



# The Evolution of the Threat

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If Muslims cannot defeat the kafir [unbelievers] in a different way, it is permissible to use weapons of mass destruction . . . . Even if it kills all of them and wipes them and their descendants off the face of the Earth.

—Nasir al-Fahd, Saudi cleric's fatwa, *Foreign Policy*, 28 August 2014.

## Introduction: The Pandemic

Today, the world faces an unprecedented global health crisis. Although coronavirus is not as deadly as the Spanish flu—February 1918–April 1920 (History.com 2020)—it has led to a dramatic loss of human lives and livelihoods. (The death toll of Spanish flu is estimated to have been between 20 and 50 million people.) Since the emergence of COVID-19 in China in December 2019, the world has witnessed heightened geopolitical rivalry, growing distrust in governments, and enhanced hostility between ethnic and religious communities. Away from the glare of international media, violent extremists and terrorists have adjusted to the novel circumstances and capitalized on the vulnerabilities the pandemic has created for their own benefit. Reactive measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 have inherently altered behavioral patterns and regimens in all aspects of life. Besides the social and economic consequences of the pandemic situation, fears have circulated that an economic downturn may add extraordinary impetus to the existing fragmentation of communities. It is also concerning whether coronavirus has exposed vulnerable segments to radical and violent online content and inspired new efforts at bioterrorism. But have terrorists and extremists changed their modus operandi and attempted to weaponize the virus? To what extent could they exploit the crisis in their propaganda?

To answer all these questions, we need to better understand the global threat landscape at the time of the pandemic outbreak. Therefore, this introductory section attempts to take account of the pre-existing conditions terrorists and extremists were contending with prior to

COVID-19. This starting scene includes radical Islamist and right-wing agendas, both in conflict and nonconflict zones.

## **The Radical Islamist Threat Landscape**

Contemporary radical Islamists aim to establish an Islamic state governed exclusively by Islamic law. They legitimize the use of violence by citing classical Islamic doctrines on jihad (Europol 2020). Radical Islamist terrorism refers to “a violent ideology exploiting traditional Islamist concepts” (MD Staff 2020). It is a “violent sub-current of Salafism, a revivalist Sunni Muslim movement that rejects democracy and elected parliaments, arguing that human legislation is at variance with God’s status as the sole lawgiver” (Europol 2020). Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are the major representatives of radical Islamist groups.

### **Syria**

In the Syrian Arab Republic, a relative improvement in the security situation was reported for the first quarter of 2020. Ankara and Moscow agreed to a temporary ceasefire in Idlib Province and began working toward a joint Turkish-Russian security corridor (International Crisis Group 2020). The biggest concerns in Syria remained around the security of detention facilities and camps (United Nations Security Council 2020) providing shelter for numerous youngsters with a heightened level of openness to radicalization. As a territory-controlling armed entity, the Islamic State may have been defeated in early 2019—but as a comprehensive threat actor in the region, it was only seriously injured (Cordesman 2020b). In fact, several questions remained. How would IS fighters be demobilized, disarmed and reintegrated into society? (BTI Transformation Index 2020). And how would the coronavirus affect Islamic State’s behavior? Would the coronavirus assist or hinder IS in its terrorist endeavors?

In early 2020, the estimated combined number of IS fighters in Iraq and Syria was more than 10,000, dispersed in small cells (United Nations Security Council 2020). Islamic State was reconstituting itself in these tiny safe havens that sheltered their operations in remote, isolated areas and therefore protected them from exposure to the virus. The pandemic generated humanitarian crises and high unemployment rates, and the Iraqi government’s failures in ensuring basic services provided disillusioned civilians a reason to be recruited by the Islamic

State. Despite the fact that IS had lost many members in the chain of command, it was still a viable group in Syria and Iraq because of its self-financing capability as well as its continuous recruitment activities (US Department of State 2019).

## Iraq

Iraq was in a particularly “fragile situation” (Cordesman 2020a) at the time of the outbreak, with conditions made even more fragile by the rapid spread of COVID-19. It had hardly recovered from the war against the Islamic State, so the political system remained unstable and dependent upon the support of both Iran and the United States. Despite the gradual changes in political leaders, still corruption and institutional incapacity paralyzed government efforts to provide stability (BTI Transformation Index 2020). Countrywide five-month-long protests called on longstanding demands for change, economic reform, and an end to corruption. Grave concerns existed in relation to authorities resorting to “excessive force” against demonstrators. Additionally, regional dynamics continued to affect Iraq. For example, there were deep tensions between ethnic Shi’ite and Sunni and Kurdish areas of the country. Operating in a “war of attrition,” IS operatives aimed to exploit the coronavirus crisis by sustaining rural insurgency and carrying out sporadic operations in larger cities (United Nations Security Council 2020).

A strong state, organized on the monopoly of force, was required to effectively address Islamic State’s ability to exploit the pandemic (UN CTED 2020). At the same time, programs were to be established concerning the repatriation of IS families. Moreover, advanced technology and military training were necessary for Iraqi security forces to more effectively fight against the Islamic State. Radical Islamists may have been defeated militarily, but the fundamental causes and factors that enabled the terrorist entity to develop still exist.

## Afghanistan

The increasing threat of insurgents and weak political institutions constitute the major challenges for the Afghan state. Kabul’s domestic political crisis deepened when Afghanistan’s two rival leaders both declared themselves as leaders of the country (International Crisis Group 2020). As the state’s monopoly on the use of force is limited, in recent years, the ever-growing power of the Taliban has jeopardized the stability of Afghan governance (BTI Transformation Index 2020). After an extensive period of negotiation between the United States and the Tal-

iban, on 21 February 2020, the parties agreed upon a seven-day reduction in violence across Afghanistan. After the successful completion of this agreement, a formal US-Taliban peace agreement could have been signed. The document would have included a pledge from the US to cease targeting terrorist groups in the country, and at the same time, the number of US troops operating in Afghanistan would have been reduced from 13,000 to 8,600 (United Nations Security Council 2020). Following the Doha Agreement in February 2020, the Taliban would have resumed intense military pressure on Afghan security forces, especially in rural areas (International Crisis Group 2020).

