



apcss.org/nexus

SECURITY NEXUS

A free, open access, international, peer-reviewed, online publication for the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies faculty and alumni.

Security Nexus Perspectives

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON TERRORISM AND COUNTER-TERRORISM: PRACTITIONER INSIGHTS

By Sam Mullins*†

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the world, with far-reaching social, political and economic consequences. Terrorists and security services alike have been forced to adapt. However, we still have relatively limited understanding of the changes that have occurred and what they mean for counter-terrorism (CT). This report presents the findings of an exploratory survey, completed by 100 security practitioners, in order to shed light on how terrorism and CT have been affected by the pandemic. Results suggest that, for the most part, terrorists appear to have gained relatively little in the short term. At the same time, although many practitioners have experienced additional challenges in CT, most of these problems have not been insurmountable. Looking to the future, there is significant concern that terrorism will increase in response to the social and economic fallout from the pandemic. As a result, most survey respondents agreed that countries will need to cooperate more closely with each other on CT, and that greater US support for CT in the Indo-Pacific will be needed.

Introduction

Many violent extremists and terrorists around the world have [sought](#) to capitalize on the coronavirus pandemic, using it to [promote](#) their worldviews and to try and draw in new recruits. Some have even masqueraded as healthcare providers, [offering](#) advice on hygiene, [building](#) quarantine centers and [enforcing](#) lockdowns. Recognizing that government resources are stretched thin, they have also [encouraged](#) their followers to take advantage and launch attacks.

Most analysts seem to agree that "[COVID-19 and extremism are the perfect storm](#)". The fact that vast numbers of people stuck at home during lockdowns turned to the internet is [thought](#) to have increased the risk of online radicalization and recruitment to terrorism. Similarly, provision of healthcare services and charity presents an [opportunity](#) for terrorists to grow their support base and [potentially](#) raise additional funds. In the months and years ahead, rising poverty and unemployment, combined with frustration at incompetent and corrupt regimes, [may lead](#) to an even greater pool of potential recruits. In

* The author is tremendously grateful to everyone who took part in and supported this research.

† Dr. Sam Mullins is a professor at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (DKI APCSS) in Honolulu, USA.

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON TERRORISM AND COUNTER-TERRORISM: PRACTITIONER INSIGHTS

the meantime, some security forces have been [redeployed](#) due to force protection concerns, or to [enforce](#) lockdowns, while others have been [hamstrung](#) by social distancing requirements that interfere with their work. In combination, this suggests that both the short- and long-term risk of terrorism has increased.

There are several indicators that lend support to this assessment. Research has shown an [increase](#) in extremist activity on the internet, including the [number](#) of online “venues” (groups, pages, channels etc. hosting extremist content) as well as [traffic](#) to those sites, which suggests an uptick in public interest. The Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress on CT operations in North, West and East Africa [reported](#) that in response to the pandemic, USAFRICOM implemented a “stop movement” directive and force health protection procedures, as ordered by the Secretary of Defense. Two multinational exercises were canceled, “[m]ost security cooperation activities across the continent [were] paused”, embassy staff were reduced and USAID missions were severely curtailed. Similarly, the Lead Inspector General Report on Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) in Iraq and Syria [documented](#) the fact that training of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) was suspended, causing more than a dozen Coalition countries to 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 assist[ing] ISF units working to combat ISIS”. During the first half of 2020, there were increases in terrorist activity in both Africa and Iraq.

In spite of the above, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism and CT is still [far from clear](#). ISIS was already on the [rebound](#) in Iraq before the pandemic hit, while terrorist attacks have been on an [upward trajectory](#) in West Africa in particular for several years. With this in mind, it is important to recognize that besides the pandemic, there are many other factors at play, not least, the ongoing [political turmoil](#) in Iraq and the gradual build-up and [expansion](#) of militant capacity over the course of several years in Sub-Saharan Africa. Elsewhere, increases in terrorist activity in places like Kashmir and Nigeria are more likely the result of predictable, seasonal weather changes (respectively, [melting snow](#) and the onset of the [rainy season](#)) than conditions caused by the spread of COVID-19.

