

OSCE PA-PAM-UNOCT Parliamentary Web Dialogue: Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

Tuesday, 30 June 2020, 15:30 – 18:00 (CET)

(Online)

HIGHLIGHTS¹

SUMMARY

On 30 June, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (PA), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM), and the United Nations Office on Countering Terrorism (UNOCT), held the first ever online joint Parliamentary Web Dialogue on “*Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic*”. The event, moderated by the OSCE PA Secretary General, Roberto Montella, provided an informal platform for representatives of over 65 parliaments to engage in a focused security debate, exchange views on how to retain counter-terrorism efforts high on Government’s agendas during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and reinforce parliamentary co-operation at this critical juncture.

Marking the International Day of Parliamentarism, nearly 200 registered participants, including both experts and parliamentarians, exchanged views on the latest terrorism and violent extremism trends and recognized the important role of parliamentarians to contribute to effective responses to interrelated regional security challenges in this context.

Opening the event, **Mr. Gennaro Migliore**, Chair of the PAM Special Committee on Counterterrorism, **Mr. Mauro Miedico**, Deputy Director, and Chief, Special Projects and Innovation Branch, UNOCT, and **Mr. Reinhold Lopatka**, Chair of the OSCE PA Ad Hoc Committee on Countering Terrorism, highlighted that it remains critical to closely follow terrorism-related trends in adjacent regions, in particular North Africa, the Middle East, and the Sahel, as they are interconnected and likely to impact the security of the OSCE region. They reiterated the importance of good institutional co-operation, as well as parliamentary contributions to advance international efforts against terrorism. **OSCE PA Secretary General Roberto Montella** emphasized that the fight against terrorism and violent extremism should be an area of the international security agenda that brings together all States, even in cases where hostility or divergence marks their relations, to join forces in *bona fide* co-operation.

¹ DISCLAIMER: The Highlights from the OSCE PA Web Dialogue are not intended to be official conclusions, nor an exhaustive list of all issues raised during the debate, but rather a collection of main points pulled together by the International Secretariat for possible future reference. As such, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly makes no claims nor warranties of any kind, expressed or implied, about their completeness and reliability.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Mr. Gennaro Migliore, Chair of the PAM Special Committee on Counterterrorism

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, remaining vigilant on the evolving threat has been a challenge for all.
- Terrorist groups worldwide have seized the opportunity created by the pandemic to strengthen their radical propaganda.
- Many countries remain reluctant to repatriate foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their families, who are often held in extremely poor conditions in detention camps. The issue of ISIL terrorist prisoners, in particular, is a complex one.
- The detention of ISIL fighters and their families by non-state actors cannot be seen as a sustainable solution, as it represents a real danger for the OSCE and PAM regions. PAM has already been able to achieve a political consensus on the issue and endorsed a proposal to establish a UN-led mission of inquiry to Syria to assist the responsible countries with repatriation, prosecution, rehabilitation, and deradicalization of their citizens as appropriate. This proposal that was received with great interest by the UN Security Council.
- It is necessary to re-examine the effectiveness of deradicalization and post-prison monitoring programs.
- There is an absolute need for close co-operation between the relevant agencies of OSCE and PAM countries, as well as for harmonized legislation pertaining not only to terrorism, but also financial crime, cybercrime and electronic evidence.
- The situation in North Africa remains particularly concerning, as the vulnerability to terrorist attacks due to the pandemic remains high. In Libya, for instance, the factors such as the mass proliferation of weapons, large scale human trafficking and migrant smuggling, and the impact of COVID-19 on the population, coupled with the active ISIL presence and the proximity to the many jihadist actors in the Sahel, are all factors contributing to a worsening of general security situation.
- In the Sahel region, a perceived poor socio-economic response to the pandemic on the part of authorities is likely to further increase the influence of Jihadist movements and undermine the official authorities.
- Events such as this present a unique platform to take stock of the above-mentioned issues and share legislative practices to highlight the critical role of parliaments and international co-operation in counterterrorism efforts.

Mr. Mauro Miedico, Deputy Director, and Chief, Special Projects and Innovation Branch, UNOCT

- Members of parliament should play a critical role in preventing and countering terrorism.
- The COVID-19-caused crisis generated new terrorist trends and exacerbated the existing grievances and prolonged conflicts, while terrorists are taking advantage of the pandemic to further destabilize some fragile states and regions.
- Terrorist groups such as ISIL and Al-Qaeda have all increased their efforts to take advantage of the situation caused by the pandemic, especially in Africa.
- ISIL, Al-Qaeda, and their affiliates have significantly increased their online outreach to young people seeking to recruit more supporters, thus integrating the virus into their propaganda and spreading hatred, xenophobia, and fear.

