

# Why EU Strategic Autonomy Apart From The U.S. Is Currently Impossible



*James W. Carden - Photo:  
Independent Media Institute*

Among the wreckage the riots that have convulsed Paris may leave in their wake include President Emmanuel Macron's pension reform; Macron's ability to effectively govern for the next four years; and, quite possibly, the Fifth Republic itself.

As *The New York Times* [reported](#) in March, protesters have been heard chanting, "Paris Rise Up...We decapitated Louis XVI. We will do it again, Macron."

But another, less noted, casualty of Macron's high-handed attempt to impose a neoliberal "reform" opposed by large pluralities of French citizens, may well be the idea of European strategic autonomy on matters relating to defense and foreign policy.

Hall Gardner, a professor of international relations at the American University of Paris tells me in his view, "Macron saw himself as the mediator between Russia and the West, but Putin's invasion of Ukraine and seeming refusal to compromise hurt Macron's international credibility, while Macron's apparent inability to foresee the extent of French social protest against his proposed reforms in the French system of retirement reveal him to be a weak leader, who is not in touch with his citizens, so that Putin will attempt to play the Far Right and Far Left, and

increasingly the Center, against him, so as to reduce French diplomatic and military support for Ukraine.”

“At the same time,” says Gardner, “the domestic crisis in France is so deep that it will weaken Macron’s efforts to play a constructive role in building an all-European foreign policy vis-a-vis Russia, the U.S. and other states.”

Macron had been pushing the concept of strategic autonomy for years, and during his first campaign for president in 2017 he [pledged](#) to “bring an end to the form of neoconservatism that has been imported to France over the past 10 years.”

From the perspective of American restrainers, this should have been welcome news; after all why, eighty years after the end of the Second World War and thirty years after the end of the Cold War is the United States, with \$31 trillion in debt, still subsidizing the defense of Europe, which has over 100 million more people and a GDP of roughly \$18 trillion?

But then the war in Ukraine came, and with it, a swift and effective effort by the Biden administration—through [any means necessary](#)—to impose a [strict discipline](#) among its NATO allies.

And so, in the aftermath of Putin’s illegal invasion of Ukraine, strategic autonomy’s future began to look bleak and the riots in Paris have now only served to further drive a stake through its heart.

Some might argue, however, that EU leaders are in fact pursuing a strategy of strategic autonomy as a result of the war in Ukraine. After all, European Commissioner for Internal Market [Thierry Breton’s](#) recently [announced](#) plans to transform the European Defense Industry Reinforcement Through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA) into a vehicle through which the EU can meet the new defense requirements for the war in Ukraine. Still more, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, in his much-heralded “[Zeitenwende](#)” (“Turning Point”) speech of last year, pledged €100 billion in new defense spending.

But an increase in spending—something the Americans have, after all, been demanding of its European partners for years—is not an alternative strategy. The fact is, the war in Ukraine has consolidated American hegemony in Europe. Firstly, the financial and military contributions to Ukraine by the United States [dwarfs](#) the contributions made by EU member states.

And then there is the curious non-reaction by the leaders of the Germany parliamentary coalition, the Social Democrats (SPD) to the destruction of Nord Stream 2. As the German sociologist Wolfgang Streeck, emeritus director of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies recently [wondered](#):

*“How long the German government can remain as subservient to the United States as it has now promised to be is an open question, considering the risks that come with Germany’s territorial closeness to the Ukrainian battlefield – a risk not shared by the U.S.”*

After conversations with German parliamentarians and activists from across the political spectrum over the past week, one comes away with the impression: Quite a good deal longer.

In Germany, the appetite for a freer hand in the formation of their own national security policy exists in pockets (on the part of the Left that still understands the value of Ostpolitik, and the far-right) but is nowhere evident among the political establishment and still less among Scholz’s coalition partners, particularly the bellicose Greens, who now seem to relish their role as a proxy for the U.S. foreign policy establishment.

Yet over the long term, Germany’s economic, energy and national security interests will likely dictate it come to reject (or take a polite pass on) American demands to sign up for the now looming global confrontation between Western democracies and Eurasian authoritarian regimes led by China and Russia.

Over time, *Ostpolitik* (The “Eastern Policy” of normalized relations with the communist states of Eastern Europe pursued by German Chancellor [Willy Brandt](#) in the late 1960s and early 1970s) may have a second life after all, given the German industry’s dependence on cheap natural gas and its ever-increasing trading ties with China: In 2021 two-way trade between Germany and China hit a [record](#) \$320 billion.

But as things now stand, with Paris distracted by a populist revolt, Washington—with the enthusiastic backing of Warsaw, London, Prague, Riga, Tallinn, Vilnius, *and* the foreign ministry in Berlin—is exercising a kind of hegemony on the continent not seen since the days when President Reagan, against vast popular protests, placed Pershing II missiles in West Germany in late 1983.

To his great credit, Macron realizes—as did his model, the great Charles de Gaulle—that protracted U.S. hegemony over Europe is both unsustainable and indeed, given Washington’s [ever-deepening involvement](#) in the Ukraine war and the new cold war posture it has taken with regard to China, dangerous. But now he is likely helpless to pursue his favored alternative strategy.

In the end, a politically stable France and German buy-in are the two foundational prerequisites for strategic autonomy to succeed. And as of this writing, there is neither.

*Author Bio:*

This article is distributed by [Globetrotter](#) in partnership with the [American Committee for U.S.-Russia Accord](#) (ACURA).

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*Source:* Globetrotter

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# **The Long Arm Of Washington Extends Into Africa’s Sahel**



*Vijay Prashad*

On March 16, 2023, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [announced](#)—during his visit to Niger—that the United States government will provide \$150 million in aid to the Sahel region of Africa. This money, Blinken said, “will help provide life-saving support to refugees, asylum seekers, and others impacted by conflict and food insecurity in the region.” The next day, UNICEF issued a [press release](#) with information from a [report](#) the United Nations issued that month stating that 10 million children in the central Sahel countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger need humanitarian assistance. UNICEF has appealed for [\\$473.8 million](#) to support its efforts to provide these children with basic requirements. According to the [Human Development Index](#) for 2021, Niger, despite holding large [reserves](#) of uranium, is one of the poorest countries in the world (189th out of 191 countries); profits from the uranium have long [drained](#) away to [French](#) and other Western multinational corporations. The U.S. aid money will not be going to the United Nations but will be disbursed through its own agencies, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development’s Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance.

Northeast of Niger’s capital Niamey, near the city of Agadez, is Air Base 201, one of the world’s largest drone [bases](#) that is home to several armed MQ-9 Reapers. During a press conference with Blinken, Niger Foreign Minister Hassoumi Massoudou [affirmed](#) his country’s “military cooperation” with the United States, which includes the U.S. “equipping... our armed forces, for our army and our air force and intelligence.” Neither Blinken nor Massoudou spoke about Air Base 201, from where the United States [monitors](#) the Sahel region, trains Niger’s military, and provides air support for U.S. ground operations in the region (all of

this made clear during the [visit](#) by Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force JoAnne S. Bass to the base at the end of December 2021). The U.S. will [spend](#) \$280 million on this base—twice the humanitarian aid promised by Blinken—including \$30 million per year to maintain operations at Air Base 201.

