COVID-19: The Impact on Terrorism & Extremism

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Abstract

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a growing body of literature investigating its impact on violent extremism around the world. With the virus' spread, intense speculation surrounded the ways in which extremist and terrorist organisations sought to exploit the public health crisis for their own gains. Eighteen months into the global pandemic, this brief summary reviews what we know so far, drawing on analysis by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and other organisations and researchers.

Understanding the challenge

Accompanying the spread of the COVID-19 Coronavirus around the globe has been the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation, or what is often referred to as the 'infodemic'. The social and economic fallout from the pandemic has ushered in profound uncertainty and insecurity for communities around the globe. Preventative lockdown measures have seen more people isolated at home and online. The crisis threatens already vulnerable systems and infrastructure as state resources are diverted to tackle the pandemic, risking further marginalisation of communities around the world. This landscape of insecurity provides fertile ground for malign actors, demagogues and simplistic narratives to take hold on- and offline. **Both state and non-state actors were quick to weaponise the fallout wrought by the pandemic to blame political opponents and minority groups for the origin and spread of the virus. At the same time, non-state actors have expanded the reach of their ideas, exploiting the uncertainty that precipitated in the wake of a global health crisis.**

Increased online reach

Non-state actors and extremist organisations across the ideological spectrum have used the crisis to spread their message and broaden their audiences. This is particularly evident in the online sphere, where extremist content has garnered an increasingly captive audience as people around the world have been forced to spend more time at home, often online. Through the first year of the pandemic, ISD analysis looked at different country contexts and extremist groups that have used the global health crisis to spread their message, disinformation, and increase their online presence across different social media platforms. The findings reveal an exponential increase in interaction with extremist content and messaging. Right-wing extremist groups in the United States have rapidly increased their activities and followers on social media platforms such as Telegram, Facebook, Reddit and 4Chan. **In Germany, Switzerland and Austria, ISD monitored an 18% increase of followers of right-wing extremist content across Facebook, YouTube and Twitter between March and September 2020.**

An ISD [investigation](#) into Islamic State (IS) presence online revealed how its accounts and supporters on Facebook have used COVID-19 information pages to embed their messaging. While IS accounts report on the pandemic, messages and information are interspersed with pro-IS content and links to broader IS network accounts. Islamist extremist groups, from Al-Qaeda and its offshoots to IS, were quick to use to virus to undermine their opponents and bolster their legitimacy, by claiming the virus to be divine intervention bringing [death to infidels](#). Once it became clear that the pandemic knew no borders, their propaganda changed tack, and '[crusaders](#)', [the West](#), [Jews](#) and other oppositional groups, were to blame for the virus' spread.

Incitement to violence

Extremist groups have also used the pandemic as a rallying call for violence. ISD [investigation](#) found that 200,000 social media posts referenced civil war or 'Boogaloo' in reference to a second civil war in the United States, which peaked during the first wave of the pandemic. In conjunction, right-wing 'Accelerationists', who seek to establish an ethno-nationalist state through terrorist violence and a 'race war', capitalised on the instability of the crisis. White supremacists called for the COVID-19 to be weaponised in this effort: to spread the virus in order to overwhelm health services and public infrastructure. Similar [calls](#) were made by a Muslim Brotherhood activist. Some research suggests that the pandemic has [reignited an interest](#) in bioweapons by the Islamic State.

Not all mis/disinformation operations are carried out by extremist organisations; much of it is reproduced by fringe internet culture and conspiracy theory groups. However, [misinformation and conspiracy theories](#) associated with the virus have commonly been underpinned by racist falsehoods that scapegoat particular groups, ethnic minorities, migrants, and refugees, thereby (re)producing social tensions and vulnerabilities that can play into the hands of extremist groups. Far-right groups in particular have [used the crisis](#) to spread anti-Chinese, [anti-Semitic](#), and anti-migrant narratives. In India, Hindu-nationalists have used the pandemic to further spread disinformation around Indian Muslims as deliberately spreading the virus through '[corona-Jihad](#)'. [Violence against Muslims spiked in the summer of 2020](#), as anti-Muslim discourses were quickly mainstreamed via social media and news media.

