



The COVID-19 pandemic and response on violent extremist recruitment and radicalisation

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Question

What evidence tells about the potential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and response on violent extremist recruitment and radicalisation? When possible please explore how previous pandemics affected violent extremist recruitment and radicalisation.

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1. Summary

This rapid evidence review provides evidence on the potential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and response on violent extremist recruitment and radicalisation. It draws on a mixture of academic and grey literature from multinational and bilateral institutions as well as non-government organisations (NGOs) and think tanks. Given the rapidly developing global context, it also draws on emerging opinion from blog posts and journalistic reports to provide evidence of current developments. The review found limited evidence on past pandemics, radicalisation and violent extremism. Evidence was, however, identified on the impact of disasters on radicalisation and violent extremism that may warrant further exploration.

The report is structured in four main sections, section two provides an overview of literature on the drivers of radicalisation identified in the literature. To understand how COVID-19 may impact on radicalisation and violent extremist recruitment it is important to explore how the pandemic may intersect and potentially exacerbate existing drivers. Section three explores emerging narratives regarding violent extremism during the pandemic response, this section draws heavily on opinion pieces and journalistic commentary. Section three should be considered emblematic of some of the ways, as yet poorly understood, that COVID-19 may influence radicalisation and violent extremist recruitment. The final section seeks to reflect more broadly on how the pandemic may impact over short, medium and long term time frames. It is clear that such impacts will be mediated by local context and how the pandemic unfolds (particularly its severity). Given the rapidly evolving nature of the crisis and uncertainty about its development, this report should be considered a discussion piece and treated accordingly.

A number of drivers of radicalisation have been identified, it is important to note that these are contested, subject to much debate and require interrogation when assessed in different contexts. These include, though are not limited to:

- Historical grievances and the role of authoritarianism
- Political climate
- Governance
- Socio-economic factors
- Marginalisation of young people
- International events, funding and the role of migrants
- Radicalisation in prisons
- Inter-group/religious rivalries

These drivers operate differently across individuals and communities and may intersect. It is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic and responses to it may amplify some of these drivers acting as an additive factor. Commentary from a number of contexts suggests that the impact of COVID-19 on radicalisation will play out differently over short, medium and long time frames. Here it is important to stress that the points below are based on a rapid analysis of available, limited and rapidly evolving sources of information. These points should therefore be considered as discussion topics that require further investigation.

- The short term impacts of COVID-19 on radicalisation and violent extremism are multifaceted and complex, these result from the immediate impact of response to the pandemic. These include social distancing and restrictions of day to day activities. Such

responses have been seized on by radical ideologues to validate their world views. Discourses pertaining to the closure of mosques in Nigeria have been framed as evidence of anti-Islam sentiments in government. Further to this, the failure or inability of government to reach certain areas or groups may lead to a void in which violent extremists may step. As shown, in certain areas of the Sahel, such groups have provided services and acted as the de facto authority in contexts where national government is absent. This may contribute to a sense that national authorities should no longer be considered legitimate given their inability to act. It may also provide credence to claims that areas or groups are treated in different ways by government, thereby exacerbating inter-regional or group tensions.

- Governance vacuums may emerge and be filled by extremist groups as national resources are stretched and the capacity to govern is challenged.
- The pandemic may be used to validate particular world views i.e. the decadence of the west, the corruption of big government
- The pandemic may provide a context in which opportunistic attacks are planned and accelerationist seek to act
- Social restrictions may provide a captive audience ripe for radicalisation. It is important to note that radicalisation is a multi-stage phenomena and individuals must usually already be receptive to extremist messaging
- The medium term impacts of COVID-19 are likely to be influenced by the broader impact of the pandemic i.e. how government responses are perceived, the fall out of said responses as well as the broader socio-economic impacts. As such radical ideologies may be provided with a space and audience to propose violent extremism. Indeed, if government's ability to act proves to be limited or ineffective, or the socio-economic impacts are particularly dire this may lead to frustrations, tensions and a situation in which individuals become more receptive to radical ideologies.
 - The pandemic may result in declining international collaboration as nations seek to fund responses to COVID-19 at the expense of other areas.
 - Countries may face challenges in providing services, this may provide a void into which extremist groups can move
 - Tensions may be created between groups as government response are perceived to be unequal
 - The crisis may result in deepening inequalities if the socio-economic impacts are significant
- Longer term impacts are harder to discern, and will play out over months and years. It is clear that how governments respond to the initial crisis will reverberate over the medium to long term. In particular decisions regarding how to respond have the potential to entrench inequalities or alienate particular areas and groups. If the pandemic leads to a sustained economic crisis at national or international level – cooperation across borders may be reduced allowing radical ideologies to proliferate.
 - Depending on the severity of the crisis a number of factors could influence radicalisation and violent extremism these, however, are uncertain.

2. Context

The growing literature on radicalisation, terrorism and violent extremism often obscures the contested and poorly understood nature of these terms. The term 'radicalisation' is generally used to mean the process by which individuals become extreme in either views or behaviour, or both. There is, however, limited consensus as to how the process might work (Glazzard & Zeuthen, 2016). 'Violent extremism' is a similarly contested term, USAID (2011: 2) defines it as "advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic or political objectives". This broad definition highlights the uncertainty associated with the term (Glazzard & Zeuthen, 2016):

- Is violent extremism, by definition, something carried out by non-state actors?
- In conflict situations, how can we differentiate violent extremists from other, more legitimate conflict actors?
- Does violent extremism always have to be ideological or can it, for example, be criminal, or even purposeless?
- Is 'violent extremism' merely a synonym for 'terrorism'?
- Are terms like 'extremism' relative, in which case does 'violent extremism' mean different things to different people?

More broadly, the labelling of a phenomenon determines how we see it and what we do in response to it. 'Violent extremism' is often considered to be a more inclusive term than 'terrorism', although they are broadly synonymous in use.

