

## Key Questions for Counter-Terrorism Post-COVID-19

Raffaello Pantucci

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Kyler Ong & Nur Aziemah Azman



# Editorial Note:

## COVID-19 And Terrorism

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has redefined almost all spheres of modern life. While states around the world are redeploying their financial resources, energies and military capabilities to cope with the challenge of the coronavirus, terrorist groups across the ideological spectrum have positioned themselves to exploit the gaps created by these policy re-adjustments. Terrorist groups are milking people's fears amid confusion and uncertainty to promote their extremist propagandas.

The rearrangement of global imperatives will push counter-terrorism and extremism down the priority list of the international community. Anticipating these policy changes, existing counter-terrorism frameworks and alliances should be revisited to devise cost-effective and innovative strategies to ensure continuity of the fight against terrorist groups.

With these considerations in mind, this special issue of the Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses (CTTA) features four articles that identify and assess important security risks around COVID-19, given its far-reaching social, economic and geopolitical impact. In the first article, **Raffaello Pantucci** reasons that COVID-19 will have a deep-seated and prolonged impact across government activity, both in terms of the categorisation of risks, as well as the resources available to tackle other issues. Perceptions of risk around terrorist threats may shift, with states grappling with stark economic, social and political challenges. At the same time, security threats continue to evolve, and may even worsen. According to the author, some of the tools developed to deal with the pandemic can potentially be useful in tracking terrorist threats. However, resource constraints will require states, on a global scale, to think far more dynamically about how to adequately buffer much-needed security blankets both within and beyond their borders.

In the second article, **Abdul Basit** outlines the opportunities and potential implications that COVID-19 has created for terrorist groups across the ideological divide. According to the author, terrorist groups have exploited the virus outbreak to spread racial hatred, doomsday and end-of-times narratives. Among jihadist groups, IS has taken a more totalitarian view of the coronavirus pandemic, while Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Taliban have used it as a PR exercise to gain political legitimacy. Far-right groups in the West have spun it to promote native nationalism, border restoration and anti-immigration policies. Terrorist groups have increased their social media propaganda to radicalise and recruit vulnerable individuals. At the same time, these groups have urged their supporters to carry out lone-wolf attacks and use the coronavirus as a bioweapon. In the post-COVID-19 world, revisiting existing counter-terrorism frameworks to devise more adaptable and cost-effective strategies would be needed to continue the fight against terrorism.

In the next article, **V. Arianti and Muh Taufiqurrohman** observe that the COVID-19 outbreak has had a varied impact on Indonesia's security landscape. On the one hand, it has emboldened IS-affiliated Indonesian militant groups to step up calls for attacks, with the government seen as weakened amidst a worsening domestic health crisis. On the other, ongoing indoctrination and recruitment activities of militant groups have also faced disruptions. According to the authors, counter-terrorism strategies will need to be reoriented as circumstances evolve, particularly in dealing with the arrest of militants and the subsequent processes of their prosecution and incarceration.

Finally, **Kyler Ong and Nur Aziemah Azman** examine the calls to action by far-right extremists and the Islamic State (IS), which reveals varying degrees of organisational coherence in the respective movements. According to the authors, such variations influence these two groups'

preferred techniques, tactics and procedures adopted in seeking to exploit the health crisis. For its part, IS has a more organised hierarchical structure, even if it has increasingly granted autonomy to its affiliates to plan and execute attacks. In comparison, the absence of a central authority, or command structure in the far-right, can lead to a fragmentation of interests. These factors invariably create uncertainties in how, when and where extremists of both ilk may seek to operationalise an attack.

In conclusion, we hope for everyone to stay healthy, observe safe distancing measures and maintain good hygiene as we surmount the COVID-19 pandemic, from wherever you're reading CTTA.

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# Key Questions for Counter-Terrorism Post-COVID-19

Raffaello Pantucci

## Synopsis

*All aspects of government decision and policymaking are likely to be impacted in a post-COVID-19 world. This article focuses on the specific impact on counter-terrorism policy and practice amidst a changed environment. Using the UK's Contest strategy and its formulation of the 4 P's (Prevent, Pursue, Protect and Prepare) as a frame, the article explores a set of questions that governments will have to think through to manage a persistent terrorist threat.*

## Introduction

The impact of COVID-19 is widespread. At a geopolitical level, it will accelerate existing trends, while free-trade and open borders will be hurt for some time as the global economy adjusts to such a dramatic freeze and the inevitable fitful re-opening. This will have consequences across the board for governments, including security policies. Though a lot has been written about how different terrorist groups are reacting to COVID-19, its impact on counter-terrorism policy and practice remains understudied.

This article will outline some key issues that security officials should be considering going forwards about how COVID-19 might impact counter-terrorism (CT) and countering violent extremism (CVE) policies and practices. As a framework, the article will use the structure of the UK counter-terrorism strategy that captures the different strands of most CT and CVE policies around the world. In short, the

UK's Contest strategy is made up of the following four pillars:

- Prevent: to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. This forward-looking work comprises of rehabilitation and de-radicalisation initiatives.
- Pursue: to stop terrorist attacks. This involves disrupting and arresting individuals involved in terrorist activity.
- Protect: to strengthen safety mechanisms against a terrorist attack, such as building up physical defences.
- Prepare: to mitigate the impact of a terrorist attack. Here, societal resilience is emphasised to ensure society can bounce back from an incident.<sup>1</sup>

## Overview of COVID-19's Impact

Before going into a detailed analysis of the impact using the four P's framework, some overarching themes need to be considered about the impact of COVID-19 on CT and CVE work. First is the re-evaluation of national risk assessment (and more importantly perceptions of risk) that will take place in the wake of the virus. Re-reading old national strategy documents or statements, it is possible to find evidence that numerous countries had identified pandemic disease as a major risk and threat – the UK's National Risk Register, for example, identified 'pandemic influenza' as the event of greatest relative likelihood and impact.<sup>2</sup> US President

<sup>1</sup> "CONTEST: the United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering Terrorism," *Home Office* (UK), June 2018, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/716907/140618\\_CCS207\\_CCS0218929798-1\\_CONTEST\\_3.0\\_WEB.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/716907/140618_CCS207_CCS0218929798-1_CONTEST_3.0_WEB.pdf). A final caveat on this choice of structure is that the author will sometimes veer away from precise UK designations about what

is covered under each pillar of Contest, but this is not relevant for the discussion at hand which is merely using Contest as a frame with which to structure a discussion.

<sup>2</sup> "National Risk Register," *Cabinet Office* (UK), 2008, [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/61934/national\\_risk\\_register.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/61934/national_risk_register.pdf).



Donald Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy had also identified pandemics as a major danger,<sup>3</sup> while President Xi Jinping had spoken of the threat in his speech to the 19<sup>th</sup> Communist Party of China (CPC)'s National Congress in 2017.<sup>4</sup> The United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) have of course been warning about these pandemic threats for years. Yet, notwithstanding these repeated warnings, it is not clear if sufficient resources and expertise were allocated into mitigating the risk.

This lack of focus (and in some cases, specific choice to reduce focus) was in part a product of the absence of political pressure around the issue.<sup>5</sup> While the global commentariat is now full of chatter about how obvious this threat was, previously it was only experts in the scientific community who were genuinely concerned with little public discussion about the threat.<sup>6</sup> Parts of Asia that had faced viruses before were more attuned to the concern than others, but largely, it was not a high ranking political issue.

The net result was other threats, like terrorism, cyberattacks, state conflicts and trade wars absorbed more attention and budget, alongside assessments of priority. Given the widespread impact of COVID-19, this balance is likely to change as governments realise the full potential extent and damage of a pandemic disease. This will in large part also be driven by public pressure as populations see extensive impact of the threat. For terrorism threats, it will highlight once again the relatively limited impact that they actually have to the average citizen (especially comparable to pandemic threats) and might make it harder to mobilise the same sort of national level concern around them in the short to medium term.<sup>7</sup>

The positive side to this will be a reduction in the noise around terrorist threats, which may have a corollary impact on the degree to which threats can multiply and reduce the copycat or lone actor phenomenon whereby individuals are drawn to terrorist ideologies more by the noise around attacks than the ideology. It will also potentially marginalise those drawn to such ideologies as people re-evaluate what matters to them and consequently refuse to simply accept the narratives advanced by terrorist groups about the global upheavals that merit terrorist mobilisation.

On the negative side, the massive expansion of online activity will produce its own problems of radicalisation with some vulnerable individuals becoming more isolated and getting more embroiled in extremist ideologies.<sup>8</sup> National budgets will also shrink around the world. Governments will have to make harder decisions and redirect their resources and capabilities on economic revivals. This will mean pressure on security budgets at home and abroad, with more questions asked about importance and prioritisation. This is where public perceptions of risk will come into play. In the wake of COVID-19, the public will continually ask about policy steps to mitigate the next possible pandemic outbreak and this will lead to reallocations of budget from elsewhere.

Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, there was already a noticeable shift away from concern around terrorist threats, with state-based conflicts or cyber threats getting the top priority. This trend will accelerate further making it harder for CT security officials to ensure their issues retain the level of attention and budget they require. This particular issue is one that is going to play across this article. Finally, how COVID-19 will impact extremist

<sup>3</sup> "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," *White House*, December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> "Full text of Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress," *Xinhua*, October 18, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c\\_136725942.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2017-11/03/c_136725942.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Marisa Taylor, "Exclusive: U.S. slashed CDC staff inside China prior to coronavirus outbreak," *Reuters*, March 26, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-china-cdc-exclusiv/exclusive-u-s-slashed-cdc-staff-inside-china-prior-to-coronavirus-outbreak-idUSKBN21C3N5>.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Harford, "Why we fail to prepare for disasters," *Financial Times*, April 16, 2020 <https://www.ft.com/content/74e5f04a-7df1-11ea-82f6-150830b3b99a>.

