist attacks, but for domestic terrorism, the surge occurs after approximately two years. Paul and Bagchi (2018, p. 409) reported a similar finding, that a natural disaster leads to ‘a surge in transnational terrorism’, using property damage as an indicator. Indeed, this can be seen in the case of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) who stressed the chaos expected to be caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and released a statement calling for increased attacks against ‘distracted’ and ‘weakened’ international and national security regimes (Islamic State, 2020). This adds to the growing view that insurgent groups that employ terrorism will exploit the concomitant vulnerabilities that disasters bring with increased violent operations against a weakened and strained government. Indeed, before the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Afghanistan, Syria, and Somalia were already marred by protracted and increasingly violent insurgencies waged by the Taliban, HTS, and Al-Shabaab, respectively. From this discussion, the first proposition is developed:

**P1:** Service-providing insurgent groups will exploit the COVID-19 pandemic by amplifying their violent operations against distracted combatant targets.

**Service provision**

The provision of services is important for insurgent groups in several ways. Key to this discussion is that it can confer legitimacy and power to groups that already control territory, and can increase the appeal of an insurgent organisation (Wilson & McConnell, 2014). Government forces similarly use service provision as a tool to win hearts and minds under a counter-insurgency strategy (Beath et al., 2012). Indeed, Wagstaff and Jung (2020, p. 296) state that existing scholarship in this area is predominantly focused on state service provision, and that ‘less attention has been devoted to insurgent group service provision’. Nevertheless, several scholars have examined how insurgent groups
establish themselves as forces of governance or social control, especially amid conflict; in particular, they study how non-state actors behave like states by substituting the state in the provision of public goods, justice, and security (Justino et al., 2013; Mampilly, 2011; Menkhaus, 2007).

Insurgent organisations operate in a wide variety of administrative domains outside of combat. For example, armed groups governing a vast swathe of territory often set up sophisticated forms of taxation and food allocation, formal conflict resolution, and the construction of infrastructure (Mampilly, 2011). Establishing parallel governance structures involves dedicating human resources to the creation of a variety of administrative institutions (Mampilly, 2011, p. 4); a significant number of these administrative institutions comprise community services provided to constituents. Service provision varies from food and basic medical care provided on an ad hoc basis to building permanent schools and hospitals. Providing services is one-way insurgent groups seek to demonstrate that they are effective governors, both to their constituents and the international community. Flanagan (2008) highlights a variety of advantages that services can accrue to the insurgent group; they can use social services to build legitimacy, to increase trust, gain political support, and recruit members. All of these motivations indicate a need to manipulate the choices of civilians under their rule. Moreover, beyond their constituents, service provision also signals to the international community the group’s firm commitment to governing after the cessation of hostilities (Stewart, 2018), while simultaneously functioning as a tool undermine the legitimacy of the state, both domestically and internationally (Grynkewich, 2008).

Taliban, HTS, and Al-Shabaab have all established sophisticated systems of parallel governance across the respective territories under their control. In Afghanistan, the Taliban operates courts, levies taxes, and maintains its government and security apparatus (Jackson, 2018). In Syria, HTS, under its core project – the Salvation Government – has several ministries that deliver essential services, such as justice, religious endowments, health, education, local administration and services, and development (Gjevori, 2020). In Somalia, Al-Shabaab runs an underground parallel administration that provides services such as ‘education and training, justice and security, food and alms distribution, local-level administration and public works, and employment to the populace under its control’ (Mwangi, 2012, p. 525).

