

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism

UPDATE



December 2020



CTED

UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL
COUNTER-TERRORISM COMMITTEE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTORATE

Overview

1. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to present Member States with complex, multi-faceted, and constantly evolving challenges that affect almost every area of policy and practice, including counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE). Over the past nine months, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) has worked with all its partners to assess and evaluate the impacts of the pandemic on the terrorist threat, as well as on counter-terrorism and CVE responses.

2. In June 2020, CTED published an overview¹ of some of the initial and potential impacts of the pandemic, which emphasized that, in the short-term, pandemic-related restrictions had provided terrorist groups with an online captive audience — potentially increasing the reach and relevance of their narratives — but also placed limitations on some operational activities. In view of the limited available evidence of other significant short-term impacts or of any clear correlation between the pandemic and an increase or decrease in terrorist violence, the overview highlighted some of the potential long-term impacts of COVID-19, including:

- Member States' diversion of counter-terrorism and CVE resources to aid their pandemic response and recovery
- A reduction in the funding available for civil society and non-State counter-terrorism and CVE actors
- An exacerbation of the underlying grievances and drivers of terrorism and violent extremism.

3. The present document is intended as an update to the initial overview and focuses on key thematic and regional developments and challenges over the past six months.

Terrorism, violent extremism and COVID-19

4. The threat posed by terrorism and violent extremism was already interacting within an increasingly complex geopolitical context prior to the onset of the pandemic. The 8th Global Terrorism Index — which analyses data from 2019 — shows that, although the overall number of deaths from terrorism continues to trend downwards, the terrorist threat has become more diffuse and diverse,² with both the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as Da'esh) and Al-Qaida and extreme far-right (or racially or ethnically motivated) terrorist groups operating in an increasingly decentralized environment. Against this backdrop, CTED's partners have raised concerns that additional stressors from pandemic-related social isolation and rising economic pressures could exacerbate existing grievances, especially in areas governed by weak State institutions.

5. Over the past six months, pre-COVID-19 regional disparities in terrorist activity have largely continued on a similar trajectory, owing in part to significant differences in the COVID-19

¹ [The Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism, and countering violent extremism](#) (2020), Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED).

² [Global Terrorism Index](#) (2020), Institute for Economics and Peace.

spread and responses possible in conflict and non-conflict zones. In conflict areas (where terrorism is most prevalent), State authorities continue to struggle to uphold COVID-19 restrictions, as pre-existing issues of poor governance, unrest, and gaps in institutional capacity continue to hamper efforts to mount a uniform public health response.³

6. In non-conflict zones, travel restrictions and quarantine measures have complicated potential planning and operational activities, thereby making it harder (but not impossible) for terrorists to conduct attacks. As many States proceed to reimpose limits on in-person gatherings (such as markets and places of worship), terrorists may shift their attention away from “soft” targets and public places and instead prioritize attacks against critical infrastructure (e.g., hospitals or clinics).⁴

7. The Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team^{5,6} has stated that Al-Qaida and ISIL affiliates, Boko Haram, and the Taliban have continued to conduct large-scale attacks in several parts of the world, including Afghanistan, West and East Africa and the Lake Chad Basin. However, the impact of the pandemic on those groups’ operational activities and strategic direction remains unclear, as these attacks either pre-date the onset of pandemic-related restrictions or are a continuation of existing trends in violence.

8. CTED’s analysis suggests that, despite the continuation of terrorist violence and despite concerns that terrorists and violent extremists will seek to exploit COVID-19 in their recruitment processes, there remains little evidence upon which to base a comprehensive analysis of the impact of the pandemic on terrorism and violent extremism.

Member States’ responses: key global trends

9. The following is a summary of the key global trends in Member States’ responses:

- In response to the renewed surge in COVID-19 infections, many States have reinstated the social restrictions and emergency powers introduced in the initial months of the pandemic (including measures that limit fundamental freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression and thus raise concerns that COVID-19 is being used as a pretext to curtail civil liberties).⁷
- In many Member States, this suspension of certain rights (e.g., mobility or assembly), the gendered implications of social isolation measures⁸ and economic downturns,⁹ and

³ Mustasilta, Katariina, [The Impacts of COVID-19 on Conflict Dynamics](#) (2020), ISS.

