

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism



June 2020



CTED

UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL
COUNTER-TERRORISM COMMITTEE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTORATE

Overview

1. The present paper has been prepared by the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) in accordance with Security Council resolution 2395 (2017). This reaffirms the essential role of CTED within the United Nations to identify and assess issues, trends and developments relating to the implementation of Council resolutions 1373 (2001), 1624 (2005) and 2178 (2014), 2396 (2017) and other relevant resolutions.

2. Based on CTED's recent engagement with Member States, international, regional and subregional organizations, civil society and CTED's Global Research Network,¹ the paper aims to provide a concise analytical overview of:

- The short-term impact of COVID-19 on terrorists and terrorist groups;
- How Member States' COVID-19 responses have affected or intersected with counter-terrorism and CVE;
- The potential long-term impacts of COVID-19 on terrorism, counter-terrorism, and CVE.

3. The paper aims to provide a global picture of these potential and actual impacts, while recognizing that – as with the impact of COVID-19 itself – those impacts are unlikely to be experienced consistently by all Member States or across all regions.

Short-term impact of COVID-19 on terrorism

4. Since COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in mid-March 2020, CTED has identified both short-term opportunities and short-term risks for terrorist actors in relation to COVID-19. The potential short-term opportunities (some of which have already been exploited) include:

- **A captive audience.** The global population, including over 1 billion students no longer in full-time education,² is spending more time online. The increase in the number of young people engaging in unsupervised Internet usage – particularly on gaming platforms³ – offers terrorist groups an opportunity to expose a greater number of people to their ideas, although the relationship between online activity and radicalization to violence is not fully understood. The reported rise in cybercrime could also lead to increased connectivity between terrorist and criminal actors.⁴

¹ See the [CTED Research Webpage](#).

² See the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) [website](#).

³ [This is not a game: How Steam Harbors Extremists](#), Anti-Defamation League (April 2020).

⁴ [COVID-19-related Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing: Risks and Policy Responses](#), Financial Action Task Force (May 2020).

- **Furthering narratives.** A wide variety of terrorist groups have already integrated COVID-19 into their narratives and propaganda, seeking to exploit current events for their own purposes and to use the pandemic to exploit divisions and weaknesses among their enemies.⁵ COVID-19 has also provided fuel for existing terrorist narratives, with tropes being repurposed to intensify hatred towards particular groups,⁶ resulting in racist, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic and anti-immigrant hate speech. These narratives have been fused with an array of new or existing conspiracy theories, particularly by the extreme right, including through the linkage of 5G technology to the spread of the virus. One study notes that the 5G conspiracy theory has gained traction at a far greater rate than other COVID-19 conspiracy theories,⁷ while other researchers have warned that conspiracy theories can act as radicalization multipliers.⁸
- **Alternative service providers.** The pandemic could also provide terrorist groups (particularly those operating in areas where the State's presence is already weak or contested)⁹ with an opportunity to step up the delivery of essential services and promote the relative effectiveness of their health and social care efforts. Real or perceived failures in Member States' COVID-19 responses have already been exploited to promote anti-State violence and accelerationist narratives, and decreased trust in the financial system has led to a rise in cash withdrawals in some Member States. Any influx of cash into the informal sector could be exploited by criminal and terrorist organizations.¹⁰

5. COVID-19 has also posed potential short-term risks for terrorist actors, which include:

- **Negative impacts on operational activities.** Limitations imposed by Governments on citizens' freedom of movement have resulted in far fewer crowded spaces, potentially reducing the effectiveness of common terrorist tactics, include stabbings, bombings and vehicle ramming.¹¹ Although restrictions on international travel are slowly being lifted, increased border security could also affect the movement of terrorist actors, including foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs).
- **Negative impacts on resources.** Because of disrupted global, regional and national supply chains, terrorist groups (particularly those operating in remote areas) may struggle to reliably access food, medicine, money and weapons.

⁵ Al-Tamimi, Aymenn, [Coronavirus and Official Islamic State Output: An Analysis](#), Global Network on Extremism & Technology (April 2020).

⁶ Comerford, Milo & Davey, Jacob [Comparing Jihadist and Far-Right Extremist Narratives on COVID-19](#), Global Network on Extremism & Technology (April 2020).

