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

UPDATE | DECEMBER 2021

**United Nations Security Council
Counter-Terrorism Committee
Executive Directorate (CTED)**

Almost two years since the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, it continues to represent a global crisis which impacts Member States in varying degrees of scale, scope, and intensity. In order to address this formidable challenge, the United Nations has developed a comprehensive response to deal with the pandemic's fallout and create a better recovery plan for Member States.

Since the onset of the pandemic, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) has explored its impact on global terrorism. In doing so, it has continued to collaborate with all its partners — including Member States, United Nations agencies, member entities of its Global Research Network (GRN), civil society organizations (CSOs), and the private sector — in order to evaluate, monitor, and assess the short-, medium-, and long-term impacts of the pandemic on the terrorism landscape. Those findings have been shared in three previous analytical reports (published in June[1] and December 2020,[2] and June 2021,[3] respectively).

The present report concludes the series by summarizing CTED's findings to date, even though CTED fully recognizes that the pandemic is far from over and that most geographical regions and thematic areas are marked by a continuation of existing pandemic-related trends. It considers the potential long-term impacts of the pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism, and countering violent extremism (CVE), while acknowledging that those impacts are fluid and evolving and that more data and analysis will be required to draw comprehensive conclusions.

Key trends

Terrorism and violent extremism conducive to terrorism

Most pandemic-related trends in the areas of terrorism and counter-terrorism have overlapped across regions. Terrorist groups have sought to exploit pandemic-related socio-economic grievances and political tensions — often exacerbated by related restrictions, which have undermined human rights — to expand their influence, drive their recruitment efforts, and undermine State authority.

Terrorists and violent extremists have also sought to exploit pandemic-related sociocultural restrictions that have led people around the world to spend increasing time online, by strengthening their efforts to spread propaganda, recruit, and radicalize via virtual platforms (including gaming platforms). Although there is significant information regarding this pandemic-related terrorist and violent extremist activity (particularly online), there is as yet limited data on the long-term impacts of those recruitment and radicalization to violence efforts.

Experts, including the Financial Action Task Force,[4] suggest that pandemic-related changes in financial behaviours (especially the increase in the volume of contactless transactions and increased digital onboarding) have exacerbated terrorism-financing vulnerabilities, thereby

[1] CTED, The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism, and countering violent extremism (2020).
[2] CTED, Update: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism, and countering violent extremism (2020).
[3] CTED, Update on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism, and countering violent extremism (2021).
[4] Financial Action Task Force (FATF), Update: COVID-19-related Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing (2020).

impacting financial institutions' ability to conduct customer due diligence (CDD) and detect anomalies. Member States have also expressed concern at the use of proceeds from pandemic-related relief efforts for terrorism-financing purposes and new opportunities for terrorist groups to abuse fundraising platforms and the non-profit sector for terrorism financing, under the guise of charitable giving.

In conflict zones where the threat of terrorism is predominant, the pandemic appears to have had limited impact on terrorist activity, allowing pre-existing trends of violence conducted by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as Da'esh, and Al-Qaida affiliates to continue. In non-conflict zones, travel restrictions and quarantine measures have brought challenges for the planning and operational activities of terrorist groups, thereby undermining their ability to carry out attacks.

The most recent report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team pursuant to resolutions 1526 (2004) and 2253 (2015) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and the Taliban and associated individuals and entities suggests that, where pandemic-related restrictions have artificially and temporarily suppressed the threat of terrorism, their easing may result in an increase in terrorist violence.[5] However, given recent surges in COVID case numbers and the discovery of a highly transmissible new variant, any easing of restrictions may be temporarily halted or reversed. Although it is clear that COVID-19 has exacerbated many pre-existing issues and challenges that shape the terrorist threat landscape, more research is required to understand whether there is any correlation between pandemic-related impacts and increases in terrorist violence.

Counter-terrorism and CVE responses

During the pandemic, public health measures introduced by many States — including travel restrictions, strengthened border control, the use of biometrics and tracking applications on phones — have been a source of rising discontent among citizens and human rights advocates. Meanwhile, lockdowns and other social restrictions imposed to contain transmission of the virus have restricted (by necessity) freedom of movement and other human rights (including freedom of assembly, speech, and expression).

These measures, and the resulting closure of civic spaces, has made it hard for CSOs and other non-State CVE actors to conduct programmatic interventions (including gender-related interventions) in communities vulnerable to radicalization to violence. In this regard, the continued marginalization of certain communities (e.g., migrants and refugees), targeted hate speech, and the growing gender gap — all factors that have been exacerbated by the pandemic — remain significant causes of concern for human rights advocates. Further, the reinstatement of social restrictions and other containment measures in States facing surges from variants of the virus are leading to growing discontent and disillusionment with pandemic-related measures, causing social unrest in some areas.