Regardless of serious losses of its senior leaders in late 2019, the threat posed by the Islamic State remained persistent. The Islamic State's South Asian Province (IS Khorasan) was still ambitious and capable of implementing high-profile operations in Afghanistan. Some 2,100 IS fighters established the new Afghan core area in Kunar Province (United Nations Security Council 2020). It was also worrisome that existing accounts for Salafism in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces may push young residents toward IS as a response to the Afghan state's practices of repression (Mir 2020). The terrorist organization was also striving to attract Taliban operatives who are against the US-Taliban agreement, but several former Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) members also joined IS forces. Because of IS Khorasan's established informal contacts with other terrorist groups, including Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, TTP, and Lashkar-e-Islam, it was believed the associated security threat may address the neighboring countries of Afghanistan (United Nations Security Council 2020). Al-Qaeda—with an estimated 400–600 fighters—were still covertly active in the country (United Nations Security Council 2020).

## Africa

Following a seven-month battle in 2016, the Libyan government forces cleared the last Islamic State North African territorial stronghold. Although IS was significantly weakened at that time, the terrorist organization continued to pose a serious security threat to Libya in the midst of the ongoing conflict in the country (BTI Transformation Index 2020). IS operated from its safe havens in the less-controlled southern parts of the country and still attacked military checkpoints and police stations. Also, there were two worrisome factors that required attention. Firstly, the influx of weapons into the Libyan conflict zone raised serious concerns that IS would exploit the opportunities provided by this new black market (United Nations Security Council 2020). Secondly, it was

also feared whether there were members of designated terrorist groups among those 7,000–15,000 fighters who had arrived from Syria to participate in the Libyan conflict (United Nations Security Council 2020).

After Libya, the Islamic State built a significant capability in the Greater Sahara. In the region of Greater Sahara—Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso—the influence of Islamic State was growing rapidly. The previous peaceful coexistence of Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) was at risk. Intensive ISGS propaganda activities had condemned JNIM for the “flexible implementation of sharia” (United Nations Security Council 2020) and its willingness to sit down with the government of Mali. The ISGS relied on the logistical supply chain with the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and this further enhanced the threat group to operate independently. Regardless of focused counterterrorism operations in the area, ISGS still maintained strongholds in the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger (United Nations Security Council 2020). ISWAP and its almost 3,500 fighters intensively attacked Nigeria, southern Niger, and northwestern Cameroon.

The Islamic State in Somalia had suffered serious personnel losses in military counter operations in late 2019, but the group remained resilient and resumed covert operations. Al-Qaeda affiliate Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahidin (al-Shabaab) was expanding across Somalia. They were attacking high-profile (both civilian and military) as well as foreign targets. Al-Shabaab leadership was urging followers to carry out attacks beyond Somalia, in the neighboring countries. As a result, low-scale cross-border incursions were reported in Kenya. Meanwhile, the threat posed by the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP) was evolving, with local recruits and foreign fighters operating in their forces. Additionally, improved improvised explosive device capability and the application of asymmetric tactics were observed by authorities. There was a persistent endeavor to consolidate regional IS online propaganda with its affiliates in Eastern, Southern and Central Africa. In this vein, IS in Puntland aimed to function as a command center for Islamic State operatives in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mozambique (United Nations Security Council 2020).

## Europe

The threat of Internet-driven home-grown extremists remained of great concern in Europe. In 2019, nearly 60 percent of jihadi attackers had the citizenship of the country in which the attack or plot took place. Online platforms and encrypted Internet applications were used for

recruitment and training purposes by both national citizens and resident foreigners. The risk of migrants being exposed to radical online inspirations was one of the greatest threats. The release of imprisoned foreign terrorist fighters in 2020 was another worrisome factor because of concerns over the effectiveness of rehabilitation programs. Reported incidents referred to the clandestine networks of women members of terrorist organizations facilitating the information exchange for radicalized prisoners. This drew attention to the threat posed by women terrorists and radicalized female inmates that should have been appropriately addressed (Europol 2020). Al-Hawl camp in the Syrian Arab Republic was of acute concern because of two factors. First, repatriating potentially radicalized women from the camp held serious security threats. And second, limited IS attempts to establish cells in Europe from Al-Hawl camp were detected. In North Europe and in the Western Balkans, the Islamic State or al-Qaeda sympathetic imams constitute new challenges for authorities. Their underground recruiting activities require constant attention. In parallel, IS-inspired Central Asian (Tajik, Uzbek, Kyrgyz) and Chechen terrorist networks have emerged with intentions to carry out attacks and recruit among migrants (United Nations Security Council 2020).

### **Southeast Asia**

Regardless of consistent counterterrorism efforts, the contemporary threat posed by the Islamic State was still persistent (United Nations Security Council 2020) and concentrated in Sulu-Sulawesi Seas. Unsurprisingly, this tri-border area of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines had been historically struggling to govern the territorial disputes of maritime borders (Borelli 2017). Nevertheless, as a result of focused countermeasures and established channels for intelligence sharing, there was a better understanding of active local radical Islamist groups' operational circumstances. The inconsistent security of maritime borders enabled a vibrant route for operatives. Great concern remained in relation to foreign fighters arriving from Iraq and Syria, who may have further improved the operational capabilities of local threat groups. The role of women in the operational planning, financing, and execution of attacks in the region continued to be of particular attention. According to the latest estimations, approximately 1,500 Indonesians traveled to the conflict zone. Among them, roughly 700, including 400 minors, were believed to have been staying in Syrian detention centers. Both the public and the official policies were against the repatriation of these nationals (United Nations Security Council 2020).

Just prior to the pandemic outbreak, two terrorist threat predictions resonated. First, whether the defeat of IS by the West and the death of al-Baghdadi would result in an elevated level of intensity among foreign operatives. And second, whether the repatriated fighters from Syria could significantly upgrade the capacity of Southeast Asian-based—mainly low potency—terrorists. None of these predictions have materialized, as foreign fighters arriving from the battlefields were caught on arrival by authorities (Jones 2020).