⁷ [Covid-19: Conspiracy Theories, Hate Speech and Incitements to Violence on Twitter](#), Moonshot CVE (April 2020).

⁸ Emberland, Terje, [Why Conspiracy Theories can act as Radicalisation Multipliers of Far-Right Ideals](#), Centre for Research on Extremism, University of Oslo (February 2020).

⁹ Columbo, Emilia & Harris, Marielle [Extremist Groups Stepping up Operations During the COVID-19 Outbreak in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), Center for Strategic & International Studies (May 2020).

¹⁰ [COVID-19-related Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing: Risks and Policy Responses](#), Financial Action Task Force (May 2020).

¹¹ Davis, Jessica [Terrorism During a Pandemic: Assessing the Threat and Balancing the Hype](#), Just Security (April 2020)

Restrictions on the movement of people and goods could also deprive terrorist actors of revenue from taxation or extortion.

- **Negative impacts on popularity.** The overwhelming focus on COVID-19 may temporarily reduce the media attention given to terrorist attacks, potentially reducing their wider terrorizing or radicalizing impact. This trend, combined with reduced target availability, may lead terrorists to seek even more “attention-grabbing” targets or techniques – as with the May 2020 attack on a maternity hospital in Afghanistan – thereby alienating potential supporters (because of the overwhelming global focus on community health and well-being).

6. There have been some indications of a connection between COVID-19-related narratives and real-world activity, including attempted attacks against a hospital treating COVID-19 patients and a hospital ship in the United States, and the arrest in Tunisia of two men who were reportedly planning to infect security forces with COVID-19. Mobile telephone towers have been vandalized or damaged in several States, and some States have reported increases in hate crimes targeting minority groups.

7. However, it is difficult to reliably connect fluctuations in terrorist activity to COVID-19, and such analysis risks confusing correlation with causation. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) notes that attacks by groups located in Sub-Saharan Africa and affiliated to Al-Qaida and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as Da’esh) increased by 37 per cent between mid-March 2020 and mid-April 2020.¹² Recent increases in ISIL activity have also been noted in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic.¹³ However, although these groups have exploited COVID-19 in their messaging, it is difficult to determine whether increased violence stems from existing trends, shifts in terrorist or counter-terrorism approaches due to the pandemic, or both.

The relationship between COVID-19 responses and counter-terrorism/CVE

8. Although individual Member States’ responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have varied, many have either declared a state of emergency or invoked exceptional powers in an attempt to limit the spread of the virus. While public health has understandably been the primary focus of such responses, some have either negatively affected or intersected with existing counter-terrorism and CVE programmes.

Impact on counter-terrorism/CVE responses

9. Some Member States have already announced the reallocation of resources, including the withdrawal (or planned withdrawal) of foreign armed forces involved in operations against ISIL and Al-Qaida,¹⁴ and the relocation of armed forces to support domestic pandemic relief efforts. A global survey of civil society organizations (CSOs)

¹² See [ACLED website](#).

¹³ Hassan, Hassan, [ISIS is back and this time, the West is ill-prepared to take it on](#), The Guardian (May 2020).

¹⁴ [Contending with ISIS in the Time of Coronavirus](#), International Crisis Group (March 2020).

identified several impacts of the pandemic on CVE activities,¹⁵ including a shift in focus from community policing to lockdown enforcement and the ongoing absence of community activities (e.g., religion, education, sport and live entertainment) that are often critical to the success of longer-term prevention efforts.

10. Travel and trade restrictions have also impacted humanitarian organizations, with the result that some civilian populations – including refugees and internally displaced persons seeking to flee terrorist groups – have been vulnerable to both the direct and indirect consequences of the pandemic. Despite fears that COVID-19 would spread through the Al-Hol camp in northern Syrian Arab Republic (and through other facilities housing individuals associated with terrorist groups), Member States’ plans to repatriate children and women (which were already limited) appear to have been put on hold.

11. Owing to the disproportionately high rate of infection in prison settings, some States have released individuals from prison early or temporarily, but do not appear to have released individuals convicted of terrorism-related offences. The suspension of visitation rights has limited legal access for detainees and negatively impacted prison-based reintegration programmes, which often rely on external CSOs. Community-based reintegration programmes for incarcerated individuals have also been suspended.

