

COVID-19 and terrorism: assessing the short-and long-term impacts



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Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic is already having a significant impact on terrorism in a variety of ways.

There is a mixed picture on the level of attacks in the short-term – lockdown measures will tend to inhibit attacks but terrorist propaganda calling for attacks (while authorities are distracted, etc.) will incite some incidents.

Much propaganda – and particularly that connected to far-right extremism – is focusing on conspiracy theories connected to COVID-19 and this has already inspired plots and attacks.

Islamist extremist propaganda is focusing more on the vulnerability of government opponents distracted by the pandemic and the opportunity this presents for attacks.

There is a significant current increase in online extremist activity, raising the risk of increasing short-to-medium term radicalisation.

There are strong long-term concerns that states weakened by the serious economic consequences of the pandemic will be more vulnerable to the emergence/resurgence of terrorist groups in many parts of the world.

Introduction

As the international community continues to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic it is already clear that the economic and social impact of the pandemic will be deep and long-lasting. Evidence suggests that COVID-19 is already having an impact on terrorism trends across the globe and it is worth considering in more detail the potential impact of the pandemic on terrorism threats and trends not only at the height of the crisis but also looking ahead to the medium and long-term.

Immediate impacts

The pandemic is likely to have a mixed impact on terrorism trends in the short term. At one level, as societies move to and remain in lockdown phases, we can expect that this will overall be associated with a reduction in real-world terrorist attacks in those societies which have the infrastructures to facilitate and enforce a widespread lockdown. Social distancing and other lockdown measures will make it more difficult for terrorists to move in public and to conduct many types of preparation for attacks. Evidence is already showing substantial drops in certain types of crime as a result of [lockdown measures](#)¹. The UK is seeing major drops in the reporting of murder and serious violent crime, rape, robbery, domestic burglaries, motor vehicle theft and shoplifting. Similar statistics are also emerging from other countries which have introduced comparable lockdown measures. These decreases are likely to be short term however and we can expect a substantial increase once the lockdown measures are relaxed and a return to normal work and social activity begins.

While terrorists may be more restricted than usual in terms of preparing and carrying out real world attacks, we can expect some displacement to other types of activity and particularly with regard to online activity. Research by Moonshot CVE, for example, has found that online engagement with extremist right wing content increased by an average 13% following the introduction of social distancing and other lockdown measures in [the US](#).² The longer the lockdown measures persisted the higher the level of engagement rose, rising to a 21% increase on pre-lockdown levels after 10 days of lockdown. Other research suggests that there has also been an upsurge in Islamist extremist online activity, with a rise reported on Islamic State-related or inspired material.

While lockdown measures may represent obstacles to terrorists to carry out real-world attacks, many terrorist groups have also flagged that the pandemic has left government and security resources being severely stretched. As a result, the ability of government, intelligence and law enforcement agencies to focus



1. <https://time.com/5819507/crime-drop-coronavirus/>
2. <http://moonshotcve.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Social-Distancing-and-White-Supremacist-Content-Moonshot.pdf>

Image left: Police officers on horseback ride down Regent Street in London, U.K., on Monday, March. 30, 2020



on traditional priorities such as counterterrorism has been undermined. As highlighted by UN Secretary General, António Guterres, in his remarks to the Security Council on 9 April 2020:

“... the threat of terrorism remains alive. Terrorist groups may see a window of opportunity to strike while the attention of most governments is turned towards the pandemic. The situation in the Sahel, where people face the double scourge of the virus and escalating terrorism, is of particular concern.”³

A number of terrorist groups have called on their followers to try to exploit the situation as governments increasingly have to focus attention and resources on dealing with the impact of COVID-19. Most notably, Islamic State in its *Al-Naba* edition of 19 March explicitly called on fighters to carry out attacks while their opponents were vulnerable as a result of the pandemic. Following publication there was an upsurge in Islamic State affiliated attacks in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia, including

assaults against a Sikh temple in Afghanistan which left 26 dead and an assault against a military checkpoint in Egypt which killed at least 5 soldiers.⁴ Al Qaeda also looks keen to exploit the situation with affiliate groups in Yemen and Somalia showing recent increases in attacks.

Right-wing extremists have also called online for followers to carry out attacks during the pandemic. This has included encouraging adherents to try to use coronavirus as a weapon by coughing on targeted individuals or through other means.⁵ There are already cases being reported in the media of individuals claiming to have the coronavirus coughing on others. In the United States, the threat has been taken particularly seriously. The authorities there officially regard coronavirus as a “biological agent” and threats to spread it are now considered an act of terrorism. At least two people have already been charged in the US with terrorism offences in connection to threats to spread the virus. Christopher Charles Perez, for example, was charged after he claimed online that he

had paid another person to spread the virus in shops in San Antonio in order to stop people visiting them. In a separate case, James Jamal Curry was charged after he coughed at a police officer and claimed to be infected, while he was being arrested for a domestic violence offence.⁶

Overall, attacks along these lines are likely to have a relatively limited impact in a context where national resources are already fully ramped up to contain and mitigate the impact of the virus. Whatever additional infections which could result as a result of such efforts would likely be relatively negligible in the context of a widespread pandemic.

3. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-04-09/secretary-generals-remarks-the-security-council-the-covid-19-pandemic-delivered>
4. <https://acleddata.com/2020/04/09/cdt-spotlight-renewed-attacks-by-the-islamic-state/>
5. <https://globalnews.ca/news/6795248/extremists-may-exploit-coronavirus-pandemic-threat-report/>
6. <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-two-charged-with-terror-offences-over-threats-to-spread-covid-19-11970802>

Image left: Sikh temple in Kabul where an armed attack earlier in the day killed at least 25 people and wounded eight others. The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the attack.

Conspiracy theory spin-offs

More serious, however, are attacks proposed against medical and other critical infrastructure. For example, on 24 March a white supremacist, Timothy Wilson, was shot dead following an attempted car-bombing attack at a Kansas City medical centre. According to reports, Wilson had already been planning an attack but accelerated the timing following the COVID-19 outbreak as the medical centre now “offered [more casualties](#)”.⁷ A potentially even more serious plot, involved the attempt to target the US Navy Hospital Ship Mercy while it was docked at the Port of Los Angeles in April. The ship was docked to assist with efforts to treat COVID-19 victims. On 2 April, a train engineer, Eduardo Moreno, deliberately derailed and tried to crash a train into the ship, claiming he was suspicious about the real reasons for the presence of the ship. He believed it was possibly related to a government takeover – a popular conspiracy theme among right-wing extremists. According to investigators, Moreno said:

“You only get this chance once. The whole world is watching. I had to. People don’t know what’s going on here. Now they will.”

The Wilson and Moreno attacks both appear linked to wider conspiracy theories often touted within far-right ideologies. In online forums some of these theories have been tied to the COVID-19 pandemic. There have also been fresh conspiracy theories which provide alternative explanations and narratives around the pandemic. One of the more prominent of these have been claims that 5G telecommunication masts are playing a role in the transmission of COVID-19. For example, research by the CVE organisation Hope not Hate found that six UK-based anti-5G Facebook groups were now posting a “toxic cocktail” of material which combined far-right, anti-Semitic and anti-government conspiracies and which called for readers to take [direct action](#).⁸ Though scientifically baseless, this conspiracy theory has been accompanied by the vandalising of over 40 masts in the UK alone in recent weeks, with other attacks reported from Ireland and the [Netherlands](#).⁹



7. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/fbi-learned-coronavirus-inspired-bomb-plotter-radicalized-us/story?id=69818116>
8. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/12/facebook-acts-to-halt-far-right-groups-linking-covid-19-to-5g>
9. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-52281315>; <https://www.dutchnews.nl/news/2020/04/counter-terrorism-service-alerted-as-arsonists-set-fire-to-telecom-masts/>

Image left: The US Navy hospital ship Mercy arrives March 27, 2020 at the Port of Los Angeles to help local hospitals amid the growing coronavirus crisis, in Los Angeles, California.



Better to wait?

For some terrorist groups, there may be an incentive to delay attacking during the height of the pandemic and wait until a degree of normal routine has returned. While the pandemic is raging, it is clear that even successful terrorist attacks or serious plots are attracting substantially less attention than they would normally. Further, the impact of attacks is also often trivial in the context of the far more damaging impact of the pandemic. Between 1 March and 14 April 2020, there were 115,933 confirmed COVID-19 deaths globally – a number which was rising **very rapidly**.¹⁰ In comparison, in the same 45 day time period in 2018, terrorist attacks resulted in 2,321 **deaths globally**.¹¹ In short, at the moment terrorism cannot compete with COVID-19 in terms of threat.

Thus for terrorists, where attracting media attention is often a significant element in the calculus for carrying out an attack, the current period may offer poor incentives to do so, and a case could be made for waiting until the recovery phase of the pandemic in order to better maximise the impact of attacks.

A further complication is that some types of terrorists may face a community backlash if they carry out attacks in the midst of the pandemic, particularly if the community judges that the attacks hinder or distract the emergency services from providing critical care and attention to dealing with the pandemic. For example, during March in Northern Ireland dissident Republicans prepared a sophisticated hoax bomb which resulted in a day-long security alert absorbing both police and Army bomb disposal resources while a controlled explosion was used to neutralise the threat. The hoax attack does not appear to have gathered any positive traction for the group and similar attempts have not been made since.

10. <https://qap.ecdc.europa.eu/public/extensions/COVID-19/COVID-19.html>

11. <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>

Image left: A member of the armed forces walks at the NHS Nightingale Hospital on the site of the ExCeL London exhibition centre in London on April 2, 2020

Flagging the benefits of CBRN?

