



# The COVID-19 Pandemic: Counterterrorism Practitioners' Assessments

*By James K. Wither and Richard Mašek*

## *Introduction*

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020 arguably created the greatest global security challenge since 1945. Faced with this unanticipated threat, scholars and practitioners from the security and counterterrorism fields have struggled to understand and assess the impact of the pandemic on global and domestic terrorism.<sup>1</sup>

Many terrorist groups and individual extremists reacted with enthusiasm to the pandemic. Salafi-jihadist and far-right extremists, in particular, claimed that the pandemic vindicated their very different ideological standpoints and called for attacks while affected states were at their most vulnerable. However, outside of areas already impacted by armed conflict like the Sahel, there has not been a rise in terrorist attacks during the pandemic. Terrorists of all kinds have stepped up their propaganda, hoping to influence anxious people largely confined to their homes by lockdowns and compelled to spend more time on the Internet and social media. However, the extent to which terrorists have successfully attracted new converts to their cause or active recruits during the crisis still remains uncertain. The pandemic has also raised the specter of bio-terrorism, as there were fears that terrorists might try to use COVID-19 as a biological weapon. Early in the crisis, some extremists used the internet to encourage infected individuals to spread the virus in public places, but there is little evidence of such activities being carried out. As regards more sophisticated attacks, some terrorist groups in the past have aspired to employ bio-terrorism, but the necessary weapons have always proved too difficult for terrorists to successfully develop or deliver.

Despite the calls for attacks on social media, the pandemic's lockdowns, increased surveillance, the ban on gatherings, and travel restrictions, coupled with a heavy police and military presence on the ground in some cities have created a challenging environment for terrorist operations. But as governments continue to focus their efforts on combating the virus, normal security protocols may be reduced or abandoned. In most countries, the security services have been drawn directly into efforts to counter the pandemic and to an extent have been affected by social distancing and

---

<sup>1</sup> Recent examples include: Daniel Byman and Andrew Amunson, "Counterterrorism in a Time of COVID," *Brookings*, August 20, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/08/20/counterterrorism-in-a-time-of-covid/>; Gary Ackerman and Hayley Peterson, "Terrorism and COVID – 19: Actual and Potential Impacts," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 4, Issue 3, June 2010; Robin Simcox, "Terrorism After the Pandemic," *Foreign Policy*, August 20, 2020; Sam Mullins, "The Impact of the COVID -19 Pandemic Reassessing the Evidence," European Institute for Counterterrorism and Conflict Prevention" (forthcoming).

other restrictions employed to combat the virus. There are also concerns that international cooperation to combat terrorism will be reduced as countries focus more narrowly on domestic priorities.

Many governments have resorted to emergency legislation to allow the police to enforce lockdowns and social isolation. This is normal behavior for autocratic governments, but unprecedented in liberal democracies, at least during peacetime. Repressive legislation allows intrusive surveillance, detention, and prevents freedom of assembly and movement. Although traditionally there has been no direct link between poverty and terrorism, socio-economic hardships caused by the pandemic are also likely to be severe, especially in the developing world. Government repression is a common trigger for acts of terrorism as it can turn already aggrieved citizens into violent extremists. To date, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted governments' lack of preparedness, social inequalities and macro-economic failings. It would be premature, however, to conclude that the coronavirus crisis will inspire new forms of anti-state terrorism or turn largely non-violent anti-globalization and environmentalist groups into violent extremists.

In the longer term, it remains to be seen whether counterterrorism will retain the priority it has been given since 9/11 in terms of financial, technical, and manpower resources. Public health as a national security priority may command a much greater share of resources than ever before. Given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public finances, budget cuts to the security services may be more severe than after the financial crisis in 2008-2009, which could create new vulnerabilities for terrorist groups to exploit.

The aim of this report is to provide further insights into the issues outlined above by providing data on the preliminary impact of COVID-19 supplied by over 400 military and civilian counterterrorism professionals surveyed by the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies' (GCMC) Program in Terrorism and Security Studies (PTSS) faculty team.

## ***Methodology***

The PTSS team produced a short survey that was emailed to all contactable PTSS alumni in September 2020. The survey was modeled on a similar initiative conducted for the Asia-Pacific region by the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) in July.<sup>2</sup> Like the APCSS survey, the GCMC's questionnaire consisted of nine statements, rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with room for additional optional comments. No personal information was collected, but respondents did identify their region. The survey reached 1835 alumni. By mid-October, 415 completed surveys had been returned, a response rate of 23%.

---

<sup>2</sup> Sam Mullins, "Assessing the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism: Practitioner Insights," *Security Nexus Perspectives*, August 7, 2020, [https://apcss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/N2515\\_Mullins-Impact\\_Pandemic\\_Terrorism.pdf](https://apcss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/N2515_Mullins-Impact_Pandemic_Terrorism.pdf).