'Violent extremism' is often applied narrowly to Islamist violence alone, ignoring the many other forms of violence that affect countries. Most research has focused on why and how people become drawn into violent extremism, referred to as 'radicalisation', and how groups and networks proposing such actions are organised. An expanding literature has focused on violent extremists in Asia and Africa.

Borum (2011) provides a review of the many and varied models of radicalisation into violent extremism and concludes that they are largely uninformed by either evidence or theory, but concludes that some models may be better than others. Borum (2011) provides a summary of assumptions which are supported by academic research into violent extremism, these include:

- radicalisation may have many causes or factors, not one;
- there may be many different pathways to violence, and (conversely) different people on a shared trajectory may have many different destinations;
- some join extremist groups because of ideology but others may come to accept an ideology because they have joined an extremist group;
- it is possible to be 'radical' and non-violent;
- radicalisation is a dynamic, psycho-social process.

Whilst the drivers and processes of radicalisation are subject to much debate and influenced by socio-political contexts and historical realities, it is possible to discern some similarities in, and characteristics of, drivers of radicalisation. More specifically, there is a growing literature which explores drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism which will be the focus of the following section. Country examples are provided to illustrate how drivers may operate at national and

sub-national levels, readers should consider whether, if at all, these drivers are relevant in the context they are operating. In the context of COVID-19, it is important to provide an overview of these to illustrate how some may be exacerbated by the pandemic and responses to it.

Historical antagonisms and the role of authoritarianism

Pargeter (2009: 1032) asserts that radicalisation must be placed “within the broader historical context of political and cultural resistance by certain peripheral regional elements to a delegitimised and stagnated central authority”. In the context of his writing on North and West Africa, he notes that recent revolutions changed the dynamics of governance, the history of authoritarianism is identified as a contributing factor in the development of some radical movements. In particular authoritarianism contributed to a vicious cycle of repression and radicalisation. This, however, does not preclude the possibility of Islamist radicalisation occurring under other political circumstances.

Drawing from regional data, Pargeter (2009) finds localised historical antagonisms have been contributing factors to radicalisation. Many of the areas that are particularly receptive to Islamic radicalisation have strong histories of rebellion and resistance against colonialism. Relatedly, many of the areas that are particularly receptive to radicalisation have been those that previously struggled to deal with the secularisation tendencies of post-independence states and which have a high propensity for social conservatism (Pargeter, 2009: 1039).

Political climate

The political context of various countries has provided opportunities for violent extremists to organise and promote their doctrines in ways often not possible during previous rule (ICG, 2013). For example the fall out of crises in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt provided a political vacuum that is fertile for Islamic radicalisation. Disillusionment with the existing political system and perceptions of the ‘hypocrisy’ of state actors have contributed to the growth of radical Islamist movements across the region (Marks, 2013: 11). In Nigeria, poor governance, allegations of corruption, and an unstable political climate have provided an environment in which radicalisation has opportunities to ‘thrive’ (Alao, 2013: 130).

Governance

Governance can act as an enabling factor in several ways. Frustration with existing governments often serves as a stepping-stone towards broad community support or at least acceptance of an extremist group promising an alternative and possibly even a change in government on the national level (Mercy Corps, 2016). Unmet socioeconomic needs may be significant, not because of actual material deprivation, but because marginalised populations feel state and society have abandoned them and left a governance gap (USAID, 2011).

Failure to deliver services, coupled with lack of trust in government, can open up pathways for proponents of violent extremism to propagate their world views (Allan et al. 2015: 6). Violent extremists may be able to establish safe havens in poorly governed areas, at times supported by communities who feel neglected by their government and who turn to extremist groups for services (Allan et al. 2015: 4).

Disappointment with democratic and liberal processes can encourage people to support other types of governance processes (Ranstorp, 2016). USAID (2011) found that, in developing

democracies, extremist beliefs formed when new elites had their expectations of economic improvement and social mobility disappointed. This disappointment motivated more extreme views than poverty did.

Socio-economic factors

The link between poverty and radicalisation has been broadly discredited (Marks, 2013). However, evidence indicates that some violent extremists have been able to exploit economic marginalisation, high levels of poverty and a lack of access to basic services to attract followers. Evidence from Libya (Pargeter, 2009) and Nigeria (Alao, 2013) show that economic and social inequalities (perceived or real) fuel discontent and create conditions that are conducive to the spread of radical ideologies. Evidence indicates that areas of radicalisation are often economically underdeveloped compared with more prosperous regions (Pargeter, 2009).

Empirical research shows that violent extremist groups have been able to garner support and immerse themselves within local communities through providing a service delivery role, filling the vacuum created by poor public services and weak state capacity (ICG, 2013). In Tunisia and Morocco they have become key economic and social actors, with a range of roles including mediating conflict, administering issues and martial disputes, and providing schooling (ICG, 2013, p. iii). Low levels of educational attainment, when combined with other drivers of extremism, can be an important feature of radicalisation, particularly among young people. Relatedly, low levels of employment have been noted as a contributory factor to radicalisation among both young and old (Pargeter, 2009).

Marginalisation of young people

Violent extremism is primarily a phenomenon of youth (Ranstorp, 2016). Political marginalisation of young people is multi-dimensional and widespread in many contexts, young people across the political spectrum have reported feeling disenfranchised from the government and neglected and 'deceived' by political leaders (Marks, 2013: 110). Among violent extremists, those experiencing marginalisation in urban settings are often first or second generation rural-to-urban migrants who struggle to settle in the new environment, economically and socially (USAID 2011). This does not mean urban migration itself is the cause of radicalisation (Allan et al. 2015: 8); rather, successful integration lessens the likelihood of radicalisation. Evidence suggests that when young people have limited opportunities and restricted economic means, the appeal of radical ideologies can grow. Research cited by ICG (2013: 6) identifies that the mobilisation of disenfranchised young people contributes significantly to the growth of radical groups.