Constant fights between radical Islamists and the Philippines military/security forces characterized the security landscape in the southern Philippines. Islamic State’s four local affiliates (Abu Sayyaf Group, Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, Maute Group, and Ansarul Khilafah Philippines) facilitated extraordinary opportunities for training and operational planning. Authorities had constant struggles combating radical Islamist online activities, including recruitment, radicalization, and fundraising via social media platforms. Local threat groups were reported to be self-sustaining; online campaigns, smuggling of arms or vehicles, and kidnap for ransom remained their preferred means for fundraising (United Nations Security Council 2020).

## United States

The threat landscape was characterized by a highly decentralized network of organizations sharing a wide range of ideologies (Jones et al. 2020). Incidents were not isolated in specific geographic areas, suggesting that terrorism was a national and not a regional phenomenon (Jones et al. 2020). It was anticipated that the threat posed by foreign terrorist organizations would likely remain overseas because of constant US counterterrorism efforts. Nevertheless, considering that these entities maintain an interest in carrying out operations in the United States, this may result in the rise of so-called “inspired attacks” on the homeland (US Department of Homeland Security 2020).

## Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism

Right-wing extremism is generally defined as a specific ideology of “anti-democratic opposition towards equality” (Carter 2018). This is, though, not a uniform ideology but rather includes united sub-tenets along with the rejection of diversity and minority rights (Europol 2020). The concept is usually associated with antisemitism, racism, xenophobia, nationalism, authoritarianism, and conspiracy theories (Ravndal 2016).

The enemy articulated in these ideologies is thought to be the main threat to the survival of the nation or race (Jupskås and Segers 2020). Different concepts have been used for the term right-wing terrorism. As a unique form of political violence, it can be interpreted somewhere between a “hate crime” and “organized terrorism” (Koehler 2016). The extreme right-wing could be defined as activists who commit criminal activity motivated by a political or cultural opinion that may cover racism, extreme nationalism, fascism, and neo-Nazism (Greater Manchester Police Counter Terrorism Branch Prevent Team 2018).

There was a 320 percent rise in right-wing terrorism on a global scale in the five years up to 2020 (UN CTED 2020). Along with space security, climate security, and emerging technologies, right-wing extremism has become one of the most concerning global security threats. The highly complex nature of right-wing threat groups makes the combat against them challenging for governments and authorities. They are complex because of their wide range of grievances, including racism, misogyny, antisemitism, anti-LGBTQ sentiments, Islamophobia, and anti-governmental ideologies, which fuel radicalized individuals (UN News, 6 July 2020).

Extreme right-wing terrorism predominantly affects Europe, Australasia, and North America. The following discussions explain the right-wing threat landscape prior to the pandemic outbreak in these geographic areas.

## Europe

Right-wing extremist attacks in 2019 drew attention to the relevance of online communication as a mean for strengthening international links among violent extremists. The perpetrators of the Christchurch, Poway, El Paso, Baerum and Halle right-wing attacks were members of like-minded transnational online communities and were inspired by one another (Europol 2020). The worrisome exponential influence of social media provided these threat groups with extraordinary opportunities for spreading hateful ideology and encouraging violence (Daines 2020). The pandemic as a “security issue” (Gjørsv 2020) has fanned the flames of this increasingly loud chorus of destabilizing voices in society. Of particular concern is the impact of extremist disinformation campaigns with regard to the pandemic. Existing and emerging far right conspiracies and fake news can potentially accelerate polarization in Western societies (Macklin 2020) and/or inspire lone actors or autonomous cells to commit violent crimes (Ravndal et al. 2020). Another worrisome factor is the tight connectivity of far right entities. Besides communicat-



ing with each other in the digital subcultures, there are ever-growing concerns of their links to conflict zones and training camps (Ong and Pantucci 2020).

## Australia

The Australian authorities thwarted far right-related violent acts in 2020. One far right extremist was seeking to travel to a conflict zone, while another was arrested for attempting to acquire firearms and manufacture an improvised explosive device. Later, in Melbourne, a man planning to attack left-wing targets was detained (Carroll 2020). The Australian 2020 terrorist threat assessment concluded that right-wing extremism is a top priority. Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO) Director-General Mike Burgess said, “The numbers are small, but growing” (Daily Sabah, 18 September 2020). As the Australian Federal Police announced on 20 October 2020, “the most concerning phenomenon is the online radicalization of youngsters” (Coughlan 2020a). ASIO reported that far right extremism then accounted for up to 40 percent of its counterterrorism workload, up from 15 percent in 2016. The pandemic has further accelerated the complaining right-wing extremists’ narratives and has made them more organized, sophisticated, and active (Daily Sabah, 18 September 2020). The threat landscape has included small right-wing cells in Australian suburbs using Nazi symbols and delivering weapon and combat training. Also, Australian far right activists reportedly had joined international white supremacist groups spreading extremist propaganda and inciting violent acts on their online forums, such as the one called Base. The associated threat was characterized by low capability (knife, gun, or a vehicle) (Whyte 2020).

## New Zealand

The far right threat became evident when 28-year-old Brenton Tarrant killed 51 people in the Christchurch Mosque shootings in New Zealand in 2019. In the following year, 60–70 groups and 150–300 right-wing activists were estimated to be operating in the country (The Guardian, 10 March 2020). Notably, numerous countermeasures were launched to monitor these threat groups and individuals. Rapid action was taken to ban military-style semiautomatics and assault weapons, which were popular weapons with far right terrorist groups. New Zealand and France founded the so-called Christchurch Call, which outlines collective, voluntary commitments from fifty governments and ten online

service providers to eliminate online terrorist and violent extremist content. Terrorists' use of technology has remained a threat, and even greater investments are necessary to enable law enforcement and intelligence agencies to intercept radical actors and their networks (Jones 2019).

In March 2020, a week prior to the first anniversary of the Christchurch attack, a member of the white supremacist group Action Zealanda was arrested in relation to a terror threat made against Al-Noor Mosque in Christchurch (Daalder 2020). Action Zealanda claims to be the “New Zealand European identity” (Counter Extremism Project 2020) and was formed in 2019. It is widely seen as a successor to the far right Dominion Movement, which described itself as “fraternity of young New Zealand nationalists” united by the belief that “Europeans are the defining people of this nation and that they were essential in its creation” (McCleery 2019).