---

[5] Twenty-eighth report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities (S/2021/655).

Some States have used pandemic-related restrictions to curb dissent by targeting groups (including civil society workers, human rights defenders, and journalists) that raise legitimate concerns. The proliferation of emergency measures and the curtailing of civil liberties have raised questions about State overreach which, if left unchecked, has the potential to exacerbate existing grievances and may be exploited by terrorists and violent extremists. The increased securitization of pandemic responses — leading to arrests, detentions, and extortion of civilians; the deployment of counter-terrorism tools and measures to implement pandemic-related restrictions; and the use of terrorism charges to prosecute COVID-19-related offences — remains a significant source of concern.

Many States have been significantly affected by the secondary impacts of the pandemic, including growing economic inequities and deepening social divisions, precipitated by an erosion of trust in Governments. Entire regions have suffered severe setbacks, risking the reversal of socio-economic progress. These economic impacts have also increased humanitarian needs, while travel restrictions have simultaneously curtailed humanitarian access and outreach.

These economic impacts have also necessitated the diversion of existing resources from counter-terrorism training and other capacity-building measures in some States. Decreased funding risks a retrenchment in counter-terrorism measures and security assistance, creating further challenges for States most at risk from terrorism, which typically require such assistance. Further, in fragile States already facing governance challenges, terrorist recruitment strategies based on economic factors may have an increasing impact.

Future challenges

The pandemic has caused unparalleled upheaval to the existing global order. As Member States juggle their recovery efforts with the pandemic's ongoing impact, including the discovery of new variants, the transnational nature of the challenge is clear. In some States, rising rates of inoculation (including boosters) and lowering infections had suggested that they may have turned a corner in combatting the pandemic. However, in many parts of the world, lack of access to vaccines caused by unequal distribution have left millions still vulnerable to the virus, allowing deadly variants to emerge and spread globally. Vaccine nationalism, growing transnational and domestic vaccination divides (often fuelled by misinformation and conspiracy theories) have continued to drive local and regional outbreaks. The resulting inequities could be exploited by terrorists and violent extremist groups in the future.

Member States must continue to uphold human rights while developing and implementing policies to contain the pandemic and avoid creating or exacerbating grievances by suppressing fundamental freedoms of individuals. In this regard, States need to ensure that pandemic-related social restrictions (including restrictions of human rights through the use of emergency powers) are strictly required by the exigencies of the situation, implemented fairly in a non-discriminatory manner and, most importantly, temporally limited.

Pandemic-related conspiracy theories and mis/dis-information will continue to fuel a situation that is conducive to societal divisions, a rise in hate speech and anti-democratic movements, and distrust in Governments and State institutions. Terrorist groups across ideological spectrums are already seeking to exploit social alienation and grievances rising from pandemic-related measures

and perceived State excesses by weaponizing those divisions. As new pandemic-related social restrictions result in closures of educational institutions, reduced employment and entertainment opportunities, and curtailed community programmes, there are concerns that resilience against violent extremism conducive to terrorism in fragile communities might be reduced, thereby making individuals more vulnerable to radicalization to violence in such settings.

In this altered geopolitical landscape, understanding and regulating the use of new technologies to prevent abuse by terrorist and violent extremist groups remains a priority. United Nations entities are working with Member States and other partners (including private-sector actors and civil society) to promote the effective and responsible use of new technologies, assist in the development of advanced monitoring methods, provide expertise in preventing abuse of the digital space for any terrorism-related purpose (including terrorism financing), and ensure that the use of technology to monitor border-control measures, enforce travel restrictions, and conduct contact tracing takes privacy concerns into consideration.

The pandemic has laid bare social inequities and structural challenges. It has also exposed how those vulnerabilities might be exploited by terrorists and their affiliates. Ongoing recovery efforts will provide an opportunity to rebuild social structures, based on the principles of cooperation, shared responsibility, enhanced multilateralism, and the meaningful inclusion of women across all spectrums, including in developing and implementing policies to address pandemic-related challenges. However, this will be achieved only if Member States effectively address emerging terrorist trends in the post-COVID-19 threat landscape; develop counter-terrorism responses that are coherent, targeted, human rights compliant and gender-and age sensitive; and adapt existing policies and measures to adequately respond to evolving challenges. CTED will continue its engagement and interaction with its partners to monitor and assess the ongoing impacts of the pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism, and CVE.