

COVID-19, terrorism, counter-terrorism, and countering violent extremism

by Anasuya Ray

In March 2020, when the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization, it was impossible to imagine its potential scale or intensity. Almost three years into this

generation-defining crisis, it is clear that the pandemic has been a landmark event in current times and decisively influenced the geopolitical situation. Impacts of the pandemic have presented complex, multifaceted, and constantly

evolving challenges for United Nations Member States, affecting almost every area of policy and practice, including counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE). While many States managed to deal with the effects of the



pandemic, the long-term impacts remain fluid and evolving. Therefore, envisioning a post-pandemic landscape necessitates understanding existing trends, many of which have varied in scale, severity, scope, and intensity and differed across geographic regions, with growing disparities between resource-rich and resource-scarce States.

Since its onset, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) has explored the pandemic's impact on global terrorism and published a four paper analytical series on the topic. During this process, CTED has collaborated with all its partners – including Member States, United Nations agencies, member entities of its Global Research Network (GRN), civil society organizations, and the private sector – to evaluate, monitor, and assess the impacts of the pandemic on the terrorist threat as well as on counter-terrorism and CVE responses.

Key trends

Terrorism and violent extremism

Terrorist groups have sought to exploit pandemic-related socioeconomic grievances and political tensions – often

exacerbated by related restrictions – to expand their influence, drive their recruitment efforts, and undermine State authority. This is especially relevant for Member States facing fragile sociopolitical conditions and terrorism threats. However, while it is clear that COVID-19 has exacerbated many pre-existing issues and challenges that shape the threat landscape, more research is required to understand whether there is any correlation between pandemic-related impacts and changes in the nature or intensity of terrorist violence.



In many regions, the pandemic is likely to have increased the underlying drivers and structural factors that are often conducive to terrorism

Terrorists and violent extremists have sought to exploit sociocultural restrictions (including – but not limited to – closures of schools, community-based activities and religious services as well as the lack of employment and

entertainment opportunities) and continued to disseminate propaganda, disinformation and misinformation, and radicalize potential recruits to violence.¹ Early evidence suggests that there may have been an increase in the number of youth and children accessing extremist content online (including through gaming platforms) due to pandemic-related social isolation, thereby creating concerns about potential radicalization to terrorism.² While there is significant information regarding this pandemic-related terrorist and violent extremist activity (particularly online), there is as yet limited data on the long-term impacts of those recruitment and radicalization efforts.

Experts suggest that while pandemic-related restrictions have artificially and temporarily suppressed the threat of terrorism, their easing may result in an increase in terrorist violence.³ In conflict zones facing terrorism/terrorist threats, the pandemic appears to have had limited impact on terrorist activity, allowing pre-existing trends of violence conducted by terrorist groups and their affiliates to continue. In non-conflict zones, travel restrictions and quarantine measures have

¹ Michael King and Sam Mullins (Just Security), “COVID-19 and terrorism in the West: has radicalization really gone viral?” 4 March 2021.

² Caleb Spencer (BBC), “Coronavirus: children may have been radicalized in lockdown”, 30 June 2020.

³ Twenty-eighth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities (S/2021/655).

instead created challenges for terrorist groups in terms of planning and operational activities, thereby undermining their ability to carry out attacks.

There are also concerns about increased terrorism-financing vulnerabilities. Experts, including the Financial Action Task Force,⁴ suggest that pandemic-related changes in financial behaviours (especially the growth of contactless transactions and increased digital onboarding) have exacerbated these vulnerabilities. Additionally, proceeds from pandemic-related relief efforts can be misused for terrorism-financing purposes. This has created new opportunities for terrorist groups to abuse fundraising platforms and the non-profit sector for terrorism financing under the guise of charitable giving.

Counter-terrorism and CVE responses

During the pandemic, social restrictions to contain transmission of the virus have limited (by necessity) freedom of movement and other human rights (including freedom of assembly, speech, and expression). These measures, and the resulting closure of civic spaces, made it hard for

civil society and other non-state CVE actors to conduct programmatic interventions (including gender-related interventions) in communities vulnerable to radicalization. The resulting vacuum can be exploited by those groups who are looking to fuel existing social grievances and tensions by targeting disaffected individuals.

The increased securitization of pandemic responses, the deployment of counter-terrorism tools and measures to implement pandemic-related restrictions, and the use of terrorism charges to prosecute COVID-19-related offences remain a significant source of concern. The proliferation of emergency measures and the curtailing of civil liberties have raised questions about State overreach which, if left unchecked, has the potential to exacerbate existing grievances and may be exploited by terrorists and violent extremists.