## United States

“Racially and ethnically motivated violent extremists—specifically white supremacist extremists—will remain the most persistent and lethal threat in the Homeland,” concluded the US Department of Homeland Security in 2020 (US Department of Homeland Security 2020). An aggravated competition among far left and far right violent groups has been observed. This rivalry may push these entities into a spiraling situation in which actions of one group intended to heighten its security may lead the rival groups to take similar measures. This increased tension can result in an elevated level of weaponization and conflict. It is also notable that demonstrations have become the primary target for both antifascist and anarchist movements. The political polarization, the pandemic, concerns about a potential economic decline, existing racial injustice, and current social alienation may all induce increased domestic terrorism (Jones et al. 2020).

## Scholarly Debates on COVID-19's Impact on Terrorism

The pandemic's impact on terrorism has already been subject to scholarly discourses. Important aspects of the phenomenon have been elaborated on by prominent academics. This section first encompasses a concise outline of the scholarly discourse on COVID-19 and terrorism. This review aims to introduce the relevant scholarship by mapping and exploring the academic contributions in the field. This book attempts

to take a step forward and build upon these scholarly assertions by providing a comprehensive assessment of the current threat landscape. This assessment includes identifying opportunities and challenges the pandemic has provided hate groups.

## **Opportunities and Challenges during a Pandemic**

Terrorism practitioners and scholars have assessed COVID-19's impact on terrorism in different ways. All their evaluations can be grouped under three approaches.

The first group of authors believes that COVID-19 has enabled terrorist activity. The novel circumstances since the pandemic outbreak have offered violent extremists across all ideological agendas new ways to encourage followers to mount attacks as well as to advance ideological objectives and recruit new members (Whiter 2020). COVID-19 continues to disrupt public health systems and has become the most dominant content in violent extremist online communications (Weimann and Masri 2020). The pandemic has been perceived by violent extremists as “an opportunity” (Daymon and Criezis 2020) to create “a more hospitable global environment for recruitment, growth and action than before” (Cruickshank and Rassler 2020). Since the emergence of SARS-CoV-2, hate groups have flooded their platforms with recruitment propaganda and calls for violence against minorities (Counter Extremism Project 2020). Al-Qaeda even called on non-Muslims to take the time spent in lockdown to study the Koran (Hanna 2020; Simons and Bianca 2020). Terrorist organizations' responses to COVID-19 have included labeling it as “an echo of traditional state structures” and accusations of blame regarding the origins of the disease (Taneja and Pantucci 2020). Extremist entities have named who to blame for the problems the situation has caused them. As a result of their conspiracy theories, anti-Chinese sentiments have broadly surfaced both in the West and in Asia (Pantucci 2020). Interestingly, while in March 2020 the Islamic State incited attacks on Chinese people and interests, no specific resources have been deployed for these efforts (Azman 2020).

The chaos caused by COVID-19 is a unique chance for these threat groups to aggravate resentment and destroy social cohesion (Voronkov 2020). Violent extremists across all ideologies have been promoting their conspiracy theories, tailor-made for the pandemic (Basit 2020). The International Crisis Group has been particularly concerned with places “where the global health challenge intersects with wars on political conditions that could give rise to new crises or exacerbate existing

ones” (International Crisis Group 2020). A general tactic of the extreme right was to hijack anti-lockdown protests to induce social tension and to call for acts of violence (Ong 2020). Government failures in addressing the crisis together with social distancing practices that they put in place triggered a wave of “disenfranchisement” (Pantucci 2020), leading to a new impetus in political violence and another drive for “catalyst plots” (Brennan 2020). While extremists responded in various ways to the pandemic, all aimed to leverage it for their own radical purpose and exploit the antigovernment atmosphere. They adopted new global narratives to show their supremacy and better “governance capability” (Taneja and Pantucci 2020). Generally, extremists are keen to pose as superiors to the existing state, although, amidst the pandemic, some of them were struggling to operate as quasi-states and provide essential public services, including public healthcare, for their supporters (Taneja and Pantucci 2020). Simultaneously, the daunting economic consequences of the pandemic pushed many individuals into serious financial hardship, perhaps making them more disillusioned and prone to joining extremist movements (Green 2020).

The second group of authors believes that COVID-19 has hindered terrorist activity. The short-term opportunities of coronavirus such as the “captive [online] audience” and government failures in addressing the crisis facilitated the circulation of extremist narratives and conspiracy theories. At the same time, the pandemic generated various short-term risks for violent extremists (UN CTED 2020), as it changed the ways in which terrorist organizations operated. Obviously, epidemiological restrictive measures created serious challenges to terrorists’ operational capacity. They resulted in far fewer crowded places, hindered terrorist groups’ access to food, medicine, money, and weapons, and moreover distracted erstwhile media attention given to terrorist activities (ibid. 2020). Because of the reallocation of roles and funds of law enforcement agencies, terrorism together with national counterterrorism and policing strategies are going through a substantial reconceptualization (Whiter 2020). Travel bans and the temporary closure of borders may result in the rise of home-grown terrorism as a potential future trajectory for the evolving terrorist threat. This is because such restrictive measures make operational logistics particularly challenging for extremist groups, as their routes and means are more noticeable to the authorities (Simons and Bianca 2020).

Terrorist organizations themselves are also concerned with the physical threat of infection by COVID-19, leading hate groups to take a safety-first approach and highlight that “Islam is a hygiene-oriented religion” (Hanna 2020). In the meantime, instead of encouraging fol-

lowers to mount attacks in the West, Islamic State asked them to “stay away from the land of the epidemic” (Hernandez-Morales 2020). There is an even heightened level of infection risk perceived when considering vulnerable radical Islamists in Indonesian prisons and Syrian refugee camps (UNODC 2021). Radical Islamists as potential carriers of coronavirus should also be pondered here. In this regard, they can be categorized into two perpetrator variables: non-IS and pro-IS militants. Non-IS radicals declared that regardless of social distancing rules they would congregate and pray and thus had the potential to spread the virus. A pro-IS group, since they resort to mounting attacks, claimed that they would not comply with any regulation imposed by Western governments and continued to live their normal life, thus they also potentially introduced the virus into their communities (Raj 2020). Lone actors are a great security concern as virus carriers. Extensively available extremist propaganda should be mentioned here, which may drive individuals to resort to lone wolf-like plots (Modern Security Consulting Group 2020).

