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Terrorism in time of the pandemic: exploiting mayhem

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ABSTRACT
Despite the world’s overwhelming preoccupation with the COVID-19 pandemic, the threat of international and domestic terrorism is not in decline according to available indicators. The angst that the pandemic induced in millions of people, and the incapacitation of major functions and institutions of world’s societies are exploited by both jihadist and far-right terror organisations for the spread of conspiracy theories aimed to fuel hate against their alleged nemeses, the encouragement of easy attacks against vulnerable targets, and the spread of bedlam and confusion intended to bring down governments and promote the terrorists’ agenda. In this paper, we illustrate and discuss terrorism trends manifest during the COVID-19 pandemic and consider the threat these trends pose to the world’s security.

Business as usual

Despite the overriding media attention to the COVID-19 pandemic and its near-total eclipse of security issues, the terrorism milieu has hardly taken a pause from its deadly pursuits or suspended the execution of its plans. Just in the week of March 11–17, 2020 Islamic State (IS) launched significant attacks in seven countries: Egypt, Niger, Nigeria, the Philippines, Somalia, and Yemen (SITE Intelligence Group, 2020e). In April alone, ISIS launched over 100 attacks in Iraq, the highest number in 2020 so far (Clarke, 2020). In Afghanistan, the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) carried out in mid May 2020, a devastating attack in a funeral parlour in Nangahar (24 killed, 68 wounded), another horrific (thus far unclaimed) attack was launched in a maternity ward in Kabul that killed pregnant women and babies (16 dead) (Gannon & Akhgar, 2020). In June and July ISIS resurged also in Syria, Kashmir, Pakistan and the Philippines (SITE Intelligence Group, 2020d). Outside of Kashmir, Pakistani institutions have also been targeted by the nationalist Balochistan Liberation Army, which is alleged by Pakistan to be supported by India (Haroon Janjua, 2020). Al-Qaeda affiliated Al Shabab organisation reported a significant uptick in its operations claiming 37 attacks in Somalia and Kenya claiming 52 dead, and 35 wounded. In Mali, Al Qaeda-linked Jama’at Nasr al-Islam kidnapped a high-profile opposition leader (Columbo & Harris, 2020). Pro-Al Qaeda groups claimed attacks also in Syria, Mali, and Yemen (Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula). The statistics for India, Pakistan, and the Malay Archipelago showed no decline in terrorist attacks in recent months (South Asian Terrorism Portal, 2020; SITE Intelligence Group, 2020b; Yaoren, 2020).

The far-right extremists have not been ‘sitting idle’ during the pandemic either. In the U.S., there have been 50 vehicle ramming attacks since late May targeting protesters (Allam, 2020). The Boogaloo Boys, a far-right, pro-guns anti-lockdown group has intensified their attacks, feeding off both the anti-lockdown protests and the police brutality protests (Jones et al., 2020). Early in the pandemic, there was a spike in anti-Asian hate crimes (ADL, 2020). In 2020 thus far, the far-right has been responsible for 90% of terrorist attacks in the U.S. compared to 66% in 2019 (Jones et al., 2020). There have also been right-wing attacks against anti-lockdown protests in Germany (Goßner, 2020). Finally, even though this has not been attributed to any known extremist groups, during the pandemic there has been a significant worldwide uptick in cyberattacks, mostly targeting hospitals (INTERPOL, 2020).

So, the awe of the pandemic notwithstanding, extremist groups have not ceased sowing their own brand of horror. Far from just keeping up their activity despite the pandemic, they are using the pandemic as an...
opportunity to grow stronger. As shown below, they are exploiting gaps in security, and the general burdens on societies that the pandemic imposes and are pushing forward their ideologies as a cure for fear, frustration, and panic (Bloom, 2020).

A boost to messaging

Specifically, the widespread upheaval, uncertainty and global anxiety occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic has been seen by terror organisations as a golden opportunity to tie their messaging to information about the disease and intensify their propaganda for purposes of recruitment and incitement to violence. These objectives are being pursued through a diverse, and, often internally inconsistent, blend of communications including conspiracy theories, claims of the God’s vengeance against its enemies, exhortation to weaponise the virus, and taking advantage of society’s weakness by launching widespread attacks wherever and whenever possible.

Though bolstered by the pandemic, the extremist messaging activities are not new, nor at least in the case of ISIS, is tying their messaging to popularly trending news and popular culture hashtags. Terrorist groups have flourished online, with ISIS becoming notorious for their high-quality propaganda videos and content that resulted in the recruitment and travel to Syria of over 40,000 foreign terrorist fighters from over 100 countries around the world. Likewise, far-right groups have flourished online prior to the pandemic. Far-right extremists across the Atlantic share methods and ideology across the Internet and bolster each other’s hatred online. Likewise, the ‘incel’ ideology, which overlaps a great deal with far-right violent extremism but also praises militant jihadism (Moonshot, 2020), was born and propagated almost entirely online and their misogynistic brand of extremist violence was recently classified as terrorism by Canadian authorities (BBC, 2020). Yet the current situation is qualitatively different from pre-pandemic realities, and entails new vulnerabilities. Now, during lockdowns, people feel alone and disempowered. They are increasingly unemployed, anxious about the future, eager for a sense of community and purpose, and looking for belonging and answers; this makes them perfect prey for terrorist recruiters who already have the skills to develop close bonds over the Internet and to incite people to violence without ever meeting in person (Speckhard & Ellenberg, 2020). Moreover, a report from the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate [UN CTED] noted that school closures and the move to distance learning has led to a dramatic increase in unsupervised Internet activity among young people, who could be exposed to terrorist messaging on social media, online chatrooms, or gaming communities (United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, 2020).

