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## Covid-19, its Impacts on Terrorism and Violent Extremism and Unconventional Protective Measures

### Introduction

The presented study is an attempt to introduce the topic of highly infectious diseases (namely the coronavirus, **covid-19**) and at least partly outline different means of protection associated with the field of **CBRN** (chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear) dangerous substances and weapon systems using such substances or materials. While this remains a relatively new topic, there are already several interesting foreign or transnational studies analysing the issue. This text places a special focus on the role of the current pandemic as it relates to radicalisation of the public and possible tendencies towards terrorism and violent extremism.

During the Cold War, it was not only the world powers, but also many other countries that were intensively preparing for the possibility of an armed conflict involving the use of weapon systems utilising chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (atomic) substances and materials. As a result, post-World War II, significant attention was focused not only on the development and perfection of such means of destruction (later termed **weapons of mass destruction** – WMDs), but also on the protection of armies and populations against such weapons. Alongside the massive direct destructive effects of nuclear weapons resulting from the shock wave, thermal radiation, ionizing radiation and strong electromagnetic pulse, the explosion of an atomic bomb also deposits radioactive substances across a wide area around ground zero, which endanger affected individuals both directly (external radiation) as well as by internal radioactive contamination. This is the case when radioactive substances enter the human organism, most commonly by inhalation of contaminated air, remaining inside for a significant time and irradiating the person from within.

There are three avenues of personal protection against the effects of radioactive substances: moving as far away from contaminated areas as possible, reducing irradiation time to a minimum and using personal protective measures such as masks or respirators, alongside protective clothing which can prevent or significantly reduce the introduction of radioactive substances into the organism.

In cases of chemical or biological threats, the approach is similar, albeit with specific issues that must be taken into account concerning personal protection. While chemically dangerous substances do not tend to spread far during an attack (exceptions being by air or contaminated water) and their amount does not constantly increase, biological agents are transferred by human contact or contact between humans and objects contaminated with these substances.

There is a clear analogy between **CBRN** threats and the **covid-19** coronavirus infection, both the experience and findings from long-term development in the area of protection from known elements of CBRN may be used against it, namely those relating to dangerous substances of a chemical, biological or radioactive nature.

## **Terrorism and covid-19**

An example of this would be the study by Gary A. Ackerman (an academic specialising in the topics of extreme events, internal security and cybernetic security) and Hayley Peterson (a postgraduate student), both working from the University at Albany (United States of America) [3]. According to their findings, the covid-19 pandemic represents both a challenge and an opportunity to terrorists. While the social disruptions of the pandemic have slowed down certain terrorist operations, the terrorists may – as inherently asymmetrical adversaries – rapidly adapt to the new situations and utilise the uncertain conditions and instability to achieve their goals.

The study discusses 10 possible ways that the pandemic could have a short-, medium- or long-term influence on the terrorist environment. These range all the way from terrorists making use of the increased likelihood of radicalisation in society (or individuals) to instigate anti-government attitudes, to their involvement in prosocial activities or even a re-evaluation of the usefulness of bioterrorism. Because covid-19 has spread worldwide, the pandemic has led to an unprecedented disruption of ties throughout almost all institutions, including within terrorist networks. Terrorists are not separate from society. Just like everyone else, they have inevitably been affected by the pandemic and the general social upheaval it has caused. They are often experienced at making use of uncertain conditions and instability to achieve their goals.

The last significant worldwide pandemic of such proportions took place during 1918–1919 (the Great influenza pandemic, often incorrectly referred to as the “Spanish flu”). The years 1918–1919 were associated with a number of broader socio-political changes, some of which are potentially relevant to our current discussion.

With the exception of a small number of entirely isolated extremists (usually associated with peripheral eschatological groups or guerrilla fighters living in remote areas) [48] most terrorist organisations and networks are just as susceptible to covid-19 infection and just as disrupted by general social distancing measures and both supply-chain and transport interruptions, as the rest of society [90].

The risk of covid-19 may not discourage a terrorist attack in its final phases of preparation, for example one would not expect suicide bombers to worry about catching the illness. However, most other elements of terrorist networks, starting with their ideologues and leaders, will in almost all cases be loath to risk infection, not merely due to the natural human psychological aversion to contamination and respect for one’s own health, but also due to “operational reasons”, such as a rash of infections in their “cadre” [18, 38, 129, 136].