Blinken is the [first](#) U.S. Secretary of State to visit Niger, a country that his own department [accused](#) of “significant human rights issues” like “unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings by or on behalf of government” and torture. When a reporter asked Blinken during the press conference what the U.S. will do “to bring democracy” to Burkina Faso and Mali, he [accused](#) that the United States is monitoring the “democratic backsliding, the military coups, which so far have not led to a renewal of a democratic constitutional process in these countries.” The military governments in [Burkina Faso](#) and Mali have [ejected](#) the presence of the French military from their territories and have indicated that they would not welcome any more Western military intervention. A senior official in Niger told me that Blinken’s hesitancy to directly speak about Burkina Faso and Mali might have been because of the distress about the faltering democracy in Niger.

Niger President Mohamed Bazoum has faced serious criticisms within the country about corruption and violence. In April 2022, president Bazoum [wrote](#) on Twitter that 30 of his senior officials had been arrested for “embezzlement or misappropriation,” and they would be in prison “for a long time.” This was a perfectly clear statement, but it obscured the deeper corruption within Bazoum’s own administration—including the [detention](#) of his Communications Minister Mahamadou Zada on corruption charges—which was [revealed](#) through an audit of the country’s 2021 spending that highlighted millions of dollars of missing state funds. Furthermore, a third of the money spent by Niger to buy \$1 billion in weapons from arms companies between 2011 and 2019 was pilfered by government officials, according to a [report](#) by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project.

In December 2022, during the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, President Bazoum joined Benin’s President Patrice Talon to [be part of](#) the U.S. project known as the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). The U.S. government pledged \$504 million toward facilitating transportation between Benin and Niger, to help increase trade between these two neighbors. The MCC, set up in 2004 in the context of the U.S. war on Iraq, has been [expanded](#) into an instrument used by

the U.S. government to challenge the Chinese-led [Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#). Senior officials in Niger, who requested anonymity, and several [studies](#) by independent authorities indicate that this MCC money is being used to upgrade African farmlands and that the corporation has been [working](#) with U.S.-funded institutions such as the [Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa](#) ([funded](#) by the Bill and Melinda Gates and Rockefeller foundations), and turn these agricultural resources over to multinational agribusinesses. The MCC grants, the senior officials said, are used to “launder” Niger’s land to foreign corporate interests and to “subordinate” Niger’s political leadership to U.S. government interests.

At the press conference, Blinken was asked about Russia’s Wagner Group. “Where Wagner has been present,” Blinken [said](#), “bad things have inevitably followed.” Statements have been made recently about the Wagner Group operating in Burkina Faso and Mali by the U.S. State Department’s [Vedant Patel](#) after the second coup in the former country in [September 2022](#), and by the RAND Corporation’s [Colin P. Clarke](#) in January 2023. Governments in both [Burkina Faso](#) and [Mali](#) have denied that Wagner is operating from their territory (although the group [does](#) operate in Libya), and informed observers such as the Nigerien journalist Seidik Abba (author of *Mali-Sahel, notre Afghanistan à nous*, 2022) [said](#) that countries in the Sahel region are being wary about any foreign intervention. Despite repeating many of Washington’s talking points about Wagner, Niger Foreign Minister Massoudou [conceded](#) that focus on it might be exaggerated: “As for the presence of Wagner in Burkina... the information that we have does not allow us to say that Wagner is still in Burkina Faso.”

Before Blinken left for Niger and Ethiopia, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee [said](#) that Niger is “one of our most important partners on the continent in terms of security cooperation.” That is the most honest assessment of U.S. interests in Niger—largely about the military bases in Agadez and Niamey.

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Source: Globetrotter

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# How The Cuban Government And Its People Collaborated On The Family Code



*Natalia Marques - Photo: commondreams.org*

*Revolutionary Havana youth describe the process of building legislation in dialogue with the people*

On September 25, 2022, Cuba [passed](#) one of the world's most progressive codes on families. All in one go, the small island nation legalized same-sex marriage, defined and upheld the rights of children, the disabled, caregivers, and the



elderly, and redefined “family” along ties of affinity rather than blood. This opens the concept of “family” to include nontraditional forms of familial relations, which exist outside the model of the heterosexual nuclear family.

Hailed as “revolutionary” by many in Cuba, the code will help provide protections to people who would have otherwise faced discrimination in society while ensuring that Cubans in same-sex relationships who wish to marry now have the legal right to do so.

According to young Cubans and social movement leaders, whom I spoke to about the Family Code while attending a conference titled “[Building Our Future](#)” in Havana in November 2022, the code is a reflection of a dialogue between the Cuban people and their government.

In the time since the code was passed, the Cuban government remains in dialogue with the people. The Ministry of Justice is still [holding seminars](#) in provinces throughout Cuba for people seeking answers to questions that have come up during the implementation process. The Family Code has been influencing everything from [sports](#) to property relations. Notably, in just the first two months of the law being passed, [112 same-sex marriages](#) were registered.

### *A Revolutionary Code*

“It’s a revolutionary code that will change the thinking and the vision that Cubans have regarding... discriminations that can happen in society,” said Jose Luiz, a third-year international relations student at the Higher Institute of International Relations Raul Roa García. The Family Code legalizes and broadens the definition of a “family” [far beyond the traditional definition](#). The code “will bring new protections to people who have, in one way or another, been discriminated against,” Luiz told me.

Cuba [ratified](#) a new constitution in 2019. The constitution was written through “[popular consultations](#)” with the Cuban people. Through this process, Cubans participated in community discussions with government officials to both discuss and amend the constitution. Article 68, which called for defining marriage as a union between two people, thus legalizing same-sex marriage, was mentioned in [66 percent](#) of popular consultation meetings. A [majority](#) of the Cuban people involved in these processes supported maintaining the definition of marriage as being a union between a man and a woman. This is partly due to [historic](#)

[prejudices](#) against LGBTQ+ people that are [prevalent across](#) the Americas, and partly due to Cuba's [growing conservative evangelical movement](#), which [opposes](#) progressive social reforms such as same-sex marriage.

After intense debate regarding Article 68 among the Cuban people, the constitutional commission decided [not to include](#) the proposed language in favor of same-sex marriage and instead [pushed](#) the decision of addressing the matter through a future "family code" legislation. This legislation became the 2022 Family Code.

### *'Popular Consultation': A Government in Dialogue With Its People*

In order to overcome social conservatism to pass one of the most [progressive](#) Family Codes in the world, Cuba underwent a meticulous process of popular consultation, from February 1, 2022, to April 30, 2022. The National Assembly of People's Power [stressed](#) the importance of Cubans familiarizing themselves with the code, in order to prevent feelings of uncertainty. Through this process, the Cuban people made [more than 400,000 proposals](#), many of which were included in the finalized code. Minister of Justice Oscar Manuel Silvera Martínez [said](#) that the 25th version of the code, presented to and approved by the National Assembly, "was more solid because it was imbued with the wisdom of the people."