The third group of authors is not yet sure whether the pandemic has enabled or hindered terrorist activities, but they all articulate the novelty COVID-19 has introduced into terrorist operational circumstances. A considerable share of scholarly publications by this group has dealt with the impact of COVID-19 on terrorism. Assessing the short- and long-term impacts of the pandemic, Andrew Silke (2020) asserted that coronavirus had already had a significant effect on terrorism in a variety of ways. Drawing on the fact that authorities were busy enforcing restrictive measures, their distracted attention may have been exploited by violent nonstate actors to incite mounting attacks. Recent threats against medical facilities have highlighted the need to enhance the security of certain critical infrastructure. At the same time, due to the prevalence of online extremist activities, there is a heightened risk of radicalization in the short to medium term. Despite the hurdles of biological terrorism, the pandemic may have also increased the interest in biological warfare. Another long-term consideration is the reallocation of counterterrorism funds, which will have made certain countries even more vulnerable and exposed to the threat of terrorism (Silke 2020). As the United Nations stated, the impact of the virus has varied between conflict and nonconflict zones, as the short-term terrorist threat has increased in conflict zones but has fallen in nonconflict areas (Decanherald, 23 July 2020). To balance the hype of terrorism during the pandemic, all relevant factors should be considered in this regard, including the deep concerns around a successful bioterror attack by using an infected individual and the mitigating conditions the pandemic has

created for the operational circumstances of violent extremists. It is critical to examine both the “exacerbating” and the “mitigating” factors to put forward a real assessment of the “evolving” terrorist threat.

Short-, medium- and long-term effects can be distinguished when considering COVID-19’s impact on violent extremism. Drawing on a pandemic context, not only potential “governance vacuums” but also social restrictions can indulge both a “captive audience” and opportunistic attacks in the short term. In the longer run, government responses may generate tensions and deepen socio-economic impacts. Arguably, the COVID-19 pandemic has become a core topic for radical narratives and threat groups who have been seeking to exploit the crisis (Avis 2020).

It is also worth hoping that for any current or future pandemic the “widespread indiscriminate infection does not align with terrorist goals.” Elevated biomedical research investments have resulted in a larger pool of scientists and knowledge, which are highly beneficial advancements for malicious violent nonstate actors, who can more effectively misuse these capabilities. Meanwhile, revisited health emergency preparedness remarkably mitigates the effect of a disease outbreak. Another important factor that suggests lower levels of terrorist capabilities for a successful bioterror attack is the fragmented organization of both radical Islamist and far right threat groups. For such an organizational structure, it is particularly challenging to develop a multidisciplinary bioweapon (Koblentz and Kiesel 2021).

Three potential novel terrorist targets can be identified when examining extremist narratives since the pandemic outbreak. Firstly, given the initial emergence of coronavirus in China, hatred toward Asian minorities has substantially increased (Dezler 2020). Secondly, as hospitals and medical facilities play a pivotal role in the fight against the virus, these critical infrastructures may be subject to future terrorist attacks. Thirdly, 5G-related conspiracies have argued that this emerging technology has facilitated the spread of the virus. Recent changes in remote work advocate and increase the significance of 5G, which adds a further perceived symbolic relevance to instances of people attacking 5G towers (Stern, Ware, and Harrington 2020).

Considering potential directions for the evolution of future terrorism, the most significant effects of the pandemic on terrorism have been the following. Engaging in prosocial activities brings a certain “degree of legitimacy” together with enhanced opportunities for recruitment and funding for these threat groups; while this was denied, uncertainty since the outbreak may have increased the public’s susceptibility to radicalization. Government responses to COVID-19 have often resulted

in divisions within a society, exacerbating antigovernment attitudes. Future cataclysmal pandemic circumstances may provide inspiration for apocalyptic-millenarian extremists. Currently, an enhanced general digital presence has obviously increased extremists' online propaganda activities. Given the disruption COVID-19 has caused, a future dangerous virus may lead to the re-establishment of bioterrorism and encourage violent extremists to weaponize it. With the heightened symbolic relevance of medical facilities and the serious security concerns with regard to CBRNE storage and prisons, the reallocation of resources "introduce[s] frictions into the counterterrorism process," substantially undermining the success of these efforts (Ackerman and Peterson 2020).

There is a need for a "balanced assessment" of violent extremists' activities and narratives during a pandemic. Ongoing threats should be regularly and thoroughly reassessed. According to Sam Mullins (2020), the few incidents that constitute acts of terrorism and that happened during the COVID-19 pandemic had very weak links to it, thus the mobilizing potential of the pandemic with regard to terrorism was "relatively weak." The fact that we may have been more exposed to radical online content or the negative social and economic consequences of the pandemic may not inherently result in the mobilization of terrorism. The challenges terrorists faced because of the pandemic outbreak should also be noted here. Financial shorting together with the risk of infection posed significant challenges for terrorist organizations. Another concern that has circulated refers to the extent of terrorist intent to engage in biological terrorism. Extremist narratives, however, underpin that, for instance, far right activists would rather stay home and watch "the society destroy itself" (Mullins 2020). Incidents have justified the continued implementation of operational hurdles to prevent a bioterror attack, not to mention future epidemiological restrictions such as tight border controls and lockdowns, which during COVID-19 made the implementation of terrorist attacks even more challenging. The potential benefits violent nonstate actors may gain from a pandemic means that noteworthy challenges of the phenomenon cannot be disregarded when assessing the associated threat (Mullins 2020).