The regional breakdown, rounded as whole number percentages, is as follows:

- Europe 40%
- Central Asia 3%
- North America 7%
- South America 7%
- Middle East 8%
- North Africa 2%
- Sub-Saharan Africa 14%
- South Asia 8%
- Rest of the World 3%

A limitation of the survey is that respondents were not asked to identify their region for each of the questions, although a significant number added comments, which are addressed, when relevant, to provide further insights into the statistical findings below. Given that all regions except the Pacific were surveyed, it is worth highlighting the range of different threats covered by the term terrorism in the countries involved. For example, many states in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East are confronted by large scale Salafi-jihadist inspired insurgencies. In South and Central America, the dominant threat is from narco-terrorist groups, while in North America and Europe, the main current terrorist threat appears to be so-called lone actors motivated by extreme right-wing or radical Islamist ideologies.

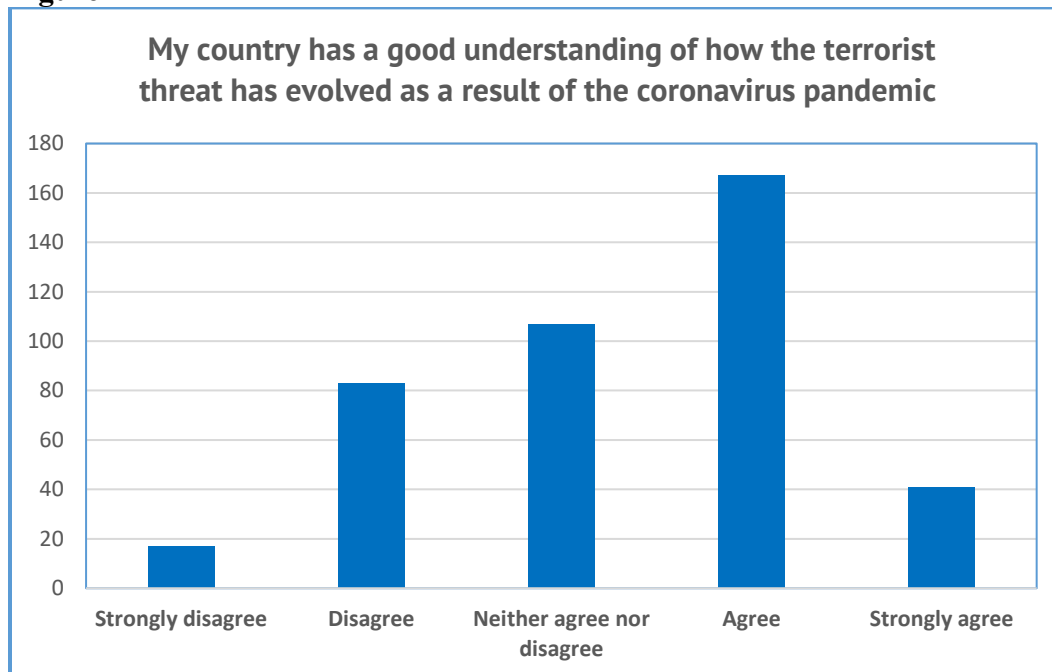
The GCMC's PTSS has alumni from 132 countries. Fifty-three percent are military or civilian members of defense ministries. Twenty-three percent are from uniformed law enforcement or are members of internal security agencies. The normal rank range of course attendees is from captain to colonel and civilian equivalents. Only 9% of PTSS alumni are female.

