



INTERNATIONAL WEBINARS AND LIVE EVENTS

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 VIRUS ON GLOBAL TERRORISM AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM*

Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) – 23 April 2020

*Moderated by **Dr Jean Marc Rickli** - Head of Global Risk, GCSP



Dr Andreea Stoian Karadeli – Visiting researcher at the University of South Wales and Associate fellow at GCSP:

Extremist groups of all kind (jihadi, far right, far left) use the virus as an element to **reinforce their ideology**, through **hate-speech, fake news, and conspiracy theories**. They also seize the opportunity of this crisis to call for actions to **conduct attack when the enemy is most vulnerable**.

Salafi groups use **religious rhetoric** (COVID soldier of Allah) ; right wing groups use **conspiracy theories** (Jewish or Chinese weapon against the West) and left wing groups blame the destructive nature of the **capitalist system**. They all reinterpret their ideologies in the framework of the virus.

The COVID19 crisis has the potential to **weaken domestic security** efforts and international counter terrorism cooperation, allowing terrorist groups to better prepare attacks in the future.

Recommendations: ensure equal treatment of terrorist groups; ensure better **data collection** on domestic terrorism; develop strategies to **counter disinformation** and extremist propaganda.



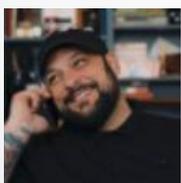
Dr Christina Schori Liang – Head of terrorism and PVE at GCSP:

Right wing terrorism is on the rise in US, Oceania, and Europe. It is becoming a global issue. New trends: use of social media, targeting a specific group, call for imitation of the crime by others.

New practices during the current crisis: **calls to weaponize COVID19** to attack police officers, Jews, Chinese with clear instructions on how to do it (cough on doorknobs, spray saliva on police officers).

Priority steps to be taken: **protect soft targets from attacks**, such as **hospitals** (and health workers), houses of worship (mosques, temples, churches of **minorities**); identify terrorist funding sources.

Importance of the **digital domain in the propaganda**. The response must be an **online response**: digital literacy in schools, courses on preventive violent extremism, **counter-disinformation** initiatives.



Mr Christian Picciolini – Author of *Breaking Hate*, founder of *Free Radicals Project*

It was a **sense of identity and purpose** that drew me in the extremist group I joined when I was 14 years old. Most people join extremist groups in **search of ideology and purpose in life**.

COVID19 is the **perfect storm for extremist groups**. When there is **uncertainty and fear**, people tend to follow **options outside of the norm** and most of these options are offered by extremist groups.

Groups are trying to paint this not just as a health plague but as a **social plague** by *scape-goating* specific groups of the society (Jews, Chinese, Muslims, migrants). We also see groups **weaponizing the COVID19**.

What is important is the way extremist groups **recruit people**. **Online platforms**, such as video games or depression forums, are the main recruiting tools of far-right extremist groups. The risk of **online radicalisation and recruitment** has increased during the **COVID19** pandemic.



Mr Jean-Paul Rouiller – Head of Terrorism-joint analysis group at GCSP:

Communication is the life and blood of terrorism. When they communicate, terrorist groups (Jihadi, far right and left) want their propaganda to be disseminated to the outside world.

Important communication have been done on the **COVID19 to develop new and updated rhetoric**. It is a **strategic moment** to recruit, train and inspire people during the crisis, because this is when people are the **most vulnerable**.

We globally find the same type of speech among the different extremist groups: they adapt their ideology to the situation and see it as an **opportunity to attack the institutions**.

During the COVID crisis, we see **how important the use of technology is** for these groups.



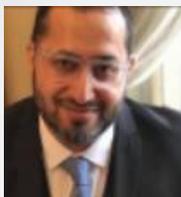
Mr Jean-Pierre Keller – Deputy and senior analyst at the terrorism analysis joint group at the GCSP:

Situation in **North-East Syria camps**: no more medical facilities in **overcrowded camps (70.000 persons)**. It could be a **disaster** if the virus outbreaks in these camps.

North East Syria **prisons**: extremely **vulnerable areas**, fertile ground to spreading the virus. ISIS fighters are in constant tension. COVID19 will **increase the tensions** in the region.

Strategy in for ISIS in North-East Syria:

- ISIS will encourage its member to **attack and exploit weaknesses** of the West
- ISIS will try to gain **new followers and support**
- International military Coalition as well as domestic security forces will be weaker on the ground, this will be an **opportunity for ISIS**



Mr Munir Zamir - Counter-Terrorism consultant, PhD Candidate at the University of South Wales

All extremist groups have **objectives**. States authorities have been **caught by surprise** by the pandemic, extremist groups as well. The pandemic surely **impacted the strategic objectives** of these groups. They will have to assess the possible gain and losses.

The current strategy for extremist groups is **framing**: creating references that are effective in reinforcing the central ideological message. There are important efforts to **contextualise the pandemic** with their cause. **Appropriating the situation** to create a sense of ownership over the narrative.

Re-purposing is also important during the COVID19 crisis: what are the effects of the pandemic on the plans, logistics, recruitment, communications? Is there a **need of re-purposing** to make the best out of the crisis?

What we are seeing now is the **cause VS the context**: extremist groups will try to find the **best strategy** in these circumstances. We often talk about government responses to COVID19, but extremist organization are also thinking about **new methods and tactics to adapt**.