**CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE
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STUDY SUBJECT
NATO IN THE COVID 19 ENVIRONMENT
AND THE THREAT OF TERRORISM

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FOREWORD

NATO's Counter-Terrorism objectives are to project stability and support cooperative security[1] which is closely linked to NATO's three essential core tasks - collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security. The reality is military power alone will not be able to deter, defend against, defeat, nor address the root causes of terrorism. The best methods to address root causes of terrorism are through Whole of Government (WoG) and Whole of Society (WoS). NATO must engage with Allies, Partner Nations, Nations of Interest, the International Community, Non-Governmental Organizations, and civil society to set conditions inside of nations to address the grievances and root causes of terrorism through the application of diplomacy and soft power by, with, and through Partner Nations and Nations of Interest.

COVID-19 presents serious challenges to all nations and especially to nations that were struggling before the crisis to meet the needs of their populations and combat terrorism. The economic downturn as a result of COVID-19 makes it more difficult for nations to address the medical and basic needs of their citizens as these nations have less revenue coming in and the international community has less money for aid. As nations struggle to address the needs and grievances of their people, terrorist organizations seek to exploit the economic, political, and social crisis for their own benefit. Terrorist organizations seek to: divide populations based on ethnic and cultural lines, turn people against their governments due to the failure of governments to adequately respond to the pandemic, and exploit grievances in order to advance their agendas.

The threat of bioterrorism will only increase post COVID-19. Many terrorist groups have previously tried to acquire or create biological weapons and agents with limited success. COVID-19 has shown the power an easily transmitted virus can wreak on the world. The attempt to weaponize similar viruses and biological elements will most certainly increase.

The following study presents terrorism threats and opportunities in the near term in light of COVID-19.

Ankara, August 28, 2020.

Colonel Daniel W.STONE (US AF)

Acting Director

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[1] MC 0472/1 MILITARY COMMITTEE CONCEPT FOR COUNTER - TERRORISM

NATO IN THE COVID-19 ENVIRONMENT
AND THE THREAT OF TERRORISM

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Introduction

Terrorism has evolved significantly in terms of its nature, goals, tactics, strategies and targets since the end of the Cold War. This makes it difficult to identify, prevent and counter the terrorism phenomenon. Terrorist attacks have become more lethal and extensive in terms of their consequences. They are now targeting civilians as much as they do governmental and public entities. The motives have also changed and ideological beliefs to legitimize violent acts have become more available. Compared to traditional groups/structures, the organizational structures of terrorist groups have also changed and they are now loosely organized and transnational; therefore, they have become more difficult to detect and disrupt.

Counter-terrorism is a difficult investment to finalize fully because as states take steps to prevent ongoing radicalization and terrorist attacks, terrorist organizations are skillful in finding new vulnerabilities to be exploited. For this reason, counter-terrorism is an enterprise that is never-ending and requires long-lasting efforts. Hence, it needs to be constantly updated in accordance with new developments and dynamics. Therefore, terrorism with all its manifestations remains a major international problem that needs continuous attention and adaptive counter strategies.

It is important to appreciate successful efforts so far in understanding and combating terrorism; however, it is also of value to be paying attention to the evolving nature of terrorism. Therefore, being adaptive is key to preventing terrorist groups from exploiting new vulnerabilities and opportunities of the current age. In this respect, this study introduces the current situation of terrorism in general and the growing threats with the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, it first focuses on the evolution of the understanding of security in general and discusses terrorism threats and opportunities in the near future from NATO's perspective. Then, the study elaborates on the potential of terrorism in the COVID-19 environment. In the last section, the study points out implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for NATO with special reference to counterterrorism.

Broadening the Security Agenda: Terrorism Threats and Opportunities in the Near Future

Security is defined simply as being safe or the absence of threat(s). In a traditional understanding, the concept of security had only been associated with state affairs for many years. In line with this understanding, as the sovereign power within its boundaries, the state was assumed the only source, subject and the purpose of security. However, the developments that have occurred

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since the 1970s and the academic studies conducted within the framework of these developments challenged the traditional security approach. In this vein, it has been well understood that neither threats nor the concept of security might be narrowed down into only a military character and limited to certain geographies. In the current understanding, security studies problematize new concepts such as organized crime, environmental pollution, rivalries for natural resources, migration, poverty and deprivation. The 1993 Humanitarian Development Report of the United Nations regarding the change in the understanding of security pointed out a remarkable fact, the importance of which would become more visible in the following years. "The concept of security must change – from an exclusive stress on national security to a much greater stress on people's security, from security through armaments to security through human development, from territorial security to food, employment and environmental security."[1]

In fact, the evolution of the concept of security in recent decades is striking. Security is no longer defined only by states nor by their boundaries. As communication and transportation opportunities increase in parallel with the rapid development of technology, boundaries no longer bound. Accordingly, the sources, dimensions and consequences of threats and risks have a transboundary character. This leads to the emergence of more diverse sets of actors and motivations posing significant threats to the Alliance. These developments have deeply affected the concept of security and it has expanded and deepened. While broadening of security means that it refers to multiple issues such as economic, social, environmental, cyber as well as military issues, the deepening of security refers to how the concept makes sense not only at the state level but also at the individual, group, society, state, regional and global levels.[2] Another important turning point in the literature on security in recent decades is the inclusion of the perceptual dimension of security understanding. In fact, the relative nature of the concept is hardly a new phenomenon. In the 1960s, Arnold Wolfers stated that security has two dimensions. While in an objective sense, it measures the absence of threats to acquired values, in a subjective sense, it refers to the absence of fear that such values will be attacked.[3] In summary, it appears possible to discuss a multi-dimensional and multilateral understanding of security. The question to be asked at this point is related to the implications of the evolving nature of this understanding of security in relation to terrorism.