⁴ [Impact of COVID-19 on violent extremism and terrorism](#) (2020), United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR).

⁵ [Twenty-sixth report of the Analytical Support and Monitoring Team pursuant to resolution 2368 \(2017\) concerning ISIL \(Da’esh\), Al-Qaida, and associated individuals and entities](#) (2020), United Nations Security Council.

⁶ [Eleventh report of the Analytical Support and Monitoring Team pursuant to resolution 2501 \(2019\) concerning the Taliban and other associated individuals and entities constituting a threat to the peace, stability, and security of Afghanistan](#) (2020), United Nations Security Council.

⁷ [Country Rating Changes](#) (@020), CIVICUS Monitor.

⁸ [The Impact of COVID-19 on Women](#) (2020), United Nations Policy Brief.

⁹ Working Paper, [The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality](#) (2020), National Bureau of Economic Research.

stigmatization and discrimination against some populations¹⁰ (i.e., refugees, migrants and displaced populations) has raised significant human rights concerns. The reinstatement of emergency measures (whether temporary or long term) that limit human rights also has the potential to increase underlying grievances that can contribute to radicalization to terrorism.

- The pandemic has undermined women’s economic security by causing loss of employment and entrenched traditional gender stereotypes have increased their workload as caregivers and thereby negatively impacted their inclusion in the political process (owing to the difficulties of balancing domestic and professional duties).¹¹
- With many Member States facing serious economic strain¹² and focused on addressing the pandemic, CTED has witnessed a certain degree of retrenchment in counter-terrorism operations, including in the form of decreased funding for training and capacity-building projects, a decrease in security assistance, and the halting of peacebuilding, humanitarian, and development initiatives to counter violent extremism.¹³
- Terrorists and violent extremists have continued to try to exploit the global increase in the use of the Internet and social media caused by the pandemic to disseminate propaganda and misinformation and radicalize potential recruits to violence (including by attempting to spread violent extremism content through gaming platforms).¹⁴ Early evidence suggests that there may have been an increase in the number of youth and children accessing extremist content online, as they spend a significant amount of time away from school, employment, and other social activities, thereby creating concerns about potential radicalization to terrorism.¹⁵
- Border closures and new technologies and procedures at points of entry (facial recognition; biometrics systems; contact tracing) have curtailed the movement of people, potentially also restricting the mobility of terrorist groups. However, biometrics and facial recognition data can be vulnerable to various forms of attack, including by criminal networks who might seek to access and exploit this information. Normalizing these exceptional measures in a post-pandemic would create a wide range of challenges, including significant human rights concerns.
- The misuse of online platforms by extreme right-wing terrorist groups and ISIL and its affiliates to raise and move funds — including the use of cryptocurrencies and technologies

¹⁰ [Human Mobility and Human Rights in the COVID-19 pandemic: Principles of Protection for Migrants, Refugees, and Displaced People During COVID-19](#) (2020), The New School.

¹¹ Brechenmacher, Saskia & Hubbard, Caroline, [How the Coronavirus Risks Exacerbating Women’s Political Exclusion](#) (2020), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

¹² Global Humanitarian Assistance Report, [Crisis Financing to the COVID-19 Pandemic Response](#) (2020), Development Initiatives.

¹³ [How is Aid Changing in the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (2020), Development Initiatives.

¹⁴ Fischer-Birch, Joshua, [The Emerging Threat of Extremist Made Video Games](#) (2020), Counter-Extremism Project.

¹⁵ [Coronavirus: Children may have been radicalized in lockdown](#) (2020), BBC.

that are untraceable — remains a cause of concern.^{16,17} The relaxation of safeguards, compliance measures, and oversight of pandemic-related economic support by some Member States may offer opportunities for corruption and fraud¹⁸ and increase vulnerabilities in the implementation of countering the financing of terrorism (CFT) strategies.