Intersection between counter-terrorism and COVID-19 responses

12. In response to COVID-19, many Member States have established or mobilized existing crisis-management procedures, creating new government agencies and communications mechanisms, and transforming national and international supply chains to safely purchase and deliver personal protection equipment and COVID-19 testing components on a significant scale. As these responses have begun to take effect, States have also begun to take measures to facilitate safe international air travel, including through the use of artificial intelligence and new biometric systems.

13. CTED’s analysis has identified several ways in which these COVID-19 responses have intersected with counter-terrorism responses, including:

- **Use of terrorism offences.** In view of the potential for COVID-19 to be spread for nefarious purposes (and online chatter encouraging individuals to do so),¹⁶ some States have introduced the use of terrorism charges for individuals deliberately seeking to infect others with COVID-19.
- **Use of mass, digital surveillance.** Population-wide contact tracing has required invasive digital monitoring, which in some States has included the use of cell phone data collected for counter-terrorism purposes, repurposed to monitor individual travel movements. Other tools and techniques used in counter-terrorism (including advance passenger information (API) and Passenger Name Records (PNR))

¹⁵ Rosand, Eric, Koser, Khalid & Schumicky-Logan, Lilla, [Preventing Violent Extremism During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic](#), Brookings (April 2020).

¹⁶ Wallner, Claudia & White, Jessica, [The Far-Right and Coronavirus: Extreme Voices Amplified by the Crisis](#), RUSI (April 2020).

systems, geo-fencing, contact chaining, facial recognition and other biometric tools) have also been utilized.

- **Human rights challenges.** Some States' COVID-19 responses have included measures that researchers suggest are designed to consolidate their Governments' grip on power,¹⁷ resulting in the arrest of political opponents, heavy-handed security responses, and the curtailment of civil liberties. The pandemic has also forced some States to close their parliaments and postpone or cancel elections, thereby limiting opportunities for oversight and scrutiny of those responses.
- **Responding to online mis/disinformation.** Researchers have described COVID-19 as "the perfect storm for the spread of misinformation,"¹⁸ owing to its inherent and persistent uncertainty. Although some States have mounted a response, including by charging individuals for spreading COVID-19-related mis/disinformation, much of the responsibility for addressing this situation has fallen to the private sector (as in counter-terrorism). However, despite the actions of many major social media platforms, who have de-platformed individuals and organizations, promoted authoritative voices, increased the use of verification mechanisms and banned adverts using misinformation to sell medical products, significant challenges remain.¹⁹

Potential long-term impacts of COVID-19

14. The COVID-19 pandemic is an event of global and historic significance, which will continue to exert a significant impact on global geopolitical and socio-economic realities and government decision-making and policymaking in the "post-COVID world". Uncertainty about the short-, medium- and long-term effectiveness of national and international responses (including the timeline for developing a vaccine and the degree to which it will be available) makes it difficult to assess how sustained that impact will be. However, CTED's analysis and engagement with a wide variety of relevant stakeholders has highlighted three broad, interconnected areas of *potential* impact relevant to CTED's mandate:

Pressure on States' counter-terrorism resources

15. Some analysts have suggested that that economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be greater than that of any event since the Great Depression. The resulting pressure on government budgets (and the need to justify spending in policy areas with no immediate impact on public health or pandemic responsiveness) could lead to pressure to cut national counter-terrorism and CVE budgets.²⁰ In States where counter-

¹⁷ [Authoritarianism in the Time of COVID](#), Harvard International Review (May 2020).

¹⁸ Starbird, Kate [How to cope with an Infodemic](#), Brookings (April 2020).

¹⁹ See for example [#WilltoAct: How Social Media Giants have Failed to live up to Their Claims on the Coronavirus 'Infodemic'](#), Center for Countering Digital Hate (June 2020).

²⁰ Pantucci, Raffaello, [Key Questions for Counter-Terrorism Post-COVID-19](#), RSIS (April 2020).

terrorism budgets have grown significantly over the past two decades, this might be seen as a necessary re-correction of priorities. However, it could also negatively affect a broad range of national and international responses.

