



**CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE  
DEFENCE AGAINST TERRORISM  
COE-DAT**



**DEVELOPMENTS IN  
TERRORISM & COUNTERTERRORISM  
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND  
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

**RESEARCH REPORT**

Authors

Capt.(N) Savaş Aydoğdu

Dr. Richard Warnes

Dr. Stephen Harley

September 2021

# DEVELOPMENTS IN TERRORISM & COUNTERTERRORISM DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Authors

Capt.(N) Savaş Aydođdu

Dr. Richard Warnes

Dr.Stephen Harley

Ankara, September 2021.

## Published by

Centre of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism (COE-DAT)



Address : Devlet Mahallesi İnönü Bulvarı Kirazlıdere Caddesi No:65 Çankaya 06582

Ankara - TURKEY

P.O. Box Address : P.K.-57 06582

Bakanlıklar-ANKARA TURKEY

PHONE : +90 312 425 82 15

FAX : +90 312 425 64 89

E-MAIL : [info@coedat.nato.int](mailto:info@coedat.nato.int)

**Printed by** Başkent Klişe Matbaacılık

Bayındır 2. Sk. No: 30/1 06420 Çankaya/Ankara (0312) 431 54 90

**© All rights reserved by the Centre of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism.**

No part of this research report may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of COEDAT.

## Disclaimer

This research report is a product of the Centre of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism (COE-DAT), and is produced for NATO, NATO member countries, NATO partners and related private and public institutions. The information and views expressed in this report are solely those of the authors and may not represent the opinions and policies of NATO, COE-DAT, NATO member countries or the institutions with which the authors are affiliated.

## **Preface**

This research report presents the developments in terrorism and counterterrorism (CT) during the COVID-19 pandemic with an eye to describe potential implications in the future. Although the pandemic is not a military situation, it is clear NATO and militaries can play a vital role to combat the current and future pandemics by supporting civilian governments.

The aim of the research project is to collect recommendations that NATO, and nations, can use which focus on the strengths of military forces and support civil government response. Recommendations for militaries during a pandemic or bioterror attack derived from this research report cover core military tasks as well as more nuanced CT tasks.

Core military activities such as medical evacuations, field hospital deployments, logistical support, maintaining stockpiles of PPE, and supporting civilian agencies improve medical preparedness naturally lend themselves as ways militaries can support and be used by civilian governments during a pandemic or major crisis.

Other potential recommendations focus on how NATO can challenge terror organizations' during a pandemic. Information warfare that challenges the response or lack of response to a pandemic by terror organizations have the ability to undermine terror organizations in the eyes of the population. Robust military planning support to civilian government in the critical infrastructure arena could increase resilience and preparedness for future bioterrorism attacks or pandemics.

The intent of the recommendations and conclusions of this research report is to initiate further discussions by enhancing links between academia and NATO military, in order to identify the best methods, strategies, and national responses on counterterrorism.

## **A little about COE-DAT**

COE-DAT provides key decision-makers with a comprehensive understanding to terrorism and CT challenges, in order to transform NATO and Nations of interest to meet future security challenges. This transformation is embedded into NATO's three declared core tasks of Collective Defence, Crisis Management, and Cooperative security.

As a strategic level think tank for the development of NATO DAT activities sitting outside the NATO Command Structure, COE-DAT supports NATO's Long-Term Military Transformation by anticipating and preparing for the ambiguous, complex, and rapidly changing future security environment. COE-DAT is able to interact with universities, think tanks, researchers, international organizations, and global partners with academic freedom to provide critical thought on the inherently sensitive topic of CT. COE-DAT strives to increase information sharing within NATO and with NATO's partners to ensure the retention and application of acquired experience and knowledge.

Col Daniel W. Stone (USAF)  
Deputy Director of COE DAT  
September 2021

## Contents

Preface .....	3
Introduction.....	6
Executive Summary .....	7
Chapter I: Environment .....	17
Chapter II: Threat.....	29
Chapter III: Policy Implications .....	44
Key Findings.....	66

## **Introduction**

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed the global, geopolitical, socio-economic and conflict landscape, with profound impacts on trends in international terrorism and with longer-term effects gradually becoming more and more evident. The social, cultural, economic and security effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have also left an atmosphere of fear, uncertainty and anxiety, which hangs like a ‘Sword of Damocles’ over contemporary society. Consequently, as the UN Secretary General noted, although the COVID-19 outbreak first emerged as a health crisis, its effects now threaten global peace and security. While there have been previous pandemics throughout history, COVID-19 has affected almost the entire world in a just a few short months from its origins in Asia to Europe, the Americas, and beyond.

Major crises such as pandemics, natural disasters and political upheaval provide terrorist groups with opportunities, which they seek to both create and exploit. There are a number of common features and actions across a range of terrorist organisations, from self-proclaimed ‘religious’ groups, such as *Da’esh* (ISIL) and *al-Qaeda*, to nationalist terror groups and Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists (REMVE) of the extreme right-wing.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Alliance’s response to it offers many lessons learned and implications on wider NATO policies. Policy implications based on ‘Threat and Response’ need to answer two key questions: “How will NATO be affected by the terrorist implications arising from the COVID-19 Pandemic?” and “What specific recommendations can be made to NATO to cope with these modified threats?”

## **Executive Summary**

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a watershed moment in many ways, not least in the fields of security and counterterrorism. It has exacerbated a number of pre-existing fractures and weaknesses in society - political, social and economic - which have been exploited by hostile actors, both sub-state terrorist networks and organised crime groups, as well as by states like Russia. These pose a range of threats to NATO Alliance members, partner nations and third countries. Most significantly, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the potential threat and impact posed by a potential future bioterrorist attack. NATO has played a critical role during the pandemic, supporting Alliance, partner and other countries with expertise and advice as well as major medical, logistical and transport support. This experience has highlighted lessons that can be applied to refine and strengthen NATO's capacity and capability to respond to any potential future bioterrorist attack.

The following report has been written to examine the *'Terrorist Implications arising from COVID-19 and predictions as to resulting Future Terrorist Implications'*. To fully address the various areas relating to the subject area, the report comprises three sections, each addressing a different aspect of the subject. These are:

### **Chapter 1 – Environment**

### **Chapter 2 – Threat**

### **Chapter 3 – Policy**

Given the amount of detail contained in the following, wider chapters, this executive summary has been written to provide the reader with an overview of the key factors and summary findings in each of the following chapters. Consequently, this can be read to provide either an informed overarching summary or as a primer for the more detailed chapters following. Further details and references for the issues raised and linked bibliographies may be found in the main chapters.

## ENVIRONMENT

Across a range of phenomena, from access to healthcare to economic inequality, COVID-19 has not only disrupted the status quo, but served as a catalyst for an increasing number of economic indicators that are worse than the ‘Great Depression’ of 1929. The constraint on work caused by COVID-19 has disrupted the production process, decreased revenue and consumer income, and all with at best a slow recovery predicted. The economic downturn, with associated factors such as unemployment and recession, create the circumstances for increased radicalisation and racism, allowing a revival in terrorism, violent extremism and ethnic separatist groups.

At the same time, it is inevitable that the budget deficit caused by the pandemic will have an impact on countries’ counterterrorism budgets, particularly in the Middle East & North Africa (MENA) and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). However, in spite of the economic effects of COVID-19, NATO member states have increased their defence spending, with an increase in real terms of 3.9% in the face of ongoing and continuing security challenges from both state and sub-state threat actors.

Unfortunately, the weaknesses and lack of preparedness exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a ‘window’ onto how a bio-terrorist attack might unfold, increasing the possibility of such an attack. Terrorists have historically exploited developments in weapons technology, and the pandemic has highlighted the potential threat and impact if biological weapons fall into the hands of terrorists.

Modern global travel patterns, rapid urbanisation and terrorist interest in weapons of mass destruction, as well as rapid advances in technology, mean the threat of a catastrophic biological event, either a naturally occurring pandemic or man-made attack, has significantly increased. This has created an urgent need to strengthen biosecurity and improve biosurveillance. Despite these increasing challenges, biosecurity remains underemphasised and there is a need for greater focus and funding on this as a security priority.

Advances in technology and a decrease in the costs of genetic sequencing mean it is now much easier for terrorists to steal microbes, create them in a laboratory environment or collect them naturally. It is also possible for a hostile country to use a terrorist group as a proxy and support and equip the organisation with the biological weapons it has produced.

NATO itself responded to the unprecedented challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic by supporting civilian responses through Military Aid to the Civilian



Authorities (MACA) operations, while continuing to protect alliance members from more traditional threats. NATO additionally sought to counter the disinformation relating to COVID-19 which emerged from China and Russia as well as other non-state actors, while helping establish field hospitals, providing military airlift support, and sharing medical expertise.

NATO can identify and strengthen various capabilities based on lessons identified during the pandemic, both practical and political. NATO military units excel in medical evacuation and can deploy field hospitals in support of civil governments. They are also able to support logistically, through the transport of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to where it is needed, for example. At a political level NATO could work to determine the levels of PPE required per day for specific numbers of healthcare workers and then recommend levels of stock held for future incidents in medical facilities and stockpiles. To better facilitate this, NATO can work with PPE manufacturers to develop priority agreements for emergency production. Finally, NATO can develop an information campaign to circulate best practice and lessons identified of how best to improve preparedness for any future pandemic or biological attack.

## **THREAT**

Initially, most terrorist groups began with a denial of the COVID-19 pandemic, either that it did not exist or that it did not affect the ‘in-group’ of terrorist members or their support base. At the same time, terrorists blamed the ‘out group’ of governments and hostile societies for creating the virus (or myth of the virus) for their own purposes. However, as the virus spread and took hold of communities, many terrorist organisations had to face reality and conducted a *Volte Face*, setting up treatment centres, acquiring PPE and issuing guidance, with some level of cooperation with health and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

Despite the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic, most terrorist groups maintained or even increased their operational tempo. In part this was to exploit inevitable opportunities when security forces were re-tasked to assist in countering the pandemic, while CounterTerrorist (CT) budgets were cut and in order to demonstrate their continuing ability to launch attacks. While it is difficult at this stage to draw clear conclusions, it appears that many terrorist groups have sought to maintain or even increase their operational tempo during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Communication is a fundamental component of wider terrorist activity and initial attempts to ignore the COVID-19 Pandemic appear to have been abandoned in order to exploit the failure of governments and other institutions to effectively respond to COVID-19. While narratives have often been contradictory, terrorist groups have used the COVID-19 Pandemic to highlight the incompetence and corruption of government responses. However, much of this messaging remained consistent with their existing narratives, with similar themes being used before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Many terrorist groups have exploited the COVID-19 Pandemic to increase their messaging, notably REMVE groups. Overall, while there were many inconsistencies in messaging during the COVID-19 Pandemic, terrorist groups have always been natural advocates of disinformation and 'Fake News' even before the terms were first coined.

Terrorist organisations also exploited the COVID-19 Pandemic as an opportunity to recruit. Their approaches ranged from face-to-face recruitment in areas they controlled, now under less security force scrutiny, to prisons and detention facilities to virtual recruitment online. All audiences were to some extent captive and isolated in a physical location, but often with more time and access to the internet. Any opportunity to expose government weaknesses and increase recruitment during this period was seized upon.

While most terrorist organisations exploited the COVID-19 Pandemic in the ways previously detailed, there were groups that responded in unexpected and different ways, as outliers to the mainstream behaviour:

Despite previous attacks against vaccination teams and health workers in Afghanistan, the *Taliban* behaved in an unexpected way to the COVID-19 Pandemic. In an unprecedented degree of cooperation, the *Taliban* agreed to a ceasefire, allowed health-workers into the areas they controlled, launched a campaign of public awareness and established both treatment centres and a quarantine system.

A very different outlier response was associated with the complex, overlapping and often morphing range of extreme right wing REMVE organisations. These groups target a range of 'enemies they identify as part of the 'out-group', for their racial characteristics, sexual orientation or political beliefs. This complexity is enhanced by the links between such groups and individuals with more mainstream right wing populist parties operating within the political system. This network of REMVE groups stood out in a number of ways; their embrace of both circumstances and technology during the lockdown in the west, their continuing calls for violence, and their encouragement of the weaponization of the virus on a scale not seen

amongst other groups. In some ways the west was particularly vulnerable to their narratives and conspiracy theories, with rising populism, strict lockdowns, and easy access to online space. This culminated in the QAnon conspiracy theory which aligned the COVID-19 Pandemic to a global Jewish conspiracy and a range of other scapegoats. The adaptability of REMVE to the COVID-19 Pandemic, especially in tailored communications that just remained within the bounds of normal political discourse, outpaced other terrorist groups.

The actions of the Afghan *Taliban*, as noted, are an outlier. What made the *Taliban* behave differently from other terrorist groups and what would have happened in other theatres if the onus was not left to the terrorist group, but was led by the government? Another missed opportunity was the failure to challenge the inadequacies of terrorist groups exposed during the pandemic, in particular the pronounced contradictions in their messaging. The fallacy of their claims to be deliverers of security and services would have undermined recruitment narratives, but little counter-narrative activity seems to have been attempted.

Terrorism requires significant funding, with many previous examples of a crime-terrorist nexus, where terrorists and criminals have cooperated for their mutual benefit. *Al-Shabaab* in Somalia regularly cooperates with counterfeiting gangs producing fake printer cartridges, cigarettes and branded or luxury goods. Such previous terrorist behaviours make it very likely that in the short term such collaboration will be used to gain control of illicit stocks of PPE and COVID-19 vaccines going forward.

The nightmare scenario is that having seen the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic, some terrorist groups will view it as a potential weapon for the future. This may be the deliberate transmission of COVID-19 or another virus, the illicit procurement of a biological weapon or the development and deployment of an entirely new capability.

## **POLICY**

### **Direct Threats**

#### **• Terrorist/ Insurgent Exploitation of the Situation**

The distraction of NATO Alliance members and partner nations in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic provides a ‘window of opportunity’ for terrorists, insurgents, and criminal groups to exploit to their advantage. The reduction of engagement by police and security forces with the public also means that the authorities are less aware of emerging threats amongst local communities.

## • **Pandemic Highlights Potential Impact of Bioterrorism**

The COVID-19 Pandemic might act as a demonstration to terrorists of the potential impact of a bio-terrorist attack, and result in an upsurge of terrorist interest in such non-conventional weapons.

### Impact on Defence Cooperation & Exploitation by State Actors

There is the threat that the COVID-19 Pandemic has led to increased national self-interest, disrupting traditional transnational alliances such as NATO, the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU) and so on, potentially negatively impacting on defence policy and longer-term defence cooperation. These factors and the wider impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic have been exploited by countries such as Russia, China and other state and non-state actors, using the opportunity to spread propaganda and conspiracy theories as well as supporting proxy extremist groups in Alliance and partner countries.

## **Indirect Threats**

### • **Cause of Unrest and Instability**

A longer-term threat from the COVID-19 Pandemic to NATO interests and personnel is its role as a catalyst for threat multiplication and as a major source of instability. This can lead to an upsurge in terrorism, human trafficking, weapons smuggling and other criminal activities, particularly in low-income countries already impacted by socio-economic imbalances and problems of governance. These could destabilise countries such as Egypt and Tunisia, while impacting on already fractured countries, such as Mali and other nations in the Sahel. It is also likely to lead to an upsurge in existing terrorist violence or unravelling of regimes in conflict areas, such as Afghanistan, Syria or Iraq.

### • **Impact on Operational Capability and Overseas Deployment**

A further long-term effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic is its impact on NATO's operational capability (including counterterrorism) over the next few years. The pandemic will impair military operational capability in a range of areas, not least on service personnel themselves and their families. Closely associated with this is Alliance members scaling down of operational support for overseas operations and withdrawal of contributions as a result of public and political pressure following the Pandemic.

## • **Impact on Refugee Issues and Operations**

Whereas before the pandemic, most issues regarding refugees were couched in terms of either the security threat they posed or the economic burden they placed on the host nation, the narrative is now increasingly focusing on them as disease carriers and potential sources of infection. This has reinforced anti-immigrant and populist messages from REMVEs, as well as promoting a shift towards border and maritime security, rather than overseas operations, particularly given the negative effect of the Pandemic on available resources and funding.

## • **Decline in Economy and Shift in Focus from Defence Expenditure**

The COVID-19 Pandemic is likely to result in a significant decline in Alliance and partner countries' economies. As NATO and its partners' economies endure a recession, defence spending will come under increasing pressure. With weakened economies, governments are likely to find increasing pressure from the public to prioritise healthcare and social welfare rather than foreign affairs and defence expenditure. This domestic focus is likely to lead to a decline in funding for overseas human security operations and development projects, which will negatively impact on effective counterterrorism.

## **Key Takeaways / Specific Recommendations**

**NATO should focus on core military tasks that can also support civilian authorities to be prepared for future pandemics/bioterrorism event such as:<sup>1</sup>**

- NATO excels at medical evacuation in a way that is safe for the patient and the medical personnel,
- NATO can deploy field hospitals to support civil government,
- NATO can transport Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to where it is needed; from anywhere to anywhere in hours.

**What NATO could do as a political/military organization during future global pandemics includes:**

- Determine the level of PPE used during COVID-19 per day per healthcare worker/patient and produce recommended levels of PPE to have on-hand in medical facilities and in warehouse stockpiles,

---

<sup>1</sup> Maj Regan F. Lyon, MC, USAF, The COVID-19 Response Has Uncovered and Increased Our Vulnerability to Biological Warfare, p.2.

- Work with PPE manufacturers to have priority agreements for emergency production,
- Information campaign to get the lessons learned on how to improve preparedness for any future pandemic/bio attack.

### **Challenge the inadequacies of terrorist groups during a pandemic**

Challenge the clear inadequacies of terrorist groups during a pandemic. The contradictions in messaging, ranging from denial to displacement to late recognition of the problem, show the inconsistency which terrorist groups are so often guilty of, rendering them deeply untrustworthy. The fallacy of terrorist groups claiming to be deliverers of security and services would have undermined recruitment narratives. But little seems to have been attempted by way of counter-narrative activity.

### **Prepare to Respond to the Threat and Impact of Bioterrorism**

While the COVID-19 Pandemic has demonstrated the potential human, social and economic damage a future bioterrorism attack could inflict, it has also identified a number of potential lessons that can be acted upon to prepare to defend against any future bioterrorist threat. NATO fulfils a critical role in countering any bioterrorist threat or indeed naturally occurring pandemic, not just in its expertise and training, but also in its coordinating role and the logistical support it can provide. However, NATO needs to continue to improve its ability to respond to the threat in four main ways: by reducing the intent and capabilities of terrorist entities, through pursuing indicators and warnings of bioterrorism activities, by protecting civilians and critical infrastructure and by preparing for future bioterrorism attacks.