Globalization has brought new opportunities; however, it has made threats more interconnected. The world is increasingly becoming more inter-connected and inter-dependent not only in digital spaces but also in physical terms.[4] With the advancement and ease of communication and transportation, terrorist groups are now more transnational in terms of militancy and their activities. They have become able to build transnational links through transnational means of

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[1] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report 1993*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 2.

[2] For an in-depth discussion, see Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams, "Broadening the Agenda of Security Studies: Politics and Methods", *Mershon International Studies Review*, Vol. 40, Issue 2, October 1996, pp. 229-254; Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen, *The Evolution of International Security Studies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 187-225.

[3] Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration: Essays on International Politics*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1962, pp. 147-165.

[4] William C. Banks and Katja Samuel, "Hybrid Threats, Terrorism, and Resilience Planning", *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism-The Hague*, 17 September 2019, https://icct.nl/publication/hybrid-threats-terrorism-and-resilience-planning/

communication and transportation. These links allow them to improve their tactics and techniques and broaden their propaganda efforts and activities. According to many expert reports, the transnational reach and scope of terrorism pose greater and more significant security challenges than the traditional challenges within a specific area.[5]

Among others, another significant trend in terrorism is the use of technology, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), drones or the Internet. Technological developments allow states to take active measures to detect, identify and prevent terrorism; however, these developments are also available for terrorist organizations. First, although it is questionable whether terrorist groups actually need to perform AI attacks due to the existence of readily available suicide attackers, it is also a reality that it is not always easy to lead terrorists to commit assassinations, especially in certain types of terrorist groups. Therefore, from their perspective, the use of AI might be considered an additional asset for such groups to conduct lethal attacks. Second, the use of drones by terrorists may be viewed as a dystopian scenario despite there being a number of counter-measures against drones; nevertheless, drone usage cannot be ignored by security officials. Third, the use of the online space by terrorists for propaganda, communication and attacks is probably the most likely imminent threat in this category for every type of terrorism.[6]

This paper outlines current trends, in and rising threats of, terrorism. Moreover, it significantly notes that one important challenge posed by terrorism is the variety of threat actors in terms of their manifestations and ideologies. Since terrorist groups are actors of their time and adaptive to new innovative technologies, counter-terrorism experts and officials need to anticipate new forms of threat in order not to suffer from failure of imagination.[7] Therefore, NATO needs to reshape existing structures and create new departments in accordance with the changing nature of terrorism. In addition to conventional terrorism, such as those that are leftist, ethnic-separatist and religiously motivated, it is highly possible that the agenda of security officials will be increasingly preoccupied with the emergence of new types of terrorism in the near future.

First, as the infrastructure of states and private companies as well as individual lives are becoming dependent upon cyber space, individuals, institutions and states are becoming subject to cyber threats. By definition, cyber-terrorism is the illegal use of a computer, computer networks or other forms of information communication technology for political causes by terrorists. It may aim to produce propaganda, communicate, collect information or directly carry out terrorist attacks causing cyber or physical casualties. In the last decade, there has been a growing extremist ecosystem online[8] and it seems that after the experience of DAESH's virtual presence, cyber-

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[5] Mauricio Artiñano et al., "Adapting and Evolving: The Implications of Transnational Terrorism for UN Field Missions", *Princeton University, Woodrow Wilson School*, Graduate Policy Workshop, April 2014, https://spia.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/content/docs/591c_Adapting_and_Evolving_The_Implications_of_Transnational_Terrorism.pdf.

[6] Renske van der Veer, "Terrorism in the Age of Technology", *Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International Relations*, 4 December 2019, https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2019/strategic-monitor-2019-2020/terrorism-in-the-age-of-technology/.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Baris Kirdemir, "Evolution of Violent Extremist and Terrorist Threats on Social Web", *Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies*, February 2020, p. 1, https://edam.org.tr/en/evolution-of-violent-extremist-and-terrorist-threats-on-social-web/.

terrorism is going to be a high security priority in the near future as terrorist organizations increasingly exploit the digital world.[9] In fact, cyber-terrorism is not a new phenomenon for the Alliance with NATO being committed to improving its defense capabilities against cyber-attacks at the 2002 Prague Summit.[10] In 2010, member states stated that "Cyber-attacks are becoming more frequent, more organized and more costly in the damage that they inflict on government administrations, businesses, economies and potentially to transportation and supply networks and other critical infrastructure. They can reach a threshold that threatens national and Euro-Atlantic prosperity, security and stability."[11] Therefore, it is important to note that the cyber sphere poses new security challenges and threats that NATO must address. Moreover, it must improve its capabilities in countering cyber-terrorism in terms of education, training and exercise activities.

Second, a revival of militant right-wing extremist groups in the Euro-Atlantic area is a growing security threat for the Alliance. Extreme right-wing terrorism is a unique form of political violence associated with a shifting, complex and overlapping milieu of individuals, groups and movements, rather than the traditional form of a terrorist organization with a hierarchical structure. Although it has traditionally been generally linked by hatred and racism in terms of hate crime and organized crime, multiple large scale and organized attacks in the last decade have had experts address the issue in the form of terrorist violence.[12] As the transnational links between these terrorist individuals and groups has increased with the advancement of Internet technology, these groups have had the opportunity to improve their propaganda tactics and assault strategies.[13] Therefore, all estimates state that there is going to be an increasing trend in extreme right-wing terrorism in the upcoming decades, which in turn will enhance the polarization of multicultural societies of Europe and North America. In summary, this will result in further extremism of different parts of society because radicalization is a mutually constructive process.[14]

Another significant form of terrorism for the near future is bioterrorism. Although pandemics are natural events, the severe security implications of the COVID-19 pandemic have reminded us once again that it is also possible for terrorist groups to weaponize biological agents for their political goals. COVID-19 primarily emerged as a health problem at the individual level but affected communities in certain cities or neighborhoods during the first expansion phase and became a social problem in a number of countries with the spread of the situation across those countries. Then it became a serious threat to states when it became a public health issue and turned into a global threat by eventually affecting different parts of the world as a transnational threat in

[9] "Internet Organized Crime Threat Assessment (IOCTA)", *European Cybercrime Centre (EUROPOL)*, 2019, p. 9, https://www.europol.europa.eu/iocta-report.