<sup>7</sup> Two caveats to this are the event of another major terror attack which might once again shift people's perceptions of risk, and the fact that over time this perception will likely shift again.

<sup>8</sup> Nikita Malik, "Self-isolation might stop Coronavirus, but it will speed the spread of extremism," *Foreign Policy*, March 26, 2020 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/26/self-isolation-might-stop-coronavirus-but-spread-extremism/>.

ideologies merit some brief thought. The economic downturn will create contexts in which anti-state groups can thrive. Racism has already emerged – in particular towards Asians, but also within Asian countries towards others – which may lead to different forms of violence.

The disenfranchised communities or inequalities that will emerge in the post-COVID-19 world will create some individuals or groups who see violence as the answer to their situation. In some contexts, the massive increase in government will produce its own problems. In America, for example, the long history of fear of federal government has generated terrorist atrocities in the past (like the Oklahoma City bombing which just passed its 25 year anniversary);<sup>9</sup> some similar reactions seem to be already appearing.<sup>10</sup> There is also the possibility that fringe groups will be able to take advantage of the ensuing world to find their own specific niche fears further exacerbated. For instance, the accelerated rise of tech during this moment may generate extremist luddites, or other fringe movements might emerge.

## Prevent

At the best of times, preventing people from being drawn towards groups or persuading them to subsequently reject extremist ideologies is difficult. Governments find it almost impossible to eradicate, counter or stop the proliferation of extremist ideologies. In some countries, dealing with the root causes of any form of terrorism can go into deep social issues whose origins go back decades. Terrorist groups offer ideologies which are parasitic on these problems. This

means that in order to eradicate the problem, governments have to deal with the underlying socio-economic issues, while at the same time prevent the spread of extremist ideas.

Fund allocation is key in dealing with these issues, be they at home or abroad. The problems far from home usually need resolution through social transformation, something which only happens through investment of resource. As budgets tighten, problems in places far from home, which are not directly linked to a threat back home, will be easily dispensable in favour of more immediate problems. This resource tightening for distant CVE work will be exacerbated by the fact that often aid work doubles as CVE work in some contexts – whether by chance or on purpose to mask its intent. This means not only will distant countries lose resource from direct CVE work, but also from a broader and likely budget tightening.

In societies with relatively limited numbers of people affected, CVE and de-radicalising work tends to be built around individual level interventions in which mentors work with individuals to steer them onto a better path. In countries with larger problems, this model is essentially enhanced, with interventions targeted at entire sectors or larger groups of people. In systems where the number of cases is limited, this will likely remain manageable, but countries where hundreds, if not thousands, need managing will require a considerable expenditure of resource which will come under pressure. While there is an ongoing debate about degrees of recidivism amongst terrorist offenders, there will be budgetary pressures on programmes in prisons.<sup>11</sup> More generally, the lack of clear

<sup>9</sup> Kelly-Leigh Cooper, "Oklahoma City bombing: The day domestic terror shook America," *BBC News*, April 19, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51735115>.

<sup>10</sup> The two separate cases of Edouard Moreno and Timothy Wilson illustrate this threat. Moreno tried to derail a train in the Port of Los Angeles and Wilson tried to attack a Kansas City hospital preparing to deal with COVID-19. Both claimed to highlight the dangerous expansion of government. For more on Moreno: "Train Operator at Port of Los Angeles Charged with Derailing Locomotive Near US Navy's Hospital Ship Mercy," *Department of Justice Press Release*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-cdca/pr/train-operator-port-los-angeles-charged-derailing-locomotive-near-us-navy-s-hospital> and Wilson; Emily Rittman and Maggie Holmes, "Court documents reveal new details in Raymore man's

alleged hospital bombing plot," *KCTV News*, April 8, 2020, [https://www.kctv5.com/news/local\\_news/court-documents-reveal-new-details-in-raymore-mans-alleged-hospital-bombing-plot/article\\_53ac1f4c-7a01-11ea-a72a-1ba92e352c7b.html](https://www.kctv5.com/news/local_news/court-documents-reveal-new-details-in-raymore-mans-alleged-hospital-bombing-plot/article_53ac1f4c-7a01-11ea-a72a-1ba92e352c7b.html).

<sup>11</sup> For example, Andrew Silke "Risk assessment of terrorist and extremist prisoners," in A. Silke (ed.), *Prisons, Terrorism and Extremism: Critical Issues in Management, Radicalisation and Reform*, (London: Routledge, 2014), pp.108-121; Omi Hodwitz "The Terrorism Recidivism Study (TRS): Examining Recidivism Rates for Post-9/11 Offenders," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (April 2019) conclude the problem is limited; Mary Beth Altier, Emma Leonard Boyle & John G. Horgan (2019): *Returning to the Fight: An Empirical Analysis of Terrorist Reengagement and Recidivism*,

evidence of programme effectiveness will make it easy for such programmes to become targets for budget cuts.

Lastly, the online ideological space and counter-messaging will face greater scrutiny as a necessary expense. Already, there are concerns around the efficacy of online counter-messaging campaigns.<sup>12</sup> It is likely that the entire counter-ideological space will come under budgetary pressure given the almost impossible task of showing causal effect of programmes to the issue they are seeking to address.

### **Pursue**

National security questions are easy to mobilise public resource towards. The public sees government as their ultimate protector and will give fairly substantial lee-way in deploying resources to keep any threats at bay. The most visible expression of this within terrorism comes via Pursue work, which involves chasing down terrorists and using security and intelligence agencies to detain and arrest terrorist suspects. This strand of work may find some of its resources redirected into other tasks. But the underlying political reality of needing to maintain this capability at a high state of readiness will ensure these parts of the system remain funded.

Pursue actors are in fact already benefitting in a COVID-19 world. The mass imposition of quarantine conditions across societies creates a context in which monitoring and disruption becomes much easier. Security forces no longer need to develop complicated reasons to detain suspected individuals but can simply mask disruptions or inquiries under the veil of the quarantine monitoring. Furthermore, suspects of interest will find themselves as housebound as everyone else creating static targets requiring less resource to observe. And should they venture out, security agencies have a justified reason to inquire as to what they are doing.

Countries have also already pushed out apps seeking to track individuals and gather data to help monitor transmission of the virus. Whilst

many legal systems will put in place strong measures to prevent their use beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, these apps are potential monitoring tools for security officials concerned about terrorist attacks or networks. Some countries may be less open about their subsequent use. It is also possible that the data generated will produce some interesting findings about human behaviour in crisis situations which might support future counter-terrorism activity.

Finally, the development of such tools will create learning within the technological space. This learning may be currently directed towards tracking COVID-19 spread, but the same tools might be later more useful in the counter-terrorism space. Analysing movement of people or potential disease transmission using multiple vectors and probabilities might generate a new set of analytical tools that might subsequently be turned towards countering terrorism or chasing terrorists online.

### **Protect**

The Protect space is dominated by expenditure on security which seeks to cover every potential eventuality. Sometimes these are sunk costs which generate one-off expenditures, but others require regular reinvestment. Furthermore, they have a habit of increasing in a corollary manner to the terrorist threat evolution, as new counter-measures need to be deployed to reflect changing patterns of terror activity.

One positive effect to the Protect space might come in the form of more restrictive behaviour that will be imposed on citizens in order to mitigate further flare-ups of COVID-19. These measures will likely focus on preventing movement, or checking people's temperatures or other indicators at regular intervals. This will create a potential Protect (and even Pursue) opportunities. For example, temperature checking posts would be a moment for security officials to check on members of public; they could be a deterrent in themselves. It has been observed that terrorists have changed attack locations due to the presence of Protect measures.

Terrorism and Political Violence conclude the opposite.

<sup>12</sup> Eric Rosand and Emily Winterbotham, "Do counter-narratives actually reduce violent

extremism?" *Brookings Institution*, March 20, 2019 <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/03/20/do-counter-narratives-actually-reduce-violent-extremism/>.



In some cases, governments seek to offset these costs by passing them on to the private sector which is at the front line of this threat. Private sector sites are often the targets of terrorist groups; consequently, they bear the expenses in making their locations safe. This discussion might become more complicated in an environment of contracted economic means, for any business sector. It will become more challenging for the governments to impose requirements for expenditure that do not answer an immediate security concern (like fire hazard) rather than a more abstract one like terrorism.

An additional challenge to the Protect space will come from the likely surge in transborder activity of goods and people that will take place in the wake of COVID-19 and the lifting of travel restrictions.<sup>13</sup> For travel hubs where international travel is an integral part of existence, this will mean a sudden potential surge in work in different directions. This will be impacted by the urgency with which there will be a push to return to normality in terms of getting trade and international supply chains moving again. While there might be a push to nationalise supply chains in some countries, few will be able to effectively deliver this, meaning an expansive security cordon which will need to be developed with equal rapidity.