Looking at terrorism more broadly, it is currently impossible to say whether the surge in online recruitment efforts has been successful. In the absence of detailed information, it is also difficult to gauge just how badly CT has been affected. At the same time, although violent extremists and terrorists may well have benefited from the pandemic, they have also experienced their own setbacks and challenges, including [lost opportunities](#) to network and raise funds, [decreased](#) state sponsorship, [restricted mobility](#) and potentially limited access to materiel (due to reductions in cross-border movement of goods), combined with [continued pressure](#) from security forces.

As a recent report by the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team [observed](#), the impact of the pandemic on terrorist activity is likely to vary according to circumstances. In conflict zones and remote areas where lockdowns are difficult to enforce, terrorists are more likely to be able to continue operating as before. Those outside of conflict zones, where States can exert control, are more likely to be affected by restrictive measures put in place to limit the spread of disease. Even within the same country, it is [possible](#) that groups will be affected differently, depending on their composition and respective capabilities.

In light of the above, there is clearly a need for further research in order to improve our understanding of how the coronavirus pandemic has impacted upon terrorism and CT in different contexts. This report presents the findings of a brief, exploratory survey of CT and security practitioners, all of whom are graduates of the Comprehensive Security Responses to Terrorism (CSRT) program at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Hawaii (DKI APCSS).

Method

The author, together with colleagues at DKI APCSS, devised a short survey consisting of nine statements (each rated on a 5-point Likert scale), with room for optional comments. This was sent out by email to all graduates of the CSRT in July, resulting in exactly 100 responses. In order to ensure anonymity, no personal information was collected. The broader pool of CSRT alumni, to which the respondents belong, consists of a total of nearly two thousand security practitioners from over a hundred countries. Seventy percent of CSRT alumni are from the Indo-Pacific region; 90% are male; 54% are military; and the majority range in rank from major to colonel, or civilian equivalents.

Results Part 1: Impact of the Pandemic on Terrorist Threats

To begin with, respondents were asked whether they thought their country had “a good understanding of if/how the terrorist threat has evolved as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.” The majority (53%) either agreed, or strongly agreed with this statement, compared to 28% who either disagreed or strongly disagreed. On balance, this suggests a fairly high level of confidence among respondents that their governments are paying attention to this issue, and that—by extension—most respondents felt they were able to provide some reasonably well-informed insights. Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of the fact that a sizeable minority indicated that the impact of the pandemic on terrorism is still poorly understood. In part, this may be because it is too early to tell. However, several respondents also acknowledged that their governments were preoccupied with other issues. This in itself is an important finding and underscores the exploratory and tentative nature of these results.

With these limitations in mind, respondents were asked to comment on whether they thought terrorists’ propaganda efforts during the pandemic had resulted in increased numbers of people becoming radicalized, and/or joining terrorist organizations in their respective countries (see Figure 1).

Fifty-one percent either disagreed or strongly disagreed that terrorists’ pandemic-related propaganda had resulted in increased radicalization/recruitment, compared to 24% who agreed or strongly agreed. It would seem that terrorists’ attempts to exploit the coronavirus pandemic in their propaganda have (thus far) been largely unsuccessful, albeit with some exceptions. Among those who agreed that terrorist propaganda was having some success, one respondent noted that “People are becoming radicalized online...[but are] [n]ot joining terrorist organizations”. This is a critical distinction to make, since radicalization does not inevitably lead to violent outcomes. Equally important is the fact that experience clearly varies between different countries and terrorist organizations. As another respondent pointed out “There are different patterns evident in different areas affected by terrorism in [my country]. It is therefore difficult to generalize this assessment.”