[10] "NATO Prague Summit Declaration – Press Release", *NATO*, 21 November 2002, http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2002/p02-127e.htm.

[11] "Active Engagement, Modern Defence: Strategic Concept for the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation", *NATO*, 19 November 2010, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_68580.htm.

[12] "Member States Concerned by the Growing and increasingly Transnational Threat of Extreme Right-wing Terrorism", *United Nations Security Council, Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED)*, April 2020, p. 2, https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CTED_Trends_Alert_Extreme_Right-Wing_Terrorism.pdf.

[13] Ibid. p. 4.

[14] Daniel Koehler, "Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism in Europe: Current Developments and Issues for the Future", *PRISM*, Vol. 6, Issue 2, 2016, pp. 85-104.

terms of the deepening of security understanding. In terms of the broadening of security, when COVID-19 became a pandemic, it immediately became of concern not only as a health issue but also as a social, economic and military issue. On the other hand, it has also become a serious cyber security issue due to daily life and professional life having become dependent on digital technologies over the Internet as people stayed at home and worked at home extensively. In terms of perception, COVID-19 has created a serious threat perception at both the individual and social levels. Looting of markets in some countries, excessive stock shopping, unavailability of health products in the market, some anger and violent incidents as a reaction to the measures taken in terms of quarantine and social distancing can be considered as indicators of this public perception caused by the COVID-19 virus. The extension of the COVID-19 pandemic and insufficient measures taken by some states has reinforced the perception of the threat in society. Therefore, the capacity, adequacy and legitimacy of states have also been questioned. To conclude, vulnerabilities and negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic may push terrorists to seek new ways to reconsider their strategies. Then, the question becomes what the COVID-19 pandemic or bioterrorism means in terms of a multi-level, multilateral and multi-dimensional security understanding for the Alliance.

Potential of Terrorism in the COVID-19 Environment

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a health, social, economic and political crisis at a global scale. The virus has infected millions of people and killed more than half a million. It also has economic implications with movement restrictions, social isolation policies, stay-at-home practices that lead to economic recession, massive unemployment and a dramatic fall in world trade. The economic implications inevitably bring harsh social consequences to all segments of society; however, they are particularly detrimental to those living in vulnerable situations. In addition, the pandemic has political impacts in many countries causing declarations of states of emergency, postponing elections and the suspension of legislative elections. Although governments are facing difficulties in handling such health, social, economic and political conditions, it is by their very nature that terrorist groups, seeking to leverage any vulnerabilities, tend to adapt to and exploit conditions of instability and uncertainty.[15] There are reports that some white supremacist, far left extremist and religiously motivated groups have already begun encouraging their militants to take advantage of the fragilities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.[16] Given the conditions created by the COVID-19 environment for terrorist groups, António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, stated that "Psycho-social, economic and political stresses associated with COVID-19 have risen dramatically... ISIL, al-Qaeda, their regional

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[15] Gray Ackerman and Hayley Peterson, "Terrorism and COVID-19: Actual and Potential Impacts", *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 14, Issue 3, June 2020, pp. 61-62.

[16] Hunter Walker and Jana winter, "Federal law enforcement document reveals white supremacists discussed using coronavirus as a bioweapon", *MSN News*, 22 March 2020,
https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/federal-law-enforcement-document-reveals-white-supremacists-discussed-using-coronavirus-as-a-bioweapon/ar-BB11vT0H; Simon Osborne, "Far left extremists urge riots, looting and violent uprising amid coronavirus chaos", *Express*, 19 March 2020,
https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1257518/coronavirus-germany-far-left-extremists-riot-looting-violence;
"Contending with ISIS in the Time of Coronavirus", *International Crisis Group*, 31 March 2020,
https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/contending-isis-time-coronavirus.

affiliates in addition to neo-Nazis, white supremacists and other hate groups seek to exploit divisions, local conflicts, governance failures and grievances to advance their objectives…"[17]

In light of these, the health, social, economic and political implications of the COVID-19 pandemic have provided terrorist groups with opportunities to spread disinformation, propaganda and recruit new militants through intensified online activity during lockdowns, thereby diversifying their targets and expanding their support base, most notably in fragile and failed states.

