

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



CTED

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Recent trends and potential long-term impacts

Border management and law enforcement

Trends

Border control measures, including restrictions on international travel, curtailed terrorist movement, limiting their ability to conduct operations, recruit, and conduct other international activities.

Experts stated that the reduction in air passenger travel resulted in an increase in illicit activities using parcel services and mail cargo.

Respondents raised concerns about recent attacks against critical infrastructure could indicate that terrorists are shifting attention from “soft” targets, owing to increasing COVID-19 restrictions.

Potential long-term impacts

- As international commercial aviation slowly returns to pre-pandemic levels, respondents noted that screening and border-management mechanisms should anticipate a potential increase in both terrorist travel and other illicit activities, such as smuggling.
- Pandemic-related measures, including new technologies and procedures at points of entry, remain in place, even as the pandemic is brought under control in some regions. These measures, if retained long-term, might raise human rights concerns.
- An increase in the use of contactless border-management technology (and other new technologies) may also present opportunities for more effective and quicker information-sharing and international cooperation.
- Some respondents raised concerns regarding plans by some States to introduce COVID-19 vaccine passports, citing uncertainties regarding the efficacy of different vaccinations in reducing transmission.

Information and communication technologies (ICT)

Trends

- Terrorist and violent extremist groups have sought to expose an increasingly online global population to their propaganda on virtual platforms.
- Many platforms, especially those with less stringent content moderation policies, have struggled to handle the growth in traffic, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation by terrorist and violent extremist groups.
- With conspiracy theories proliferating online, large tech platforms have sought to combat misinformation/disinformation, including by expanding their actions against extreme right-wing (or “racially and ethnically motivated”) terrorist groups. These actions raise potential concerns about freedom of expression online.

- Cybercrime (including theft of identity, distributed denial of service and ransomware attacks) is increasingly prevalent. More evidence is required to establish its relationship (if any) with pandemic-related measures or trends.

Potential long-term impacts

- Countermeasures by large media platforms can cause violent extremists and delinquent individuals to migrate to platforms that are less closely monitoring their activities.
- Such countermeasures encourage individuals to use the dark web, creating additional monitoring challenges for States.
- De-platforming can increase the risk of social exclusion, potentially affecting individuals vulnerable to terrorist rhetoric and recruitment.
- Respondents recommended a more balanced approach to terrorist exclusion using ICT, which promotes alternative narratives, community resilience, social inclusion, and delinquent media literacy and mental health services.

reintegration (PRR)

Trends

of CTED's CSO partners concerns at the limited or implementation of gender-programmes – including used on CVE, tion and reintegration – dget reallocation.

There has been a global increase in harassment and abuse of during the pandemic, led by existing social ns.

Economic restrictions have led traditional gender roles, ing the care burden for women rmining their economic

Some justice and legal has been affected or ed, making it more difficult e accountability for s of women's human rights, g gender-based violence.

Potential long-term impacts

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

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

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

Trends

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

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

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

Potential long-term impacts

- Continued restrictions of CSOs or local stakeholders supporting individuals v reintegrate into society those being reintegrated delay the progress of re rehabilitation program reduce positive outcom

- Delays in judicial proceedings including obtaining search and arrest orders, could long-term impacts on o prevent and counter ter

Potential long-term impacts

Trends

Trends

Potential long-term impacts

Respondents reported that government stimulus programmes had been implemented, with the result that funds could be obtained through legitimate means and institutions.

It was also observed an increase in the use of virtual assets for financing purposes. Research is needed to determine whether this was a continuation of existing trends or a new trend since the pandemic.

Financial behaviours and activities that have impacted financial institutions' ability to conduct due diligence and detect financial anomalies.

Respondents raised concern at the potential abuse of COVID-19 relief payments or donations meant for pandemic-related relief efforts by terrorists.

Respondents noted that this concern could result in stricter anti-money-laundering/countering the financing of terrorism (AML/CFT) measures, thereby making it more difficult to effectively deliver aid to beneficiaries and pushing humanitarian funds into informal channels.

Other respondents suggested that there might be an increase in fraud, ransomware attacks, or similar types of criminal activities in relation to terrorism financing.

Preventing, detecting and suppressing the abuse of new payment technologies for terrorism-financing purposes is likely to be of increased importance, including through the effective and responsible use of new technologies (such as trustworthy Digital ID).

Member States have in some cases curtailed the rights to freedom of movement, assembly, speech, and expression, thereby further shrinking civic space and the freedom of CSOs to operate.

These restrictions have severely curtailed CVE programmes, including those involving engagement with communities, youth, women and marginalized populations.