In short, the pandemic has most likely generally increased the overall “friction” associated with terrorist operations, and the level of its incidence depends on the

level of disruption and official measures impacting the spaces that terrorists operate in.<sup>1</sup> This argument applies equally to all types of terrorist organisation, from jihadist networks and racist militias, to idiosyncratic misanthropes (oversensitive and intolerant individuals, shunning the rest of society) and paramilitary units. The study attempts to identify the 10 most significant potential impacts of the current situation on terrorist subculture, irrespective of their order, relevance or likelihood.

### ***Terrorist involvement in prosocial activities***

Terrorist groups often try to find and achieve at least a certain level of legitimacy by participating in social and other activities, namely in areas (countries) with largely dysfunctional or corrupt public administrations. Although they may only carry out these activities temporarily or for pragmatic reasons, it seems that larger terrorist organisations see the pandemic as an opportunity to significantly ramp up their support, including recruitment and financing, even in the long-term. While most terrorist groups lack the resources to ensure medical services to the broader public, even relatively low-effort involvement may serve to gain attention and emphasize the insufficiency of local government. This is for example true for the **jihadist** platforms Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed operating in Pakistan [9]. In Afghanistan the Taliban, which aims to gain control over vast territories, has promised safe passage to any medical personnel. The Taliban has also launched its own public health information campaign and is purportedly even providing certain healthcare services [26, 27]. Likely the greatest effort was exerted by the Shi'ite Hezbollah in Lennon (probably best equipped for such purposes), which attempted to compete with the dysfunctional state by reportedly sending out up to 1500 doctors, 3000 nurses and rescue workers, a further 20,000 activists and over 100 emergency vehicles to fight covid-19 and disinfect public spaces.<sup>2</sup> These groups can clearly see the propaganda value of such efforts. Similarly **anarchist** networks in the United States of America are organising or trying to organise free food distribution networks and other forms of mutual aid to counteract the social disruption caused by the pandemic [74]. These types of prosocial activities were apparently not tracked among violent extremists or terrorists endorsing **extreme right-wing** ideas.

### ***Increased susceptibility to radicalisation***

The pandemic has resulted in the disruption of everyday life, with many people losing their close relatives or jobs and are afraid for their life and future. [63] This can lead to basic psychological symptoms, from increased anxiety to mild paranoia, which are likely to get worse the longer the entire disruption continues. This can lead to frustration and self-destructive behaviours.<sup>3</sup> In Turkey, terrorist and violent

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<sup>1</sup> Where government control mechanisms are weak, terrorists may continue to enjoy at least a relative freedom of action. There were cases of attacks by radicals during lockdowns, for example the stabbing of seven victims by a jihadist in France, in Romans-sur-Isère on 4 April 2020 [79].

<sup>2</sup> The mentioned platform is "Frontline Islamic Resistance Medics" [26, 27, 52, 92, 96].

<sup>3</sup> See for example the Kaiser Family Foundation website, which shares disputed positions on the alleged discrimination against people of colour in the United States, including the purported minimisation of covid-19, which is reported to have a greater impact on people of colour [10, 12, 17, 22, 93, 120, 135].

extremist structures are focusing on recruiting migrants from Turkmenistan, made unemployed by the pandemic [8, 9, 94]. There have been broad attempts by various extremists, including terrorists, to recruit individuals who are insecure, anxious or otherwise influenced by the pandemic. The same can be applied to the frustrated and disrupted online audience, which is more receptive to their conspiratorial narrative. The Sunni jihadists claim covid-19 is a conspiracy from the enemies of Islam. Al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State depict covid-19 as evidence of Allah's anger against unbelievers, which can only be stopped by an increased adherence to the rules of "true" Islam [5, 36, 79, 104, 118]. Attempts to encourage conversion to Islam as the only revealed religion have been noticed during periods of isolation and quarantine. One white supremacist channel noticed a growth in user numbers by 800% during covid-19. Isolation from others and restrictions of regular social interactions mean that there is a smaller chance anyone will notice behaviours commonly labelled radicalisation.

### ***Increase in anti-government stances***

Dissatisfaction with government responses relating to covid-19, exacerbated by conspiracy theories spread by various parties, is likely to boost current levels of frustration and incite anti-governmental extremism. The first part of this process is regularly conceived as a reaction to the often incompetent or inconsistent reaction of worldwide governments to the pandemic [28, 31, 55, 67, 85, 95, 134]. However, one cannot ignore the links between the areas most impacted by the flu pandemic during 1918–1919 and increased support for the Nazis in those parts of Germany during the elections of the early 1930s [2, 14, 39, 50, 55, 108, 109, 131].