Faced with the secondary impacts of the pandemic – including growing economic inequities and deepening social divisions, precipitated by an erosion of trust in governments – many States have suffered severe setbacks, risking the reversal of socioeconom-

ic progress. These economic impacts have also increased humanitarian needs at a time when pandemic-related travel restrictions contributed to curtailing humanitarian access and outreach.

In some States, these economic impacts have also necessitated the diversion of existing resources from counter-terrorism training and other capacity-building measures. Decreased funding for training and capacity-building projects, reduction in security assistance, and the halting of peacebuilding, humanitarian, and development initiatives to counter violent extremism may cause retrenchment in counter-terrorism measures and security assistance.⁵ This can create further challenges for States most at risk of terrorism, which typically require such assistance.

Key global trends and Member States' responses:

➤ In response to the renewed surge in COVID-19 infections, some States have reinstated social restrictions and emergency powers introduced in the initial months of the pandemic (thereby raising concerns that COVID-19 is being used as a pretext to

curtail civil liberties).⁶ The reinstatement of these containment measures has led to growing discontent and disillusionment with pandemic-related measures, causing social unrest in some areas.

➤ In many States, this suspension of certain rights (e.g., mobility or assembly), the gendered implications of social isolation measures,⁷ the economic downturns⁸ and the stigmatization of, and discrimination against, some populations⁹ (i.e., refugees, migrants, and displaced populations) raised significant human rights concerns and have the potential to increase underlying grievances that can contribute to radicalization to violence.

➤ The pandemic has also undermined women's economic security by disproportionately causing loss of employment. Entrenched traditional gender stereotypes have increased their workload as caregivers and thereby negatively impacted their



inclusion in the political process (owing to the difficulties of balancing domestic and professional duties).¹⁰

➤ Border closures and new technologies and procedures at points of entry (facial recognition, biometrics systems, and contact tracing) had curtailed

the movement of people, potentially also restricting the mobility of terrorist groups during the early days of the pandemic. Various criminal networks might seek to abuse biometric and other related data by exploiting existing vulnerabilities in the system. Normalizing these exceptional measures in

4 "Update: COVID-19-related money laundering and terrorist financing", December 2020.

5 Amy Dodd, Dean Breed and Daniel Coppard (Development Initiatives) "How is aid changing in the COVID-19 pandemic?", 9 November 2020.

6 International Centre for Not-for-profit Law and European Centre for Not-for-profit Law, [COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker](https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/). Available at <https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/> (accessed on 10 October 2020).

7 United Nations, "Policy brief: [the impact of COVID-19 on women](#)", 9 April 2020.

8 Titan M. Alon and others, "[The impact of COVID-19 on gender equality](#)", National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 26947 (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2020).

9 Zolbert Institute on Migration and Mobility, The New School, "[Human Mobility and Human Rights in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Principles of Protection for Migrants, Refugees, and Other Displaced Persons](#)".

10 Saskia Brechenmacher and Caroline Hubbard (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), "How the coronavirus risks exacerbating women's political exclusion", 17 November 2020.



Financial disruptions caused by the pandemic may render terrorist groups more prone to criminal activities “

a post-pandemic world would create a wide range of challenges, including significant human rights concerns around data protection and privacy. As such, any technology or surveillance measures must be in accordance with the law, necessary, proportionate, and non-discriminatory, restricted in time and have stringent safeguards in place to uphold and protect human rights.

Financial disruptions caused by the pandemic may render terrorist groups more prone to criminal activities, including drug smuggling, trafficking in minerals and precious stones, fraud through electronic means, the sale of counterfeit medicines,

and cybercrime. International travel restrictions could also give rise to new trafficking and cash smuggling routes.¹¹ As States strengthen their legislation and measures for countering the financing of terrorism (CFT), the pandemic is also fuelling a debate on the extent to which targeted financial sanctions might impact emergency humanitarian responses.