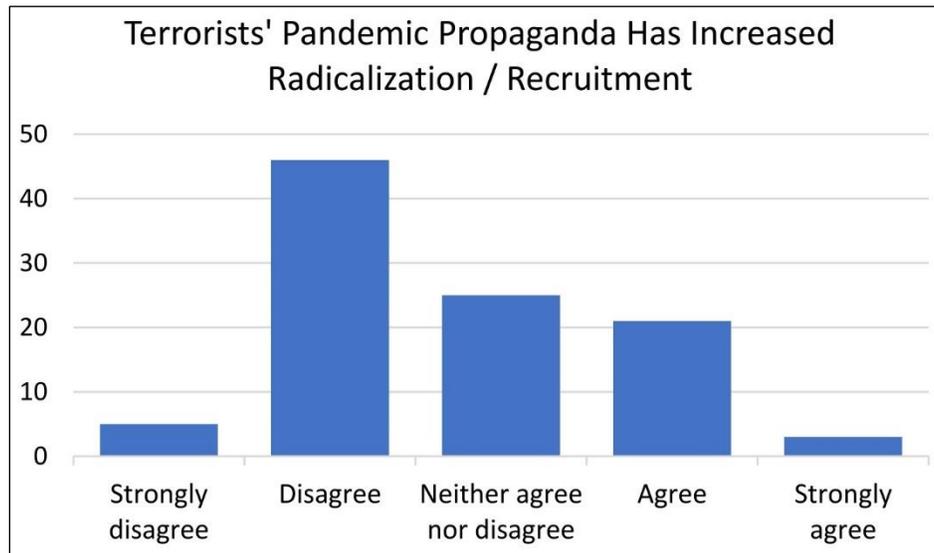


Figure 1. Respondents' answers to the statement, "Terrorists are exploiting the coronavirus pandemic in their propaganda. Because of this, we have seen an increase in the number of people becoming radicalized and/or joining terrorist organizations in my country."

After radicalization and recruitment, respondents were asked about terrorists' fundraising. In response to this, 68% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that "Because of the coronavirus pandemic, terrorists in my country have been able to raise more funds than usual." In contrast, only 9% agreed or strongly agreed. Most of the comments on this topic indicated that there was no information to show that terrorists were exploiting the pandemic in this way. One person explained that "Raising fund[s] [has] stopped due to the restriction[s] on movements." Unfortunately, none of those who were of the opposite opinion opted to provide supporting details. As it stands, these results suggest that terrorist exploitation of the pandemic for financial gain (for example, through the use of fraudulent charitable collections or other criminal enterprises) is very rare, and/or difficult to detect.

The final threat-related topic that respondents were asked about was terrorists' ability to conduct attacks. Much of the public commentary on terrorism and CT during the pandemic has suggested that security forces are "[distracted](#)" or over-burdened. The implication of this is that there will be resultant gaps in security that terrorists will be able to exploit in order to conduct attacks. Respondents were thus asked to evaluate the statement that "Because of the Coronavirus pandemic, terrorists in my country have been able to conduct more attacks than usual."

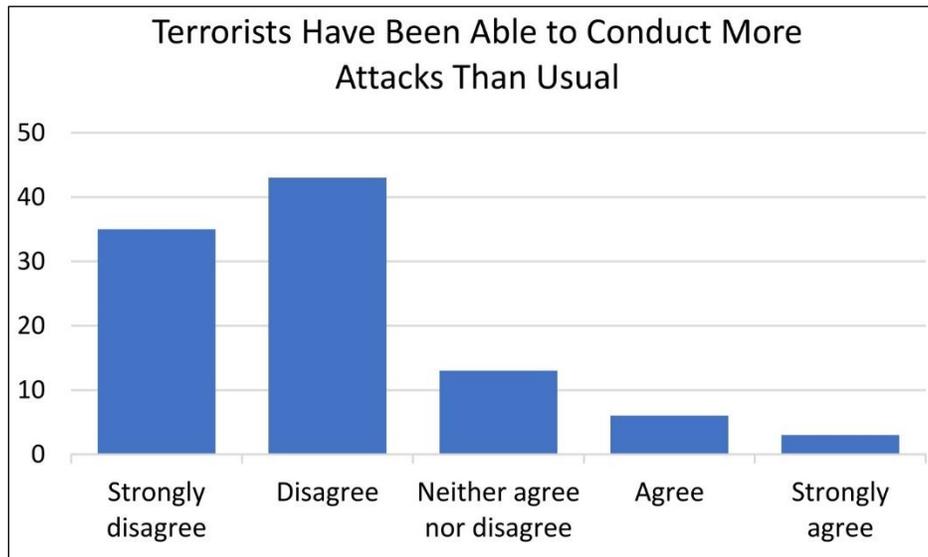


Figure 2. Respondents’ answers to the statement, “Because of the Coronavirus pandemic, terrorists in my country have been able to conduct more attacks than usual.”

