



COVID-19 AND TERRORISM

Professor Andrew Silke assesses the short and long-term impact on security of the on-going Coronavirus

As the international community continues to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic it is clear that its economic and social impact will be deep and long lasting. Evidence suggests it is already having an impact on terrorism trends across the globe and it is worth considering in more detail its potential impact threats in the medium and long-term.

Starting with the short term, as some countries remain in lockdown we can expect that this will result in a reduction in real-world attacks for those with the infrastructures to facilitate and enforce a widespread lockdown. Social distancing makes it difficult for terrorists to conduct many types of preparation for attacks.

While terrorists may be more restricted than usual, we can expect some displacement to other types of activity particularly online. Research by Moonshot CVE has found that online engagement with extremist right-wing content increased by an average 13 percent following the introduction of lockdown measures in the US. The longer the measures persisted the higher the engagement rose, rising to a 21 percent increase on pre-lockdown levels after 10 days. Other research suggests there has also been an upsurge in Islamist extremist online activity.

While lockdown may represent obstacles to terrorists to carry out real-world attacks, many groups have flagged that the pandemic has left Government and security resources severely stretched. As a result, the ability of

Coronavirus has been used as a potential weapon by coughing on targeted individuals

Government, intelligence and law enforcement agencies to focus on traditional priorities such as counterterrorism has been undermined. As highlighted by UN Secretary General, António Guterres, on 9 April 2020: "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."

A number of groups have called on their followers to try to exploit the situation as Governments have to focus attention and resources on dealing with the impact of COVID-19. Most notably, Islamic State in its *Al-Naba* edition of 19 March called on fighters to carry out attacks while their opponents were vulnerable. Following publication there was an upsurge in Islamic State-affiliated attacks in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia, including assaults against a Sikh temple in Afghanistan, which left 26 dead and an assault against a military checkpoint in Egypt, killing at least five soldiers. Al Qaeda also looks keen to exploit the situation with affiliate groups in Yemen and Somalia showing increases in attacks.

THE HUGE IMPACT OF COVID-19 MAY RE-IGNITE SOME INTEREST IN BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS

Right-wing extremists have called online followers to carry out attacks, encouraging adherents to try to use Coronavirus as a weapon by coughing on targeted individuals or through other means. There are already cases being reported of individuals claiming to have the Coronavirus coughing on others. In the United States, the threat has been taken particularly seriously. The authorities there officially regard the virus as a "biological agent" and threats to spread it are now considered an act of terrorism. At least two people have already been charged in the US with terrorism offences in connection to threats to spread the virus. Christopher Charles Perez was charged after he claimed online that he had paid another person to spread the virus in shops in San Antonio to stop people visiting them. In a separate case, James Jamal Curry was charged after he coughed at a police officer and claimed to be infected, while being arrested for domestic violence.

Overall, attacks along these lines are likely to have a relatively limited impact in a context where national resources are already fully ramped up to contain and mitigate the impact of the virus. Whatever additional infections that could result as a result of such efforts would likely be relatively negligible in the context of a widespread pandemic.

More serious, however, are attacks proposed against medical and other critical infrastructure. For example, on 24 March a white supremacist, Timothy Wilson, was shot dead following an attempted car-bombing attack at a Kansas City medical centre. According to reports, Wilson had already been planning an attack but accelerated the timing following the COVID-19 outbreak as the medical centre now "offered more casualties". A potentially even more serious plot involved the attempt to target the US Navy Hospital Ship *Mercy* while it was docked at the Port of Los Angeles in April. The ship was docked to assist with efforts to treat COVID-19 victims. On 2 April, a train engineer, Eduardo Moreno, deliberately derailed and tried to crash a train into the ship, claiming he was suspicious

about the real reasons for its presence. He believed it was possibly related to a Government takeover – a popular conspiracy theme among right-wing extremists. According to investigators, Moreno said: "You only get this chance once. The whole world is watching. I had to. People don't know what's going on here. Now they will."

The Wilson and Moreno attacks both appear linked to wider conspiracy theories often touted within far-right ideologies. In online forums some of these theories have been tied to the COVID-19 pandemic. There have also been fresh conspiracy theories, which provide alternative explanations and narratives around the pandemic. One of the more prominent of these have been claims that 5G telecommunication masts are playing a role in the transmission of COVID-19. For example, research by the CVE organisation Hope not Hate found that six UK-based anti-5G Facebook groups were now posting a "toxic cocktail" of material which combined far-right, anti-Semitic and anti-Government conspiracies and called for readers to take direct action. Though scientifically baseless, this conspiracy theory has been accompanied by the vandalising of over 40 masts in the UK alone in recent weeks, with other attacks reported from Ireland and the Netherlands.

