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

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Introduction

The Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) has been at the forefront of efforts to monitor and evaluate the impacts of the pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE), including through its two previous analytical reports, published in June[1] and December[2] 2020, respectively.

More than a year after COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO), it continues to have a significant impact on the geopolitical landscape and in most domestic and foreign policy areas. Although some Member States have made progress in limiting the effects of the pandemic — aided by vaccination programmes and other containment measures — COVID-19 and its impacts continues to be widespread in many parts of the world.
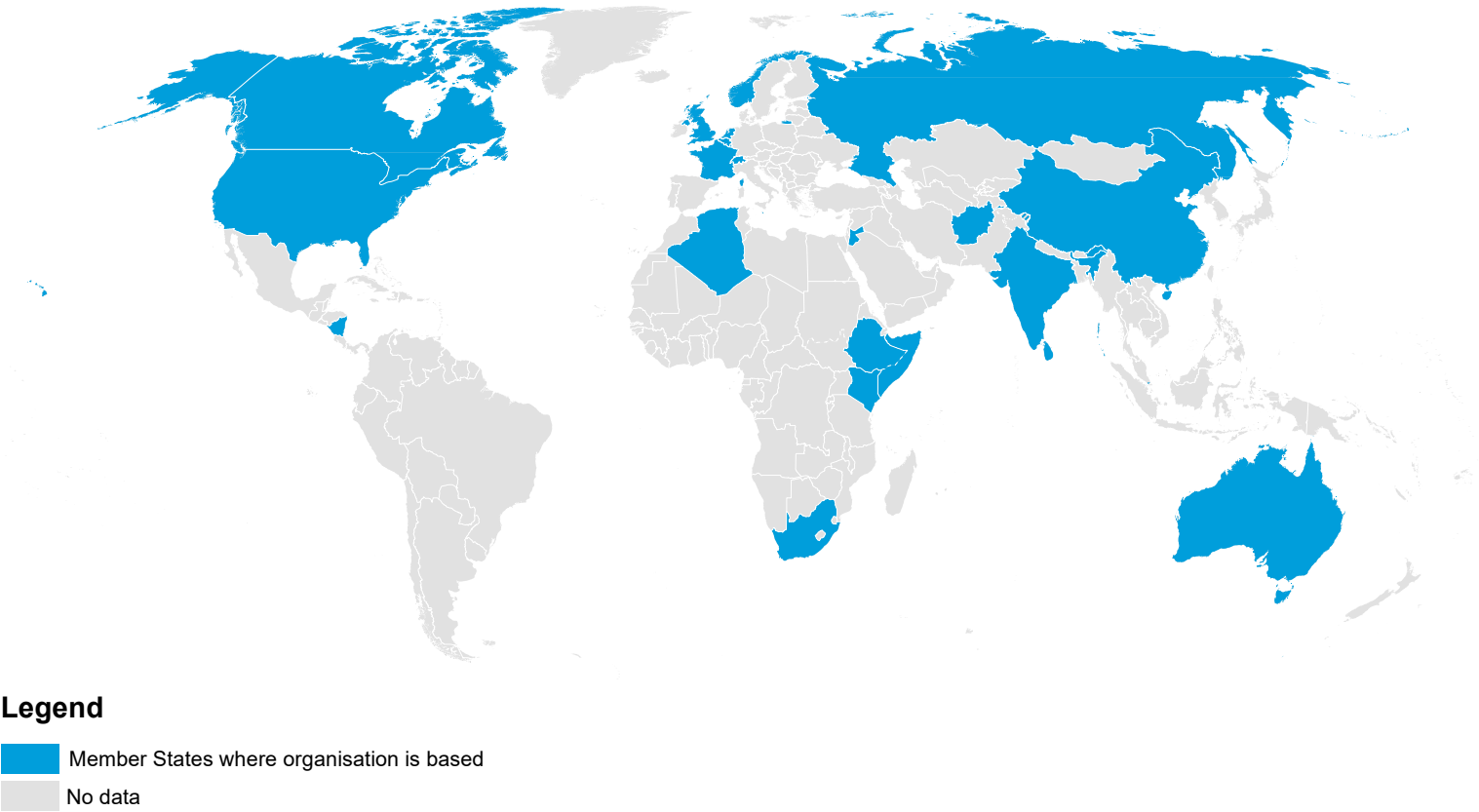
CTED has continued to analyse key trends, informed by its ongoing dialogue with Member States (including within the framework of the hybrid assessment visits currently being conducted on behalf of the Counter-Terrorism Committee) and with international and regional organizations. The present report combines this information with data collected by CTED through a survey of its partners aimed at gathering their views on the potential long-term impacts of the pandemic.