## Prepare

Societies have for the most part demonstrated a remarkable resilience against terrorist attacks. Terrorists have largely failed to disrupt social orders in the wake of their attacks.<sup>14</sup> Where they have caused damage, however, is in tearing the social fabric. And this could worsen in a post-COVID-19 world. While there have been globally remarkable demonstrations of collective civil mindedness and a push to help and celebrate fellow humans, there has also been a darker edge as people seek to apportion blame. Most

obviously, this is visible against Asians in the west in particular with repeated reports of assaults on people of Asian appearance in response to what has been described by very senior government officials in the United States as the 'Chinese virus'.<sup>15</sup>

This tension is visible in other contexts as well and is likely to generate its own counter-responses, both in terms of state-to-state tensions, but also amongst communities. Within China, there has additionally been a growing anger towards African communities.<sup>16</sup> While this does not necessarily portend terrorism, it does raise the danger that as waves of the virus continue to express themselves and be reported in different parts of the world, this might lead to consequent targeted social tensions at different moments. This is significant in terms of shoring up social cohesion and resilience, a key component of long-term Prepare work.

The practical tools often used to advance Prepare goals are potentially ones impacted by broader budgetary cuts. Emergency services are essential amenities which people expect, but ensuring their resource levels are maintained to a high enough level to cover every contingency might come under pressure. While emergency response services will always be needed, the question will be whether the additional training and expense required to maintain a full-spectrum counter-terrorism response (which might include low probability events like CBRN attacks) can be justified or is essential in the same way as it was before.

## Looking Ahead

The impact of COVID-19 on CT policy and practice will be complicated and varied. Overall, the pressure on direct CT measures will not necessarily be strong. Concerned publics will continue to expect governments to deliver adequate defences against terrorist

<sup>13</sup> Officials in Wuhan noted an immediate surge in travel in the wake of the lifting of the strict quarantine there.

<sup>14</sup> There are of course counter examples, with IS success in Syria-Iraq being the most recent example. But in many of the cases where success can be evaluated, it involves a level of contact resulting in taking on the state as a military force. Terrorism campaigns in otherwise peaceful societies have not for the most part resulted in the same level of impact.

<sup>15</sup> "Trump defends calling coronavirus the Chinese virus," *Al-Jazeera*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/newsfeed/2020/03/trump-defends-calling-coronavirus-chinese-virus-200323102618665.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Danny Vincent, "Africans in China: We face coronavirus discrimination," *BBC News*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52309414>.

threats. If security agencies are dynamic enough, ample opportunities avail to use the virus restrictions as an opportunity to enhance security blankets. But longer-term programmes focused on dealing with problems at root are likely to be impacted. This problem is magnified in third-world and poorer countries badly affected by the COVID-19 fall-out, and has a knock-on effect on the threat picture emanating from these locations.

The danger will also come from a threat picture rendered even more complex in the wake of COVID-19; in part, driven by existing threats which will not resolve themselves and may even get worse and also, as a result of new emerging threats. With more people pushed deeper into online worlds, this might generate a new articulation of the lone actor terrorist threat under different ideologies. While much of broader society, focused on health security and economic recovery, will vie for greater government attention and resources, terrorists will not go away and likely multiply in new and confusing ways.

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# The COVID-19 Pandemic: An Opportunity for Terrorist Groups?

Abdul Basit

## Synopsis

*Since its outbreak, the COVID-19 pandemic has been at the fore-front of terrorist groups' social media messaging. Spinning the spread of the contagion as God's wrath on their enemies, extremist groups are promoting racial hatred, apocalyptic conspiracy theories and end-of-time narratives. Taking advantage of governments' over-occupation with the ongoing public health crises, these groups could seek to expedite recruitment campaigns and plot new attacks. In this context, the role of social media companies is critical in monitoring and taking down extremist materials and fake news online.*

## Introduction

Generally, terrorist groups are opportunistic, exploitative and byproducts of chaos. Their incentive structures are so complex that they can create win-win situations even in the most trying conditions. For instance, presently terrorists are framing the coronavirus as "God's wrath" against their enemies. But if it starts affecting these groups, they will twist it as "God's test." Crises present opportunities for terrorist groups to pursue their extremist objectives.<sup>1</sup> They exploit natural disasters, calamities and pandemics to validate their ideological worldviews.<sup>2</sup>

COVID-19 has created various openings for terrorist groups across the ideological spectrum.<sup>3</sup> While governments around the

world are re-directing their energies, resources and military capabilities to contain the spread of the contagion, these groups have stepped up their social media propaganda to radicalise and recruit more fighters.<sup>4</sup>

Against this backdrop, this article explores how terrorist groups across the ideological divide have responded to COVID-19 and outlines their likely implications. It argues that the lockdown measures put in place worldwide to contain the spread of the virus, potentially increases the chances of radicalisation as more people spend time on social media at home looking for answers amid uncertainties, exposing themselves to terrorist propaganda. Likewise, the disengagement of various states from counterterrorism coalitions in various conflict-hit areas would create permissible environments for terrorists to revive and reassert themselves.

## Reactions of Militant Groups to COVID-19

Calling it God's wrath and revenge against their enemies, terrorist groups view the contagion as an endorsement of their ideological narratives and worldviews.<sup>5</sup> Though all groups have peddled conspiracy theories and misinformation regarding the virus, some variations also exist. For instance, IS has taken a more totalitarian view of COVID-19 compared to Al-Qaeda and the Taliban which are using it as a PR-campaign.

<sup>1</sup> Claude Berrebi and Jordon Ostwald, "Earthquakes, Hurricane and Terrorism," *Rand Corporation*, November 30, 2011, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/working\\_papers/WR876.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/working_papers/WR876.html).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Mia Bloom, "How Terrorist Groups Will Try to Capitalize on the Coronavirus Crisis," *Just Security*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/69508/how-terrorist-groups-will-try-to-capitalize-on-the-coronavirus-crisis/>.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "How Jihadists Are Reacting to the Coronavirus Pandemic," *Foundation for Defence*

*of Democracies*, April 6, 2020, [https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/04/06/how-jihadists-are-reacting-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic/?mc\\_cid=a68c70e9a5&mc\\_eid=ba816b4660](https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/04/06/how-jihadists-are-reacting-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic/?mc_cid=a68c70e9a5&mc_eid=ba816b4660).

<sup>5</sup> Souad Mekhennet, "Far right-wing and radical Islamist groups are exploiting coronavirus turmoil," *Washington Post*, April 11, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/far-right-wing-and-radical-islamist-groups-are-exploiting-coronavirus-turmoil/2020/04/10/0ae0494e-79c7-11ea-9bee-c5bf9d2e3288\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/far-right-wing-and-radical-islamist-groups-are-exploiting-coronavirus-turmoil/2020/04/10/0ae0494e-79c7-11ea-9bee-c5bf9d2e3288_story.html).

At the other end of the spectrum, far-right groups in the West see it as an opportunity to accelerate their agendas by spreading the virus among Jews, blacks and immigrant communities.

### *Islamic State*

The COVID-19 has spread at a time when the group was on the rebound in Iraq. Moreover, the spread of the pandemic not only feeds into IS' apocalyptic and end-of-time narratives, but it has further weakened the anti-IS coalition as Canada, the UK, France and Spain have withdrawn their troops from Iraq.<sup>6</sup> Planned training programs of the Iraqi security forces have also been paused.<sup>7</sup> The US has already reduced its military footprint in Iraq following tit-for-tat rocket attacks with Iran-supported Shia militias in the aftermath of General Qassim Soleimani's killing in early January. The coronavirus' spread will further impede the anti-IS campaign in Iraq.<sup>8</sup>

IS' extremist narrative has shifted as the geographical scope and the effects of the corona virus have evolved. When the virus first emerged in Wuhan, IS labelled it as God's wrath against "communist China" for abusing Uyghur Muslims.<sup>9</sup> Subsequently, when it hit Iran, IS conveniently labelled it God's punishment for Shia Muslims' "idolatry."<sup>10</sup> Later, when the virus spread to the West, IS termed it as "God's wrath" against "infidels" and "crusaders" for waging a war against "the

mujahideen."<sup>11</sup> Ironically, IS initially labelled the virus a weapon created by evil America.<sup>12</sup>

IS has a two-pronged focus during the COVID-19 outbreak. First, raid prisons and free its supporters from jails and prison camps in Iraq and Syria. IS prisoners, particularly women and children, continue to languish in overcrowded prisons in Iraq (Mosul), Syria (Baghouz) and Libya (Sirte) in miserable conditions.<sup>13</sup> IS has urged its supporters to make it their duty to take advantage of the current situation to free the prisoners.<sup>14</sup>

Second, reclaim some of the lost space in Iraq by taking advantage of the weakening anti-IS coalition in the country. As mentioned above, several important countries have withdrawn their troops from Iraq while the US has reduced its military footprint along with scaling back anti-IS operations.<sup>15</sup> The COVID-19 outbreak and resultant reallocation of resources and military capabilities will create more space for IS to operate with more freedom and reorganise itself.<sup>16</sup> IS notes in Al-Naba that "crusader powers cannot coordinate with their allies when they are over occupied containing the spread of coronavirus and mitigate the economic recession."<sup>17</sup>

### *Al-Qaeda and the Taliban*

Al-Qaeda (AQ)'s response to COVID-19 has been subdued and somber. AQ's six-page statement entitled *The Way Forward: A Word*

<sup>6</sup> Dominic Nicholls, "Army redeploys troops home from Iraq as Coronavirus forces end to training mission," *The Telegraph*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/03/19/army-redeploys-troops-home-iraq-coronavirus-forces-end-training/>.

<sup>7</sup> Spencer Ackerman, "US Military Pauses Training Missions in Iraq for Coronavirus," *Daily Beast*, March 20, 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/us-military-pauses-training-missions-in-iraq-for-coronavirus>.