- CTED’s analysis suggests that the financial disruptions caused by the pandemic may make terrorist groups more reliant on criminal activities, including drug smuggling, trafficking in minerals and precious stones, fraud through electronic means, the sale of counterfeit medicines, and cybercrime. International travel restrictions could also give rise to new trafficking and cash smuggling routes.¹⁹ As States strengthen their CFT terrorism legislation and measures, the pandemic is also fuelling a debate on the extent to which targeted financial sanctions might impact emergency humanitarian responses.
- The pandemic has further reduced the degree of attention given to the security and humanitarian challenges posed by the detention conditions of ISIL-associated foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) in prison settings (most of whom are adult males but reportedly include teenage boys) and their family members in makeshift camps. The situation of this second group of individuals (the vast majority of whom are women and children (many under the age of five) already required urgent attention from the international community. However, this situation has been made even more urgent by reports of COVID-19 cases in the crowded camps that house ISIL-associated women and children in the Syrian Arab Republic and Iraq.²⁰
- As Member States begin to implement COVID-19 vaccination programmes in an effort to bring the pandemic under control, there is a need to address growing misinformation and conspiracy theories surrounding vaccinations. Further, unless all countries have equal access to vaccinations, it might exacerbate issues around economic inequities and access, thereby potentially increasing existing grievances.

¹⁶ [Joint report of the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate and the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team](#) pursuant to resolutions 1526 (2004) and 2253 (2015) concerning Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) (Da’esh), Al-Qaida and the Taliban and associated individuals and entities on actions taken by Member States to disrupt terrorist financing, prepared pursuant to paragraph 37 of Security Council resolution 2462 (2019), United Nations Security Council.

¹⁷ [Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing Red Flag Indicators Associated with Virtual Assets](#) (2020), FATF.

¹⁸ For example, the Council of Europe Committee of Experts on the Evaluation of Anti-Money Laundering Measures and the Financing of Terrorism (MONEYVAL) reported the risk that relief measures such as direct payments to population (vouchers, bank transfers to citizens etc.) and social support (increase in social aid for some categories), unintentionally create opportunities to abuse this support.

¹⁹ Information Note for [Combating Money Laundering and Financing of Terrorism \(EAG\) concerning the COVID-19 impact on the EAG countries' AML/CFT efforts and measures taken to mitigate the ML/TF risks stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic](#) (2020), Eurasian Group on Combating money laundering and financing of terrorism.

²⁰ See press release [Amid Rising COVID-19 Infection Rates, Medical Supply Shortages in Syria, More Testing Key to Gauging Extent of Outbreak, Humanitarian Chief Tells Security Council](#) (2020), United Nations Security Council.

Key regional trends

10. The following is a summary of the key regional trends in Member States' responses:

- Member States have continued to use monitoring tools and surveillance to track the movement of individuals, including by accessing their location and communication data. In Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas²¹, reports suggest that some Governments have locked up dissenters, banned opposition political parties, shut down independent media outlets and curtailed press freedom.
- Violent extremist actors have adapted their online and offline narratives in response to the pandemic. Extreme right-wing groups — notably groups located in Western Europe — have exploited the pandemic for recruitment and propaganda purposes, as highlighted in CTED's related July 2020 Trends Alert.²² There has also been a global increase in misogynistic online content, which risks intensifying violence towards women and girls. Initial evidence from South and South-East Asia suggests that digital forums have been used to spread false rhetoric and hate speech about women, potentially provoking online and offline violence.²³
- In West Africa and the Sahel, ongoing violence and the pandemic have created specific challenges for children. Out of school, many are at risk of being forcefully recruited by armed groups, pushed into menial labour, and at risk of sexual and gender-based violence. Elsewhere around the globe, the widespread closure of schools, religious services, and social activities has prevented frontline workers, healthcare professionals, teachers and social workers from identifying potential signs of radicalization to violence.
- COVID-19 has severely impacted the implementation of protection measures, prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration (PRR) measures, CVE programming, criminal-justice processes, and judicial procedures. In-person access to inmates has been restricted, and overcrowding is rampant. This serves to further exacerbate detention conditions. Many imprisoned individuals, including human rights defenders, are facing suspended hearings and sentencing with no clear dates, thereby putting them at risk of indefinite detention. Ongoing or planned repatriation efforts of individuals associated with FTFs have nearly been halted, with pandemic-related restrictions often cited as impediments (a noted exception being Uzbekistan, which repatriated 98 further citizens in December 2020 under its Operation "Kindness"²⁴).
- Experts from the Eurasian region have observed instances where terrorist and violent extremist groups have sought to exploit economic grievances relating to loss of employment by offering financial support to affected individuals (including offers to pay

²¹ [Rush to pass 'fake news' laws during Covid-19 intensifying global media freedom challenges](#) (2020).

