

COVID-19 impact on violent extremism: a warning for Europe and member states

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In everyday life the scale of change being wrought by COVID-19 has been massive. From the toll of human lives lost to economic hardship to the impact on mental health, life has changed immensely since the beginning of this year. There are many concerns about how we can recover and what changes will be permanent.

Individual States responses to the pandemic have varied. With the majority of them declaring a state of emergency or applying exceptional powers in order to limit the spread of the Covid-19, and a few others inclined to follow a lighter approach. While public health has understandably been the primary focus of public policies, the measures taken have unfortunately negatively affected the existing counter-terrorism and counter violent extremism programmes. Even if COVID-19 looms as a threat to global health, other security issues cannot be overlooked.

Since the outbreak of the new coronavirus, violent extremists and terrorists have tried to exploit the crisis to sow division and undermine the social fabric. Throughout their ideological spectrum, they have incorporated the pandemic into their messaging and their operations, though groups have differed on just what COVID-19 means and how to best exploit the pandemic and its resultant unrest.

Jihadist groups have primarily seen the pandemic as an opportunity to regain territory in Iraq, Syria and Sahel and expand their influence everywhere, while governments are consumed with pandemic response and a rapidly deteriorating economic and social situation¹. In times of uncertainty, the Islamic State has steadily attempted to offer local populations stability and present itself as the one and only cohesive and just community for true believers throughout the world². Both Isis organization and its supporters are now exploiting this uncertain time to create and convey discourses of opportunity for the organization and future recruitment.

In the jihadist narrative, the virus is a punishment from Allah on China for their treatment of Uighurs Muslims and on the western infidels for their “degeneracy”³.

Far Right activists and Neo-Nazi groups, spreading conspiracy theories and supporting anti-minority narratives via social media, has targeted Asians and immigrants more generally as the source of the virus, as well as Jews, who are, all over and always, a target⁴. Far-right extremists posted messages against immigration, the perceived Islamization of Europe and globalization.

¹ ICG, “Contending with ISIS in the Time of Coronavirus”, March 2020: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/contending-with-isis-time-coronavirus>.

² Isis and al-Qaeda have issued formal statements on the pandemic through their respective media channels providing guidelines for followers to prevent the spread of COVID-19, with al-Qaeda highlighting in its message that “Islam is a hygiene-oriented religion”. See Wilson Centre “What Islamists Are Doing and Saying on COVID-19 Crisis”, May, 2020: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/what-islamists-are-doing-and-saying-covid-19-crisis>.

³ In an editorial of al-Naba, the Isis newsletter, the group welcomes the idea that the onset of the virus has been a punishment of God upon idolaters; see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Islamic State Editorial on the Coronavirus Pandemic,” 19 March 2020: <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/03/islamic-state-editorial-on-the-coronavirus>.

⁴ Macklin G., “Coronavirus and the Far Right; Seizing the Moment?” ISPI, May 2020: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/coronavirus-and-far-right-seizing-moment-26153>.

The far-Left extremists too did not fail to make their voice heard during the corona virus crisis, blaming the nature of the capitalist system and claiming that the lockdowns and the social distance, implemented to stem the spread of the virus, are in fact government plots to take away liberties⁵.

All three extremist categories (jihadists, far-Right, and far-Left) have used this crisis moment to reinforce their ideology via fake news and conspiracy theories; they all align in strategic intent to spread disinformation that distorts the reality and exacerbates pre-existing problems. Paradoxically, while the engagement with online extremist communities is on the rise and the long-term effects of the pandemic will provide opportunities for extremists to recruit, anti-extremism programs signal less engagement⁶.

All over the world and across the political spectrum violent extremism is primarily a phenomenon of young people; they are particularly susceptible to many of the alienating effects created by the pandemic-related lockdown policies, such as the social distancing and isolation, while the economic crisis and rising unemployment can multiply grievances and exacerbate existing drivers of extremism. In fact, if the young people are less at-risk in terms of developing severe physical health symptoms linked to COVID-19 than older age people, the disruption in their access to education and employment opportunities put them on a much more volatile trajectory in finding and maintaining quality jobs and income

Young people, especially since they are particularly intolerant of pandemic containment measures and risk being recruited by extremist and terrorist organizations, they are also the ones who have more access to online platforms and, therefore, to sources of disinformation.

While the impact of disasters and pandemics on youth radicalization and violent extremism needs further exploration, measures that are youth-oriented must be implemented, while also supporting peer-to-peer coronavirus-awareness messaging campaigns.

Long-term considerations in crisis response and recovery strategies must be developed, integrating anti-radicalization and anti-violent extremism measures and involving youth stakeholders from diverse backgrounds.

To this regard, EU institutions, together with member states, are therefore called not to lower attention on such issue of global relevance.

⁵ Leodenthal M., "The 2020 Pandemic and its Effect on Anarchist Activity", ISPI, May 2020: <https://www.isponline.it/it/pubblicazione/2020-pandemic-and-its-effect-anarchist-activity-26157>.

⁶ A global survey of civil society organizations (CSOs) identified several impacts of the pandemic on counter violent extremism activities; see Rosand E., Koser K., Schumicky-Logan L., Preventing Violent Extremism During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic, Brookings, April 2020; CTED, "The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Terrorism, Counter-terrorism and Countering violent extremism, June, 2020: <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/CTED-Paper%20%93-The-impact-of-the-COVID-19-pandemic-on-counter-terrorism-and-countering-violent-extremism.pdf>.