PTSS Virtual Global Alumni Community of Interest Workshop:
The Impact of the COVID–19 Pandemic on Terrorism and Counterterrorism

By James K. Wither

Introduction

This paper presents the findings of a George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies (GCMC) Counterterrorism (CT) Virtual Global Alumni Community of Interest (COI) workshop held on January 20-21, 2021. The objectives of the workshop were as follows:

- Analyze the effect of the coronavirus pandemic on terrorism and CT nationally and internationally.
- Identify the extent to which the pandemic has created vulnerabilities that terrorists have been able to exploit to mount attacks and/or attract new recruits.
- Explore the extent to which the pandemic might make societies more vulnerable to terrorism and irregular warfare in the longer term and the reasons why this could happen.
- Formulate policy recommendations for the global counterterrorism community from the perspective of GCMC CT Alumni.

The virtual workshop was structured around four panels, each with two alumni panelists with practical or academic expertise on the selected topics. GCMC CT faculty acted as panel moderators. The panels examined the impact of the pandemic on terrorist financing as well as terrorism and CT in the Middle East, the Americas, and the Sahel in Africa. Thirty selected global alumni took part in the workshop and raised additional questions and comments after the formal panel sessions. Initially, planning for the COI took place in spring 2020, when it was wrongly assumed that the worst of the pandemic would be over by 2021 and assessments of its impact would, therefore, be relatively conclusive. However, given the continued threat posed by COVID-19, with countries around the world still suffering from its impact, the assessments below must be regarded as interim. Therefore, the workshop made no specific policy recommendations.

Marshall Center CT faculty members, along with their colleagues at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia–Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS), have researched the impact of the pandemic on terrorism since March 2020.[1] The COI followed a survey of alumni on the impact of the

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[1] James K. Wither, "The COVID-19 Pandemic: A Preliminary Assessment of the Impact on Terrorism in Western States," *Occasional* Paper, No. 33, April 2020, https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2020-04/occ-paper_33-en.pdf; Tova C. Norlen, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Salafi-Jihadi Terrorism," *Connections: The Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 2, Spring 2020, pp. 11-23, https://connections-qj.org/article/impact-covid-19-salafi-jihadi-terrorism; James K. Wither and Richard Mäsek, "The COVID-19 Pandemic: Counterterrorism Practitioners' Assessments," *Perspectives*, No. 17, October 2020, https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2020-11/Perspectives_17_Wither_Masek_Covid_and_CT_OCT_2020%20_FINAL.pdf; Sam Mullins, "Assessing the

pandemic on terrorism and CT conducted in October 2020.[2] Over four hundred military and civilian counterterrorism practitioners responded to the survey from Europe, North and South America, Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. Unsurprisingly, many of the conclusions from the recent workshop are similar to impact statements in the earlier survey.

Terrorist Activities during the Pandemic

Initially extremists of all kinds responded favorably to the outbreak of COVID-19. Salafi-Jihadi and right wing extremists, in particular, believed that the disruption and anxiety caused by the crisis would create social and political change that would enable them to advance their respective ideologies and agendas. In response to early lockdowns, extremists stepped up their propaganda and recruitment activities online knowing that millions of people were confined to their homes and would be spending more time on the internet, including social media. Despite the calls on social media for attacks, widespread lockdowns, increased surveillance, the ban on gatherings and travel restrictions, coupled with a heavy police and military presence on the ground in many cities created a challenging environment for terrorist operations. Nevertheless, some workshop participants expressed surprise that terrorists had not deliberately targeted hospitals and other coronavirus-related medical facilities in order to increase the chaos, fear, and societal breakdown that they promoted online.

According to the countering terrorism financing (CTF) panelists, terrorists have found it more difficult to acquire direct contributions during the pandemic. This has forced groups to find novel ways to raise funds. For example, terrorists in Indonesia have extorted funds from "non-believers" to make up for the shortfall in voluntary donations from Muslim supporters, an ISIS supporter in Turkey was found to be selling personal protective equipment to raise funds for the group, and other known extremists set up fake charities to gain access to government relief funds dispersed during lockdowns. A speaker on the Americas' panel noted closer links between extremists and organized crime in Central America and the Caribbean, which included human trafficking and weapons smuggling linked to growing cooperation between Venezuela and Iran. Panelists from Africa reported an increase in cooperation between criminal organizations and terrorist groups, particularly involving kidnapping for ransom. By contrast, speakers from the Philippines and North Macedonia stated that they had detected no discernable increase in terrorist/crime cooperation during the pandemic so far. A senior officer from the South African Border Police reported that there had been a recent increase in terrorist suspects from the Middle East seeking to transit through South Africa to other African states. Many individuals had been stopped with fake passports and some had paid large sums of money to gain entry to the country. However, many suspects could not be detained because South Africa currently has limited access to international law enforcement databases. It is not known whether this observed travel pattern is related to the pandemic.

