

The Impact of Covid-19 on Terrorism Trends

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has even bolstered the speed of terrorism evolution. Even though research play an important role in the formulation of national security decisions and analysis of current and potential threats of terrorism, little is known about the evolving trend of terrorism after the outbreak of pandemic. In regard to this status quo, this paper analyzes different types of change in terrorism after the Covid-19 pandemic, and further extend it to a prevention method of potential threats of terrorism. The study identified three significant shifts in terrorism method affected by Covid-19. First, it investigates psychological symptoms due to Covid-19 which eventually increased susceptibility to radicalization of people due to psychological symptoms. Due to increased anxiety, people aim to scapegoat others and find easy solutions from the terrorist organizations. Also, terrorists have evolved their method by weaponizing of Covid-19 as a 'biological agent', spreading Covid-19 in different scales based on three different aims. Furthermore, it pinpoints the weaker security and offers possible interventions using technological advances. This study will be a foundation for enacting policies on national and international terrors and for formulating national security decisions.

Introduction

Globally facing violent events, terrorism becomes one of the popular social issues. During the pandemic, it is often assumed that violent extremists from terrorism are deterred; however, this assumption is false (Sinatra, 2020). Since the outbreak of the epidemic, terrorist organizations have expedited their terror and recruitment efforts on the online spaces. For example, Sunni jihadists claim that Covid-19 is a plot by Islam's enemies, with the goal to radicalize the online users. Similarly, Al-Qa'ida and the Islamic State (IS) have increased followers by portraying Covid-19 as 'God's little soldier' against the nonbelievers, asserting that it can only be avoided by increasing adherence to "true" Islam (Hesham, 2020). They use hashtags related to Covid-19 to redirect users to its jihadist propaganda (Pauwels, 2020). In the 2000s and early 2010s when the rise of social media, much of the online terrorism content was accessible on traditional media such as radio, television, and print advertisement, but terrorists have also expanded their activities on new spaces such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to radicalize and recruit people (Nyst, 2019; Ozkaya, 2017). Therefore, the threat of terrorism brings one step closer to people's lives and terrorism during this era will have long-lasting consequences. This study will provide insight into prevalent trend among terrorism in the midst of pandemic in order to add a new idea in the typology of terrorism studies as well as become a groundwork for national policies. Furthermore, the analysis of current and potential threats of terrorism will help to formulate national security decisions.

Increased susceptibility to radicalization and weaponizing Covid-19

Currently, terrorists are less concerned with their own safety, and focused on spreading deadly infections one person to another (Pilch, 2020). Anxiety and other psychiatric disorders caused by Covid-19 are a perfect script for the theater of terrorism, allowing extremists to increase the appeal for the narratives (Ackerman and Peterson, 2020). In the US, far-right

content and Internet interaction surged by 13% and reached a 21% increase in engagement levels 10 days after the lockdown and social distancing measures were put into place (Silke, 2020). While socially isolated, anxious individuals may be more prone to radicalization and there are less chances that these behaviors will be observed by others who might be able to take action.

Also, since there are virus samples related to Covid-19 already accessible, terrorists have regarded the Covid-19 as the biological agent so it is drawn to using the SARS-CoV-2 virus as a weapon (Pilch,2020). Here, Ackerman and Peterson (2020) analyze three possible scenarios that might take place. First, as low-level threats that the virus spreads, an emotional outburst without prior planning results from intentionally coughing, spitting at people, and licking products in stores. Second, terrorists used the virus as a weapon of planned attack on particular ideological targets. The vilest end of this scenario is represented by ‘Holocough’, where terrorists use Covid-19 against Jews. Also, IS-linked networks in Indonesia called on their infected followers to spread the coronavirus to law enforcement officials (Ong & Nur, 2020). Last, the third scenario is to purposefully disseminate the coronavirus widely with the aim to spread or rekindle the epidemic on a significant scale.

