

COVID-19 restrictions unexpectedly reduced Islamic State violence—political science experts explain why

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World leaders and [policy experts](#) at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic [feared that](#) the health crisis might make the world more

dangerous. They worried specifically that terrorist organizations like the [Islamic State group](#) would [capitalize on the pandemic](#) to increase attacks on civilians and recruit new sympathizers.

In some ways, the pandemic presented an opportunity to groups like the Islamic State group, known by the initials IS, because the sudden increase in health spending [strained many countries' budgets](#) and diverted attention [away from extremism](#). Governments' COVID-19 responses also called on police and armies to deliver health care services [in some cases](#).

But the feared increase in IS violence [largely did not materialize](#).

We are [scholars who study](#) the causes of violence within countries, often between [armed groups](#) and governments, and what works to prevent it. Along with our colleague [Qutaiba Idlbi](#), a senior fellow at the [Atlantic Council](#) think tank, [we wanted to understand](#) how COVID-19 lockdowns affected the ability of groups like IS to operate.

As our new [research](#) shows, 2020 COVID-19 lockdown measures such as curfews and [travel bans](#)—which governments have mostly [since lifted](#)—made it difficult for IS to operate and, as an indirect result, helped reduce violence in Egypt, Iraq and Syria.

Understanding the Islamic State group

[Islamic State group](#)—also known as IS, ISIS and ISIL—emerged as an offshoot of the Islamic [militant terrorist group](#) al-Qaida in Iraq around 2004.

In its rise, Islamic State group used unusually brutal and sadistic [tactics](#) against government officials, as well as civilians, including intense [torture](#) and [beheadings](#).

But IS still cultivated genuine support from some locals in Iraq and Syria by exploiting [their grievances](#) over weak, corrupt governance—while sometimes providing better [public services](#), like routine street cleanings and power line repairs, than the government did in the areas it controlled.

Omar, a local journalist and civil society activist from Deir Ezzor, Syria, recalled in 2022 to our co-author Qutaiba how for many in his province, "When ISIS took over Deir Ezzor province, the poor and those unable to flee were glad that the province did not fall back to the Assad regime. For them, ISIS was the better devil."

Throughout 2013 and 2014, the [Islamic State group began](#) to take over territory in Syria and Iraq. At the time, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was [engaged in a civil war](#), which began in 2011 when Assad attempted to quash a popular uprising against his family's 40-year-long rule.

The Assad regime shot at [peaceful demonstrators](#), detained and tortured activists, and [retaliated against communities](#) that challenged his authority. In 2013, the [Assad regime attacked its own](#) people with sarin gas, killing more than 1,400 people—many of them children—in Eastern Ghouta.

Political instability was not limited to Syria at the time.

In Iraq, for example, then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki responded to [2011 protests](#) against corruption with violence, kidnapping, [torture and assassinations of activists](#) and protesters.

The Islamic State group grew during the civil conflicts and public uprisings, and [tried to establish](#) control over territory in parts of Iraq and Syria.

At its height in 2014, IS [controlled](#) 34,000 square miles—or 88,000 square kilometers—across Syria and Iraq, home to about [10 million people](#). The group also changed [its name from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham to the Islamic State](#), reflecting its plans to expand control over more territory.

The U.S. launched an [international military intervention](#) to defeat the Islamic State group in 2014.

This military coalition [brought IS to its knees](#) by the beginning of 2018 and ended its control over the large territory it once controlled in Syria and Iraq.

The U.S. [announced it would pull out its troops](#) from Syria in 2018 and declared victory over IS. The Islamic State group lost control over its last [bit of](#) territory in Syria in 2019.

Islamic State group under lockdown

But despite the group's setbacks—including [tens of thousands](#) of fighters killed since its rise—IS [remained active in early 2020](#).

In March 2020, the [Syrian government enforced](#) a two-month lockdown that closed most businesses and imposed a partial curfew. [Iraq and Egypt](#) also implemented widespread closures and curfews to prevent COVID-19 from spreading.

We analyzed data on more than 1,500 attacks initiated by IS over an 18-month period in these places during 2019 and 2020. Our [research, published in January 2023](#), shows that travel bans and curfews helped reduce IS attacks substantially.

These findings highlight that COVID-19 lockdown measures affected

the Islamic State's ability to operate. The curfews made it difficult for IS to generate revenue and hide its movements by closing public and private institutions and restricting travel between provinces.

Our analysis showed that while in effect, curfews and travel bans helped to significantly reduce IS violence, especially in highly populated areas.

In Iraq, violence declined around 30% because of lockdowns. In Syria, there was an approximate 15% overall reduction in violence during this period.

But in Egypt, the government had already instituted curfews [in some areas because of the Islamic State group's presence](#) and violence there. This made it difficult to analyze COVID-specific lockdowns.

Unlike many other militant groups, IS had large [financial reserves](#) to sustain itself during the lockdown. It also operates in largely [rural areas](#) and, therefore, was not especially vulnerable to the effects of lockdown measures in urban areas.

Broader implications

Our research comes at a critical time as policymakers and [counterterrorism experts debate](#) a long-term strategy to eliminate the Islamic State group.

In 2022, the U.S. and [local military forces in Syria and Iraq](#) conducted 313 operations in Iraq and Syria, killing 700 IS fighters.

The U.S. and its partners in the region have also killed several prominent [IS leaders](#) over the past few years, including Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, [who died](#) in February 2022.

But we think the United States' [current strategy](#), which focuses heavily on military alliances with local partners, is not sustainable—in part because it does not pay heed to the reasons some people in Syria and Iraq still support IS.

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