In what follows, we illustrate the new trends in extremists’ online propaganda via specific messaging examples the likes of which are in the many thousands. These continue to elevate the threat of terrorism, keeping up a dangerous level of incitement that societies would do well to prepare for both while the pandemic lasts and in its aftermath.

The jihadist response

The extremist narrative: grievance, culprit, method

To appreciate the potential impact of the terrorists’ propaganda strategies, it is useful to consider them in the context of a paradigmatic extremist narrative that justifies violence against some target. Its three essential elements are those of Grievance, Culprit and Method (Kruglanski et al., 2019; Kruglanski & Fishman, 2006). The Grievance element refers to the harm or injustice that a given group of people suffered, or allegedly suffered. The Culprit is the social entity (nation, state, organisation, ethnic group or religion) deemed responsible for the harm/injustice. Crucially, the Method is the unleashing of violence deemed as both effective and morally justifiable means of punishing the Culprit and achieving glorious victory over the enemy. In jihadist circles, moral justification for unleashing violence is often, if not always, couched in defensive terms with the Culprit blamed for the original grievance and anti-Muslim violence, therefore morally justifying defensive and retributive action to prevent further acts of grievance, as in ‘an eye for an eye’. Different elements in the terrorist propaganda have pertained to different elements of this narrative.

Conspiracy theories

In context of the COVID-19 pandemic, a veritable cottage industry of conspiracy theories was put in motion bearing on the Grievance and the Culprit elements of the terrorist narrative. In this regard, the jihadists and far-right have mirrored each other, often repeating the claims made by their seemingly polar opposite and fanning flames of conspiracies about Western governments and their responsibility for the virus. In the case of jihadists, two types of grievance have been articulated: (1) the pandemic itself and (2) former crimes against Muslims by alleged enemies of their faith. In the first category have been claims that the Chinese or the Americans deliberately initiated the spread of the virus. Such conspiracies are widely shared in jihadist chat groups as well as by other elements of mainstream society, some of whom have emulated Western far-right (and U.S. President
Trump’s own) labelling of COVID-19 as ‘the Chinese Virus’ (SITE Intelligence Group, 2020b). For instance, Abu Ali al-Askari, a security chief for the Hezbollah Brigades, an Iraqi Shia militia attributed the pandemic, in a 26 February 2020 tweet to ‘The capitalist countries led by America’ whose ‘Biological weapons are among many tools they use to crush their opponents’. Blaming the U.S. as the originator of the virus, he, therefore, enjoined ‘all on the sincere media, the selfless and those of sound opinion to reveal those killers and expose their violations in order to reduce the danger facing our human world’ (SITE Intelligence Group, 2020 c).

Likewise, on jihadists’ Instagram pages, reports of the ‘New World Order’, an oft-used conspiracy theory advanced by the far-right, abound. One meme featured Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and Microsoft founder Bill Gates sitting on a couch conspiring to exploit their enemies and gain from the pandemic. A speech bubble above Zuckerberg reads, ‘I will delete the post who are exposing us on every platform which belong to us . . .’, with Gates responding, ‘Good! And I will delete the people’s through vaccines & viruses. however we are on same mission [sic].’ The same poster referred to the pandemic as ‘Operation COVID-19: A global PSYOP [psychological operation], false flag operation, mass casualty event and series of bioterrorist attacks carried out by NATO and British Crown.’ The post’s author went on to claim that the pandemic was ‘paid for by international banking cartel to expedite the military deployment of 5 G […] establish a mandatory vaccination requiring immunity certificates and other draconian healthcare mandates.’ In jihadist propaganda, this simply reinforces the existing claims that the Western powers are trying to dominate and even eliminate Muslims. Moreover, it feeds sinister fears about the true objective of vaccinations offered by Western governments, after a doctor purporting to be going house to house vaccinating Pakistani children was found to actually be a spy who helped determine the location of Osama bin Laden before he was subjected to a U.S. special forces capture and kill operation (Reardon, 2011). These conspiracy theories of social control are bolstered by government responses to the COVID-19 crisis, including mass surveillance and use of the military in domestic policing (United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, 2020).

