

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM

The global COVID-19 pandemic has brought a significant threat to the safety, health and wellbeing of societies and communities around the world. In light of the crisis, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres has recently called out for a global ceasefire and pleaded nations to focus on fighting the pandemic. Meanwhile, violent extremists across the ideological spectrum view the global pandemic as an opportunity for expansion.

While COVID-19 and several measures taken by governments around the globe have contributed to the suppression of the activities of violent extremist and terrorist groups, the new “normal” created by the crisis can also play into the hands of violent extremist and terrorist groups.

At UNITAR, we have looked into facts and figures and identified the following trends and how to respond to them.

POSITIVE TRENDS	IMPACT
Decreased recruitment activities in public spaces and other offline settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Violent extremists and terrorist groups use public spaces for activities to attract new followers and recruit active members. Due to restrictions on public gatherings, travel and movement, one can expect a decrease in recruitment activities in the public sphere. <p>However, linked to this trend, we expect a significant increase in online activities, notably on social media. Additionally, protests against governments could be exploited by violent extremist groups to attract new followers - please see below for more details.</p>
Decreased visibility for violent extremist and terrorist groups in media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - One main objective of terrorism and violent extremism is gaining outreach by spreading fear. Due to a greater focus on COVID-19 in international and national media, violent extremist groups are expected to attract less coverage by media and thus less visibility.
Potential discontent towards leaders of violent extremist and terrorist groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A common thread that runs through many violent extremist and terrorist groups regardless of their ideological orientation is a strong cult of charismatic leaders. If those leaders fail to protect their members against COVID-19, some followers could lose faith in their leadership and may turn against the group.

NEW CHALLENGES IN PREVENTING AND COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

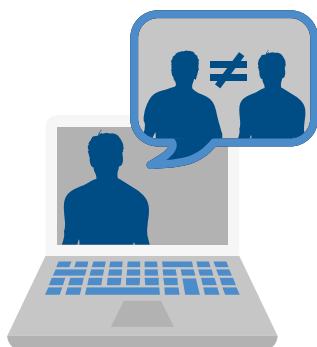
NEGATIVE TRENDS	IMPACT	WHAT COULD BE DONE
<p>Increased spread of disinformation, conspiracy theories and propaganda</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Undermining trust in government or moderate political society groups sits at the forefront of violent extremist and terrorist activities. By spreading disinformation, conspiracy theories and propaganda about the virus through online and offline settings, violent extremist movements and terrorist groups aim at sowing mistrust in authorities. – Some groups might try to exploit moderate political protests or movements to spread extremist narratives, expand their support base and recruit new members. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Build and develop strategies for effective communication to prevent and counter the spread of false information and conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19 – Improve capacities of key actors, such as community leaders and local CSOs, to counter extremist messages and narratives, hate speech and the spread of false information – Strengthen official responses to counter disinformation while respecting freedom of expression
<p>Increased recruitment online</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Spreading propaganda, attracting followers and recruiting new active members through the internet have increased in recent years. Due to restrictions of movement, violent extremist and terrorist groups may further increase their efforts to recruit new members through social media and other online forums. Young people remain particularly vulnerable as they are likely to spend more time online due to closed schools, shut down of leisure activities and lost employment opportunities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Improve efforts to prevent and counter online recruitment by developing digital solutions and tools to reach individuals 'at risk' – Develop and implement online resilience building initiatives and campaigns – Empower young people and generate new sources of income to increase resilience against recruitment – Build capacities of key actors, such as youth leaders and religious leaders, to counter online recruitment
<p>Backfire of preventive COVID-19 lockdown measures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The UNDP report 'Journey to Extremism' as well as a number of other studies have found that law enforcement approaches lacking respect for fundamental rights may provoke tension and could facilitate violent extremist recruitment from disfranchised populations. <p>COVID-19 related lockdowns with limitations of freedoms and local authorities imposing preventive COVID-19 measures through force could lead to further tensions and disfranchisement of parts of the population.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Build capacities of security forces and local authorities to ensure respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms while applying lockdown measures – Build and develop capacities for community policing to improve communication and understanding between citizens and security forces

