The Specter of Terrorism During the Coronavirus Pandemic

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GREG SIMONS AND CRISTINA BIANCA, MAY 8 2020

Currently the entire globe is inundated with the coronavirus pandemic and its rapid spread along with its devastating and disruptive effects. A number of stories have predicted a changed society that will be left in the wake of the pandemic. For example, a Foreign Affairs article by Richard Haass, predicts that the crisis shall tend to accelerate history rather than reshape it. This is a reference to the rise of a post-American world owing to the decline of appeal in the American model and an anarchic post-liberal world. A crisis of this kind also offers some actors outcomes and possibilities that are not ordinarily available because those same threats represent opportunities. There has been some speculation as to whether terrorists may take advantage of the massive suffering, chaos and upheaval inflicted upon governments and publics around the world. In a time of fear and panic there are weaknesses that terrorists can exploit.

Understandably, some actors have used the humanitarian crisis caused by COVID-19 to call for humanity to put aside their differences and to form a unified front to better focus and combat the challenges presented by the virus. Specifically, they have been using the timing of the moment to employ political symbolism to cease armed conflicts that are plaguing the globe. The vision of the UN Chief, António Guterres, reflects the desire for the international community to give up arms and to fight together against the coronavirus pandemic. His vision is focused mainly on geographical areas such as Syria, Lebanon and Yemen as "The COVID-19 storm is now coming to all these theatres of conflict." Guterres wrote a letter to G20 economic powers in March pressing them "to ensure access to food, essential health supplies, and COVID-19 medical support".

As one of the terrorist groups with an entrenched reputation for lack of mercy or compassion, Al Qaeda-linked Boko Haram has ignored the calls for peace and unity and in fact stepped up its attacks in West Africa. Furthermore they are also claiming new territory in Mozambique. According to the article, Al Qaeda has been using the crisis to send various messages to different groups. Warning its followers and members to exercise spiritual and sanitary caution in what it terms as a divine retribution against unbelievers, but also encouraging them to use the moment to launch attacks without any mercy. In addition, they urged non-Muslims to learn about the Koran during their lock down experience. A report indicated that the various Jihadi groups were using the crisis with further stretched security resources to take advantage in Africa and the Middle East North African region to spread their physical influence and to increase recruiting.

Different terrorist, insurgent and criminal groups have been using the new possibilities created by COVID-19 to increase their power and influence. Not only through the path of political violence and use of force against civilian populations, but through the more soft means of gaining a sense of political legitimacy through the provision of 'humanitarian' aid to civilian populations in regions and countries where governments are either unwilling or unable to do so. This public opinion battle for hearts and minds is taking place in countries where there is a weakened state, such as Afghanistan, Somalia and Syria. In addition to stories and narratives on actual operational examples and aspects of terror groups taking advantage of the pandemic, there are others that focus more on the logistical and psychological possibilities.

Predictive analysis and forecasting has identified the global pandemic as an opportunity for terrorists and extremists.

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One of the identified weak points is the information realm, and consequently, the cognitive realm. The possible avenue is to increase the public sense of fear and anxiety and/or to increase the use of misinformation activities to increase the chaos and disorder. The primary objective of these operational exercises is to sow distrust in governments and authorities and to make the task of governance more difficult – and, at the same time, to try and increase their perceived sense of legitimacy (political and spiritual) when diminishing that of their opponents. One possible operational calculation is that Western security forces are focused in their home countries and less able to assist foreign client states. Others speculate that the pandemic may have another consequence alltogether by prompting terrorists to move forward their attacks or present new targets of opportunity. This includes the category of homegrown terrorism, which will be potentially more prominent with the temporary closing of borders to most international travel. This makes the logistical aspects of an operational plan more challenging and more noticeable to the relevant authorities, with a number of cases being recorded.

It is also important to take into consideration the perceived risk of the pandemic to terrorists themselves. ISIS has itself advised its terrorists to avoid Europe for jihad due to fears over infection. This advice is to be found in the ISIS' al-Naba newsletter which presents "sharia directives" urging its people not to travel to "the land of the epidemic". Moreover, this statement contains information about infected jihadists in Europe, telling them to not come back home, unless they are treated.

Ever since the events of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent Global War On Terrorism, the major threat feared was terrorism. However, since the pandemic in 2020, the greatest fear promoted by mass media is Covid-19 and this has relegated terrorism from the front pages of newspapers in a rather rapid fashion. However, this does not mean that terrorists can exploit the environment of fear and disruption that the pandemic has shaped for their own ends and agenda. A dilemma and a constraint for terrorists at the moment is that they are facing significant competition for headlines in the mass media marketplace for fear (where fear is the belief something bad can happen and that it can be experienced personally). On the one hand, this temporarily displaces terrorism as the most significant and hot news item and terrorism loses its oxygen to spread its psychological influence. On the other hand, this may well prompt terrorist organizations to up their game and reclaim their place in the headline news.

The practice of social distancing in this era of the pandemic, although considered as necessary for aiding the fight against the coronavirus, could prove to be a significant vulnerability when the public is already feeling vulnerable. Isolated people have much 'free' time on their hands during the various lockdown measures undertaken and will search for answers and explanations in this time of fear. If they start to source this from extremist and terrorist groups, they may be led down the path of radicalization. The main strength for terrorist groups and a weakness for governments and authorities is the information realm and the possible effects on the cognitive realm.

Some terrorist groups have managed to use the pandemic to benefit their operational choices and opportunities. However, when looking at the geographical nature and concentration of these attacks, they seem to be taking place in countries that experience weakened government control and limited public goods and services – typical effects of the presence of armed conflict. This situation of further additional strain on those governments, together with a decreased capacity for foreign military assistance has enabled opportunities for increased use of kinetic operations in those areas. On the constraint side of this equation, the lack of freedom of movement and massively increased surveillance and security measures for COVID-19 enforcement, make the task of planning, preparing and executing a terrorist act abroad much more problematic, yet of course not impossible.

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