The pandemic further reduced the degree of attention given to the security and humanitarian challenges posed by the detention conditions of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) associated with the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as Da'esh) in prison

settings and of their family members in makeshift camps. The urgency of the situation has been highlighted by reports of COVID-19 cases in the crowded camps that house ISIL-associated women and children in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic.¹²

Key regional trends

Member States have continued to use monitoring tools and surveillance to track the movement of individuals, including by accessing their geolocation and communication data. In Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas,¹³ reports suggest that some States have used pandemic-related restrictions to curb dissent by targeting groups that raise legitimate con-

11 Eurasian Group on combatting money laundering and financing of terrorism, "Information Note: concerning the COVID-19 impact on the EAG countries' AML/CFT efforts and measures taken to mitigate the ML/TF risks stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic".
 12 United Nations, Security Council, "Amid rising COVID-19 infection rates, medical supply shortages in Syria, more testing key to gauging extent of outbreak, humanitarian chief tells Security Council", press release, 16 September 2020.
 13 International Press Institute, "Rush to pass 'fake news' laws during COVID-19 intensifying global media freedom challenges", 3 October 2020.

cerns, banning opposition political parties, shutting down independent media outlets, and curtailing press freedom.

Violent extremist actors have adapted their online and offline narratives in response to the pandemic. Groups affiliated with ideologies stemming from xenophobia, racism, and other forms of intolerance, or in the name of religion or belief (XRIRB) – notably those located in Western Europe – have exploited the pandemic for recruitment and propaganda purposes.¹⁴ There has also been a global increase in misogynistic online content, which risks intensifying violence against women and girls. Initial evidence from South and South-East Asia suggests that digital forums have been used to spread false rhetoric and hate speech about women, potentially provoking online and offline violence.¹⁵

In West Africa and the Sahel, ongoing violence and the pandemic have created specific challenges for children. Out of school, many are at risk of being forcefully recruited by

14 United Nations, Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, "Trends alert: Member States concerned by the growing and increasingly transnational threat of extreme right-wing terrorism", July 2020.
 15 United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), "Social media monitoring on COVID-19 and misogyny in Asia and the Pacific".



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armed groups, pushed into menial labour, and at risk of sexual and gender-based violence. Elsewhere around the globe, the widespread closure of schools, religious services, and social activities has prevented front-line workers, healthcare professionals, teachers, and social workers from identifying potential signs of radicalization to violence.

- The pandemic has severely affected the implementation of protection, prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration measures, CVE programming, criminal-justice processes, and judicial procedures. While some States have resumed repatriations of select nationals (mostly minors), at the height of the pandemic, barring few exceptions,^{16,17} most States halted ongoing or planned repatriation efforts of individuals associated with FTFs, with pandemic-related restrictions often cited as impediments.
- Experts from the Eurasian region have observed instances where terrorist and violent extremist groups have sought to exploit economic griev-

ances relating to the loss of employment by offering financial support to affected individuals (including offers to pay off debts or cover rent and utility expenses), perceiving this as an opportunity to indoctrinate or recruit them.

- The pandemic also forced many migrant workers to return to their countries of origin, thereby causing a dramatic decrease in remittances and potentially exacerbating existing grievances. Additionally, Governments in Central Asia are concerned that radicalization to terrorism of migrant workers working abroad could create counter-terrorism challenges on their return home.
- In some countries in Latin America, weakened democratic institutions, increasingly politicized judicial systems, and rising levels of crime and violence may be exacerbated by the pandemic. These political factors, together with pandemic-related economic issues, such as declining growth, rising inequality, and inadequate public services and social safety measures, could also con-

tribute to an increase in violent extremism.

- COVID-19 has also exacerbated humanitarian crises globally, often curtailing the ability of humanitarian organizations to deliver assistance to the most needy and vulnerable. Some regions – notably West Africa and the Sahel¹⁸ – have experienced an increase in the targeting of aid workers by terrorist groups. Although some of the political and economic instabilities in the region predate the pandemic, COVID-19 fuelled these instabilities, which can potentially impact humanitarian relief work and further exacerbate drivers of terrorism and violent extremism in many regions.
- Even in regions where COVID-19 cases appear to be relatively low, disproportionate long-term effects of the economic slowdown and diminished international assistance could further weaken the delivery of essential services and limit economic opportunities. It is probable that in parts of Africa, violent extremism and radicalization to terrorism will increase, owing not

only to the imposition of restrictions but also to declining socioeconomic conditions, the weakening of infrastructure and governance, the deepening of inequities that fuel existing grievances, and extreme poverty and hunger (all of which are underlying drivers that fuel terrorism and violent extremism).