Breeding Ground for Violent Extremist Propaganda, Radicalization and Recruitment

The COVID-19 virus has forced governments to implement extraordinary measures such as social distancing and lockdown practices in order to contain the pandemic. These measures have made people stay at home with very limited real social interaction. As a result, people are now spending most of their time online as they continue their business, do their shopping, socialize, entertain themselves and order meals through their computers, tablets, cell phones and smart TVs at home.[18] In addition to the effect on how people live, the measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic have had negative psychological impacts on society. Imposed lockdown practices, in this regard, appear to have produced dissatisfaction, anxiety, hysteria, suspicion, fear, distress, anger, confusion, denial, frustration, loneliness, despair and insomnia, all of which may be intensified by forced quarantine, uncertainty of the progression of the pandemic, financial losses due to economic regression and insufficient supply of basic necessities.[19] These setbacks make people more susceptible to extremist propaganda and radicalizing narratives that provide straightforward answers to uncertainties and promise simple solutions to problems. Hence, as Ackerman and Peterson state, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a fertile environment for terrorist groups to spread their extremist propaganda and radicalization.[20]

Given the implications of the COVID-19 virus on people's lives and psychological state, terrorist groups have gained new ways to spread extremist propaganda, expand radicalization activities and recruit new militants. As people have been spending more of their lives online and experiencing the psychological impact of this, there has been an increasing rate of unsupervised Internet usage, which offers terrorist groups an opportunity to interact anonymously with an increasing number of people from all segments of society, spread their extremist and radical ideas in addition to disinformation and conspiracy theories. Such activities aim to sow distrust in governmental authorities and destabilize public order thereby increasing their support from society and expanding their base for recruitment.

A study conducted by Moonshot CVE, for instance, has demonstrated that there was a 13-percent increase in online engagement with the violent extremist content on Google across the

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[17] Beyza Binnur Dönmez, "UN: Terrorists must not exploit post-virus fragilities", *Anadolu Agency*, 6 June 2020, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/un-terrorists-must-not-exploit-post-virus-fragilities/1901744.

[18] Ella Koeze and Nathaniel Popper, "The Virus Change the Way We Internet", *The New York Times,* 7 April 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/07/technology/coronavirus-internet-use.html.

[19] Souvik Dubey, Payel Biswas, Ritwik Ghosh, Subhankar Chatterjee, Mahua Jana Dubey, Subham Chatterjee, Durjoy Lahiri and Carl J. Lavie, "Psychosocial impact of Covid-19", *Diabetes & Metabolic Syndrome: Clinical Research & Review*, Vol. 14, 2020, p. 780.

[20] Ackerman and Peterson, "Terrorism and COVID-19", p. 61.

United States between 30 March 2020 and 5 April 2020. The level of engagement was even higher, 21% in places where lockdown practices had been in place for more than ten days.[21] Another study by London-based *Institute for Strategic Dialogue* has shown that while a far-right white supremacist *Telegram* channel, which focuses on messaging related to COVID-19, grew from 300 users to 2,700. Other far-right channels grew by more than 6,000 users in March.[22] Far-right groups are very organized on online social platforms such as *Telegram, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Gab* and others. These groups have been capitalizing on people's fears and anxiety emanating from the COVID-19 environment by spreading disinformation, conspiracy theories and racist, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic and anti-migrant hate speech. Far-right groups are calling for people to commit vandalism and terrorism, be they direct assaults on Jews, Muslims, migrants and law enforcement or using the virus as a biological weapon by coughing in crowded places.[23]

In addition, religiously motivated terror groups such as DAESH, Boko Haram, and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Al-Shabaab have been framing the pandemic as a geopolitical opportunity and spreading narratives related to the COVID-19 virus to appeal to people's attention for further radicalization. For example, DAESH magazine al-Naba portrayed the COVID-19 virus as God's painful torment brought down on the disbelievers and thus the "Crusaders'" worst nightmare. In this respect, the virus was labelled a "divine element" sent by God as a punishment for those targeting believers such China for its treatment of the Uyghur Muslim population and Western countries for their siege against DAESH. In line with this, DAESH has been urging its militants to launch attacks and take advantage of the negative ramifications of the COVID-19 virus on nations' economies and stability.[24] Accordingly, DAESH has identified a two-pronged focus during this COVID-19 time: first, conducting prison breaks and freeing its militants in Iraq and Syria, and second, reclaiming territories it had once claimed.[25] Moreover, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria has been spreading narratives that link the outbreak of the pandemic with Muslims deaths at the hands of the so-called *kafirs* (disbelievers) all over the world. The weekly Iba' magazine affiliated with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham stated

> This [the outbreak of the COVID-19] coincides with a state of anxiety and fear of the unknown striking the peoples and governments amid complete inability to deal with a virus only seen by the microscopes and which has been harvesting thousands of souls here and there, and infecting hundreds of thousands among them the heads of kufr [disbelief] and criminality while they have killed and shed the blood of

[21] "The Impact of Social Distancing on Engagement with Violent Extremist Content Online in the United States", *Moonshot CVE*, 14 April 2020, http://moonshotcve.com/social-distancing-white-supremacy/.

[22] Billy Perrigo, "White Supremacist Groups are Recruiting with Help from Coronavirus and a Popular Messaging App", *Time*, 8 April 2020, https://time.com/5817665/coronavirus-conspiracy-theories-white-supremacist-groups/.

[23] Jason Wilson, "Disinformation and blame: how America's far right is capitalizing on coronavirus", *Guardian*, 19 March 2020,
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/19/america-far-right-coronavirus-outbreak-trump-alex-jones;
CJ Werleman, " The coronavirus pandemic is a rallying cry for far-right bigots", *TRT World*, 2 April 2020,
https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/the-coronavirus-pandemic-is-a-rallying-cry-for-far-right-bigots-35053.

[24] Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Islamic State Editorial on the Coronavirus Pandemic", *Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi Blog,* 19 March 2020, http://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/03/islamic-state-editorial-on-the-coronavirus; also see Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Coronavirus and Official Islamic State Output: An Analysis", *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, 15 April 2020,
https://gnet-research.org/2020/04/15/coronavirus-and-official-islamic-state-output-an-analysis/.