- Parliamentarians have powerful tools in their hands to counter the online propaganda phenomenon and explain the reasons for extraordinary measures taken by the government to contrast hate speech and change the perception of the public.
- Parliamentary oversight is essential, as some countries might use counter-terrorism legislation and mass digital surveillance in ways that do not comply with human rights under the pretext of the pandemic response.
- The situation in camps and places of detention holding suspected FTFs and associated women and children in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere, remains alarming and presents a ticking bomb for the global security.
- Repatriation of FTFs and their families, especially of children, remains a matter of utmost urgency.
- Victims of terrorism are particularly affected by the global health crisis, which is why the international community should stand in solidarity and support the victims through joint efforts.
- There are grave concerns that the global shutdown will result in pressure on States' resources and reduction of counter-terrorism budgets, and thus undermine national and international responses to terrorism.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a structural vulnerability to any form of biological attacks, as the devastating impact on the coronavirus on healthcare infrastructures and economies may act as an incentive for terrorist groups looking to unleash pathogens on different nations.
- The COVID-19 pandemic will continue to significantly impact international peace and security and related policymaking in the long term, which is why multilateralism is, and should be, of essence.

Mr. Reinhold Lopatka, Chair of the OSCE PA Ad Hoc Committee on Countering Terrorism

- It remains critical to closely monitor terrorism trends in adjacent regions, in particular in North Africa, the Middle East, and the Sahel, as they are traditionally impacting on the security of the OSCE area.
- While the COVID-19 has been keeping authorities all over the world highly occupied, shifting their attention towards fighting the pandemic, terrorist groups remain active and seek to exploit these challenging circumstances.
- The pandemic seems to provide a fertile ground for terror groups to boost their online propaganda, call for new attacks, increase recruitment operations, stigmatize minorities, and above all, disseminate false and discriminatory information.
- Right-wing extremists use the health crisis to increasingly propagate hatred towards minorities and foreigners, especially Asians, and spread the anti-Semitic myth of a Jewish world conspiracy.
- Left-wing extremists, on the other hand, blame governments for exploiting the crisis to increase their authoritarian powers and limit human rights and fundamental freedoms, including through strict surveillance programmes.
- Others, finally, argue that the Chinese city of Wuhan is a test site for the new 5G mobile communication system, that such technology is the cause of pandemic, and that therefore it must be destroyed by any means.
- It is paramount that we all stand united to counter terrorism and violent extremism throughout our vast regions.

- Parliamentarians should work together to ensure that all Governments place this objective high up on their national and international agendas.

EXPERTS' KEY POINTS

Amb. Mohamed El-Amine Ould Ikek, Assistant Secretary General for Legal Affairs, League of Arab States

- International co-operation, particularly in the area of FTFs and border security, remains crucial.
- Repatriation of FTFs and their families is of utmost importance, as they could also present a threat of their own upon return, while the mechanisms for their reintegration should be adequate and well-tailored to their needs.
- In order to combat the terrorist threat effectively, it is essential to learn and build upon the lessons from the past.
- Many of the countries represented in the League of Arab States are particularly vulnerable during the pandemic and represent fertile ground for terrorist groups.
- It is necessary to consolidate national, regional, and international efforts in the field of countering terrorism, not only during the COVID-19 crisis, but also in its aftermath.
- Biological terrorism presents a serious issue to be further explored and tackled by joint efforts and strengthened international co-operation.
- *The Arab Convention for The Suppression of Terrorism*, adopted within the framework of the League of Arab States in 1998, represents a valuable instrument in promoting and reaffirming mutual co-operation in the suppression of terrorist offences.

Amb. Alena Kupchyna, Co-ordinator of Activities to Address Transnational Threats, Transnational Threats Department, OSCE Secretariat

- The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the threat of violent extremist movements and terrorist organizations across a broad range of ideologies.
- Violent extremist movements and terrorist organizations have shown intent to capitalize on the vulnerability, fear and uncertainty emerging from this situation.
- In particular violent right-wing groups accelerated their efforts to place blame on minority groups, including migrants, for the spread of the disease.
- Isolation and fear increase human vulnerability and create fertile grounds for misinformation and disinformation that may target (as victims) specific social groups, and encourage violent hate crimes.
- The transnational nature of online crimes and terrorist use of the Internet, require closer collaboration between relevant state agencies and the private sector.
- The respect for human rights is, and must be, a cornerstone and an unchangeable criteria in all areas of OSCE work.
- There are concerns that terrorists may develop new operational capacities and targets in response to the changing security environment, presenting an increased risk to “soft” targets and critical infrastructure.
- The viability of applying the virus as a bio-weapon is unclear, and more data is needed before it is feasible to analyze whether COVID itself might become part of a new form of violence.