### **Increase the Focus on Human Security and Enhance Civil Preparedness**

Modern emerging threats, including the COVID-19 Pandemic, have led to a renewed focus on human security considerations. By nature, these threats are transnational, ignore borders and threaten sub-state entities. The socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic has reinforced the need for an increased NATO focus on human security, rather than just the more traditional national security. Closely associated with this is the need to enhance and strengthen civil preparedness amongst NATO members and partner nations, including closer cooperation between the military and civilian emergency services. This will better prepare NATO for future emerging threats, whether natural or man-made.

## **Maintain Collective Security from both Hostile Sub-State and State Actors Exploiting the COVID-19 Pandemic to their advantage**

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, with Alliance members and partner nations pre-occupied in coping with the impact of the virus, it would have proved easy for NATO to lose focus on its core role of maintaining collective security. However, NATO remained focused on its core task despite both hostile state and sub-state actors seeking to exploit the situation caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic to their advantage. NATO must draw upon and learn from any lessons, while continuing to focus on two key roles: maintaining the safeguarding and health of its service personnel and their families and the continuing maintenance of collective security against both state and sub-state actors.

### **General Recommendations**

#### **Improve Information Sharing of Best Practices and Lessons (particularly in relation to pandemics or bioterrorism)**

At a more general level, NATO has acted as a strategic level platform for the sharing of best practice amongst Alliance and partner nations during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as well as impacting on some operational support, during the earlier stages of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the lack of coordinated information sharing between Alliance members and partner countries seriously impacted on the effectiveness of a collective response to the pandemic. Consequently, to better synchronise NATO responses to any potential future bioterrorist attack, improved information sharing of best practices around policies and procedures should be strengthened, drawing upon relevant lessons from countering the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **Consolidate and Innovate Strategic Communication**

Among its other impacts, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged NATO's strategic communications in three ways: firstly, Alliance members faced a public health rather than military threat; secondly, the pandemic spread rapidly through Alliance members; and, thirdly, the multilateral system came under criticism for failing to respond during the early stages of the crisis. NATO responded to the COVID-19 Pandemic with four key messages of 'Maintained Readiness', 'NATO Joining National Efforts', 'Solidarity Among Allies' and 'Repurposing NATO Equipment'

to counter the pandemic. However, while NATO promoted a coherent narrative, highlighting cooperation and its contributions, to better engage with the public, NATO needs to develop more innovative and coordinated strategic communication methods.

### **Increase MACA Capabilities and Preparedness**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, NATO played a key role in Military Aid to Civil Authorities (MACA) operations, leveraging its experience in crisis management and disaster relief along with its massive logistical apparatus. NATO's role and the lessons learned during the pandemic can be used to inform models of future MACA assistance. Where possible, NATO should seek to improve and refine its MACA capabilities, cooperate with other agencies and prepare for any similar future bio-terrorist or pandemic challenges.

### **Strengthen Defence Cooperation and Integration of Military and Civil capabilities**

A final recommendation is for the increased strengthening of NATO's defence cooperation and a greater integration between military and civil capabilities. The COVID-19 Pandemic has highlighted the transnational and cross-border impacts of such emerging threats and the potential ramifications of a bio-terrorist attack, strengthening the case for increased international defence cooperation. At the same time, Alliance members will need to more closely integrate military and civilian responders around concepts of 'Total Defence' in a comprehensive, whole of society approach to such future threats.



*MacArthur's Strategic Rule: **Manage the environment.***

*In Papua, New Guinea, General Douglas MacArthur's men were decimated by an unexpected enemy: malaria. Most of his troops were ill. He formed a task force to tackle the pandemic and soon greatly reduced infection rates, while Japanese troops continued to suffer from rampant malaria. "Nature is neutral in war," MacArthur later wrote, although he noted elsewhere that the army that adapts to the terrain wins.<sup>3</sup>*

### Introduction

In the space of just over a year the COVID-19 crisis has fundamentally changed the global geopolitical, socio-economic and conflict landscape. In this context, the pandemic has had a profound impact on trends in international terrorism, whose long-term effects are only now gradually becoming evident<sup>4,5</sup>.

To state that this is a strange time we are living right now is no understatement. The Coronavirus is changing our way of life and the way we work, potentially forever. It is materializing in an exponential way and, at the same time, causing widespread anxiety. We hear the personal stories of so many people around the world who have been the victims of the virus. We understand that this is a random and developing phenomenon, a factor which actually multiplies the fear and anxiety, because it can affect anybody, at anytime, anywhere. Based on the commonality of suffering, this is the time to unify all efforts in the struggle to overcome the COVID-19 virus<sup>6</sup>. Of course, it is not possible to say that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which hangs like the 'Sword of Damocles' over all people in all countries, will end in a short time until a conclusive vaccine that works against all variants is developed.

As emphasized by UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, although the COVID-19 outbreak first emerged as a health crisis, its effects are threatening global

---

<sup>2</sup> Captain (Turkish Navy - OF-5), Chief of Staff of NATO COE-DAT, Ankara/Turkey

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/leadership-books/post/reading-no-substitute-for-victory/2011/03/07/AGZK7BCH\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/leadership-books/post/reading-no-substitute-for-victory/2011/03/07/AGZK7BCH_blog.html) (accessed 22 April 2021)

<sup>4</sup> Miles Comerford, How have terrorist organisations responded to COVID-19?, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/how-have-terrorist-organisations-responded-to-covid-19/> (accessed 12 May 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace, Global Terrorism Index 2020, p.29.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9fnn8NjKzCk> (accessed 2 May 2021)

peace and security<sup>7</sup>. Undoubtedly, from the moment the pandemic reached a global dimension, it ceased to be just a health problem; it now has a place in everyone's agenda with social, cultural, economic and security dimensions.

In every period of history, human beings have struggled with pandemics. Many infectious diseases such as plague, cholera, smallpox and influenza, caused enormous numbers of deaths. For example, the plague, known as the “black death”, was one of the most deadly pandemics in human history, causing the death of between 75 and 200 million people in Eurasia and North Africa between 1346 and 1353<sup>8</sup>.

These pandemics, which caused the death of a significant part of the global population and caused great economic disruption, affected the socio-economic, political, scientific, cultural and military structures of societies, collapsed empires, changed borders, and came with significant economic, political and demographic consequences.

COVID-19 affected almost the whole world in a very short space of time (four and a half months) following its emergence in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, and the world then entered a period of change and uncertainty that did not have a clear end. While the death toll caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic is still increasing, the epicenter of casualties has shifted from Asia to Europe and America<sup>9</sup>. It may well spread further still, especially in Africa.

### **Economic Effects**

Across a range of phenomena, from access to healthcare to economic inequality, the COVID-19 Pandemic has not just disrupted the status quo, but has served as a catalyst, hyper-charging existing trends<sup>10</sup>. The world economy, which has been growing for years, has begun to weaken suddenly. As a result of the economic weakening, unemployment rates continue to be high.

The world's leading economists are in consensus that the economic indicators of the COVID-19 Pandemic are worse than the world economic depression of 1929, which was dubbed the Great Depression<sup>11</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> Necmettin Çelik, Belirsizliklerin Dünya ekonomisine Yönelik Yansımaları, Bir Virüsün Öğrettikleri (Nobel Publication, 2020), p.317

<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_Death](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Death) (accessed 20 April 2021)

<sup>9</sup> Rajib Shawa, Yong-kyun Kimb and Jinling Hua, Governance, technology and citizen behavior in pandemic: Lessons from COVID-19 in East Asia (22 Jun 2020), p.1.

<sup>10</sup> Miles Comerford, How have terrorist organisations responded to COVID-19?, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/how-have-terrorist-organisations-responded-to-covid-19/> (accessed 12 May 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Fatih Aslan, Salgınla Yaşamak (Vadi Publication, 2020), p.56.

Due to the feeling of uncertainty about the future, it is expected that the COVID-19 Pandemic will prompt a deep, global recession, especially in terms of demand and investment. The constraints created by the pandemic on labor are expected to bring long term disruptions to the production process. This will cause a decrease in revenue and consumer income while it is also predicted that the recovery process for the world economy will be slow<sup>12</sup>.

The economic effects of the pandemic have created major stressors in fragile societies and less developed countries. In the new world order, as a result of the economic downturn due to the pandemic, it is possible that racist and radical groups will increase the numbers of their sympathizers at a great rate in the short to medium term, and therefore the world may face a serious increase in the problems of radicalization and racism. In addition, with the increase in unemployment and the contraction of the economy, combined with an increase in criminal activity, there is a strong likelihood that terrorist groups and ethnic separatist groups will begin to revive and expand<sup>13</sup>.

It is probable that the increase in countries' budget deficits caused by increased public expenditures due to the COVID-19 Pandemic will adversely affect counterterrorism budgets. However, cutting counterterrorism budgets may ultimately hinder domestic or international counterterrorism operations, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)<sup>14</sup>.

The COVID-19 outbreak has had a negative impact on operations launched by the global coalition to defeat *Da'esh* (aka ISIS). Some members of the international coalition have announced a planned withdrawal of forces from Iraq due to concerns about the spread of COVID-19<sup>15</sup>. In addition, the pandemic delayed repatriation plans of former ISIS members, including many women and children who remained in the Al-Hol camp in Syria, the ramifications of which are explored in more detail in the next chapter.

Counterterrorism activities in the Sahel region have also been affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic. As part of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stability Mission (MINUSMA) in Mali, national governments in the region are currently being supported by around 14,000 UN peacekeeping troops, 5,100

---

<sup>12</sup> Necmettin Çelik, *Belirsizliklerin Dünya ekonomisine Yönelik Yansımaları, Bir Virüsün Öğrettikleri* (Nobel Publication, 2020), p.317-318.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Global Terrorism Index 2020 Measuring The Impact of Terrorism, COVID-19 and Terrorism, p.20.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29.

French soldiers and 500 special forces drawn from 13 European countries<sup>16</sup>. But the countries that provide support to the governments of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger may withdraw the deployment of troops or resources to focus on their own needs in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The COVID-19 Pandemic also imposes an additional burden on governments in the Sahel region as they struggle to provide basic services. The so-called *jihadist* groups in the region have had some success in gaining local support by taking advantage of existing ethnic tensions and positioning themselves as alternative service providers<sup>17</sup>.

### NATO Defence Spending

When looking at the impact of COVID-19 on NATO from an economic perspective, 2020 was the sixth consecutive year of increased NATO defence spending with an increase in real terms of 3.9 %. Fig. 1 shows the increased NATO defence spending. That trend is expected by NATO officials to continue in 2021. It is absolutely vital that a momentum should be maintained due to increasing security challenges<sup>18</sup>.

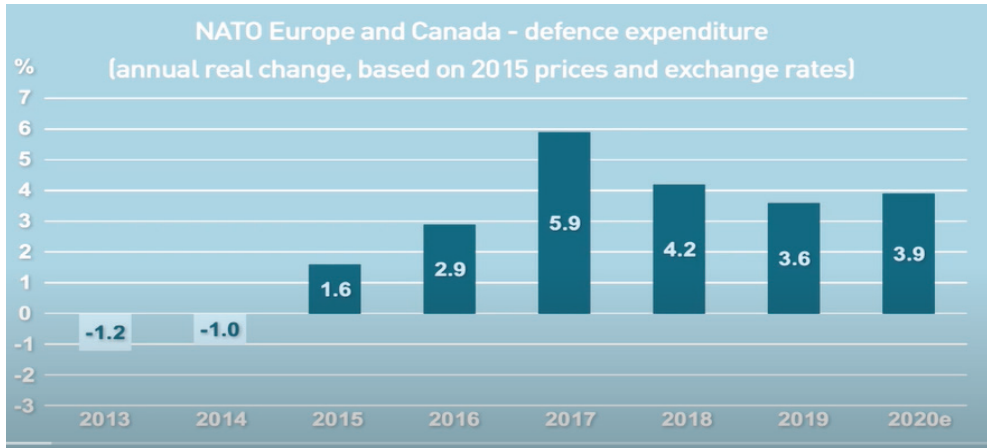


Fig. 1. NATO Europe and Canada Defence Expenditure.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Global Terrorism Index 2020 Measuring The Impact of Terrorism, COVID-19 and Terrorism, p.29.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfNhPydRbiY> (accessed 23 April 2021).

## **Biological Warfare, Use of Biological Weapons**

The lethality of modern terrorism since the first instances of anarchist terrorism in the 1880s, continues to increase in line with developing weapons technology. It can be anticipated that the destructiveness of terrorist attacks may increase even more, especially if biological weapons fall into the hands of terrorists. Biological warfare has traditionally been viewed as an unlikely, but nonetheless a serious concern for military operations and national security<sup>19</sup>. But since the COVID-19 Pandemic the likelihood of terrorists using bioweapons has increased.

Biological weapons have been used by mankind for centuries. During ancient sieges the enemy surrounding a city or castle would launch the carcasses of horses, cattle, and even captured soldiers to generate a pandemic amongst the city garrison and denizens. The rotting bodies contaminated food and water and infected people directly. Sometimes rivers would also be polluted with garbage or poisons.

During the WW1 the use of chemical and biological weapons reached new peaks. Deadly gases were used on a grand scale for the first time, killing and maiming thousands of soldiers. Soldiers from all sides returned to their homes with incurable injuries. The impact of this new type of warfare terrorized soldiers and societies so much that by the time WW2 began no nation dared to use these gases again. However, throughout this time biological weapons were rightly feared for their unpredictability, as the Imperial Japanese Army's use of rats carrying mites with bubonic plague in China in 1940 demonstrated (some of the rats found their way back to Japanese lines).<sup>20</sup>

However, nations continued to develop and stockpile chemical and biological weapons. In April of 1979, people from the Soviet city of Sverdlovsk began exhibiting strange and inexplicable symptoms. Kremlin scientists and military officials concluded that it was contaminated meat from local cattle, but later it was revealed that it was an accident at a clandestine biological weapon laboratory that released deadly anthrax spores into the air. After the accident the city was closed. Many suspect that Russia still continues to test deadly pathogens and other hazardous materials at the site<sup>21</sup>.

Biological weapons have the potential to kill millions, cost billions in economic losses, and create political and economic instability as well as widespread terror,

---

<sup>19</sup> Maj Regan F. Lyon, MC, USAF, *The COVID-19 Response has Uncovered and Increased Our Vulnerability to Biological Warfare*, p.1.

<sup>20</sup> Watts, Jonathan, 'Japanese bombed city with plague' in *The Guardian* dated 25 January 2001 '<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/jan/25/jonathanwatts>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GRN4ymkSCo> (accessed 23 April 2021).

whether naturally occurring, through accidental release, or by deliberate design. The risk of a catastrophic biological event is magnified by globalisation (especially global travel) and urbanization, terrorist interest in weapons of mass destruction and rapid advances in technology (weapons and otherwise)., This includes the risks posed by newly developed or manipulated pathogens with pandemic potential.

When all of these factors are taken together, it reveals an urgent need to strengthen biosecurity, reduce biological risks posed by advances in technology, create new approaches to improve infectious disease surveillance, and identify and fill gaps to measurably strengthen global health security capabilities. Despite these challenges, biosecurity remains an underemphasized and under-funded global security priority<sup>22</sup>.

While the methods of obtaining biological weapons by terrorists were previously difficult and arduous, with advances of technology genetic sequencing, costs have decreased and creating new organisms has become easier, more accessible and cheaper. Viral microbes could be stolen by terrorist groups, created in a laboratory environment or even collected naturally<sup>23</sup>.

The ongoing struggles for superiority amongst rival countries may also encourage them to use all the weapons at their disposal, including biological weapons.

A country that plans to inflict significant damage on its opponent may consider using terrorist groups or others as a proxy and support this group with the biological weapons it has developed. The realization of such a situation may mean that biological weapons can be accessed by terrorist organisations. Easy access and the ease of use of biological weapons has the potential to cause major disasters for humanity and even all living things<sup>24</sup>.

Biological weapons are clearly a very serious threat with the potential to destabilize the world. If these weapons fall into the hands of terrorist organizations, it is certain that states and international organizations will have difficulties implementing countermeasures.

The existence of biological weapons in the past and the present is an indication that they may be used in the future<sup>25</sup>. In the medium term, it is assessed that terrorist organizations' actions in this regard will be very much dependent upon the cooperation mechanisms that states establish to prevent the use of biological weapons.

---

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.nti.org/about/biosecurity/> (accessed 23 April 2021).

<sup>23</sup> Gürkan Gündüz, Bir vekalet savaş Yöntemi Olarak Biyoterör ve COVID-19 Salgını, Bir Virüsün Öğrettikleri (Nobel Publication, 2020), p.89.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p.92.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.93.

But the interests of the states are changing day by day and this may make it difficult to obstruct and deter terrorist organizations. This situation, if left as it stands, may pose serious problems in terms of future world peace. In the new world order, if these weapons are acquired by terrorist organizations, the cooperation that the world can achieve without having taken the necessary precautions beforehand, may not be sufficient.

### **Legal Aspect of Biological Weapons**

There are official treaties that forbid the use of biological weapons such as the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) on the prohibition of the development production and stockpiling of bacteriological, biological and toxin weapons and on their destruction, signed on 10 April 1972 and which entered into force on 26 March 1975. The BWC supplements the 1925 Geneva Protocol, which had prohibited only the use of biological weapons<sup>26</sup>.

In UN Security Council Resolution 1540 (2004), the Security Council declared that all states shall refrain from providing any form of support to non-State actors that attempt to develop, acquire, manufacture, possess, transport, transfer or use nuclear, chemical or biological weapons and their means of delivery, in particular for terrorist purposes. The resolution requires all States to adopt and enforce appropriate laws to this effect as well as other effective measures to prevent the proliferation of these weapons and their means of delivery to non-State actors, in particular for terrorist purposes<sup>27</sup>.

Despite the huge loss of life and destructiveness of WW2 and the crimes committed against humanity, the main belligerents did not use biological weapons against each other. That may have been due to a fear of reprisals using similar weapons, but the 1925 Geneva Protocol had nevertheless established a new and clear norm in international law<sup>28</sup>.