Extremists whose ideologies are exceptionally antagonistic towards the government pay detailed attention to government oversight, in order to increase the level of public frustration that is, as mentioned above, often associated with aggression. A classical instrument are the large number of disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories.<sup>1</sup> There is an especially colourful selection of such theories originating from far-right extremists in North America and Europe. Supporters of the online activist group QAnon assert that the People's Republic of China, Bill Gates or Big Pharma companies are to blame for the creation of the coronavirus. They also believe that 5G broadband network towers are responsible for the spread of covid-19. [109] This type of conspiracy theory is not exclusive to the far right. The far left also utilises the narrative of the virus being only a cover for the strengthening of control by corporations and authoritarian governments over the "working class". [123]

In early April 2020, the engine driver Eduardo Moreno purposefully derailed his train in the hopes of colliding with a military medical vessel in the Los Angeles docks. Moreno claimed that he wanted to bring attention to conspiracies associated with covid-19. [89, 109, 126] Things were also complicated due to the murder of African American George Floyd by a police officer in Minnesota, where large demonstrations took place despite the public restrictions on gatherings. It's as if history is repeating. During the 1918 flu pandemic in the United States of America,

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<sup>1</sup> This does not preclude the involvement of state actors in spreading virus misinformation, but that is not the topic of this contribution [19, 34, 107].

there was an Anti-Mask League, which organised large public protests and purportedly even convinced some opponents of compulsory masking to attack public officials [25, 69]. During the current pandemic, activists from (not only) the United States have carried out broad protests against local or federal restrictive measures, including death threats sent to public officials, such as the governor of New Mexico.

### ***Inspiration for apocalyptic extremists***

Rather than merely searching for opportunities to utilise the pandemic to their own advantage, a small percentage of terrorists may be ***inspired*** by the spread of the virus and the disruption it leaves in its wake. These aspects, typical for groups like Aum Shinrikyo and Covenant, Sword and the Arm of the Lord, may interpret the current global pandemic as a precursor to the prophesied end of the world, or as an expression of their interpretation of God or gods' dissatisfaction with humanity. A pandemic evoking Biblical plagues may then act as a catalyst to a whole range of interconnected activities. The same can be said for jihadist groups such as the so-called Islamic State, whose worldview also contains elements related to the awaited end of the world<sup>1</sup> [11, 41, 72, 74, 117]. To show something of a “halfway” position we could point to an article from the turn of May and June 2020. Its author, William Lind, is understood to be a “politically high-profile” so-called paleo-conservative thinker, supporter of a number of concepts falling within the remit of conspiracy theories. His common claim is that “the end of the world as we know it is near” and the only solution to that problem is radical autonomy for individuals and small communities and a return to conservative (Christian) values. Here he talks about the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic by describing the whole situation as a significant inspiration for the creation of “4th generation weapons”, including genetic engineering, in order to engage in biological warfare alongside other weapons of mass destruction (genetically modified illnesses, etc.) [73]. And this specific case is a text published in a relevant journal and introduced into academic databases.

### ***Terrorists “working from home”***

With the expansion of quarantine, stay-at-home orders and the disruption of the regular functioning of society, terrorists (just like everyone else) may also be forced to work from home. One cannot therefore ignore extremists' increased propaganda efforts online. Apart from the production and dissemination of propaganda materials and increased recruitment efforts, terrorists may also use this “downtime” to plan and

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<sup>1</sup> At the start of the 1990s, despite its international activities, including an attempt to procure or develop CBRN assets, the Aum Shinrikyo platform was not on the radar of any relevant intelligence service [54].

From radical environmental protection groups there follows the article from 1989, which appeals to ideologically affiliated persons in the terminal stages of fatal diseases – asking them to carry out decisive acts in support of protecting the planet. [45] “*Contributions are urgently solicited for scientific research on a species-specific virus that will eliminate Homo shiticus from the planet.*”

Another example of related wishful thinking is Abubakar Shekau, one of the leaders of Boko Haram. He declared that true believers are protected against the virus and as a result decried any attempts to fight it [8, 20].

coordinate future attacks. Evaluating potential targets via Google Earth and analysing open sources of information can help identifying security loopholes. Cybernetic criminality has also generally escalated during the pandemic, including an increase in attempts at ransomware attacks against critical infrastructure with an emphasis on hospitals and other medical services. Rather than requiring a ransom per se, the typical ambition of the terrorists may have been to deactivate or otherwise disrupt these systems and thereby aggravate the impacts of the pandemic [23, 37].