Outside of areas already affected by armed conflict, there has not been an increase in terrorist plots and attacks during the pandemic. But this has clearly not been the case in parts of the Middle East and Africa. A Kurdish military workshop speaker explained that pandemic

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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; "The Impact of COVID-19 on Terrorism and Counterterrorism," Marshall Center Program in Terrorism and Security Studies Colloquia, April – July 2020, https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/gcmc-external-publications/covid-19/marshall-center-program-terrorism-and-security-studies-colloquia-1.
[2] Wither and Măsek, ibid.

constraints had reduced the regular liaison between the Iraqi Army and Peshmerga forces that helped police the informal border between their respective areas of control in Central Iraq. As a result, he claimed that Islamic State militants had been able to exploit what he referred to as a "security gap" to regroup. He estimated that 3,000 fighters were now operating in the area. Panelists from Nigeria and Ghana reported that Salafi-jihadi groups and other militants in Sahel regarded the constraints imposed by COVID-19 on security force operations as an opportunity to exploit and had stepped up attacks. The Global Terrorism Index 2020 confirmed that deaths from terrorism had risen significantly in Mali, Niger, and especially Burkina Faso. However, the extent to which this trend has been facilitated by the pandemic remains unclear.

Early in the pandemic, there was much speculation that COVID-19 would be employed as a biological weapon. For example, in April 2020, the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, singled out the corona virus as a bioterrorism threat and warned that non-state groups could gain access to virulent strains that might devastate societies around the globe. Terrorist groups have traditionally found viable biological weapons difficult to produce, but some right-wing extremists, in particular, encouraged coronavirus-infected supporters to practice crude bioterrorism to spread the virus to racial and ethnic minorities and law enforcement officers. However, workshop participants agreed that a bioterror threat had not materialized during the pandemic. Some speculated that COVID restrictions had reduced both suitable targets and opportunities for such attacks. It was also acknowledged that the sheer number of infections far exceeded original estimates, rendering any terrorists' attempts to spread infection largely superfluous.

Many panelists and workshop participants reiterated that terrorist groups and sympathizers had stepped up propaganda and recruitment activities during the pandemic. A common theme was that young people, in particular, unable to go to school, deprived of leisure activities or made redundant from their jobs, had been subject to a barrage of online anti-government propaganda and conspiracy theories intended to undermine societal cohesion and promote radicalization. This was a common phenomenon across the world, notably from the far right in North America and Salafi-jihadist groups in the Middle East and the Sahel. In the Sahel, panelists had observed that some terrorist organizations were touting salaries online to attract unemployed and disaffected men challenged to feed their families because of the pandemic. A panelist from Lebanon referred to what he termed a "virtual Netflix for extremist propaganda." Other participants expressed concern about growing, potential radicalization in refugee camps as COVID restrictions had reduced local authority control and monitoring and many international staff had left. In this context, it may be significant that a recent edition of the ISIS online magazine, "Naba," focused on the group's members and sympathizers in prisons and refugee camps and promised they would be released.

Overall, the workshop consensus was that the full impact of online radicalization activities would not be known until the end of the pandemic, not least because state security agencies were unable to assess the extent of the problem at the moment. For example, a U.S. panelist noted with concern that pandemic restrictions had reduced referrals to services designed to prevent and counter violent extremism, while community police had not been able to maintain the normal interface with the communities that they served.

The Effect of the Pandemic on the Security Forces

There was broad agreement that the pandemic continues to have a negative impact on counterterrorism operations and preparedness. Presenters from both the Middle East and Africa, in particular, complained about postponed or cancelled training and exercises. There were also concerns that elements of the armed forces had been diverted from CT-related duties to assist the civil powers and health authorities to manage the pandemic by controlling population movements and policing borders. In addition, COVID-19 had affected capacity-building operations by foreign militaries as Western partner countries had pulled troops out of theater or cancelled training programs. African participants, in particular, feared that the current reduction in what they described as "critical military support" by Western powers in the Sahel would become permanent in the aftermath of the pandemic. A couple of workshop participants also raised the issue of declining police and military morale caused by longer working hours and stress as colleagues became sick or were forced to quarantine. Reports from the U.S. earlier in the pandemic confirmed that infection rates in the military and police services tended to be significantly higher than in the general population.

