

*RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.*

---

## **Weaponising of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

*By Katalin Petho-Kiss*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The global pandemic offered extraordinary opportunities for extremists and terrorists to mobilise themselves. This analysis is built upon a quantitative and qualitative comparison between the nature of the jihadist and the far-right-related threat in 2018 and 2020. The ultimate goal was to provide a true picture of novel trends since the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. This established snapshot view could serve as the basis for amendments to be made in countering terrorism strategies both in the conflict and in the non-conflict zones.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Coronavirus, known officially as SARS-CoV-2, constituted a novel security threat and worrisome threat groups expressed their interest in exploiting the pandemic. From disseminating propaganda to raising funds, they fomented racial and religious tensions and violence. By engaging in online interactions with like-minded individuals, they were eager to build communities of supporters and sympathisers.

Violent Islamic extremists argued that COVID-19 is a “Soldier of God”, “a divine retribution”, and they encouraged waging “Corona jihad” to infect opponents. Meanwhile, far right threat groups urged direct action to spread the virus to “non-whites” – mainly minorities and immigrants. Right-wing extremists mounted cyberattacks on anti-pandemic and health institutions, seeking to accelerate the crisis.

Arguably, COVID-19 offered extraordinary opportunities for extremists to mobilise and revive themselves as powerful actors in the security landscape. The question naturally arises whether these threat groups could really capitalise on the coronavirus crisis and advance their malevolent agendas.

My co-authored manuscript titled [\*Terrorism and the Pandemic: Weaponizing of COVID-19\*](#) was eager to address these assumptions.

As a first step in this analysis, our research established whether Islamist terrorists as well as far right entities managed to exploit novel vulnerabilities the pandemic had created. Although the mid- and long-term impact of COVID-19 on terrorism is yet to be seen, there is a remarkable volume of information available to learn more about the changes in terrorists' operational circumstances.

A rigorously compiled terrorism database with information from the Global Terrorism Database (University of Maryland), the SITE Intelligence Group and the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center provided the basis for the research. The research concept was built upon a qualitative and quantitative comparison between the nature of the jihadist and the far right-related threat in 2018 and 2020.

The ultimate goal of this analysis was to provide a true picture of novel trends in the first four and a half months after the pandemic outbreak in March 2020. This established snapshot view served as the basis for amendments to be made in countering terrorism strategies both in the conflict and in the non-conflict zones.

### **Modus Operandi**

Restrictive epidemiological measures introduced novel challenges in extremists' and terrorists' operational circumstances. We determined the key findings of these changes in accordance with two spectrums, namely in nonconflict and conflict zones.

#### *Nonconflict Zones*

The lockdowns in nonconflict zones resulted in challenges to mounting an attack and also hindered well-established supply chains. Resorting to armed assault instead of deploying improvised explosive devices may suppose that the movement of goods was restricted and terrorists' access to operational resources was limited during lockdowns.

The number of terrorist attacks in these areas decreased after the World Health Organization declared the spread of COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020. It is also noteworthy that – despite the increase of online audiences due to the pandemic restrictions – traditional meet-ups were made impossible. Presumably, this resulted in severe operational consequences for far-right threat groups that used demonstrations as regular means for recruitment and building transnational connections with like-minded groups.

We need to mention the individual case of France, where there was a surge in terrorism in 2020. These developments were the continuation of the Charlie Hebdo incident but more specifically linked to the trial of the perpetrators, which had been scheduled for November 2020. French president Emmanuel Macron's support for the right to caricature Prophet Muhammad further heightened anti-France sentiment across the fundamentalist Muslim world.

## *Conflict Zones*

On the battlefields, pandemic restrictions in the aftermath of 11 March 2020 created a paradoxical effect. Our findings showed that in the first four and a half months after the pandemic outbreak, the jihadist threat considerably increased in the conflict zones – more specifically in East and West Africa, Iraq and Syria. This evolving trend can be explained with the following reasons.

Firstly, due to the crisis situation, governments were forced to divert their resources from the battlefields to save lives and livelihoods. This reallocation resulted in novel vulnerabilities which terrorists were keen to attack.

Secondly, to minimise the risk of COVID-19 infection, international troops were withdrawn from the most critical areas. This seriously paralysed those enhanced technical capabilities local governments were provided with in their counterterrorism efforts.

The only exception from this increasing trend was Afghanistan, where the intensity of terrorist attacks decreased with the pandemic outbreak. This was due to the Doha Declaration, in which the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan Government engaged in negotiations, with US assistance.

Thirdly, the heightened level of military presence, as well as the symbolic value of security forces during a crisis, made military personnel and facilities the number one targets of the terrorists.

## **Propaganda Activities**

Arguably, COVID-19 had a significant impact on terrorists' and violent extremists' online agitation acts. The pandemic outbreak encouraged both radical Islamist and far right groups to exploit the elevated online public presence and increase their propaganda activities in the digital realm.

This included bolstering their agenda, circulating conspiracy theories, inciting violence and recruiting new members. Interestingly, according to our findings, this initial boost in extremist propaganda activities decreased considerably as the pandemic spread further.

It was feared that the pandemic may further accelerate polarisation and engender more violence in the end. It has been argued that in a crisis situation, people tend to turn to religion, and the risk that those who begin to engage in religious ideologies may fall victim to radicalisation should be taken into account.

## **Policy Recommendations**

The COVID-19 pandemic drew the attention of intelligence and law enforcement authorities to new types of security threats. Among these, two are the most significant, namely, the elevated level of digital presence and the novel vulnerabilities that the crisis situation created. These changed operational circumstances should be taken into consideration when counter policies are designed.

Firstly, with regard to the digital sphere, detecting and moderating or removing radicalised online content is only one side of the problem. Additional efforts are necessary to explicitly and publicly communicate that these posts are harmful for young people. In parallel, the younger generation should be taught to think critically when encountering potentially radicalised ideologies.

Secondly, the pandemic and the restrictive counter measures fundamentally changed the scope of potential terrorist targets. While public gatherings were eliminated, the significance of medical facilities and grocery stores substantially increased. In line with this, risks and security arrangements of vulnerable facilities should be re-evaluated.

## **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced novel circumstances and thereby restructured the applicable security landscape overnight. Our findings showed that violent non-state actors rapidly reacted to these new vulnerabilities and made prompt efforts to exploit the crisis situation. We should draw lessons from these changes and take into account the mid- and long-term impact of the pandemic on extremism and terrorism. The ultimate goal would be to learn from the consequences of such an unexpected situation and reconsider security arrangements accordingly.

---

*Dr Katalin Petho-Kiss is a Senior Fellow at the Global Peace Institute in the UK and a Senior Analyst at the Counter Terrorism Information and Criminal Analysis Centre in Hungary. A CBRN specialist, she is the author of "Terrorism and the Pandemic: Weaponizing of COVID-19" with Professor Rohan Gunaratna.*

---

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore  
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798  
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: [rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg) | W: [www.rsis.edu.sg](http://www.rsis.edu.sg)