### ***Part 1: The Impact of the Pandemic on Terrorist Threats***

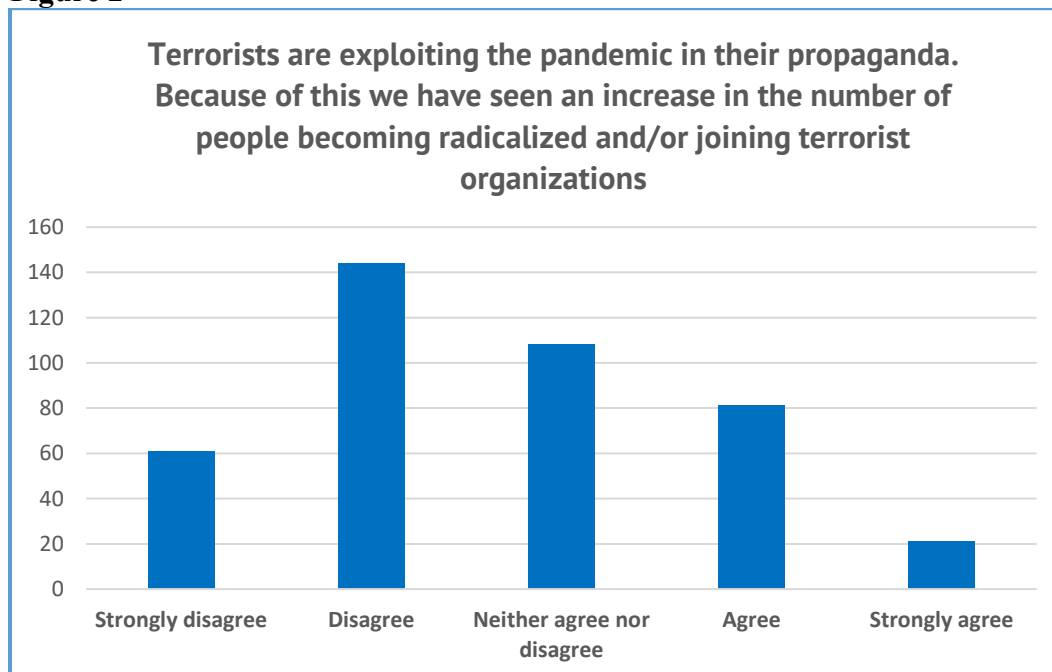
The first question (Figure 1) concerns our alumni's perception of their countries' understanding of the evolving terrorist threat due to the pandemic. Fifty percent agreed or strongly agreed that their country had a good understanding, although a significant minority (25%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. Of course, the pandemic is far from over and these statistics can only represent a preliminary assessment. This was reflected in many of the additional sixty-nine optional comments posted by the alumni. Comments suggest that many governments and security services either do not understand the correlation of COVID-19 and terrorism or currently lack sufficient analyses of these issues. However, many participants presented reasons why they believe or do not believe that the pandemic has had an impact on terrorism in their countries. These comments can be interpreted as evidence of our respondents' understanding of the issue.

As noted above, many terrorist organizations claim that the pandemic has vindicated their ideology and represents an opportunity to recruit fresh supporters and members. However, according to the statistics in Figure 2, terrorist efforts to increase radicalization and recruitment do not appear to have been successful, at least so far. Fifty percent disagree or strongly disagree with the statement that radicalization and recruitment has increased during the pandemic. Only 5% of those surveyed strongly agreed with the statement.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**



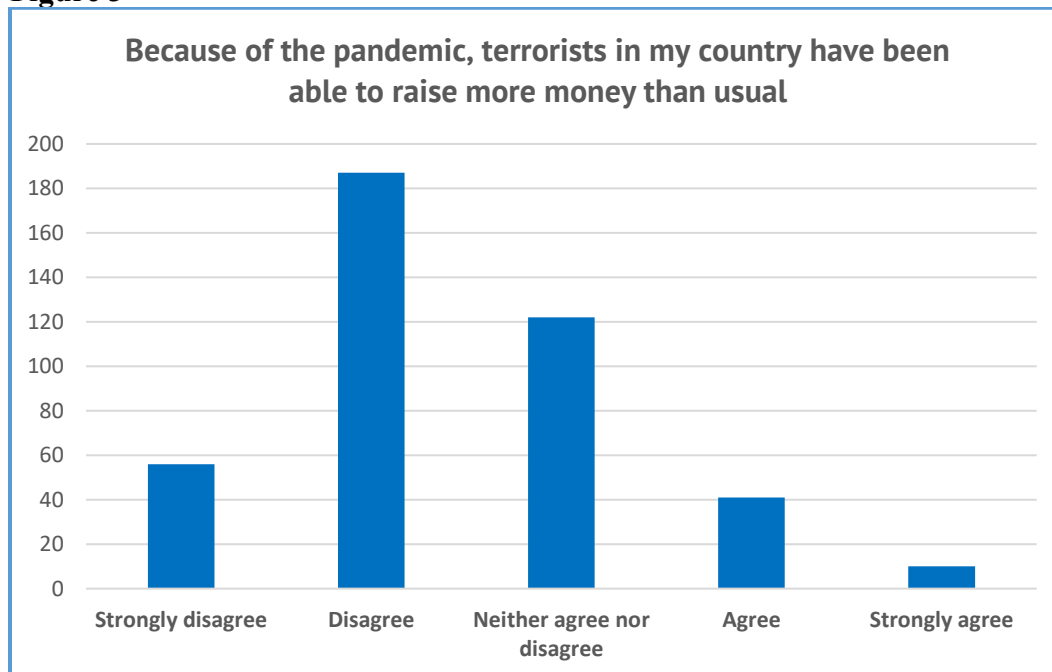
There were forty-nine comments on this question. Nineteen alumni stated that, despite evidence of increased terrorist activity online, there had been no signs of increased radicalization or recruitment. A typical comment is as follows: “While terrorists are exploiting the pandemic in their propaganda, we have not seen a significant increase in incidents resulting from it. We did, however, see an increase in online activities associated with lockdowns.” A further six comments referred to the lack of data on which to base a decision, hardly surprising given that 26% of

respondents had ticked neither agree nor disagree. Just six comments referred to increased radicalization. Specific groups mentioned were Islamic State in India, Al Shabaab in Somalia, and right-wing extremists in the U.S.