It is contested whether terrorist attacks in 2020 in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, or Nigeria happened in accordance with the pandemic outbreak or whether they would have emerged anyway. The prediction that a spike in terrorist activities in the West was guaranteed was speculative. Likewise, there is little open-source evidence to substantiate any claim that there was an increase in the amount of extremist content online after the outbreak of the virus. It is not to say that as the pandemic

continues violent actors' activities will not get worse and law enforcement/intelligence agencies should not devote sufficient attention and resources to counter malevolent extremist intentions. Arguably, there is still not enough solid evidence available to assess the full impact of COVID-19 on terrorism (Gurski 2020).

### **Some Implications for Developing Countries**

Threats are of a different nature when considering the pandemic's consequences in developing countries, where terrorists can more easily advance their campaigns of violence and exploit general public dissatisfaction with the government. In the developing world, the coronavirus has deepened poor economic and social discrepancies, amplified existing food and financial shortages, and enabled conditions that are more optimal for "terrorist violence" (Bellinger and Kattelman 2020). While attempting to increase the legitimacy of their actions, terrorist entities become more state-like and adopt mandatory norms that they would usually seek to defy.

In the Sahel, limited resources, poor health conditions, and the lack of public health services and other societal vulnerabilities may drive the countries in the region further into destabilization. Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM)—an al-Qaeda umbrella affiliate—and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)—a recognized Islamic State affiliate—could take advantage of these unstable conditions and exploit these vulnerabilities. Without appropriate foreign counterterrorism operations, the region's chances of eliminating the contributing factors to radicalization and violent extremism might further decrease (Coleman 2020). Reportedly, Iraqi forces face extraordinary challenges in fighting Islamic State's small guerrilla units. Such military operations urgently need high technical solutions, especially capabilities for reconnaissance, air support, and intelligence information, which have been provided by the United States (Magid 2020).

### **Theoretical Considerations on the Pandemic's Impact on Terrorism**

In this section, we identify and analyze potential political, social, economic, and psychological causes of terrorism in the context of COVID-19, and public health crises in general, to evaluate whether such emergencies create novel vulnerabilities terrorists can exploit. For the purpose



of this analysis, a broad interpretation of the causes of terrorism has been applied.

### The State of Research

The impact of a pandemic is an important security concern. It has been argued that terrorism does not arise in a vacuum (Shughart 2006). An extreme event like a pandemic may induce changes in pre-existing circumstances. Through these mechanisms, such an emergency event can ultimately influence terrorism. It is plausible that turmoil in the aftermath of a pandemic outbreak creates or exacerbates vulnerabilities that terrorist groups might exploit. As the World Health Organization (WHO) stated in 2012, “infectious diseases have shaped societies, driven conflict, and spawned the marginalization of infected individuals and communities throughout history” (WHO 2012). In a similar vein, the Munich Security Conference report in 2016 affirmed that “in addition to the human toll, major outbreaks can also have significant impacts on economies and pose a political risk to governments, particularly those in fragile states that fail to control the disease. Because of their threat to human health, to economies, and to the stability of states as a whole, lapses in health security can become issues of international security” (Munich Security Conference 2016). Infectious diseases were identified as a national security threat in 1995 based upon the assessment of the US National Science and Technology Council. In a 2000 report, the US National Intelligence Council stated that “(re-)emerging infectious diseases threatened U.S. citizens and armed forces, exacerbated social and political instability in countries and regions of U.S. interest” (Patrick 2011). Outbreaks of infectious diseases do not only cause human losses but seriously affect political, social, and economic circumstances (Menzel 2020).

There are different forms of terrorism, and each has its own preconditions. However, certain direct or indirect factors may help us better understand why acts of terrorist violence occur (Newman 2006). The definition of terrorism and, accordingly, the causes of it are both highly contested concepts in the scholarly literature (Lia and Skjølberg 2004; Schmid 2005). Yet, to provide a rigorous theoretical framework for the analysis in this section, an outline of the prevailing causes of terrorism is needed. When analyzing the reasons for terrorism, “this plethora of different elements, their mutual relations and the conditions that influence them” (Lia and Skjølberg 2004) should be scrutinized. It is important to stress here that terrorists are “rational and intentional actors” (Bjørørgo 2005), who take into consideration these precipitants during

their operation. We also need to see that these factors operate in causal processes and interplay among societal, group, and individual factors (Marone 2021). The discussion on this complex phenomenon does not purport to be complete, nor could it be. The purpose of this review is to offer a wide-ranging discussion of the idiosyncratic processes that may have an impact on the future evolution of terrorism. In the interest of exhaustiveness, for the purpose of this research, four sets of the underlying causal factors were identified: political, social, economic, and psychological circumstances.

### Political Factors

In the aftermath of a public health emergency, security and maintaining control can suffer significantly. Political tensions may also arise from the state's failure to provide essential facilities during the management of and the recovery from a natural disaster. Crisis management forces authorities to reconsider priorities and reallocate government resources. This can generate political, social, and economic instabilities (Price-Smith 2002). As a result, the disruption caused by such an extreme event can easily incentivize terrorist action (Berreni and Ostwald 2011). Failed or weak states without the capacity to provide basic needs to their citizens provide fertile ground for the emergence of terrorism. Terrorists are keen to exploit this power vacuum (Bjørøgo 2005). This happened, for instance, in Pakistan, following the devastating floods in the country in 2010. Taliban together with other terrorist groups capitalized on weakened state control and intensified their operation (Hasan 2010).

Political instability and terrorism are not unrelated (Hall 1994). A political crisis can ultimately be responsible for a surge in global terrorism (Schumacher and Schraeder 2019). State instability could generate conditions for "creating" terrorists as well as opportunities for terrorists to flourish (Piazza 2007). Infectious disease outbreaks can result in a lower level of political stability, considering that public services together with state capacity can be seriously eroded (Patrick 2011). A crisis situation like a pandemic can induce social tension and increase citizens' lack of faith in government (Rohwerder 2014). Such extreme events may have a serious impact on a country's social as well as political stability (Studies IfS 2014).