ISD research also illustrates how the flow of online misinformation differs geographically. For example, social media platforms often lack the capacity to set up effective algorithms that can manage and capture disinformation in target languages for all regions and communities. This is one factor in the spread of online conspiracy theories in the [Middle East and North Africa](#) region and the [Western Balkans](#), but is also considered to be a problem for managing online disinformation and hate speech globally.

Militant violence

Beyond polarising disinformation, mob violence and violent hate crimes, militant extremist groups initially appeared to use the crisis to increase attacks, particularly in already fragile contexts in the Middle East, the Sahel and Sub-Saharan African regions. In March 2020, there were a number of violent attacks carried out by local terrorist groups in the Lake Chad area, Nigeria and Mali. In Nigeria's northern Borno province, Islamist militants exploited the reduced police and security presence as a result of the pandemic and slaughtered 81 people in a single day. In Iraq, Islamic State attacks close to doubled what they were the previous year between the months of December and March.

However, more than a year into the pandemic, data on militant violence does not show a persistent increase. A recent assessment of the leading global databases on various forms of political violence and violent extremism shows that 'by almost every metric calculated, violent activity is down year-on-year between 2019 and 2020.' The year 2020 therefore followed the global downward trajectory in militant violence since 2016. This is likely in part due to extremist organisations and terrorist groups suffering the same pandemic-induced financial and resource constraints endured the world over.

Exploiting the void

Despite this, it is well documented that extremist organisations exploit the gaps and weakened capacities of normative governance in times of crisis. In many parts of the world, resources have been diverted to tackle the pandemic. This includes already over-stretched health and security services that are at risk of collapse or entirely absent in some communities, a reduction in global humanitarian relief efforts in order to reduce viral transmission, and international security efforts that have been delayed or withdrawn. The pandemic has therefore exacerbated vulnerabilities in areas of social governance which extremist groups have exploited. Al-Shabaab in Somalia, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Northwest Syria and other Al-Qaeda offshoots have used it as an opportunity to propagandise their health service provisions. In Kenya and Somalia, Al-Shabaab has exploited the COVID-19 crisis to reinforce perceptions of corruption and weakness in the Kenyan government. The group has widened its recruitment efforts on- and offline, not only targeting young Muslims but disaffected youth more broadly in the region, capitalising on existing grievances as well as increasingly focusing attention on radicalising non-ethnic Somalis.

Conclusion

For more than a year, analysts have evidenced the 'infodemic' of mis- and disinformation, often connected to, or reproduced by, extremist organisations in different parts of the world. The numbers reveal a significant increase in online activities related to the messages of these groups, whether through sharing content, following pages or accounts linked with extremist organisations, or interacting with the content in other ways. It is also clear that dangerous, divisive and sometimes coordinated disinformation campaigns have

manipulated, exploited and exacerbated social and political polarisation and have contributed to episodes of violence around the world, particularly hate crimes against minority groups and violent protests.

Assessing the extent to which extremist organisations have been able to materially exploit the pandemic is, however, more complicated. The number of attacks by militant groups globally, as one [indicator of its impact on terrorism](#), does not appear to have experienced a sustained increase despite initial claims earlier in the pandemic. One explanation for this is that extremist organisations face the same constraints around resources amid a pandemic as the rest of the world. How they have materially benefitted in terms of resources and recruitment is also inconclusive at this stage.

Nevertheless, the pandemic has undoubtedly brought fresh challenges to prevention and resilience efforts the world over. An onslaught of terrorist-related disinformation and messaging around the pandemic and the exacerbation of existing social fissures and community vulnerabilities to radicalisation and recruitment continue to play out as we enter the next phases of the crisis. Extremist organisations across the spectrum have used the crisis as a '[wedge issue](#)' to promote their cause and has resulted in a landscape of violent extremism that is more heterogeneous than before. We must redouble global efforts for context-sensitive analysis that can inform and allow us to better target prevention activities that protect our communities.