The pandemic naturally is also a lesson in the potentially potent impact of CBRN weapons and in particular of biological agents. One genuine concern is that COVID-19 may lead to a resurgence in interest among terrorists for using such weapons. As UN Secretary General António Guterres warned in April:

“... the weaknesses and lack of preparedness exposed by this pandemic provide a window onto how a bioterrorist attack might unfold – and may increase its risks. Non-state groups could gain access to virulent strains that could pose similar devastation to societies around the globe.”¹²

Historically, a range of terrorist movements have tried to develop and use biological weapons.

Perhaps no group showed as much effort to develop and acquire biological weapons as Aum Shinrikyo. For example, in 1992 after a Japanese tourist died in Zaire from the highly infectious Ebola virus, Aum dispatched a 40 strong team to try to acquire samples of the disease. The team spent weeks visiting hospitals in Zaire but failed to acquire the sought after virus and eventually returned to Japan empty-handed. Had they succeeded, it is certain they would have tried to use Ebola to carry out mass casualty attacks in Japan. Aum did subsequently carry out a number of anthrax-based attacks but mistakes with preparation meant that the anthrax they developed was ineffective.

In general, there have been very few successful attacks by terrorists using biological weapons. There are serious hurdles to overcome in both developing and disseminating biological agents and these difficulties have deterred most terrorists from being too interested in such weapons. While serious obstacles certainly remain, the huge impact of COVID-19 may re-ignite some interest in biological weapons. An added concern is that historically it has mainly been religiously-motivated or right-wing terrorists who have been most attracted to using biological weapons, and in the west these are currently the dominant terrorist movements.



12.
<https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-04-09/secretary-generals-remarks-the-security-council-the-covid-19-pandemic-delivered>

The vulnerable aftermath

The long-term economic impact of the pandemic looks set to be very serious. The UK Government, for example, has already committed over £50 billion in funding to mitigate the impact of [the pandemic](#)¹³, and faces an extra budget deficit of approximately £200 billion anticipated as tax revenues fall and government spending increases. These figures though are still relatively initial estimates of the economic impact, and the longer the crisis lasts, the steeper the economic costs become. At this stage, most economic analysts accept that a serious global recession [seems inevitable](#).¹⁴

Further, there are substantial concerns that the current outbreak is merely the first of a potential series. If COVID-19 follows the pattern of some previous pandemics we may experience equally serious waves later this year or next year, each adding further to the economic burden. As is, developed economies in countries such as the UK and US have deep pockets but will still be economically rocked by the crisis in a manner that is expected to be worse than

the 2009 economic crash, and possibly on a par with the Great Depression in [the 1930s](#).¹⁵

One consequence is that funding for counterterrorism activity across government and the private sector may be scaled back in the face of massive economic pressure. In the UK, following the economic crash of 2009, Government spending on counterterrorism was largely protected and generally emerged intact from a series of austerity budgets. One factor behind this was the importance of protecting the 2012 London Olympics which faced a variety of terrorism threats. Subsequently the major rise of Islamic State inspired terrorism from 2014 onwards, marked by high profile attacks in London and Manchester emphasising the need for maintaining investment. Looking ahead in the medium and long term, government spending is likely to come under fiercer stress than in the past decade and pressure on counterterrorism budgets going forward is likely to be more intense. Whether these budgets can continue

to be ring-fenced as before is uncertain.

Tied into this, the economic impact of the pandemic is almost certainly going to feed into destabilising parts of the world. Countries with less resources may face even greater crises. Potential terrorist hotspots overseas may re-ignite as international co-operation and investment to suppress terrorism is weakened as resources are diverted to other priorities. Failed states are unlikely to experience significant improvements in a context of a widespread global recession. On the contrary, they are at risk of sinking deeper into the morass. Similarly, currently vulnerable states may succumb to the fresh range of challenges and slip into failed state status in the medium term. Combined, this may offer a range of terrorist movements new safe-havens to organise and launch campaigns of violence.

Overall, while some terrorist propaganda has been focused on immediate opportunities for attacks, the heavy economic impact of COVID-19 suggests

that serious long-term vulnerabilities lie ahead. Terrorism is only one of the problems that governments will have to address. At an international level it is difficult to envision that the wider budgets to tackle terrorism and violent extremism can remain as strong as they were. As the economic consequences of the pandemic bite both directly and indirectly, it seems likely that many regions will become increasingly vulnerable to the emergence or resurgence of a range of terrorist groups.



13. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8866/>

14. <https://www.ft.com/content/0c13755a-6867-11ea-800d-da70cff6e4d3>

15. <https://www.ft.com/content/33c03dc6-ceab-40e5-b61f-66829c5b9b2c>; <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/apr/14/great-lockdown-coronavirus-to-rival-great-depression-with-3-hit-to-global-economy-says-imf>