NEW CHALLENGES IN COUNTER-TERRORISM

NEGATIVE TRENDS	IMPACT	WHAT COULD BE DONE
<p>Modified strategies for violent attacks</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Due to restrictions of movement, a change in plotting attacks of terrorist groups is likely. Traditional targeting in the public space where people used to gather, e.g. markets, public squares and places of worship, may be replaced by targeting critical infrastructure such as hospitals or supermarkets. – One could also expect that some terrorist groups might aim to intentionally spread SARS-COV-2 to scare public fear. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Improve preparedness of security forces to modified approaches of terrorist groups – Increase protection and target hardening of critical infrastructure like hospitals and supermarkets against terrorist attacks – Build and develop capacities against attempts to spread SARS-COV-2
<p>Halted and reduced international security assistance missions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – International security assistance, including training initiatives, has become an important pillar of international counter-terrorism efforts. Halted and reduced support to training activities for military and police forces may severely affect the capacities of local security forces in the fight against terrorism. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Continue to support countries throughout the pandemic in counter-terrorism. Prepare for a rise in terrorist activities as terrorist groups exploit the current situation, as described above – Develop online solutions to replace or reinforce local training and capacity building, where possible – Build and support local training facilities and step up Training of Trainers approaches to create self-sufficient training capacities within local security forces
<p>Halted peacebuilding and development initiatives</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – In many countries, peacebuilding and development initiatives contribute significantly to the prevention of violent extremism. Halted activities due to COVID-19 may create a vacuum where terrorist groups may seek to undermine the credibility of authorities and development actors. By reinventing themselves as service providers and providing food and basic goods to ‘at risk’ populations, some violent extremist and terrorist groups may seek to gain trust and appreciation to increase their base for support and recruitment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Increase support and strengthening of capacities of local actors, such as CSOs, to build and implement locally led initiatives to support communities at risk – Adapt initiatives from on-site to online methodology in order to uphold development efforts where possible – Develop creative technological online solutions to uphold peacebuilding efforts during the pandemic
<p>New ways of financing terrorism</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – In the past, violent extremist groups and their supporters tried to hide their financial activities from authorities by claiming to finance humanitarian relief operations. Similar cover-ups are expected to take place during the COVID-19 crisis. – It has also been observed, in the past, that violent extremist groups and their supporters had exploited the willingness of people, claiming their donation contributed to humanitarian relief whereas it was in fact financing violent extremist groups and their activities. Similar financing strategies might be applied during the pandemic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Build capacities for financial oversight and develop regulatory systems to prevent terrorists from raising and moving funds, in accordance with international recommendations and the Security Council Resolution 2462 (2019)

THREE TRENDS IN DETAIL

INCREASED SPREAD OF DISINFORMATION, CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND PROPAGANDA



With the spread of COVID-19, the pandemic seems to have turned into the most dominating force in extremist communications, forums and chatrooms online.

Violent extremist and terrorist groups across the whole ideological spectrum aim to exploit the COVID-19 crisis to their advantage. They approach the pandemic as an opportunity to spread conspiracy theories and disinformation to undermine confidence in the government and also as an opportunity to increase their support base.

Notably, **extreme right-wing terrorist groups** have been observed trying to exploit protest movements to spread xenophobic or anti-Semitic narratives.

Meanwhile, **ISIL/Da'esh** seems to focus mainly on sowing seeds of distrust in public authorities by spreading disinformation regarding the pandemic.

By appealing to emotions of financial hardship and isolation, such extremist messages and narratives could trigger hate and potentially incite individuals to plot attacks and commit acts of violence. With the further unfolding of the crisis, violent extremist groups could use events around the world to validate their own worldviews, expand their support base, and recruit new members.