The internet is an important feature of radicalisation processes, particularly among those under 35 (Hearne & Laiq, 2010). Empirical studies have identified the importance of YouTube and similar video-sharing websites in increasing access to radical or extremist material (Boubaker, 2011). The internet can facilitate network formation and thus enhances the platform available for radicalisation. Online imagery, extremist chat rooms, and religious television channels from the Gulf etc. are important components in these modern processes of radicalisation (Boubaker, 2011: 61). Although social media is often depicted as having manipulative power, there is a lack of research on whether there is a causal relationship between access to information (or lack thereof) and radicalisation (Ranstorp, 2016).

International events, funding and the role of migrants

International issues may influence radicalisation and violent extremism, this is particularly the case when considering events that impact on the Islamic world which may have a resonance on radicalisation in countries with significant Muslim populations, though experts caution these have a far lesser degree of influence than local political and economic issues. It is noted that increasing external funding for Salafism and Wahhabism has supported radicalisation in North Africa. Similar trends are observable in West Africa, where research shows the majority of radical clerics were either trained (through scholarships) or influenced by teachings from outside countries. International assistance for radicalisation here has come from Iran, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and is predominately channelled through radical literature and scholarships for young people to study abroad (Alao, 2013). Restrictions on the flow of individuals between regions, during COVID-19 may have some impact on the diffusion of particular streams of thought.

Recent trends of rising nationalism across Europe and the US suggest rejection of the globalised system by voters and underscore the conflicting experience of living under a perceived international system..

Radicalisation in prisons

Prisons play a significant role in the narratives of radical and militant movements and have been identified as 'breeding grounds' or 'incubators' for radicalisation. The vulnerability of the prison environment, combined with over-crowding and inadequate staffing levels amplify the conditions that lend themselves to radicalisation (Mulcahy, Merrington, & Bell, 2013).

Local culture and community

Some academic literature emphasises the community that radical groups offer followers as an appealing dimension of radicalisation. For example Boubaker (2011: 67), contends that Wahhabi groups are welcoming to all people and provide them with membership in a community. The collapse of local culture in rural areas also plays an important role in the process of radicalisation. Belaala (2009) finds that jihadism is an ideological response to the collapse of local culture and a lack of political belonging to the national modern identity.

Inter-group/religious rivalries

Drawing from empirical research in five West African states, Ismail (2013: 240) finds evidence that inter-religious rivalry is a contributing factor to the radicalisation. In Nigeria, rivalry between Muslim and Christian groups, overlaid by ethnic divisions, has led to several violent events. Research has highlighted that addressing grievances might not be sufficient to end extremist violence if one group is still seen as benefitting more from a system than another.

Perceptions or experience of marginalisation and neglect are regularly cited as a driver of violent extremism, although one comprehensive literature review finds the evidence supporting this clear causality is mixed (Allan et al., 2015: 4). Extremist groups that offer a social circle and some livelihood protection are seen as an alternative (USAID, 2011). Several factors need to come together for social and economic marginalisation to be a clearly identifiable factor in radicalisation. One crucial element is that marginalisation and group identities must overlap: only if there is a peer group that shares the same experience of marginalisation does it become a powerful factor (Allan et al., 2015: 8).

Disasters, radicalisation and violent extremism

It is clear that shocks, whether natural or manmade, can impact on the above drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism in different ways depending on the countries being studied. The turmoil after a catastrophe may create or exacerbate vulnerabilities within a state which violent extremist groups might exploit. Analysis has been undertaken on disasters that have hit multiple countries to explore their impact on violent extremism (see for example discussions of the 2004 Tsunamis that hit multiple countries around the Indian Ocean).

Bauman et al (2004) highlights that the tsunami and the tsunami interventions had different impacts on dynamics of conflict. In Aceh/Indonesia, the major actors, GAM and the Government of Indonesia (GOI), successfully negotiated a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) ending almost 30 years of war. Conversely, in Sri Lanka the relations between the government and the LTTE deteriorated. In Sri Lanka, case evidence and data both suggest that terrorism escalated significantly in the years following the tsunami (Renner & Chafe, 2007). With over 8,000 deaths, Thailand was also devastated by the tsunami, tourism suffered and unrest increased (McDowall & Wang, 2009).

A larger study undertaken by Berrebi and Ostwal (2011) sought to assess empirically whether natural disasters had an effect on terrorism. Using detailed information on terrorism, natural disasters, and other relevant economic and demographic variables of 167 countries between 1970 and 2007, they were able to identify and estimate the effect of natural disasters on terrorism. They found that disasters have a strong positive association with subsequent terrorism incidence and fatalities. They concluded that natural disasters primarily affected terrorism in low to middle GDP per capita countries with effects most concentrated in poorer, low GDP per capita, countries. Additionally, the findings indicated countries with high GDP per capita did not experience terrorism following a natural disaster. Such findings may prove important when one considers the impact of COVID-19 on radicalisation and violent extremism.

3. Narrative accounts regarding violent extremism and COVID-19

Since its emergence, the COVID-19 pandemic has dominated public attention. Governments have redirected resources and focus to address the multifaceted impact of COVID-19 and citizens in many countries have been affected both directly and indirectly. The Soufan Center (2020) predicts that the long-term effects of the coronavirus will provide “devastating opportunities for extremists of all stripes to recruit. Religious extremists will exploit the view that it is a judgment from God to explain exactly what God is judging in their favour; right-wing extremists will be able to point to ethnic minorities as a source of disease; left-wing extremists will be able to point to globalisation, the rich, and business as the cause of the recession that will follow; environmental extremists, animal rights extremists, and others will all be able to use the situation to recruit and justify fresh and dangerous action”.