The survey — which included quantitative and qualitative questions, tailored to the areas of expertise of the respondents — was sent to a selection of United Nations agencies and offices, civil society organizations (CSOs), member entities of the CTED Global Research Network (GRN), and private-sector organizations. CTED technical and regional experts also contributed responses.

CTED's own research and the inputs of its partners have identified the following key recent trends and potential long-term impacts across key thematic areas.

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1   The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism, and countering violent extremism (2020), Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED).
2   Update: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism, and countering violent extremism (2020), Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED).

Select List of Global Participants for the COVID-19 Survey

Legend

- Member States where organisation is based
- No data

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by United Nations.
Dotted line represents approximately the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir agreed upon by India and Pakistan. The final status of Jammu and Kashmir has not yet been agreed upon by the Parties.
Final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined.
A dispute exists between the Governments of Argentina and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland concerning sovereignty over the Falkland Islands (Malvinas).

UNITED NATIONS
Map No.4625 Jun 2021

Key recent trends and potential long-term impacts

Border management and law enforcement

Trends	Potential long-term impacts
• Border-control measures, including restrictions on international travel, have curtailed terrorist movement, impacting their ability to conduct attacks, recruit, and conduct other operational activities.	• As international commercial aviation slowly returns to pre-pandemic levels, respondents noted that screening and border-management mechanisms should anticipate a potential increase in both terrorist travel and other illicit activities, such as smuggling.
• Some experts stated that the reduction in air passenger travel had resulted in an increase in illicit activities using parcel services and maritime cargo.	• Pandemic-related measures, including new technologies and procedures at points of entry, remain in place, even as the pandemic is brought under control in some regions. These measures, if retained long-term, might raise human rights concerns.
• Some respondents raised concerns that recent attacks against critical infrastructure could indicate that terrorists are shifting attention away from "soft" targets, owing to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions.	• An increase in the use of contactless border-management technology (and other new technologies) may also present opportunities for more effective and quicker information-sharing and international cooperation.
	• Some respondents raised concerns regarding plans by some States to introduce COVID-19 vaccine passports, citing uncertainties regarding the efficacy of different vaccinations in reducing transmission.

Information and communications technologies (ICT)

Trends	Potential long-term impacts
• Terrorist and violent extremist groups have sought to expose an increasingly online global population to their propaganda on virtual platforms.	• Countermeasures by large social media platforms can cause terrorists, violent extremists and de-platformed individuals to migrate to smaller platforms that are less capable of monitoring their activities.
• Many platforms, especially those with less stringent content moderation policies, have struggled to handle the growth in traffic, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation by terrorist and violent extremist groups.	• Such countermeasures can also encourage individuals to shift to the dark web, creating additional monitoring challenges for Member States.
• With conspiracy theories proliferating online, large tech platforms have sought to combat misinformation/disinformation, including by expanding their actions against extreme right-wing (or "racially and ethnically motivated") terrorist groups. These actions raise potential concerns about freedom of expression online.	• De-platforming can increase feelings of social exclusion, potentially making disaffected individuals more vulnerable to terrorist rhetoric and propaganda.
• Cybercrime (including theft of identity, distributed denial of service and ransomware attacks) is increasingly prevalent. More evidence is required to establish its relationship (if any) with pandemic-related measures or trends.	• Respondents recommended a holistic approach to terrorist exploitation of ICT, which promotes alternative narratives, community resilience and social inclusion, and delivers enhanced media literacy and mental health services.

Gendered impacts

Trends

Potential long-term impacts

- Several of CTED's CSO partners raised concerns at the limited or delayed implementation of gender-related programmes — including those focused on CVE, rehabilitation and reintegration — due to budget reallocation.

- There has been a global increase in online harassment and abuse of women during the pandemic, exacerbated by existing social restrictions.

- Socio-economic restrictions have reinforced traditional gender roles, increasing the care burden for women and undermining their economic security.

- Access to some justice and legal services has been affected or suspended, making it more difficult to secure accountability for violations of women's human rights, including gender-based violence.

- The pandemic is likely to have a serious long-term impact in perpetuating, and in some cases worsening, gender inequality. Respondents recommended that Member States integrate and mainstream gender in all post-pandemic recovery efforts.