### ***Bioterrorism becomes more attractive as a feasible tactic***

Many studies have been written about bioterrorism as a tactic, [4, 75] while the general expert consensus has been that only a relatively small proportion of terrorists are willing and able to make use of such a possibility [56, 113, 117, 127]. In our current situation, terrorists are however carefully observing the likely consequences of such weapons and such means. The indiscriminate spread of covid-19 and the fact that it affects everyone without regard to their religion, ethnicity or citizenship may give pause to terrorists targeting only a specific population, at least in regards to the use of infectious pathogens. The potential for an increase in the likelihood of bioterrorism is then likely only relegated to generally misanthropic terrorists, or to those adhering to eschatological ideologies.

### ***Use of covid-19 as a weapon***

Most previous attempts by terrorists or other violent non-governmental subjects have mainly involved the use of non-infectious biological substances such as anthrax or various biotoxins [4, 13, 109]. Among the most significant of these conspiracies is that of the R.I.S.E group, which in 1972 planned to use salmonella typhi as part of a world-destroying conspiracy, with the goal of its eventual resettlement. [21] Similar considerations were made by the seventh day cult Aum Shinrikyo, which attempted to collect Ebola virus samples in Zaire in 1992 [61]. In 1995, the white supremacist Larry Wayne Harris ordered bottles with bubonic and pneumonic plague progenitors [116]. and in 2014 an activist of Tunisian origin connected to the so-called Islamic State expressed interest in using the same substance [44]. Recent studies show that ***deliberate spread*** of dangerous pathogens via a single person infecting others is clearly possible for perpetrators with little care for their own safety. [97] It cannot therefore be ruled out, especially since this is the case of an extremely infectious agent whose samples are easily accessible, that some terrorists may be attracted to the notion of using covid-19 as a weapon. It is no longer exceptional to see variously motivated persons claim they have contracted coronavirus, while purposefully coughing or spitting on other people, licking goods in stores, etc. [6, 32, 59, 60, 62, 68, 98, 100, 109, 137, 138]. The targets of such virus-spreading attempts may be security force personnel [78, 87, 105] or the Jewish community [91] (in these cases the term “holocough” is mentioned, referencing the Holocaust [123]). However, as soon as a reliable cure is developed, this bioterrorist pathway will lose all potential.

### ***Utilising the weakened security community for conventional attacks***

The pandemic deflects media attention to topics associated with healthcare, which is why many terrorists may decide that the pandemic is ***not the best time to carry out a large-scale attack***. The expectation is that in this context, even a large-

scale incident would fail to garner similar media attention as in pre-pandemic times (the 2 November 2020 incident in Vienna is an exception in this regard, requiring further study) [79, 91,109]. Most traditional targets, such as airports, metro stations and night clubs are now closed, making it more advantageous for the terrorists to wait until restrictions are lifted. Even then, it may take some time for the number of people visiting transport hubs to increase to pre-pandemic levels once again. There is however one significant exception, healthcare facilities. Places where coronavirus patients are receiving care may provide both a high concentration of victims as well as a high-level of publicity in the case of any attack. This was apparently the case for Timothy Wilson, the white nationalist and anti-government extremist killed in Missouri on 24 March 2020 after attempting to attack the local hospital [66]. After the pandemic struck, he changed the target and timing of his prepared attack because the healthcare facility “offered more victims” [115]. Jihadist groups have also made a call for their followers to use the disruptions caused by the pandemic to initiate attacks in the West. [40] Once more putting the Vienna attack aside, this seems to have been predominantly knife incidents, or the injury of three police officers through intentional vehicular collision on 27 April 2020 in France [79].

### ***Adverse influence on the safety of many facilities***

Government buildings are now less secure than at other times. This is the result of operational restrictions, placement of employees in quarantine, the dispersal of the workforce or reliance on agenda (and visitor) reductions. Despite many of the institutions functioning on only minimum staff being a less attractive target for terrorists looking for a large body count – for those **terrorists** looking specifically to target a smaller number or even zero victims (for example animal rights organisations) or who prefer to target symbolic goals, this lower level of security provides a greater opportunity for a successful attack. Terrorists may see the lower security levels at a facility as an opportunity to steal materials from a location they would otherwise not risk entering (munitions storage, chemical plants or facilities for the storage of nuclear, radiological or other dangerous materials). Attempts at legitimate purchases may also become less risky for terrorists. For example an attempt to purchase large amounts of peroxides may also more easily slip under the radar. Prison security is also at stake. In the bulletin of the so-called Islamic State from March 2020, there was a call to utilise the covid-19 pandemic to “liberate” Muslim prisoners. The large-scale riots in the Gwheran prison in Eastern Syria that took place on 30 March 2020 were apparently no coincidence, and allowed several jihadist fighters to escape [46].