For some terrorist groups, there may be an incentive to delay attacking during the height of the pandemic, waiting until a degree of normal routine has returned. While the pandemic is raging, it is clear that even successful attacks or serious plots are attracting substantially less attention than they would normally. Further, the impact of such attacks is also often trivial in the context of the far more damaging impact of the pandemic. Between 1 March and 14 April 2020, there were 115,933 confirmed COVID-19 deaths globally – a number which was rising very rapidly. In comparison, in the same 45 day time period in 2018, terrorist attacks resulted in 2,321 deaths globally. In short, at the moment terrorism cannot compete with COVID-19 in terms of threat.

Thus for terrorists, where attracting media attention is often a significant element in the calculus for carrying out an attack, the current period may offer poor incentives to do so, and a case could be made for waiting until the recovery phase of the pandemic in order to better maximise the impact of attacks.

A further complication is that some types of terrorists may face a community backlash if they carry out action in the midst of the pandemic, particularly if the community judges that the attacks hinder or distract the emergency services from providing critical care and attention to dealing with the pandemic. For example, during March in Northern Ireland dissident Republicans prepared a sophisticated hoax bomb, which resulted in a day-long security alert absorbing both police and army bomb disposal resources while a controlled explosion was used to neutralise the threat. The hoax attack does not appear to have gathered any positive traction for the group and similar attempts have not been made since.

The pandemic naturally is also a lesson in the potentially potent impact of CBRN weapons and in particular of biological agents. One genuine concern is that COVID-19 may lead to a resurgence in interest among terrorists for using such weapons. As UN Secretary General António Guterres warned in April: "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. Non-state groups could gain access to virulent strains that could pose similar devastation to societies around the globe.”

In general, there have been very few successful attacks by terrorists using biological weapons. There are serious hurdles to overcome in both developing and disseminating biological agents and these difficulties have deterred most terrorists from being too interested

DELIBERATE THREATS TO SPREAD THE VIRUS ARE NOW CONSIDERED AN ACT OF TERRORISM IN THE US

in such weapons. While serious obstacles certainly remain, the huge impact of COVID-19 may re-ignite some interest in biological weapons. An added concern is that historically it has mainly been religiously motivated or right-wing terrorists who have been most attracted to using biological weapons, and in the West these are currently the dominant threats.

Further, there are substantial concerns that the current outbreak is merely the first of a potential series. If COVID-19 follows the pattern of some previous pandemics we may experience equally serious waves later this year or next year, each adding further to the economic burden. As is, developed economies in countries such as the UK and US have deep pockets but will still be economically rocked by the crisis in a manner that is expected to be worse than the 2009 economic crash, and possibly on a par with the Great Depression in the thirties.

One consequence is that funding for counterterrorism activity across Government and the private sector may be scaled back in the face of massive economic pressure. Looking ahead in the medium and long term, Government spending is likely to come under fiercer stress than in the past decade and pressure on counterterrorism budgets going forward is likely to be more intense. Whether these budgets can continue to be ring-fenced as before is uncertain.

Tied into this, the economic impact of the pandemic is almost certainly going to feed into destabilising parts of the world. Countries with less resources may face even greater crises. Potential terrorist hotspots overseas may re-ignite as international co-operation and investment to suppress terrorism is weakened as resources are diverted to other priorities. Failed states are unlikely to experience significant improvements in a context of a widespread global recession. On the contrary, they are at risk of sinking deeper into the morass. Similarly, currently vulnerable states may succumb to the fresh range of challenges and slip into failed state status in the medium term. Combined, this may offer a range of terrorist movements new safe-havens to organise and launch campaigns of violence.

Overall, while some terrorist propaganda has been focused on immediate opportunities for attacks, the heavy economic impact of COVID-19 suggests that serious long-term vulnerabilities lie ahead. Terrorism is only one of the problems that Governments will have to address. At an international level it is difficult to envision that the wider budgets to tackle terrorism and violent extremism can remain as strong as they were. As the economic consequences of the pandemic bite both directly and indirectly, it seems likely that many regions will become increasingly vulnerable to the emergence or resurgence of a range of terrorist groups ●

Professor Andrew Silke holds a Chair in Terrorism, Risk and Resilience at Cranfield University. He has a background in forensic psychology and criminology and has worked both in academia and for Government.

Far-right groups have used Coronavirus as an opportunity to spread conspiracy theories



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