**Allah’s soldier**

In contrast to blaming Western or Chinese powers for creating and spreading the virus as a bioweapon, common among ISIS and Al-Qaeda propagandists is the claim that the coronavirus is a soldier of Allah sent to avenge the Muslim people’s suffering brought about by the US and its allies. In this narrative, the coronavirus is seen as a type of plague sent by God that will kill the enemies of Allah, sparing the believing Muslims. For instance, ISIS spokesman Abu Hamza al-Qurashi made a speech entitled ‘And the Disbelievers Will Know who Gets the Good End’, released 28 May, 2020, in which he compared the pandemic to the biblical story of Moses cursing Pharaoh with the 10 plagues until he relented and let God’s people go. Al-Qurashi claimed that the coronavirus of today is a modern-day plague sent by Allah to inflict the U.S. and its allies to demonstrate the righteousness of Muslims and Allah’s divine power; to turn Western unbelievers them from their disbelief and compel them to repentance. Likewise, he claimed that the pandemic was divine retribution for the deaths in ISIS-held territories in Syria and Iraq caused by the U.S. led coalition, pointing out the similar number of deaths now caused by COVID-19 and the parallel situation of people having to now stay locked in their homes (SITE Intelligence Group, 2020 j). On 20 March 2020, a user on a pro-ISIS platform made an almost identical claim: ‘The daily number of deaths and new infections in Europe and North America is running almost equal to the number of daily civilian deaths and injured during coalition bombings in Mosul and Raqqah’ to which a fellow user replied: ‘they are getting payback for their crimes inshallah, now they experience some of the pain experienced by the Ummah’ (SITE Intelligence Group, 2020 g). Two days later on March 22, the first user shared a chart reporting total and new cases of the COVID-19 infections and deaths in America, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Switzerland and gleefully exclaiming: ‘alhamdullah’ (praised be Allah), and the acronym LOL (laughing out loud). Another user tweeted: ‘#coronavirus is doing the work of the mujahadeen, alhamdullah; Muslims should enjoy how’s Allah punishing kuffar for their support against Muslims.’ (SITE Intelligence Group, 2020 g), and on 20 March 2020 Gazan Imam Jamil Al-Mutawa sermonised: ‘(Allah) has sent just one soldier. what would happen had he sent 50 like the corona virus? He has sent just one soldier and it has hit all 50 (American) states . . . They talk about 25 million infected people in just one of the 50 states (California). Allah be praised’ (MEMRI, 2020). Other clerics pointed to the virus’s initial epicentre in Wuhan, China, as evidence that the virus was sent by Allah to punish China for its severe persecution of Uighur Muslims (Hanna, 2020).

It was not only ISIS and al-Qaeda referring to the coronavirus as the soldier of Allah. A New York-based Muslim Brotherhood activist called on Egyptians infected with the virus to forgo hospitalisation and instead visit as many secular government officials and headquarters as possible to act as a human vector for spreading the widely spreading the infection to perceived government oppressors. This fits with the jihadist idea of ‘martyrdom’ and sacrificing oneself by attacking
and dying for the good of the Muslim community (Al Arabiya English, 2020).

The idea that the coronavirus was sent as ‘Allah’s soldier’ resonates deeply with people of faith who already have accepted claims about atrocities carried out by the global world powers against Muslims worldwide: Russia’s carpet bombing of Chechnya, China’s oppression of Uighurs, Myanmar’s rape and genocidal killing of Rohingya, and the U.S. coalition bombardments and killings of Muslim civilian populations in Syria and Iraq. The ‘Allah’s soldier’ theory, however, puts Muslims in danger as it claims that true believers will be spared, as were the followers of Moses from the ancient Biblical plagues. In that vein, Iranian Shia pilgrims, perhaps believing they would be divinely protected, streamed into Iraq during the holy days, carrying the virus with them as they gathered in close quarters and kissed relics in succession, spreading the disease among themselves and into Iraq.

Conspiracy theories’ widespread appeal, beyond fringe extremists, is due to their provision of clarity in times of troubling uncertainty and the guidance for action required under the circumstances (Graumann & Moscovici, 1987). As demonstrated by the use of the ‘Allah’s Soldier’ narrative as well as the conspiracy theories propagated by terror groups, extremists are often able to frame situations in a way that promotes their ideology. Logically, however, a disease sent by Allah to punish infidels cannot be simultaneously be created by Bill Gates and the New World Order; the fact that ISIS supporters have put forward both narratives – might lend itself to exploitation in CVE messaging efforts.

A call to action

Consistent with identification of the Grievance/harm (the pandemic, anti-Muslim violence) and the Culprit (China, the US and its allies) is the recommended Method of restoring dignity and significance to the injured (cf. Kruglanski et al., 2019), namely unmitigated violence aimed to (1) exploit the weakness and discomabolation of the enemy allowing the mujahadeen to hit them hard and with impunity, (2) developing a bio-weapon of one’s own given its spectacular lethality. Relevant to the first theme, the ISIS editorial in the ISIS magazine NABA 226 titled “The Worst Nightmares of the Crusaders” stated: ‘Their houses are shuttered, their markets and activities disrupted . . . Do not have mercy on the disbelievers and the apostates even when they are at the height of their affliction. Exacerbate the stress on them, so that they become weaker . . . (in) their ability to fight the mujahideen’ (The Stabilization Network, 2020). And on 18 March 2020, ISIS Maldivian supporters posted on a Dhivehi and English Telegraph Channel the posting: “Today we are witnessing the start and the spread of a new and dangerous disease which has shaken the world, and thrown all the governments into panic. Their attention is diverted . . . and even if they wanted to redirect their focus against us . . . the bitter truth is that they cannot afford to do that no matter how much they wanted . . . So, take advantage! And carry out Amaliyat (operations) . . . according to your capability. Do something good which will benefit you and others with you – for the sake of Allah (SITE Intelligence Group, 2020 h). Less than a month later, a major attack occurred in the Maldives, the first terror attack in the country to be claimed by ISIS (Zahir, 2020).