Young people played a central role in the process leading up to the approval of the Family Code. "The Cuban youth... are involved in all tasks that are deployed by the Cuban revolution," said Luiz. "We also participated in our referendum for our [constitution in 2019](#). We were in popular committees, discussing the constitution and we contributed to that."

In 2019, Cuba held a referendum on a new constitution. The referendum passed with a majority vote of [86.85 percent](#), which is about 73.3 percent of the total electorate. The referendum was preceded by a popular consultation process, in which a draft constitution was discussed in 133,000 public meetings nationwide, where the people of Cuba submitted 783,000 proposals for changes. Cuban officials stated that almost 60 percent of the draft constitution was modified based on the proposals submitted by the public during the popular consultation process.

"I remember at my college, we had meetings to explain the [Family Code], and for us as students to give our perspective of the code and propose something for the

code,” Neisser Liban Calderón García, also a Cuban international relations student, told me. “But after we did that at college, we had the same thing in our community, with a different perspective because at college we are with our friends, with [other] students; but in the community, we are with people from all ages and from different families.” García, who has a boyfriend, told me that he is glad that he will now have the opportunity to marry in the future.

The results of this popular process speak for themselves: With [74.01 percent](#) of eligible voters participating, the Family Code passed in a landslide victory with 66.87 percent of votes in favor.

“The day that... [the Cuban people] voted for the Family Code in the popular referendum, I also participated directly in the polling station,” said Luiz. “I could see the high participation of the people in the process, and the high acceptance and eagerness for the approval of the code.”

As Luiz mentioned, some young people had the opportunity to participate in an even more direct way. “Through the University Student Federation [FEU], we have meetings with the leadership of the country. For example, my institute had a meeting with the president. And in that meeting, we described the vision we have as revolutionary and communist youths, the vision we have of the change that needs to happen regarding the base and the leaders of the country,” Luiz said. “We have a voice [as youth] in every space that we have, including the [president of FEU](#) [who at the time was law student Karla Santana]. She is [part of the National Assembly of People’s Power](#) in Cuba. And she shares her perspective with the Cuban government regarding the thinking of the youth and its tradition in the Cuban revolution.”

Gretel Marante Roset, international relations officer for the Federation of Cuban Women, told me that the women of Cuba played a special role in the process of creating the Family Code. “Our commander in chief [Fidel Castro] said that the Federation of Cuban Women is a revolution within another revolution. Women in Cuba are beneficiaries and protagonists of our own development.” Women hold [half](#) of all national parliamentary seats in Cuba.

“The Federation of Cuban Women was part of the commission writing the draft of the Family Code to propose the text and interpretation of gender equality,” Marante Roset told me.

“About the Family Code, I think that the document is for the future. It is based on love... recognizing other types of families, joint human rights... I think that this is the future for Cuba,” Marante Roset said.

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This article was produced in partnership by [Peoples Dispatch](#) and [Globetrotter](#).

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*Source:* Globetrotter

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# **In Berlin, Mizrahi Activists Face An Identity Conflict Over Judicial Protests**



*Mati Shoemelof - Portrait:  
Joseph Sassoon Semah*

*With Netanyahu's visit to Germany, Mati Shemoelof struggles to reconcile the*

*Mizrahi Jews' struggle for a political voice with their role in the rise of the ultra-religious Right.*

In January, I received an email from a group of Mizrahi activists in Israel. The Netanyahu government was about to forge ahead with its judicial “reforms” and the email outlined a new Initiative: [A Mizrahi-civil collective regarding the public agenda of the new government](#).

I knew most of the activists from our mutual activism activities in Israel, from social justice and questions of multiculturalism to the growing social gaps in Israel. The invitation to join this new collective prompted a major dilemma for me. I had started following Israeli news almost obsessively. The new voices of protest and the hundreds of thousands of Israelis protesting every weekend in the big cities had me glued me to the internet.

However, I also felt reassured that I had made the right move by leaving that place, that I had put the correct geographical distance between me and this extreme right-wing government. But could I just sit and do nothing? Even worse, hardly anyone I knew in Germany, a country loaded with Ashkenazi history, could understand my dilemma.

And then Natan Sznajder, an academic and writer who was born in Germany and moved to Israel when he was 20, wrote an article in the German newspaper [die Taz](#) about the struggle in Israel as one between the Mizrahi and the Ashkenazi Jews. Ok, I thought.

So, I read the policy papers of the collective and tried to understand from afar. Now, I want to spread the messages of the Mizrahi Left and challenge the idea that there are two camps here in Berlin fighting each other.

I edit texts and try to contribute as much as I can to help the collective. But the truth is it's hard for me to contribute much. I am no longer informed like I once was. Then I tell myself that's just an excuse. So, two weeks ago the collective took to [social media](#) and in Hebrew and Arabic put out an [open call for worried citizens to join the collective](#).

We sent our policy paper to politicians and the media and shared it on different channels. We got more than 1853 signatures.

Then we began working with groups of activists in different fields: democracy and protest, education system, culture and media, social justice, housing, public

space, transportation and gender and LGBTQ+ rights. And as distant as I am, it is important to me to create a distinct Mizrahi voice in the Israeli media.

Benjamin Netanyahu is using his Mizrahi ministers to undermine the accomplishments of the Mizrahi democratic struggle. [For example, he's cancelled the public housing law that helped lower-income families](#), which is bound to worsen the ongoing and systematic harm inflicted upon marginalised and mostly Mizrahi populations in Israel.

But there is more to my dilemma, as I learned during my online activism. Some of the opposition discourse on Netanyahu's rule contains racist elements. People on the Left who do not know Mizrahi history are blaming the Mizrahi people for this judicial reform; they don't know how the Mizrahi Left contributed to social justice, democracy, and other important issues.

They also use stereotypes and racism when they criticise Mizrahi ministers and forget that our democratic struggle should be clean from racism.

On the Right there is also a scary process, a steady co-option by right-wing pundits and politicians of the discursive fruits of the Mizrahi struggle. Our collective demands for representation, described as "the second Israel" or "periphery and centre," have turned the discussion over recognition and rights into a confrontation wherein ignorance of Mizrahi history and culture has increased and the profound problems of the present have been silenced.

These right-wing politicians have never participated in the struggles for equality in education, the equitable re-drawing of local council jurisdictions, the expansion of public housing, the prevention of evictions, and the struggle against forced removals of Mizrahi residents of neighbourhoods such as Kfar Shalem, Givat Amal, Abu Kabir, and HaArgazim.

The Mizrahi collective has three main aims: First, we will not be silenced, we will criticise the policies of this government and we will not attempt to silence "the other" within Israeli society.