<sup>8</sup> Nafiseh Kohnavard, "Iraq military bases: US pulling out of three key sites," *BBC News*, March 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51914600>.

<sup>9</sup> "Contending with ISIS in the Time of Coronavirus," *International Crisis Group*, March 31, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/contending-isis-time-coronavirus>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Louisa Loveluck, "Inside Syria's teeming ISIS prisons: Broken men, child inmates and orders to break free," *Washington Post*, November 2, 2019,

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/inside-syrias-teeming-isis-prisons-broken-men-child-inmates-and-orders-to-break-free/2019/11/01/25219bda-fb39-11e9-9e02-1d45cb3dfa8f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/inside-syrias-teeming-isis-prisons-broken-men-child-inmates-and-orders-to-break-free/2019/11/01/25219bda-fb39-11e9-9e02-1d45cb3dfa8f_story.html).

<sup>14</sup> Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Islamic State Editorial on the Coronavirus Pandemic," *Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi's Blog*, March 19, 2020, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/03/islamic-state-editorial-on-the-coronavirus>.

<sup>15</sup> Pasha Magid, "Islamic State Aims for Comeback Amid Virus-Expedited U.S. Withdrawal," *Foreign Policy*, April 6, 2020, [https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/06/iraq-islamic-state-comeback-coronavirus-us-withdrawal/?fbclid=IwAR0hJSxTaFbPxqp8efKVWtIMB\\_4\\_oMjXuGXldmolPZJoPDMDX8nY\\_KAPo0k](https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/06/iraq-islamic-state-comeback-coronavirus-us-withdrawal/?fbclid=IwAR0hJSxTaFbPxqp8efKVWtIMB_4_oMjXuGXldmolPZJoPDMDX8nY_KAPo0k).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Nur Aziemah Azman, "Divine Retribution: The Islamic State's COVID-19 Propaganda," *The Diplomat*, March 24, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/divine-retribution-the-islamic-states-covid-19-propaganda/>.

of *Advice on the Coronavirus Pandemic* has primarily targeted a Western audience.<sup>18</sup> Labelling it an “invisible soldier” of God, the statement highlights the economic cost of COVID-19 on the US economy. AQ maintains COVID-19, “has exposed the brittleness of a global economy dominated by the United States.”<sup>19</sup> An entire section of the statement *A General Call for the Masses in the Western World to Embrace Islam* invites people of the West to convert to embrace Islam.<sup>20</sup>

On their part, the Afghan Taliban have used COVID-19 as a PR-exercise. The group has released three statements since the outbreak aimed at improving its image. In one statement, the group has urged the Afghan government to release the Taliban prisoners as they are at the risk of getting infected or take appropriate measures to ensure their health and safety inside the prisons. Likewise, the Taliban has invited health workers and humanitarian organisations to send relief packages and operate in Taliban-controlled areas but promised security as well.<sup>21</sup> For example, the Taliban have reconciled with the International Committee of Red Cross by restoring security guarantees and allowing the organisation to work in areas under their control. The Taliban has also offered a ceasefire to the Afghan government in areas most-affected by the coronavirus.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, they have distributed pamphlets to create awareness about the coronavirus and asking

locals with symptoms to visit government hospitals.<sup>23</sup>

The third statement was a condolence message to the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and the Iranian people on the death and devastation caused by the virus in Iran.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, the statement also conveyed the Taliban’s reservations to the Iranian leadership over the mistreatment of Iran-based Afghan refugees. Following the COVID-19 outbreak, Iran expelled several thousand Afghan refugees from its territory.

### Far-Right Groups

Far-right groups have capitalised on public fears created by COVID-19 in online discussions on Telegram, Gab, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The far-right is promoting conspiracy theories, sowing panic and disinformation and calling for attacks whether through direct assaults or using the virus as a biological weapon.<sup>25</sup> It is also promoting the idea of accelerating the disorder brought about by COVID-19 through acts of vandalism and terrorism.<sup>26</sup> Such messaging not only speaks to those seeking disorder but also to the public looking for answers amid uncertainty.<sup>27</sup> Alarming, the case of 36-year old Neo-Nazi member Timothy Wilson from Missouri who tried to bomb a hospital believing COVID-19 was engineered by Jews indicates that individuals

<sup>18</sup> Valerio Mazzoni, “Coronavirus: How Islamist Militants Are Reacting to the Outbreak,” *European Eye on Radicalization*, March 30, 2020, <https://europeaneyeonradicalization.com/coronavirus-how-islamist-militants-are-reacting-to-the-outbreak/>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, “How Jihadists Are Reacting to the Coronavirus Pandemic,” *Foundation for Defence of Democracies*, April 6, 2020, [https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/04/06/how-jihadists-are-reacting-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic/?mc\\_cid=a68c70e9a5&mc\\_eid=ba816b4660](https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/04/06/how-jihadists-are-reacting-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic/?mc_cid=a68c70e9a5&mc_eid=ba816b4660).

<sup>21</sup> “Taliban promises safe passage for coronavirus health workers,” *Al-Jazeera*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/taliban-promises-safe-passage-coronavirus-health-workers-200318162138283.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Kathy Gannon, “Taliban ready to begin cease-fires in virus-hit Afghan areas,” *Washington Post*, April 2, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/taliban-ready-to-begin-cessate-fires-in-virus-hit-afghan-areas/2020/04/01/bcdd5f5e-7438-11ea-ad9b-254ec99993bc\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/taliban-ready-to-begin-cessate-fires-in-virus-hit-afghan-areas/2020/04/01/bcdd5f5e-7438-11ea-ad9b-254ec99993bc_story.html).

<sup>23</sup> “How Will the Coronavirus Impact Afghanistan?” *The Soufan Centre*, April 6, 2020, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-how-will-the-coronavirus-impact-afghanistan/>.

<sup>24</sup> “Statement of Islamic Emirate regarding Afghan refugee problems in Iran,” *Voice of Jihad*, March 19, 2020, <https://alemarahenglish.com/?p=33768>.

<sup>25</sup> Jason Wilson, “Disinformation and blame: how America’s far right is capitalizing on coronavirus,” *Guardian*, March 19, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/19/america-far-right-coronavirus-outbreak-trump-alex-jones>.

<sup>26</sup> C. J. Werleman, “The coronavirus pandemic is a rallying cry for far-right bigots,” *TRT World*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/the-coronavirus-pandemic-is-a-rallying-cry-for-far-right-bigots-35053>.

<sup>27</sup> Besty Woodruff Swan, “How the coronavirus is reshaping terrorists’ attack plans,” *Politico*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/27/coronavirus-terrorism-justice-department-150870>.



are willing to respond to such calls. He was eliminated in a shootout with the FBI.<sup>28</sup>

Far-right conspiracies generally feed into anti-Semitic narratives or xenophobia against China.<sup>29</sup> They also blame the “Jewish elite” for the spread of the virus and its negative impact on the international stock market.<sup>30</sup> In Telegram messaging, the far-right is also asking why the virus has not affected Israel.

Far-right groups have also issued calls for exploiting COVID-19 as a biological weapon. Different posts on social media have urged infected far-right supporters to visit local synagogues and hug as many Jews as possible.<sup>31</sup> Other posts have asked infected far-right supporters to cough on local minorities, the transit system or go to the bank and withdraw currency notes in small bills, contaminate them and then go shopping.<sup>32</sup>

## Implications

### a. Lone-wolf attacks

IS has called for lone-wolf attacks amid COVID-19 to further increase the pain and miseries of “crusader nations.” Al-Naba’s editorial maintains, “The last thing they hope for today, is that this difficult time will coincide with the preparations of the soldiers of the Caliphate for new strikes on them, similar to

those of Paris, London and Brussels and elsewhere.”<sup>33</sup> On April 5, a man of Sudanese origin killed two people and injured five others in a knife attack near Lyon, a town southeast of France.<sup>34</sup> France’s anti-terror police arrested the assailant and the initial investigation has revealed the attack was aimed at disturbing public order by intimidation or terror.<sup>35</sup>

In keeping with its view that COVID-19 has affected Western military strategy vis a vis fighting global terrorism, IS has urged its operatives to show no mercy to “infidels” and “apostates” in their moment of crisis.<sup>36</sup> It further upholds that they (the infidels) will be less able to harm the Muslims because their ability to wage the war against the Mujahideen will be affected.<sup>37</sup>

IS has asked its supporters to launch attacks in areas where security measures may have been relaxed and security personnel redirected to maintain social distancing and preserve the socioeconomic order.<sup>38</sup> IS maintains, “Fear of this contagion has affected them [crusader nations] more than the contagion itself.”<sup>39</sup>

### b. Lockdowns and Isolation can Increase Chances of Radicalisation

<sup>28</sup> Henry Zeffman, “Neo-Nazi plot to blow up hospital is foiled by FBI,” *The Times*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/neo-nazi-plot-to-blow-up-hospital-is-foiled-by-fbi-b7hgcf936>.

<sup>29</sup> David Brennan, “How Neo-Nazis are Exploiting Coronavirus to Push their Radical Agenda,” *Newsweek*, March 27, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/how-neo-nazis-exploiting-coronavirus-push-radical-agenda-1494729>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Cécile Guerin, “Coronavirus, the ‘Soros Bio-weapon’: How Far Right anti-Semitic Conspiracy Theories Are Infecting Mainstream Politics,” *Haaretz*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/premium-soros-bio-weapon-anti-semitic-far-right-coronavirus-theories-go-mainstream-1.8732195>.