They continue that it is not just that extremist ideologies will find more resonance when people want something to blame. There will also be greater opportunity to spread the message; social lock downs have provided a captive audience. Systems in place to try to support people in danger of radicalisation are often weakened. The socio-economic impact of the pandemic may also lead to a reprioritisation of resources and governments may face growing pressure to pay off the debts accrued in trying to counter the global shutdown (Soufan Centre, 2020).

COVID-19 has also become an important topic for terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State who have both issued formal public statements on the pandemic through their respective media channels (Wilson Centre, 2020). Both have provided guidelines for followers to prevent the spread of COVID-19, with al-Qaeda highlighting in its message that “Islam is a hygiene-oriented religion” (Wilson Centre, 2020).

Whilst recognising the threat posed by COVID-19, messaging from these organisations also highlights that both groups are seeking to exploit the global upheaval to radicalise new recruits, as well as to exploit the situation to plan and perform targeted attacks. Publishing in English and blaming the pandemic on the oppression of Muslims and on the decadence of the West, al-Qaeda has called on people, including those from the “Western World”, to use their time in self-isolation to convert to Islam (Wilson Centre, 2020).

In what follows I provide a summary (predominantly blogs and articles) to explore how violent extremists have responded to the global crisis, the messaging they have articulated around the issue and how they have adapted their activities and narratives. The summary includes examples from a number of contexts and types of radical groups to illustrate the multifaceted nature of the response. This review should not be considered exhaustive but rather illustrative.

The Sahel

Coleman (2020) reports that coronavirus has reached many countries in the Sahel, even though confirmed cases remain relatively low. With limited health infrastructure, resources and poor health outcomes, the disease threatens to destabilise countries, which are already facing humanitarian crises triggered by conflict. With the further destabilisation likely due to COVID-19, additional opportunities have emerged for groups operating in the Sahel, *Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin* (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) to exploit vulnerabilities amongst local communities and gain support to pursue their aims in the region.

In the Sahel, COVID-19 feeds into a deteriorating security situation (Burkina Faso saw a 2150% increase in fatalities in terrorist attacks from 2018-2019). National governments are also combatting the threat posed by other armed groups, including self-defence militias and criminal enterprises. They are currently supported by around 14,000 UN peacekeeping troops as part of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), as well as over 5000 French troops as part of Operation Barkhane. Despite this support from the international community, JNIM, ISGS, and other extremist groups appear to be gaining ground by exploiting longstanding issues in the region: poor governance, perceived neglect of vast areas of territory, and existing inter-ethnic tensions (often generated by scarcity of resources).

According to Coleman (2020), one risk of the pandemic is that countries providing support to tackle the growing violence may shift attention and resources elsewhere e.g. to domestic needs. Although the strategy to counter terrorism in the Sahel is yet to be successful, cooperation amongst the international community and their continued engagement is vital to halting the spread of terrorism in the Sahel. Without continued external support, Sahelian countries will be left in an even more vulnerable position.

Violent extremist groups have already demonstrated an ability to immerse themselves into local communities, providing services otherwise unavailable, including healthcare and security. As the resources of the Sahelian governments are increasingly burdened by the fight to counter COVID-19, their ability to provide services is likely to be strained. In the Sahel, support for groups such

as JNIM and ISGS is often separated from the groups' ideological outlooks, tied rather to factors such as the groups' ability to provide financial or security incentives to membership.

One additional, often overlooked, factor should be to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on prisons throughout the Sahelian countries, which often suffer from overcrowding, with the spread of diseases, and which house an increasingly expanding number of terrorist offenders. As countries in the Sahel consider the release of low-risk inmates in order to alleviate the overcrowding that is likely to accelerate the spread of coronavirus amongst inmates, it will become even more important that they are supported in managing the terrorist offender population.

As the burden of the coronavirus pandemic spreads further and penetrates the countries of the Sahel more deeply, the potential for terrorist groups to continue to exploit weak points to gain support and strength will increase. Coleman (2020) concludes that continued cooperation and a broadened approach that addresses the underlying drivers of radicalisation towards violent extremism are necessary to stop the further spread of terrorist activity in the Sahel. Without it, the spread of COVID-19 will serve to reinforce the frustrations and grievances that have allowed these groups to gain a foothold in the first place, and will render the challenge of stopping terrorist groups in the Sahel more difficult than ever.

Africa

Campbell (2020) comments that ideologically, there are two ways in which groups may seek to exploit the current situation. If the pandemic spreads in Muslim-majority areas, they may peddle conspiracy theories about its origins, blaming the West, Jews, and Zionists, i.e. "enemies of Islam." If the spread of the pandemic is controlled and does not reach Muslim-majority areas, particularly those controlled by jihadi groups, they may frame it as divine punishment against those areas. Either way, groups claiming to fight for Islam in Africa will use the virus outbreak to recruit and radicalise fighters and justify their narratives of hate, division, and enmity.

Campbell (2020) continues that operationally, violent groups may try to capitalise on the situation to wreak more havoc. Many African states are already vulnerable to violence and struggling to counter extremist efforts. Campbell (2020) draws attention to an attack by extremists on a strategic port in Mozambique in late March. As governments re-task their military capacity to support the public health response, countries may be more vulnerable to attacks.

Campbell (2020) concludes that strategically, jihadi groups could increase efforts to exploit humanitarian vacuums created by outbreak and may seek to deliver services such as health and infrastructure to recruit members and build credibility with sympathisers. In the current climate, these groups might increase service provision where the state is failing in medical, water, and food provisions, to build popular support for their cause and proto-states.

Middle East

In the Middle East (Iraq and Syria) Welby (2020) reports that Daesh (ISIS) has ordered followers to stay away from Europe to protect themselves. The group's leadership is reported to be concerned about possible impacts of the pandemic on the groups support base. Welby (2020) highlights that there is a concern for many that captured fighters are at heightened risk. There are reports that Kurdish forces in Syria are concerned about the virus spreading in refugee camps and detention centres under their control. Welby (2020) continues that the focus of national decision makers and the international community has meant that resources have been

deployed to prepare health systems for coronavirus patients with a consequential shift of attention from counter-extremism.