Although the international community banned the use of biological weapons after WW1, advances in biotechnology and changes in the security environment have raised concerns that longstanding restrictions on the use of biological weapons may be ignored<sup>29</sup>. So, a strong global collaboration is vital for BWC on health security.

---

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.un.org/disarmament/biological-weapons/> (accessed 24 April 2021).

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/sc1540/> (accessed 23 April 2021).

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/chemical-biological-weapons> (accessed 10 May 2021).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

## NATO's Response to COVID-19

RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	CHANGE	RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	CHANGE	RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	CHANGE
1	Iceland	1.078	↔	29	Poland	1.657	↓ 1	57	Greece	1.877	↑ 8
2	New Zealand	1.198	↔	30	Estonia	1.68	↑ 3	57	Liberia	1.877	↓ 1
3	Portugal	1.247	↔	31	Italy	1.69	↑ 6	59	Malawi	1.885	↓ 14
4	Austria	1.275	↔	32	Costa Rica	1.691	↑ 2	60	Equatorial Guinea	1.891	↑ 10
5	Denmark	1.283	↔	33	Botswana	1.693	↓ 2	60	The Gambia	1.891	↔
6	Canada	1.298	↔	34	Latvia	1.7	↓ 2	62	North Macedonia	1.9	↑ 2
7	Singapore	1.321	↔	35	Uruguay	1.704	↔	63	Madagascar	1.905	↓ 8
8	Czech Republic	1.337	↓ 1	36	Lithuania	1.705	↔	64	Vietnam	1.92	↓ 5
9	Japan	1.36	↑ 2	37	Taiwan	1.707	↔	64	France	1.93	↓ 3
10	Switzerland	1.366	↔	38	Spain	1.712	↑ 1	66	Eswatini	1.934	↑ 9
11	Slovenia	1.369	↓ 2	39	Kuwait	1.723	↑ 5	67	Oman	1.941	↑ 1
12	Ireland	1.375	↔	39	Mongolia	1.723	↑ 7	68	Montenegro	1.944	↓ 2
13	Australia	1.386	↔	41	United Arab Emirates	1.752	↑ 6	69	Kazakhstan	1.948	↓ 4
14	Finland	1.404	↔	42	United Kingdom	1.77	↓ 2	70	Moldova	1.95	↓ 3
15	Sweden	1.479	↑ 3	43	Ghana	1.776	↓ 2	71	Jordan	1.958	↑ 3
16	Germany	1.494	↑ 6	44	Zambia	1.794	↑ 5	72	Nepal	1.974	↓ 1
=17	Belgium	1.496	↑ 6	45	Chile	1.804	↓ 17	73	Argentina	1.978	↑ 3
=17	Norway	1.496	↔	46	Sierra Leone	1.82	↓ 4	74	Paraguay	1.991	↑ 11
19	Bhutan	1.501	↓ 4	47	Senegal	1.824	↑ 7	75	Dominican Republic	1.992	↑ 6
20	Malaysia	1.525	↔	48	South Korea	1.829	↑ 9	76	Sri Lanka	2.003	↓ 4
21	Netherlands	1.528	↓ 5	49	Indonesia	1.831	↓ 6	77	Cambodia	2.011	↑ 3
22	Romania	1.541	↑ 3	50	Laos	1.843	↓ 2	78	Bosnia and Herzegovina	2.04	↓ 1
23	Mauritius	1.544	↑ 1	51	Serbia	1.846	↑ 1	80	Jamaica	2.041	↔
24	Hungary	1.559	↓ 5	52	Tanzania	1.85	↑ 6	81	Rwanda	2.049	↑ 4
25	Slovakia	1.568	↓ 4	53	Namibia	1.861	↑ 8	82	Guyana	2.05	↑ 8
26	Croatia	1.615	↑ 1	54	Timor-Leste	1.863	↓ 3	83	Morocco	2.057	↑ 1
27	Qatar	1.616	↑ 3	55	Albania	1.872	↓ 2				
28	Bulgaria	1.628	↓ 2	56	Panama	1.875	↓ 6				

RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	CHANGE	RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	CHANGE	RANK	COUNTRY	SCORE	CHANGE
84	Peru	2.066	↑ 3	112	Djibouti	2.215	↓ 6	138	Niger	2.608	↓ 11
85	Kosovo	2.07	↓ 6	113	El Salvador	2.243	↓ 2	139	India	2.628	↑ 2
=86	Bolivia	2.074	↑ 3	114	Thailand	2.245	↑ 1	140	Colombia	2.646	↑ 3
=86	Cuba	2.074	↑ 2	115	Guatemala	2.267	↑ 1	141	Cameroon	2.65	↓ 1
88	Trinidad and Tobago	2.078	↑ 4	116	Turkmenistan	2.276	↓ 1	142	Iran	2.672	↓ 5
89	Guinea	2.082	↑ 7	=117	Algeria	2.287	↔	143	Palestine	2.699	↓ 1
90	Ecuador	2.085	↓ 17	=117	Mauritania	2.287	↑ 1	144	Mali	2.729	↔
91	Angola	2.087	↓ 2	119	Honduras	2.288	↑ 4	145	Israel	2.775	↑ 1
92	Tunisia	2.09	↓ 1	120	Azerbaijan	2.3	↑ 12	146	Lebanon	2.828	↑ 2
93	Kyrgyz Republic	2.094	↑ 2	121	United States of America	2.307	↔	147	Nigeria	2.865	↔
94	Belarus	2.111	↑ 4	122	Burkina Faso	2.316	↓ 13	148	Ukraine	2.927	↑ 1
=95	Gabon	2.116	↓ 1	123	South Africa	2.317	↑ 3	149	Venezuela	2.936	↓ 4
=95	Georgia	2.116	↑ 4	124	Republic of the Congo	2.343	↑ 1	150	Turkey	2.959	↑ 2
97	Bangladesh	2.121	↑ 7	125	Kenya	2.375	↓ 3	151	North Korea	2.962	↑ 1
98	Lesotho	2.131	↑ 5	126	Brazil	2.413	↓ 3	152	Pakistan	2.973	↑ 1
=99	Armenia	2.135	↑ 15	127	Myanmar	2.424	↑ 2	153	Sudan	3.043	↓ 2
=99	Mozambique	2.135	↑ 2	128	Saudi Arabia	2.443	↑ 3	154	Russia	3.049	↔
-101	Guinea-Bissau	2.157	↑ 9	129	Philippines	2.471	↑ 6	155	Central African Republic	3.237	↑ 3
-101	Papua New Guinea	2.157	↓ 5	130	Egypt	2.481	↓ 2	156	Democratic Republic of the Congo	3.243	↔
103	Uzbekistan	2.158	↓ 1	131	Zimbabwe	2.485	↓ 1	157	Libya	3.258	↔
104	China	2.166	↓ 4	132	Burundi	2.506	↑ 6	158	Somalia	3.302	↓ 3
105	Cote d'Ivoire	2.169	↑ 7	133	Ethiopia	2.526	↑ 3	159	Yemen	3.411	↔
106	Benin	2.182	↓ 35	134	Chad	2.538	↓ 1	160	South Sudan	3.447	↑ 1
107	Tajikistan	2.188	↑ 1	135	Nicaragua	2.553	↓ 15	161	Iraq	3.487	↓ 1
108	Togo	2.201	↓ 3	136	Eritrea	2.567	↑ 3	162	Syria	3.539	↔
109	Uganda	2.202	↓ 3	137	Mexico	2.572	↓ 3	163	Afghanistan	3.644	↔
110	Bahrain	2.209	↑ 9								
111	Haiti	2.211	↓ 18								

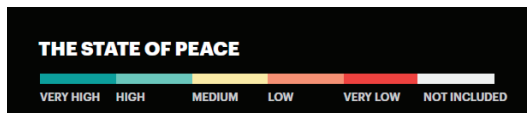


Fig.2. State of Peace<sup>30</sup>

The COVID-19 Pandemic posed an unprecedented challenge for the world and, as a result, NATO was obliged to support the civilian response to the pandemic while continuing to protect member states and allies against any and all threats. Given the political tensions within the Alliance in recent years, there was little reason to

<sup>30</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace, Global Peace Index 2020, p.8-9



be optimistic about NATO's response, especially at a time when transatlantic allies were competing for medical supplies<sup>31</sup>.

Nevertheless, NATO remained prepared and vigilant. NATO leveraged its experience in crisis management and disaster relief to provide two kinds of responses. First, NATO focused on ensuring the continuity of its operations while at the same protecting its personnel to prevent the health crisis from impacting readiness. Most NATO missions were preserved, although some encountered temporary suspensions including the pausing of deployments of Battlegroups to Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq to prevent further spread of the virus by ground troops<sup>32</sup>.

In addition, NATO multiplied efforts to counter disinformation from China and Russia. NATO and Allied military personnel have also been key in supporting civilian efforts – setting up field hospitals, providing military airlift, sharing medical expertise, and helping to develop innovative responses.

Such actions, although performed through the means of NATO member states and relatively limited in scope, were an important testimony of the reactive capability of the alliance and of the solidarity that exists between member states. Yet, it is reasonable to say that more could have been done. From this experience NATO could draw important lessons, from improving resilience to external threats to investing in readiness for catastrophic scenarios like another global pandemic or a similarly scaled catastrophe.

COVID-19 will continue to disrupt the global economy and the global supply chain and may have a negative impact on countries' defence spending and defence industries. However, given the resilience the alliance has shown so far, the COVID-19 Pandemic will not be the determining factor for the future of NATO. Instead, the chances for NATO to operate efficiently vis-à-vis growing global challenges will ultimately depend on a relaunch of transatlantic relations<sup>33</sup>. NATO needs to do even more to prepare for a resurgence of the disease and continue to assess ways to speed up and improve future responses. As part of a coordinated approach, NATO should work closely with other international organisations.

---

<sup>31</sup> Giovanna De Maio, Foreign Policy Brookings, NATO's Response to COVID-19: Lessons for Resilience and Readiness, October 2020, p.1.

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfNhPydRbiY> (accessed 24 April 2021).

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfNhPydRbiY> (accessed 24 April 2021).

## **Take Aways from The Pandemic**

Terrorist organizations and hostile nations had an opportunity to view the weak response of NATO and other partner nations to the COVID-19 Pandemic. This may lead terror groups and hostile states to increase their attempts to weaponize biological weapons and diseases against NATO nations.

In summary, then, what the militaries/NATO can do in response to a pandemic/bioterrorism based on lessons learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic includes<sup>34</sup>:

- Militaries excel at medical evacuation in a way that is safe for the patient and the medical personnel,
- Militaries can deploy field hospitals to support civil government,
- Militaries can transport Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to where it is needed; from anywhere to anywhere in hours.

What NATO could do as a political/military organization during future global pandemics includes:

- Determine the level of PPE used during COVID-19 per day per healthcare worker/patient and produce recommended levels of PPE to have on-hand in medical facilities and in warehouse stockpiles,
- Work with PPE manufacturers to have priority agreements for emergency production,
- Information campaign to get the lessons learned on how to improve preparedness for any future pandemic/bio attack.

## **Conclusion**

It is probable that the increase in the budget deficit caused by increased public expenditures due to the pandemic will adversely affect counterterrorism budgets. It is absolutely vital that NATO defence spending trends should continue in a momentum that will not be affected adversely from security challenges.

As a result of the economic downturn due to the pandemic, it is possible that racist and radical groups will increase their sympathizers at a significant rate in the medium term, and therefore the world may face serious problems of radicalization

---

<sup>34</sup> Maj Regan F. Lyon, MC, USAF, The COVID-19 Response Has Uncovered and Increased Our Vulnerability to Biological Warfare, p.2.

and racism. A close coordination should be conducted among NATO Allies, Partner Nations and International Organisations to develop policies on the prevention of radicalization and racism.

The MENA and SSA regions remain the world's least peaceful. It is predicted that terrorist organizations will be able to concentrate in the MENA and SSA regions in the medium term and will try to create a center of gravity there. Based on this fact, NATO should seek to increase support for efforts in projecting stability and strengthening security in MENA and SSA.

NATO also needs to do more to prepare itself for a resurgence of the disease or for a biological warfare attack and continue to assess ways to speed up and improve future responses. In this regard, it should check its capabilities especially in excelling at medical evacuation, deploying field hospitals and transporting Personal Protective Equipment in response to a pandemic or a bioweapon attack.

## **Bibliography**

- Aslan, Fatih, "Covid-19 salgını'nın Suç Ortamına Etkileri", İsmail H.Demircioğlu - Zakir Avşar - Can Ozan Tuncer (Eds.), Salgınla Yaşamak (Vadi Publication, Ankara, 2020).
- Black Death, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Black-Death> (accessed 27 May 2021)
- Comerford, Miles, How have terrorist organisations responded to COVID-19?, <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/how-have-terrorist-organisations-responded-to-covid-19/> (accessed 12 May 2021).
- Commission for Countering Extremism, July 2020.
- Çelik, Necmettin, "Belirsizliklerin Dünya ekonomisine Yönelik Yansımaları", Mustafa Polat & Mehmet Aslantas (Eds.), Bir Virüsün Öğrettikleri (Nobel Publication, Ankara, 2020).
- Dark Docs, Biological Chernobyl - The Sverdlovsk Incident, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GRN4ymkSCo> (accessed 23 April 2021).
- Ganor, Boaz (Prof.), "COVID-19 and Global Terrorism Pandemics", [https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2672/COVID19\\_and\\_Global\\_Terrorism\\_Pandemics#gsc.tab=0](https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2672/COVID19_and_Global_Terrorism_Pandemics#gsc.tab=0) (accessed 27 May 2021)
- Global Terrorism Index 2020 Measuring The Impact of Terrorism, COVID-19 and Terrorism.
- Gökmen, Yunus, "COVID-19 Salgınının Yayılımına Genel Bakış", Mustafa Polat & Mehmet Aslantas (Eds.), Bir Virüsün Öğrettikleri (Nobel Publication, Ankara, 2020).
- Gündüz, Gürkan, "COVID-19 Salgınının Yayılımına Genel Bakış", Mustafa Polat & Mehmet Aslantas (Eds.), Bir Virüsün Öğrettikleri (Nobel Publication, Ankara, 2020).

ICRC, The International Community of The Red Cross, Chemical and biological weapons, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/chemical-biological-weapons> (accessed 10 May 2021).

Institute for Economics & Peace, Global Terrorism Index 2020.

Institute for Economics & Peace, Global Peace Index 2020.

Kurum, Mehmet, “Covid-19 salgını’nın Suç Ortamına Etkileri”, İsmail H.Demircioğlu - Zakir Aşar - Can Ozan Tuncer (Eds.), Salgınla Yaşamak (Vadi Publication, Ankara, 2020).

Lyon, Regan F., The COVID-19 Response has Uncovered and Increased Our Vulnerability to Biological Warfare.

Maio, Giovanna De, Foreign Policy Brookings, NATO’s Response to COVID-19: Lessons for Resilience and Readiness, October 2020.

NTI, The Nuclear Threat Initiative, Reducing Biological Risk And Enhancing Global Biosecurity, <https://www.nti.org/about/biosecurity/> (accessed 23 April 2021).

Secretary-General’s Remarks to the Security Council on the COVID-19 Pandemic <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-04-09/secretary-generals-remarks-the-security-council-the-covid-19-pandemic-delivered> (accessed 21 May 2021)

Shawa, Rajib, Yong-kyun Kimb and Jinling Hua, Governance, technology and citizen behavior in pandemic: Lessons from COVID-19 in East Asia (22 Jun 2020).

Stoltenberg, Jens, NATO Secretary General’s Annual Report for 2020, 16 MAR 2021

The Economic Times, ISIS warns UK of attack more severe than Paris assaults, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/isis-warns-uk-of-attack-more-severe-than-paris-assaults/articleshow/50796433.cms> (accessed 6 May 2021).

The Washington Post, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/leadership-books/post/reading-no-substitute-for-victory/2011/03/07/AGZK7BCH\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/leadership-books/post/reading-no-substitute-for-victory/2011/03/07/AGZK7BCH_blog.html) (accessed 22 April 2021).

UN Counter-Terrorism Week Side event: “Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counterterrorism, and countering violent extremism” Concept note (June 2021).

UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, Biological Weapons Convention, <https://www.un.org/disarmament/biological-weapons/> (accessed 24 April 2021).

UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, UN Security Council Resolution 1540 (2004), <https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/sc1540/> (accessed 23 April 2021).

## Chapter II: Threat

Dr. Stephen Harley

‘Terrorists and violent extremists, aiming to change societies and governmental structures through violence, seek to exploit major crises to achieve their objectives.’<sup>35</sup>

As Gilles de Kerchove notes, major crises such as pandemics, along with natural calamities, political upheaval and other seismic shifts in the social order present terrorist groups with opportunities. Terrorist groups are increasingly aware of this and, in many ways, they actively seek out or create such sources of disruption.

This chapter addresses the way in which terrorist organisations responded to one particular case, the COVID-19 Pandemic which began in late 2019/early 2020 and was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11th, 2020. At the time of writing the pandemic is ongoing.

This chapter poses the following questions:

What happened in the field?

How did terrorist organisations exploit the pandemic?

Were terrorist organisations transformed by the pandemic? Were there, for example, any remarkable changes in their goals, targets, methods, organisation, finance, recruitment and so on?

This chapter also identifies a series of semi-sequential commonalities in the way terrorist organisations behaved, exploited and adapted during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Clearly, at the time of writing the pandemic is by no means over, with new variants still emerging and ‘hotspots’ of COVID cases appearing at various levels, from a town or community, to within a nation’s borders (often as a result of the nature and effectiveness of the nation’s response), to across whole trans-national borders and even whole continents. At the same time, a global campaign of vaccination using a variety of treatments to achieve a degree of collective or ‘herd’ immunity and allow the world to return to something like normal is ramping up. But this effort still has a long way to go, with many parts of the world still lacking sufficient quantities of

---

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Comerford, ‘How Have Terrorist Groups Responded to the COVID-19 Pandemic’, *Vision of Humanity*

the vaccines, or the infrastructure to deliver them when they do finally arrive. The conclusions drawn in this chapter are, therefore, drawn *in media res*. Further, more authoritative observations may be possible in time.

However, at this point there are a number of features in the way terrorist organisations responded during the COVID-19 Pandemic which straddle, for example, the self-proclaimed Religiously Motivated Groups/Terrorist Organizations (RMGTOs) claiming to represent Islam, groups such as *al-Qa'ida*, *Da'esh*, Somalia's *al-Shabaab*, *Boko Haram* in the Lake Chad basin and the emergent, apparently *Da'esh*-linked group operating in northern Mozambique, nationalist terror groups and the Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists (REMVEs) such as the Atomwaffen Division or the Boogaloo Bois.