More relevant to the topic of this article, all groups have a track record of actively delivering relief efforts in areas under their control that have been affected by natural disasters. For instance, following an earthquake that devastated Afghanistan in 2015, the Taliban declared a temporary truce, provided safe passage for aid organisations, and formally instructed its fighters and local businesses to help residents (VICE, 2015). At the height of the Syrian Civil War, HTS (under its precursor organisation Jabhat al-Nusra) provided food and medicine and evacuated people in areas of intense conflict where no other groups could operate (Heller, 2016; Sayigh, 2013). Similarly, Al-Shabaab, learning from its disastrous mistakes during the 2011 famine in Somalia,3 played a significant role during the 2017 drought. It distributed aid in affected regions, launched drought committees to coordinate relief, and dug canals to help farmers access to water for irrigation (Rono, 2017). This indicates that insurgent groups have the potential to play an important role after disasters. From this discussion, the second proposition is drawn.
**P2:** To bolster their legitimacy and public support, service-providing insurgent groups will provide public health relief following the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Methods and data**

**Selection**

While a large number of insurgent groups control a certain amount of land or territory, only a few have established proto-states that deliver social services. To gain insights into how service-providing insurgent organisations are leveraging the COVID-19 crisis, this study focuses exclusively on three distinct service-providing insurgent groups, namely the Taliban, Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham, and Al-Shabaab. The factors underpinning the selection criteria were based on geographic variation (Central Asia, Middle East and Africa); availability of empirical data (all three groups have media wings that chronicled their organisational response to the COVID-19 pandemic); are designated as terrorist organisations as part of ‘the war on terror’ including their perceived homeland; and have established proto-state governance in areas under their control. Relatedly, the selected groups also happen to be Sunni Jihadist groups.

**Data**

To investigate both research propositions, I gathered and integrated data from a wide variety of sources assessing how the Taliban, HTS, and Al-Shabaab have responded in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The most widely used resources for violence levels are the ACLED and the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP). ACLED was selected for this study – despite some limitations – instead of the more widely used UCDP data because it is more inclusive of violent events and documents the behaviour of more actors (Eck, 2012). Moreover, there is the inherent limitation of ‘real-time’ coverage, with the current UCDP data predating the COVID-19 pandemic. For the first proposition (i.e. violent operations), data was taken from the ACLED event database. ACLED gathers real-time data on reported political violence around the globe using a wide variety of sources, such as local media, government reports, research publications, NGOs, and social media (Raleigh et al., 2010). The dataset captures many events including, inter alia, riots, protests, battles, and strategic developments. These events comprise incidents that took place in different locations, involved different types of violence, and different actors.

For each event, the dataset records the date, actors involved, types of violence, location, fatalities, and space and time precision estimate. However, for this study, only a subset of the data was gathered: battles, explosions/remote violence, and violence against civilians. According to ACLED, a battle is recorded if it meets the threshold of ‘a violent interaction between two politically organised armed groups at a particular time and location’ (ACLED, 2019), while explosions and remote violence are regarded as ‘one-sided violent events in which the tool for engaging in conflict creates asymmetry by taking away the ability of the target to respond’ (ACLED, 2019). Finally, violence against civilians is defined as events ‘where an organised armed group deliberately inflicts violence upon unarmed non-combatants’ (ACLED, 2019). Lastly, country-specific
COVID-19 cases and fatalities were extracted from the World Health Organisation (WHO) (WHO, 2020), from the first cases reported in Afghanistan, Syria, and Somalia up until the most recent (27 June 2020).

For the second proposition (related to public health provision), data was gathered that identified the presence, type, and extent of insurgent-provided public health services at the outset of the coronavirus pandemic in Afghanistan, Syria, and Somalia. A search was conducted on all related news reports associated with each insurgent organisation for indicators of public health service provision activities following the onset of the pandemic. To measure the services provided following the coronavirus pandemic, I used the Lexis-Nexis database where I identified and collected all news items for the first 12 weeks following the arrival date of the coronavirus pandemic in Afghanistan (24 February), Syria (22 March), and Somalia (16 March). As most insurgents organisations publish their propaganda materials online, I also scanned Taliban-, HTS-, and Al-Shabaab-affiliated websites for additional output reflecting their service provision activities during the coronavirus outbreak.