How to respond:

- Develop communication strategies to prevent and counter the spread of false information and conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19 since violent extremist and terrorist groups may try to take advantage of any possible opportunity to erode the credibility of authorities. A strategy should cover the following elements:
 - innovative means of communication;
 - suitable channels for awareness raising or information campaigns;
 - outreach in regions with limited access to the internet.
- Improve capacities of key actors, such as community leaders and local CSOs, to counter extremist messages and narratives, hate speech and the spread of false information in line with the [Security Council resolution 2354 \(2017\)](#). Local actors are often best suited to address, deconstruct and disrupt extremist messages and narratives.
- Strengthen official responses to counter disinformation. To avoid measures playing into extremist propaganda, respecting the freedom of expression and human rights is essential for all measures taken. Recall the right to freedom of expression, as reflected in Article 19 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and Article 19 of the [International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights](#), if reinforcing new regulative frameworks in response to the spreading of disinformation and conspiracy theories. Limitations to civil liberties and power expansions may threaten democratic principles and lead to public dissatisfaction and violent protests.

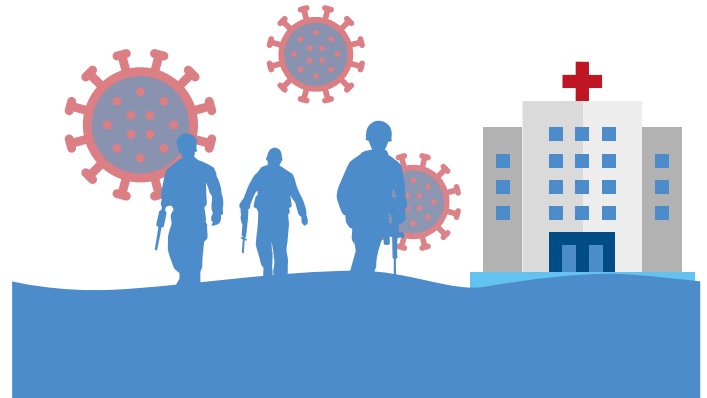
MODIFIED STRATEGIES FOR VIOLENT ATTACKS

As COVID-19 has brought restrictions on the movement of people, a change in plotting tactics of terrorist groups may occur.

- Instead of traditional targets in the public space, e.g. markets, public squares and places of worship, terrorist groups may increase targeting critical infrastructure such as hospitals or supermarkets.
- Followers of extreme right-wing terrorist groups have openly been encouraged to conduct attacks by using the virus as a weapon and intentionally spreading it. Although at a small-scale, there have already been reported threats and incidents of intentional spreading of SARS-COV-2.
- Leading ISIL/Da'esh figures have called to seize the opportunity and launch attacks, while countries are busy fighting the pandemic.

How to respond:

- Improve preparedness of security forces to modified approaches of terrorist groups
- Increase protection and target hardening of critical infrastructure like hospitals and supermarkets against terrorist attacks
- Build and develop capacities against attempts to spread SARS-COV-2



HALTED AND REDUCED INTERNATIONAL SECURITY ASSISTANCE MISSIONS

It is likely that COVID-19 will further affect the on-going international assistance missions as well as diplomatic initiatives and mediation efforts in conflict-affected regions due to the reduced activities of international actors and organisations.

In many regions, coordinated security operations between international and local forces and security assistance, including capacity building of local security forces, are critical to effectively counter terrorist groups such as ISIL/Da'esh. The current health crisis is endangering those efforts as international actors withdraw military troops and trainers. This might have severe consequences for the following reasons:

- In general, terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaida and ISIL/Da'esh tend to utilize conflicts and social turmoil as opportunities to increase their activities and seize control over new territories.
- ISIL/Da'esh has openly communicated that they expected the international community to be reluctant in deploying troops abroad as the pandemic was ongoing, and has urged followers and affiliated groups to take advantage of the situation by intensifying their activities and escalating quantity and quality of attacks.

How to respond:

- Continue to support countries throughout the pandemic in counter-terrorism. Prepare for a rise in terrorist activities as terrorist groups exploit the current situation, as described above.
- Develop online solutions to replace or reinforce local training and capacity building, where possible.
- Build and support local training facilities and step up Training of Trainers approaches to create self-sufficient training capacities within local security forces.



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