The next question addressed terrorist funding opportunities during the pandemic (Figure 3). A clear majority disagreed with this statement (59%). Only 12% expressed agreement, with 30% uncommitted.

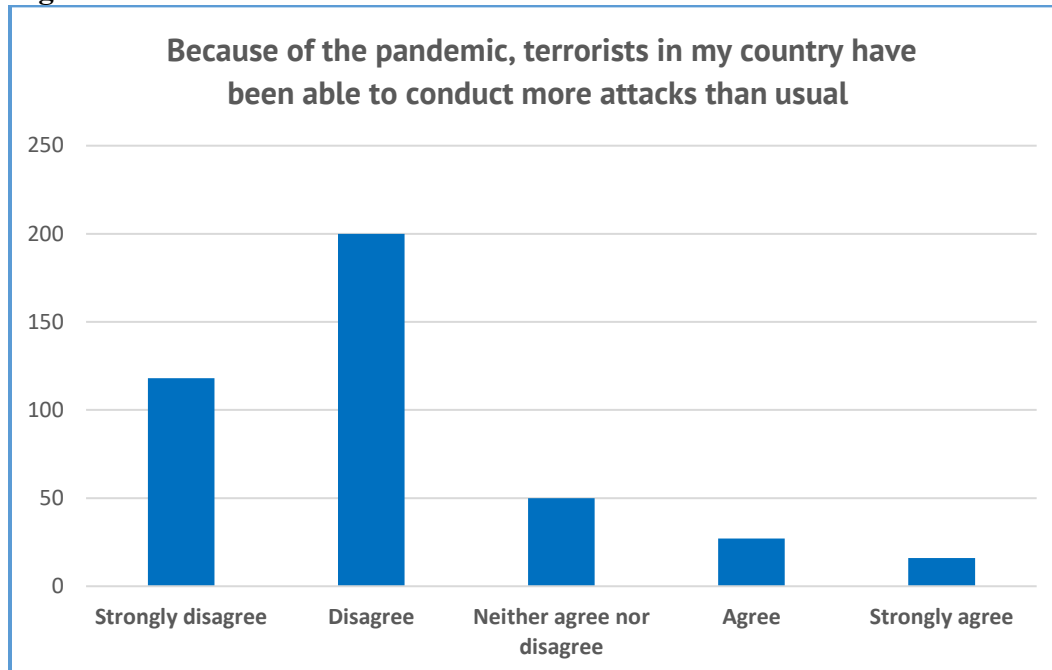
Forty-four alumni made additional comments. A majority stated that there was either a lack of sufficient data to make a judgement or that lockdowns had made terrorist fundraising and indeed criminal activity more difficult. A typical viewpoint regarding the impact on terrorist funding was summarized as follows: “The pandemic has worsened already bad economic situations for the population. It is unlikely that people would donate money that they themselves may need.”

**Figure 3**



The final question in the “threat” section addressed the issue of whether the pandemic has enabled terrorists to conduct more attacks than usual (Figure 4). Some commentators have expressed fears that security forces may be distracted by pandemic related tasks, thus providing operational opportunities for terrorist groups and lone actors. Once again, a large majority of respondents (68%) disagreed with the survey statement, including 29% who strongly disagreed. This suggests that widespread lockdown measures, such as travel restrictions, border closures, and bans on public gatherings have curtailed terrorist activities despite online calls for attacks. Forty-three people commented on this question. One individual appeared to speak for the majority with the following comment: “Due to lockdown nobody is moving. The pandemic period is a good opportunity to control people!” However, Colombia may be an exception, as one respondent stated that although attacks stopped at the start of the pandemic, terrorist activity had risen significantly since July.