To operationalise the data for the first proposition, a set of comparisons were made. Using a before-and-after approach and a pre-processing activity of data normalisation (Patro & Sahu, 2015), all the violent events of the selected groups were divided into two periods: the period before the COVID-19 pandemic and the period after. Each represented data on violent events that occurred either in the last three months before the outbreak, or the first three months after the outbreak. This before-and-after research design provides a sufficiently small time frame to identify any significant change in a group’s modus operandi. In addition, given the absence of any data beyond the selected time frame, the three-month window was selected in order to get a clear understanding of all selected groups’ behaviour both before and after the pandemic while minimising the influence of other outside events.

Results

COVID-19-related violence

How did the coronavirus outbreak affect the Taliban, HTS, and Al-Shabaab’s violent activities? Did they leverage the crisis to expand their footprint, or scale down their violent operations? I examine the data by making a set of comparison between the three months before the coronavirus outbreak in the groups’ respective countries and the three months following the coronavirus outbreak. I commence with an overview of the larger arc of the groups’ violent activities during these two particular periods, before disaggregating their violent activities in order to realise their motives and priorities.

The data revealed that in the three months before the onset of the pandemic, the number of recorded violent events for the Taliban, HTS, and Al-Shabaab varied significantly. The Taliban and HTS engaged in a total of 1,428 and 14 violent events, respectively, revealing a gradual decline in incidents up to the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic was observed (see Figures 1(A,B)). Most likely, the series of partial truces implemented in Afghanistan and Syria contributed to this gradual decline in violent activities. Al-Shabaab, on the other hand, were increasing their activities every month, revealing an
Figure 1. Insurgent attacks and COVID-19 statistics (pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19).
uptick in violent incidents (see Figure 1(C)). In total, 277 violent events were attributed to Al-Shabaab in the three months preceding the first recorded case in Somalia.

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Afghanistan, Syria, and Somalia, the rate of violent incidents changed drastically. A total of 918 events were attributed to the Taliban during the three months following the first recorded case in Afghanistan, indicating a 36% decline in violent incidents. By contrast, 24 and 311 events were attributed to HTS and Al-Shabaab, respectively, in this period, indicating an increase of 71% for HTS and 12% for Al-Shabaab.

When the data is disaggregated by different targets, different expressions of priorities and motives are revealed (see Figure 2). There was a general decrease in combatant targeting by the Taliban and HTS following the COVID-19 pandemic, with a 38% reduction in Taliban incidents against combatants in the first three months, and a 9% reduction recorded for incidents against combatants by HTS. However, combatant targeting by Al-Shabaab gradually increased in the three months after the first recorded coronavirus case in Somalia, with a 13% increase in combatant targeting.

Surprisingly, while there was an overall decrease in combatant targeting by the Taliban and HTS during the three months following the first recorded coronavirus cases in Afghanistan and Syria (38% and 9% decreases, respectively), a surge in combatant targeting was observed in the first four weeks, when compared to the preceding four weeks. It is important to note that an outlier is observed in the Taliban data in the first week of the COVID-19 pandemic (23 February 2020). Excluding this outlier week for the Taliban only, there was a 23% increase in attacks against armed groups in the first month after the COVID-19 infection was reported in Afghanistan (see Figure 1(A)). Similarly, a 400% increase in activities against armed groups were attributed to HTS in the first month of the pandemic (see Figure 1(B)). However, it is important to note that by comparison to the Taliban, relatively smaller recorded incidents were recorded for HTS and as such, any increase in attacks from a low base figure can induce a much larger impact on the percentage increase. The data for Al-Shabaab, however, revealed a negligible decrease in attacks (2%) armed groups in the first month of the pandemic. To rule out cyclic patterns, no significant increase in attacks against combatants were reported for the same month last year (2% for the Taliban, 0% for HTS, and (minus) 29% for Al-Shabaab.

Conversely, recorded violent incidents by Al-Shabaab showed a general gradual increase in combatant targeting (9%) when compared to the pre-coronavirus period. Most incidents involved clashes with security forces and assassinations of off-duty security forces.