<sup>32</sup> Gabriel Weimann and Natalie Masri, “The Virus of Hate: Far-Right Terrorism in Cyberspace,” *International Centre for Counter-terrorism*, April 5, 2020, [https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2528/The\\_Virus\\_of\\_Hate#gsc.tab=0](https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2528/The_Virus_of_Hate#gsc.tab=0).

<sup>33</sup> James Gordon Meek, “Terrorist groups spin COVID-19 as God’s smallest soldier attacking West,” *ABC News*, April 2, 2020,

<https://abcnews.go.com/International/terrorist-groups-spin-covid-19-gods-smallest-soldier/story?id=69930563>.

<sup>34</sup> David Keohane, “Knife attack in France kills two and injures five,” *Financial Times*, April 5, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/22db9a76-de30-42ff-a155-56594a3dbdfb>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Alice Cachia, “ISIS tells its followers to show no mercy and launch attacks during coronavirus crisis amid fears counter-terror efforts will be weakened by the outbreak,” *Daily Mail*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8180683/ISIS-tells-followers-no-mercy-launch-attacks-coronavirus-crisis.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Aymen Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Islamic State Editorial on the Coronavirus Pandemic,” March 19, 2020, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/03/islamic-state-editorial-on-the-coronavirus>.

<sup>39</sup> “Coronavirus: How Islamist Militants Are Reacting to the Outbreak,” *European Eye on Radicalization*, March 30, 2020, <https://europeaneyeonradicalization.com/coronavirus-how-islamist-militants-are-reacting-to-the-outbreak/>.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, there has been an upsurge of extremist materials on Youtube, Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms related to notions of doomsday, crusaders and the Mahdi who will appear before the Day of Judgement to rid the world of evil forces.<sup>40</sup> Terrorist groups are trying to cash in on social distancing measures announced by the governments. As people are confined to their homes, they are spending more time on social media talking to their friends and families as well as consuming material produced on social media.<sup>41</sup>

In times of crises, people need coping mechanisms to deal with their fears and anxiety.<sup>42</sup> For instance, people turn to religion to deal with the pains brought about by pandemics or other natural calamities.<sup>43</sup> In this atmosphere, terrorist groups try to lure vulnerable segments of populations to their extremist narratives by appealing to their fears, expectations and aspirations.<sup>44</sup>

#### c. Exploiting New Technologies

Terrorist groups are innovative and capable of modifying commercially available technologies for diverse purposes. In the wake of COVID-19, if drone technology is introduced for package deliveries, surveillance of quarantined neighborhoods and in disinfection sprays used in the virus-affected areas to minimise human exposure, terrorist groups can exploit it for surveillance and attacks by rigging them with explosives.

Both AQ and IS have worked on drone technology in the past with a fair degree of success and accuracy.<sup>45</sup> The introduction of

drones in the main cities would simply require slight modifications by terrorist groups to repurpose them for their nefarious designs. In October 2016, IS used a bomb-laden drone to kill two Kurdish peshmerga soldiers in Iraq.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, in January 2017, IS issued a propaganda video showing several quadcopters releasing explosives from the air. Likewise, IS has also developed expertise in making bomb-capable drones.<sup>47</sup>

#### d. Increasing Influence of Terrorist Groups Post COVID-19

Both the COVID-19 and its aftermath will likely reorder the existing priorities of states, pushing the fight against terrorism down the priority list. This would have two linked but separate implications: a) compromising existing counter terrorism gains, and b) reviving the influence of terrorist insurgents in poorly governed areas of weak states. The longer the pandemics lasts and more the time states take to recover from its devastation and the financial recession, the greater are the chances for terrorist groups to increase their influence in areas such as the West African region of the Sahel and the Lake Chad area, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, among others.

In the past, terrorist groups like Pakistani Jamaat-ud-Dawa, an AQ-linked outfit, Lebanese Hezbollah, Somali Al-Shabab and the Afghan Taliban have used crises as opportunities to exploit service delivery gaps of the states through humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations.<sup>48</sup> Conflict escalations post COVID-19 due to the weakening of counter-terrorism coalitions

<sup>40</sup> Nikita Malik, Self-Isolation Might Stop Coronavirus, but It Will Speed the Spread of Extremism," *Foreign Policy*, March 26, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/26/self-isolation-might-stop-coronavirus-but-spread-extremism/>.

<sup>41</sup> Andrew Hutchinson, "People Are Spending 20% More Time in Apps During the COVID-19 Lockdowns," *Social Media Today*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/people-are-spending-20-more-time-in-apps-during-the-covid-19-lockdowns-re/575403/>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Vivian Yee, "In a Pandemic, Religion Can be a Balm and a Risk," *New York Times*, March 22, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/22/world/middleeast/coronavirus-religion.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Nikita Malik, *ibid*.

<sup>45</sup> Steven Stalinsky, R. Sosnow, "A Decade Of Jihadi Organizations' Use Of Drones – From Early

Experiments By Hizbullah, Hamas, And Al-Qaeda To Emerging National Security Crisis For The West As ISIS Launches First Attack Drones," *Middle Monitoring Research Media Research Institute*, February 21, 2017,

<https://www.memri.org/reports/decade-jihadi-organizations-use-drones-early-experiments-hizbullah-hamas-and-al-qaeda>.

<sup>46</sup> Don Rassler, "The Islamic State and Drones: Supply, Scale and Future Threats," *Combating Terrorism Centre*, July 2018, p. 4, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=813142>.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Colin P. Clarke, "Yesterday's Terrorists Are Today's Public-Health Providers," *Foreign Policy*, April 8, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/08/terrorists-nonstate-ungoverned-health-providers-coronavirus-pandemic/>.

coupled with the reallocation of financial resources could create a ripe environment for terrorist groups operating in weak states to recapture territory and plan largescale attacks.<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

While states grapple with flattening the COVID-19 curve and to mitigate its economic consequences, terrorist groups seem one step (if not two) ahead of the curve. Already, they are positioning themselves to exploit the existing state gaps and the potential opportunities that the post COVID-19 world could offer. Terrorist groups are anti-status quo entities with adaptive and flexible organisational structures. Compared to states which are status-quo oriented with rigid structures, it is easier for the terrorists to adapt to changing circumstances as well as survive and expand in adverse situations.

On the counter-narrative front, social media companies need to be more vigilant and proactive to counter extremist propaganda and disinformation campaigns. At the same time, states need to evolve cost-effective counter-terrorism mechanisms to ensure continued cooperation against various terrorist groups and deny them potential openings to revive and reassert themselves.

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<sup>49</sup> "Contending with ISIS in the Time of Coronavirus," *International Crisis Group*, March 31, 2020,

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/contending-isis-time-coronavirus>

# Security Implications of COVID-19 for Indonesia

V. Arianti and Muh Taufiqurrohman

## Synopsis

*The COVID-19 pandemic has inadvertently had a significant impact on Indonesia's terrorism landscape. On the one hand, it has put the brakes on consolidation efforts among pro-Islamic State (IS) local groups. On the other, it has also increased the risk of prison breaks and uprisings. On the counter-terrorism front, police operations to arrest suspects may continue with caution but ongoing trials to prosecute terrorist offenders, as well as deradicalisation programmes have faced disruptions.*

## Threat Environment

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a mixed impact on pro-IS groups' indoctrination and recruitment efforts in Indonesia. There have been some calls for opportunistic attacks, with the government seen as weakened as it comes to grips with a brewing domestic health crisis. Anti-Chinese rhetoric has also been ramped up on extremist channels. Although discussions are still largely confined to racist discourses and target lists, experts caution some pro-IS supporters may exploit the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic to expand their actual targeting beyond police officials to include domestic and international Chinese targets.<sup>1</sup>

In framing the pandemic, pro IS militants believe that only God, and not the virus, which they claim as God's creation, should be feared. Moreover, in line with their view that the government is an "apostate" ruler, pro-IS groups also generally reject the government's call for social or physical distancing to reduce the spread of COVID-19, albeit with some exceptions.

## Indoctrination Activity, Training Programmes, and Attacks

At an operational level, pro-IS groups based in Java such as Jamaah Ansharud Daulah (JAD) and Jamaah Ansharul Khilafah (JAK) continue to engage in ideological indoctrination activities through closed-door religious study sessions. Some pro-IS group leaders have also ramped up efforts to provide social safety nets for their members and families, through the distribution of food and other basic needs. Given many communities have fallen into economic hardship, such outreach efforts can often harden ideological commitment to the group's cause.

Some JAD and JAK members have, however, opted to suspend portions of *i'dad* (training) because their training venues, including archery fields and hiking trails, have been shut due to the COVID-19 outbreak. However, training programmes that can be conducted at home, such as developing bomb-making skills, will likely continue. Meanwhile, the administrators of some home-based pro-IS schools that indoctrinate the children of pro-IS supporters, have opted to observe government guidelines on social distancing, by temporarily closing them, likely to reduce the risk of pro-IS children being infected.

In Sulawesi, the pro-IS Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia/MIT) group has continued to launch attacks. The latest incident on April 15 saw two MIT militants shoot a police officer and attempt to rob the latter of his rifle in the town of Poso (Central Sulawesi). Police then chased the attackers, who had escaped on motorbike, and killed them in an ensuing gun battle.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "IPAC Short Briefing No. 1: COVID-19 and ISIS in Indonesia", IPAC, 2 April 2020.