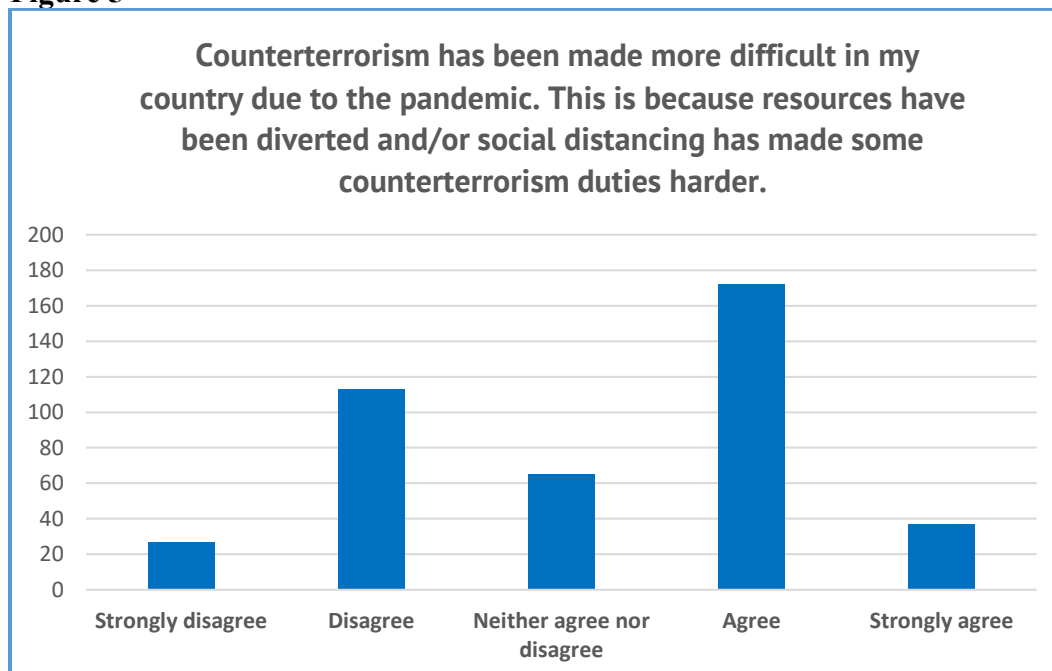
**Figure 4**



### ***Part 2: The Impact of the Pandemic on Counterterrorism***

The first question in this section asked whether counterterrorism had been more difficult during the pandemic. The results are at Figure 5. Fifty-one percent of those surveyed agreed with the question, while 34% disagreed. Given that the alumni who responded are almost all directly engaged in counterterrorism, their insights are of particular interest.

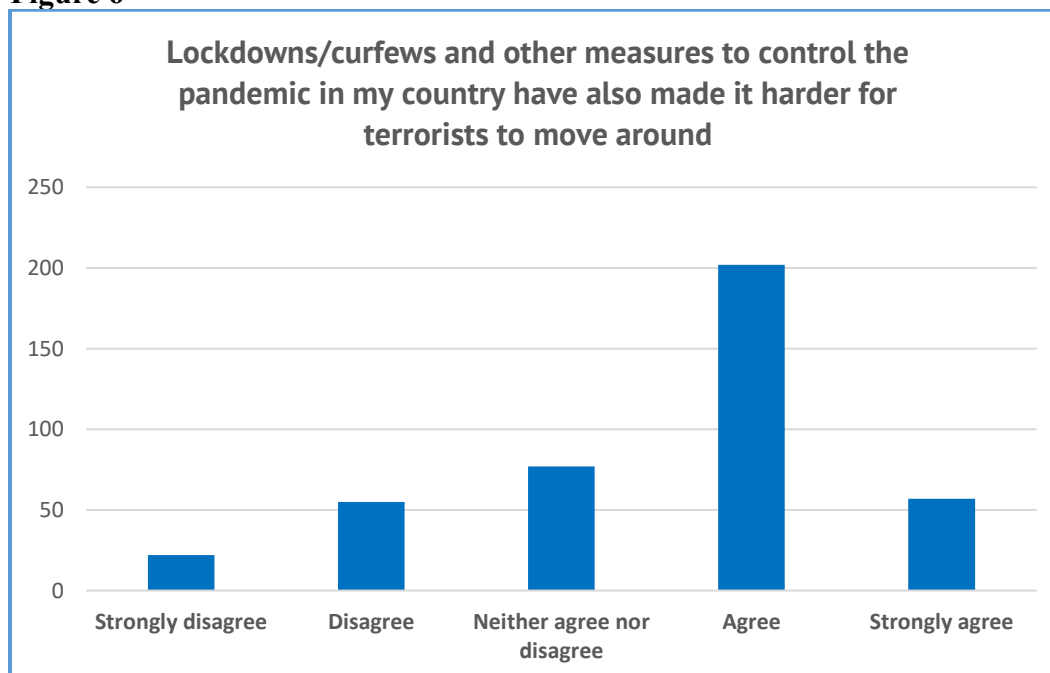
**Figure 5**



Thirty-eight people provided additional comments. The majority of comments acknowledged that measures to control the pandemic had complicated the management of counterterrorism resources. Social distancing was singled out as a particular problem, especially early in the crisis. Interestingly, two comments referred to the absence of direct face-to-face contacts in cases involving efforts to prevent or counter violent extremism (P/CVE). The impact of social isolation on P/CVE activities is an area that merits further research. However, ten respondents specifically stated that pandemic restrictions had not ultimately had an impact on counterterrorism operations. For example, one comment noted, “Social distancing has certainly made it more difficult to manage counterterrorism efforts and slowed down responses, however, it did not significantly disrupt operations as priority investigations continued unimpeded.” Five participants stated that the pandemic had actually made it easier to track and isolate terrorists. Just two comments referred to difficulties organizing and planning major military operations.