COVID-19-related health interventions

Taliban in Afghanistan

The Taliban was relatively quick in assisting both domestic and international efforts to limit the spread of the virus in the areas under its control. Although the first fatality in Afghanistan was announced on 22 March 2020 and no cases were recorded in Taliban-controlled areas; the Taliban grasped the severity of the pandemic much earlier. On 16 March, the group announced that they had arrested a runaway COVID-19 patient from Dawlatabad District, Balkh Province, and had handed him back to health authorities (Kumar, 2020b). Following a call by the UN Secretary-General for an immediate
Figure 2. Number of violent incidents committed each week by the Taliban, HTS, and Al-Shabaab (pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19).
ceasefire in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the group announced that they would declare a ceasefire in their controlled areas in the event of a coronavirus outbreak (Gannon, 2020), although there is no record of the Taliban actually declaring such ceasefire. Simultaneously, the group initiated public health awareness workshops in the Jowzan and Logan provinces in an attempt to educate people on how to use gloves and masks, wash hands with soap, and practise social distancing (Hamid, 2020; Kumar, 2020a). These timely initiatives won the commendation of the Afghan Ministry of Public Health and the US State Department (Sieff et al., 2020). Beyond the public health awareness campaigns, the group distributed medical equipment, including surgical masks and protective gloves, and also brochures listing health precautions and vegetables containing high amounts of vitamin C to boost immunity (Zarifi, 2020). It also set up quarantine centres to isolate those suspected of carrying the virus and test residents arriving from other provinces (Kumar, 2020a).

Furthermore, and in line with the Afghan government, the Taliban cancelled public events and instructed people to pray at home instead of visiting mosques. Finally, the group harnessed technology by releasing propaganda videos and images; apparently aimed at making appear to be engaged in the fight against the coronavirus (Farmer & Yousafzai, 2020). For instance, a video posted by a Twitter account affiliated with the group showcases the group’s ‘public awareness’ efforts in response to the virus. The video shows a Taliban official speaking at a podium, flanked by hygiene workers dressed in white personal protective clothing and carrying spraying tanks. The speaker’s audience appears to be practising safe social distancing, sitting in widely spaced chairs (Marx et al., 2020).

Despite these measures, the Taliban was acutely aware that limited resources hampered their efforts, and it sought urgent assistance – similar to previous natural disasters and humanitarian crises (Voice of Jihad, 2020a) – from international humanitarian organisations. Previously deeply suspicious about health workers dealing with epidemics like polio and targeting aid workers (Nordland, 2019), the group declared their readiness to work with international humanitarian actors and guaranteed the security of aid and health workers assisting in the areas under their control (Gannon, 2020). To help alleviate the burden of COVID-19 on the group’s limited health services, the Taliban directed refugees returning from Iran to the testing facility provided by the Afghan government and even provided ambulances to transport patients (Rossi, 2020).

Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham in Syria
Before COVID-19 arrived in Syria, HTS implemented a series of preventive measures to avoid a potential outbreak materialising in the areas of the country they controlled. On 14 March, eight days before the first reported case, HTS provided guidance and instructions in its weekly magazine, detailing preventive measures to be taken to deal with the novel coronavirus (Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham, 2020). It subsequently, on 23 March, created an emergency response committee that initiated several awareness campaigns and implemented preventive measures across HTS-controlled territory (Enab Baladi, 2020). A core narrative of self-sufficiency drove the majority of these measures. This was emphasised in a statement released in al-Idrissi, the official telegram channel of HTS, where the group stressed that its actions must be driven by self-reliance. To do so, HTS stressed that it ‘must not depend on foreign aid for protection from the corona epidemic’ and must try
to provide the necessary equipment to the ‘people in the liberated areas’ (Jawad Al-Tamimi, 2020). The group further underscored the need to build a ‘comprehensive framework as a means for bringing together efforts and employing them and then directing them towards their targets without dispersal or loss’ (Jawad Al-Tamimi, 2020).