### ***Disruption of counter-terrorist systems***

Not even counter-terrorism experts are immune to the physical or psychological impacts and social disruptions caused by the pandemic. At all levels, from intelligence analysts to law enforcement authorities, each individual is at risk of illness or associated effects such as anxiety and frustration. The continuing situation is at least likely to introduce friction into the anti-terrorist process, increasing the likelihood that a significant warning indicator or piece of intelligence information will be missed. Even more damaging is the possibility that measures to fight covid-19 may exhaust the resources of **anti-terrorist operations** at home or abroad. Development projects or organised humanitarian aid are being reduced (including

neuralgic African locations), and there are reductions in military presence abroad. As soon as these spots are vacated, they are immediately filled by Salafists or other radicals. Similarly the situation in Iraq, which was relatively stable before the pandemic broke out [101] has become more complicated. Many terrorist groups, including the so-called Islamic State, are carrying out multiple attacks on vulnerable opponents [109]. In just April of 2020, 110 incidents took place in Iraq. [26] It is worth mentioning the report on the increase in number of Iraqi incidents after the introduction of the long-term curfew [76].

## **Terrorism impact scenarios - with an emphasis on the impact of covid-19**

Three authors from the Austrian Institute for International Affairs, together with the Federal Ministry of Defence, analysed the regular monitoring reports of Austrian representative bodies, recording the development of the most important trends, taking into account the contributing factors of terrorism. The study deals primarily with the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on these aspects. The most likely scenarios remain **chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear challenges**, as well as terrorist cyberattacks. In the area of the Sahel in Southeast Asia, medium-size or large-scale jihadist attacks are to be expected, as well as attacks by jihadist and reportedly also right-wing extremists in Europe and North America [51].

The outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic has so far not had a significant impact on the overall frequency and death toll associated with “conventional” terrorist attacks. Outposts of the so-called Islamic State are continuing their strategy of attacks on security forces and citizens who refuse to collaborate with them. This is especially true for affiliates of the so-called Islamic State in Africa (Boko Haram and others) [1, 77, 16, 57]. In this region, activities of the local branch of Al-Qaeda (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin) are also continuing.

During the pandemic, jihadist and right-wing propaganda and activities have intensified, to a certain degree for pragmatic reasons concerning the use/exploitation of the pandemic. In the future, one can also expect negative impacts on the economic development of a number of countries worldwide.

Right-wing extremists and jihadist actors have collaborated in the past. [65] With the coming of covid-19, the likeliness of scenarios of the abuse of biological substances has increased. Under regular conditions, the use of such weapons requires a high level of ability and knowledge, alongside access to highly-regulated and protected materials. However, a not-insignificant proportion of global society is currently equipped with a potentially deadly bioweapon that is easy to use [132]. Among jihadist and far-right terrorist groups in the Arabic and Western World, the call to use the virus as a weapon is growing ever stronger.

There have been cases of Muslims claiming to have been infected with the virus and planning on using it as a bioweapon by coughing on variously designated “Jews” or random shoppers in supermarkets. A number of right-wing extremists have carried out attacks using similar methods [84, 109].

To a certain degree, covid-19 has achieved what the jihadists have failed to do for a long time: hold people in constant fear. For this reason, jihadists have

sometimes referred to covid-19 as a “soldier of Allah” [83, 130]. Covid-19 is depicted as a punishment for “crusaders” and Muslims who have failed to uphold their duty to wage jihad [121]. The virus is a punishment on the People's Republic of China for their persecution of the Uyghur Muslims and on the Iranian Shi'ites for turning away from the true faith [43, 112].

The newspaper of the so-called Islamic State, Al-Naba, claims that the virus punishes sinners and crusaders [84, 112]. And even setting this aspect aside, if the call were merely for a “regular” attack, this would still be under the assumption that such an attack would be more successful due to weakened security forces being less capable of preventing an attack, and also unable to effectively pursue any escaping attackers [80, 84, 130].