In terms of activities, alongside their “travel advisory”, it is reported that Daesh has encouraged followers already in Europe to launch attacks on weakened infrastructure. In Germany, police have arrested a cell claiming allegiance to the group and planning attacks on US forces.

According to an article by Coleman (2020), the Daesh has urged its followers to continue to wage global jihad and to take advantage of overburdened security capabilities to launch attacks. Despite the UN Secretary-General's recent call for a global ceasefire in light of the pandemic, it is clear that groups, who thrive off of instability will continue to do so in the current climate.

The Islamic State (Iraq and Syria)

The Wilson Centre (2020) report that the Islamic State (a Sunni jihadi movement), blamed Shiites for the first cases of coronavirus in Iraq and called the outbreak a “sign” that Shiites should “abandon polytheism.” As the virus spread to Europe, the Islamic State adjusted its message and called the disease a “painful torment” for all “Crusader nations” in the West, according to statements in its al Naba newsletter. The group urged followers not to travel to Europe to commit terrorist attacks during the epidemic to avoid contracting the virus. Instead, the group urged its followers in Iraq and Syria to free ISIS prisoners being held in camps.

Hayat Tahrir al Sham (Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria)

Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), a Sunni jihadi group in Syria, instructed its followers not to let the virus distract them from their fight against Shiites and others. HTS referred to the virus as a “temporary epidemic” that paled in comparison to Shiites who “have corrupted the religion of the people and their earthly life.” HTS has also reported in its Iba’ newsletter that the virus had been sent by God to kill disbelievers who “shed the blood of Muslims.” It also told followers “not to be preoccupied with tracking the news and reports” of the virus. HTS took limited steps to prepare for a potential outbreak. It closed down schools and mosques and transported suspected coronavirus patients to Turkey. Al Qahtani advised followers to “keep distant from gatherings and avoid hand-shaking” and to “stay in your place” as the epidemic spread (Wilson Centre, 2020).

Hezbollah (Lebanon)

In Lebanon, the Wilson Centre (2020) report that Hezbollah initially reacted faster and more extensively than Lebanese state institutions. It deployed nearly 25,000 health care professionals and more than 100 emergency vehicles to handle COVID-19 patients. Hezbollah claimed to have reserved beds in its Beirut hospital for treating coronavirus patients and prepared 32 medical centers for overflow patients. As the crisis deepened, political tensions became accentuated, and led to questions about Hezbollah's ties with Iran. Hezbollah's political opponents blamed the group's physical contacts with Iranian officials for the initial spread of COVID-19 to Lebanon.

Lake Chad

Okpara (2020) reports that the COVID-19 pandemic will have spill over effects in the Lake Chad region. While the scale of the pandemic remains uncertain, the possibility of it worsening social, economic and political fragility is anticipated. Okpara (2020) comments that the pandemic will trigger challenges that might impact on the fight against insurgency. Much of North-eastern

Nigeria and Western Chad near Lake Chad remain under intense insurgent attacks as shocks from drought intensify, and humanitarian conditions worsen.

Okpara (2020) comments that resources are being diverted to provide for healthcare facilities, food, water and medicines in states with high numbers of coronavirus cases, including to support the deployment of armed forces to vulnerable states. Okpara (2020) comments that shrinking resources will undermine the capacity of regional governments to support for soldiers who might remain in the battlefield, as well as social protection for displaced populations. At the same time, military personnel will find themselves squeezed on all fronts: their working conditions might allow for the spread of COVID-19, and if they become infected and are quarantined, they naturally become unavailable to curtail emergency attacks from insurgent groups.

Okpara (2020) highlights that discourses have already emerged that illustrate how ideologues may weaponise social restrictions as part of divisive narratives. In the Lake Chad Basin, the terrorist leader Abu Bakr Shekau claimed that attempts to counter the virus such as shutting mosques were in fact attempts to counter Islam.

Okpara (2020) concludes that, reducing shocks from COVID-19, state fragility, climate and conflict will require collaborative work across multiple agencies, the military and national governments. At its heart, Okpara (2020) suggests that government planners across the Lake region should anticipate significant reductions in people's capacity to cope in the short-term during periods of social distancing and other behavioural changes resulting from COVID-19, especially if water, land, food and medicine become inaccessible.

South Asia

The Wilson Centre (2020) report that the senior leadership of al Qaeda, based in South Asia, blamed the West for triggering the viral outbreak. The group's senior leadership said in its English language media that the virus was a "punishment" from God "for the injustice and oppression committed against Muslims" by Western governments. Al Qaeda mocked the United States for its failure to provide enough ventilators to patients in need and urged Muslims living in the West to "revolt against oppression and oppression." The group's senior leadership also called Islam a "hygiene-oriented" religion. It cited Quranic verses that referenced the importance of cleanliness, covering one's face when coughing and self-quarantining during a viral epidemic.

United States of America

Reports from the United States of America (Politico, 2020) highlight how violent extremists are mobilising in response to the pandemic. The Department of Homeland Security intelligence has circulated a memo to law enforcement officials around the country. The memo cites recent arrests of individuals who have threatened government facilities and elected officials over the health restrictions that have been imposed to stop the spread of COVID-19.

Those arrested include an "anti-government extremist" who threatened to kill New Mexico's governor over the coronavirus restrictions, and another individual who was arrested for allegedly threatening to blow up the Orlando Police Department's headquarters. The Department of Homeland Security (Politico, 2020) comments that "recent incidents and arrests nationwide illustrate how the COVID-19 pandemic is driving violent actors, both non-ideologically and ideologically motivated, to threaten violence," the memo reads. "These incidents indicate that COVID-19 is serving as the impetus for some domestic terrorist plots."