A template can be identified which has the following elements:

The Initial Response: Denial, Displacement  
Recognition  
Operations  
Communications  
Recruitment

And this then provides a structure for a deeper discussion of how terrorist groups have responded to the COVID-19 Pandemic to date.

There are, of course, outliers, notably the Afghan *Taliban* and the kaleidoscope of REMVE groups, and these are explored towards the end of this chapter.

Furthermore, initial analysis indicates that there are also opportunities that were missed but which are worthy of discussion, and some degree of prediction may also be possible about what might happen next, based on the previous behaviour of terrorist groups and the aftermath of other pandemics and natural calamities.

Finally, it should be noted that, while the evidence base for this chapter draws on a range of different terrorist group responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic, a common area of focus based on the response of the *al-Qa'ida* linked Somali terrorist group, *al-Shabaab*, runs through this chapter, based on the author's own tracking of the group on behalf of the British Embassy in Mogadishu. Release authority was sought and received for the author's work studying *al-Shabaab* during the pandemic. While not a case study of the *al-Shabaab* response to the pandemic *per se*, this approach was selected to provide a narrative thread that draws the broader discussion together, and which is then adorned with examples from other terror groups.

## **The Initial Response: Denial & Displacement**

In broad terms, most terrorist organisations began with an initial denial: that the disease either did not even exist, or that it did not affect the terrorist organisation's 'in-group'. This was generally coupled with the blaming of the 'out-group': for creating of the virus (or the myth of the virus) to suit the out-group agenda; for spreading the virus; then for enforcing lockdowns and other forms of restrictions; and finally for withholding protective equipment, treatments and vaccines.

In the case of Somalia's *al-Shabaab*, the group initially focused on the first reported cases in the country in April 2020, a group of businessmen returning from China and a group of Somali National Army soldiers returning from a training course in Italy<sup>36</sup>. At that point China was the assumed point of origin for the virus and Italy was at the epicentre of the pandemic. Italy also had the added bonus in terms of *al-Shabaab* messaging in that a clear link was formed to the former colonial power in southern Somalia, a subject that even now touches a raw nerve with many, proudly nationalistic Somalis. Subsequent reported cases included members of the government who were also part of the Somali Diaspora, members of the African Union peace-keeping mission in the country and international workers serving with the UN. All the initial victims aligned with *al-Shabaab*'s consistent ultra-nationalistic narrative of Somalia-for-the-Somalis.<sup>37</sup> *Al-Shabaab* quickly established a narrative that the disease was, therefore, only affecting those who were in contact with or part of the Near and Far enemies: the Somali government and security forces; and its backers from black Christian Africa and, ultimately, the liberal west. By extension, therefore, *al-Shabaab* adopted a posture of denial: precautions were unnecessary, since the virus only affected those outside the *al-Shabaab* 'in-group'. The group was also vigorous in its refusal to close communal areas, especially mosques and madrassas, although this was not exclusive to the group and was, in fact, part of a wider Somali attitude that reflects the country's religious conservatism and general virus denial<sup>38</sup>.

Comerford notes similar denial and displacement by *Da'esh* in Syria, the Afghan *Taliban* and even the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which many consider a state-sponsored terrorist organisation, which will be further examined in the section on Communications.

---

<sup>36</sup> Maruf, 'Somalia Confirms First Case of Coronavirus', dated March 16th 2020

<sup>37</sup> BEM *al-Shabaab* Exploitation reports dated 06 & 20 April 2020

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*

The REMVEs followed a similar path to the majority of RMGTOs, also aligning the disease with its traditional narratives of Jewish conspiracy or exploiting its apparent origin the Chinese city of Wuhan (Kruglanski et al). *Boko Haram* in Nigeria and across the Lake Chad basin went further in the initial stages of the pandemic by simply ignoring the virus.<sup>39</sup>

## Recognition

Terrorist organisations then had to face the reality of the virus as it took hold in the areas they controlled. Many conducted a complete *volte face*, setting up treatment centres, procuring and issuing stocks of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) as well as issuing guidance: some of that guidance was in line with sensible, international scientific and medical advice; some of it was counter-productive disinformation; the two were often delivered virtually concurrently. There were varying degrees of cooperation, although not necessarily with governments, but more often with NGOs.

In Somalia, for example, *al-Shabaab* began to directly message around virus prevention measures, albeit prohibiting cooperation with government and international health entities and actively harassing health professionals<sup>40</sup>. At the same time, it also set up its own treatment centres in towns it controlled in southern Somalia including Adan Yable, Bulo Burte, Hawadle, Jalalaqsi and Jilib. The group also issued guidance on COVID-19 prevention during mosque sermons and online which, while medically unsound, was in line with both Somali cultural traditions including traditional herbal remedies and Islamic virtues such as the power of prayer<sup>41</sup>.

However, it is worthy of note that recognition that the COVID-19 Pandemic was real and required action was not an overnight occurrence and, in fact, *al-Shabaab* continued to harass medical workers and even those who were simply wearing PPE (especially during mosque-based communal prayers)<sup>42</sup>.

There was much inconsistency. At the same time as it was setting up treatment centres, *al-Shabaab* also summarily executed fighters who contracted the virus<sup>43</sup>: So too did the Somali *Da'esh* franchise in northern Somalia, albeit focusing entirely

<sup>39</sup> Bukarti, 'How Is Boko Haram Responding to Covid-19?', dated 20 May 2020

<sup>40</sup> BEM al-Shabaab Exploitation Analysis, dated 06 July 2020, 09 August 2020 & 17 August 2020

<sup>41</sup> BEM al-Shabaab Exploitation Analysis, dated 20 July 2020

<sup>42</sup> BEM al-Shabaab Exploitation Analysis, dated 06 July 2020, 09 August 2020 & 17 August 2020

<sup>43</sup> BEM al-Shabaab Exploitation Analysis, dated 06 July 2020



on foreign fighters.<sup>44</sup> Both *al-Shabaab* and the Somali *Da'esh* franchise vigorously enforced lockdown, partly to prevent the spread of the virus and partly as an excuse to exert enhanced control over the population through isolation<sup>45</sup>.

There was inconsistency between different locations: some of the southern elements of *al-Shabaab* actively publicised prevention measures, distributed PPE and offered to provide transport for those exhibiting symptoms, albeit to *al-Shabaab*'s own, dubious treatment centres<sup>46</sup>, while the northern elements in Somaliland and Puntland continued to adopt a posture of prohibiting the wearing of PPE and denying access to medical treatment. So, too, did the members of their rivals, Somali *Da'esh* franchise for those exhibiting the symptoms of the disease as late as October 2020<sup>47</sup>.

It may well be that *al-Shabaab* was reacting to the different approaches it saw being adopted by its enemies: the Somali government and the general population in the south of the country effectively ignored the virus, so *al-Shabaab* delivered what was lacking to provide a comparison, hinged around effective delivery of medical services. In the north, it may have felt compelled to match its *Da'esh* rival's harder posture.

This inconsistency was a common feature, reflecting the myth of homogeneity that many assume to be the case in terrorist groups. Some groups, such as *Hayat Tahrir al-Shams* in Syria adopted to two track approach, taking physical measures to limit the effects of the virus but at the same time sticking to narratives of denial and displacement that were common to virtually every terrorist group in the early stages of the pandemic<sup>48</sup>. Bukarti notes similar inconsistencies in the behaviour of both *Boko Haram* and ISWAP<sup>49</sup>.

Leaders also regularly fell prey to the virus: in Somalia, two senior *al-Shabaab* commanders contracted the virus but survived (although one of the commanders' wives died), while a senior Somali *Da'esh* commander did succumb, along with his wife and son<sup>50</sup>. So, too, did, senior members of the Afghan *Taliban*<sup>51</sup>. This may reflect the age of commanders, their conservative world view and an associated denial of the virus and its ability to affect them, or the inevitable physical vulnerabilities

---

<sup>44</sup> BEM al-Shabaab Exploitation Analysis, dated 20 July 2020

<sup>45</sup> BEM al-Shabaab Exploitation Analysis, dated 06 July 2020

<sup>46</sup> BEM al-Shabaab Exploitation Analysis, dated 09 August 2020

<sup>47</sup> BEM al-Shabaab Exploitation Analysis, dated 26 October 2020

<sup>48</sup> Kruglanski et al, p 127

<sup>49</sup> Bukarti, 'How Is Boko Haram Responding to Covid-19?', dated 20 May 2020

<sup>50</sup> BEM al-Shabaab Exploitation Analysis dated 17 August 2020

<sup>51</sup> Kapur, Rashni, 'The Afghan Taliban and Covid-19: Leveraging the Crisis or a Change of Heart?' dated 13 April 2021

accumulated in hostile environments with no access to medical care and a generally unhealthy lifestyle. Clearly, the loss of leaders could have had implications for operations - but it generally did not, perhaps demonstrating the ‘flat pyramid’ of the modern terrorist group, that emphasises what Betz refers to as ‘survivability, flexibility and scalability’ through avoidance of previous, deeply hierarchical - and fragile - structures<sup>52</sup>.

## Operations

In parallel, though, most groups also maintained or even increased their operational tempo during the pandemic. Part of this was exploitation of the inevitable opportunities which appeared as, for example, security forces were re-tasked as part of the broader effort to control the pandemic, budgets were diverted away from CT activities and the groups themselves felt an apparent need to prove their ability to continue to deliver, as a contrast to the seemingly floundering response of national and international institutions.

*Al-Shabaab*, for example, continued to mount terrorist attacks and assassinations of members of the government and the security forces, to launch attacks on isolated rural outputs manned by African Union peacekeepers and the Somali National Army and even to venture across the border into Kenya<sup>53</sup>. Fund-raising activities also continued and, if anything, appear to have increased<sup>54</sup>.

Other groups also maintained and even increased their terrorist activities. *Da'esh* mounted six major attacks between March 11-17th, 2020, the week the WHO declared a global pandemic, in Egypt, Niger, the Philippines, Somalia and Yemen. Its franchise in Nigeria, *Boko Haram*, launched significant, bloody attacks on March 19th, 2020, killing at least 100 government troops in Chad and at least 47 government troops in neighbouring Nigeria<sup>55</sup>. It is clear that many terrorist groups certainly tried to maintain their operational tempo and some even increased it. Longer term analysis of the various groups examined as part of this activity also appears to indicate that few have slowed down their kinetic activities during the pandemic but, as noted earlier, further analysis may be required before robust conclusions can be drawn.

---

<sup>52</sup> Betz, pp 183-4

<sup>53</sup> Hiraal Institute, ‘Semi-annual Somalia Security Report’ dated 16 July 2020

<sup>54</sup> Hiraal Institute, ‘A Losing Game: Countering al-Shabaab’s Finance System’ dated October 2020

<sup>55</sup> Bukarti, ‘A deadly alliance: coronavirus makes Boko Haram more dangerous than ever’, in The Daily Telegraph, dated 07 June 2020

## Communications

Communication is a fundamental component of terrorist activity and the response to the pandemic was no different. Initial attempts to ignore the virus or suppress awareness were abandoned when it became apparent that governments and other institutions were struggling, which presented a rich vein of material with which to expose the weaknesses of the terror groups' opponents.

The groups generally aligned the unfolding pandemic and the response by their enemies, be they governments, the security forces, international institutions, or other nations, races and religions, with existing narratives. Existing narratives could include the terrorist group's opposition to vaccination, education, globalisation and the broader, western-liberal, democratic system of values, or intertwined conspiracy theories and tales of historic persecution. Communications approaches were diverse, but also often contradictory, as factions within the terrorist group addressed local problems or adhered to sub-group ideologies.

*Al-Shabaab*, for example, aligned the unfolding pandemic firmly with previous narrative streams: that the Federal Government of Somalia was corrupt, claiming the country's Ministry of Finance was embezzling funds given by the WHO<sup>56</sup> and that the Ministry of Health in the Federal Member State of Somaliland was viewing the pandemic as a money-making opportunity while also giving out misleading advice<sup>57</sup>. Using the pandemic as a rod with which to beat opponents, whether it be to highlight incompetence or corruption was a consistent approach used by terrorist groups.

But generally *Al-Shabaab* continued with its existing strands of messaging, about attacks on the government and the African Union, on the global conspiracy against the *Ummah* and western corruption and the success of its own provision of security and services - and not exclusively health services, but also justice, education and economic development. In fact, of 1,315 articles reviewed between March and September 2020, only 35 were focused on COVID-19<sup>58</sup>.

In fact, much of *Al-Shabaab's* messaging around the pandemic was simply regurgitated from international news sources, focusing on the numbers of dead and infected - perhaps *Al-Shabaab* felt that the story was telling itself and too much amplification may produce unintended consequences linked to raised awareness of the virus in the areas it controlled. However, *Al-Shabaab* did adjust this approach in mid-October 2020, when the President of the United States, Donald Trump, was revealed to have the virus, but quickly reverted to its previous stance in the weeks that followed<sup>59</sup>.

<sup>56</sup> BEM al-Shabaab Exploitation Analysis dated 06 July 2020

<sup>57</sup> BEM al-Shabaab Exploitation Analysis dated 31 August 2020

<sup>58</sup> BEM al-Shabaab Exploitation Analysis dated 28 September 2020

<sup>59</sup> BEM al-Shabaab Exploitation Analysis dated 12 October 2020

Reinforcing existing narratives was a consistent theme: Comerford notes that *Da'esh* in Syria called the virus 'the harbinger of the apocalypse' and 'the soldier of Allah' while the Afghan *Taliban* claimed it had been sent by Allah to punish 'disobedience' and 'the sins of mankind'. Similarly, the Iranian Republican Guard Corps claimed the virus was a Zionist biological terror attack, aligning the pandemic with its antipathy towards the state of Israel rather than the tenets of Islam.<sup>60</sup>

Many groups also increased or diversified their messaging. *Da'esh*, always an active user of social media, intensified its messaging on both Facebook and Twitter<sup>61</sup>. But even *Da'esh's* natural affinity with the digital space pales in comparison with REMVEs, which will be examined in the later section on Outliers.

As noted previously, inconsistencies in messaging also abounded. Just like *al-Shabaab*, *Boko Haram* began to knit together messages from the initial period of denial, with its leader, Abubakar Shekau, claiming it was a 'divine punishment' while other communications continued to deny the virus even existed and yet more offered contradictory guidance (prayer versus medical guidance)<sup>62</sup>. It should, of course be remembered, that terrorist groups were natural advocates of disinformation and 'Fake News' before the terms were even invented. But whether or not the intention was to confuse, the end result is inevitably the same, with very real effects.

## Recruitment

Terrorist organisations also saw an opportunity to use the pandemic as a recruitment tool. The attempts ranged from the physical, face-to-face in the areas they controlled (which were often now less subject to strikes and other security forces operations), in areas where they were contained (such as the detention facilities or prisons) and online. All audiences were, in one way or another, captive: either in a physical location or at home, isolated and disempowered, but with a high-speed internet connection and an excuse, under the cover of 'online learning' or 'working from home', for considerably more and completely unfettered access than would normally be the case. *Al-Shabaab*, for example, pressed the population under its control for more and more child soldiers, when previously the option of a 'financial donation' or young boys was given.<sup>63</sup>

In the physical realm, former *Da'esh* fighters, along with their associated wives and offspring, are an example of how a shift of government and international community focus, in this case onto the pandemic, can present terrorist groups with

---

<sup>60</sup> Comerford, *ibid*

<sup>61</sup> Comerford, *ibid*

<sup>62</sup> Bukarti, *ibid*

<sup>63</sup> BEM *al-Shabaab* Exploitation Analysis dated 23 November 2020

an opportunity. Al-Hol in Syria was constructed as a camp where assessments could be made of the individuals and the families in detention, who could then face justice where appropriate, be placed in de-radicalisation programmes or repatriated to their home countries (where they may also be subject to the first two approaches). But with the advent of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Al-Hol is now little more than a squalid concentration camp - and a potential breeding ground for future recruits to *Da'esh*. Neglect, unrecognised trauma, possible maltreatment and the very real possibility of the presence of unreconciled adherents of *Da'esh's* perverse ideology makes the camp a rich venue for *Da'esh* recruitment.<sup>64</sup> In an interesting example of the intertwining of recruitment and narratives, *Da'esh* have also drawn comparisons between Al-Hol and the Russian treatment of Muslims during the Chechen Wars as well as the brutal repression of the Rohingya in Myanmar and the Uighur in China.<sup>65</sup> Any concentration of a group of the vulnerable - inmates in prison, migrants in detention camps, former terrorists and their often blameless families - presents a rich target for extremist recruiters, especially when aligned with accessible narratives of longer term, global oppression.

Many groups, such as *Boko Haram* and ISWAP in Nigeria, also appear to be taking advantage of a rise in lawlessness. The spike in banditry in some parts of Nigeria, often in the absence of security forces as a result of re-positioning and re-rolling in response to the pandemic, may leave those populations susceptible to the claims of terrorist groups being the most effective providers of security (Idowu, 2020). Similarly, *al-Shabaab* has recently sought to exploit political tensions in Somalia around the postponed National Elections.<sup>66</sup> No opportunity to expose the weaknesses of the institutions of government was missed.

### **The Outliers**

As noted in the preamble to this chapter, there are, inevitably, outliers: the Afghan *Taliban*, in their delivery of a campaign of COVID-19 prevention measures and messaging, is one; REMVEs, in their exploitation of the circumstances of those in lockdown, particularly in the western hemisphere, is another.