Security issues

Lockdowns may act as an obstacle to terrorists plotting attacks in the real world, but several terrorist groups have also warned that government and security systems have been severely underutilized as a result of the outbreak (Silke, 2020). This undermined governments and other agencies’ ability to focus on traditional priorities such as counterterrorism. The resources used for counterterrorism such as military resources are allocated to public health and economy which leads to security vulnerability (Chen, Dong & Zhuang, 2022). For

instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic, sub-Saharan African extremist groups stand to gain strategically by outwitting distracted and overwhelmed foreign and domestic security forces, consequently, violent attacks in sub-Saharan regions rose by 37 percent (ACLED, 2019; Columbo, 2020). While extremist organizations in Sub-Saharan Africa use the Covid-19 outbreak as an opportunity to recruit new members and intensify their attacks, the regional governments have redirected increased security assets to the pandemic (Columbo, 2020). In fact, the military in Nigeria has been ordered to put more strict security measures such as moving the Covid-19 patients to hospitals, restricting travels, and protecting government food stocks used for patients (Carsten, 2020). Similarly, the Kenyan military is actively involved in enforcing the nation's lockdown and curfew as well as providing medical assistance, transporting essential supplies, and guarding important installations (Gisesa, 2020). Although these tactics have advantages, concentrating on Covid-19 may leave the military unprepared and vulnerable to an increase in extremist activities (Columbo, 2020).

As security in areas are at risk, governments must develop counter-terrorism systems, using new technological advances, in order to prevent a window for terrorists to attack. For instance, terrorists all make wide use of cyberspace, leaving digital footprints of their communications and activities (Sinai, 2020). Counterterrorism agencies should attempt to uncover their digital footprints by implementing new technologies. This becomes even more significant when combined with other software tools such as social network analysis. Through this, government will be able to gather vast amount of data in cyberspace to look for suspicious information such as individual's contact with terrorist accounts or purchase of weapons.

Additionally, they can also use biometric identification verification and facial recognition tools in order to provide biological characteristics of terrorists (Alrahawe & Shinde, 2021). The use of facial recognition technology combined with CCTV video monitoring has increased the use of biometrics in efforts to identify terrorists, and individuals suspected of committing terrorist offenses, especially in public places (CTED Analytical Brief, 2021). In this context, biometrics are used for a variety of purposes, including verifying a person's identity and identifying whether the person in question is listed in databases used for law enforcement and counterterrorism, and including through connections to pertinent Interpol databases as mentioned in Resolution 1363 (UNSC, 2001). AI algorithms also correlate a wide range of parameters, including preceding incidents, reports of suspicious activity, and threats made on social media in order to forecast the locations, strategies, weaponry, and timing of upcoming terrorist attacks (Huamani, Alicia & Gonzalez, 2020).

Lastly, the government should collaborate with social networking sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to use AI-based data mining to mine the content of their users. Assessing and removing ant necessary posts with extremist and terrorist nexus will make it more difficult for terrorists and their extremist supporters to operate in cyberspace. By forcing terrorists to look for new social media platforms, governments strain their limited resources.

In the current status quo, however, it is quite troublesome how counterterrorism tactics are developed. Deportation, trials without juries, widespread surveillance, and data retention are only a few of the counterterrorism methods that can directly violate people's rights and liberties (De Londras & Morgan, 2020). Furthermore, it generally violates people's rights to privacy and civil liberties when emergency laws and procedures become the norm, creating

what some have dubbed ‘the counter-terrorist state’ (De Londras & Morgan, 2020). The use of counterterrorism can be used cynically to suppress dissent and political opposition.

Counter-terrorism laws and policies raise concerns about our ability to ensure that states are held accountable for how they employ their counter-terrorism powers, laws, and policies in addition to posing threats of this nature to rights and dissent. They particularly encourage us to consider if and how nations can be held accountable for the manner in which, when, and with what repercussions they use counterterrorism. Therefore, despite all the advancements in technology and software, it is essential for counterterrorism services to uphold the law and protect civil rights to the greatest extent possible in a secure nation.

Conclusion

This paper discussed impacts of Covid-19 on the scale of terrorism, including heightened vulnerability to radicalisation and Covid-19 as a biological agent, and weakened national counterterrorism system due to the pandemic. In fact, the budget for counterterrorism has been globally more intense, and it is a harsh situation to combat serious long term vulnerabilities. Therefore, the need to formulate effective response measures is more desperate than ever. In order to avoid both short-term and long-term impact of the pandemic on terrorism, countries must develop counter-terrorism systems to maintain ongoing collaboration against various terrorist groups and deny their potential opportunities to resuscitate and reassert themselves.

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