Furthermore, a concern has been raised that the jihadists will learn from the horrific world impact of COVID 19 and intensify their efforts to switch from the use of complicated devices, bombs, and suicide attacks to biological warfare, and bioterrorism. The interest of terror groups in the use of biological weapons is longstanding and it has waxed and waned over the years (Guarrieri & Meisel, 2019). Yet recently (in 2018), the British MI5 received information that returning British jihadists from Syria and Iraq were trained in developing basic bio-weapons like ricin and anthrax. Likewise, researchers at the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) recently interviewed doctoral-level scientists who had been recruited by ISIS to study scientific journals around the world in multiple languages about biological and chemical advancements and from these compile for ISIS instructions on what to buy and how to create weapons of mass destruction in a lab they were running in Erbil, Iraq (Speckhard & Shajkovci, 2019). Al-Qaeda also experimented with anthrax and ricin even exposing dogs to bioweaponry in attempts to test lethality. These trends raise the possibility that the devastating health impact of the coronavirus, and its potential for societal and economic disruption would tempt terror organisations and revive their interest in pursuing the bio-weapons option (Jayaratne, 2020).

While development of unconventional weapons would take serious time to develop and likely require state sponsorship to come to full fruition, terrorists are already taking advantage of security gaps produced by the pandemic. At the simplest level, security forces all over the world will be depleted when servicemembers get sick, and they are also being redeployed as a result in a shift in priorities and the interest of safety. In Iraq, American forces shifted focus in early 2020 to focus on Iran and Iranian-funded militias and aircraft carriers of naval soldiers have seen serious spread of infection while on worldwide patrol. Concerns over the spread of COVID-19 in Iraq as well as attacks by Iranian militias caused relocations, consolidations and depletions of the American presence as troops were cautiously withdrawn. Coalition allies also removed many of their troops from Iraq in the face of the pandemic. Western countries such as the United Kingdom have delayed deployments to
Africa in order to focus on fighting the virus, leaving local security forces more vulnerable to jihadist attacks (Campbell, 2020). ISIS urged its followers to take advantage of the power vacuum, directly referencing the pandemic by pronouncing, ‘Fear of this contagion has affected them more than the contagion itself’ (Magid, 2020).

Indirect initiatives (1) Proselytisation for Islam
Beyond the glee and celebration of the coronavirus as ally in the jihadist fight, a ‘Soldier of Allah’, extremist organisations recognised the danger that COVID 19 poses to believers, and urged Muslims to repent and embrace their religion. On 22 March 2020, the Afghan Taliban urged Muslims and others to realise that humans are weak and should commit, therefore, to the service of Allah. Specifically, the message stated: “Humans distinct from Islam must consider this tribulation as time for reflection and change while the Muslims in general must also return back to Allah by seeking forgiveness for their sins, and renewing their commitment to religious principles. As much as coronavirus is a calamity and plague it is also an exemplary lesson and an admonitory tribulation” (SITE Intelligence Group, 2020 f).

Similarly, Al-Qaeda Central in a statement published on 31 March 2020 exhorted: ‘In this crisis, we would like to remind people of knowledge and callers to Allah to intensify their efforts to call people to Allah and invite them to repent sincerely. Now is the time to spread the correct Aqeedah, call people to Jihad in the Way of Allah and revolt against oppression and oppressors. We also call upon rich Muslims to step forward and show mercy towards the poor and deprived segments of society so that they may find some solace in these distressing times. There is a dire need today to take care of the orphans, widows, families of the prisoners and to support the sincere Mujahideen’ (SITE Intelligence Group, 2020i).

And in a call to non-Muslims, the same proclamation stated ‘O people of the Western World! Allah (swt), the Creator, has revealed the brittleness and vulnerability of your material strength. It is now clear for all to see that it was but a deception that could not stand the test of the smallest soldier of God on the face of the earth … reflect on the phenomenon that is Covid-19 and carefully consider its deeper causes. This pandemic is a punishment from the Lord of the Worlds for the injustice and oppression committed against Muslims specifically and mankind generally by governments you elect. Your rulers have spread wars, destruction, and famines. They have stolen the resources and wealth of poor nations and, to advance this vile cause, propped up despotic rulers all over Muslim lands’ (SITE Intelligence Group, 2020i).