Securitized COVID-19 responses (including arrests and detentions) have diminished trust among vulnerable populations and created fear and anger against government entities in several States.

Other repressive measures used to target government opponents include charges relating to knowingly spreading "fake news and false information" about the virus.

Reduced funding for CSO activities has decreased the quality and quantity of services provided by such organizations, potentially exacerbating challenges faced by vulnerable populations.

Respondents highlighted any new pandemic-related measures to be human rights compliant.

The survey results also indicate that emergency powers granted to Member States should be temporary and not be abused to suppress human rights.

In some Member States, human rights defenders are being at increased risk of being persecuted by terrorist groups.

Respondents noted the importance of Member States' responsibility on scientific data, to ensure protecting and promoting fundamental right to life and human beings.

Graphic impacts of the D-19 pandemic

omic-related trends on and counter-terrorism success regions. Some key trends include the following:

Following frustration, misperceptions among the population in many States at COVID-19 that they perceive as disproportionate and unjustified. Trends of ideology, pandemics, economic hardships, rising unemployment, growing inequality, and (insecurity) are potential drivers of increased terrorist threat.

States lag behind in addressing economic challenges and frustrations arising from economic, governance-related tensions between States and groups might increase.

Terrorist groups are already using the pandemic to cultivate legitimacy, expanding recruitment and radicalization through charity, the provision of monetary resources, and related support.

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

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

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

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

SMALL ISLAND STATES, INCLUDING STATES WITH TOURISM-DEPENDENT ECONOMIES

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

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

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

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

EXACERBATION OF SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY TENSIONS

Pandemic-related impacts have exacerbated a volatile socio-economic situation in States already facing internal tensions, particularly among minority groups are excluded from political, social or economic participation. Growing conspiracy theories and anti-Government sentiment may fuel existing societal tensions, coalescing violent extremism around their ideological frameworks.

- Minority groups have been impacted by the pandemic through online misinformation/cyberbullying and conspiracy theories targeting vulnerable communities and seek to exploit pre-existing social and communal tensions.

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

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

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POPULATIONS, IN INTERNAL CAMP, AND INDIVIDUALS

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

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

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

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

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

- Migrants who are stranded outside their States of origin in temporary camps at the borders or forced

to return to their States of origin without employment may be targeted by terrorist propaganda.

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

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

DEVELOPING STATES FACING ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

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

- The pandemic has led to some reductions in national and local capacities for stabilization and reduced international support for counter-terrorism operations,

mentoring, and training might impact the capability of security forces and dialogue aimed at countering the terrorist

- This trend is particularly in areas where terrorist challenge the State's weakened presence and especially if such groups successfully instrumentalize economic and social to expand to newer territories

- Many such States are struggling to access vaccination their citizens, in addition other infrastructural and challenges to the deployment of vaccination programmes

- Some terrorist groups have statements warning local populations against vaccinations against vaccination Somalia, for example, Al-Shabaab has warned against the vaccine and blamed Somalia's enemies for distributing substance among the

- The pandemic has placed considerable constraints on preparations and funding political tensions have seen in several States entering elections. Some survey results suggested that public opinion increased owing to the exploitation of the pandemic incumbents in post-pandemic

Studies

HUMANITARIAN CRISIS, COVID-19, AND ANTITERRORISM

Humanitarian needs continued during the pandemic, which has exacerbated economic downturns and armed conflict worldwide. However, increased restrictions on humanitarian aid outreach in regions of the world, where communities need humanitarian aid, continue to face a lack of livelihood opportunities, and exclusion from health systems.

Donors believed that the pandemic had contributed to an increase in attacks on humanitarian and health workers, particularly in conflict areas. Such attacks risk the sustainability of service provision and humanitarian assistance.

Rights of people in detention have been a priority in COVID-19 measures,

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

3. In States affected by terrorism, the gendered impacts of COVID-19 and COVID-19 responses have exacerbated inequalities. Women and girls have been particularly affected during the pandemic, as reflected in an increase in sexual and gender-based violence, forced marriage, human trafficking, and sexual exploitation.
4. There are concerns that increasing funding gaps could prevent the humanitarian community from adequately addressing humanitarian needs, with respect in particular to protection activities. The redirection of funds from pre-existing humanitarian priorities to COVID-19 responses could have a negative impact on previously identified needs of already vulnerable populations.

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

Long-term challenges:

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

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

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

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

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

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

EVIDENCE-BASED RESEARCH AND UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON TERRORISM

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

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

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

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

VACCINATIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD IN COUNTERING TERRORISM

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusions

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

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

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

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

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

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