As shown in Figure 2, 78% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement compared to just 9% who were of the opposite opinion(s). One respondent observed that “the pandemic has hindered... destructive activities” while another remarked that “We even notice a more stable situation”. Others explained that this was due to the closure of borders and implementation of lockdowns. No examples or explanations for *increased* terrorist attacks were given, although one person commented that “there is still some fighting” between terrorists and security forces.

Results Part 2: Impact of the Pandemic on Counter-Terrorism

When asked about the impact of the pandemic on counter-terrorism, 50% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that CT has become more difficult during the pandemic, either because resources have been diverted elsewhere, and/or because social distancing has interfered in some CT duties. A third of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed (see Figure 3).

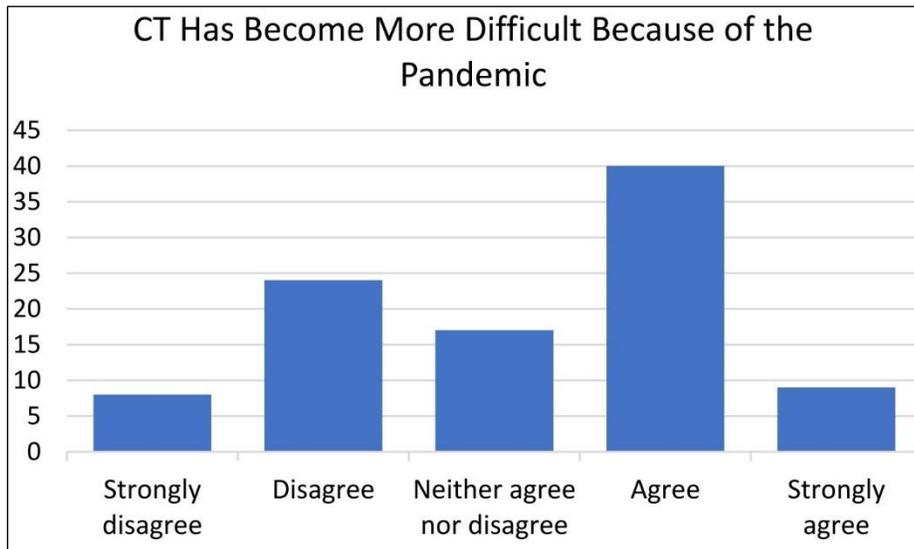


Figure 3. Respondents’ answers to the statement, “Counter-terrorism has been made more difficult in my country as a result of the pandemic. This is because resources have been diverted, and/or because social distancing has made some counter-terrorism duties harder to do.”

This confirms that the pandemic has indeed had a negative impact on CT in many places. Nevertheless, the reality is complex and some security forces have been able to adapt quite successfully, despite the newly challenging circumstances. One respondent commented on this at length, noting that the biggest challenge had been accessing classified information during the strictest part of the lockdowns. However, he/she added that a solution was found, while other plans and procedures were also adapted. Additionally, although social distancing meant that fewer people could be physically present at work, alternative working arrangements were put in place, which allowed the team “to function at full capacity in most aspects of our work.” Others commented that “counter-terrorism efforts are being conducted relentlessly” despite difficulties imposed by the pandemic, and that “Close collaboration with CT partner agencies, domestic and international, has continued throughout the pandemic in spite of the disruption caused by changes in work arrangements.” Thus, although CT has become more difficult in some cases, it is not readily apparent that it has suffered enough to give terrorists a significant advantage.