Future challenges

There have been tremendous strides in combating the pandemic – rising rates of inoculation (including boosters)

and decreasing numbers of infections suggest that many States may have turned a corner in combatting the pandemic. However, in many parts of the world, lack of access to vaccines (caused by unequal distribution) has left millions still vulnerable to the virus, allowing deadly variants to emerge and spread globally. The continued disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories surrounding COVID-19 vaccinations also need to be addressed. As recovery efforts continue against a backdrop of long-

term impacts of the pandemic, the transnational nature of the challenge is clear.

- Member States must continue to uphold human rights while developing and implementing policies to contain the pandemic and avoid creating or exacerbating grievances by suppressing the fundamental freedoms of individuals. In this regard, States need to ensure that pandemic-related social restrictions (including through the use of emer-



16 Reuters, "Uzbekistan repatriates 98 people from Syrian Camps", 8 December 2020.

17 See <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/9733353>.

18 BBC, "Niger attack: French aid workers among eight killed by gunmen", 9 August 2020.

gency powers) are strictly required by the exigencies of the situation, implemented fairly in a non-discriminatory manner, and, most importantly, temporally limited.

- A whole generation of youth has directly experienced the impacts of the pandemic with closures of educational institutions, reduced employment and entertainment opportunities, and curtailed community programmes. As a result, resilience to violent extremism in fragile communities may be reduced, thereby making individuals more vulnerable to radicalization to violence in such settings.
- Despite the lack of clarity regarding potential long-term impacts, it is clear that there will be no straightforward return to pre-pandemic norms and that many working methods and approaches have likely shifted significantly and permanently. Adapting to, and thriving within, this new reality will be critical to international counter-terrorism and CVE efforts moving forward.
- In States with sizeable counter-terrorism budgets, this new reality may be an opportunity to rebalance national priorities.

However, other States, including those most impacted by terrorism, were already facing significant resource challenges prior to the pandemic and often relied on bilateral or multi-lateral support to counter the terrorism threat. It is therefore essential that counter-terrorism remains high on the international agenda and that Member States continue to prioritize international and regional cooperation to counter the evolving global terrorist threat.

- The proliferation of pandemic-related conspiracy theories and misinformation/disinformation presents an enormous challenge, as they can enhance societal divisions and increase distrust in Governments and State institutions. Terrorists and violent extremist groups across ideological spectrums are already seeking to exploit social alienation and grievances arising from pandemic-related measures and perceived State excesses by weaponizing those divisions.
- In this altered geopolitical landscape, understanding and regulating the use of new technologies to prevent abuse by terrorist and violent extremist groups remain a priority.

United Nations entities are working with Member States and other partners (including private-sector and civil society actors) to promote the effective and responsible use of new technologies, assist in the development of advanced monitoring methods, provide expertise in preventing abuse of the digital space for any terrorism-related purpose (including terrorism financing), and ensure that the use of technology to monitor border-control measures, enforce travel restrictions, and conduct contact tracing takes privacy concerns into consideration.

Conclusion

The pandemic has caused unparalleled upheaval to the existing global order and laid bare social inequities and structural challenges. A comprehensive, collaborative, and tailored approach is required to address its effects, as terrorists and violent extremists seek ways to exploit the resulting socioeconomic fault lines. Ongoing recovery efforts will provide an opportunity to rebuild social structures, based on the principles of cooperation, shared responsibility, enhanced multilateralism, and the meaningful inclusion of women, including in developing and implementing policies to address pandemic-relat-

ed challenges. However, this will be achieved only if Member States effectively address emerging terrorist trends in the post-COVID-19 threat land-

scape; develop counter-terrorism and CVE responses that are coherent, targeted, gender-sensitive, and human rights compliant; and adapt

existing policies and measures to adequately respond to evolving challenges.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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These initiatives aim at promoting the knowledge and practice of human rights; facilitating dialogue among cultures and generations, and raising awareness about the United

Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The International Mediterranean Women's Forum is a UNESCO and ECOSOC NGO based (since 1997) at the Club for UNESCO in Turin. Its main purpose is to further cooperation and the exchange of experiences between women of the Mediterranean countries in order to develop and carry out sustainable solutions for the effective improvement of women's condition at a global level and, more specifically, throughout the Mediterranean.

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During the guided visits to the UN Campus and through the written materials pre-

pared by the Club per l'UNESCO di Torino, students have the opportunity to learn about the international organizations and associations based on the Campus, deepen their understanding of the UN and the 2030 Agenda, and actively engage in specific themes.

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