Of particular concern is the extremists' use of social media to encourage biological attacks using the virus. The latter was deemed "crudely viable" and warranting attention, but with likely minimal real-world effects. While social distancing measures have made mass gatherings less ubiquitous and therefore more difficult for bad actors to target, "the pandemic has created a new source of anger and frustration for some individuals," the memo says. "As a result, violent extremist plots will likely involve individuals seeking targets symbolic to their personal grievances."

As Americans are staying home, online searches for white supremacist content have increased, according to. Analysis that explores the lock down shows that in states that have had local stay-at-home orders in place for 10 or more days, there has been a 21% average increase in engagement with violent extremist content (Moonshot CVE, 2020). In states with local stay-at-home directives in place for less than 10 days, the average increase in engagement was 1%.

Areas being tracked by commentators as the pandemic unfolds include are provide below. These are highlighted to illustrate the areas extremists may pursue or that radicalised elements may be interested in exploring. It also highlights how government responses may provide fodder for ideologues keen to promote a particular view of the conflict:

Hate crimes: An FBI assessment predicted "hate crime incidents against Asian Americans likely will surge, due to the spread of coronavirus disease," according to an intelligence report obtained by NPR (2020). The report warned that a portion of the U.S. public will associate COVID-19 with China and Asian American populations. That idea has been reinforced by political leaders, who have referred to the "Chinese virus" and variations that reference China or Wuhan.

Recruiting youth: The increase in unsupervised screen time at a time of crisis creates "a perfect storm for recruitment and radicalisation". For extremists, this is an ideal time to exploit youth grievances about lack of agency, families' economic distress, and intense sense of disorientation, confusion, fear and anxiety.

Anti-government flashpoints: Militias and self-described "constitutionalist" factions, categorised by federal authorities as anti-government extremists, are critiquing stay-at-home orders. Some armed groups reject the measures outright, calling them unconstitutional or overreaching.

Calls for violence: Monitors are tracking accelerationists that believes in using violence to sow chaos in order to collapse society and replace it with a white nationalist model. In chat forums, they've discussed using the virus to infect people, staging attacks on medical centres and other forms of violence they hope will trigger a domino effect leading to the breakdown of society.

Canada

Pandemics and other natural crises create unprecedented challenges that terrorists could exploit to conduct attacks against and already stressed society, and strained government and public safety system. JCAT (2020) comment that "While most citizens isolate in their homes, public safety personnel, hospitals and establishments, such as supermarkets and pharmacies, serve the largest number of co-located individuals, making them potentially attractive targets."

As efforts to contain the new coronavirus have largely emptied places where people typically gather in large numbers, security officials have speculated that terrorists may respond by shifting targets. There are concerns that violent extremist movements may view the pandemic as an opportunity to strike at societies as they are already struggling to cope with the health crisis.

JCAT (2020) comment that a related concern is propaganda calling on ‘believers,’ adherents, and supporters to exploit the prevailing duress on law enforcement and security professionals to attempt to execute attacks,” the report said. But the report also said medical facilities may not be a “favourable environment” for violent extremists, and they lack experience with such targets. They may also fear contracting the virus themselves.

Europe

As reported by Gerrand (2020), responses to COVID-19 have largely include adopting radical new physically distanced behaviours is crucial. These paradoxically distanced yet pro-social behaviours have the potential to undermine existing systems and further exacerbate existing fissures within society. COVID-19 is likely to deepen existing inequalities and polarisation, in ways that may damage community resilience and democracy.

For many far right influencers and organisations the pandemic represents an environment that is conducive to their longed-for demise of democratic society. The large increase in numbers of jobless people who are housebound and online, constitutes a new potential demographic for recruitment. Losing one’s livelihood represents a loss of dignity and violent extremist groups exploit people with a real or perceived lack of prospects. Terrorists often succeed in radicalising people through narratives of restored agency and purpose.

Australia

The Lowy Institute (2020) comment that as governments respond to crises they develop strategic communications campaigns to project a sense of control and authority, and to mitigate the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories that emerge during times of crisis. They continue that governments are missing a key element of crisis response and have not fully accounted for the acceleration of violent extremist narratives. The acceleration of extremism and extremist narratives during disasters is clear in the Australian context. In a preliminary examination of some of the public statements of members of the Australian far right and alt-right, Lowry Institute (2020) identify a series of themes:

- (1) to contest government legitimacy,
- (2) to identify groups to blame,
- (3) to encourage mobilisation – and in so doing tacitly incite violence – against outsider groups as a response.

Some far-right extremists in Australia have spread the conspiracy through social media that the bushfires were started by Muslims. This narrative was picked up and spread globally. The Covid-19 pandemic and legitimate government responses such as quarantining, self-isolating, and closing borders also play into the hands of extremist narratives that promote ethnic segregation and extreme immigration restrictions. Far-right figures have used the government’s Covid-19 response to stoke distrust in government by claiming that government is using the crisis to control Australians. Disasters and emergencies play into “accelerationism” theory, found throughout the extreme right, which posits that the liberal-democratic order is a failure and that one must accelerate its demise through stoking social division and violence.

4. Impacts of COVID-19 on Radicalisation and Violent Extremism

Analysis of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and responses to it on violent extremist recruitment and radicalisation are hard to identify and assess. It is clear that existing and complex drivers of radicalisation will continue throughout the pandemic, with some potentially being exacerbated by COVID-19's multiple economic, social and political impacts. It is also clear that the impacts will take different forms over different time periods, indeed whilst the short term impact of social restrictions may be viewed as evidence of government targeting certain communities, long term failure to respond may be portrayed as the inability of the state to care for people. As seen in Nigeria, ideologues have seized on the government closure of mosques as an example of anti-Muslim tendencies. The economic impact of COVID-19 on the financial health of nations will manifest over the medium to long term and may impact on the ability of government to deliver services potentially exacerbating intra-regional differences.