A closely related question is whether terrorists have also faced additional challenges as a result of the pandemic. Seventy-one percent of respondents agreed, or strongly agreed that “lockdowns/curfews and other measures put in place to control the pandemic in my country have also made it harder for terrorists to move around.” Just 14% disagreed or strongly disagreed. As [highlighted](#) by the UN, this is likely related to the type of environment that different terrorist groups operate in, and where lockdowns are more or less enforceable. As one respondent neatly summarized it, “This applies in urban areas.” According to another, the impact of lockdowns has been especially “acute” at international borders, where the flow of people has been “vastly reduced” (in effect, lightening the workload of some services and allowing them to focus on other areas of risk). Meanwhile, in rural settings—where many terrorist organizations are located—lockdowns are harder to enforce, meaning terrorists’ freedom of movement is less likely to have been affected. Finally, it is worth considering that restrictions on movement are to some extent a double-edged sword. As one person observed, this had also impacted on the work of government officials.

Results Part 3: Looking to the Future

Having covered the effects of the pandemic on terrorism and CT in the short-term, in the final part of the survey respondents were asked to share their thoughts on how things might develop in future. As depicted in Figure 4, 58% agreed or strongly agreed that “the long-term social and economic consequences of the pandemic will lead to an increase in terrorism in the Indo-Pacific.” Just 6% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

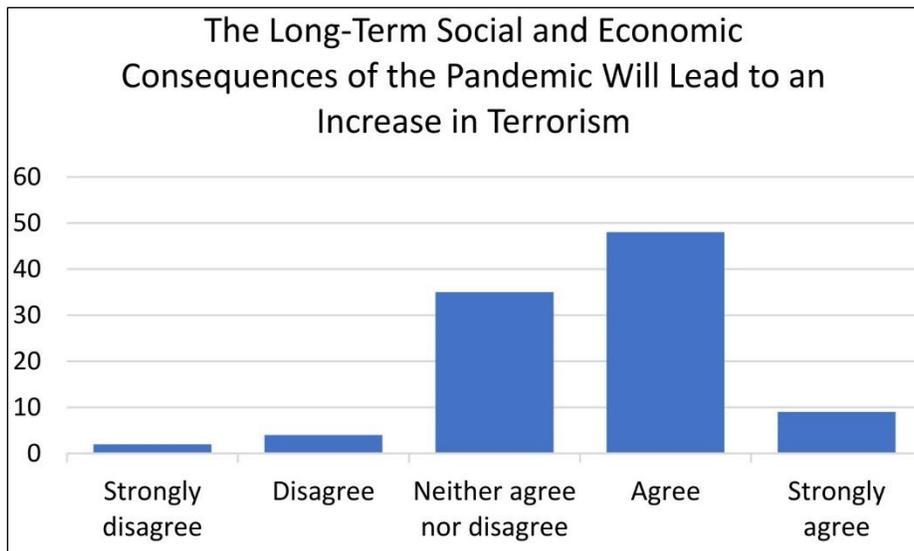


Figure 4. Respondents’ answers to the statement, “Looking ahead, the long-term social and economic consequences of the pandemic will lead to an increase in terrorism in the Indo-Pacific.”

These responses show quite clearly that the practitioners who completed this survey are more worried about the future, long-term impact of the coronavirus pandemic on terrorism than they are about its current effects. In support of this viewpoint, respondents commented that governments are likely to be “more focused on economic rehabilitation than security concerns”, while youths are likely to become more vulnerable to terrorist recruitment as a result of rising poverty and unemployment, inequality, greater disparity between “the haves and have nots” and “irrational behavior” of political elites. One person did point out, however, that “this will vary according to specific areas” and so again, it is important not to generalize. These views are very much in line with much of the academic commentary on the long-term impact of the pandemic on terrorism.

With future challenges still in mind, respondents were asked whether “countries in the Indo-Pacific region will need to cooperate more closely with each other on counter-terrorism”. Ninety-three percent agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, compared to just one person who strongly disagreed and 6% who were ambivalent. As one respondent pointed out, “cooperation between countries is desirable even without the impact of COVID-19”. Although this is undoubtedly true, the strong show of support perhaps suggests that the mutual experience of difficulty brought on by the pandemic may heighten the need for cooperation on shared security challenges in future. Along similar lines, another person noted that

although cooperation in the current context was more difficult due to limited face-to-face relationship building, this was balanced by “the common situation... countries find themselves in.” Elsewhere, it has been [argued](#) that the current global crisis may lead to a “new era in multilateral cooperation.” It is thus quite possible that the pandemic will also lead to new forms of cooperation in CT.