Consistent with the notion that the pandemic represents Allah’s vengeance against corrupt infidels and apostates, embrace of true Islam was thought to offer a protection from the plague, and in the worst case – secure martyrdom. On 9 March 2020, a user of a pro-ISIS platform quipped: ‘Notice, how coronavirus only affects the kuffar, rajifah and murtadeen (apostates)’ (SITE Intelligence Group, 2020e), and on March 20, the Gazan Imam Jamil al-Mutawa exclaimed: ‘Look how empty their streets are, and how crowded this mosque is. Who is it that has given us security and terrified them? Who is it that protected us and harmed them? Allah’ (MEMRI, 2020). On March 19, the Thabaat News Agency published a piece by Khalid al Saba-i, who stated ‘And if he (the believer) … is infected and dies as a result, he is a martyr, Allah permitting’ (TRAC, 2020). And in the Philippines, an account linked to the Bagsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighter (BIFF) organisation released a series of videos urging Muslims to disregard the government’s mandate to close the Mosques and keep at home. On 27 March 2020, BIFF faction leader Muhidin Animbang mocked religious leaders for obeying President Duterte’s exhortation to refrain from fighting. Specifically, he stated: ‘When Duterte declared that we shouldn’t be praying (in Mosques) our religious leaders believed and followed his order. You know that not performing prayers on Friday is tantamount for a person to be called a Munafiq’ (SITE Intelligence Group, 2020a). Similarly, on March 30, 2020, another BIFF cleric stated in a video ‘You children, parents (and congregational followers), please believe that the one that prevents us to pray is not the virus but the infidels who are always finding ways to destroy us and Islam as a whole’ (SITE Intelligence Group, 2020a). Finally, on 10 April 2020, in another video the commander Muhidin Animbang exclaimed: ‘Us mujahideen if we die inside the mosque then Alhamdullah, we are in the guidance of Allah. I wish that we stand firm in going and worshipping inside the mosque. Do not listen to the kuffar. This is just a virus’ (SITE Intelligence Group, 2020a).

Humanitarian assistance to affected Muslims
Some postings acknowledge the danger that COVID-19 poses to Muslim, and in particular to jihadists in prisons and refugee camps (in Syria). A poster in an Indonesian pro-ISIS chat group wrote specifically: ‘there are reports that (the virus) has spread to the Al-Hol (that) contains thousands of Muslim families who had merely resided in ISIS areas or are suspected to be ISIS family members. Oh brothers don’t forget to pray for your brothers and sisters’ (The Stabilization Network, 2020). And a March 19 editorial published in al Naba called for action to ‘free the Muslim prisoners in the prisons of the idolaters and the camps of humiliation in which they are threatened by disease’ (ibid).
Humanitarian and preventative actions are now being carried out by extremist groups on behalf of those suffering from the pandemic, stepping into areas that governments neglected. These actions serve a practical purpose in the battle for hearts and minds. For groups that aim to establish shariah governments, the virus has provided an opportunity to prove their ability to respond effectively to a wide-scale crisis in stark contrast to governments that defaulted on their duty in this regard. This contrast also serves to foment further distrust in the official governments, leading to anti-State violence. Opportunities for such violence are also strengthened by the strain on resources causing United Nations member states to withdraw troops previously supporting those official governments (United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, 2020). In Idlib, HTS’s civilian front known as the Salvation Government took a number of steps to prevent and contain the spread among Muslims, despite HTS’s contradictory claims that the virus was punishment for unbelievers. Nevertheless, the steps, presumably taken with HTS leadership’s approval, included releasing informational videos, conducting body-temperature checks at border crossings, educating clerics, setting up isolation centres, closing markets, and instituting remote schooling. Their actions, along with those of the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration in Northeast Syria, stand in stark contrast to Syria’s official government’s repeated denial that the virus has taken a major toll on the population (Zelin & Alrifai, 2020).

In Gaza, Hamas banned public gatherings and directed its fighters to focus on sanitisation of crowded areas and in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood launched their ‘One People’ campaign to help the population deal with the economic repercussions of the pandemic. Perhaps one of the most notable responses came from Hezbollah in Lebanon, a group which has long been known for competing successfully with the government in providing services to the people. Hezbollah sent 25,000 healthcare professionals and 100 emergency vehicles to assist patients and transformed an area of a hospital previously used to treat its fighters to accommodate COVID patients. Hezbollah fighters also offered humanitarian services to Iran and rented hotels to be used for quarantine (Perry & Bassam, 2020). All these actions serve to advance jihadist groups’ claims that their strict Islamist system of government is superior to the inept secular or moderate Islamic governments, and better equipped to deal with emergencies. In many parts of Africa, governments already struggle to gain the trust of the citizenry; their failure to effectively deal with the pandemic provides opportunities for groups like al Shabaab in Somalia to enter the services vacuum, emphasising to the Somali people the superiority of shariah governance (Campbell, 2020).