[25] Abdul Basit, "The Covid-19 Pandemic", *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, Vol. 12, Issue 3, April 2020, p. 8.

the Muslims all over the world. And it is as though the gnat that God (Almighty and Exalted is He) sent to destroy Nimrod – the greatest of the tyrants of the earth in his time – is conceived in this small entity in order to harvest through it heads that have tyrannized and killed thousands of the Muslims.[26]

Similarly, the al-Qaeda linked al-Shabab terror group in Somalia has been spreading propaganda that the COVID-19 pandemic has been spread "by the crusader forces who have invaded the country and the disbelieving countries that support them."[27]

Failed States as Safe Havens for Terrorist Groups

Although the COVID-19 pandemic erupted as a health issue, it has transformed into a socio-political and economic crisis at a global scale. In this respect, the COVID-19 virus has demonstrated that pandemics not only lead to widespread humanitarian concerns but also present real and multi-dimensional security threats. Accordingly, there are broadly three implications.[28] First, pandemics threaten the health and well-being of individuals for whose preservation states are principal actors. If large numbers of people are incapacitated or lose their lives, it would become difficult to provide health services to entire populations in a timely and fair manner. Second, pandemics may disrupt social order and thus create instability. In this respect, lockdown practices and large numbers of people unwilling or unable to go to work may cause disruptions in providing social services and thus threaten the functioning of the state. Third, pandemics may have far-reaching consequences in the economic sphere due to the imposition of restrictions to halt the spread of the virus. The most effective way to fight against a pandemic is to control, or stop if necessary, social life. However, this also means the switching of economic activities. On this, Kristalina Georgieva, IMF Managing Director, stated as follows:

> Given the necessary containment measures to slow the spread of the virus, the world economy is taking a substantial hit. This is especially true for retail, hospitality, transport, and tourism. In most countries, the majority of workers are either self-employed or employed by small and medium-sized enterprises. These businesses and workers are especially exposed.
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> And just as the health crisis hits vulnerable people hardest, the economic crisis is expected to hit vulnerable countries hardest.[29]

Accordingly, health and the socio-political and economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic would bring catastrophic consequences to fragile states in the international system. According to the Council of the European Union,

> fragility refers to weak or failing structures and to situations where the social contract is broken due to the State's incapacity or unwillingness to deal with its basic functions, meet its obligations and responsibilities regarding the rule of law, protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, security

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[26] Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Jihadist Perspectives on Coronavirus Pandemic: Primary Sources", *Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi Blog,* 25 March 2020, https://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/03/jihadist-perspectives-on-coronavirus-pandemic.

[27] "Coronavirus: Fighting al-Shabab propaganda in Somalia", *BBC News,* 2 April 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52103799.

[28] Collin McInnes, "Health" in Paul D. Williams (ed.), *Security: An Introduction,* London: Routledge, 2008, pp. 278-279.

[29] Kristalina Georgieva, "Confronting the Crisis: Priorities for the Global Economy", *IMF,* 9 April 2020, https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/04/07/sp040920-SMs2020-Curtain-Raiser.

and safety of its population, poverty reduction, service delivery, the transparent and equitable management of resources and access to power.[30]

Given the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an increasing risk that fragile states in the international system might transform into failed states, which present breeding grounds for threats to international peace and security, such as instability, organized crime, refugee flows, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and terrorism. Hence, state fragility and failure may cause a wide range of security threats at different levels. For instance, the European Security Strategy, adopted by the European Union Heads of States in 2003, identified that "Collapse of the State can be associated with obvious threats, such as organized crime or terrorism. State failure is an alarming phenomenon that undermines global governance and adds to regional instability."[31] In a similar vein, the 2017 National Security Strategy of the United States underlined that "Transnational threat organizations ... and organized crime, often operate freely from fragile states and undermine sovereign governments. Failing states can destabilize entire regions."[32]

In parallel with official documents that stress the link between failed states and terrorism, scholarly studies demonstrate how failed states constitute breeding grounds for terrorist groups. First, as Rotberg (2003) presents, failed states leaving a power vacuum, are incapable of asserting sovereignty within their territories.[33] These states are naturally attractive to terrorist groups in the sense that there is a lack of governmental authority and thus ineffective counterterrorism measures. As a result, failed states present safe havens for terror groups as they are able to function with impunity. Hence, terror groups gain capabilities of establishing training camps, planning attacks and engaging in financial and pro-social activities.[34]

In addition to the attractiveness of failed states to terrorist groups, Howard's study (2010) demonstrated that individuals in failed states are more likely to be attracted to radicalization and political violence as failed states are incapable of fulfilling their responsibilities to citizens, even the most basic ones of providing safety, shelter, nutrition and medical assistance.[35] Terrorist groups seek to take advantage of these fragilities by shouldering those responsibilities and obtaining a degree of legitimacy among their people. Therefore, individuals begin to interact with radical ideologies and become more susceptible to terrorist networks. Consequently, terror groups not only

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[30] "Council Conclusions on a EU response to situations of fragility", *Council of the European Union*, 2831st External Relations Council Meeting, 19-20 November 2007.

[31] "European Security Strategy: A Secure Europe in a Better World", *Council of the European Union*, 2009, pp. 31-32.

[32] "National Security Strategy of the United States of America", *The White House*, December 2017, p. 39.

[33] Robert I. Rotberg, "Failed States in a World of Terror", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, Issue 4, July-August 2002, p. 128.

[34] See J. A. Piazza, "Draining the Swamp: Democracy Promotion, State Failure, and Terrorism in 19 Middle Eastern Countries", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 30, Issue 6, 2007, pp. 521-539; Peter Tikuisis, "On the relationship between weak states and terrorism", *Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, January 2009, pp. 66-79;Tiffiany Howard, "Failed States and the Spread of Terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 33, Issue 11, 2010, pp. 960-988; Bridget L. Coggins, "Does State Failure Cause Terrorism? An Empirical Analysis (1999-2008)", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 59, Issue 3, April 2015, pp. 455-483; Justin George, "State Failure and Transnational Terrorism: An Empirical Analysis", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 62, Issue 3, March 2018, pp. 471-496.