The **conspiracy theories** in this area were mainly aimed at the following topics: the targeted creation and spread of covid-19 in the pursuit of economic interests and global control via vaccines; intentional development of the virus for a specific demographic impact or the “virus as a hoax”. One of the most popular right-wing conspiracies comes from anti-globalization circles and states that covid-19 was developed by large (often “Jewish”) companies for the purpose of introducing mandatory vaccination in order to control or enslave society [112]. Another form of this message is the idea that covid-19 is a tool to **manipulate** the markets or to achieve demographic changes in North America and Europe by killing white people. [34]. The topic is also associated with the ideas referred to as QAnon and Pizzagate<sup>1</sup>. One of the narratives is that the virus was produced in a lab in Wuhan, which also produces the compound adrenochrome. Production of this substance allegedly requires ritual child murder. The coordinator of this process is named as George Soros, with covid-19 being only part of his plan to take control over the world [35].

Facebook misinformation claims that contact with infected individuals has been “clinically shown to benefit the immune system”. Infected individuals are encouraged to visit people in their neighbourhood or primarily overcrowded mosques and synagogues.

A number of terrorist groups have called for their members to choose critical infrastructure as the targets of their attacks, because the current situation would amplify the effects of such an attack [132]. After a number of countries introduced tough restrictions on freedom of movement, small-scale **cyberterrorist attacks** are much likelier [102].

Afghanistan is unstable due to continuing Taliban attacks. A peaceful resolution is most likely not on the horizon. In all probability, Sahel and Afghanistan will remain

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<sup>1</sup> QAnon (Q = the highest level of classified information; Anon = anonymous) is a popular conspiracy theory which claims that a variously conceived elite (in the United States of America this is supposed to be the Democratic Party, but it may also refer to Satanists or Hollywood celebrities) is carrying out a global programme of human trafficking, especially with children, whose blood they then have removed in underground laboratories (for adrenochrome, ostensibly able to keep members of the elite supernaturally healthy) and sexually abuse them. The term Pizzagate is closely tied to the QAnon concept, as the human trafficking hubs are supposed to be certain restaurants, including pizzerias. The concept has spread broadly and contains elements of a modern pseudo-religion.

the primary arenas for jihadist terrorism, including bomb attacks. Looking at Europe, specifically at France and the United Kingdom, there were several knife attacks, with the perpetrators most often claiming allegiance to the so-called Islamic State.

In the United States of America (and elsewhere), conspiracy theories surrounding covid-19 have led to attacks by lone offenders who can be described as right-wing extremists [47, 49, 109, 110].

The reasons behind this are increased attempts at public mobilisation by extremist structures, as well as the reallocation of resources in security and other agencies, leading to possible reductions in anti-terrorist measures and a lowering of the associated readiness. Apart from that we can expect changes in the targets of attacks. While quarantine measures are in place, there is a reduced impact on targets such as overcrowded shopping centres, aeroplanes, mass events and public transit – reducing their attractiveness to terrorists.

## **Trends associated with jihadism and Islamism**

Groups of jihadists and Salafists have instrumentalised the pandemic in multiple ways, some of which are similar to those of far-right groups. The common narrative between jihadist and Salafist groups is a positive depiction of the virus as God's help in fulfilling their vision, not just by killing “unbelievers”, but also by distracting and encumbering the security forces of the enemy. This claim is “confirmed” by the fact that Western countries, but also Shi'ite Iran, have suffered many victims of the pandemic. Islamist groups have also used covid-19 to argue that Western countries are standing “on feet of clay” and that their material prosperity will fail to protect them from collaps. [83].

Another topic is applying the pandemic to the “end of the world” rhetoric that is common in *propaganda* publications. As a result, YouTube and other similar channels have seen an increase in videos on end-of-the-world topics or martyrdom.<sup>1</sup>

Another aspect concerns the impact of the pandemic on lifestyles. Westerners are described as “hypocritical”, because Muslim women were previously criticised for wearing scarfs and niqābs, but now the faces of Europeans are similarly covered and this is even mandatory in some countries. Salafists also welcome the closing of night clubs and bars [114].

Similarly to the right-wing extremists, some radical Islamists have turned to conspiracy theories concerning the United States of America and the Jewish population in relation to covid-19. For example some claim that the virus was used by Zionists and Iran against the Syrian Sunni rebels [112], while several Islamist groups have also blamed the United States of America and/or “the Jews” in general, for the creation and use of covid-19 as a bioweapon. Although this interpretation varies significantly from the narrative of covid-19 as “Allah's soldier”, it is a better fit for the communication strategy of groups concentrating on fighting the West rather than corrupt governments and groups at a local and regional level.