International Press Institute.

²² Trends Alert, [Member States concerned by the Growing and Increasingly Transnational Threat Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism](#) (2020), Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED).

²³ [Social Media Monitoring on COVID-19 and Misogyny in Asia and the Pacific](#) (2020), UN-Women.

²⁴ [Uzbekistan repatriates 98 people from Syrian Camps](#) (2020), Reuters.

off debts or cover rent and utility expenses), perceiving this as an opportunity to indoctrinate or recruit them.

- The pandemic has also forced many migrant workers to return to their countries of origin, thereby causing a dramatic decrease in remittances and potentially exacerbating existing grievances. Central Asian Governments have raised the concern that radicalization to terrorism of migrant workers working abroad would create counter-terrorism challenges on their return home.
- In some countries in Latin America, weakened democratic institutions, increasingly politicized judicial systems, and rising levels of crime and violence may be exacerbated by the pandemic. These political factors, along with pandemic related economic issues, such as declining growth, rising inequality, and inadequate public services and social safety measures could also contribute to an increase in violent extremism.
- COVID-19 has also exacerbated humanitarian crises globally, often curtailing the ability of humanitarian organizations to deliver assistance to the most needy and vulnerable. Some regions — notably West Africa and the Sahel²⁵ — have experienced an increase in the targeting of aid workers by terrorist groups. In other States (e.g., Mozambique;²⁶ Nigeria,²⁷ and Cameroon²⁸), increasingly brutal attacks have been carried out against civilians. Although these trends pre-date the pandemic, there is a need to be aware of COVID-19 fuelled political and economic instabilities, which can potentially impact humanitarian relief work and further exacerbate drivers of terrorism and violent extremism in many regions.
- Globally, the effects of the pandemic will be felt long after it is over. COVID-19 poses challenges to existing fragile political, economic, and governance structures. Even in areas where COVID-19 cases appear to be relatively low, disproportionate long-term effects of the economic slowdown and diminished international assistance could further weaken the delivery of essential services and limit economic opportunities. It is probable that in parts of Africa there will be a potential increase in violent extremism and radicalization to terrorism, owing not only to the imposition of restrictions but also to declining socio-economic conditions, the weakening of infrastructure and governance, the deepening of inequities that fuel existing grievances, and extreme poverty and hunger (all of which are underlying drivers that fuel terrorism and extremism).

²⁵ [Niger attacks: French aid workers among eight killed by gunmen](#) (2020), BBC.

²⁶ [Militant Islamists “behead more than 50” in Mozambique](#) (2020), BBC.

²⁷ [Why 78 Nigerian farmers were murdered](#) (2020), The Economist.

²⁸ [Cameroon: Boko Haram suicide bombers strike displacement site](#) (2020), Human Rights Watch.

Conclusions

11. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic represent a global, generational crisis. CTED's analysis suggests that a comprehensive, collaborative, and tailored approach is required to address its effects, as terrorists and violent extremists seek ways to exploit the resulting socio-economic fault lines. Human rights overreach, the increased securitization of pandemic responses, and the suppression of dissent under the pretext of countering the pandemic all have the potential to exacerbate existing grievances and fuel conditions conducive to terrorism and violent extremism. It is therefore vital that States strive to ensure proportional COVID-19 responses and adopt a comprehensive, balanced, fully human rights-compliant and gender-sensitive approach to counter-terrorism and CVE.

12. The counter-terrorism community should seek to reimagine and address the threats of terrorism and violent extremism in a post-pandemic world. There is an urgent need to ensure enhanced governance that addresses existing conditions of inequality and fragility and restores trust in State institutions. CTED, working together with its United Nations and other partners and Member States, will continue to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the evolving terrorist threat and on counter-terrorism responses, monitor the evolution of existing trends, and analyse emerging issues and challenges.