[35] Howard, "Failed States and the Spread of Terrorism", p. 962.

acquire sanctuary within the territories of failed states, they also obtain a support base among the population and expand their recruitment pools.

From this point, terrorist groups have been using the opportunities created by the COVID-19 pandemic to increase their power and influence in fragile and failed states in the international system. Given the halted or reduced international counterterrorism assistance missions and peacebuilding initiatives in fragile areas due to the effects of the COVID-19, the capacities of local security forces have declined dramatically. There are reports that Boko Haram, leaving 92 soldiers killed in Chad and 47 soldiers killed in Nigeria, has stepped up attacks in West Africa while affiliates of DAESH have claimed the strategic port city of Mocimboa da Praia in Mozambique.[36] Moreover, DAESH has launched new offensives in Iraq and Syria. It is reported that there were 151 DAESH attacks in April, presenting a 50-percent increase from the previous month. In May, the number was even higher with 193 attacks. The characteristics of attacks have also shifted from "basic kidnapping and shake-downs of local officials to more brazen car bombs, roadside ambushes, sniper attacks and suicide bombings of police and military forces."[37]

Terror groups have also engaged in pro-social activities to gain trust and appreciation among populations and thus a degree of legitimacy. These activities would contribute to increasing the radicalization of individuals in fragile and failed states that are unable or unwilling to provide services to their citizens. Hence, terror groups would become more embedded in society, rendering it more difficult to fight against terrorism. In this respect, the Taliban in Afghanistan has offered safe access to health care personnel crossing its territory, initiating a public healthcare campaign to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus.[38] Similarly, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Syria, citing World Health Organization procedures, published guidelines on social distancing and hygiene measures in March.[39] Among those engaging in pro-social activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, Hezbollah in Lebanon has been the most active terror group. It is reported that Hezbollah has mobilized approximately 25,000 people, including 1,500 doctors, 3,000 nurses and paramedics and 20,000 activists to support the efforts to contain the pandemic. Hezbollah has also deployed 4 hospitals, 32 medical centers and more than 100 emergency vehicles for the treatment of infected patients and has even rented a hotel to be used for quarantine measures.[40]

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[36] Abu-Bakarr Jalloh, "Increased terror attacks in Africa amid coronavirus pandemic", *Deutsche Welle*, 9 April 2020, https://www.dw.com/en/increased-terror-attacks-in-africa-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/a-53066398

[37] Andrew Hanna, "ISIS Offensive Exploits Pandemic", *Wilson Center*, 8 June 2020, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/isis-offensive-exploits-pandemic.

[38] Colin p. Clarke, "Yesterday's Terrorists Are Today's Public Health Providers", *Foreign Policy*, 8 April 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/08/terrorists-nonstate-ungoverned-health-providers-coronavirus-pandemic/.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Tom Perry and Laila Bassam, "Hezbollah deploys medics, hospitals against coronavirus in Lebanon", *Reuters*, 26 March 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-hezbollah/hezbollah-deploys-medics-hospitals-against-coronavirus-in-lebanon-idUSKBN21C3R7; Andrew Hanna, "What Islamists Are Doing and Saying on COVID-19 Crisis", *Wilson Center*, 14 May 2020, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/what-islamists-are-doing-and-saying-covid-19-crisis.

Increasing Awareness of Terrorist Groups on the Effects of Bioterrorism

Throughout history, there have been many examples of biological agents having been weaponized for the purposes of biological warfare and bioterrorism. One of the earliest examples dates back to the pre-historic era when the Hittites and Scythians sent tularemia infected rams to spread infectious diseases in the ranks of their enemies in the 14th century BC.[41] A more recent example of biological warfare is from the First World War, in which biological agents such as anthrax, cholera, glanders and plague were widely utilized by the warring parties.

Apart from the state sponsored examples of the use of biological agents during armed conflicts, there has been an increasing trend in the utilization of biological weapons for terrorist purposes, called bioterrorism. It is related to the intentional use of biological agents by non-state actors to achieve political, social and economic destruction as shown with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic by spreading infectious diseases throughout society. Bioterrorism is defined as "the deliberate release of viruses, bacteria, or other germs (agents) used to cause illness or death in people, animals or plants."[42] These biological agents can be pathogens or toxins. A pathogen is a disease caused by a microorganism that directly attacks human biological processes. Toxins are naturally or synthetically produced poisonous substances. In other words, these biological agents can be found in nature or they can be processed to increase their effectiveness. In this respect, while crude materials such as fecal matter, animal carcasses and infected arrows in decomposed bodies, etc. were used to contaminate public water in the past, they were comparatively easy to identify.[43] In modern times, however, concentrated forms of bacteria and viruses or genetically modified organisms are available and contamination caused by them is very difficult to detect.[44]

In terms of their deliberate use, some pathogens require more demanding laboratory equipment and expertise. Although advanced biological programs for the production of biological weapons are limited in terms of availability and expertise, it is important to note that terrorist organizations, especially in fragile and failed areas, might acquire the capabilities to develop infrastructures. It is known that some terrorist groups such as DAESH already had plans to utilize bioterrorism before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, in 2018 an DAESH-linked group urged lone wolves to use biological weapons in Western countries.[45] Given the catastrophic health, social, economic and political impacts of the COVID-19 virus and the inability of developed countries to prevent them, terrorist groups could calculate the deliberate use of biological agents to be an effective way to trigger societal disruption, economic crises and political

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[41] V. Barras and G. Greub, "History of Biological Warfare and Bioterrorism", *Clinical Microbiology and Infection*, Vol. 20, Issue 6, June 2014, p. 498.