16. Researchers have suggested that States may realign, rather than reduce funding,²¹ including by prioritizing “dual-use” hard security measures (such as digital surveillance) at the expense of long-term programmes focused on tackling the root causes of terrorism. Persistent challenges to international cooperation and multilateralism may be exacerbated by the pandemic,²² negatively impacting contributions to multinational forces involved in counter-terrorism or peacekeeping operations and reducing funding for technical assistance or capacity-building programming. Although one study concluded that “COVID-19 will almost certainly handicap domestic security efforts and international counter-ISIS cooperation,”²³ the true impact of the pandemic on States’ counter-terrorism responses will likely be difficult to assess for some time.

Reduced capacity of non-State counter-terrorism actors

17. These geopolitical trends and economic pressures will also affect the wide range of stakeholders that are essential to a whole-of-society, comprehensive counter-terrorism approach. If national priorities trend away from long-term preventive programming, this is likely to reduce the capacity of CSOs responsible for its delivery. Many CSOs involved in CVE activities in those Member States most affected by terrorism rely on funding from international aid budgets, which may also be at risk of spending cuts. Technological and travel limitations could make it impossible for some CSOs to replace or supplement their in-person activities for the foreseeable future. Researchers will face similar challenges, which may limit their capacity to conduct field research, particularly as many academic institutions face unprecedented funding challenges. The gendered impacts of the shift towards remote working are also negatively impacting research outputs.²⁴

18. Private-sector actors engaged in counter-terrorism through public-private partnerships (including in the banking, hospitality, transport and construction sectors) have also suffered significant financial losses. This could make it difficult for Governments to impose expenditure on them, if such expenditure does not answer an immediate security concern. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) has warned, for example, that financial institutions may redirect their resources from anti-money-laundering/counter-financing of terrorism (AML/CFT) due diligence to broader prudential measures.²⁵

Increase in underlying grievances and drivers

19. A significant proportion of research into the impact of COVID-19 on terrorism/counter-terrorism has focused on the current exploitation of the pandemic by

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² [The post COVID World Could be less Global and less Urban](#), World Economic Forum (May 2020).

²³ [Contending with ISIS in the Time of Coronavirus](#), International Crisis Group (March 2020).

²⁴ [No room of one's own](#), Inside Higher Ed (April 2020).

²⁵ [COVID-19-related Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing: Risks and Policy Responses](#), Financial Action Task Force (May 2020).

terrorist actors and the potential for the pandemic to intensify existing grievances or create new ones. Many individuals will continue to face uncertainty, isolation and political instability, and COVID-19's profound effects on governance, social polarization and unrest, the economy, the information landscape and political discourse will affect how extremist ideologies are constructed and disseminated.²⁶ COVID-19's clearly gendered impacts²⁷ could also be exploited by a range of violent extremist actors, including in their narratives and recruitment efforts.

20. Some States' responses to COVID-19 risk further exacerbating conditions conducive to radicalization to terrorism. Some States may be slow to revoke certain emergency powers – including the use of mass surveillance and efforts to counter the spread of disinformation – which could be abused to target civil society, the media and political opposition. Research also suggests that the use of the military in domestic policing (increasingly common in States' responses to COVID-19) increases the risk of human rights abuses²⁸ and that recourse to authoritarian or militarized responses may exacerbate underlying drivers to radicalization, including by reducing trust in Government. Lastly, the reduction or reallocation of government resources may disproportionately impact remote or under-served areas (such as rural or border communities), thereby creating a more permissive environment for illicit activity, which could be exploited by terrorist groups.

21. CTED will continue to monitor trends, issues and developments relating to the impact of COVID-19 on terrorism, counter-terrorism and CVE through its assessments of Member States' efforts to implement the relevant resolutions of the Security Council, and its dialogue with relevant United Nations entities; international, regional and subregional organizations; the private sector; civil society; and the research community.

²⁶ Comerford, Milo & Davey, Jacob, [Comparing Jihadist and Far-Right Extremist Narratives on COVID-19](#), Global Network on Extremism & Technology (April 2020).

²⁷ See United Nations Secretary General's [Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women](#).

²⁸ Wood, Reed & Wright, Thorin, [Pandemics and Political Violence](#), Political Violence at a Glance (April 2020).