### **The Afghan Taliban.**

The Afghan *Taliban*, for example, could have been expected to vigorously resist any attempt at vaccination, given their long history of campaigning against polio vaccinations, that they claimed would sterilise the population and which also contained pig's blood.<sup>67</sup> They, along with their erstwhile allies, *al-Qa'ida*, were well

<sup>64</sup> Hurley, Julia C., 'Coronavirus and ISIS: The Challenge of Repatriation from Al-Hol', dated 28 May 2020

<sup>65</sup> Kruglanski et al, p 123

<sup>66</sup> UN News, 'Somalia leaders walk 'back from the brink' dated 25 May 2021

<sup>67</sup> Kapur, *ibid*

aware that Usama Bin Ladin was targeted for assassination in 2011 using a front organisation that claimed to be enrolling people for a campaign of vaccinations. The group also had a long history of attacks on health-workers.<sup>68</sup>

However, the Afghan *Taliban* did not behave as might have been predicted. There are a number of possible reasons for this. The group may have been aware of the general weakness of the medical infrastructure in Afghanistan and realised that a campaign of non-cooperation or even active opposition could ultimately result in catastrophic results for the population. The sudden influx of refugee returners from Iran, another epicentre of the virus in the early months of the pandemic, may also have influenced thinking.<sup>69</sup>

The result was an unprecedented degree of co-operation. While other groups in Colombia and the Philippines also initially did so too, only the Afghan *Taliban* has done so consistently throughout the pandemic. The group agreed to a ceasefire, allowed health-workers into the areas it controlled, launched a campaign of public awareness and set up both treatment centres and a system of quarantine.<sup>70</sup>

It is unclear why the Afghan *Taliban* adopted this approach: it may have been a purely pragmatic approach that limited effects of the virus; it may have allowed the *Taliban* to appear to be behaving like a government in waiting while the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan floundered; and, not entirely unassociated, it might have been linked to ongoing peace process with the US, which the Afghan *Taliban* clearly viewed as a route to ultimate US and western withdrawal from the country.<sup>71</sup>

However, as Glinski notes, at a practical level the group now actively negotiates with NGOs (although not the government), raising the possibility of positive habit-forming going forward, and the glimmer of hope that a future Afghan *Taliban* may be different from the brutal organisation that ruled the country in the 1990s<sup>72</sup>. This may, of course, prove to be an intensely naive viewpoint.

### Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists

Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists (REMVEs), especially in the US, were also an exception in a number of ways but, because of these groups' kaleidoscope nature, analysis can be a challenge. This is made all the more difficult

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid

<sup>69</sup> Ibid

<sup>70</sup> Ibid

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Glinski, 'Afghanistan's COVID-19 vaccine rollout plans cross conflict front lines' dated 07 April 2021

by the profusion of right wing and racist commentators who often hold respectable positions, including in the news media and, political parties and even elected office. Not all openly advocate violence against whoever they identify as ‘out-group’, although their inflammatory statements may nonetheless inspire some to commit acts of violence against ‘the other’, be they, for example, those of Asian extraction, Black Lives Matter (BLM) protestors or simply functionaries in shops, on public transport and in medical facilities who are trying to enforce COVID-19 prevention measures.

Some groups do openly advocate violence though, such as the Boogaloo Bois, the Proud Boys and the Oath Takers in the US, all of whom embrace REMVE and extreme Libertarianism narratives, often manifested in fierce hatred of the institutions and behaviours of the western liberal order. Internationally groups such as the Atomwaffen Division and the Azov Brigade are equally extreme. Going further, the Involuntary Celibates (or InCels), whose loose narrative embraces the same range of poisonous ideologies but with the addition of intense misogyny, are already designated as terrorists by Canada.<sup>73</sup>

This loose grouping stands out for a number of reasons: their embrace of both circumstances and technology during lockdown in the west; their calls for violence; and their encouragement of the weaponisation of the virus, one which other groups appear to have adopted, but certainly not on the scale of REMVEs.

As previously noted, terrorist groups have a history of exploiting truth, half-truth and outright lies to build their narratives and support the achieving of their objectives. However, the circumstances conspired to make those in the west in some ways more vulnerable than elsewhere: rising populism in the west; vigorously enforced and monitored lockdowns with an accompanying feeling of disempowerment; easy access to the online space but without the normal constraints of being in the workspace or under adult supervision. Conspiracy theories and other forms of disinformation abounded.<sup>74</sup> An extensive information ecosphere that included message boards such as 4Chan and 8Chan, the secure online messaging servers Parler, Vote and Telegram offered numerous means for extremists to spread their interpretation of the pandemic<sup>75</sup>.

The culmination was, of course, QAnon, although this was only one of a number of gateways to extremism. QAnon adherents aligned the pandemic with their

---

<sup>73</sup> Kruglanski et al, p 122

<sup>74</sup> Ibid

<sup>75</sup> Comerford, ibid

narratives of a global Jewish conspiracy as well as racial hatred of the Chinese, blacks, science, modern gender politics and an array of other scapegoats. Products were often sophisticated, such as the now completely debunked ‘documentary’, ‘Plandemic’.<sup>76</sup>

Some went much further than sharing ludicrous conspiracy theories: on more extremist sites there were calls to weaponise the virus by deliberately contracting it and then targeting synagogues, mosques and so on.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, during the Black Lives Matter protests calls for a repetition of the 2017 Charlottesville car ramming attack which killed one and injured 28 others were heeded, although thankfully only on a small number of occasions.<sup>78</sup> But the adaptability of REMVEs far outpaced that of other terrorist groups, especially in its tailored communications and its consistent treading of a line that often remained within the bounds of normal political discourse - just - without drawing the attention that overt violent extremism and terrorism bring.

### **What If?**

This chapter concludes with a series of ‘What If?’s.

The first ‘What If?’s relate to opportunities that may have been missed while, understandably, governments and other institutions were struggling to understand, limit and ultimately control the pandemic: the missed chance to engage with terrorist groups and other forms of violent extremism, and the opportunity to expose the gaping holes in terrorist group claims to be functional entities delivering security and services and with a cohesive world vision.

The second ‘What If?’s relate to patterns of terrorist behaviour around the terrorist/criminal nexus, and to what lessons terrorist groups may have learned from the pandemic, including the weaponisation of virus or even the securing of Weapons of Mass Destruction,

### **Missed Opportunities**

The example of the Afghan *Taliban* is, already noted, an outlier. But why? Do the reasons for the Afghan *Taliban*’s decision to cooperate with COVID-19 prevention efforts, even though this directly challenged their core narratives and their previous behaviours, lie in pragmatism, shifting emphasis to the ‘political’ element of the

---

<sup>76</sup> Kruglanski et al, p 127

<sup>77</sup> Comerford,

<sup>78</sup> Kruglanski et al p 126



definition of terrorism as political violence? Is the Afghan *Taliban* still a terrorist or violent extremist group? Most commentators (and Afghans) would say yes. So what made the Afghan *Taliban* behave differently from all the other groups? What would have happened in other theatres if the onus for negotiation and potential cooperation was not left to the terrorist group but was led by the government? This is clearly an area for further exploration, probably when both the pandemic and the negotiated settlement in Afghanistan are concluded in some enduring manner.

Another missed opportunity was the chance to challenge the clear inadequacies of terrorist groups during the pandemic. The contradictions in messaging, ranging from denial to displacement to late recognition of the problem, show the inconsistency which terrorist groups are so often guilty of, rendering them deeply untrustworthy. The fallacy of terrorist groups claiming to be deliverers of security and services would have undermined recruitment narratives. But little seems to have been attempted by way of counter-narrative activity.

### **Predictions**

On the other hand, some predictions can be made about what might happen next,

Terrorism is an expensive activity and the terrorist-criminal nexus, whereby both elements, the terrorists and the criminals, progressively cooperate and combine their efforts to suit mutual requirements, is the subject of an increasing body of literature. It can be assumed that terrorists and criminal gangs will seek to gain control of illicit stocks of PPE going forward, as well as vaccines. Counterfeit vaccines are inevitable and will be of similar interest to both. *Al-Shabaab* in Somalia already cooperates extensively with counterfeiting gangs, albeit often involving more innocuous goods such as fake printer cartridges, cigarettes and branded or luxury goods. Previous terrorist group behaviours make this a very likely course of action in the short to medium term.

The nightmare scenario, however, is that some terrorist groups see the devastating nature of the COVID-19 virus as a demonstration of a potential weapon's capability. Whether this be the deliberate transmission of COVID-19 or another existing virus, the illicit procurement of an existing biological weapon or the development and deployment of an entirely new capability, the effects could be potentially devastating. While terrorist groups have actively sought Weapons of Mass Destruction before, few have truly held apocalyptic visions such as that of *Aum Shinrikyo*. This may not always be the case, especially as entire ethnicities, religions and world visions become the perceived persecutor or threat.

## Bibliography

- Betz, David, 'Carnage and Connectivity: Landmarks in the Decline of Conventional Military Power', Hurst, London (2015)
- Boaz, Ganor, 'COVID-19 and Global Terrorism Pandemics', International Institute for Counter Terrorism', dated 22 March 2021  
[https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2672/COVID19\\_and\\_Global\\_Terrorism\\_Pandemics](https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2672/COVID19_and_Global_Terrorism_Pandemics) British Embassy Mogadishu/Albany Associates, 'aS Exploitation Reporting', Mogadishu, Somalia, March 2020 - May 2021
- Bukarti, Audo Bulama, 'How Is Boko Haram Responding to Covid-19?', Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, dated 20 May 2020 <https://institute.global/policy/how-boko-haram-responding-covid-19>
- Bukarti, 'A deadly alliance: coronavirus makes Boko Haram more dangerous than ever', The Daily Telegraph, London, dated 07 June 2020 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/deadly-alliance-coronavirus-makes-boko-haram-dangerous-ever/>
- Campbell, John, 'Beyond the Pandemic, Boko Haram Looms Large in Nigeria', Council on Foreign Relations, New York, dated 21 July 2020 <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/beyond-pandemic-boko-haram-looms-large-nigeria>
- Comerford, 'How Have Terrorist Groups Responded to the COVID-19 Pandemic', Vision of Humanity', Vision of Humanity, undated <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/how-have-terrorist-organisations-responded-to-covid-19/>
- Commission on Countering Extremism, 'COVID-19: How Hateful Extremists are exploiting the pandemic', dated July 2020 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/906724/CCE\\_Briefing\\_Note\\_001.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/906724/CCE_Briefing_Note_001.pdf)
- Economic Times of India, 'Groups associated with al-Qaeda, ISIS spread conspiracy theories about COVID-19: UN report', India, dated 19 November 2020 [https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/groups-associated-with-al-qaeda-isis-spread-conspiracy-theories-about-covid-19-un-report/articleshow/79297124.cms?utm\\_source=contentofinterest&utm\\_medium=text&utm\\_campaign=cppst](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/groups-associated-with-al-qaeda-isis-spread-conspiracy-theories-about-covid-19-un-report/articleshow/79297124.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst)
- Gill, Paul & Salman, Nadine L., 'Terrorism during the COVID-19 pandemic', UCL Jill Dando Institute, dated May 2020 [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jill-dando-institute/sites/jill-dando-institute/files/terrosim\\_covid19\\_final\\_no\\_13.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jill-dando-institute/sites/jill-dando-institute/files/terrosim_covid19_final_no_13.pdf)
- Glinski, Stephanie, 'Afghanistan's COVID-19 vaccine rollout plans cross conflict front lines', The New Humanitarian, dated 07 April 2021 <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/2021/04/07/afghanistan-s-covid-19-vaccine-rollout-plans-cross-conflict-front-lines>
- Hiraal Institute, 'A Losing Game: Countering al-Shabaab's Financial System' Mogadishu, October 2020 <https://hiraalinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A-Losing-Game.pdf>
- Hiraal Institute, 'Semi-annual Somalia Security Report', Mogadishu, dated 16 July 2020 <https://hiraalinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Semiannual-Somalia-Security-Report.pdf>
- Hockey, Christopher & Jones, 'The Limits of 'Shabaab-CARE': Militant Governance amid COVID-19' in CTC Sentinel vol 13 issue 6, Combatting Terrorism Centre at Westpoint, United States, dated June 2020 <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-limits-of-shabaab-care-militant-governance-amid-covid-19/>

- Hurley, Julia C., 'Coronavirus and ISIS: The Challenge of Repatriation from Al-Hol', United States Institute for Peace, dated 28 May 2020 <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/05/coronavirus-and-isis-challenge-repatriation-al-hol>
- Idowu, Harrison Adewale, 'Reappraising Conflict Trends in Nigeria Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic', African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes, Durban, South Africa (2020) <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/reappraising-conflict-trends-in-nigeria-amidst-the-covid-19-pandemic>
- Kapur, Rashni, 'The Afghan Taliban and Covid-19: Leveraging the Crisis or a Change of Heart?' Middle East Institute, Washington DC, United States, dated 13 April 2021 <https://www.mei.edu/publications/afghan-taliban-and-covid-19-leveraging-crisis-or-change-heart>
- Kruglanski, Arie & Ellenberg, Molly, Gunaratna, Rohan, Speckhard, Anne, 'Terrorism in time of the pandemic: exploiting mayhem', Global Security: Health, Science & Policy vol 5, dated 30 October 2020
- Lederer, Edith M., 'UN experts: COVID-19 upped extremist threats in conflicts', Associated Press, dated 05 February 2021 <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-islamic-state-group-coronavirus-pandemic-covid-19-pandemic-taliban-5068d57c7ec1367a78b82b1f082ef488>
- Maruf, Harun, 'Somalia Confirms First Case of Coronavirus', Voice of America, dated March 16th 2020 <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/somalia-confirms-first-case-coronavirus>
- Mullins, Sam, 'The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Reassessing the Evidence', in EICTP Research Study: Key Determinants in the Era of COVID-19 and Beyond. Trajectory, Disruption and the Way Forward. Volume II, dated 22 March 2021 <https://apcss.org/the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-terrorism-and-counterterrorism/>
- Silke, Andrew, 'COVID-19 and terrorism: assessing the short and long-term impacts of terrorism', Poole Re/Cranfield University, dated 07 May 2020 <https://www.poolre.co.uk/reports/covid-19-and-terrorism-report/>
- UN Counter Terrorism Executive Directorate, 'The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on counterterrorism and countering violent extremism (ENG) UPDATE', dated May 2020 <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/content/cted-paper--impact-covid-19-pandemic-counterterrorism-and-countering-violent-extremism-eng>
- UN News, 'COVID sparks resurgence of ISIL terrorists, threatening international peace and security, Security Council hears', New York, United States, dated 10 February 2021 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/02/1084362>
- UN News, 'Somalia leaders walk 'back from the brink', resume talks on critical elections', New York, United States, dated 25 May 2021 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/05/1092722>

## Chapter III: Policy Implications

Dr. Richard Warnes

### Introduction

The third Chapter of this paper will examine the wider Policy implications for NATO associated with the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Alliance's response to it. As a recent article by a senior NATO official states...

*“COVID-19 has already made clear that pandemics can have far-reaching implications for the security of our nations and the stability of the world around us, and that also NATO needs to continue to adapt to meet those risks and challenges.”*<sup>79</sup>

### Methodology Note

Consequently, in examining the issue outlined, this Policy Chapter is divided into two sections, based around both the 'Threat' and 'Response', which are designed to answer two key research questions:

- 1. How will NATO be affected by the terrorist implications arising from the COVID-19 Pandemic?**
- 2. What specific recommendations can be made to NATO to cope with these modified threats?**

In examining these questions, a 'Grounded Theory' approach was used.<sup>80</sup> This is an inductive methodological approach, where rather than framing a hypothesis before testing it against the data, the data is examined to identify emerging themes in order to establish key issues and factors. These can then lead to an overarching hypothesis. To identify the key issues for this Chapter, textual content analysis was conducted on Thirty (N=30) relevant documents, including NATO publications and press releases. Open Coding was used to identify the emerging themes from all documents before these were grouped together under overarching categories in the process of Axial Coding.<sup>81</sup> These emerging categories form the sub-headings of the following chapter.

---

<sup>79</sup> Cadenbach, Ambassador B, 'NATO's Response to COVID-19', Bled Strategic Forum, 24 Nov 20. NATO's response to COVID-19. Key political workstrands and early... | by Bled Strategic Forum | Medium

<sup>80</sup> Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction.

<sup>81</sup> Warnes, R, (2009) "Grounded Theory", Chapter 10 in Ling, T, and Villalba van Dijk, L (eds.) *Performance Audit Handbook: Routes to effective evaluation*. Santa Monica CA: RAND, pp. 76-82. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/technical\\_reports/TR788.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR788.html)

In addition, the categorisation highlighted that there were two aspects to each research question. For the first ‘Threat’ question, there were both direct and indirect threats, while for the second ‘Response’ question, there were both specific and general recommendations. Given the breadth of issues covered, while the chapter will highlight the key issues and themes which emerged, more detailed analysis of specific issues can be found in the publications listed in the footnotes and following bibliography at the end of the Chapter.

## **Key Findings**

### **Direct Threats**

- Terrorist/ Insurgent Exploitation of the Situation
- Pandemic Highlights Potential Impact of Bioterrorism
- Impact on Defence Cooperation & Exploitation by State Threat Actors

### **Indirect Threats**

- Cause of Unrest and Instability
- Impact on Operational Capability and Overseas Deployment
- Impact on Refugee Issues and Operations
- Decline in Economy and Shift in Focus from Defence Expenditure

### **Specific Recommendations**

- Prepare to Respond to the Threat and Impact of Bioterrorism
- Increase the Focus on Human Security and Enhance Civil Preparedness
- Maintain Collective Security from both hostile Sub-State and State Actors

### **General Recommendations**

- Improve Information Sharing of Best Practices and Lessons
- Consolidate and Innovate Strategic Communication
- Increase MACA Capabilities and Preparedness
- Strengthen Defence Cooperation and Integration of Military and Civil Capabilities

## How will NATO be affected by the terrorist implications arising from the COVID-19 Pandemic?

### Direct Threats

#### a. Terrorist/ Insurgent Exploitation of the Situation

The distraction of NATO Alliance members and partner nations in dealing with the COVID-19 Pandemic has provided a ‘window of opportunity’ for terrorists, insurgents, organised crime groups and other malign actors to exploit the situation for their advantage.<sup>82</sup> At the same time the resultant reduction in interaction by the police and security forces with the public means that the authorities are less situationally aware of potential threats emerging amongst local communities.<sup>83</sup> In April 2020, while addressing the Security Council, the UN Secretary General reminded us that:

*“The threat of terrorism remains alive. Terrorist groups may see a window of opportunity to strike while the attention of most governments is turned towards the pandemic. The situation in the Sahel, where people face the double scourge of the virus and escalating terrorism is of particular concern.”*<sup>84</sup>

*Da’esh* has already announced that it will use the situation to step up its activities in MENA,<sup>85</sup> while there has been an upsurge in attacks by *al Qaeda* affiliated groups, such as *al Shabaab* in Somalia.<sup>86</sup> Certainly, the pandemic has,

*“Exacerbated the negative trajectory of terrorism in sub-Saharan Africa, which was on a concerning path towards becoming an increasingly central locus of global terrorism in the wake of the decline of ISIS’ territorial [so-called] ‘Caliphate’ in the Levant...with particular concerns raised about the Sahel.”*<sup>87</sup>

However, as noted in the previous chapter, it is not just Religiously Motivated Groups/Terrorist Organisations (RMGTOs) which have exploited the COVID-19

<sup>82</sup> Zandee, D. Duchateau-Polkerman, E. and Stoetman, A. ‘Defence and COVID-19: Why the budget cuts should be off the table’, Clingendael Apr 20. [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Alert\\_Defence\\_and\\_Covid-19\\_April\\_2020.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Alert_Defence_and_Covid-19_April_2020.pdf)

<sup>83</sup> Salman, N. and Gill, P. ‘Terrorism during the COVID-19 pandemic’, Jill Dando Institute May 20, University College London. [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jill-dando-institute/sites/jill-dando-institute/files/terrosim\\_covid19\\_final\\_no\\_13.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jill-dando-institute/sites/jill-dando-institute/files/terrosim_covid19_final_no_13.pdf)

<sup>84</sup> UN Secretary General, ‘Remarks to the Security Council on the COVID-19 pandemic’, UN 09 Apr 20.