HTS implemented several processes to fulfil the core narrative of self-sufficiency. Some of these measures, many mimicking state measures, were discussed in a series of articles in its weekly magazine. These included the establishment of quarantine centres for people coming from neighbouring Turkey into Jisr al-Shughur in the Idlib Governorate in northwestern Syria; the sterilisation of public infrastructures, such as educational and religious facilities; forums conducted by religious and medical professionals explaining the realities of the disease and how to communicate this to the common populace (Al Nawbani et al., 2020; BBC Monitoring, 2020); and the closure of public parks and markets, including the prevention of gatherings by removing public seats and benches (Al-Lami, 2020). Some of these measures also included symbolic actions of ‘self-sufficiency’, such as opening a local factory to make rudimentary masks (TeleSUR, 2020), conducting training courses for medical volunteers, and opening several isolation units in the areas under HTS control (Dahnon, 2020). Notably, HTS made sure that its activities were recorded and disseminated in a series of propaganda videos and images in order to showcase the group’s fight against COVID-19.

**Al-Shabaab in Somalia**

Even though the first recorded case in Somalia was reported on 16 March, it took Al-Shabaab several months to take the threat of the pandemic seriously and prescribe and implement preventive measures. Initially, the group urged locals not to follow the public health measures devised by the federal government of Somalia, arguing that they were emulating the ‘examples of disbelievers’ (Somali Guardian, 2020). However, it performed a *volte-face* in May 2020 when one of the group’s senior leaders, Fuad Shongole, delivered a key sermon in mosques across territories under Al-Shabaab control. He highlighted that those who were ‘weak in faith’ would not be able to use prayer and charity to protect themselves from COVID-19, and provided practical guidance, including advice on how to live a healthy lifestyle, while simultaneously warning businesses not to raise prices or exploit the economic situation (Cabdi, 2020). Two weeks later, the group released a statement announcing that they had established a seven-member ‘committee’ tasked with combating COVID-19 in Somalia. While denying that the coronavirus had reached the territories under their governance, the group stressed that the committee members – supposedly composed of doctors, religious scholars, and intellectuals – had been tasked with pre-emptively curbing the spread of the virus (Radio Kulmiye, 2020). The committee did not provide a subsequent update on its campaign against COVID-19 until a month later.

On 12 June 2020, Al-Shabaab purportedly set up a COVID-19 ‘treatment centre’ in Jilib, Somalia, claiming that disease posed a ‘grave threat’, as emphasised by ‘international health authorities’ (Reuters, 2020). The group boasted that the treatment facility, announced in a radio broadcast message, included an around-the-clock hotline and had ‘all necessary equipment to isolate and treat patients’ (Guled, 2020). It is usual for the group to attach videos and pictures when it unveils any public relations initiative,
especially one as ambitious as an isolation and care facility. Notably, on this occasion, no photos or videos were provided.

Discussion

The primary goal of this article was to examine how insurgent organisations with territorial control have leveraged the COVID-19 crisis. After examining the data, two important and linked findings are presented. In this section, I demonstrate that while the study’s propositions appear to be mutually exclusive, the empirical findings reveal that both propositions hold for the Taliban and HTS, albeit occurring at different temporal points (a week difference). Taliban and HTS exploited the disorder the contagion caused by deploying a dual strategy. First, at the outset of the pandemic, they stepped up their attacks against distracted authorities but only for the first month, while simultaneously implementing preventive measures in fighting the coronavirus. Then, in the subsequent months, both the Taliban and HTS prioritised the delivery of public health services while scaling down their activities against combatants. I show that this move was connected to both groups’ aim to acquire greater public support and legitimacy by directly delivering public health services and maintaining law and order amid the disorder.

Second, the same results were not observed for Al-Shabaab, as the group initially made no changes to their usual routine and seemingly chose to deliver public health services many months after the first case was recorded in Somalia. In this section, I explain why the group failed to make operational changes by highlighting how Al-Shabaab differed from the Taliban and HTS in their framing of the pandemic.