In the above analysis of reports on the intersection of COVID-19 with violent extremism a number of themes emerge. It is important to note that these are mediated by national and intra-national contexts and may be experienced differently. It should also be noted that this list is neither exhaustive nor based on longitudinal analysis. In many ways, COVID-19 can be considered additive, i.e. exacerbating latent drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism present in many countries. These are discussed in greater detail below:

- Short term impacts
 - Governance vacuums may emerge and be filled by extremist groups as national resources are stretched and the capacity to govern is challenged.
 - The pandemic may be used to validate particular world views i.e. the decadence of the west, the corruption of big government
 - The pandemic may provide a context in which opportunistic attacks are planned and accelerationist seek to act
 - Social restrictions may provide a captive audience ripe for radicalisation. It is important to note that radicalisation is a multi-stage phenomena and individuals must usually already be receptive to extremist messaging
- Medium term impacts
 - The pandemic may result in declining international collaboration as nations seek to fund responses to COVID-19 at the expense of other areas.
 - Countries may face challenges in providing services, this may provide a void into which extremist groups can move
 - Tensions may be created between groups as government response are perceived to be unequal
 - The crisis may result in deepening inequalities if the socio-economic impacts are significant
- Long term impacts
 - Depending on the severity of the crisis a number of factors could influence radicalisation and violent extremism these, however, are uncertain.

Short term impacts

The short term impact of COVID-19 on radicalisation and violent extremism is likely to be related to initial government responses. Narrative accounts suggest that enforced social distancing and the restrictions of daily activity have provided both a context in which to articulate extremist ideologies and a potentially captive audience.

Impacts of social distancing and responses to COVID-19:

Many countries are responding to COVID-19 by imposing restrictions on social movement and enforcing social distancing. Initiatives include the closure of public spaces and business deemed to be non-essential. As noted above, such initiatives have been seized on by proponents of extremist ideologies as examples of the loss of legitimacy of government (see examples from the US) or evidence of anti-group tendencies (see examples from Nigeria and responses to the closure of mosques).

Social distancing will lead to changes in social activities due to public health measures and regulations to combat COVID. Different sub-populations have different infection, hospitalisation and fatality rates as well as different social behaviour. Okpara (2020) suggests that government planners should anticipate significant reductions in people's capacity to cope in the short-term during periods of social distancing and other behavioural changes resulting from COVID-19, especially if water, land, food and medicine become inaccessible. This is particularly the case in areas already experiencing fragility. In contexts where service provision is variable, perceptions of differential access may lead to grievances. Such grievances may be exploited by a range of actors to sow dissension. Without appropriate measures in place, the social distancing required to fight COVID-19 is likely to deepen existing inequalities and polarisation, in ways that may damage community coherence, resilience and democracy.

Perceptions of response measures

Restrictions of social activities may be cast as targeted attacks on civil liberties, or on activities of particular communities. Examples drawn from the global north (US, Canada, Australia and Europe) and global south (Nigeria) illustrate how narratives are being mobilised to this affect.

Perceptions of the response may exacerbate views of atrophy or lack of capacity of state institutions. A common narrative of extremist groups is that governments are either unable or unwilling to act and should thus not be seen as legitimate. A botched, partial (i.e. focused on particular areas or groups) or problematic response may result in an erosion in public trust in state institutions. In many contexts, proponents of violent extremism have sought to fill the void left by an absent state and immersed themselves into local communities, often by providing services otherwise unavailable, including healthcare and security. It is suggested that as COVID-19 stretches the resources of governments, non-state actors may seek to fill the gaps that emerge. As noted, the opportunities that this scenario could provide to extremist groups should not be underestimated. This may be particularly true in areas such as the Sahel, where support for groups such as JNIM and ISGS is often separated from the groups' ideological outlooks, tied rather to the ability to provide financial or security incentives to membership.

Lockdowns and the diffusion of radical ideologies

Globally, lockdowns have restricted social movement with many seeking to fill their time in a variety of ways. Proponents of violent extremism have exploited ICT to diffuse their narratives.

This includes via internet chat rooms, social media and messaging tools. From the outset of the crisis, concerns regarding the spread of dis- and miss-information have been evident. As referenced above, constraints on movement outdoors have led to increases in online searches for extremist information. In a similar vein, organisations such as al Qaeda have utilised social media to diffuse messages.

In other contexts, radio or mobile messaging may be the medium of choice. The reality is that information (some accurate, some not) is circulating in a context where fear and uncertainty is high. As seen in the Ivory Coast, fears around the pandemic can lead to destructive action, a health centre being constructed was destroyed by protestors. The building, erected in Abidjan's Yopugon district, was considered too close to people's homes according to residents (BBC, 2020). In a context of heightened anxiety, the diffusion of miss-information, or the articulation of divisive narratives might mobilise some to take actions into their own hands.

Evolving methods / targeting

It is clear that social lockdowns will impact on the ability of militant groups to perpetrate some activities, whilst providing opportunities for new kinds of attacks. Daesh has encouraged followers already in Europe to launch attacks on weakened infrastructure. Arrests in Germany, have disrupted planned attacks on US forces. It has been suggested by some that targets may shift i.e. to hospitals and food dispensaries. This shifting focus may be a particular concern in contexts where resources are stretched or limited. The commentary on the Lake Chad region provides a pertinent example.

There is, however, a risk of overstating the problem. In many countries, there is greater alertness to people acting suspiciously and being outdoors without good reason – this may also make mass casualty attacks much harder. Police patrol and question curfew breakers. Privacy campaigners are already concerned about an increase in surveillance powers granted too many states to check the spread of the virus; these may be adapted for crime fighting.

Medium term impacts

The medium term impacts of COVID-19 are likely to be influenced by the broader impact of the pandemic. Depending on how government responses are perceived, the fall out of said responses as well as the broader socio-economic impacts. As such radical ideologies may be provided with a space and audience to propose violent extremism.

