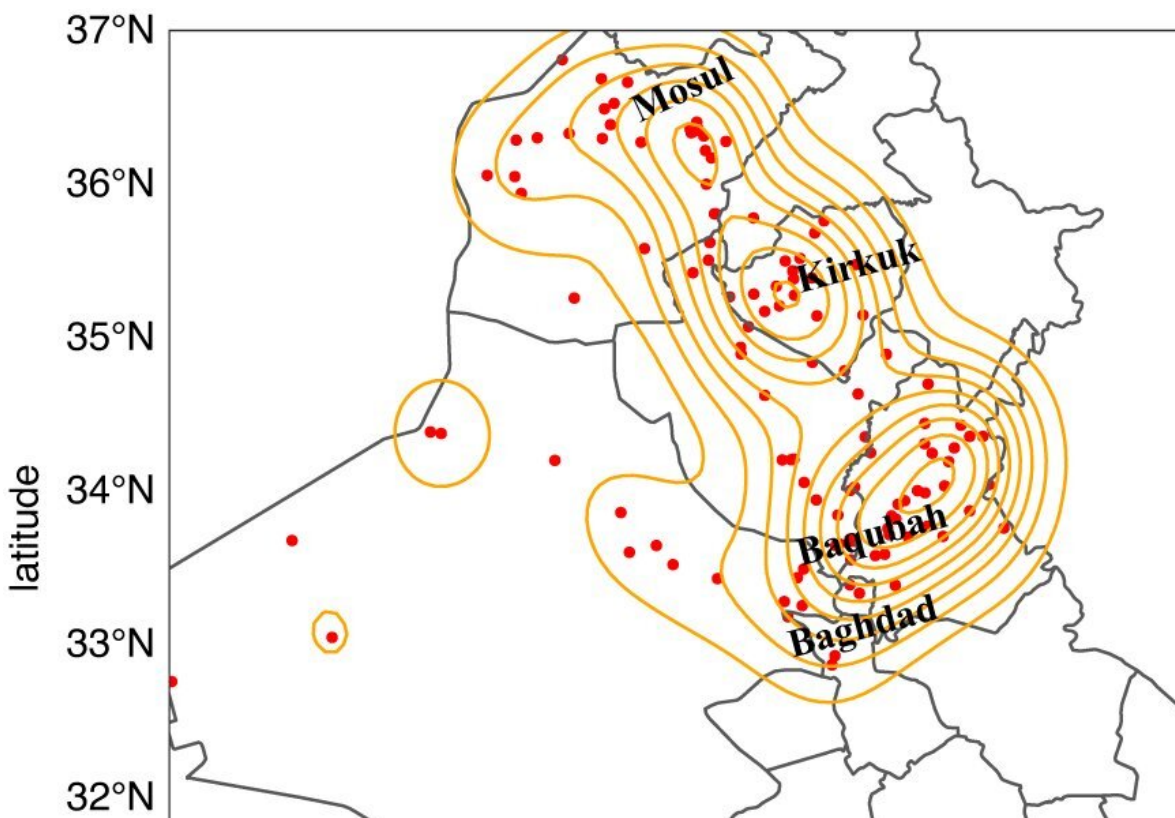


Terror under lockdown: Pandemic restrictions reduce ISIS violence

January 30 2023



Lockdown Measures and ISIS Violent Events within Governorates: Urban versus Rural Areas. Credit: *American Political Science Review* (2023). DOI: 10.1017/S0003055422001423

Lockdown measures aimed at slowing the spread of COVID-19 had the unintended benefit of curtailing violence by the insurgent group ISIS,

according to a new study led by Yale political scientist Dawn Brancati.

The study, published on Jan. 30 in the journal *American Political Science Review*, found that government-imposed curfews and [travel bans](#) instituted to protect public health in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt were significantly associated with a reduction in ISIS attacks, especially in [urban areas](#) and locations outside the militant organization's base of operations.

"Although ISIS leaders vowed to ramp up attacks during the pandemic, our analysis found that pandemic lockdown measures likely reduced the group's attacks by depleting its [financial resources](#), reducing high-value civilian targets, and making it logistically more difficult for ISIS to conduct attacks by reducing its cover," said Brancati, a senior lecturer in the Department of Political Science in Yale's Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

"Our findings provide important insights into the effects of public health measures on violence by non-state actors like ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Boko Haram, as well as the general effectiveness of curfews and travel restrictions as counterinsurgency tools."

In examining the effects of the lockdown measures on violence by non-state actors, Brancati—along with co-authors Jóhanna Birnir of the University of Maryland-College Park and Qutaiba Idlbi of the Atlantic Council—focused on ISIS due to the group's explicit pledge to accelerate violence during the pandemic and because its large financial reserves, rural base, and preference for targeting government installations over civilians make it less vulnerable to the effects of curfews and travel restrictions.

The researchers analyzed data on more than 1,500 ISIS-initiated violent events in Iraq, Syria, and Egypt—the countries where the group launches

most of its attacks—compiled by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project covering a 78-week period between Dec. 31, 2018, and June 28, 2020.

In March 2020, pandemic-related curfews and travel bans were imposed in all three countries and were in place for three to four months. The researchers also mapped the number and location of ISIS attacks within and across Iraq's governorates using geographic information system (GIS).

The public health measures significantly reduced violence, especially in cities and areas outside of the militant group's rural bases, the study showed. For example, the number of violent events was about 30% lower in Iraq and 15% lower in Syria when COVID-19 related curfews were in place in these countries.

The researchers found that the higher a governorate's population, the more effective curfews were in reducing violence. For example, the number of ISIS-initiated [violent events](#) in the governorate of Baghdad, which has a population of 8.1 million, was 11% lower when the curfews were in place. There was no change in the Iraqi governorate of Najaf (a center of Muslim pilgrimage, surpassed by only Mecca and Medina), which has a population of 1.5 million people.

Based on interviews with [government officials](#), military leaders, policy experts, and residents of places covered in the study, the researchers concluded that the curfews and [travel restrictions](#) reduced the number of high-value civilian targets and made it more difficult for ISIS militants to move about without being noticed.

While there is evidence that the [public health](#) measures also strained the group's financial resources—for instance, by limiting its ability to collect money from locals or operate its commercial businesses—the group's

financial reserves, which amount to hundreds of millions of dollars by most estimates, likely allowed it to keep funding its cells, the researchers concluded.

Given that pandemic lockdown measures seem to have hindered ISIS's ability to initiate violence, they likely have similar or greater effects on other violent non-state organizations, the researchers said.

"Most non-state actors lack ISIS's financial resources, tend to target civilians more heavily, and operate in urban areas, which suggests they would be more vulnerable to the effects of lockdown measures than ISIS is," Brancati said. "This does not suggest that lockdown measures are a magic bullet in fighting insurgencies since they have harsh side effects on society, especially in developing countries where militant groups operate."

More information: DAWN BRANCATI et al, Locking Down Violence: The COVID-19 Pandemic's Impact on Non-State Actor Violence, *American Political Science Review* (2023). DOI: [10.1017/S0003055422001423](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422001423)

Provided by Yale University

Citation: Terror under lockdown: Pandemic restrictions reduce ISIS violence (2023, January 30) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-01-terror-lockdown-pandemic-restrictions-isis.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.