The next question (Figure 6) asked whether COVID–19 control measures had had an impact on terrorists’ ability to move around. A clear majority (63%) agreed that this was the case. Only 18% disagreed. Thirty-one alumni made additional comments. Several mentioned that movement restrictions, including border closures, had curtailed terrorist movement. Some respondents noted that while physical movement had been restricted in their country, terrorists had stepped up their online activities. Six comments mentioned the negative impact of restrictions on the movement of security officials, including access to human intelligence from the community. A couple of respondents from African countries dealing with major rural-based insurgencies claimed that the pandemic had not had any impact on terrorist groups’ ability to move around internally.

**Figure 6**

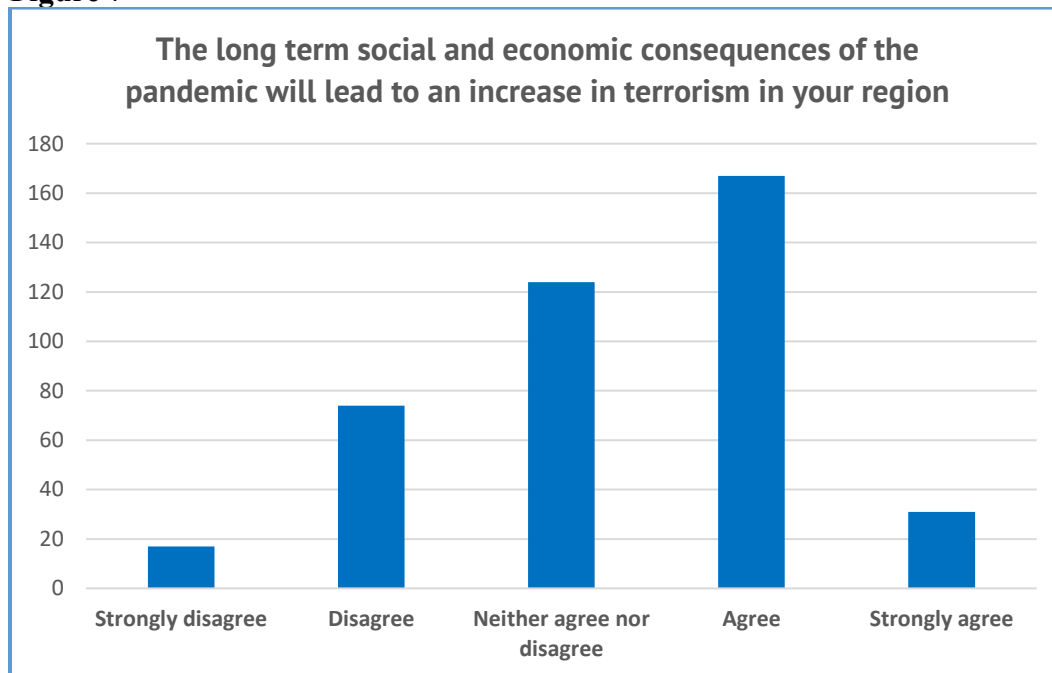




### ***Part 3: The Future Impact of the Pandemic on Terrorism***

The first question in this final section asked the alumni whether the long-term social and economic consequences of the pandemic would lead to an increase in terrorism in their region (Figure 7). Forty-eight percent agreed with the question statement, 22% disagreed, while unsurprisingly given the speculative nature of the question, 30% were unsure.