According to a panelist from a financial intelligence unit based in North Macedonia, increased teleworking during the pandemic has had a detrimental effect on financial intelligence operations throughout the Western Balkans. As a result, he claimed that less time-sensitive information was being shared at the working level; there was reduced access to classified information; and overall a slowdown in counterterrorism finance casework. There was some speculation by participants that this may have prevented early identification of suspicious financial transactions by Kujtim Fejzullai, a dual national, North Macedonian/Austrian gunman who killed four civilians in a terrorist attack in Vienna in November 2020. Recent reports from the UK and U.S. have also expressed concerns about teleworking, especially regarding difficulties with access to classified information for intelligence analysts and contractors working from home.

A common theme of the workshop was the likely longer-term impact of the pandemic on security forces. Widespread doubts were expressed that states outside of current conflict zones would be willing or able to continue to give CT its existing high security priority in terms of financial, technical, and personnel resources. Public health, albeit including protection against bioterrorism, is likely to command a much greater share of national resources than hitherto. Changing security priorities, as well as the impact of COVID-19 on public finances, could lead to many states implementing budget cuts more severe than those that followed the 2008-2009 financial crisis. Given the global political, social, and economic impact of the pandemic, many workshop participants, again especially those from the Middle East and Africa, stressed that there may be a need for even greater efforts to be devoted to fighting terrorism, especially internationally. This was despite an acknowledgement of the likely financial pressures on CT resources in the U.S. and other major powers that currently take the lead in military operations, training, and capacity-building missions intended to counter international terrorism.

The Political and Economic Impact of the Pandemic

The likelihood of severe political and economic fallout from the pandemic was a major topic discussed during the workshop. There was general agreement that the coronavirus pandemic had exacerbated existing problems with poverty, inequality, and repression. In already fragile states, participants feared that governments might lose the capacity to provide for and protect their

citizens, which would allow extremists to exploit growing anger and grievance. Attempts by authoritarian regimes to use repressive tactics to clamp down on both illegitimate and legitimate political expression would likely worsen already grave security problems.

Not surprisingly, panelists from the Middle East and Africa were very pessimistic about the post-pandemic security situation in their regions. Middle East participants raised measures taken by Egypt, Turkey, and Jordan to expand restrictions on personal and press freedoms in the name of COVID-19 mitigation as examples of authoritarian governments' exploitation of the pandemic to increase their overall control of the population. African panelists perceived that the population in the Sahel had lost confidence in governments' ability both to combat the pandemic and provide security. As a result, existing grievances had become more entrenched and therefore, in a worsening economic and security environment, insurgents could have even more success in channeling the local discontents that have arisen following decades of state neglect. A number of participants also expressed concern that terrorist groups were providing services to the local population in areas that they controlled, further undermining government legitimacy. However, this is not a development that is peculiar to the pandemic era. Long-established insurgent groups often seek to build support by offering social services that governments are unable or unwilling to provide. The pandemic has simply provided them with a further opportunity to demonstrate governance credibility. Hezbollah, for example, mobilized thousands of people to fight the epidemic, providing doctors, testing facilities, ambulances, and a dedicated hospital.

Apart from the U.S., the formal workshop sessions did not address pandemic-related terrorism in Western states specifically. The Americas' panel discussed right wing extremism in the United States, where militants had advocated violence against what they perceived as government overreach in measures to combat the pandemic. In follow-up discussion, workshop participants cited violent protests against pandemic restrictions and the extra powers granted to law enforcement in Europe. However, participants from Western states did not appear to be concerned that governments' handling of the pandemic itself might inspire new forms of domestic anti-state terrorism.

Conclusions

As noted above, any assessment of the impact of COVID-19 must be provisional while the world is still in the grip of the pandemic. However, results from both the aforementioned alumni survey and the COI Workshop have confirmed some potentially significant trends regarding terrorism and CT. These are summarized below.

- Terrorist groups have not been able to capitalize on perceived pandemic vulnerabilities in target states. Lockdowns, travel restrictions, and other factors have reduced, if not eliminated, opportunities for attacks. In existing conflict zones, such as the Sahel, the pandemic appears to have had limited impact on the tempo of terrorist and insurgent operations.
- COVID-19 restrictions and pandemic related taskings have reduced security force CT preparedness in many states. The pandemic has affected surveillance and intelligence gathering as well as training, exercises, and deployments. Both domestic and international CT operations have been affected, but it is too early to assess whether this has created vulnerabilities that major terrorist groups can exploit.

- Extremists and terrorists have been very active online during the pandemic, spreading propaganda, disinformation, and conspiracy theories to target the millions stuck at home by lockdowns. However, at present, their success in attracting additional supporters or active recruits remains unclear.

It appears likely that the long-term effects of the pandemic will disproportionally impact already fragile states and vulnerable communities suffering from poverty, displacement, and repression. Such environments will provide additional grievances for terrorist and insurgent groups to exploit and could exacerbate existing irregular wars in Africa and the Middle East. These wars will increasingly impact global as well as regional security.

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.

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