- COVID-19 is a transnational security threat that demands co-ordination and co-operation with international bodies such as the UN, EU, Interpol and the OSCE PA.
- Crises, however, prove the fundamental necessity of togetherness, partnerships, and collective responses as the only way to secure sustainable results and build more resilience.
- Parliamentarians, as lawmakers, must play an important role in counter-terrorism efforts.

Dr. Andrea Margelletti, President, International Studies Centre (Ce.SI), Advisor to the Ministry of Defense of Italy

- It is important to distinguish religion and religious groups from violent extremists and terrorist groups.
- A further exploration of the phenomenon of “lone-wolf terrorism” is necessary.
- It is necessary to closely monitor the situation in Africa, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic, since COVID-19 provides a platform for terrorist groups to strive and fulfil their goals.
- Especially in countries without strong authorities and institutions, who are unable to provide basic needs to their citizens, terrorist groups stand ready to fill this gap, thus becoming the centre of gravity.
- Authorities worldwide need to think in advance and develop long-term strategies in order to adequately tackle crises such as the one caused by the COVID-19.
- International co-operation in the field of countering terrorism remains crucial.
- Security, governance and economy are cornerstone segments of a healthy society, which, however, need to be supported by a strong civil society. Thus, to combat the terrorist threat, it is necessary to involve civil society organizations.
- Parliamentarians, as direct representatives of people, should play an important role in bridging the gap between common citizens and authorities, at all times.

THE DEBATE

Over a dozen of OSCE PA and PAM members actively engaged during the ensuing debate and exchanged a wide range of insights and national experiences on the short- and long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism and terrorist groups in two regions. The vital role of national parliaments in bridging diverging views between state authorities and common citizens, as well as inter-parliamentary dialogue was highlighted. Moreover, the oversight power of parliaments was underlined as an invaluable tool to ensure that all counter-terrorism measures fully respect fundamental freedoms at all times, including times of crises.

Highlights:

- Terrorist activities are closely related to organized crime, which is why it is crucial to fully explore the nexus between these two phenomena, and thus enhance States’ co-ordinated policy and legislative responses to them.
- Armed conflicts tend to create conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism and terrorist groups, which is why strong and continuous international co-operation to adequately monitor and address them remains vital.

- The issue of FTFs should remain high on the agenda of all States, particularly when it comes to repatriation and reintegration of women and children. Moreover, development of appropriate and adequate rehabilitation and reintegration programs, tailored to the national context and repatriated individuals, are of utmost importance.
- Terrorism should be considered as a global issue which should not be associated with any religion, at all times, and multilateral co-ordination and parliamentary diplomacy in this context should remain crucial.
- Terrorist activities bypass boundaries, which is why monitoring terrorism-related developments in neighbouring States and regions remains vital. In this regard, continuous international co-operation and parliamentary dialogue in exchanging relevant information are key.
- When designing counter-terrorism policies and legislation, it is important to promote social inclusion and integration, to consider the private sector and communities on the ground, as well as have a strong gender perspective, thus applying a whole-of-society approach.
- Parliamentary oversight is a critical tool, as all terrorism-responses should comply with international human rights standards, including during the time of the crises.
- Education is a key factor in providing the tools for personal social growth and for creating a culture of tolerance and social cohesion. We must assume a collective responsibility to ensure access to quality education, especially to the most disadvantaged people, as a tool to prevent radicalisation.
- Terrorism and terrorist groups thrive in the poor societies which lack socio-economic stability. Hence, States should act ahead of terrorist groups which exploit the lack of resources, by providing basic needs to citizens, increasing COVID-19-related public services and tackling the spread of disinformation.

Closing the event, **Mr. George Tsereteli, OSCE PA President**, stressed the importance of seeing terrorism as a transnational threat and underlined that concerted responses are the most efficient in dealing with such global security challenges. **Mr. Gennaro Migliore, Chair of the PAM Special Committee on Counterterrorism**, added that the aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic will present a new phase in countering terrorism, where the parliamentarians have an important role in ensuring a whole-of-society holistic approach and strong international collaboration.