<sup>85</sup> Zandee et. al. (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.3.

<sup>86</sup> Silke, A. ‘COVID-19 and Terrorism: Assessing the short and long-term impacts of terrorism’, Cranfield University 7 May 20. <https://www.cranfield.ac.uk/press/news-2020/covid19-and-terrorism-assessing-the-short-and-longterm-impacts>

<sup>87</sup> Comerford, M. ‘How have terrorist organisations responded to COVID-19?’ Vision of Humanity/ Global Terrorism Index 2020. <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/how-have-terrorist-organisations-responded-to-covid-19/>

Pandemic, with Racially & Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists (REMVE) individuals and networks spreading conspiracy theories, denigrating racial and minority communities, seeking to divide society and calling upon their supporters to launch attacks.<sup>88</sup>

The quarantines and lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 Pandemic have led to a global increase in the use of the internet and social media.<sup>89</sup> Exploiting this, and the isolation and mental health of vulnerable individuals during the pandemic, RMGTO and REMVE extremists have taken the opportunity to disseminate propaganda, spread disinformation, radicalise and recruit individuals, fuel hatred and promote their agendas.<sup>90</sup> Consequently, in a future worst case scenario, the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic could lead to: International and local terrorism coming together, an increase in bioterrorism, the emergence of lawless parallel communities as fertile breeding grounds for terrorism and serious crime, increased attempts to establish terrorist recruitment amongst diasporas in developed countries, a shift in funding from counterterrorism to health and social welfare, an increase in radicalisation and a spike in lone-actor terrorist attacks.<sup>91</sup>

## **b. Pandemic Highlights Potential Impact of Bioterrorism**

One of the most direct threats posed by the COVID-19 Pandemic is that although COVID-19 is not itself classified as a biological weapon, the effects of the pandemic have demonstrated to terrorist networks the potential impact of a bioterrorist attack.<sup>92</sup> The pandemic has thus acted as a lesson, highlighting the potential effects of an attack utilising biological agents, and generating genuine concern that the pandemic will lead to an upsurge in terrorist interest in such non-conventional weapons.<sup>93</sup> With regular travel, growing global interconnectedness, increasing urbanisation and high population density, the modern world is particularly vulnerable to a bioterror attack<sup>94</sup>:

---

<sup>88</sup> UK Government, *'How Hateful Extremists are Exploiting the Pandemic'*, Commission for Countering Extremism July 2020. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/906724/CCE\\_Briefing\\_Note\\_001.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/906724/CCE_Briefing_Note_001.pdf)

<sup>89</sup> United Nations CTED, *'The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism'*, Dec 20. [https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CTED\\_Paper\\_The-impact-of-the-COVID-19-pandemic-on-counter-terrorism-and-countering-violent-extremism\\_Dec2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CTED_Paper_The-impact-of-the-COVID-19-pandemic-on-counter-terrorism-and-countering-violent-extremism_Dec2020.pdf)

<sup>90</sup> Kruglanski, A. et. al. *'Terrorism in time of the Pandemic: Exploiting mayhem'*, Global Security: Health, Science and Policy 5: 1 2020. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/23779497.2020.1832903?needAccess=true>

<sup>91</sup> Adlakha-Hutcheon, G. and Johnston, P. *'The Future Impacts of COVID-19 on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization – a Futures Framework'*, Defence Research and Development Canada (DRDC/RDDC) Oct 20, p.16. [https://cradpdf.drdc-rddc.gc.ca/PDFS/unc349/p812285\\_A1b.pdf](https://cradpdf.drdc-rddc.gc.ca/PDFS/unc349/p812285_A1b.pdf)

<sup>92</sup> Ifimie, I. *'The Implications of COVID-19 for NATO's counter-bioterrorism'*, Chapter 6 in Tardy, T. (ed.) *'COVID-19: NATO in the Age of Pandemics'*, NATO NDC Research Paper 09, May 2020. <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1440>

<sup>93</sup> Silke (2020) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>94</sup> Cadenbach (2020) *Op. Cit.*

*“The negative social and economic implications of the COVID-19 crisis will result in growing intent by terrorist groups to use biological agents against NATO member states for the purpose of achieving their goals. In the words of the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, - the weaknesses and lack of preparedness exposed by this pandemic provide a window onto how a bioterrorist attack might unfold – and may increase its risks.”<sup>95</sup>*

This concern has been exacerbated by the initial dysfunctional and uncoordinated responses of NATO members and others to the COVID-19 Pandemic. However, the flipside is that the pandemic has helped highlight those areas where Alliance and partner countries can improve cooperation, coordination and information sharing in anticipation of future biological threats.<sup>96</sup>

An associated concern heightened by the pandemic is the potential for extremist terrorist groups, such as *Da'esh*, to identify, radicalise and recruit highly trained scientists with skills in biology, virology etc., who might be able to fabricate and develop effective biological weapons.<sup>97</sup> This concern was previously partially realised by the Japanese cult *Aum Shinrikyo* during the 1990s.<sup>98</sup> Should such scientific recruitment occur again, the fear is that this would be a game-changer in the case of a bio-terrorist attack.<sup>99</sup>

### **c. Impact on Defence Cooperation & Exploitation by State Threat Actors**

At a wider overarching level, there is the threat that the COVID-19 Pandemic has led to an increased level of national self-interest, disrupting trans-national alliances such as NATO, the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU), potentially impacting on the development of NATO defence policy and hampering longer term defence cooperation<sup>100</sup>:

*“The coronavirus did not create this situation, but it further erodes confidence in the proclamations of solidarity that ritually end every NATO summit. In the past months, as the virus spreads throughout the world, NATO (and EU) allies have seen their partners hoarding equipment and medical supplies. Moreover, intra-alliance borders*

<sup>95</sup> Ifimie (2020) *Op. Cit.* pp. 52-3.

<sup>96</sup> Tardy, T. (ed.) *COVID-19: NATO in the Age of Pandemics*, NATO NDC Research Paper 09, May 2020. <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1440>

<sup>97</sup> Martellini, M. *The Risk of Skilled Scientist Radicalization and Emerging Biological Warfare Agents* in Martellini, M. and Rao, J. (eds.) (2017) *The Risk of Skilled Scientist Radicalization and Emerging Biological Warfare Threats*. NATO Science for Peace and Security. Amsterdam: IOS Books. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_168052.htm?](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_168052.htm?)

<sup>98</sup> Reader, I. (2000) *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan: The case of Aum Shinrikyo*. London: Routledge

<sup>99</sup> Stern, J. (1999) *The Ultimate Terrorists*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press

<sup>100</sup> Billon-Galland, A. *COVID-19 Strengthens the Case for EU Defence*, Chatham House 17 Jun 20. COVID-19 Strengthens the Case for EU Defence | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank



*have been closed down, not only between NATO and EU members within Europe, but also bans forbidding travel across the Atlantic have been enacted.*"<sup>101</sup>

These factors, and the wider impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic, have been exploited by threat countries such as Russia<sup>102</sup>:

*"Taking advantage of people's appetite for information given the overall uncertainty surrounding the coronavirus, powers like China and Russia seized the opportunity to discredit NATO member states' management of the pandemic and even accuse the alliance itself of spreading the virus."*<sup>103</sup>

Consequently, the COVID-19 Pandemic has re-affirmed the pernicious nature of Russian and Chinese propaganda, including the spreading of conspiracy theories.<sup>104</sup> Their exploitation of the pandemic is likely to generate re-thinking in the NATO and partner countries over China's role in numerous global supply chains.<sup>105</sup> While much has already been written about Russia's nefarious activities during the COVID-19 Pandemic, and while this is not the main focus of this chapter, these actions have included influencing, and in some cases supporting, proxy groups in various Alliance and partner countries - nationalist separatist, extreme right-wing, anarchist and others - some of whom fall under traditional definitions of insurgents and terrorists.<sup>106</sup>

## **Indirect Threats**

### **a. Cause of Unrest and Instability**

A significant longer-term threat from the COVID-19 Pandemic to NATO interests and personnel is caused by the way it has acted as a catalyst for threat multiplication and as a major source of instability. Such instability can lead to an upsurge in terrorism, human trafficking, weapons smuggling and other criminal activities by both terrorist networks and organised crime groups, particularly in low-income countries already impacted by socio-economic imbalances and problems of governance<sup>107</sup>:

---

<sup>101</sup> Gvosdev, N. 'The Effect of COVID-19 on the NATO Alliance', Foreign Policy Research Institute, Eurasia Program, 23 Mar 20, p.4. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/03/the-effect-of-covid-19-on-the-nato-alliance/>

<sup>102</sup> Giles, K. 'Beware Russian and Chinese Positioning for After the Pandemic', Chatham House 9 Apr 20. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/04/beware-russian-and-chinese-positioning-after-pandemic>

<sup>103</sup> De Maio, G. 'NATO's Response to COVID-19: Lessons for Resilience and Readiness'. Brookings Institute Oct 20, p.4. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/natos-response-to-covid-19-lessons-for-resilience-and-readiness/>

<sup>104</sup> Lucas, E. et. al. 'Information Bedlam: Russian and Chinese Information Operations During COVID-19', Center for European Policy Analysis, 15 Mar 21. <https://cepa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CEPA-Russia-China-9.14.21.pdf>

<sup>105</sup> Kochis, D. and Coffey, L. 'NATO's role in Pandemic Response', Heritage Foundation 5 May 20. NATO's Role in Pandemic Response | The Heritage Foundation

<sup>106</sup> Herd, G. 'COVID-19, Russian Responses and President Putin's Operational Code', George C Marshall Center 20 Apr 20. <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/covid-19-russian-responses-and-president-putins-operational-code>

<sup>107</sup> European Parliament, 'How the COVID-19 crisis has affected security and defence-related aspects of the EU', EU External Relations Jan 21. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2021/653623/EXPO\\_IDA\(2021\)653623\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2021/653623/EXPO_IDA(2021)653623_EN.pdf)

*“The socio-economic consequences of the pandemic therefore have multi-layered consequences that tend to reinforce existing problems in terms of poverty, human rights, inequality, crime and thus threaten human security. We can also expect familiar secondary effects, such as growing migration to the north, putting pressure on Europe’s borders.”*<sup>108</sup>

The instability caused as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic, could destabilise countries to the south of NATO, such as Egypt and Tunisia, while impacting on already fractured countries, such as Mali and other parts of the Sahel.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, for the reasons outlined, the pandemic is also likely to see an upsurge in existing terrorist violence or an unravelling of regimes in conflict areas where NATO missions are already operating and have personnel based, such as in Afghanistan, Syria or Iraq.<sup>110</sup>

### **b. Impact on Operational Capability and Overseas Deployment**

A further long-term effect of COVID-19 which will impair NATO’s operational capability (including Counterterrorism ) over the coming years is the impact of the pandemic on a range of military functionality. The areas impacted include personnel, intelligence, operations, logistics, planning, communications, training and civil affairs.<sup>111</sup> In particular there is the longer-term concern at the impact the COVID-19 Pandemic has had on NATO service personnel and their families, challenging military readiness and operational effectiveness:

*“An armed force that is medically unfit is useless. Also, soldiers who are deployed thousands of miles from home should not have to worry about the safety and health of their family members at home. They need to be 100 percent focused on the mission at hand. During an international pandemic, this is perhaps the single most important issue for armed forces.”*<sup>112</sup>

Closely associated with this, and also affecting operational capability and overseas deployment, is the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Alliance members support for future overseas operations, the scaling down of forces on current operations and countries’ unwillingness to take part in exercises.<sup>113</sup> As a result of public and political pressure following the pandemic, there is a push for countries to withdraw their contributions from overseas missions and exercises to focus on the home front<sup>114</sup>:

*“On Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) in Iraq and Syria... training of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) was suspended, causing more than a dozen Coalition countries to*

<sup>108</sup> EU Parliament (2021) *Op. Cit.* p.13.

<sup>109</sup> Zandee et. al. (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.3.

<sup>110</sup> Zandee et. al. (2020) *Op. Cit.* p. 3.

<sup>111</sup> NATO, ‘Alliance scientists study the military impact of COVID-19’, 16 Mar 21. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_182281.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_182281.htm?selectedLocale=en)

<sup>112</sup> Kochis & Coffey (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.3.

<sup>113</sup> Zandee et. al. (2020) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>114</sup> Gvosdev (2020) *Op. Cit.* pp.4-5.

*reposition their troops outside of Iraq. Operational support for the ISF was also temporarily suspended, although the Coalition continued to collaborate with the ISF on force protection... information sharing and assisting ISF units working to combat ISIS. During the first half of 2020, there were increases in terrorist activity in both Africa and Iraq.*"<sup>115</sup>

### **c. Impact on Refugee Issues and Operations**

Whereas prior to the pandemic the issue of refugees was normally framed in the context of either the security threat they posed, or the negative impact and burden they placed on the host nation's economy, the COVID-19 Pandemic has re-shaped the narrative. Consequently, no longer is the threat of refugees seen primarily in terms of threats to security, internal stability and terrorism, but now increasingly as disease carriers and potential sources of infection:

*"If, in the past, arguments about stopping migrant flows revolved around defending national distinctiveness and the general features of the European welfare state – arguments that didn't always gain traction - it becomes harder to ignore if uncontrolled refugee movements pose a risk to public health."*<sup>116</sup>

There is also ample evidence that Far Right and Extreme Right-Wing politicians, networks and media have exploited the COVID-19 Pandemic to push forward their anti-immigrant and populist messages, resulting in a surge of recorded 'Hate Crime' in many countries.<sup>117</sup>

These factors, and resulting public opinion, will impact on both national and NATO operations dealing with the refugee crisis and may affect Alliance and partner nation's decision making in terms of operational focus and priorities. Such a focus may see a shift towards national border and maritime security, rather than joint overseas operations, including in counter-terrorist roles, particularly given the negative effects of the Pandemic on available resources and funding.<sup>118</sup>

### **d. Decline in Economy and Shift in Focus from Defence Expenditure**

An additional indirect threat emerging as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic that is likely to impact on NATO's counter-terrorist capabilities, is a significant decline in Alliance and partner countries' economies. In a wider comparison between the impacts of global terrorism and the COVID-19 Pandemic, it was noted that both have caused severe economic harm:

---

<sup>115</sup> Mullins, S. 'Assessing the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism: Practitioner Insights', Security Nexus Aug 20, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS), p.2. [https://apcss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/N2515\\_Mullins\\_Impact\\_Pandemic\\_Terrorism.pdf](https://apcss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/N2515_Mullins_Impact_Pandemic_Terrorism.pdf)

<sup>116</sup> Gvosdev (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.3.

<sup>117</sup> Klein, O. 'How is the Far Right capitalizing COVID-19?' Centre for the Analysis of the Radical Right 10 Apr 20. How is the far-right capitalizing COVID-19? – Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right ([radicalrightanalysis.com](http://radicalrightanalysis.com))

<sup>118</sup> Gvosdev (2020) *Op. Cit.*

*“COVID-19 measures that require social distancing and quarantine have caused a significant decrease of the GDP of many countries as well as an unprecedented peak of unemployment rates. Air traffic tourism and leisure time industry were among the most severely affected. Similarly, following notorious terror atrocities such as 9/11 in the US as well as other terrorism waves in different countries, these measures have caused severe damage to these and other industries and economies.”*<sup>119</sup>

In the longer term many countries damaged by the serious economic consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic will be more vulnerable to a resurgence of terrorist activity in various parts of the world.<sup>120</sup> In addition, as NATO and partner countries’ economies endure a major post-pandemic recession, defence spending will come under increasing pressure.<sup>121</sup> Public opinion means this is likely to be accompanied by a shift of focus away from defence expenditure<sup>122</sup>:

*“Governments will soon have to face the challenge of balancing increased government spending on social-economic welfare by quickly reduced state income. Sooner or later, this will lead to amending existing budgets. Most likely, healthcare, social welfare and other governmental expenditure of direct importance to citizens will be prioritised at the cost of Foreign Affairs and Defence.”*<sup>123</sup>

Lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 Pandemic have impacted on national GDPs, with a concomitant decline in tax receipts to fund countries’ spending, while large military budgets provide an easy source of cash for hard pressed governments.<sup>124</sup> With the economic damage caused by the lockdowns, it will become increasingly difficult for political figures in NATO countries to justify increased defence spending.<sup>125</sup> More specifically, in the field of counterterrorism, countries facing serious economic pressures have decreased funding for overseas training, capacity building and security assistance, halting human security and development projects planned to counter the growth of violent extremism.<sup>126</sup>

---

<sup>119</sup> Ganor, B. ‘COVID-19 and Global Terrorism Pandemics’, ICT Herzliya 22 Mar 21. [https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2672/COVID19\\_and\\_Global\\_Terrorism\\_Pandemics#gsc.tab=0](https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2672/COVID19_and_Global_Terrorism_Pandemics#gsc.tab=0)

<sup>120</sup> Silke (2020) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>121</sup> Billon-Galland (2020) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>122</sup> Wither, J. and Masek, R. ‘The COVID-19 Pandemic: Counterterrorism Practitioners’ Assessments’, Perspectives No. 16. Oct 2020. George C Marshall Center. [https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2020-11/Perspectives\\_17\\_Wither\\_Masek\\_Covid\\_and\\_CT\\_OCT\\_2020%20\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2020-11/Perspectives_17_Wither_Masek_Covid_and_CT_OCT_2020%20_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>123</sup> Zandee et. al. (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.3.