COVID-19-related violence

The first proposition suggested that authorities grappling with the coronavirus pandemic would witness increased attacks by the Taliban, HTS, and Al-Shabaab. As previously discussed, few papers (Berrebi & Ostwald, 2011, 2013; Paul & Bagchi, 2018) have empirically examined whether there is a major surge of terrorist attacks after a natural disaster, and have identified a distinction between domestic and transnational terrorism. Berrebi and Ostwald found that transnational attacks ‘increase immediately following the disaster, suggesting an impetus to exploit weakened ‘hard’ targets during the chaos’ (2013, p. 793), while an increase in domestic terrorism takes much longer to realise. The authors explain this based on the assumption that ‘effects of natural disasters could diminish targeting costs for some previously ‘hard’ targets’ (2011, p. 385).

However, based on the results of the present study, I find evidence that there was a short-term surge in domestic attacks against combatant targets following the outbreak of COVID-19, and that this was mostly observed during the first month of the crisis. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of violent activities engaged in by the Taliban and HTS were gradually decreasing, most likely because of the periodic partial truces (Borger, 2020; Roth, 2020; Thomson Reuters, 2020), however, in the first month after the arrival of the pandemic in Afghanistan and Syria, events attributed to the Taliban and HTS revealed significant increases (23% and 400%, respectively) in attacks against combatants or ‘hard’ targets. A disaster often weakens or distracts the government apparatus, and insurgent groups use these opportunities to re-evaluate the
targeting costs (Berrebi & Ostwald, 2011). Nel and Righarts (2008, p. 162) noted that ‘natural disasters can weaken state capacity and legitimacy, creating opportunities for the disgruntled to engage in violent resistance’. For instance, in the aftermath of floods in Pakistan in 2010, insurgent groups reportedly took advantage of the disruption to carry out more attacks (Abbas, 2010; Hasan, 2010).

Although attacks by the groups were declining as a result of partial truces, the sudden surge of attacks against combatants following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic provides credence to the idea that it was a strategic opportunity for both groups to exploit the health crisis. Indeed, operationally, insurgent groups may try to capitalise on such situations to wreak further havoc. Afghanistan and Syria are already vulnerable to violence and struggling to counter violent groups. As governments re-task their military capacity to support the public health response, countries may become more vulnerable to attacks. Interestingly, however, while the Taliban and HTS increased their combatant targeting in the first month following the outbreak, the subsequent two months revealed a sharp decline in attacks against combatants. One possible explanation is that insurgent groups invariably allocate different resources to violent strategies (Abrahms & Potter, 2015). Operations against hard targets necessitate a high degree of planning, creativity, coordination, and expertise. As such, the decrease in combatant targeting can arguably be attributed to the groups’ increased focus and diverting needed resources in seeking (or maintaining) greater legitimacy by delivering essential public health services while minimising the potential disorder that the virus might bring through maintaining law and order. The next section will expound this salient point.

**COVID-19-related health interventions**

The second proposition implied that since Taliban, HTS, and Al-Shabaab were already providing services to their core constituents, they would most likely engage in relief efforts aimed at both combating the COVID-19 pandemic and strategically bolstering their existing legitimacy. As previously mentioned, there is a growing corpus of studies that concretely link insurgent service provision with specific causal mechanisms, such as legitimacy, influence, and derailment of defection (Berman & Laitin, 2008; Mampilly, 2011; Wagstaff & Jung, 2020). By providing a utilitarian exchange of core services, insurgent groups demonstrate that they are effective governors among their core (and envisaged) constituency.

Both the Taliban and HTS have been using the new possibilities created by COVID-19 pandemic to increase their political legitimacy and influence through the provision of ‘humanitarian’ aid to civilian populations in regions where governments are either unwilling or unable to do so. Both the Taliban and HTS recognised the severity of the coronavirus before the first fatality and, as such, pre-emptively enacted a series of preventive measures to avoid a potential outbreak materialising in the territories under their control. These included conducting public health awareness campaigns, distributing medical equipment, and setting up quarantine centres to isolate and treat those suspected of carrying the coronavirus (Al Nawbani et al., 2020; BBC Monitoring, 2020; Hamid, 2020; Kumar, 2020a; Zarif, 2020). To highlight these efforts, they utilised technology, sharing a series of videos and messages in multiple languages.