[42] "Bioterrorism Overview", Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 28 February 2006, p. 1, https://emergency.cdc.gov/bioterrorism/pdf/bioterrorism_overview.pdf.

[43] V. Barras and G. Greub, "History of biological warfare and bioterrorism", *Clinical Microbiology and Infection*, Vol. 20, Issue 6, June 2014, pp. 497-502.

[44] Violet N. Pinto, "Bioterrorism: Health sector alertness", *Journal of Natural Science, Biology and Medicine*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, January 2013, p. 24.

[45] "IS-linked group urges lone wolves use biological weapons in western countries", *Site Intelligence Group*, 20 July 2018, https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Multimedia/is-linked-group-urges-lone-wolves-use-biological-weapons-in-western-countries.html.

turmoil, "a perfect script for the theatre of terrorism."[46] Hence, terrorist groups could adopt bioterrorism as a viable tactic and thus intensify their efforts to obtain biological capabilities. António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, has pointed out that the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic "provide a window into how a bioterrorist attack might unfold – and may increase its risks."[47] In this respect, there are reports that some white supremacist groups in the United States already have plans to weaponize COVID-19 through saliva, spray bottles or laced items.[48]

To conclude, the examples of bioterrorism have so far been rare and their casualties limited. Moreover, biological agents are not easy to acquire and certain phases of conducting a biological terrorist attacks require advanced skills. Therefore, there has been a consensus that bioterrorism would be a relatively limited risk for the time being. However, the risk it poses cannot be ignored as was also stated especially after the consequences experienced with the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, NATO has been taking such risk serious since the end of the Cold War with official documents stating that "Terrorism poses a direct threat to the security of the citizens of NATO countries, and to international stability and prosperity more broadly. Extremist groups continue to spread to, and in, areas of strategic importance to the Alliance, and modern technology increases the threat and potential impact of terrorist attacks, in particular if terrorists were to acquire nuclear, chemical, biological or radiological capabilities."[49]

Conclusion: Implications for NATO

Looking at its effects at the global scale, the COVID-19 pandemic constitutes the greatest social, economic and political challenges that the world has faced since the Second World War. As an intergovernmental organization, NATO, its allies and partners are not immune to those challenges. Accordingly, NATO is a political and military organization established according to the principle of collective security. As stated by the Organization itself, "NATO's essential and enduring purpose is to safeguard the freedom and security of all its members by political and military means."[50] Such a purpose necessitates responding to a wide spectrum of challenges such as Russia's aggressive actions, the proliferation of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons, cyber-attacks, fundamental environmental problems and terrorism from a variety of areas, including the Baltic, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia, North Africa and the Middle East.

For the purposes of this study, the risks related with the terrorism threat relating to the COVID-19 pandemic were discussed in detail in the previous section. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided breeding grounds for terrorist groups, most notably in fragile and failed states to

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[46] Ackerman and Peterson, "Terrorism and COVID-19", p. 64.

[47] Giles Clarke, "COVID-19 threatening global peace and security, UN chief warns", *UN News*, 10 April 2020, https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061502.

[48] Hunter Walker and Jana Winter, "Federal law enforcement document reveals White supremacists discussed using coronavirus as a weapon", *Yahoo News*, 22 March 2020, https://news.yahoo.com/federal-law-enforcement-document-reveals-white-supremacists-discussed-using-coronavirus-as-a-bioweapon-212031308.html.

[49] NATO, "Active Engagement, Modern Defence: Strategic Concept for the Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation," *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, 19 November 2010, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_68580.htm.

[50] "NATO's Purpose", *NATO*, 18 April 2018, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_68144.htm.

spread violent extremist propaganda, recruit new militants and expand their range of attacks, including the use of biological weapons. This demonstrates that the neighboring environment for the NATO Allies will be more difficult to handle with regard to terrorism in addition to other threats, such as organized crime and mass refugee flows. Indeed, the threat that terrorism poses to the Allies and international peace and security is well known to the Alliance such that NATO has been an active actor in international counterterrorism efforts prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Article 5 of the NATO Charter, the collective defense clause, was invoked only once in the 71-year history of the Alliance in response to the 9/11 terror attacks against a member state, the United States. The NATO Allies laid out policy guidelines on counterterrorism at the 2012 Chicago Summit, which "focus on improved *awareness* of the threat, adequate *capabilities* to address it and *engagement* with partner countries and other international actors."[51] Later at the 2016 Warsaw Summit, NATO Heads of State and Government, pointing the nexus between fragile-failed states and terrorism, declared that

> Our security is also deeply affected by the security situation in the Middle East and North Africa, which has deteriorated significantly across the whole region. Terrorism … has risen to an unprecedented level of intensity, reaches into all of Allied territory, and now represents an immediate and direct threat to our nations and the international community. Instability in the Middle East and North Africa also contributes to the refugee and migrant crisis.
>
> …
>
> Together with the rest of the international community, our aim remains that Afghanistan will never again become a safe haven for terrorists who can pose a threat to our security, and that it is able to sustain its own security, governance, and economic and social development.[52]

This was followed by an action plan agreed upon by foreign ministers at the 2017 Brussels meeting. The action plan cast a more active role onto NATO in the international fight against terrorism. In this respect, the Alliance was mandated to join the Global Coalition to Defeat DAESH, establish a terrorism intelligence cell, appoint a coordinator to oversee NATO's efforts in the fight against terrorism and conduct more AWACS and air-to-air refueling missions.[53] In 2019, NATO's foreign ministers agreed on updating the action plan to enhance Alliance counterterrorism activities.[54] Hence, NATO has had an increasing role in the international fight against terrorism over diverse geographies, including the Caucasus, Central Asia, North Africa and the Middle East since 2001.