Second, we will bring our Mizrahi activism to the public to remind Israelis what we gained with former struggles and what we intend to do.

Third, we will use social media to reach out to a younger audience.

This is another moment of important Mizrahi intellectual resistance. We have

requested meetings with politicians, we have published a legal paper and sent it to President Herzog with a request for a meeting.

It has also been sent to both the chairman of the Knesset's Constitution, Law and Justice Committee and the Minister of Justice with a demand to stop judicial proceedings, and to adopt the position paper.

This Mizrahi activism empowered me to stand and argue my special point of view, even here in the weekly protests at the Brandenburg Gate, where most of the protesters are Ashkenazim. Now, I am protesting with them against the coup, while continuing to argue for the long history of Mizrahi struggle, a sharp stance of a Mizrahi Left.

Source:

<https://plus61j.net.au/jewish-world/in-berlin-mizrahi-activists-face-an-identity-conflict-over-judicial-protests/>

*Mati Shemoelof* is a poet and an author. His writing includes seven poetry books, plays, articles and fiction, which have won significant recognition and prizes. He has written a radio play for German radio WDR. A German edition of his bi-lingual poems was published by AphorismA Verlag.

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# **Three Banks Have Now Collapsed. A Progressive Economist Explains Why**



*Gerald Epstein is Professor of Economics and a founding Co-Director of the Political Economy Research Institute (PERI) at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.*

Three banks in the U.S. (Silicon Valley Bank, Signature Bank and Silvergate) have collapsed since early March. The collapses of Silicon Valley Bank and Signature Bank are the two biggest bank failures since 2008. Silicon Valley Bank had deep ties to the high-tech industry while Signature Bank and Silvergate were some of the world's biggest crypto-friendly banks. So, why are banks collapsing now? Is there a banking crisis underway? Moreover, are government bailouts back? Leading progressive economist Gerald Epstein addresses these and other questions in this exclusive interview for *Truthout*. Gerald Epstein is professor of economics and co-director of the Political Economy Research Institute (PERI) at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and author of a forthcoming book from the University of California Press titled, *Busting the Bankers' Club: Finance For the Rest of Us*.

*C.J. Polychroniou: In 2007, the biggest financial crisis since the Great Depression erupted in the U.S. and, within a couple of years, it rippled across the globe with ramifications which, in some instances, have yet to be resolved. Indeed, many analysts have been suggesting all along that the next financial crisis was just waiting to happen because the necessary structural changes to the banking system were never put in place. Now, it seems that the critics were right: On March 10, 2023, Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) collapsed due to a classic bank run and its inability to raise capital. Moreover, a couple of days earlier, California-based Silvergate Bank had also folded and on March 12, the New York-based*



*Signature Bank, which had over \$100 billion in assets, became the next casualty. What caused SVB, which was the 16th largest bank in the U.S., to collapse?*

*Gerald Epstein:* There are five main causes of the SVB collapse and the subsequent knock-on problems facing the U.S. and global financial system: the Federal Reserve's anti-inflation obsession causing it to raise interest rates too high and too fast; the inherent fragility of banking, which for centuries has periodically erupted in crises; inadequate regulation of this fragile system, which often leads to high profits that accrue to banks and their wealthy owners; the corruption and self-dealing that often result from banks' insufficient supervision; and the lack of public alternatives for financial institutions and services that could perform many of the key functions of banking and finance with less risk and without the private financiers taking their cut. Some of the huge profits financiers make from this system are funneled to buy support from politicians to prevent adequate regulation, and to secure bailouts when the system crashes.

This structure produces failures in various ways and forms. The causes of SVB's failure are both old school and new dawn — with these two being intertwined and intermingled — creating an old vintage brew poured into new, high-tech bottles. The bank's investments (assets) were concentrated in a single industry — technology start-ups — that had been booming for several years but then dramatically slowed down, reducing business and income for SVB. To bolster its profits, SVB invested in risky financial assets to enhance short term returns: in this case it invested in long-term U.S. government bonds (and government guaranteed mortgage bonds) that were highly rated (AAA) but had high risks of loss if interest rates went up significantly. In [its overzealous attempt to fight inflation](#), the Fed raised interest rates by more than 4 percentage points within a year, causing the market value of the government's long-term bonds to plummet. This would not have created problems if SVB had held onto these bonds to term (e.g., 10 years). But, the bank funded these start-ups and bond investments with significant amounts of potentially flighty short-term debt — in this case, large amounts of uninsured deposits lent to the bank by Silicon Valley-oriented venture capital firms (VCs) and their customers ("founders" or "start-ups"). This means that the bank funded its risky investments with flighty debt rather than from its owners' equity capital. In other words, the bank had high levels of "leverage" (debt relative to assets) based on debts (deposits) that could be demanded back from the bank at a moment's notice.

Sensing problems with the bank, or just wanting to move their funds to earn higher interest rates, the VC investors began taking their money out of SVB and, as a result, SVB had to sell its government bonds at a loss in order to pay them back their deposits. These losses on the bonds cut into SVB's capital. When SVB tried to raise more capital in order to cover these losses, this raised eyebrows about the solvency of the firm. VC firms withdrew millions of dollars and told their "start-ups" to take their money and run. When the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) took control of SVB on March 10, SVB was the 16th-largest bank in the U.S., with over \$200 billion in assets, and its collapse was the largest since Washington Mutual in 2008. (For context, the largest U.S. bank is JPMorgan-Chase with \$3.2 trillion).

Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders, and many others (law professor [Jennifer Taub](#), Lisa Donner of Americans for Financial Reform and Dennis Kelleher of Better Markets, to name a few) are pointing to the Trump-era partial deregulation of medium-sized banks (less than \$250 billion in assets), which contributed to SVB's failure. SVB's capital and liquidity requirements were reduced, mandatory stress tests were eliminated, the rules against proprietary trading (the [Volcker Rule](#)) were suspended, and the need to prepare plans in case the bank became insolvent (so-called 'living wills') was eliminated. These stricter rules would have made it much more likely that the problems with SVB would have been dealt with by the Federal Reserve and FDIC sooner and in a much less disruptive way. Right after Lehman Brothers collapsed in 2008, the Queen of England asked economists at the London School of Economists how they had all missed the warning signs. Many are now asking the same of the Federal Reserve Board and the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco that were supposed to be supervising SVB. It turns out that they did know of these problems at least a year ago, but, it seems, only offered toothless warnings.

This lack of serious attention reminds me of the [Carmen Segarra saga](#) after the great financial crisis. Segarra was hired to be the New York Federal Reserve monitor/supervisor onsite at Goldman Sachs in 2011. She saw first-hand the lack of risk controls at Goldman and the obsequious behavior of the other New York Fed monitors who seemed more interested in gaining favor with Goldman than protecting the public. Segarra was fired after repeatedly complaining about the lack of serious Fed supervision of Goldman. One wonders if the San Francisco Fed has put on a repeat performance.