The far-right domain

Violent extremism on the far right has been on the rise in Western societies. The data speak for themselves: Far-right terrorist attacks increased by 320% between 2014 and 2019 according to the 2019 Global Terrorism Index (Weimann & Masri, 2020). In 2018 alone, far-right terrorist attacks made up 17.2% of all terrorist incidents in the West, compared to Islamic groups which made up 6.28% of all attacks. How did the far-right domain respond to the COVID-19 pandemic? Its reaction has been intense and widespread. Typically, its supporters seized on the opportunity that this unprecedented situation afforded for spreading their narrative and mobilising followers for a new type of violence against their perceived nemeses. These comprised the traditional targets of far-right hate: Jews, minorities, foreigners, the government and more generally anyone outside the White supremacist milieu. Far-right rhetoric has been rampant on the various social media; it has comprised (1) a plethora of conspiracy theories, (2) concrete calls for violent action including both conventional attacks and deliberate spreading of the virus; (3) disinformation initiatives designed to promulgate chaos and panic.

Conspiracy theories

Far-right conspiracy theories that dominated the online chatter alleged that (1) COVID-19 was weaponised by the Jews or by the Chinese, and (2) it is an Asian disease, a ‘Chinese virus’, caused by the Chinese poor hygiene, or (3) indeed by ‘filthy Jews’. The first type of ‘theory’ is exemplified by a tweet from @CEO ErickHayden whereby: ‘A Jewish scientist at Harvard was caught working with Chinese nationals who were smuggling biological materials to China. Now Israel has the vaccine before everyone’ and facetiously: ‘How many are ill from coronavirus in Israel?’ (Katz, 2020).

In this vein, far-right extremists have propagated the theory that the virus is a tool of the New World Order, led by the ‘usual suspects’, far-right scapegoats George Soros and Jacob Rothschild. A photo posted on Instagram featured Rothschild with the words, ‘First we spread the disease, put the planet on lockdown, bankrupt the planet, invoke martial law, then BOOM, the third temple emerges.’ Numerous other posts suggested that Soros was funding the people protesting police brutality in Minneapolis, Minnesota in order to start a race war when the pandemic failed to ‘work’. These posts often referenced a viral video entitled,
‘Plandemic’, which featured a discredited scientist claiming that global elites, a nonexistent cabal of which Soros is the face, were using the virus and future vaccine as a means of social control. The video was viewed millions of times after being shared first by far-right conspiracy theories on QAnon and then by a well-known anti-vaccination physician, a professional mixed martial arts fighter, and a Republican politician from Ohio. The video was eventually removed from YouTube and Facebook, and many posts on Instagram with the hashtag ‘Plandemic’ having been deleted for spreading misinformation, but extremists had already been validated by their mainstream popularity. By then, they were able to frame any discreditation of the video as censorship and efforts by the elites to silence and control those who dared to tell the truth (Frenkel et al., 2020).

Timothy Wilson, a Neo Nazi who was planning to bomb a hospital in Missouri, stated: ‘the Zionist operated government is using it (COVID 19) as an excuse to destroy our people. They scar people and have society break down. Mark my words, it is coming. I hope people are ready’ (Martin, 2020). And ‘Nordic Resistance Movement’, a Swedish Neo Nazi group tied together the Jews, the Chinese and African Americans in the following conspiracy theoretic message: ‘This Jewish made coronavirus is affecting the international stock market because our manufacturing is our sourced, this is all relied upon by China so we are in this position because of globalisation because of the Jews. You watch they will now use our collapsing economies by importing African infinity niggers’ (Katz, 2020).

The second type of theory is illustrated by a 13 March 2020 blog that stated, ‘the world has finally realized that Asians are a plague … and spread the virus to the whites.’ Similarly, the French neo-Nazi blog Blanche Europe opined: ‘the Chinese unlike the Japanese have no concern for hygiene.’ The Misanthropic Division, a section of the far-right organisation Azov Battalion posted a footage allegedly showing Jewish shamans summoning the coronavirus to non-Jews. And a ‘diejewdie’ user of the Gab platform tweeted ‘Unless we deport these filthy Jews, this pandemic is never gonna stop’ (Katz, 2020). Identification of the Jews as culprits for the pandemic is sad reminder of the massive persecutions and massacres of Jews in the middle ages based on the conspiracy theory that it was Jews who propagated the Black Death plague in Europe between 1348 and 1351 (Cohn, 2007).

**Calls for violent action**
The far-right online chatter hardly has stopped at the propagation of conspiracy theories that attribute the pandemic to minorities and foreigners. In a sinister exploitation of the possibility of contagion, calls on the far right have been repeatedly urging supporters to deliberately spread the coronavirus to alleged enemies of America, the Jews in particular. In the past, far-right extremists did not shrink from the desire to use CBRN weapons in order to advance their ‘revolution.’ This led to several CBRN plots by the far right in Western countries, the U.S., in particular that, fortunately, failed (Koehler & Popella, 2018). The current pandemic offered, therefore, a ‘low hanging fruit’ kind of opportunity for biological violence against hated groups. A post on the 8chan board stated ‘if you get infected with the corona virus, go visit your local synagogue and hug as many Jews as possible, cough on all the door knobs, rails, pens, etc.’ A Telegram channel ‘Coronawaffen’ posted a poll asking respondents ‘If I get sick where should I go’. The most popular answer given by 76% of the participants was ‘synagogue’ with ‘Parliament Hill’, a remote second at 10%. A section of the Telegram channel called ‘Only White People Go to Heaven’ recommends that anyone infected with the virus ‘travel to more ethnic parts of town, including mosques and synagogues, etc.’ (Katz, 2020).