Finally, respondents were asked whether, and to what extent, US support for CT in the Indo-Pacific should either be increased or decreased in future. Seventy-one percent said that it should be “somewhat increased” or “increased a lot”; 23% felt that it should stay about the same as it is now; and 5% said it should be “somewhat decreased” or “decreased a lot”. As several comments made clear, the perceived need for additional support from the US in CT was specifically tied to the detrimental effects of the pandemic and the anticipated shortfalls in capacity. One person noted that it was not only material support that would be needed, but also US assistance in facilitating cooperation between other countries. Similarly, another respondent remarked that “Leadership is crucial at times like these and the US is historically best qualified to deliver it with the collaborative approach championed by the ilk of the DKI APCSS.” Together, these responses indicate that many security practitioners place great value on US assistance in CT, and that—assuming predictions concerning the dire, long-term consequences of the pandemic hold true—there will be an increasing demand on the US to play a leading role. This is quite significant, since the US has [deprioritized](#) CT in favor of great-power competition, and must also deal with the social and economic consequences of COVID-19 at home. It is therefore quite possible that there will be an increasing need and demand for US support in CT at the precise time that American capacity and will are stretched.

Summary and Concluding Remarks

This report set out to explore the short- and long-term impact of the coronavirus pandemic on terrorism and CT, according to security practitioners. Bearing in mind that this is an issue that is not yet fully understood, and clearly also varies around the world, the majority of survey respondents did not think that terrorists’ attempts to exploit the pandemic in their propaganda has been very successful. Similarly, most were of the opinion that terrorists have thus far failed to capitalize on the pandemic to raise funds and have also generally failed to take advantage of the situation to launch attacks. Fifty percent of respondents reported that CT had become more difficult during the pandemic, either because resources had been redirected and/or due to social distancing. However, in response, security services have been forced to adapt and appear to have found workable solutions to many of these problems (which also gels with other [accounts](#)). Meanwhile, lockdowns have made it more difficult for terrorists to move around, particularly in urban areas and at controlled border crossing points. Conversely, government officials have also been affected by restrictions on travel.

Looking to the future, the majority of respondents expressed concern that the long-term social and economic consequences of the pandemic will lead to an increase in terrorism when many countries are experiencing severe shortfalls in capacity. On a more positive note, the vast majority saw this as added reason to increase CT cooperation. At the same time, many also felt that under such circumstances, there will be an even greater need for US leadership and assistance. On one hand, this would likely come at a time of immense difficulty for the US, when it too would be focused on economic recovery, while simultaneously embroiled in strategic competition with Russia and China. On the other hand, this could also present the US with an important opportunity to strengthen and expand its partnerships, advancing both CT and great power competition simultaneously.

Compared to much of the commentary on the impact of COVID-19 on terrorism in the media, the results gathered in this survey paint a more nuanced, and slightly more positive picture (at least in the

short-term). Terrorists are certainly trying to exploit the pandemic to their advantage, but in most cases it seems they have not had a great deal of success. Nevertheless, as several respondents to this survey cautioned, we should be careful not to generalize. Though perhaps the exception to the rule, some terrorists *are* apparently thriving in the current environment. Moreover, only a few months have passed since the pandemic was officially declared and it appears to be far from over. Indeed, most respondents were in agreement that the long-term outlook is much gloomier.

Although exploratory in nature, the findings presented in this report are an attempt to bring the voices of CT practitioners into play. It will of course take far more in-depth research, and in all likelihood many years, before we fully comprehend the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on terrorism and CT. As it stands, we have barely scratched the surface.

*The views expressed in this article are the author's alone, and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the DKI APCSS or the United States Government.
August 2020*