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<sup>1</sup> Mahdist videos work with motifs of the redeemer or messiah, who will appear before the end of the world (judgement day) [77], [83].

The only protection against covid-19 is said to be conversion to Islam. Nevertheless, radical Islamist organisations have additionally been providing informational materials on how to avoid infection [83].

Some Islamist organisations - namely Hezbollah and Hamas - have temporarily suspended their model of fighting and focused on medical and social services. This includes the requirement that people self-isolate at home, pray, and that it is their religious obligation to report any symptoms of illness to the medical authorities [29, see figure No. 3, [103].

In some situations, both jihadist as well as Islamist groups are sharing factual information and advice, in an attempt to fill the gaps left by government inaction. In general, most jihadists are urging their followers to abide by the instructions of the World Health Organization, which are being presented as “instructions according to Sharia”. In the Arabic world however, many Salafist and jihadist groups are also organising anti-government demonstrations, because religious gatherings have been forbidden due to covid-19.

### ***Trends in right-wing extremism***

In both Europe and the United States of America, right-wing extremist actors have tried to make use of the pandemic. Similarly to the jihadists, most right-wing extremist groups are spreading messages with the idea that covid-19 is especially lethal to foreigners. The virus is seen as an ally, a comrade-in-arms. Closing borders, at least around the Schengen Area, has long been a goal of right-wing extremists and white supremacist groups. The pandemic has fulfilled their wish. Although there is clearly no connection between the active efforts of these groups and the closing of borders, these subcultures have latched onto this “opportune moment” to propose permanent border closure. **Extremist groups** in Europe are generally attempting to utilise the potential frustration of the population with state institutions, pointing to their failures and weaknesses - while simultaneously claiming to be ready to replace the state. [82, 84, 112, 130, 132]

There is also an increase in anti-Asian rhetoric. [132] The Chinese are explicitly blamed for intentionally spreading the virus or intentionally selling non-functional medical equipment worldwide. [24] This is for example associated with the term “China virus” [82]. Information is also being spread about migrants who ignored quarantine measures or even made use of the pandemic in their attempts to enter into Europe [24].

One story used inconsistently and with many alternative variants concerns the associations of covid-19 with the ambitions of the “deep state” (a worldwide shadow government), with attempts to take over the world using martial law, with attempts by the “elites” to reduce the rest of the world population (only the “powerful and rich have the cure”) [25].

In the events surrounding covid-19, there is also search for the maximum potential ethnic homogeneity in specific countries or Europe as a whole [42]. Sometimes apparent concern for the health of migrants is used and they are advised not to travel to Europe “because it represents a health risk” [99].

One especially popular theory is that of **accelerationism**, which refers to current developments as something that will speed up the collapse of the liberal democratic order [64]. Apart from conspiracy theories, there have also been fresh calls to violence and attacks (coughing or physical contact with the regular target groups: minorities, Jews, Muslims, security authority personnel) [25, 84, 109]. At the end of March 2020, agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation shot a person previously classified as a potentially violent extremist, during preparation for an attack on a hospital treating patients with a covid-19 diagnosis in Kansas City. Hours before the incident, the person in question published anti-Semitic messages claiming that covid-19 can be blamed on the Jews. The message also contained racist statements against African Americans [25, 95].

A number of right-wing extremist groups in Euro-Atlantic countries are attempting to make use of the opportunities created by covid-19 related to the alleged expected collapse of society.<sup>1</sup> It is also worth mentioning the “boogaloo” concept here. Supporters of this theory claim that covid-19 could enable or accelerate the start of a civil war. Members of various groups are spreading tactical advice to their followers (such as how to behave during a shootout). There are also boogaloo games (card or computer games), where you for example gain points for placing infectious spit on the door handles of local tax authority offices.

### ***Trends in economic development***

Some terrorist groups have taken advantage of the crisis by offering certain members alternative sources of income and meaning of life. Such attitudes are stronger in countries where Muslims and immigrants are a significant proportion of the population. As violent incidents increase, tensions are expected to rise as well as mutual antagonisms. Right-wing **extremism** already sharply rose as a consequence of the 2008 financial crisis. Concerning predictions of direct economic crisis (unlike anything the world has known since World War II), the West (or the whole world) might be “sitting on a powder keg”. This will lead to even higher unemployment (not only among young adults) and is likely to bring more people into extremist groups [133].