Moreover, acknowledging its limited resources, the Taliban signalled its readiness to work with international aid agencies and facilitate aid relief (Al Jazeera, 2020). HTS,
however, did not verbally signal such a commitment; arguably, this was because it did not have to, with dozens of international humanitarian actors already active in the region, with most of the aid coming from Turkish charities (Turoglu, 2020).

The efforts demonstrated by the Taliban and HTS constitute concerted and well-coordinated attempts to win the proverbial ‘hearts and minds’ of the common people vis-à-vis the respective governments. Asal et al. (2020, p. 2) found that insurgent groups ‘quest for legitimacy offers the best explanation for service provision to civilians’, but also, and more importantly, that groups that deliver essential services do so in order to undermine the state. In the past, the Taliban decapitated existing institutional arrangements and exploited the governance vacuum by providing services. Weigand (2017) concluded that this was done with the intention of ‘undermining the legitimacy of the state by illustrating that it could not protect its citizens’. Similar behaviour was observed in organised criminal groups during the COVID-19 pandemic, where cartels and mafias delivered direct sustenance, enforced social distancing rules and propping local businesses (UNODC, 2020).

**Divine punishment**

While the Taliban and HTS exploited the crisis with an initial surge in attacks involving combatant targeting in the first month, followed by engagement with humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations in the subsequent months to strengthen their legitimacy and popular support, no changes were observed in Al-Shabaab’s tactical responses. Instead, Al-Shabaab continued to deploy the same tactics – albeit slightly elevated – before and during the COVID-19 crisis. As Al-Shabaab shares similar characteristics with the Taliban and HTS, this raises the question of why similar findings were not observed in the group’s response. In this article, I show that this can be attributed to the group’s divergent attitude and interpretation of the coronavirus pandemic.

First, while the Taliban, HTS, and Al-Shabaab interpreted the coronavirus pandemic within the eschatological view of ‘divine punishment’, the Taliban and HTS took a more pragmatic and strategic approach in their response. They interpreted the crisis as a ‘tribulation’ that needed responding to, while Al-Shabaab, by contrast, portrayed a conspiracy – claiming that the virus had been exported to Somalia by ‘crusader forces who have invaded the country’ (BBC, 2020b; Jowhar News, 2020). More specifically, it depicted the pandemic as a due divine punishment from God, meted out to the non-believers across the world in response to their ‘evil deeds’ against the believers. Similar to Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab’s rhetoric framed the virus primarily as a Western and Chinese problem, and in their public speeches leading ideologues belittled the threat it posed, urging their core (and envisaged) constituents to ignore the government’s public health measures (Anka Yusuf, 2020; Jowhar News, 2020). Moreover, similar to the behaviour observed in Boko Haram, how they framed this narrative advertently fuelled the group’s refusal to deploy any preventive measures against the virus at the outset of the pandemic, and instead they continued with their routine. A similar observation can be inferred from other service-providing insurgent groups that failed to implement preventive measures in the areas they controlled and framed the virus as a ‘divine punishment’ of non-believers. Al-Qaeda’s Sahel affiliate, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), hailed the pandemic as a ‘God-sent’ virus and a ‘justified punishment’ that was
severely impacting the foreign troops in Mali (BBC, 2020c). Similarly, the Houthi movement initially blamed the Saudi-led coalition and refused to take any ‘precautionary or emergency measures’ in areas under their control (Debriefer, 2020).

However, after cases started rising sharply and fatalities entered into double digits in May, Al-Shabaab retreated from its original rhetoric and signalled an intention to combat the virus by establishing an ad hoc committee in early May (Radio Kulmiye, 2020) and a COVID-19 isolation and care centre in early June, (Reuters, 2020) a move that bears a striking resemblance to the Houthis’ change in rhetoric from denial to acceptance when they announced a ‘comprehensive mobilisation’, months after the first reported case in Yemen (Aksoy, 2020).