<sup>124</sup> Lye, H. ‘Crisis Response and Budget Cuts: How COVID-19 could affect future military funding’, Global Defence Technology Jun 20. How Covid-19 could affect future military funding - Global Defence Technology | Issue 112 | June 2020 (nridigital.com)

<sup>125</sup> Gvosdev (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.1.

<sup>126</sup> United Nations CTED (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.3

## **What specific recommendations can be made to NATO to cope with these modified threats?**

### **Specific Recommendations**

#### **a. Prepare to Respond to the Threat and Impact of Bioterrorism**

As was outlined, as well as providing a ‘window of opportunity’ the COVID-19 Pandemic has demonstrated the potential human, social and economic damage that could be inflicted in the future by a bioterrorism attack. However, while the COVID-19 Pandemic has provided a real-time lesson of what bioterrorism could look like, it has also delivered a timely opportunity to identify, apply and act upon any lessons.<sup>127</sup>

*“Those lessons will include strengthening our defences against biological threats. NATO already has several tools in place to strengthen the capabilities of Allies and partners in this area. NATO Centres of Excellence for CBRN Defence in the Czech Republic and for Military Medicine in Hungary provide training to Allied and partner personnel in all aspects of defending against those threats and mitigating the consequence of their use.”<sup>128</sup>*

NATO therefore fulfils a critical role in countering the bioterrorism threat, not just in its expertise and training, but also in its coordinating role and the logistical support it can provide through such structures as the Euro Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC). The EADRCC was active during the COVID-19 Pandemic in supporting numerous Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA) medical operations, having previously assisted Alliance members, partner and other nations responding to terrorist attacks, CBRN incidents, such as the 2018 chemical attacks in the United Kingdom, epidemics such as Ebola in Africa and previous pandemics, such as H1N1.<sup>129</sup> These responses have demonstrated NATO’s role in helping counter any potential future biological attack or natural pandemic.

However, in line with the 2012 Chicago Summit decisions and lessons emerging from the COVID-19 Pandemic, NATO needs to continue to improve its ability to respond to the threat and mitigate the impact of a potential bioterrorism attack.<sup>130</sup> While the Biological Weapons Convention is designed to address the proliferation of biological weapons by state actors, sub-state actors, such as terrorists, or organised crime groups, may be able to fabricate low-level biological weapons using

<sup>127</sup> Iftimie (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.59

<sup>128</sup> Cadenbach (2020) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>129</sup> Iftimie (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.51

<sup>130</sup> Dwyer, A. et. al. (2002) *Jane’s Chem-Bio Handbook*. Second Edition. Coulsdon, Surrey: Jane’s Information Group

commercially available natural zoonotic agents, particularly if assisted by scientific individuals with skilled knowledge in biology or virology.<sup>131</sup> Consequently, NATO will need to continue to enhance its ability to counter bioterrorism in four main ways:

*“First, to prevent the increase in intent and capabilities of terrorist entities; second to pursue indicators and warnings of bioterrorism activities; third to protect civilians and critical infrastructure of NATO members; and fourth to prepare for future bioterrorism attacks.”*<sup>132</sup>

## **b. Increase the focus on Human Security and Enhance Civil Preparedness**

Previously, international relations tended to focus on globalisation, interdependencies, and the rules based international order. However, even before the COVID-19 Pandemic, a resurgence in nationalist populism, authoritarian politics and great power competition has arguably impacted on this:

*“Integration, cooperation, and global governance as a prevailing pattern of international and regional politics had been under strain long before the Chinese Government announced the existence of a new Coronavirus on December 31 2019.”*<sup>133</sup>

While the resurgence of the great power competition paradigm has strengthened the state-centric focus, modern emerging threats, such as terrorism, mass migration, climate change and now the COVID-19 Pandemic, have led to a focus on human security considerations.<sup>134</sup> By nature, these threats are transnational, ignore borders and threaten sub-state entities and individuals, requiring a human security response.<sup>135</sup> The need to focus on human security has been enhanced by the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic, which has reinforced existing problems such as poverty, human rights abuses, inequality and crime, particularly in third countries, where citizens are threatened by disease and hunger as well as violence from a range of state and non-state actors.<sup>136</sup> As a result,

*“The current threat may lead to an increased focus on human security considerations over strictly-defined defence matters. Debates on issues such as health security, resilience or civil protection will gain momentum and likely lead to policy choices –*

<sup>131</sup> Martellini (2017) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>132</sup> Tardy (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.4

<sup>133</sup> Roloff, R. ‘COVID-19 and No One’s World: What Impact for the European Union?’ *Connections* 19, No.2, pp.25-36 (2020), p.27. <https://connections-qj.org/article/covid-19-and-no-ones-world-what-impact-european-union>

<sup>134</sup> UK MOD, ‘JSP 1325 – Human Security in Military Operations’, Part 1 Directive Jan 2019. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/770919/JSP\\_1325\\_Part\\_1\\_2019\\_O.PDF](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/770919/JSP_1325_Part_1_2019_O.PDF) Part 2 Guidance Jan 2019. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/770922/JSP1325\\_Part2.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/770922/JSP1325_Part2.pdf)

<sup>135</sup> Tardy, T. ‘COVID-19: Shaping future threats and security policies’, Chapter 2 in Tardy (2020) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>136</sup> EU Parliament (2021) *Op. Cit.* p.10

*far beyond the defence and security realm – that would have been difficult to envisage prior to the crisis.*”<sup>137</sup>

Given that the NATO Secretary General has stated that the Alliance’s core responsibility is to ensure that the current COVID-19 Pandemic does not become a security crisis<sup>138</sup>, this will require NATO to adapt to a more integrated international system with an increase in its focus on human security, rather than just the more traditional national security.<sup>139</sup>

Closely associated with developing an increased focus on human security is the need to enhance civil preparedness amongst NATO members and partner nations, including closer cooperation between the military and civilian emergency services, which has been seriously tested by the COVID-19 Pandemic<sup>140</sup>:

*“Civil preparedness is a primary instrument to improve national resilience. It is about the capacity to cope with the full range of challenges, from natural disasters (including pandemics), cyber and hybrid attacks, to armed conflict. Within NATO, Allies have agreed on seven baseline requirements for national resilience, against which they can measure their levels of preparedness. These requirements need to be continuously adapted to ensure that certain core tasks are maintained under the most strenuous circumstances. Of particular significance are the continuity of government, essential services to the population, and civil support to the military.”*<sup>141</sup>

These baseline requirements for civil preparedness are based on lessons drawn from the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>142</sup> Although NATO’s Civil Emergency Protection Cell is regularly conducting assessments of Alliance member’s resilience,<sup>143</sup> civil preparedness needs to be enhanced and strengthened going forward, to better prepare NATO Alliance and partner nations for future emerging threats, whether natural or man-made.<sup>144</sup>

---

<sup>137</sup> Tardy (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.5

<sup>138</sup> NATO, ‘Press Conference: by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs’, 02 Apr 2020. NATO - Opinion: Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs, 02-Apr.-2020

<sup>139</sup> Roloff (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.36.

<sup>140</sup> Berger, C. and Salloum, C. ‘Pandemics, the South and NATO’ Chapter 4 in Tardy (2020) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>141</sup> Missiroli, A. and Ruhle, M. ‘The Pandemic and the military: towards total defence?’ NATO Defence College (NDC) Policy Brief No.21, Nov 20, p.2. <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1502>

<sup>142</sup> Laird, R. ‘NATO and the Coronavirus Crisis: An Input to Crisis Management Learning’, Second Line of Defence 18 Apr 20. NATO and the Coronavirus Crisis: An Input to Crisis Management Learning - Second Line of Defense (sldinfo.com)

<sup>143</sup> Ellehuus, R. ‘NATO Responds to the Covid-19 Pandemic’, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) 2 Apr 20. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/nato-responds-covid-19-pandemic>

<sup>144</sup> Rodihan, C. and McPartland, C. ‘NATO in the fight against coronavirus: Coordinating, contributing, controlling and communicating’, New Atlanticist 15 Apr 20, Atlantic Council. NATO in the fight against coronavirus: Coordinating, contributing, controlling, and communicating - Atlantic Council

### **c. Maintain Collective Security from both hostile Sub-State and State Actors (exploiting the COVID-19 Pandemic to their advantage)**

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, with member states and partner nations pre-occupied in coping with the longer term medical and economic consequences of the virus, it would have proved easy for NATO to lose focus on its core role in order to respond to the immediate threat.<sup>145</sup> However, despite the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic, NATO must remain focused on its core task of maintaining collective security for its Alliance members. This is particularly the case when as detailed, both sub-state terrorist groups and hostile state actors such as Russia, continue to test the Alliance across conventional, irregular, cyber and informational domains, seeking to exploit the situation to their advantage<sup>146</sup>:

*“NATO must remain vigilant against malign exploitation of crises. Under whatever circumstances may arise, the Atlantic alliance should not shift its focus away from its main objectives of pushing back against adversaries through deterrence and response-readiness.”*<sup>147</sup>

After the worst of the COVID-19 Pandemic is over, NATO must draw upon and learn from any lessons in its response and support to both Alliance members and partner nations.<sup>148</sup> In particular, it must focus on two key roles, the safeguarding and health of its service personnel and their families, and the continuing maintenance of collective security against both sub-state and state actors.<sup>149</sup> Consequently...

*“NATO should continue to strengthen its Enhanced Forward Presence in the Baltic states and Poland and, in particular, its Tailored Forward Presence in the Black Sea. Measures could include enhanced support to Black Sea partners Georgia and Ukraine and approval of additional Tailored Assurance Measures for Turkey.”*<sup>150</sup>

## **General Recommendations**

### **a. Improve Information Sharing of Best Practices and Lessons (particularly in relation to pandemics or bioterrorism)**

At a more general level, NATO has acted as a strategic level platform for the sharing of best practice amongst Alliance and partner nations during the COVID-19 Pandemic.<sup>151</sup> This has included continuing to support Alliance members' and partner

<sup>145</sup> Ellehuus (2020) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>146</sup> Kochis & Coffey (2020) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>147</sup> De Maio (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.8

<sup>148</sup> Tardy (2020) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>149</sup> Kochis & Coffey (2020) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>150</sup> Ellehuus (2020) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>151</sup> NATO, 'NATO's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic', NATO Factsheet 14 Apr 20. [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/4/pdf/200401-factsheet-COVID-19\\_en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/4/pdf/200401-factsheet-COVID-19_en.pdf)



nations' COVID-19 efforts during the pandemic through increasing awareness, improving capabilities and strengthening engagement.<sup>152</sup> Although the pandemic impacted on operational support for Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) in Iraq and Syria, NATO continued to support Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) countering *Da'esh* through information sharing.<sup>153</sup>

More directly related to the impact of COVID-19, the NATO Centre of Excellence for Military Medicine (MILMED COE) has provided a continuing weekly update report on the pandemic.<sup>154</sup> However, during the earlier stages of COVID-19, the lack of coordinated information sharing between Alliance members and partner countries seriously impacted on the effectiveness of a collective response to the pandemic.<sup>155</sup>

*“Improving the information sharing process will significantly improve the capacity to respond more rapidly and coherently to a pandemic. By the same token, an improved intelligence-sharing process among nations, be it within NATO or the EU, would enable these institutions to fully leverage their coordinating functions.”*<sup>156</sup>

Likewise, to better synchronise NATO responses to any potential future bioterrorist attack, improved information sharing of best practice around policies and procedures should be strengthened, while drawing on relevant lessons from countering the COVID-19 Pandemic:<sup>157</sup>

*“Increased investments in medical and technical capabilities, and in databases/systems developed and maintained by NATO are critical to further enhance situational awareness, command and control, interoperability and synchronization efforts between Allies during future bioterrorist attacks.”*<sup>158</sup>

## **b. Consolidate and Innovate Strategic Communication**

The COVID-19 Pandemic challenged NATO's strategic communications in three ways: firstly, Alliance members and partner nations faced a public health, rather than military threat; secondly, the COVID-19 virus spread rapidly through NATO member states; and thirdly, the multilateral system, including NATO, came under criticism for its failure to respond early enough to help nations prevent the crisis.<sup>159</sup>

<sup>152</sup> NATO, 'Countering Terrorism', 22 Apr 21. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_77646.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_77646.htm)

<sup>153</sup> Mullins (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.2.

<sup>154</sup> NATO MILMED COE. COVID-19 - NATO MILMED COE (coemed.org)

<sup>155</sup> Missiroli and Ruhle (2021) *Op. Cit.* p.3

<sup>156</sup> Missiroli and Ruhle (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.3.

<sup>157</sup> EU Parliament (2021) *Op. Cit.* p.34.

<sup>158</sup> Iftimie (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.58.

<sup>159</sup> Bjola, C. and Manor, I. 'NATO's Digital Public Diplomacy during the COVID-19 Pandemic', Turkish Policy Quarterly (TPQ) Summer 2020. pp. 78-9. <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/1018/natos-digital-public-diplomacy-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>

As has been outlined in the first part of the chapter, these factors have been exploited by both sub-state terrorist actors and hostile states, utilising propaganda narratives for their own advantage.<sup>160</sup>

*“To counter disinformation and its disruptive impact during such tense moments, NATO’s Public Diplomacy Division has been extensively monitoring and reporting these false claims with fact checking in cooperation with the EU.”*<sup>161</sup>

In responding to COVID-19, NATO stressed four key messages of ‘Maintained Readiness’, ‘NATO Joining National Efforts’, ‘Solidarity Among Allies’ and ‘Repurposing NATO Equipment’ to counter the pandemic.<sup>162</sup> Consequently,

*“NATO has responded to the crisis by developing a narrative that seeks to provide reassurance that the Alliance has remained fully operational during the pandemic, and that it has redoubled its efforts to come to the assistance of its members and allies. At the same time, the Alliance has also taken steps to show the public how the organization has been functioning internally in a time of confinement.”*<sup>163</sup>

Through such strategic communication, NATO has provided a ‘trusted narrative’, encouraging public resilience, and advising and supporting Alliance members and partner countries. This has fulfilled the critical role of mobilising and enlisting the support of the general public in countering the impact of COVID-19 through incorporation, education and transparency.<sup>164</sup>

However, while NATO promoted a coherent narrative, which highlighted cooperation and its contributions to countering the pandemic, in order to better engage with the public NATO needs to develop more innovative and coordinated strategic communication methods.<sup>165</sup> In addition to engendering public support,

*“NATO’s ability to conduct well-coordinated strategic communication campaigns to combat disinformation must be consolidated, as such disinformation may weaken the effectiveness of both defence and deterrence efforts, including in combating CBRN threats.”*<sup>166</sup>

---

<sup>160</sup> NATO, ‘NATO’s approach to countering disinformation: a focus on COVID-19’, 17 Jul 20. <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/177273.htm>

<sup>161</sup> De Maio (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.4.

<sup>162</sup> Bjola and Manor (2020) *Op. Cit.* pp. 79-82.

<sup>163</sup> Bjola and Manor (2020) *Op. Cit.* p. 84.

<sup>164</sup> Ganor (2021) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>165</sup> Bjola and Manor (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.86.

<sup>166</sup> Ifimie (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.59.

### c. Increase MACA Capabilities and Preparedness

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, NATO played a key role in Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA) operations. Despite initial delays and lack of coordination between Alliance members and partner nations, NATO promptly established a dedicated COVID-19 Task Force to deliver medical aid and equipment, including Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), masks, test kits and disinfectants, across the Alliance and beyond to partners and third countries.<sup>167</sup> These included North Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Moldova, Tunisia, Ukraine, Colombia, Afghanistan, Kosovo and Iraq.<sup>168</sup>

*“Leveraging its experience in crisis management and disaster relief along with its massive logistical apparatus, the alliance was able to offer a decisive response through transporting medical aid and equipment across the globe, fighting against disinformation and ultimately preventing the public health crisis from leading to a traditional security crisis.”<sup>169</sup>*

The MACA aspect of this support was coordinated through a range of NATO structures. These included NATO’s Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) which is NATO’s principal emergency response mechanism in the Euro-Atlantic area, the NATO Support and Procurement Agency (NSPA) providing logistical support and transportation of key supplies, and the Movements Coordination Centre Europe (MCCE). These utilised the C-17 Globemasters of the Strategic Airlift Capability (SAC), the charter aircraft of Strategic Airlift International Solution (SALIS) all supported by NATO’s Rapid Air Mobility system to distribute aid.<sup>170</sup> In the first half of 2020,

*“Some 350 flights delivered critical supplies around the world. Across the Alliance, almost half a million troops supported the civilian response, constructing almost 100 field hospitals, securing borders and helping with testing and transport.”<sup>171</sup>*

NATO therefore demonstrated its utility in responding to the pandemic, and indeed to any potential future bio-terror attacks.<sup>172</sup> Its role alongside other organisations and the lessons learned during the COVID-19 Pandemic can be used to inform a model for any future MACA assistance.<sup>173</sup> In addition,

---

<sup>167</sup> De Maio (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.1

<sup>168</sup> NATO, ‘NATO responds to the COVID-19 Pandemic throughout 2020, helping Allies and partners’, 22 Dec 2020. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_180548.htm#:~:text=and%20Article%203-,NATO%20responds%20to%20the%20COVID%2D19%20pandemic,2020%2C%20helping%20Allies%20and%20partners&text=Through-out%202020%2C%20NATO%20and%20Allied,in%20Allied%20and%20partner%20countries](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_180548.htm#:~:text=and%20Article%203-,NATO%20responds%20to%20the%20COVID%2D19%20pandemic,2020%2C%20helping%20Allies%20and%20partners&text=Through-out%202020%2C%20NATO%20and%20Allied,in%20Allied%20and%20partner%20countries).