**Figure 7**



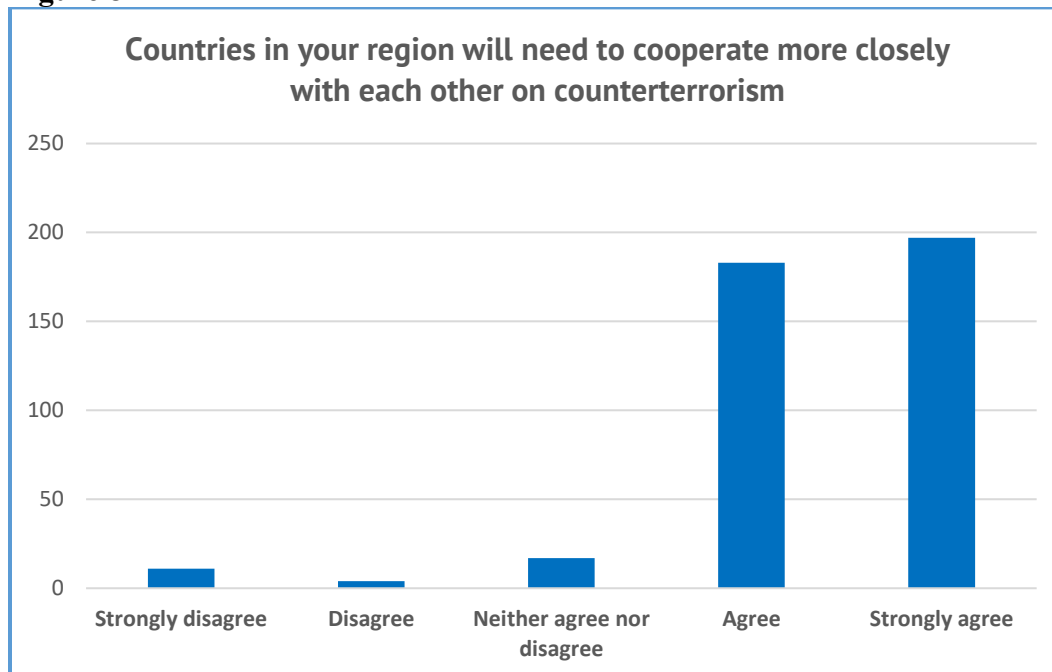
Forty-nine alumni made additional comments on this question. Seventeen specifically linked economic problems caused by the pandemic to possible future recruitment to terrorist organizations. One example stated, “Economic hardship will make it easier for terrorist organizations to radicalize and social deprivation may push many vulnerable youth into the terror trap.” A minority of respondents felt that the economic and social impact of coronavirus would not affect the level of terrorism or that there was no correlation between COVID-19 and terrorism.

The next question addressed the issue of international cooperation in counterterrorism (Figure 8). It was no surprise that the alumni overwhelmingly supported the assertion that countries needed to support each other more closely. The need for closer international cooperation in the fight against terrorism is a perennial theme on PTSS and related programs. Ninety-two percent agreed or strongly agreed with the question statement. Only 4% disagreed.

There were twenty-nine additional comments. All reinforced the need for cooperation; many pointed out that this was unrelated to the pandemic. More interesting were a few comments that mentioned regional barriers to cooperation. Examples were: governments’ fears of becoming a target for terrorism in the case of Mozambique’s neighbors, the difficulty of cooperation in South Asia due to India-Pakistan rivalry, and inevitably the hostility between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Caucasus.

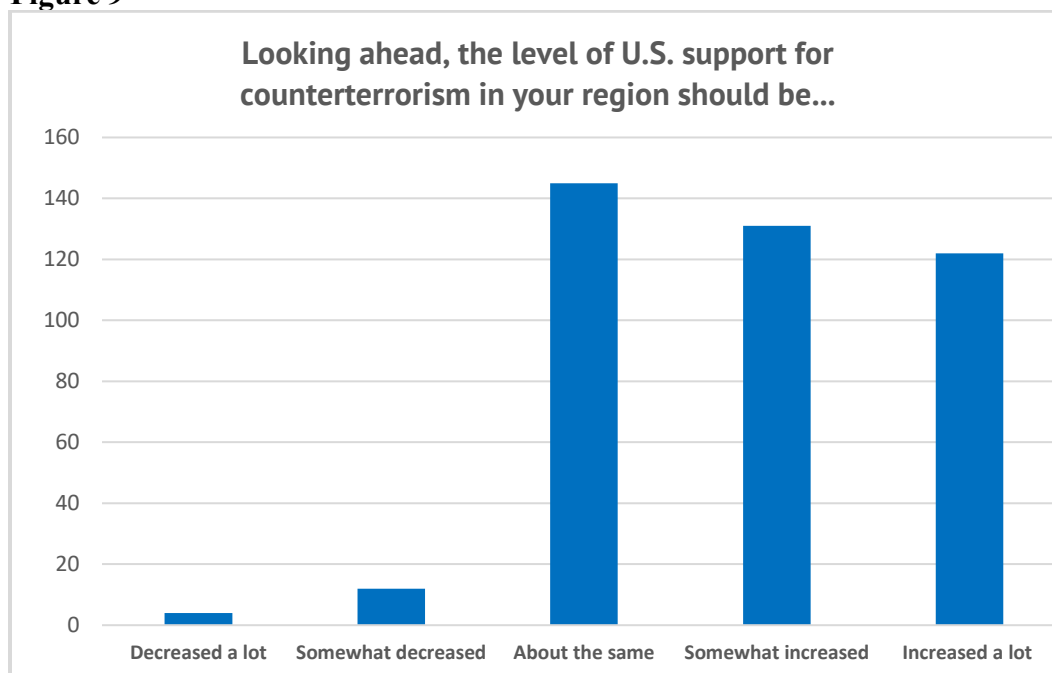


**Figure 8**



The final survey question asked what the level of U.S. support should be for regional counterterrorism efforts. There was overwhelming backing for continued U.S. support, again hardly surprising from a PTSS alumni group. Thirty-five percent wanted support to remain the same, while 62% wished to see this actually increase. Only a small minority (4%) voted for less U.S. regional counterterrorism assistance.

