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*Global Health Security
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

Pandemic's Effect on Counter-Terrorism

By Kalicharan Veera Singam

SYNOPSIS

The rise of the extreme far right and violent Christian extremism reflects the evolving face of terrorism at a time of the pandemic. Counter-terrorism capabilities are also changing as technologies developed to control the spread of COVID-19 are also being considered for use in counter-terrorism efforts.

COMMENTARY

WITH THE outbreak of the pandemic, most governments were compelled to [divert resources away from counter-terrorism](#) to mitigate the unprecedented health and economic crisis. Societies are now confronted with a changed terrorism landscape that continues to evolve. At the onset of the pandemic itself there was speculation that [terrorism will no longer be the same](#). The ways in which security threats have evolved over the last year confirms this shift.

As some countries have started administering COVID-19 vaccines and progress is being made to bring the spread of the virus under control, there is an expectation that more resources would be allocated for counter-terrorism efforts. Counter-terrorism approaches are also adapting in some important ways. Of particular interest and concern are technologies that were developed out of necessity during the pandemic which are being considered or already being applied in counter-terrorism efforts. Given the rise of far-right extremism in some countries, more domestic surveillance made possible by technologies developed during the pandemic can also be expected.

Evolving Threat Landscape & the Rising Far-Right

A few changes in extremism and terrorism could be attributed directly to the pandemic. For example, the pandemic had a significant economic impact accentuating poverty and socio-economic inequalities. The doom and gloom of the lockdowns, for some, increased perceptions of hopelessness and despair. Inability to contain the spread of the virus also increased anti-government sentiments in a few countries.

These conditions gave terrorist groups opportunities to present their extremist narratives for a new social and global order to a larger and more receptive audience. But not all militant groups were intent on disrupting societies. Some groups are also engaged in "[pro-social activities](#)" (These comprised social welfare initiatives such as distributing humanitarian aid to populations affected by the pandemic).

Engagement in pandemic relief operations provided these groups invaluable administrative and governance capabilities and widened their support base.

There have also been some changes on the ideological front during the pandemic. Most notably, different variants of right-wing extremism have arisen as another major ideological source that spawns violent political action. Although the terrorist threat from right-wing extremist ideologies is not new, the pandemic fast-tracked their rise over the past year.

At the onset of the pandemic governments had to prioritise their response to the health crisis and the economic fallout. This provided the space for the rise of right-wing extremist groups and their rhetoric to flourish. "[Anti-migrant, anti-Semitic, anti-Asian, racist and xenophobic](#)" conspiracy theories heightened during the pandemic.

The socio-economic disruptions were seen by some far-right groups as further confirmation that the current social and global order is flawed and its disintegration should be expedited.

Governments' Increasing Domestic Surveillance Capabilities

As the security landscape transforms, so will governments' capabilities. To effectively deal with the augmented terrorist threat, governments are likely to free-up some of their resources that were diverted earlier to address the health crisis. At the onset of the pandemic, [counter-terrorism technologies](#) and in some cases even [security agencies](#) were repurposed to fight the spread of the coronavirus.

The unprecedented and all-consuming nature of the pandemic warranted this diversion. With the slow but steady progress some governments are starting to make in rolling out vaccines and limiting the spread of the virus the return of some of these resources back to counter-terrorism can be expected.

Additionally, governments could also deploy technologies that were developed out of necessity during the pandemic for counter-terrorism use. In a few [developed Asian countries](#) in particular there was extensive and active deployment of advanced technology for contact tracing which contributed to their relative success in limiting the spread of the virus.

In these societies, [though some were opposed](#), most citizens submitted themselves

to be tracked and forego some of their personal liberties. To others, monitoring the spread of the virus took precedence over privacy and concerns of [big government](#).

Some governments are likely to take advantage of the public's increased receptiveness to monitoring and tracking for counter-terrorism purposes. Besides contact tracing and monitoring, [biometric data collection and surveillance](#) also intensified during the pandemic and could potentially be used in [counter-terrorism policing](#).

Governments' Decreasing External Surveillance Capabilities

The capacity of governments to directly monitor overseas terrorist networks has also been reduced. This is in contrast to governments' domestic surveillance capabilities, which as noted above, increased during the pandemic.

At an [ICPVTR Webinar on "What Happens Now? Terrorism and the Challenges of Counter-Terrorism in the Next Decade,"](#) Suzanne Raine from the Centre for Geopolitics at Cambridge University noted that the on-the-ground monitoring of overseas terrorist networks has been affected.

Governments' resource capabilities to monitor foreign terrorist groups at hotspots in parts of the Middle East and Afghanistan have shrunk, resulting in a reduction in the direct monitoring and intelligence gathering of those groups. The travel restrictions and lockdowns also affected the news media's independent reporting on groups in the Middle East which was another invaluable source of information for counter-terrorism.

For most governments, it would seem logical to look inward to curb domestic terrorism during the pandemic. But the reduction in the monitoring of terrorist groups that are based overseas might be a huge blind spot with long term implications for cross-border terrorism.

The security landscape, though not completely transformed by the pandemic, has changed in significant ways. The increased threat from right-wing extremist groups which occurred in part due to the pandemic, is a new area of concern.

As societies gradually emerge out of COVID-19, the pandemic's effects on the terrorist threat landscape would become clearer. Counter-terrorism measures are already adapting to the evolving threat landscape but they would continue to require fresh lenses to keep up with the changing threats.

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