<sup>2</sup> "Baku Tembak di Poso, 2 Anggota MIT Tewas, 1 Polisi Terluka", *Benarnews*, April 15, 2020,

<https://www.benarnews.org/indonesian/berita/mit-poso-militan-04152020142723.html>.

Officials later said the two men, who were found with vest bombs strapped to their bodies, had been on a police wanted list for their involvement in terrorist activities.<sup>3</sup>

### *Consolidation Efforts*

Efforts to consolidate linkages between terrorist inmates and militant networks appear to have been severely impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak. This is partly because the country's Directorate General of Corrections (Ditjen PAS) has suspended prison visits.<sup>4</sup> Such restrictions are significant, given prisons have long been hotbeds of radicalisation in Indonesia. The practice of visiting terrorist inmates by their extremist counterparts based outside the prisons is a regular occurrence, and remains a key part of threat groups' strategy to ensure the inmates' continued commitment to their cause. They also play a critical role in keeping intact pro-IS networks in Indonesia, and helped bring together a network of autonomously run pro-IS cells that morphed into the JAD, currently the largest pro-IS group in the country.

Prison visits have also been instrumental in providing "spiritual" support for specific terrorist attacks.<sup>5</sup> Prior to 2016, many operatives involved in JAD-linked attacks were known to have visited prominent radical clerics Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and Aman Abdurrahman in Nusa Kambangan Correctional Facilities (LAPAS) in Cilacap, Central Java, to gain ideological affirmation. JAD leader and operatives such as Suryadi

Mas'ud and Saiful Muhtorir alias Abu Gar, also visited Iwan Darmawan Munto, alias Rois<sup>6</sup>, for technical guidance in preparation for the Jakarta attacks of January 2016.

While key radicals have been moved to maximum security facilities or isolated cells to curtail their influence, contact between inmates and pro-IS networks outside is known to persist in other prisons with lesser security controls. For instance, several former terrorist inmates who remain radicalised, such as Sulthon Qolbi and Joko Jihad, have conducted a series of prison visits aimed at consolidating the pro-IS movement in prison.<sup>7</sup> However, such activities could be curtailed in the short term, due to the recent restrictions placed on prison visits.

### *Prison Breaks*

Renewed concerns of prison breaks or uprisings have also emerged<sup>8</sup> with prison authorities – already understaffed – being stretched to the brink and unrest growing among inmates in some prisons. To mitigate the spread of COVID-19 in correctional facilities, Ditjen PAS has, to date, released 36,554 criminal inmates – out of around 50,000 – eligible for parole.<sup>9</sup> Terrorist offenders, drug dealers, and corruption cases inmates were excluded from eligibility given the gravity of their offences.<sup>10</sup> Aggrieved with the government's decision, there has been online chatter among IS supporters calling for Abu Bakar Ba'asyir to be released from prison by "war". Earlier this month, Ba'asyir – despite

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> "Ditjen PAS Tunda Penerimaan Tahanan Baru di Lapas/Rutan Karena Corona", *Kompas*, March 31, 2020.

<https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/03/31/20092101/ditjen-pas-tunda-penerimaan-tahanan-baru-di-lapas-rutan-karena-corona?page=1>.

<sup>5</sup> Muh Taufiqurrohman, Muhammad Ali Usman, and Ardi Putra, "Why Terrorism Breeds in Indonesian Prisons", *Today Online*, November 6, 2017, <https://www.todayonline.com/world/why-terrorism-breeds-indonesian-prisons>.

<sup>6</sup> Rois was sentenced to death in a Jakarta court for his major role in planning and executing the Australian embassy bombing in Jakarta in 2004.

<sup>7</sup> "Lembaga Amal Pendukung Terorisme", *PAKAR*, January 26, 2020, <https://www.radicalismstudies.org/1451/2020/01/9-lembaga-amal-pendukung-terorisme.html>.

<sup>8</sup> "IPAC Short Briefing No. 1: COVID-19 and ISIS in Indonesia", *IPAC*, 2 April 2020.

<sup>9</sup> "Kemenkumham Telah Bebaskan 36.554 Napi di Tengah Wabah Corona", *CNN*, April 11, 2020, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200411155847-20-492629/kemenkumham-telah-bebaskan-36554-napi-di-tengah-wabah-corona>; "Radical Indonesian Cleric Bashir Asks for Early Release from Prison", *The Straits Times*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/radical-cleric-bashir-asks-for-early-release-from-prison-says-age-puts-him-in-covid-19>.

<sup>10</sup> Criminal inmates eligible for early release are those who have completed 2/3 of their sentences or half of their sentences for juvenile inmates. See: "30 Ribu Napi Bebas Penjara karena Corona, Banyak dari Sumatra Utara", *Suara.com*, April 1, 2020, <https://www.suara.com/news/2020/04/01/142258/30-ribu-napi-bebas-penjara-karena-corona-banyak-dari-sumatra-utara>; "Dibebaskan karena Wabah Virus Corona, Perasaan Napi Senang Campur Gundah", *Kompas*, April 3, 2020, <https://regional.kompas.com/read/2020/04/03/11354091/dibebaskan-karena-wabah-virus-corona-perasaan-napi-senang-campur-gundah>.



citing old age and concern over the spread of COVID-19 in prison<sup>11</sup> – had another request for an early release turned down by the authorities.

The frequent calls by transnational militant networks such as Al Qaeda and IS to “free Muslim prisoners” (mostly militants serving time for committing terrorist acts) have been mirrored in the Indonesian extremist community over the last decade. These calls have mostly manifested through participation in rallies, the erection of banners, and spread of online discourses, calling for the release of prominent militants such as Abu Bakar Ba’asyir and Aman Abdurrahman from prison.

To date, episodes of prison breaks and uprisings have been mostly orchestrated by terrorist inmates from within, rather than by outsiders. These include the Tanjung Gusta Correctional Facility riot in Medan, North Sumatra, in July 2013, which saw 15 prison officers taken hostage by rioters. Two of them eventually died.<sup>12</sup> More than two hundred inmates also escaped, nine of whom were terrorists, although the latter were all subsequently re-arrested by the end of that year.<sup>13</sup> The second incident involved the Mako Brimob riot in May 2018, that resulted in five police fatalities.<sup>14</sup>

One of the factors that had provoked the Tanjung Gusta riot was disappointment over a then new government decree that tightened the remission (sentence reduction) process

for serious offenders (including terrorist inmates) issued a month prior.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, a key demand for the Mako Brimob rioters had been better treatment for terrorist inmates in Nusa Kambangan.<sup>16</sup>

The exclusion of terrorist and drug dealer inmates from the recently announced early release prison programme could trigger renewed unrest, given growing fears of a possible coronavirus outbreak in several overcrowded prisons. Prison riots in Maesa Prison, Palu (Central Sulawesi) on March 31 and another in Tuminting Prison, Manado (North Sulawesi) on April 11, were partly instigated by these exclusions.<sup>17</sup> The possibility of criminal (particularly drug dealers) and terrorist inmates joining forces to stage a riot akin to the Tanjung Gusta riot of 2013 takes on an added dimension, given JAD and JAK inmates continue to recruit new members within the prisons. Several could be mobilised by them to stage further riots.

## Implications on Counter Terrorism

### *Arrests and Trials*

The COVID-19 outbreak has not deterred the anti-terror police unit Detachment 88 from conducting counter terrorism operations, where necessary. Early this month, it arrested four members of a JAD cell in Southeast Sulawesi. Separately, the police were also involved in a series of shootouts with MIT

<sup>11</sup> The government has considered releasing corruption inmates who are above 60 years old and have served two thirds of their sentences. However, early release for old terrorist inmates due to COVID-19 is unlikely particularly for inmates who have refused to participate in deradicalisation programmes.

<sup>12</sup> “Korban Tewas Kerusuhan LP Tanjung Gusta 2 Sipir dan 3 Napi”, *Liputan 6*, July 12, 2013, <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/637313/korban-tewas-kerusuhan-lp-tanjung-gusta-2-sipir-dan-3-napi>.

<sup>13</sup> “Buron Terakhir Napi Teroris Lapas Tanjung Gusta Ditangkap”, *Republika*, December 3, 2013, (<https://nasional.republika.co.id/berita/mx83xy/buron-terakhir-napi-teroris-lapas-tanjung-gusta-ditangkap>); “Napi Teroris yang Kabur dari Tanjung Gusta Tinggal 4 Orang”, *Berita Satu*, July 12, 2013, <https://www.beritasatu.com/nasional/125382/napi-teroris-yang-kabur-dari-tanjung-gusta-tinggal-4-orang>; “Napi Provokator Rusuh Tanjung Gusta Dipindah ke Nusakambangan”, *Liputan6*, July 31, 2013, <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/654026/napi-provokator-rusuh-tanjung-gusta-dipindah-ke-nusakambangan>.

[provokator-rusuh-tanjung-gusta-dipindah-ke-nusakambangan](https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/654026/napi-provokator-rusuh-tanjung-gusta-dipindah-ke-nusakambangan).

<sup>14</sup> “One Inmate, Five Police Officers Killed in Jail Riot in Indonesia”, *The Straits Times*, May 10, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/one-inmate-five-police-officers-killed-in-jail-riot-in-indonesia>.

<sup>15</sup> “4 Indikasi Penyebab Rusuh Tanjung Gusta”, *Tempo*, July 14, 2013, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/496263/4-indikasi-penyebab-rusuh-tanjung-gusta/full&view=ok>.