**Figure 9**



Thirty-eight alumni supplied additional comments. Many expressed the need for continued U.S. counterterrorism capacity building in their countries. Fourteen responses specifically mentioned the importance of intelligence sharing, surveillance or logistic support. Others valued counterterrorism training and financial support. One respondent considered support for “social programs” to undermine support for terrorism to be the most pressing requirement. Two comments expressed concern about uncertain U.S. commitment to counterterrorism in their region following the presidential election. A similar number stated that they were not clear what criteria the U.S. used when selecting counterterrorism partner states.

### *Additional Comments*

At the end of the formal survey, alumni were invited to provide additional comments. Fifty-three people chose to do so. A summary of substantive issues raised by respondents in this final section is below:

- Economic upheaval caused by COVID–19 will cause youth unemployment and poverty. This will make society particularly vulnerable to terrorist propaganda.
- COVID-19 threatens supporters of terrorist groups just like other members of society. We should not assume that terrorists will benefit from the pandemic.
- Research is needed to examine the potential threat from bio-terrorism inspired by the global impact of the pandemic.
- Much greater efforts are required to combat online extremist propaganda, which has been particularly prevalent on social media during the pandemic.
- International planning is needed to assess and address the likely threat from terrorism in a post-pandemic environment.

### *Conclusions*

It is evident as the world enters a so-called second or even third wave of COVID–19 that the pandemic crisis is far from over. This is reflected in many of the responses to the PTSS alumni survey. In addition, the large number of respondents who selected “neither agree nor disagree” to many questions in the survey confirms that it is too soon to fully assess the impact of the pandemic on terrorism and counterterrorism. That said, it is clear that some early expectations by terrorist groups that they would be able to capitalize on vulnerabilities created by the crisis, have, at least so far, proved unfounded. There is little evidence of any increase in terrorist attacks as a result of the pandemic and it is clear that lockdowns, restrictions on public gatherings, and travel have made terrorist operations more difficult in many countries. However, just over half of respondents also confirmed that pandemic-related taskings for the security services, along with precautions taken to control the spread of the virus, have created challenges for those engaged in counterterrorism activities. On a more optimistic note, it is evident that many services and agencies have been able to adapt to the constraints of the pandemic without compromising their operational effectiveness.

Among our respondents, there is clearly concern about the as yet unknown long-term social and economic impacts of COVID–19. A clear majority of respondents concluded that the aftermath of the pandemic, with rising poverty, unemployment, and diminished governmental capacity, would make vulnerable societies more susceptible to all types of extremist propaganda and terrorist recruitment. Perhaps in response to these fears, over 90% of PTSS alumni agreed that

there would be a greater need for regional cooperation in the fight against terrorism. Equally strong was the call for continued or increased U.S. support for national and regional counterterrorist efforts.

It is interesting to note how similar the GCMC survey results are to that conducted by the APCSS, referenced earlier, in which one hundred terrorist practitioner alumni from the Asia-Pacific region responded to similar questions. Clearly, terrorists have not yet been able to turn the pandemic to their advantage, although the long-term outlook appears a lot less sanguine. More research, including further practitioner surveys by both institutions, will further contribute to our understanding of the impact of COVID-19 as the global crisis evolves.

### *About the Authors*

**James K. Wither** is a Professor of National Security Studies at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies (GCMC) in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany. He is a retired British Army officer and former researcher in 20th century warfare at the Imperial War Museum, London. He has published widely on the subject of warfare, terrorism, and Western security and has lectured or taught at a variety of institutions, including the FBI Academy, the UK Defence Academy, the NATO School, the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, and the Afghan Army Staff College.

**Richard Mašek** is currently an intern on the Program on Terrorism and Security Studies at the Marshall Center. He is a law student at the Charles University Prague. Previously, he served for two years as the Director of U.S. Ambassador's Youth Council in Prague. He is also a graduate of the Robinson-Martin Security Scholars Program at the Prague Security Studies Institute.

An earlier version of this article was published in *Small Wars Journal* in October 2020.

*The George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, a German-American partnership, is committed to creating and enhancing worldwide networks to address global and regional security challenges. The Marshall Center offers fifteen resident programs designed to promote peaceful, whole of government approaches to address today's most pressing security challenges. Since its creation in 1992, the Marshall Center's alumni network has grown to include over 14,000 professionals from 157 countries. More information on the Marshall Center can be found online at [www.marshallcenter.org](http://www.marshallcenter.org).*

The articles in the *Perspectives* series reflect the views of the authors and are not necessarily the official policy of the United States, Germany, or any other governments.