Calls have also proliferated on far-right chat rooms to exploit the public’s preoccupation with the pandemic in order to carry out devastating conventional attacks with impunity. A call inciting sympathisers to rob a non-profit organisation gleefully asserted: ‘the best part is, everyone is already wearing masks! Even if they did report you it is not like the cops can spare resources in the midst of an epidemic break.’ A similar message on the Telegram platform counselled would be far-right attackers to ‘wear a breathing mask, they won’t question it’ all that in order to ‘cut the powerlines, climb on grocery stores, and cut the cooling systems hit rocks into rich neighbourhoods with tennis rackets, tip watertowers, blow up bridges, railroads and sewage treatment plants most power stations are completely unprotected, it is legal to open carry an RPG just cover your face and you won’t get caught’ (Katz, 2020).

Some of the calls have come to fruition. In the United States, reports of verbal harassment of Asian-Americans, anti-Semitic and xenophobic vandalism abound. In New Jersey, a girl was charged with bias-related crimes for yelling racial slurs at an Asian woman and punching her in the back of the head. In Manhattan, a woman was charged with hate crime assault after she spat in the face of an Asian woman and pulled some of her hair out, and another woman verbally harassed and punched a Korean woman before fleeing the scene. In Texas, a 19-year-old man attempted to murder an Asian-American family, including a 6-year-old and 2-year-old, by stabbing them in a parking lot, and in Los Angeles, a teenager was brutally assaulted (ADL, 2020).

**Promoting Chaos.** Terrorist (the likes of the German Red Army Faction leader Andreas Baader or
the Brazilian Communist Carlos Marighela) have long believed that their function is to create a disintegration of the civic order by provoking the authorities to excessive response to attacks that would undermine the public trust in government and prepare the society for a revolution. In like fashion the accelerationist theory promoted by far-right movements aims at creating havoc and confusion which would lead to a collapse of the state, and pave the road to desired change. In this vein, the media group ‘Terrawave Refined’ affiliated with the far-right group AWD (Atomic Waffen Division) urged subscribers to augment the panic by spreading disquieting, deliberately forged lies, specifically directing them to “Make social media posts about some Chinese guy who was in the grocery store coughing in the fruit, and use a burner phone to cold call police and journalists to tell them you’re about to enter significant crowd areas while infected with the coronavirus. A 20 March 2020 from the blog of ‘Slovak’s Siege Shock’ counselled readers to ‘spread rumors about troop deployment in urban areas’ feigning horror about the infringement on freedom these entail. Using CDC and World Health Organisation logos, far-right propagandists cynically encouraged people to (1) frequent mosques and synagogues allegedly to benefit from these venues’ high hygienic standards, (2) spend time in ethnic neighbourhoods allegedly to augment one’s immune system and (3) utilise the public transport system as it is ‘made with anti-bacterial material’ (Katz, 2020).

Far-right extremists have also been able to sow chaos through their actions in virtual and physical gatherings. During the first weeks of shelter-in-place in American cities, the video chatting platform, Zoom, gained immense popularity, allowing for meetings, classes, and family events to occur while socially distancing. Not yet protesting the lockdown orders in front of statehouses, far-right extremists infiltrated Zoom calls and shared their screens, projecting violent and graphic imagery such as swastikas and pornography into the homes of unsuspecting attendees and making it impossible for schools to rely on Zoom for home-based lessons. Such actions, known as ‘Zoombombing’, were eventually curtailed by Zoom features requiring hosts to admit people into Zoom meetings as a default setting with an option to opt-out (Lorenz, 2020).

Later, as ordinary citizens grew weary of staying home, extremist views of the lockdowns as acts of tyranny and fascism spread, leading to armed protests in Michigan, North Carolina, Colorado, and elsewhere. There is evidence that the virus was spread among protesters, but public support from right-wing politicians, including President Trump, was more meaningful for the extremists yearning for significance and relevance (Wilson, 2020). Frequently seen at these lockdown protests, wearing Hawaiian shirts and holding semi-automatic weapons, are ‘Boogaloo’, who for a long time flew under the radar in the far-right world. The Boogaloo movement started online and promotes civil war against law enforcement. In contrast to other far-right movements, the civil war anticipated by Boogaloo is not divided by race, making their brand of violent extremism more palatable to those protesting the lockdowns who do not want to be associated with neo-Nazis (Evans & Wilson, 2020). In the wake of COVID-19, it appears that far-right extremists have discovered the extent of people’s fear of social control and loss of liberty, and have realised how easily they can manipulate citizens, who may not normally subscribe to the extreme ideology, into joining their cause.