<sup>16</sup> “Rekaman Negosiasi Aman Abdurrahman & Wakil Tahanan Mako Brimob”, *Tirto.id*, May 11, 2018, <https://tirto.id/rekaman-negosiasi-aman-abdurrahman-wakil-tahanan-mako-brimob-cKec>.

<sup>17</sup> “Rutan Maesa Rusuh, 10 Napi Dipindahkan”, *Metro Sulawesi*, April 1, 2020, <http://metrosulawesi.id/2020/04/01/rutan-maesa-rusuh-10-napi-dipindahkan/>; “Lapas Tuminting di Manado Rusuh, Napi Mengamuk Hingga Bakar Bangunan”, *Kumparan*, April 11, 2020, <https://kumparan.com/manadobacirita/lapas-tuminting-di-manado-rusuh-napi-menga-muk-hingga-bakar-bangunan-1tCfAwC8T5T>.

operatives in Poso.<sup>18</sup> Surveillance will need to be stepped up further over pro-IS groups around Ramadhan (the Muslim fasting month), which will start on April 24. IS supporters regard Ramadhan as a month of 'conquest and plunder' and, in recent years, have conducted several attacks during this period. They include the July 2016 suicide attack on the Surakarta Police headquarters (Central Java), the May 2017 suicide bombings in East Jakarta, the May 2018 attack on the North Sumatra police headquarters and the 2018 church bombings in Surabaya (East Java).<sup>19</sup>

The continued spread of COVID-19 has a two-fold implication on the existing ability of the authorities to carry out their arrests and prosecutions. For one, when conducting arrests, and particularly around districts with relatively high numbers of COVID-19 cases, resources should be deployed to ensure Detachment 88 officials are equipped with adequate protective gear, given there have been calls for IS supporters who have been infected with COVID-19 to spread it to the *thaghut* (usually refers to police officers).<sup>20</sup>

For another, ongoing trial sessions to convict terrorist detainees have been conducted through online video conferencing to ensure safe distancing measures are in place. Judges, prosecutors and defence lawyers are usually based in Jakarta district courts; the defendants remain in their detention centres; meanwhile, witnesses are based in district courts in their respective cities of origin. Yet, these trial sessions have faced some disruptions due to slow internet connections.

### *Deradicalisation Programmes*

COVID-19 has also disrupted ongoing deradicalisation programmes conducted in Indonesia's correctional facilities. Restrictions placed on visitors in these facilities have also applied to personnel from entities that run

deradicalisation programmes, such as Detachment 88, the National Anti-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) and various NGOs. This means that a total of 117 inmates – 48 of them are in Nusa Kambangan – whom the government announced as being “deradicalised”,<sup>21</sup> are at risk of being re-radicalised amidst the present “lockdown” (a term used by extremists to describe the prison visit ban). Prison lockdowns risk isolating inmates who may have been on a positive path and may also negatively impact prison social dynamics, especially if the “deradicalised” inmates are housed in the same compound as more ideologically hardened ones.

### **Recommendations**

Pro-IS groups in Indonesia will likely attempt to conduct attacks amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Yet despite the apparent targeting of the Chinese community in their discourse, the primary target of attacks will remain police officers, against whom pro-IS militants seek revenge for the deaths and arrests of their fellow operatives. Similarly, stabbing and low-tech bomb attacks are a more likely prospect than local terrorists seeking to weaponise the COVID-19 virus, akin to far-right groups in the West.

In the near term, Indonesian counter terrorism agencies should adapt and reorient their counter-measures as circumstances evolve, particularly in dealing with the arrest of terrorist offenders and the subsequent processes of their prosecution and incarceration. Specific to the latter, while some correctional facilities have taken steps to address the overcrowding issue in their facilities, this is still not the case in various detention centres (*rutan*) that are manned by the prosecutor offices and police. The latter facilities are generally used to house detainees prior to their convictions. The government should consider housing these

<sup>18</sup> “Polri Sebut Empat Terduga Teroris di Sultra Jaringan JAD”, *CNN Indonesia*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20200415001058-12-493615/polri-sebut-empat-terduga-teroris-di-sultra-jaringan-jad>; “Baku Tembak dengan Satgas Tinombala, 1 Anggota KSB di Poso Tewas”, *Detik*, April 10, 2020, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4972842/baku-tembak-dengan-satgas-tinombala-1-anggota-ksb-di-poso-tewas>; “Baku Tembak di Poso, 2 Anggota MIT Tewas, 1 Polisi Terluka”, *Op.Cit.*

<sup>19</sup> “Rentetan Bom dan Aksi Terorisme Selama Ramadan di Indonesia”, *CNN Indonesia*, June 4, 2019, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20190604110800-20-400871/rentetan-bom-dan-aksi-terorisme-selama-ramadan-di-indonesia>.

<sup>20</sup> Informatics Report, ICPVTR, March 2020.

<sup>21</sup> “Mahfud: 117 Napi Terorisme Ikut Deradikalisasi di Tahun 2020”, *Inews*, March 7, 2020, <https://www.inews.id/news/nasional/mahfud-117-napi-terorisme-ikut-deradikalisasi-di-tahun-2020>.

detainees temporarily in other facilities to avoid further overcrowding in these detention centres. This is particularly important should there be significant numbers of further arrests, and given correctional facilities have also now ceased accepting newly convicted inmates.<sup>22</sup>

Amidst the ongoing pandemic, some other measures the authorities could consider include: conduct rapid COVID-19 tests in pockets of areas populated by IS supporters (given the calls to infect the police); work closely with internet service providers to ensure faster broadband speeds so that terrorism trials can run smoothly; collaborate with correctional facility authorities to ensure minimal disruptions to deradicalisation programmes for terrorist offender inmates; and finally, significantly buffer resources in the generally under-staffed prisons across the country that house terrorist inmates to prevent potential prison uprisings. Through such measures, disruptions in the country's counter-terrorism strategy, as it grapples with the devastating impact of COVID-19, can at least be minimised.

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<sup>22</sup> "Ditjen PAS Tunda Penerimaan Tahanan Baru di Lapas Rutan Karena Corona", Op.Cit.

# Distinguishing Between the Extreme Far-right and Islamic State's (IS) Calls to Exploit COVID-19

Kyler Ong and Nur Aziemah Azman

## Synopsis

*Far-right extremists are seeking to incite pandemonium through bio-terrorism and violent insurgency, amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Separately, Islamist terror networks have also urged the intensification of operations against their enemies. The calls to action reveal varying degrees of organisational coherence in the two movements. This inadvertently affects the preferred tactics employed by both movements to exploit the crisis.*

## Distinct Calls to Action

As governments around the world struggle to deal with the alarming spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has infected more than 2 million people, and claimed well over 100,000 lives, the instinct to capitalise on current uncertainties and public insecurities, as well as the immediate focus of states on health threats over security issues, is consistent among both far-right extremists and violent jihadists.

On the one hand, the Islamic State (IS) in its propaganda messaging has made renewed calls for the 'mujahideen' to launch attacks against the enemy.<sup>1</sup> In a bid to motivate followers, gain wider appeal by projecting itself as the protector of Muslims and also replenish its ranks, IS has called for supporters to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic to free 'Muslim prisoners'.<sup>2</sup> These include the

thousands of IS fighters presently interned in detention and refugee camps in Syria. Yet, a major COVID-19 outbreak in key theatres such as the Middle East would severely impact its own forces. Therefore, like any terrorist group concerned for their fighters' health, it has issued directives warning operatives to avoid Europe, and also offered guidance on how to deal with the pandemic.

For far-right extremists, the outbreak has presented an opportunity to promote conspiracy theories and rhetoric online, which has also translated into explicit calls for attacks on various encrypted channels such as Telegram, whether through direct armed violence or using the virus as a biological weapon. It is in the latter strategy, wherein infected persons are encouraged to weaponise the virus by spreading it to law enforcement officials and non-white populations, that far-right groups appear to be distinguishing themselves. For example, a post in a Telegram channel called Eco-Fascist Central circulated in March advocated for members to target Jewish communities by simply coughing on the door handles of local synagogues.<sup>3</sup> Another poster called for the same tactic to be employed against critical infrastructure, that is, "cough on your local transit system."<sup>4</sup>

## Organisational Factors

### Encouragement of Lone-Wolf Attacks

<sup>1</sup> "The Worst Nightmares of the Crusaders", *Al-Naba' Newsletter*, Issue no. 226, p. 3, March 20, 2020; Fundamentally, IS' enemy consists of those it deems to be infidels, polytheists, apostates, hypocrites, those who aid them, including Muslims, and moderate Sunnis who oppose them. This includes the US, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian regime, Iraqi government and military, Shiites, Kurds, other jihadist groups and rebel groups in Syria.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Eco-Fascist Central, Telegram*, 04:15 (GMT +8), March 24, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> "The Far-Right's Online Discourse on COVID-19 Pandemic," *SITE Intelligence Special Report*, March 26, 2020.

Several factors differentiate the far-right extremists from Islamist terror groups like IS. One is organisational. IS has a more hierarchical organisational structure having at one time established a quasi-government that administered over large swathes of territories in Iraq and Syria, albeit for a short time. In contrast, the extreme far-right is largely decentralised, with different centres of influence. This partly explains the frequency of lone-wolf attacks in recent years, linked to individuals self-radicalised by white supremacist ideologies online. They seek to take matters into their own hands, including by transforming themselves into a “weapon” to facilitate bio-terror attacks.<sup>5</sup>

IS also encourages lone-actor attacks among its supporters. However, it adopts a mixed strategy, given the current centralisation and decentralisation of its command structure and operations. At the same time as it decrees efforts to release Muslim prisoners in various theatres, for example, IS also encourages followers to intensify attacks in their respective regions by any means possible. Following IS’ reorientation into a decentralised, guerilla-style insurgency, it has increasingly granted its affiliates around the world the autonomy to plan and execute attacks, whilst remaining under the group’s banner, and broadly abiding by IS’ official directives.