Greg Becker, SVB's CEO, had lobbied Congress for the Trump-era deregulation bill. He also sat on the board of directors of the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco up until the day the bank collapsed.

*In the cases of SVB and Signature Bank, FDIC insurance will cover all depositors regardless of size, but the Biden administration says this does not amount to a bailout. Does this sound right? I mean, if the U.S. government steps in to shore up deposits in failed banks, doesn't such a move qualify as a bailout? And who ultimately benefits from a bailout?*

This question of whether the FDIC's after-the-fact decision to cover all of SVB's and Signature's deposits — plus, the decision by Federal Reserve to create a special facility to lend money to banks that hold long-term government bonds, dollar for dollar at the original value of the bonds — constitutes a "bailout" is politically and morally fraught, and the discussion of it has, generally, been full of bluster with only a few illuminating contributions.

The term "bailout" is not a technical term; it is a colloquial term. Since at least the 2008 crisis, it has had a largely pejorative connotation, and suggests that someone has been compensated even though they should have known, or did know, better. Worse, perhaps they did something illicit and were still getting compensation from the government. In this meaning, bailout suggests a rescue so that these people will not have to bear the consequences of their acts. This rescue will make it more likely that they will do this irresponsible and costly action again (leading to what economists and insurance companies call "moral hazard"). After 2008, there was a widespread view that "Wall Street got bailed out and Main Street did not." This really angered people and contributed to the rise of the "Tea Party" and later, to more perverse and dangerous incarnations. No government wants to be accused of doing bank bailouts again, including Joe Biden. Has he, or hasn't he?

Let's use an analogy to see if that helps us decide. Say there is a fierce hurricane that hits Miami. Compare three people. One has a house in the middle of town, and it gets destroyed. Say this person could not afford hurricane insurance. If the government comes in and gives this person compensation to help his family get back on their feet, do we think most Americans will call this a bailout? I don't think so. It is a rescue, or aid. Let's say another person built a house on the beach. Their house gets swamped. The government gives them compensation,

without the condition that they can't build on the beach again. Will people call this a bailout? Maybe. Then there is a third case. A big property developer who builds a huge apartment complex on the beach, a complex that erodes the beach and makes it easier for high waters to come off the ocean into the complex and the neighbors' apartments as well. The hurricane wrecks the complex and the neighbors' apartments, and the building developer gets compensation from the government. Will people call this a bailout? No question. And moral hazard? Definitely. The builder will just do it again with bad implications for him and his neighbors.

Let's apply this analogy to SVB. The management and owners made bad and irresponsible decisions. The government fired the management and is giving no compensation to the bank's owners (or other big non-depositor creditors). No bailout here. The FDIC is compensating the startups that had more than \$250,000 in the bank, either because they had nowhere else to easily park their payroll and reserves, or because SVB or their VCs forced them to keep their money on deposit at SVB. Are they being bailed out or aided/rescued? I would say that most Americans who understood this situation would say no bailout here. What about the venture capitalists who made multimillion-dollar deposits into SVB, presumably in exchange for benefits from the bank, and some of whom rapidly pulled their money out and told their start-ups to do likewise. The FDIC is making them whole if they did not manage to get all their money out. This smells like a bailout to me.

There are other interesting cases that do not fit into a neat box. Little commented on, the SVB depositor rescue by the FDIC constitutes the first bailout of a major cryptocurrency firm. Circle — the issuer of its crypto-connected "stable-coin," USD Coin (USDC) — had deposits of more than \$3 billion in SVB. These are Circle's U.S. dollar assets that they use to try to maintain a 1-to-1 dollar peg between their "stable" coin and the U.S. dollar. When SVB went under, USDC dropped off its peg to about 80 cents. U.S. financial regulators such as Securities and Exchange Commission Chair Gary Gensler had warned that these so-called stable coins were unstable and could only be made stable with bail-outs. They found evidence right here. And these regulators should nip this dangerous "financial innovation" in the bud before it causes more problems.

The FDIC will not get the funds to compensate these depositors by raising taxes but by assessing the banks. But small community banks are asking: Why should

we bail out these massive VC firms? Shouldn't the big VC investors, like Peter Thiel, get assessed for these costs?

But even the claim that the executives of SVB are not getting bailed out is questionable. No one doubts that they are largely responsible for the debacle. But it is not true that they are not getting rescued. [Senators Elizabeth Warren and Richard Blumenthal](#) have put together a whole rap sheet on possible self-dealing and wealth-grabbing by CEO Gregory Becker and other top management that contributed to SVB's demise. These include stock sales in the weeks before the collapse and significant bonuses just before the FDIC take over. Warren, Blumenthal, Biden, and others have called for "clawbacks" of ill-gotten gains from bank executives in these situations.

The bottom line, in my view, is that there have been serious bailouts here and more will probably be discovered; but it is not correct to paint all those with large deposits who got rescued as being "bailed out." There is a structural problem in our current financial system. There needs to be a safe place for businesses to place their reserves and working capital without providing funds to speculative financiers, and without fear that their deposits will be wiped out in a bank failure. That, among other reasons, is why we need publicly provided accounts where households and businesses can hold their money, risk-free.

*Given where things stand at the present time, would you say that a banking crisis is under way? Moreover, is there a connection between the SVB collapse and the state of the U.S. economy?*

There is a banking crisis underway. I don't think it will have the strength or reach of the 2008 crisis, but the problems have spread. There is a two-way street between these banking problems and the overall economy. On the one hand, the rapid increase in central bank interest rates to fight inflation is a major precipitating factor driving the financial problems. This interest rate overshooting by the Fed is, as my colleague Bob Pollin and his co-author Hanae Bouazza have shown, due to its wrong-headed commitment to driving inflation down to an arbitrary 2 percent [target](#). These high interest rates and the banking problems partially caused by them will probably restrict useful lending to the economy and may make a recession more likely.

*The general consensus so far is that the SVB collapse will have minimal impact on*

*global markets and global financial institutions. Be that as it may, it seems that the U.S. banking system has learned no lessons from the 2007-2008 financial crisis. If this is so, is the problem with private institutions geared toward the pursuit of profit at any cost, or with public policy?*

Yes. That is clearly a big part of the problem. A healthy economy needs a set of basic institutions that provide financial services to families and businesses that facilitate their productive and necessary activities. The problem with private, more speculative banks like the big banks that dominate our economy is that they provide lousy and costly services to most families and smaller businesses. And as SVB shows, sometimes these deposit accounts for families and businesses are held alongside large speculative deposits that fund speculative investments that put the whole bank at risk.

At a minimum, we need to restore the levels of financial regulation we had after the Dodd-Frank Act was implemented, but this is not enough. We have to have public provision of basic financial services, such as Federal Reserve Accounts, and/or a postal banking system where anyone can have risk free deposit accounts and, in the latter case, households can get basic banking services. Public banks at the state, municipal or regional level are another example of financial institutions that can provide loans and other financial services insulated from the negative aspects of the profit motive of private banking.