However, NATO's success in effectively responding to terrorism challenges in different geographies requires developing the necessary capabilities and sufficient resources. To this end, the Allies at the 2014 Wales Summit agreed on the Wales Summit Pledge on Defense Investment (DIP), which targets pledging 2 percent of countries' GDPs to defense expenditure over the following 10 years. However, the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global economy could risk the implementation of the DIP. Given that meeting the requirements regarding

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[51] "NATO's policy guidelines on counter-terrorism", *NATO*, 24 May 2012, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_87905.html.

[52] "Warsaw Summit Communiqué", *NATO*, 9 July 2016, para. 5 and 87, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm.

[53] "Countering Terrorism", *NATO*, 10 December 2019, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_77646.htm.

[54] Ibid.

the DIP had already been a point of controversy among the Allies in the pre-COVID-19 environment, the prospects of the implementation are bleak with the outbreak of the pandemic. According to World Bank estimates, an economic recession due to the COVID-19 pandemic would be the deepest since the Second World War with a 6.2% decline in global per capita GDP being expected in addition to 5.2% negative growth in the global economy.[55] The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) presents a more pessimistic forecast that the global economy will decline by 6% in 2020. The decline would be 7.6% depending on whether there will be a second wave of the pandemic. The OECD also estimates that global GDP will shrink by 8% and 9%. Based on these forecasts, the OECD concluded "The global economy is now experiencing the deepest recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s."[56] Based on these figures, it is expected that there will be sharp reductions in industrial output, spending and employment. In this economic environment, defense budgets would be reduced as the Allies have been struggling to support their economies to keep the business and financial sectors running and to prevent massive job losses. In this respect, governments are more likely to prioritize spending on social and health services over their militaries.[57] Given the anticipated budget cuts to the military, NATO Allies should consider ways to sustain resources to face the challenges to which the Alliance is expected to respond.

In addition to the budgetary implications, the Alliance is more likely to face capacity constraints due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The spread of the pandemic has affected NATO's readiness in the strategic sphere as major NATO exercises including "Cold Defender 20" and "Europe Defender 20," were canceled or curtailed.[58] There are also reports that troops were incapacitated because of the COVID-19 infections and military deployment abroad was scaled down. As part of this, the aircraft carriers USS Theodore Roosevelt and the Charles de Gaulle were directed to ports after confirmed COVID-19 cases among their respective crews.[59] Moreover, the United States ordered all of its forces abroad to remain in barracks for 60 days.[60] This was followed by the British decision to withdraw forces from a NATO training mission in Iraq, designed to

[55] The World Bank, *Global Economic Prospects*, Washington: The World Bank Group, June 2020, pp. 5 and 15.

[56] OECD, *OECD Economic Outlook, Volume 2020 Issue 1*, No. 107, Paris: OECD Publishing, June 2020, pp. 12-13.

[57] Dick Zandee, Els Duchataeau-Polkerman and Adája Stoetman, "Defence and Covid-19: Why budget cuts should be off the table", *Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International Relations*, April 2020, p. 3; Amit Cowshish, "Covid-19: Recession will take its toll on defence budget", *Financial Express*, 16 April 2020, https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/covid-19-recession-will-take-its-toll-on-defence-budget/1930787/; Karsten Friis, "Biowar next? Security implications of the coronavirus", *LSE Ideas*, May 2020, pp. 5-6.

[58] Zandee, Duchataeau-Polkerman and Stoetman, "Defence and Covid-19", p. 2; Stefanie Babst, "The coronavirus pandemic hits NATO: Five potential implications", *European Leadership Network*, 14 April 2020, https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/the-coronavirus-pandemic-hits-nato-five-potential-impli cations/; Daniel Kochis and Luke Coffey, "NATO's Role in Pandemic Response", *The Heritage Foundation*, Issue Brief No. 5068, 5 May 2020, p. 4.

[59] Paul D. Shinkman, "Aircraft Carrier Directed to Port Amid Spike in Coronavirus Cases", *US News*, 26 March 2020, https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2020-03-26/us-aircraft-carrier-directed-to-port-amid-spike-i n-coronavirus-cases; "Coronavirus: 668 infected on French aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle", *BBC*, 16 April 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52308073.

[60] Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali, "Exclusive: Pentagon orders halt overseas movement for U.S. military over coronavirus", *Reuters*, 25 March 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-usa-pentagon-exclu/exclusive-pentagon-orders-halt-to-overs eas-movement-for-u-s-forces-for-up-to-60-days-over-coronavirus-idUSKBN21C3A2.

strengthen the counterterrorism capabilities of Iraqi security forces against DAESH and Al-Qaeda. The withdrawn soldiers were deployed for domestic services to increase their respective countries' capabilities to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.[61] Since there is a risk of a second wave of the pandemic, NATO's operational readiness has become a point of concern. Therefore, NATO Allies would be well advised and in full communication to develop contingency plans for the continuation of overseas missions, exercises, training and troop rotation to maintain the Alliance's capabilities and resources against terrorism at a maximum level and respond effectively to challenges.

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[61] "British Personnel to Drawdown from Iraq due to Coronavirus", *Euro Weekly News*, 19 March 2020, https://www.euroweeklynews.com/2020/03/19/british-personnel-to-drawdown-from-iraq-due-to-coronavirus/.