- An increase in domestic work and unpaid labour, due to COVID-19 measures, may reinstate barriers previously faced by women to their participation in political, economic and social processes.

- The disruption of government services has been exploited by terrorist and violent extremist groups, some of which have provided services to further immerse themselves in local communities (often resulting in negative gendered impacts).

Prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration (PRR)

Trends

Potential long-term impacts

- The repatriation of individuals associated with the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as Daesh), has continued to be limited in scale (with a few notable exceptions). Some States cite the challenges posed by pandemic-related travel restrictions as a contributing factor in this regard.

- COVID-19 has caused significant delays in judicial proceedings. Although some States are conducting online sessions, a lack of resources and the need to uphold constitutional and human rights principles has limited States' ability to do so.

- Limitations on public gatherings have affected the timing and frequency of activities related to the implementation of the rehabilitation and reintegration components of PRR strategies, including in some parts of West Africa.

- Continued restrictions might prevent CSOs or local stakeholders from supporting individuals who are due to reintegrate into society or engage with those being reintegrated. This might delay the progress of reintegration and rehabilitation programmes and/or reduce positive outcomes.

- Delays in judicial proceedings, including obtaining search warrants and arrest orders, could also have long-term impacts on overall efforts to prevent and counter terrorism.

Countering the financing of terrorism (CFT)

Trends	Potential long-term impacts
• Some respondents reported that COVID-19 government stimulus and support programmes had been used fraudulently, with the result that illicitly obtained funds could be laundered through legitimate organizations and institutions.	• Respondents raised concern at the potential abuse of COVID-19 relief payments or donations meant for pandemic-related relief efforts by terrorists.
• Respondents also observed an increased use of virtual assets for terrorism-financing purposes. Further research is needed to conclude whether this was a continuation of existing trends or a result of the pandemic.	• Respondents noted that this concern could result in stricter anti-money-laundering/countering the financing of terrorism (AML/CFT) measures, thereby making it more difficult to effectively deliver aid to beneficiaries and pushing humanitarian funds into informal channels.
• Changing financial behaviours and a rise in remote transactions have negatively impacted financial institutions' ability to conduct customer due diligence and detect potential financial anomalies.	• Other respondents suggested that there might be an increase in fraud, ransomware attacks, or similar types of criminal activities in relation to terrorism financing.
	• Preventing, detecting and suppressing the abuse of new payment technologies for terrorism-financing purposes is likely to be of increased importance, including through the effective and responsible use of new technologies (such as trustworthy Digital ID).

Human rights

Trends	Potential long-term impacts
• Member States have in some cases curtailed the rights to freedom of movement, assembly, speech, and expression, thereby further shrinking civic space and the freedom of CSOs to operate.	• Respondents highlighted the need for any new pandemic-related policy measures to be human rights compliant.
• These restrictions have severely curtailed CVE programmes, including those involving engagement with communities, youth, women and marginalized populations.	• The survey results also emphasized that emergency powers adopted by States should be temporally limited and not be abused to suppress human rights.
• Securitized COVID-19 responses (including arrests and detentions) have diminished trust among vulnerable populations and created fear and anger against government entities in several States.	• In some Member States, CSO workers and human rights defenders reported being at increased risk of violence perpetrated by terrorist groups.
• Other repressive measures used to target government opponents include charges relating to knowingly spreading "fake news and false information" about the virus.	• Respondents noted the need for Member States' responses to be based on scientific data, to ensure they were protecting and promoting the fundamental right to life for all human beings.
• Reduced funding for CSO activities has decreased the quality and quantity of services provided by such organizations, potentially exacerbating challenges faced by vulnerable populations.	

Geographic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

Many pandemic-related trends on terrorism and counter-terrorism overlap across regions. Some key recent trends include the following:

- There is growing frustration, mistrust, and anger among the populations of many States at COVID-19 restrictions that they perceive as disproportionate and unjustified.

- Regardless of ideology, pandemic-related economic hardships (including rising unemployment, poverty, growing inequality, and food insecurity) are potential drivers for an increased terrorist threat

- As some States lag behind in addressing economic challenges and social frustrations arising from the pandemic, governance-related competition between States and terrorist groups might increase.

- Several terrorist groups are already exploiting the pandemic to cultivate authority and legitimacy, expanding their recruitment and radicalization tactics through charity, the provision of food or monetary resources, and other related support.