And we need to regulate the regulators, like the Federal Reserve, to prevent them from doing the bidding of the banks. Major structural changes need to be implemented, but I am afraid these issues are beyond the scope of this interview.

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# Religion, Nationalism, And ‘Western’ Hate: The Covid-19 Crisis Explained In Russian-Speaking And Arab-Islamic Regions

В РОССИИ 11:30, 21 декабря 2020

**В РПЦ отметили опасность разделения общества из-за коронавируса**

Москва, 21 декабря. INTERFAX.RU - В Русской православной церкви высказали мнение, что разделение во взглядах людей, возникшее по поводу коронавируса, не менее опасно, чем сама пандемия COVID-19.

## *1 Introduction*

When the world was hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, reactions from religious leaders were inevitable. Christian and Islamic leaders were no exception to that rule, trying to formulate explanations for cause of the pandemic. Some statements breathed the atmosphere of resignation: the pandemic is affecting the world and therefore believers and the faithful must also resist the pandemic based on their beliefs (Kowalczyk, Roszkowski, Montane et al., 2020). Often religious leaders streamlined their statements with national government policies. In such cases they strove to have the rules of conduct for the faithful to deviate as little as possible from the relevant national approaches to the epidemic (Hart & Koenig,

2020). Yet statements were also made in which religious authorities cite reasons why the world was hit by the pandemic, and in particular the role of God in it (Kowalczyk, Roszkowski, Montane et al., 2020). There are religious authorities who explain the calamities that befall the world in terms of God's punishment for the sinful behavior of unbelievers (Moravec & Lacková, 2021). In doing so, they would exonerate themselves. Religions have in common the notion of sacredness and sacredness by definition cannot be 'polluted' by whatever cause (Chryssides & Geaves, 2011). And with this background in mind, leaders were also confronted with the question of what to do now that the pandemic was affecting rituals that are sacred within the communities concerned. Based on these considerations, an interesting question is how religious authorities interpret the Covid-19 pandemic. In our expose, we make a comparison between the reaction of the Russian Orthodox Church and various Islamic fundamentalist organizations on the pandemic. We do this because on initial consideration we found that there seem to be remarkable similarities and differences in the reactions of both.

Thus, this article examines two cases of religious leaders having to formulate answers to questions raised by the pandemic. On the one hand, this concerns the question of how the Russian Orthodox Church reacted to the question of whether believers were still allowed to touch sacred objects such as icons, and on the other hand, the question is how Islamic fundamentalist jihadi movements explain the origin of the pandemic and what they recommend their followers to do to prevent contamination and spread. In short this article aims to answer the following question: 'How did Russian Orthodox and Islamic fundamentalist officials address the Covid-19 crisis and what motivated them to react as they did?'. The choice to research this particular question is also motivated by the dominant value religion has in Russian-speaking and Islamic societies. Statements of religious leaders have a serious impact on the faithful and the general population of these areas.

This article is structured as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical background on the basis of which the cases are treated. This is followed by a description of both cases, that of the Russian Orthodox Church first, followed by that of Islamic fundamentalist organizations. The article ends with the formulation and a discussion of the conclusions.

## *2 Theoretical background*

The Covid-19 pandemic has made it hard for the authorities to immediately



change and adapt countries' policies to the newly emerging reality of the increasing danger. Governments' slow reactions and delayed quarantine measures have led to a series of issues in which online and offline misinformation became countries' strategies to counter the virus (Alimardnai & Elswahi, 2020). This contributes to the global stream of sharing false information to support political goals. The spread of untruthful facts has become one of the key features of contemporary media due to its rapid distribution via user-generated content and propagandist channels (Bakir & McStay, 2017).

Scholarly debates differentiate various definitions of false information depending on its spread and intent to cause harm (Wang et al., 2019; Wardle & Derakhsan, 2017). Misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information are politicized terms of what is commonly referred to in the media as 'fake news' (Wang, et al., 2019). Separating different subgroups of deceptive information helps provide a set of clear-cut characteristics of specific 'fake news' types that can be helpful for scholars and policymakers alike. However, a foreseeable difficulty with defining these concepts is finding the intent of a fake news story spread and putting it in a category solely based on factors not entirely known to the researcher (Wang et al., 2019). The current article sticks to the following definition of misinformation in relation to mass media and politics — "when false information is shared, but no harm is meant" (Wardle & Derakhsan, 2017). However, the paper also uses misinformation as an umbrella term for all the media stories that have a certain degree of deception because scholars cannot always be certain about the intent of news materials reaching the public. This could be a possible limitation of the studies focusing on the false information spread.

The research topic of misinformation remains very relevant, however, with numerous scholars describing the current period as the "era of fake news" (Wang, et al., 2019). What brings misinformation studies under the spotlight is its abuse by political actors in the public sphere. The main issue with the increasing usage of misinformation by political parties is that while they use it to their advantage, at the same time they create a challenge for the society of undermining democracy (Bakir & McStay, 2017). Namely, wrongly informed citizens get emotionally invested given the provocative nature of misinformation and keep sharing false news while being stuck in digital echo chambers (Bakir & McStay, 2017).

What makes it particularly easy for a misleading news story to gain visibility is its

topicality in the specific time period. The 'basic law of rumor' is applied here with the amount of circulation varying due to the importance of the subject to the individuals concerned multiplied by the ambiguity of the evidence applied to the topic (Wang, et al., 2019, Allport & Postman, 1947). During the COVID-19 crisis, the two aspects intensified due to the growing individual importance of the news articles regarding the pandemic, and the hoax of evidence and information spread by media outlets. We do not need to undermine the overall vulnerability of individuals and institutions in what homes to misinformation about health (Wang, et al., 2019).

Conspiracy thinking also fuels the spread of false information. The first few months of 2020 have marked a chain of widespread beliefs on Bill Gates, 5G, scientific uncertainties, governments hiding the truth, harms of vaccinations, and the role of China in the virus spread. As the pandemic started approaching more countries, the issues discussed have become significantly more political (Ball & Maxmen, 2020). Especially in the Middle East, where conspiracy theories are immensely influential (Pipes, 1996). In fact, it is important to understand that throughout history, they made their way into providing a key to the political culture of the region (Pipes, 1996). Scholars claim that to understand Middle Eastern culture, one needs to orient himself in the distorting lens of conspiracy theories and to be able to plan around conspiracism, as well as the unique discourse it builds as the region's most distinctive political feature (Pipes, 1996).

It is interesting to note that, while discussing the theoretical background of fake news more and more website and applications spring up to make the public, in all its diversity, aware of the presence of fake news, how to discover it and how to analyze and deconstruct it. The three authors of this article have also collaborated in an Erasmus+ project financed by the European Union, called *CoMMiTTed* (see [this link](#)), presenting a full program for students and student teachers on fake news in English, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese. The title of the project is 'Covid, Migrants and Minorities in Teacher Education: A Fake News Observatory to promote Critical Thinking and Digital Literacy in times of Crisis' (Pijpers, de Rooter & Souza da Silva, 2023). The said program leans strongly on the earlier work of Wardle & Derekhshan (2017).