A surge in conspiracy theories may also generate public distrust in governments. Misleading or manipulated information was circulated during both the Spanish flu (Jackson 2018) and COVID-19 pandemic. After years of war propaganda, there was a general distrust of public information and governments during the 1918 flu pandemic. Conspir-

acy theorists blamed COVID-19 on the development of 5G networks, while allegedly radio waves were thought to be the reason for the 1918 flu (Woodward 2020). Trust in public health communication and transparent information, however, has turned out to be crucial. Misleading statements and fake news shared on social media platforms can hamper efforts to curb the consequences of a pandemic (Cotter 2020). Disinformation campaigns together with conspiratorial thinking during a public health emergency event pose significant security concerns (Davies, Wu, and Frank 2021).

## Social Factors

There are numerous social factors to consider during a pandemic that may lead to terrorism. First, experiencing discrimination based on ethnic or religious origin can give rise to political violence, which may manifest itself in ethnonationalist terrorism (Bjørge 2005). Scapegoats and victims of conspiracy theories may feel total alienation from society. Like the use of “Spanish flu,” “Chinese virus” during the COVID-19 pandemic quickly spread as a discriminatory term. This, combined with the intense fear of the pandemic, intolerance, propaganda narratives, racism, and stereotypes provided a breeding ground for hateful narratives and acts (Cotter 2020). Blaming foreigners for disease outbreaks is a catalyst for a rise in extremist narratives and activities, as seen with right-wing extremist voting during the Spanish flu. Historians and epidemiologists estimate that about a third of the world’s population was infected, and 2.5 to 5 percent of the world’s population died in the three waves of the 1918–1919 influenza pandemic (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2020).

Similarly, a sense of social injustice can also be a strong motivating factor for terrorism (Bjørge 2005). High social inequality may induce aggression, which may lead to violent acts of terrorism (Ola 2018). A disaster can arguably exacerbate pre-existing social divisions, leading to social-revolutionary terrorism. Research suggests that marginalized groups are disproportionately affected by the consequences of a disaster (Albala-Bertrand 1993; Bolin 2007; Cohen and Werker 2008). This together with the inequalities in the distribution of aid may also be an important determinant of terrorism (Azam and Delacroix 2006; Azam and Thelen 2008; Bandyopadhyay, Sandler, and Younas 2011; Basuchoudhary and Shughart 2010).

Alienation from a political system may lead to frustration. For these excluded individuals, terrorism may be a tempting option to exercise power (Bjørge 2005). Lockdowns during COVID-19 provided extrem-

ists with the “ideal time to exploit youth grievances about their lack of agency, their families’ economic distress, and their intense sense of disorientation, confusion, fear and anxiety” (Derish 2020). With digital schooling, the impact of lockdowns on the younger generation may deserve special attention. This captive young audience in the digital sphere is for terrorists an important pool for new recruits (Beach, Clay, and Saavedra 2020). The increase in general online presence also accelerated the spread of misinformation (Davies 2021).

The long-term consequences of a pandemic on the growth of a population are felt in areas that suffer the highest number of fatalities. Heavily affected towns in Germany during the Spanish flu had on average spent less per capita on their inhabitants in the decade following the outbreak. This generated notable problems within society, including an elevated level of violence, intolerance, and racism, meaning German urban centers were more likely to vote for extremist parties in the federal elections (Frankopan 2020).

One of the major differences between the Spanish flu and COVID-19 is the age groups affected. While the 1918 influenza targeted the youth, COVID-19 was extremely fatal to seniors (Derish 2020). Major losses in the older generation have inherently affected future societies (Blickle 2020). The effect of a pandemic on birth rate also has an impact on future societies. In 1921, in the aftermath of the Spanish flu, an increase in stillbirths and infant mortality was reported in Brazil. Girls were more likely to survive in the womb than boys, which scientists have argued was largely “because female fetuses are less vulnerable than male fetuses to diseases in general” (Frankopan 2020).

A pandemic may delay making decisions to have children because of the economic and public health instability. According to Beach et al., it has been implied by some studies that in the post-COVID era there has been a decline in births and an increase in miscarriages (Beach, Clay, and Saavedra 2020).

## **Economic Factors**

Pandemics pose a severe threat to the security and stability of an economy (Sarkodie and Owusu 2020), creating a gloomy economic forecast (Kanupriya 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic contributed heavily to declining economic growth, unemployment, and stagnation in the affected countries (Eisawy 2020). The OECD projected that global GDP would drop between 6 and 7.6 percent and unemployment would increase by 3.8 to 4.6 percent in 2020 (OECD 2020). The International Monetary Fund’s April 2021 World Economic Outlook predicted:

a stronger recovery for the global economy in 2021 and 2022 compared to the forecast in the previous October, with growth projected to be 6 percent in 2021 and 4.4 percent in 2022. Nonetheless, the outlook presents daunting challenges related to divergences in the speed of recovery both across and within countries and the potential for persistent economic damage from the crisis. Cumulative per capita income losses over 2020–22, compared to pre-pandemic projections, are equivalent to 20 percent of 2019 per capita GDP in emerging markets and developing economies (excluding China), while in advanced economies the losses are expected to be relatively smaller, at 11 percent. (International Monetary Fund 2021)

Compared to the economic consequences of the Spanish flu on the labor market, COVID-19 will likely not generate a negative labor supply shock of the same volume (Beach, Clay, and Saavedra 2020). This is because of the age of the most affected population. While the 1918 influenza outbreak was lethal to the working age, COVID-19 has been fatal to the oldest. It is also noteworthy that approximately 2 percent of the population died in the 1918 influenza pandemic. This suggests that “the pandemic resulted in a 6 percent decline in real GDP per capita and an 8 percent decline in real consumption per capita on average. These values are remarkably close to the OECD projections for the real GDP decline in 2020” (Barro, Ursua, and Weng 2020). Production decline due to labor shortage was recorded both during the Spanish flu and COVID-19 (Bodenhorn 2020). At the same time, the negative labor supply shock resulted in increased wages (Jedwab, Johnson, and Koyama 2020).

Outbreaks of infectious diseases also have severe economic consequences, diminishing living standards, affecting productivity, reducing fiscal resources and government revenue, affecting trade, and exacerbating real or perceived income inequalities (Price-Smith 2002). Extremists have been capitalizing on novel vulnerabilities including economic hardship and global uncertainty. Their ideologies strive to advance divisiveness and hatred by inciting acts of violence (Burchill 2020).