Conclusions

The uncertainty and confusion caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are being widely exploited by international and domestic terror groups for spinning a plethora of sinister schemes portending a potential new tide of violence against people and governments. The terrorists’ propaganda unexceptionally included the grievance-culprit-method elements characteristic of violence justifying narratives. The specific contents of these elements differed across the different groups. The jihadists have contended that the West has been on a campaign to subdue Islam, and the far right has claimed that Jews, Chinese, people of colour and governments who support them, have been trying to deprive white Aryans of their freedoms and exploit them. For both the jihadists and the far righters, the pandemic has offered new opportunities and methods for unleashing violence against the objects of their hate.

In the realm of messaging, portraying the pandemic as God’s punishment against evil actors, and/or identifying specific ethnic, religious or national groups as deliberate creators of the plague may boost the recruitment to extremist organisations whose simplistic ‘black and white’ narratives offer certainty and guidance for millions of anxious people in dire need of clarity. Likewise, with the intimacy of Internet connections and the widespread lockdowns, Internet recruitment of vulnerable people, youth particularly, isolated during lockdown are making online recruitment to extremist groups much easier.

The pandemic has created an opportunity for extremist groups to pin the responsibility for the virulent disease on their hated nemeses. Mixed messages regarding the origin of the virus aside, militant jihadist groups in
Africa and the Middle East have taken the opportunity to provide services to civilians, highlighting the ineptitude of secular or moderate governments and the benefits of the ‘true’ Islam, untainted by democracy. Lockdowns, contact tracing, and vaccinations have allowed the far-right to emerge from the depths of the Internet to congratulate themselves for having known the truth, that an evil cabal of Zionist elites have been planning to surveil and ultimately destroy ordinary citizens in pursuit of a New World Order. Militant jihadists and far-right extremists have both used such ‘proof’ to reinvigorate their loyal followers as well as attract new ones.

There is no question that violent extremist groups’ explanations of and reactions to COVID-19 are dangerous in many ways, but even non-violent fundamentalists can offer false security in a time of panic, posing a major threat to public health. An element that the jihadi narrative shares with other religious rhetoric across the board is an attitude of fatalism and surrender, the faith that religious piety guarantees God’s protection and deliverance from this modern-day plague. In India, the Tablighi Jammat, a non-political Sunni evangelical movement is now known as the largest viral vector of COVID-19 in South Asia after its preacher ignored India’s quarantine laws (ThePrint Team, 2020). Several evangelical clergy members in the U.S. similarly defied the authorities’ exhortations to practice social distancing. Bishop Gerald Glenn of the New Deliverance Church in Virginia exclaimed ‘I firmly believe that God is larger than this dreaded virus’, and that he was going to keep on preaching ‘unless I’m in jail or in the hospital’. Soon thereafter he died of the virus (King, 2020). In Israel, prominent ultra-orthodox rabbis refused to comply with government directives regarding the closing of schools and yeshivas. Rabbi Kaniewski of the Ponovitz yeshiva in Bnei Brak even opined that ‘canceling Torah study is more dangerous than corona’ (Sokol, 2020).

What can be done when religious fundamentalism and political extremism provide so much clarity in times of high uncertainty, anger and anxiety? Beside allotting the necessary resources for increased vigilance and effective thwarting of plotted assaults, world leaders must offer an alternative coherence, one based on science and rationality and must disavow their own supporters who promote bigoted conspiracy theories under the guise of liberty. The peaceful Muslim community must speak in a clear voice and condemn as blasphemous the ‘Soldier of Allah’ portrayal of COVID-19 and remind their followers that disease can be spread to one and all alike unless protective measures are taken. Ulama who represent the voice of reason must be heard. As the common saying goes, ‘God helps those who help themselves.’ After all, it was the Prophet (PBUH), according to the Hadith, who recommended to fear God yet at the same time be cautious about earthly dangers. ‘Pray to God but tie the camel tight,’ counselled the Prophet to a Bedouin who entered the mosque without securing his animal. Furthermore, it is told of the second Caliph, Omar, who on the way from Medina to Syria met fellow travellers who alerted him to a pandemic in which thousands have died. Omar immediately discontinued the journey and when later challenged to explain why he was running from God’s decree, he answered, ‘I am going from one of God’s decrees to another of God’s decree.’

Raising the voices of ex-far-right extremists is also useful to discredit their messages of hate. Likewise, online platforms need to work effectively as they did in identifying terrorists’ content and implementing take down policies. A recent controversy with Facebook and Twitter concerning the President’s own posts seeming to incite violence in the face of protests against racism make clear that when it comes to the far-right and politicians who benefit from their support this won’t be an easy or noncontentious task.

Far from uniting humanity against a common threat, the global uncertainty and vulnerability caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is being widely exploited by international and domestic terror groups and violent extremists. Presenting the pandemic as God’s punishment against evil actors, and/or portraying given ethnic, religious or national groups as perpetrators of the plague may boost the recruitment to extremist organisations whose simplistic narratives offer certainty and guidance for millions of anxious people. Though everyone’s attention is naturally drawn to the immense health and economic challenges that the pandemic poses, we cannot ignore the potential storm of intensified world terrorism that seems to become in its shadows.

Note

1. an imageboard website composed of user-created message boards, with minimal interference from the administration.

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