Russian media are also known to manipulate information, especially when it comes to crisis situations (Serrato & Wallis, 2020). Similarly to the Middle Eastern region, conspiracy thinking prevails in the country and gets fueled by the

media reports of the “well-trodden” conspiracy theories on coronavirus origin, measures, and social impact (Serrato & Wallis, 2020). Information on Russian media got continuously manipulated throughout the pandemic.

This article presents, as indicated above, two cases of misinformation coming from two sources that seem to be far away from each other, i.e. the Russian Orthodox Church and Islamic fundamentalist organizations, but it will show that they are quite strongly related to each other, each one defending its unique position vis-à-vis the pandemic, hitting the whole world and causing the whole world to take measures, but not both religious bodies for reasons that will become clear below.

### *3 The Russian Orthodox Church*

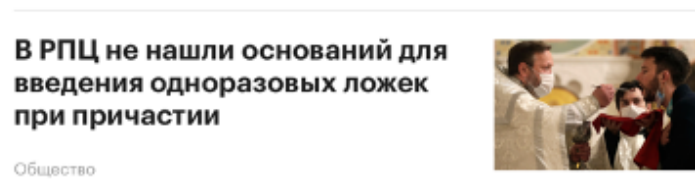
To analyze the case of the rhetorical situation where the COVID-19 pandemic is interpreted as a punishment from God, several cases were analyzed. When it comes to Russia, Orthodox Christianity is the country’s largest denomination. There is a lot of value put on religion in the public domain and media. Russian president Vladimir Putin has publicly demonstrated his confirmation to the Russian Orthodox church. Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, the Russian Orthodox bishop, is also an authoritative figure in the public sphere. He often shares comments on public matters and they get picked up by the domestic and international media.



Figure 1: News article reporting Patriarch Kirill’s opinion on being infected in churches.

Therefore, news articles featuring patriarch Kirill’s opinions on the spread and

the origin of coronavirus were analyzed for this paper. The first article was published by the Russian source RBC (РБК) on the 13th of April 2021 (Figure 1). The news piece was viewed over 32 thousand times (20.01.2022). The article headline states 'Patriarch Kirill declared the impossibility of contracting COVID through holy gifts'. The subheader translates as 'The deacons consume the remaining holy gifts after the Liturgy, and "none of them fell ill," said patriarch Kirill. According to him, he himself consumes them from a common bowl' (Polyakova, 2021). The news article reports patriarch Kirill's opinion that holy grails used in the Liturgy are not subject to coronavirus and no one should doubt their healing powers of the holy mysteries of Christ (Polyakova, 2021). The article also reports new measures applied in churches and the coronavirus infection statistics among the clergy of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia. In the meantime, patriarch Kirill is being quoted: "partaking of the body and blood of Christ, we partake of the great shrine, which is not subject to any infection, any evil, because it is a saint that is taught to the saints" (Polyakova, 2021). The article also links to a related material published on the absence of single-use spoons in churches during the Liturgy (Figure 2).



*Figure 2: The integrated link with the headline 'The Russian Orthodox Church did not find grounds for the introduction of disposable spoons during communion'.*

The other article comes from the same source, RBC Russia (Figure 3). The material was published on the 8th of October, 2020 and it was read by over 52 thousand users. Again, it reports patriarch Kirill's opinion on COVID-19. The headline quotes the bishop 'Patriarch Kirill called COVID "a signal from the Lord" and "the last call"'. The subheader adds: "According to the primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, humanity received a "call, a signal from the Lord himself" in order to learn to think differently and relate to daily duties. On October 8, the patriarch went into quarantine due to contact with the infected". The article repeatedly quotes the bishop how the pandemic could be the "last call" and 'an

amazing lesson' for the human kind (Anisimova, 2020). At the same time, patriarch Kirill shared 'that humanity has reached 'a certain point'', and people have the opportunity to 'see the futility of what the best years of life are given to, all the forces, all the tension of the mind and will'' (Anisimova, 2020). The article states that the bishop interprets the virus as a call from God himself to become more mindful about saving peoples' souls (Anisimova, 2020).



*Figure 3: The article reporting patriarch Kirill's opinion on the emergence of COVID-19.*

Another source, Интерфакс (interfax.ru) published a related article on 21st of December 2021, with a header "The Russian Orthodox Church noted the danger of division of society due to coronavirus" (Figure 4). The subheader states that "The Russian Orthodox Church expressed the opinion that the division in the views of people that arose over the coronavirus is no less dangerous than the COVID-19 pandemic itself" (Interfax, 2021). The piece reports the official statement on the pandemic made by Vladimir Legoyda, Head of the Synodal Department for Relations between the Church, Society and the Media.

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*Figure 4: The article found on the source Interfax.ru, reporting the official concern of the Russian Orthodox church for the polarization of society in Russia caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.*

The article quotes Legoyda: ‘When there was the first wave, and they were forced to limit visits to churches by the laity, when they introduced sanitary measures in churches (they began to wipe icons, litters after communion, etc.), this confused many. But in the end it highlighted what true loyalty to Christ and the Gospel is “Do you betray Christ when you put on a mask or follow other rules prescribed by experts? Yes, you should not be afraid of death, but should you run towards it, endangering other people? And so on,”’ (Interfax, 2021). He later adds that it was not easy for the Russian Orthodox church, but in his opinion “the church responds to this challenge [of coronavirus] with dignity” (Interfax, 2021).

The announcement by the prominent public figure of the Russian orthodox church visibly politicizes the issue of the coronavirus pandemic and gets picked up by the local media sources. The phrasing of the statement does not seem to provide definite answers whether it is sinful or not to wear a mask or to follow other coronavirus safety measures. The way the announcement was formulated gives space for interpretation for both, the believers that follow the Covid-19 rules and those who do not.

The strategy of ambiguity is applied in numerous Russian media when reporting coronavirus pandemic and other crises. In this way, the article and the institution, be it the Russian orthodox church or the government directly, gets support from people with different opinions on a whole political spectrum. The unclear wording awakes confirmation bias in the readers of the article. The phrasing is the key in the national narratives spread by the media in Russia. The ambiguous framing makes the message of the expertise of the Russian orthodox church more appealing which increases its shareability among the population.

#### <4 Covid and Islamic jihadi organizations

The Arab-Muslim world was also affected by Covid-19, and in that region of the world too, conspiracy theories have emerged, and fingers have been raised to the alleged causes of the pandemic, in particular to people who allegedly caused the disease (Piwko, 2021). The Arab-Islamic world is very diverse and the regimes that rule it vary from theocratic, such as Saudi Arabia, to -somewhat- democratic, such as Tunisia. For most countries, however, freedom of expression and press is limited and, in some countries, the coverage of Covid was under tight state control, such as in Egypt. In addition, the Arab-Islamic world is also not free from prejudices against people who are of non-Arab-Islamic descent (Pipes, 1996).