- The pandemic has severely restricted access to education worldwide, thereby violating children's rights and placing them at increased risk of being recruited by terrorist groups, being forced into menial labour, and made vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence.

- A reduction in educational, entertainment, and employment prospects for youth can also potentially weaken existing defences and resilience against violent extremist discourse.

69% of respondents stated that countering terrorism has become more challenging as a result of the pandemic.

In addition to the above global trends, there are certain additional trends that specifically impact Member States of specific regions.

SMALL ISLAND STATES, INCLUDING STATES WITH TOURISM-DEPENDENT ECONOMIES

The pandemic has already caused a severe contraction in economic activity in States that are highly dependent on international tourism (notably small island States). Many such States currently face a significant economic and social crisis, with highly damaging effects on employment and inequality.

- Quarantines and social-isolation policies have had a major impact on aviation, tourism, and commerce, with businesses facing a substantial fall in revenues, difficulties in obtaining credit, and an increased likelihood of insolvency. This economic downturn is likely to increase poverty, social inequalities, and overall dissatisfaction with governance measures.

- With Governments focused on combatting the pandemic, there is a risk that organized crime, including bribery, misappropriation of public funds, financial fraud and scams (including trafficking in counterfeit medicines) may increase.

- Small Island Developing States have also faced climate-related disasters, leading to severe structural damage (and thereby increasing public debt). This might result in a reduction in funds available for national security, including counter-terrorism programmes.

EXACERBATION OF SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY TENSIONS

Pandemic-related impacts have created a volatile socio-economic climate in States already facing intercommunal tensions, particularly where minority groups are excluded from political, social or economic structures. Growing conspiracy theories and anti-Government sentiments may fuel existing societal fissures, coalescing violent extremist groups around their ideological fringes.

- Minority groups have been impacted by the pandemic, as online misinformation/disinformation and conspiracy theories target vulnerable communities and seek to exploit pre-existing social and communal tensions.

- There have been increasing instances of violent anti-lockdown protests in States whose populations include vocal or organized groups that advocate anti-Government and anti-establishment ideologies, including those motivated by extreme right-wing ideologies. Violent extremists might try to exploit this sense of social exclusion and growing discontent during the pandemic.

72% of respondents stated that CVE has also become more challenging as a result of the pandemic

- COVID-19 response strategies might also negatively impact cohesion within and among communities and ethnic groups. Perceived favouritism in the distribution of government support has reportedly increased inter-group tensions in certain areas of the Lake Chad Basin. This can reduce trust, increase frustrations, and generate grievances towards State authorities, thereby weakening social cohesion in the long term.

REFUGEE POPULATIONS, POPULATIONS IN INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT CAMPS, AND RETURNING INDIVIDUALS

The pandemic has exacerbated already unsustainable conditions in camps for refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), and in the detention camps in Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic housing ISIL-affiliated women and children.

- These populations face both a heightened danger of health complications from the pandemic and growing risks of radicalization to violence.

- COVID-19 has severely impacted PRR programmes in States that have returned their citizens from these camps in the Middle East. The ongoing detention of individuals affiliated with foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) requires urgent attention from the international community.

- In-person access to inmates and persons in rehabilitation and reintegration facilities and programmes has been restricted, remote proceedings are often not feasible, and many prisons are overcrowded and face worsening conditions. Although some States have allowed the early release of select inmates, this policy has not been applied to those detained on terrorism-related charges.

- Pre-existing terrorist- and conflict-related violence in parts of the Sahel (including the tri-border area shared by Burkina Faso, Malia and Niger); the Lake Chad Basin; and West Africa make it hard to identify causal links with the pandemic.

- The return and resettlement of refugees and IDPs in West Africa has been slowed, and the pandemic has also negatively impacted the reintegration of ex-combatants into society.

- The deterioration of the security situation and the disruption to the delivery of humanitarian aid in the Lake Chad Basin appears to have had a disproportionately high impact on women and girls, who continue to be abducted and exploited by terrorist groups, including Boko Haram.

- Governments' COVID-19 responses have been uneven and could thus further fuel perceived grievances.

- Migrants who are stranded outside their States of origin in temporary camps at the borders or forced to return to their States of origin without employment may be targeted by terrorist propaganda.

- Owing to travel restrictions, radicalized individuals are likely to remain in their home States instead of travelling to conflict zones, raising the risk of increased local terrorist activity. Some Member States are therefore concerned at the potential for an increase in violent extremist activities in States of origin.