### Fragmentation of Interests

For the far-right, the absence of a central authority, or command structure, around which followers can anchor themselves and receive strategic advice or directives (save for a few universally accepted ideological goals espoused by the movement), can create internal contradictions as well as a fragmentation of interests. This was observed

in the polarised reactions on Telegram platforms and 8kun message boards frequented by far-right extremists, following the 2019 Christchurch mosque attacks and more recently the February 2020 mass-casualty attacks in Hanau, Germany.<sup>6</sup>

While hailed as successful attacks by some in the far-right community, for others, such vigilante-style violence is seen as detrimental to the movement’s long-term strategy of “winning the hearts and minds” of wider Western populations.<sup>7</sup> The latter faction also believes such sporadic acts of violence only serve as justification for law enforcement agencies to ramp up operations against them. Due to its decentralised nature, internal fissures may again emerge amidst the recent surge in calls to use the COVID-19 virus as a bioweapon to orchestrate bio-terror attacks.

### **COVID-19 As a Bio-weapon**

#### Far-right’s Motivations

In recent decades, even though there have been no significant cases of successful far-right attacks involving biological weapons, a number of plots have been uncovered pointing to the motives and tactics of these extremists. A high-profile case from 2010 involved a member of a neo-Nazi group known as Aryan StrikeForce, who became the first Briton convicted of producing a biological weapon (ricin) in an alleged plot to poison water supplies of Muslim households.<sup>8</sup>

More recently, several far-right extremists have touted accelerationist, siege and Great Replacement theories, which advocate the collapse of systems of governments throughout the West and their replacement with white ethno-states, to incite individuals to take action.<sup>9</sup> Given the accentuation of individual agency in the movement, recent

<sup>5</sup> In another instance, a reposted message on the extreme far-right Telegram group, National Accelerationist Revival, cited the poster’s intention to “volunteer as host to spread corona-chan.” See *National Accelerationist Revival, Telegram*, 17:37 (GMT +8), January 27, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> As an example of recent reactions to the Christchurch mosque attacks, extreme opinions on the attacker Brenton Tarrant was split, as observed by postings on the 8kun message board. Whilst some defended Tarrant and sanctified him as a “Saint” for his actions, others criticised him for jeopardising white supremacist interests advancing their cause through “winning hearts and minds.” See

“TARRANT CUCKS”, /pnd/ - *Politics, News, Debate, 8kun*, March 26 – March 31, 2020, <https://8kun.top/pnd/res/83006.html>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Koehler and Peter Popella, “Mapping Far-right Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) Terrorism Efforts in the West: Characteristics of Plots and Perpetrators for Future Threat Assessment,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, August 2018, p. 2, DOI: [10.1080/09546553.2018.1500365](https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1500365).

<sup>9</sup> Mia Bloom, “How Terrorist Groups Will Try to Capitalize on the Coronavirus Crisis,” *Just Security*, April 3, 2020,



chatter in the online cesspool of right-wing extremism on conducting bio-terror attacks should also not be discounted. Despite its disparate nature, the heightened volume of graphics, posters and memes circulating online in far-right channels in recent weeks clearly indicates the eagerness of some to use biological weapons as a means of terror.<sup>10</sup> Such calls are of added concern, given the ease with which individual actors can crudely weaponise the COVID-19 virus.

Security agencies have warned of a credible risk of physical hate crimes spiking, with some elements invigorated by the proliferation of anti-Chinese, anti-Asian and anti-immigration rhetoric online, which has already resulted in more hate crimes being committed.<sup>11</sup> Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, some far-right extremists in the West also appear to have been buoyed by a sense of vindication, given their views on globalisation, immigration and protectionism appear to be gaining traction among the general public.<sup>12</sup>

#### IS' Absence of Calls

For IS, the absence of an official call so far to weaponise the COVID-19 virus and launch bio-terror attacks begs the question of why it has not done so. In recent years, IS appears to have not had any qualms about using weapons of mass destruction, even if it has never officially acknowledged these efforts in its propaganda. It was widely reported, for example, that IS developed and employed chemical weapons, using chlorine and sulphur mustard agents, on several dozen occasions

during the height of the Iraq and Syria wars,<sup>13</sup> although it never claimed any of them.

Similarly, there have been other attempted operations, sans acknowledgement, which indicate that IS has made concerted efforts to develop, obtain and use bio-weapons. For example in 2014, it was reported that a laptop belonging to a Tunisian IS fighter, who had fled Idlib province in Syria, allegedly contained information on creating biological weapons and, more specifically, how to weaponise the Bubonic plague using infected animals.<sup>14</sup> Two years later, a bio-terror attack involving IS-linked militants also almost came to fruition in Kenya, before it was foiled by the authorities.<sup>15</sup> Again, the plot was not mentioned in any of IS' subsequent propaganda material.

Nonetheless, and despite IS' lack of official directives, lone wolves or affiliates inspired by IS' ideology may seek to autonomously weaponise COVID-19 and execute attacks. In Indonesia, for example, some IS-linked networks have called on infected followers to spread the coronavirus to law enforcement officials. Islamist militant groups elsewhere also seem emboldened to act. Earlier this month, Indian media reports claimed a handful of infected militants, allegedly affiliated with the Lashkar-e-Taiba terror network, had attempted to infiltrate the Jammu and Kashmir region, from Pakistan, to spread the virus among locals.<sup>16</sup> The accusations were swiftly rebutted by Pakistan's authorities. In a separate incident, Tunisian authorities on April 16 also announced it had foiled a "terrorist plot" involving a group of local jihadists, who had

<https://www.justsecurity.org/69508/how-terrorist-groups-will-try-to-capitalize-on-the-coronavirus-crisis/>.

<sup>10</sup> "The Far-Right's Online Discourse on COVID-19 Pandemic," *SITE Intelligence Special Report*, March 26, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> "Covid-19 and the Global Far Right," Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, April 14, 2020, <https://institute.global/policy/covid-19-and-global-far-right>.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Helene Cooper, "ISIS is Suspected of a Chemical Attack Against Kurds in Syria", *The New York Times*, August 14, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/15/world/middleeast/isis-suspected-of-chemical-attack-against-kurds-in-syria.html>; Josh Lederman, "War with ISIS: US Investigating Chemical Weapons Attacks Against Kurds in Iraq", *The Independent*, August 14, 2015,

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/war-with-isis-us-investigating-chemical-weapons-attacks-against-kurds-in-iraq-10456619.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Tyler Headley, "Introducing 'the Poor Man's Bomb': Biological Weapons", *The National Interest*, December 2, 2018,

<https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/introducing-poor-mans-atomic-bomb-biological-weapons-37437>

<sup>15</sup> Ty McCormick, "Foiled Kenya Anthrax Plot Hints at Islamic State's Scramble for Africa", *Foreign Policy*, May 4, 2016,

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/04/foiled-kenya-anthrax-plot-hints-at-islamic-states-scramble-for-africa/>.

<sup>16</sup> "Pakistan Pushing Coronavirus Infected Terrorists Into Kashmir," *Republic World*, April 4, 2020, <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/pakistan-news/pakistan-pushing-coronavirus-infected-terrorists-into-kashmir.html>.

intended to spread the coronavirus among security forces by coughing, sneezing and spitting on them.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a timely reminder of the extreme and sinister lengths both far-right extremists and Islamist terror groups will go to exploit periods of crisis and panic to destabilise societies and wreak further havoc, all in the name of advancing their respective warped ideologies. Given that the pandemic has shown no signs of dissipating, it will likely stay at the forefront of their messaging and directives in the near term.

The varying degrees of organisational coherence in both movements will inevitably create greater uncertainties on how, where and when terrorists may operationalise an attack. IS' official propaganda channels, as well as pro-IS and far-right extremist online chatter must therefore be closely monitored for renewed calls to use COVID-19 as a bio-weapon. Moreover, even if the pandemic gradually dissipates over the next few months, and countries gradually lift their extensive lockdown measures, places of congregation, especially hospitals, must be subjected to stringent health and safety regulations over a sustained period.

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<sup>17</sup> "Tunisia Arrests 2 For Trying To Infect Police With Virus," *Barron's*,

<https://www.barrons.com/news/tunisia-arrests-2-for-trying-to-infect-police-with-virus-01587061804>.

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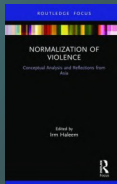
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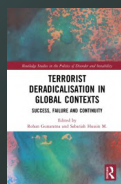


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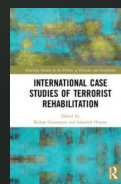
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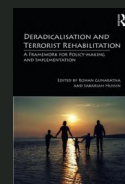
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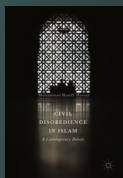
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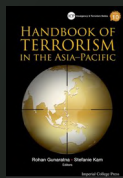
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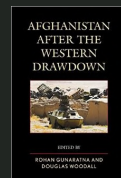
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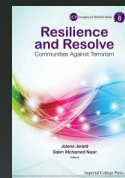
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