Another interesting phenomenon is that of fundamentalist movements, in the case of the Arab-Islamic world a movement like Islamic State (IS), that tend to see any disaster or pandemic as a punishment from God for the people; fundamentalist Christian preachers apply the same line of thinking as well (Käsehage, 2021). At the same time, these movements themselves also face this disease among their ranks.

Figure 5 presents an online flyer with the directives of IS of how to deal with Covid-19.



Figure 5: directives of Islamic State concerning Covid-19

Basically these directives are formulated [as follows](#) (we apply the translation of [Aymen Jawad in his blog on this subject](#)):

- The obligation of faith that illnesses do not strike by themselves but by the command and decree of God;
- The counsel to put trust in God and seek refuge in Him from illnesses;
- The obligation of taking up the causes of protection from illnesses and avoiding them;
- The counsel that the healthy should not enter the land of the epidemic and the afflicted [/infected] should not exit from it;
- The counsel to cover the mouth when yawning and sneezing;
- The counsel to cover the vessels and tie the waterskin;
- The counsel to wash the hands before dipping them into vessels

The directives of Islamic State concerning Covid-19, under bullet points 3 to 7, are remarkably sensible. They are based on what the prophet Mohammed told to do in cases like these, on what Sharia prescribes, and on what Muslim theologians have advised to do or not to do in cases of pandemics. The [website of the Wilson Center](#) further describes how Islamic State explains the pandemic (Hanna, 2020):

‘The Islamic State, a Sunni jihadi movement, blamed Shiites for the first cases of coronavirus in Iraq and called the outbreak a “sign” that Shiites should “abandon polytheism.” As the virus spread to Europe, the Islamic State adjusted its message and [called](#) the disease a “painful torment” for all “Crusader nations” in the West, according to [statements](#) in its al Naba newsletter. The group urged followers not to travel to Europe to commit terrorist attacks during the epidemic to avoid contracting the virus. Instead, the group [urged](#) its followers in Iraq and Syria to free ISIS prisoners being held in camps’.

It does not come as a surprise that Islamic State lays the blame for something negative with its traditional enemies, the Shiites being the first one of them, in many cases followed indeed by ‘Crusader nations’ by which countries like France, the United Kingdom and the United States are meant. In more recent time Islamic State declared not to take sides in the Russian-Ukraine war as it concerns ‘a crusader internal war of Christians’ which is caused by ‘their nature’ and Islamic State just watches them, destroying each other, that being at the advantage of Islamic State in all cases.



In general Islamic countries issued directives comparable to directives in other countries in the world (cf. OECD, 2020). The advice or duty to wear mouth masks, the advice to wash hands regularly, to sneeze into the elbows and the like. Also most countries set up vaccination campaigns but with different measures of success. Well-to-do countries such as the United Arab Emirates could easily finance these campaigns while in countries like Egypt people had to pay for their vaccinations and for tests by the way as well.

Still, what is common to all Islamic countries is the traditional distrust concerning medication, any medication for that matter, whether or not vaccines contain products coming from pigs, even if it would concern the slightest quantities. Still, in the end of many days, most Islamic authorities, representing the Islamic establishment in most Islamic countries, allowed the use of different vaccines (OECD, 2020; Piwko, 2021).

It is not only Islamic State that blames its traditional enemies as being the cause of the pandemic. Al Qaeda, the other and older branch of a fundamentalist jihadi movement expressed itself in similar terms (cf. Hanna, 2021). The group maintained that the virus was a “punishment” from God “for the injustice and oppression committed against Muslims” by Western governments (Hanna, 2021). At the same time the group also referred to Qur’anic verses propagating distance and hygiene measures in order to confront the virus.

The Islamic fundamentalist organization Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) which rules an enclave in the Northwestern part of Syria promulgated similar rules as ISIS and Al Qaeda to combat the virus, at the same time blaming the unbelievers, in this case the Shiites in particular, for its cause. Its leader Al Qahtani [advised](#) followers to “keep distant from gatherings and avoid hand-shaking” and to “stay in your place” as the epidemic spread (Hanna, 2021).

In a more Islamic mainstream analysis of the causes of the Covid-19 pandemic and how to interpret it from an Islamic perspective, Asif (2020) explains that pandemics are indeed from God, as all that happens on earth is from God, but that God means to test both unbelievers and believers. Here we observe a difference with the fundamentalist organizations treated in this article that recognize the pandemic as coming from God, but explicitly to punish the enemies of Islam, of whom there are many.

Taking the whole Islamic world into consideration we observe what happens in the whole world. Religions face the challenge of tackling the causes and effects of the pandemic and in doing so we see that mainstream religious authorities follow governments in promulgating behavioral guidelines for the believers and that at the same time more fundamentalist movements add specifically to that that the unbelievers, whomever they may be, are the cause of the pandemic.

### *5 Conclusions and discussion*

Even though the Russian Orthodox Church does not explicitly state that the sins of the unbelievers are the cause of the pandemic; it does state that the virus cannot negatively influence the rituals of the church. In this we see a difference with Islamic organizations that, in our opinion, are more realistic noticing that the virus can influence their rituals (Shabana, 2021), but in turn state much more explicitly that the appearance of the virus is due to the actions and sins of the unbelievers. Similar interpretations were not found with the Russian orthodox church, although this church's tendency to deny the effects of the virus in relation to its rituals can also be understood as a conception of the inviolability, even for a virus, of the church. The tendency to see oneself as pure and holy in a depraved world is what we find in both cases anyway, but its effect differs between the two. The Russian orthodox church protects the rituals but refrains from directly commenting on the cause of the virus, at the same time distributing ambiguous messages about the coronavirus prevention measures; the Islamist movements are more realistic in recognizing the effects of the virus on their rituals but are very explicit in blaming its cause on the actions of the sinners in the world.

The motivation to react as they did is very much inspired by the conviction of both religious institutions to keep their religion and rituals aloof. Recognizing that they bear any responsibility in the cause of the crisis and the spread of the disease are for both a challenge that they prefer to avoid. Instead, they maintain that the disease cannot hamper their sacred rituals, like the Russian Orthodox Church claims, or they blame the cause of the disease completely to the outside world, in case of the Islamic organizations treated here, to the unbelievers and the punishment of God on them.

It was stated above that religions have in common the notion of sacredness and sacredness by definition cannot be 'polluted' by whatever cause (Chryssides & Geaves, 2011). They have to bend over backwards to do justice to the sanctity of their rituals. They are almost forced to lose sight of the harsh reality of a

pandemic. After all, a pandemic does not distinguish between believers and unbelievers and does not care about the sacred. In this context it is tempting to accuse church leaders of hypocrisy, but that accusation is unjustified. After all, the intentions of the leaders and believers, whatever their signature, are sincere. But it is perhaps because of this split that theological Islamic texts end with the formula that “God knows best” or, in Arabic: *والله أعلم* (wa-allaahu ‘a‘lamu).

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