> **Migrants and refugees face huge risks from exposure to the COVID-19 virus. However, several low-income States do not have the capacity and resources to extend health services to refugees without additional infrastructure and funding.**

DEVELOPING STATES FACING ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

Governments of developing States or States with limited borrowing capacity have been left with fewer resources to develop State services or to respond to the economic and social needs of their populations, thus reinforcing some of the key drivers of terrorism.

- The pandemic has led to some reductions in national and local capacities for stabilization and reduced international support for counter-terrorism operations, mentoring, and training. This might impact the capabilities of security forces and disrupt community dialogue aimed at countering the terrorist threat.

- This trend is particularly worrying in areas where terrorist groups challenge the State's already weakened presence and authority, especially if such groups can successfully instrumentalize difficult economic and social conditions to expand to newer territories.

- Many such States are also struggling to access vaccinations for their citizens, in addition to facing other infrastructural and logistical challenges to the deployment of vaccination programmes.

- Some terrorist groups have issued statements warning local populations against vaccinations. In Somalia, for example, Al-Shabaab has warned against the use of the vaccine and blamed Somalia's enemies for distributing a harmful substance among the population.

- The pandemic has placed considerable constraints on electoral preparations and funding, and political tensions have surfaced in several States entering elections. Some survey respondents suggested that public anger had increased owing to the perceived exploitation of the pandemic by incumbents in postponing elections.

Case Studies

Humanitarian needs continued to rise during the pandemic, in some cases exacerbated by economic downturns and prolonged armed conflict and violence. However, pandemic-related restrictions have impacted humanitarian access and outreach in many regions of the world, affecting the communities most at need of humanitarian support, who continue to face disease, lack of livelihood opportunities, and exclusion from public health systems.

Impacts:

1. Survey respondents believed that the pandemic had contributed to an apparent increase in attacks against humanitarian and health care workers, particularly in conflict-affected areas. Such attacks risk undermining the sustainability of long-term service provision and broader humanitarian assistance.

2. The legal rights of people fleeing persecution have been infringed by COVID-19 measures,

including enforced restrictions of movement, closed borders, and lockdown measures.

3. In States affected by terrorism, the gendered impacts of COVID-19 and COVID-19 responses have exacerbated inequalities. Women and girls have been particularly affected during the pandemic, as reflected in an increase in sexual and gender-based violence, forced marriage, human trafficking, and sexual exploitation.

4. There are concerns that increasing funding gaps could prevent the humanitarian community from adequately addressing humanitarian needs, with respect in particular to protection activities. The redirection of funds from pre-existing humanitarian priorities to COVID-19 responses could have a negative impact on previously identified needs of already vulnerable populations.

Despite total humanitarian funding having reached a record high last year, the exponential increase in the number of people in need as a consequence of the pandemic caused the funding gap to reach 52%.

Long-term challenges:

1. The potential misuse or unnecessary extension of emergency powers may exacerbate existing trends regarding the shrinking of the humanitarian space. It is essential that related restrictions contain provisions to enable humanitarian and health care workers to reach populations in need.

2. The pandemic has amplified the underlying causes of insecurity and conflict, as well as social and economic inequalities driving humanitarian needs, while also increasing the gap between needs and available resources. All these factors have increased the complexity and volatility of humanitarian operations.

3. Pandemic-related restrictions have led to adverse operational and security implications for humanitarian action. Safeguarding the humanitarian space, ensuring unimpeded humanitarian access, and strengthening implementation of the international protection framework for humanitarian workers remain essential.

4. The pandemic is a global crisis, which requires a global response, implemented in close coordination with national and local authorities. Respondents recommended that donors and partners develop flexible and simplified funding mechanisms and emphasize

partnership and coordination in order to ensure the necessary organizational, programmatic and budgetary adaptation.

78% reported that COVID-19-related restrictions have created human rights challenges in their region.

CTED, aided by the work of its GRN partner entities, has been analyzing evidence-based research on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism, and CVE. These impacts have not been uniform. Significant differences remain, especially between conflict and non-conflict areas. There are also growing disparities between resource-rich and resource-scarce States. However, many key trends have been universal (although distinct in scale, severity, scope, and intensity).

1. As social restrictions and stringent border-control measures continue, the number of terror attacks carried out in non-conflict areas has declined. However, terrorist groups (including ISIL and Al-Qaida) and extreme right-wing groups continue to seek to exploit the fallout from the pandemic.