However, it is important to note that while the Taliban and HTS both visually publicised their public health campaigns using videos and images, Al-Shabaab made no effort to highlight their activities, aside from releasing written statements on their efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. This is in stark contrast to the group’s previous relief operations (e.g. in the 2017 drought), where it extensively posted media content exhibiting its efforts (Rono, 2017). Although Al-Shabaab signalled a change in its initial rhetoric regarding the pandemic, there can be serious doubt regarding whether it actively implemented measures to combat the virus.

Conclusion

This study is among the first to empirically examine how service-providing insurgents have leveraged the disastrous coronavirus pandemic in terms of violent operations and service delivery. Using the Taliban, HTS, and Al-Shabaab as case studies, the findings show that all three groups dynamically operationalised their operational responses based on their framing of the source of the pandemic. The Taliban and HTS portrayed the coronavirus as ‘God’s punishment’ of humankind and repurposed their modus operandi in a way that strengthened the groups’ aims and objectives. In the first month of the pandemic, the Taliban and HTS employed a dual strategy of exploiting weakened ‘hard’ targets during the disruption by immediately stepping up attacks and delivering health interventions across the areas under their control. Second, as the pandemic worsened, both groups scaled down their attacks and prioritised delivering health services in a bid to bolster their legitimacy with sympathisers and build popular support for their cause and proto-states. However, Al-Shabaab interpreted the pandemic as selective ‘divine retribution’, that was only meted out against non-believers for their ‘evil deeds’. Consequently, the group made no changes to their operational routine following the pandemic, only changing its stance months later, after the virus had spread throughout Somalia.

The findings build upon emerging literature that intersects civil conflict, terrorism, and disaster by highlighting how service-providing insurgent groups exploit global health pandemics by repurposing their existing campaigns to maximise strategic gains, such as increased legitimacy and popular support. It further demonstrates how these organisations dynamically deploy multiple strategies amid the ensuing chaos and, more significantly, highlights how the framing of a disaster can act as a determining factor affecting a group’s strategical and tactical response to a disaster. State actors that are facing a violent insurgency often ignore or downplay the role(s) service-providing insurgent groups play
following a crisis. Whether service-providing insurgent groups strategically amplify their
violent operations or engage in relief efforts following a crisis, both responses are per-
ceived as instrumental means to delegitimise state authorities. Indeed, the COVID-19 pan-
demic has shone a light on the abject failure of some government responses to the
pandemic, from slow reaction to the crisis to inability to enforce rules. This (lack of)
response enabled service-providing insurgent groups to step in and fill the void by
strengthen their governance role. For this reason, active governance and timely interven-
tions are crucial in diminishing any form of exploitation by violent non-state actors.

Future research is required to generalise to other cases. Several service-providing and
non-service-providing insurgent organisations have released statements concerning the
COVID-19 pandemic. Exploring how such groups have interpreted and operationalised
their response will undoubtedly strengthen the generalisability of the findings. Moreover,
while the inclusion of civilian targeting was beyond the scope of this article, further
research could benefit from whether the onset of COVID-19 pandemic altered insurgent
groups’ behaviour towards civilian targeting.

Notes
1. Abu Mariya al-Qahtani [of Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, published on 23 March 2020 on Twitter].
2. Halane is a heavily guarded compound that is situated near Aden Abdulle International
Airport in Mogadishu and is home to UN workers, international diplomats and the AMISOM.
3. Al-Shabaab blocked aid deliveries in areas under their control during the 2011 drought and
famine. The resulting deaths of over a quarter million people during the 2011–12 famine
sapped much of Al-Shabaab’s legitimacy.
4. The number of violent incidents recorded during this week stands at nine events, which is
comparatively low compared to the preceding (103) and subsequent weeks (165). This
sharp drop in violence is attributed to the formal negotiations between the US and the
Taliban which resulted in the 29 February peace deal signing.
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