<sup>169</sup> De Maio (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.2

<sup>170</sup> NATO – *NATO’s Response...* (2020) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>171</sup> NATO, ‘NATO responds...’ (2020) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>172</sup> De Maio (2020) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>173</sup> Kochis and Coffey (2020) *Op. Cit.*

*“To ensure NATO is prepared for a possible second wave of COVID-19, Allies have agreed on a new plan – Operation Allied Hand, which involves setting up a stockpile of medical equipment, and a new fund for the quick acquisition of medical supplies to which many Allies have already offered to contribute.”*<sup>174</sup>

Despite its successes in MACA support during the C-19 pandemic and its work to prepare for any future pandemic (or possible bio-terrorist incident), where possible NATO must draw upon lessons from the latest emergency and seek to improve its MACA capabilities, cooperation with other agencies and preparedness for any similar challenges in the future.<sup>175</sup>

#### **d. Strengthen Defence Cooperation and Integration of Military and Civil capabilities**

A final recommendation is for the increased strengthening of NATO’s defence cooperation and the greater integration of military and civil capabilities. The COVID-19 Pandemic has highlighted the transnational and cross-border impacts of such emerging threats, and the potential longer-term ramifications of a bioterrorist attack.<sup>176</sup> Such threats require increased international cooperation to effectively respond to them.<sup>177</sup> Consequently, the case for defence cooperation in the post-pandemic world is stronger than ever.<sup>178</sup> Along with increasing international cooperation, Alliance members will need to expand national capabilities by more closely integrating military and civil responders around concepts of ‘Total Defence’, in a comprehensive, whole of society approach. This will enable them to better deal with non-kinetic, but extremely harmful challenges, such as a future bioterrorism attack<sup>179</sup>:

*“NATO must continue to grow its engagements with both national as well as regional entities (such as the EU Emergency Response Coordination Centre) and international ones (such as the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) that can supplement national biodefence efforts.”*<sup>180</sup>

## **Conclusion**

<sup>174</sup> Cadenbach (2020) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>175</sup> De Maio (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.9

<sup>176</sup> British Medical Association (1999) *Biotechnology, Weapons and Humanity*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers

<sup>177</sup> Ganor (2021) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>178</sup> Billon-Galland (2020) *Op. Cit.*

<sup>179</sup> Missiroli and Ruhle (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.2

<sup>180</sup> Ifimie (2020) *Op. Cit.* p.58

The COVID-19 Pandemic has been a watershed moment in many ways, not least in the fields of security and counterterrorism. It has exacerbated a number of pre-existing fractures and weaknesses in society - political, social and economic - which have been exploited by hostile actors, both sub-state terrorist networks and organised crime groups, as well as by states like Russia. These pose a range of threats to NATO Alliance members, partner nations and third countries. Most significantly, the COVID-19 Pandemic has highlighted the threat and impact posed by a potential future bioterrorist attack. NATO has played a critical role during the pandemic, supporting Alliance, partner and other countries with expertise and advice as well as major medical, logistical and transport support. This experience has highlighted lessons that can be applied to refine and strengthen NATO's capacity and capability to respond to any potential future bioterrorist attack.<sup>181</sup>

---

<sup>181</sup> Tardy ed. (2020) *Op. Cit.*

## **Bibliography**

- Adlakha-Hutcheon, G. and Johnston, P. *'The Future Impacts of COVID-19 on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization – a Futures Framework'*, Defence Research and Development Canada (DRDC/RDDC) Oct 20, [https://cradpdf.drdc-rddc.gc.ca/PDFS/unc349/p812285\\_A1b.pdf](https://cradpdf.drdc-rddc.gc.ca/PDFS/unc349/p812285_A1b.pdf)
- Berger, C. and Salloum, C. *'Pandemics, the South and NATO'* Chapter 4 in Tardy, T. (ed.) *'COVID-19: NATO in the Age of Pandemics'*, NATO NDC Research Paper 09, May 2020. <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1440>
- Billon-Galland, A. *'COVID-19 Strengthens the Case for EU Defence'*, Chatham House 17 Jun 20. COVID-19 Strengthens the Case for EU Defence | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank
- Bjola, C. and Manor, I. *'NATO's Digital Public Diplomacy during the COVID-19 Pandemic'*, Turkish Policy Quarterly (TPQ) Summer 2020. <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/1018/natos-digital-public-diplomacy-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>
- British Medical Association (1999) *Biotechnology, Weapons and Humanity*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers
- Cadenbach, Ambassador B, *'NATO's Response to COVID-19'*, Bled Strategic Forum, 24 Nov 20. NATO's response to COVID-19. Key political workstrands and early... | by Bled Strategic Forum | Medium
- Comerford, M. *'How have terrorist organisations responded to COVID-19?'* Vision of Humanity/ Global Terrorism Index 2020. <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/how-have-terrorist-organisations-responded-to-covid-19/>
- De Maio, G, *'NATO's Response to COVID-19: Lessons for Resilience and Readiness'*. Brookings Institute Oct 20. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/natos-response-to-covid-19-lessons-for-resilience-and-readiness/>
- Dwyer, A. et. al. (2002) *Jane's Chem-Bio Handbook*. Second Edition. Coulsdon, Surrey: Jane's Information Group
- Ellehuus, R. *'NATO Responds to the Covid-19 Pandemic'*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) 2 Apr 20. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/nato-responds-covid-19-pandemic>
- European Parliament, *'How the COVID-19 crisis has affected security and defence-related aspects of the EU'*, EU External Relations Jan 21. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2021/653623/EXPO\\_IDA\(2021\)653623\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2021/653623/EXPO_IDA(2021)653623_EN.pdf)
- Ganor, B. *'COVID-19 and Global Terrorism Pandemics'*, ICT Herzliya 22 Mar 21. [https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2672/COVID19\\_and\\_Global\\_Terrorism\\_Pandemics#gsc.tab=0](https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2672/COVID19_and_Global_Terrorism_Pandemics#gsc.tab=0)
- Giles, K. *'Beware Russian and Chinese Positioning for After the Pandemic'*, Chatham House 9 Apr 20. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/04/beware-russian-and-chinese-positioning-after-pandemic>
- Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction

- Gvosdev, N. 'The Effect of COVID-19 on the NATO Alliance', Foreign Policy Research Institute, Eurasia Program, 23 Mar 20. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/03/the-effect-of-covid-19-on-the-nato-alliance/>
- Herd, G. 'COVID-19, Russian Responses and President Putin's Operational Code', George C Marshall Center 20 Apr 20. <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/covid-19-russian-responses-and-president-putins-operational-code>
- Iftimie, I. 'The Implications of COVID-19 for NATO's counter-bioterrorism', Chapter 6 in Tardy, T. (ed.) 'COVID-19: NATO in the Age of Pandemics', NATO NDC Research Paper 09, May 2020. <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1440>
- Klein, O. 'How is the Far Right capitalizing COVID-19?' Centre for the Analysis of the Radical Right 10 Apr 20. How is the far-right capitalizing COVID-19? – Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (radicalrightanalysis.com)
- Kochis, D. and Coffey, L. 'NATO's role in Pandemic Response', Heritage Foundation 5 May 20. NATO's Role in Pandemic Response | The Heritage Foundation
- Kruglanski, A. et. al. 'Terrorism in time of the Pandemic: Exploiting mayhem', Global Security: Health, Science and Policy 5: 1 2020. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/23779497.2020.1832903?needAccess=true>
- Laird, R. 'NATO and the Coronavirus Crisis: An Input to Crisis Management Learning', Second Line of Defence 18 Apr 20. NATO and the Coronavirus Crisis: An Input to Crisis Management Learning - Second Line of Defense (sldinfo.com)
- Lucas, E. et. al. 'Information Bedlam: Russian and Chinese Information Operations During COVID-19', Center for European Policy Analysis, 15 Mar 21. <https://cepa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CEPA-Russia-China-9.14.21.pdf>
- Lye, H. 'Crisis Response and Budget Cuts: How COVID-19 could affect future military funding', Global Defence Technology Jun 20. How Covid-19 could affect future military funding - Global Defence Technology | Issue 112 | June 2020 (nridigital.com)
- Martellini, M. 'The Risk of Skilled Scientist Radicalization and Emerging Biological Warfare Agents' in Martellini, M. and Rao, J. (eds.) (2017) *The Risk of Skilled Scientist Radicalization and Emerging Biological Warfare Threats*. NATO Science for Peace and Security. Amsterdam: IOS Books. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_168052.htm?](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_168052.htm?)
- Missiroli, A. and Ruhle, M. 'The Pandemic and the military: towards total defence?' NATO Defence College (NDC) Policy Brief No.21, Nov 20. <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1502>
- Mullins, S. 'Assessing the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism: Practitioner Insights', Security Nexus Aug 20, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS). [https://apcss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/N2515\\_Mullins-Impact\\_Pandemic\\_Terrorism.pdf](https://apcss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/N2515_Mullins-Impact_Pandemic_Terrorism.pdf)
- NATO MILMED COE. COVID-19 - NATO MILMED COE (coemed.org)
- NATO, 'Countering Terrorism', 22 Apr 21. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_77646.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_77646.htm)

- NATO, '*Alliance scientists study the military impact of COVID-19*', 16 Mar 21. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_182281.htm?selectedLocale=en](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_182281.htm?selectedLocale=en)
- NATO, '*NATO responds to the COVID-19 pandemic throughout 2020, helping Allies and partners*', 22 Dec 2020. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_180548.htm#:~:text=and%20Article%203-,NATO%20responds%20to%20the%20COVID%2D19%20pandemic,2020%2C%20helping%20Allies%20and%20partners&text=Throughout%202020%2C%20NATO%20and%20Allied,in%20Allied%20and%20partner%20countries](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_180548.htm#:~:text=and%20Article%203-,NATO%20responds%20to%20the%20COVID%2D19%20pandemic,2020%2C%20helping%20Allies%20and%20partners&text=Throughout%202020%2C%20NATO%20and%20Allied,in%20Allied%20and%20partner%20countries)
- NATO, '*NATO's approach to countering disinformation: a focus on COVID-19*', 17 Jul 20. <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/177273.htm>
- NATO, '*NATO's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic*', NATO Factsheet 14 Apr 20. [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/4/pdf/200401-factsheet-COVID-19\\_en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/4/pdf/200401-factsheet-COVID-19_en.pdf)
- NATO, '*Press Conference: by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs*', 02 Apr 2020. NATO - Opinion: Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs, 02-Apr.-2020
- Reader, I. (2000) *Religious Violence in Contemporary Japan: The case of Aum Shinrikyo*. London: Routledge
- Rodihan, C. and McPartland, C. '*NATO in the fight against coronavirus: Coordinating, contributing, controlling and communicating*', New Atlanticist 15 Apr 20, Atlantic Council. NATO in the fight against coronavirus: Coordinating, contributing, controlling, and communicating - Atlantic Council
- Roloff, R. '*COVID-19 and No One's World: What Impact for the European Union?*' Connections 19, No.2, pp.25-36 (2020). <https://connections-qj.org/article/covid-19-and-no-ones-world-what-impact-european-union>
- Salman, N. and Gill, P. '*Terrorism during the COVID-19 pandemic*', Jill Dando Institute May 20, University College London. [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jill-dando-institute/sites/jill-dando-institute/files/terrosim\\_covid19\\_final\\_no\\_13.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/jill-dando-institute/sites/jill-dando-institute/files/terrosim_covid19_final_no_13.pdf)
- Silke, A. '*COVID-19 and Terrorism: Assessing the short and long-term impacts of terrorism*', Cranfield University 7 May 20. <https://www.cranfield.ac.uk/press/news-2020/covid19-and-terrorism-assessing-the-short-and-longterm-impacts>
- Stern, J. (1999) *The Ultimate Terrorists*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press
- Tardy, T. (ed.) '*COVID-19: NATO in the Age of Pandemics*, NATO NDC Research Paper 09, May 2020. <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1440>
- UK Government, '*How Hateful Extremists are Exploiting the Pandemic*', Commission for Countering Extremism July 2020. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/906724/CCE\\_Briefing\\_Note\\_001.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/906724/CCE_Briefing_Note_001.pdf)
- UK MOD, '*JSP 1325 – Human Security in Military Operations*', Part 1 Directive Jan 2019. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/770919/JSP\\_1325\\_Part\\_1\\_2019\\_O.PDF](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/770919/JSP_1325_Part_1_2019_O.PDF)



- Part 2 Guidance Jan 2019. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/770922/JSP1325\\_Part2.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/770922/JSP1325_Part2.pdf)
- United Nations CTED, *'The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counterterrorism and countering violent extremism'*, Dec 20. [https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CTED\\_Paper\\_The-impact-of-the-COVID-19-pandemic-on-counterterrorism-and-countering-violent-extremism\\_Dec2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CTED_Paper_The-impact-of-the-COVID-19-pandemic-on-counterterrorism-and-countering-violent-extremism_Dec2020.pdf)
- UN Secretary General, *'Remarks to the Security Council on the COVID-19 pandemic'*, UN 09 Apr 20.
- Warnes, R. (2009) "*Grounded Theory*", Chapter 10 in Ling, T, and Villalba van Dijk, L (eds.) *Performance Audit Handbook: Routes to effective evaluation*. Santa Monica CA: RAND, pp. 76-82. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/technical\\_reports/TR788.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR788.html)
- Wither, J. and Masek, R. *'The COVID-19 Pandemic: Counterterrorism Practitioners' Assessments'*, Perspectives No. 16. Oct 2020. George C Marshall Center. [https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2020-11/Perspectives\\_17\\_Wither\\_Masek\\_Covid\\_and\\_CT\\_OCT\\_2020%20\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.marshallcenter.org/sites/default/files/files/2020-11/Perspectives_17_Wither_Masek_Covid_and_CT_OCT_2020%20_FINAL.pdf)
- Zandee, D. Duchateau-Polkerman, E. and Stoetman, A. *'Defence and COVID-19: Why the budget cuts should be off the table'*, Clingendael Apr 20. [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Alert\\_Defence\\_and\\_Covid-19\\_April\\_2020.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/Alert_Defence_and_Covid-19_April_2020.pdf)

## **Key Findings**

### **Environment**

- The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic has fundamentally affected the global geopolitical, socio-economic and conflict landscape, leading to profound impacts on international terrorist trends
- The COVID-19 Pandemic has led to economic indicators worse than the ‘Great Depression’ of 1929, impacting upon countries defence and counterterrorism budgets
- The Pandemic has provided a ‘window’ onto how a bio-terrorist attack might unfold, increasing terrorist interest in its utility and the likelihood of an attack

Despite international treaties controlling the production, stockpiling and use of biological weapons, advances in biotechnology and changing security environments mean there is an increased threat of their use and need for stronger global collaboration

- The impact of the Pandemic has forced states to shift their focus and resources from Counterterrorism, to counter COVID-19
- This has increased the opportunities for a range of ideologically varied and geographically dispersed terrorist organisations to exploit the situation to advance their agendas depending on the nature and resilience of the target country
- In some cases, this has included a rising tempo of attacks, increased radicalisation and recruitment and the exploitation of fear through disinformation and conspiracy theories, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region
- NATO has supported civilian authorities during the Pandemic with Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA) operations, while protecting its personnel, continuing operations and maintaining collective security
- A key part of NATO’s response has been its medical aid. Experience during the pandemic shows that the military excel at medical evacuation, the deployment of field hospitals and transportation of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE): consequently, NATO has a role in preparing for any future pandemic or bioterrorist attack

- The COVID-19 Pandemic has presented a generational challenge impacting on all aspects of geopolitical and policy landscapes, including counterterrorism. Consequently it has become necessary to understand, analyse and prepare to counter the effects of COVID-19, including terrorist exploitation of social and political factors

## **Threat**

- Initially, most terrorist groups sought to deny the COVID-19 Pandemic, either that it did not exist or that it was only affecting their enemies
- As the virus spread, many terrorist organisations changed their positions, recognizing the virus, setting up treatment centres, acquiring PPE and developing some level of cooperation with NGOs. However, there were a range of responses and significant inconsistencies, even within the same terrorist organisations
- Despite the impact of COVID-19, most terrorist organisations maintained or increased their operational tempo, exploiting inevitable opportunities when police and security forces were re-tasked to counter the pandemic.
- Although there were inconsistencies, after initially ignoring COVID-19 most terrorist organisations exploited the pandemic to highlight the incompetence and corruption of government responses
- Along with exploiting the pandemic to increase their messaging, terrorist organisations have used the opportunity to increase recruitment
- While most terrorist organisations exploited the COVID-19 Pandemic in the ways detailed, there were outliers. These included the Afghan *Taliban* who allowed health workers into their areas and, at the other extreme, Racially & Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremist (REMVE) groups who exploited both circumstances and technology on a scale not seen amongst other groups
- Missed opportunities include identifying what made the *Taliban* behave differently, and failing to challenge the inadequacies of terrorist groups exposed during the pandemic

- Previous examples of the crime-terrorism nexus make it very likely that in the short term such collaboration will be used to gain control of illicit or fake stocks of PPE and COVID-19 vaccines
- The major concern is that having seen the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, some terrorist groups will consider bioterrorism as a weapon of the future

## **Policy**

- The distraction of the COVID-19 Pandemic for NATO and partner nations provided a ‘window of opportunity’ for terrorist organisations to exploit to their advantage
- The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a demonstration to terrorists of the potential impact of a bio-terrorist attack, with the fear that this may result in an upsurge of terrorist interest in such a non-conventional weapon
- National self-interest during the COVID-19 Pandemic may disrupt traditional transnational alliances, such as NATO and the European Union, allowing hostile state and sub-state actors to further exploit the situation
- The pandemic has also acted as a catalyst for threat multiplication and a major source of instability, potentially leading to an upsurge in terrorism, human trafficking, weapons smuggling and other criminal activities
- The COVID-19 Pandemic will impair military operational capability in a range of areas, not least with service personnel, while political and economic pressure following the pandemic may result in the scaling down of operational support
- The pandemic has reinforced anti-immigrant and populist messages from the extreme right wing as well as promoting a shift towards border and maritime security, rather than overseas operations
- COVID-19 is likely to result in a significant decline in Alliance and partner nation’s economies, with governments likely to find increasing public pressure to prioritise healthcare and social welfare, rather than foreign affairs and defence

- The pandemic has identified a number of potential lessons that NATO needs to act upon in order to better prepare for either a future pandemic or a bioterrorist attack
- Modern emerging threats, such as the pandemic, are transnational, requiring the need for an increased NATO focus on human security rather than just the more traditional national security
- Despite the demands during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the need to learn from any lessons, NATO must continue to maintain its primary objective of collective security against both state and sub-state actors
- To better synchronise NATO responses to any potential future bioterrorist attack, improved information sharing of best practices around policy and procedures should be strengthened
- While NATO promoted a coherent narrative during the pandemic, highlighting cooperation and its specific contributions, to better engage with the public, NATO needs to develop more innovative and coordinated strategic communication methods
- Despite its key operations in support of the civil authorities during the pandemic, where possible NATO should seek to improve and refine its MACA capabilities, cooperate with other agencies and prepare for any similar future bio-terrorist or pandemic challenges
- The COVID-19 Pandemic and potential ramifications of a future bio-terrorist attack, strengthen the case for increased international defence cooperation and a closer integration between military and civilian responders around 'Total Defence' in a comprehensive, whole of society approach to further threats