We now provide an overview of theoretical discussions involved in the economic considerations of a pandemic. First, economic grievances due to the novel circumstances are taken into account (Gassebner 2011). The debate on the role of economic conditions when investigating the root causes of terrorism has remained unresolved (Burgoon 2006). It has been a highly contested issue whether poverty and adverse economic conditions play an important role in explaining terrorism. Scholarly standpoints arguing that poor economic circumstances increase the probability of civil conflict<sup>1</sup> have been challenged by empirical studies (Krueger and Laitin 2004; Piazza 2006). In a similar vein, Abadie could not identify a significant association between terrorism and economic

variables (Abadie 2006). Furthermore, Feldmann and Perälä (2004) found no association between “economic performance or structural economic conditions and the incidence of nongovernmental terrorism.” Other studies still could not confidently support the hypothesis that terrorism is rooted in economic grievances (Berman and Laitin 2008; Blomberg and Hess 2008; Blomberg and Rosendorff 2009; Krueger and Maleckova 2003; Tavares 2004).

Krueger and Laitin (2008) concluded that poverty is not an economic condition for terrorism. And Piazza (2006) has contested the so-called rooted-in-poverty thesis. His analysis revealed that neither the GDP growth, inflation, stable prices or unemployment “are significant predictors of either terrorist incidents or casualties,” but he asserted that “low levels of economic and social development increase the appeal of political extremism and encourage political violence and instability” (ibid.). This is similar to Enders and Hoover’s position (2012). They argued that there is a “non-linear relationship between income and terrorism” but asserted that middle income is more conducive to terrorism. Blomberg et al., however, argue that economic contractions do lead to an increased likelihood of terrorist activities (Blomberg, Hess, and Weerapana 2004). And Goldstein’s study (2005) revealed that the overall terrorist risk is affected by unemployment rate.

When relating poverty and inequality with political violence, relative deprivation is considered “a link between economic disparity and the propensity of individuals to resort to violent action.” Gurr (1970), Chen (2003), Paxson (2002), and Li and Schaub (2004) argued that economic conditions influence deprivation and the feeling of injustice and therefore can ultimately induce political tension. Pandemics can disproportionately affect certain groups in society (Gross et al. 2020). During the COVID-19 lockdowns, inequality emerged where some occupations could be done remotely while other businesses had to shut down (Montenovo et al. 2020). Remote working, thanks to accelerated digital modernization, went some way in reducing the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the technology for this obviously lacking during the 1918 influenza (Nicola et al. 2020). Ultimately, social redistributive measures and policies at the national level (Burgoon 2006) and foreign aid (Azam and Delacroix 2006) are important instruments to alleviate citizen grievances and thereby reduce the occurrence of terrorism.

## Psychological Factors

In the scholarly literature, modifiable social and psychological factors have been identified that contribute to the genesis of the terrorist mind-

set. Victoroff (2005) argued that terrorist behavior is probably always determined by a combination of innate, biological, early developmental, and cognitive factors, temperament, environmental influences, and group dynamics. Certain novel social, economic, and psychological circumstances emerging with a pandemic seem to influence vulnerable individuals. In an apocalyptic experience, it may cause paranoia if all certainties in our lives are shaken (Guilhot 2020). Labeling some ethnic minorities and blaming them for spreading a virus can induce social tensions and conflict, leading to hatred and racism. Not only individuals but their families and the whole community may be affected by the accompanying psychological distress (Madhav et al. 2017).

Lockdowns, home offices and digital schooling quickly changed the regular ways of interacting during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social distancing established an irregular, more isolated lifestyle among average citizens (Russell Sage 2020), which has been strongly associated with anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Doyle et al. 2020). With the feeling that the state is incapable of proving adequate protection in a public health emergency incident, public mistrust can seriously get around. This psychological stress among the population can incite an elevated level of antigovernment activities (Price-Smith 2002).

## Conclusion

As the analysis has revealed, infectious disease outbreaks have serious political, social, economic, and psychological impacts. First, crisis management requires extraordinary resources and renders the possibility of political, social, and economic instability, which may be further exacerbated by manipulated disinformation campaigns. Violent nonstate actors may capitalize on the low level of stability in such challenging times. Second, political tension may arise from discrimination experienced as a scapegoat or victim of conspiracy theories during a pandemic. Frustration from these grievances makes isolated members of a society more likely to engage in political influence and violence. Third, a pandemic can have a serious effect on the global economy. Decline during COVID-19 was recorded globally both in real GDP and real consumption. Perceived economic hardship and uncertainty provide fertile ground for political extremist narratives. Fourth, the psychological impact of a pandemic, with social isolation to blame for increases in psychological stress, may lead to anxiety and depression, making people more vulnerable to hateful influences.

This chapter attempted to first introduce the security threat landscape at the time of the COVID-19 outbreak. Second, academic discourses on COVID-19's immediate impact on terrorism have been detailed. In line with this, we have explored emerging terrorist opportunities and challenges. In the final section, potential political, social, economic, and psychological causes of terrorism were examined in the context of COVID-19, and public health crises in general, to evaluate whether such emergencies create novel vulnerabilities terrorists can exploit.

## Note

1. For instance, Joseph Kahn and Tim Weiner, "World Leaders Rethinking Strategy on Aid to Poor," *The New York Times*, 18 March 2002; Alberto Alesina, Sule Ozler, Nouriel Roubini and Phillip Swagel, "Political Instability and Economic Growth," *Journal of Economic Growth*, 1996, 1(2): 189–211; Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers*, 2004, 56(4): 563–95; Edward Miguel, Shanker Satyanath and Ernst Sergenti, "Economic Shocks and Civil Conflict: An Instrumental Variables Approach," *Journal of Political Economy*, 2004, 112(4): 725–53; and Todd Sandler, "The Analytical Study of Terrorism: Taking Stock," *Journal of Peace Research*, 2014, 51(2): 257–71.

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