- Ongoing violence continues in conflict areas, but it is hard to draw a direct correlation between the impacts of the pandemic and terrorist violence.

- Existing trends towards more decentralized operational, strategic, and tactical decisions by terrorist groups have continued.

2. Terrorist groups have also been forced to alter their operational methods against the backdrop of ongoing restrictions.

- Some groups are using this opportunity to plan, fundraise, and advance their agenda, mostly online.

- Terrorists and violent extremists have sought to exploit people's discontent at the socio-economic and human rights consequences of pandemic-related measures for their own purposes.

3. Pandemic-related constraints have led to human rights challenges in many regions, with repressive measures (including social and cultural restrictions) and economic anxieties also contributing to an environment that favours conditions conducive to radicalization to terrorism.

- The scapegoating of minority and migrant communities can heighten communal tensions, which are often further fuelled by political opportunism and socio-economic changes.

- More research is required on the long-term impacts of factors that might lead to social exclusion and thereby create fertile conditions conducive to terrorism and violent extremism.

44% of survey respondents believe that COVID-19 has increased the threat of terrorism in their respective regions.

VACCINATIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD IN COUNTERING TERRORISM

As with counter-terrorism, addressing the impacts of COVID-19 requires global cooperation; solidarity; and a comprehensive, holistic approach. Although the development and deployment of COVID-19 vaccination programmes continues apace, growing transnational and domestic vaccination inequalities and divides have emerged.

1. Member States facing conflict and a heightened terrorist threat have struggled to implement COVID-19 restrictions, as pre-existing issues of insecurity, governance challenges, and capacity gaps inhibit the development of a consolidated public health response. This will be compounded by lack of access to, and procurement of, vaccines, making it harder for such States to combat and contain the pandemic.

2. The vaccination of populations located in areas controlled by terrorist groups will be a significant challenge. Sanctions and other counter-terrorism measures prohibit making funds and other assets available to proscribed terrorist groups, but the provision of medical assistance to local populations is in accordance with international humanitarian law. Efforts to engage local communities and religious leaders and to protect healthcare workers will be essential to these endeavours.

3. Without equal access to vaccines, local and regional outbreaks of the virus will continue, thereby perpetuating the threat posed by the pandemic. Unequal access might also exacerbate issues relating to economic and social inequities, thereby potentially increasing existing grievances. In some States, elites and privileged populations have been vaccinated, without proper regard for public health priorities.

4. As Member States begin to implement COVID-19 vaccination programmes, there has been a growth in the spread of misinformation/disinformation, often online. Some violent extremist groups have also sought to develop ties with anti-vaccination communities. An international response is required to combat this spread of misinformation/disinformation through coordinated interventions, capacity-building,

efforts to counter the spread of conspiracy theories, and measures to build vaccine confidence.

Most African States have only secured enough vaccinations for between 5 and 10% of their population.

Conclusions

Although the pandemic has clearly presented the counter-terrorism community with significant challenges, there is as yet limited evidence of any clear correlation between the pandemic and a change in the nature or intensity of terrorist violence. However, CTED's analysis indicates that, in many regions, the pandemic is likely to have increased the underlying drivers and structural factors that are often conducive to terrorism.

Although the long-term effects of COVID-19 on counter-terrorism and CVE are similarly difficult to determine, the pandemic will likely have a significant impact on global counter-terrorism responses, particularly with regard to resourcing. Indeed, there is already evidence that Member States and relevant organizations have re-allocated counter-terrorism and CVE resources or budgets during the pandemic.

In some States with sizeable counter-terrorism budgets, this might represent a necessary re-balancing of national priorities. However, other States, including those most impacted by terrorism, were already facing significant resource challenges prior to the pandemic and were often reliant on bilateral or multilateral support to counter the terrorism threat. It is therefore essential that counter-terrorism remain high on the international agenda and that Member States continue to prioritize international and regional cooperation to counter the evolving global terrorist threat.

> **53% believe that pandemic-related socio-economic and political impacts will increase the threat of terrorism and violent extremism in the future.**

Despite the lack of clarity regarding potential short-term and long-term impacts, it is clear that there will be no straightforward return to pre-pandemic norms and that many working methods and approaches are likely to have shifted significantly and permanently. Adapting to, and thriving within, this new reality will be critical to international counter-terrorism and CVE efforts moving forward.

CTED will continue to engage with all its partners to inform its analysis of the impacts of the pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism, and CVE, ensuring that Member States are kept abreast of relevant trends and developments.