Economic distress

Commentators have identified that over short, medium and long term time frames, COVID-19 will become increasingly associated with economic distress. Whilst the immediate impacts have been associated with restrictions on income generating activities, it is expected, given the extent and length of lock downs, that economic distress will continue and potentially worsen over the medium to long term. Acemoglu and Tirole (Webinar 2020) note that there is likely to be high cost of the COVID-19 pandemic relative to previous epidemics, especially if the outbreak leads to a protracted health crisis. Acemoglu and Tirole (Webinar 2020) continues that in emerging economies there will be an additional impact due to drop in commodity prices and tourism. Whilst the relationship between poverty, radicalism and violent extremism is complex, it is apparent that if an economic downturn accompanied by a widespread loss of jobs and attendant economic hardships, may result in the emergence of a receptive audience for radical ideologies based on blame.

The WFP (2020) comment that the impact of the coronavirus epidemic in East Africa could have significant socio-economic repercussions, with potential impacts on livelihoods, food security, national economies and global financial and food markets. They continue that economic shocks are likely to exacerbate the severity of acute food insecurity in countries such as South Sudan. Movement restrictions affecting trade activity within Uganda and Sudan and closure of border ports of entry are leading to reduced food commodity imports, price hikes, and panic buying. Such a context may exacerbate inter-group tensions and provide an audience for radical ideologies that seek to apportion blame for the crisis. Further to this, economic hardship, particularly among the young may lead to frustration, resentment and anger.

Government Responses

Whilst initial government responses may exacerbate deep-seated inter-regional or group grievances, how governments respond to the crisis and its impacts over the medium to long term could entrench such tensions. Acemoglu and Tirole (Webinar 2020) highlight that the levers used to regulate how people act during COVID-19 – i.e. acts, regulations and laws will mediate how government's responses will be perceived.

More broadly there is much debate about what the pandemic will imply for the future of economic and political institutions. Of particular concern is the extent to which medium term macro-economic management and issues around debt sustainability may lead to fiscal crises. Limited investment will impact on debt and the ability of governments to respond to other shocks. Further to this, poor countries may lose their ability to borrow and spend as lenders avoid perceived risk (WFP, 2020: 2-3). This may produce a context in which radicalisation and extremist narratives attain more support.

Declining international cooperation to tackle the causes and consequences of radicalisation

As national government resources are strained, some may retreat from international commitments. This will undermine the ability of governments in the global south to not only tackle threats, but also to address the drivers of radicalisation. Although the strategy to counter terrorism in the Sahel has not yet proven to be successful on its own, warranting a more comprehensive approach that includes addressing the social, economic, and political drivers of radicalisation, cooperation amongst the international community and their continued engagement is vital to halting the spread of terrorism in the Sahel. Without continued external support, Sahelian countries will be left in an even more vulnerable position vis-à-vis extremist groups. According to Coleman (2020) one real risk of the coronavirus pandemic is that countries providing support and expertise to Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso to tackle the growing violence may shift their attention and resources elsewhere e.g. to domestic needs

Okpara (2020) continues that the focus of national decision makers and the international community has meant that resources have been deployed to prepare health systems for coronavirus patients with a consequential shift of attention from counter-extremism.

In normal circumstances, many countries have systems in place to try to spot people in danger of radicalisation. During a pandemic, those systems are weakened. To start with, most teenagers and young adults, who are often the most vulnerable to radicalisation, are not in school or college, or some other organised environment where changes in their behaviour can be noted.

Okpara (2020) notes that discourses have already emerged that illustrate how ideologues may weaponise social restrictions as part of divisive narratives. In the Lake Chad Basin, the terrorist leader Abu Bakr Shekau claimed that attempts to counter the virus such as shutting mosques were in fact attempts to counter Islam.

It is also important to note that responding to the pandemic and its multiple social, economic and political impacts may provide space for reconciliation between parties engaged in or prone to conflict. The converse is also true, it may lead to increased tensions and cleavages between groups. Evidence to support this can be gleaned from disaster response. Bauman et al (2004) highlights that the tsunami and the tsunami interventions had different impacts on dynamics of conflict. In Aceh/Indonesia, the major actors, GAM and the Government of Indonesia (GOI), successfully negotiated a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) ending almost 30 years of war. Conversely, in Sri Lanka the relations between the government and the LTTE deteriorated.

Medium to longer term

Whilst the medium to longer term impacts on radicalisation and violent extremism are hard to predict and defined by a high level of uncertainty, commentators have highlighted that this is a critical juncture for institutions in many countries, providing both challenges and opportunities. Acemoglu and Tirole (Webinar 2020) suggests that, whilst hard to ascertain, response to the pandemic could include:

- Backlash against globalisation or greater international coordination
- Fear turning us towards authoritarian leaders or recognition of their failures
- More democracy or less democracy
- Common enemy of the viruses versus its identification as a Chinese virus or linked to other groups, or every country/community for itself mentality.

It is clear that the severity of the pandemic will influence how it is perceived and how it impacts on radicalisation and violent extremism.

In a more pessimistic commentary, the Soufan Center (2020) predicts that the long-term effects of the coronavirus will provide opportunities for extremists to recruit. Religious extremists will exploit the view that it is a judgment from God to explain exactly what God is judging in their favour; right-wing extremists will be able to point to ethnic minorities as a source of disease; left-wing extremists will be able to point to globalization, the rich, and business as the cause of the recession that will follow; environmental extremists, animal rights extremists, and others will all be able to use the situation to recruit and justify fresh and dangerous action.

More positively, some have highlighted the increased levels of citizen solidarity and gap bridging that have emerged evidenced by the joining of social groups and the outpouring of empathy. In many countries, community groups and religious groups have come into their own in building society up despite the isolation; while extremists may be able to recruit online, stronger social links between communities undermines their message. Whether the pandemic will be followed by a return to business as usual or be treated as a wakeup call to address some of the underlying drivers of radicalisation is open to question.

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