### ***Trends relating to unstable countries***

The first cases of covid-19 have already been reported in the Sahel (Nigeria has been especially hard hit), Somalia, Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya and Syria.<sup>2</sup> Due to insufficient testing capacity, the data is however very imprecise. For these already unstable countries, it may be difficult to impose healthcare measures. Insufficient access to drinking water also makes management of the illness more difficult [33, 119].

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<sup>1</sup> C. J. Werleman (his full name is practically never mentioned) characterises himself as a globe-trotter, a “world-renowned journalist” who is trying to call attention, where possible, to injustice perpetrated against Muslims. This is to atone for his past, when - due to ignorance - he spread anti-Muslim and Islamophobic stereotypes [24, 25, 106, 133].

<sup>2</sup> There are arguments whether or not the country least prepared for the coronavirus is Somalia or Yemen, in both cases these are potential incubators for terrorism or waves of migration [86, 88].

While most terrorist groups have suspended their “combat” or rebel operations, some - such as for example the Taliban and certain North African groups - are continuing with their attacks and using the pressure of covid-19 to press these already fragile countries into even greater capacity problems. Such a scenario could lead to a power vacuum that the terrorists and extremists are eager to fill [125]. Terrorist attacks with “bioweapons” on busy targets in disrupted countries can also not be ruled out. International collaboration should therefore aim more towards building capacities and institutions in this region.

### **The extreme right and militant Islamists and their calls for the possible exploitation of covid-19**

In the same professional periodical (the same issue) there is another relevant study, which talks directly about the possible ambitions of terrorist structures to use/exploit covid-19 for their own purposes. Its authors are Kyler ONG and Nur Aziemah AZMAN, associate scientists at the Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, Singapore [91].

The covid-19 pandemic represents the potential for *far-right extremists* and Islamist terrorist groups, at least in so far as the period of crisis and panic may be used to destabilise society, in the name of promoting their ideology.

Over the past decades, despite there being few significant cases of successful attacks from the far right involving bioweapons, a number of conspiracies have been uncovered, showing the motivations and tactics of extremists falling within this definition. A case from 2010 included a member of the Neo-Nazi group known as the Aryan Strike Force, who became the first citizen of the United Kingdom to be convicted for the production of a bioweapon (ricin) in an alleged conspiracy to poison the water supply of Muslim households. Despite their disparate nature, the increased volume of images, posters and memes circulating in the past few weeks throughout far-right channels, clearly point to the eagerness of certain people to use bioweapons for terrorist purposes. These calls are especially alarming due to the ease with which individuals can pass along covid-19. Security agencies have warned against the credible risk of an increase in hate-based terrorist acts, while some elements have been strengthened due to the spread of anti-Chinese, anti-Asian and anti-immigrant rhetoric online (something that has already led to perpetration of further crimes). In relation to the rise of the covid-19 pandemic, it seems that certain far-right extremists in the West have been encouraged by the increase in popularity of their opinions on globalisation, immigration and nepotism among the broader public [7, 122].

Special attention is garnered by the Christchurch mosque attacks in New Zealand in 2019, the attack in Germany, in Hanau in February of 2020. Although the attackers are celebrated anonymously, such extreme violence is considered deleterious in the long run, at least as regards “gaining the hearts and minds” of the Western population. Other spokespeople on the far right believe that such sporadic violent acts serve only to justify law enforcement interventions. Due to the decentralised nature of the movements, the opinions of the more influential spokespeople concerning the use of covid-19 as a bioweapon to carry out terrorist attacks are not unanimous [12, 65]. Spokespeople for the far right are attempting to

spread chaos via bioterrorism and violent insurrections during the ongoing covid-19 pandemic. This is similar to the ways Islamist terrorist networks are in some cases urging followers to intensify operations against their enemies. Calls to action show the various levels of ideological similarity of both intellectual movements. At the same time they are sharing inspiration on how to exploit the current situation.<sup>1</sup>

For far-right extremists, the spread of the pandemic represented the potential to intensify their conspiracy and promotional narratives. For example a popular call is for any sick supporters of the far right to target the Jewish community by “coughing on the door handles of local synagogues.” Other campaigns are aimed against the state (“the system”) and public or namely critical infrastructure (literally “cough on your local public transport”) [122].

Unlike Islamist structures that have managed to take over, at least temporarily, certain territories, the extreme right is largely decentralised. This partially explains the frequency of lone-wolf attacks in recent years, from individuals who have been radicalised online. They are trying to take matters into their own hands, by becoming a “weapon”, which could include biological terrorist attacks. The question remains, why the so-called Islamic State has not yet addressed their followers with a call to ***spread covid-19 as a bioweapon***. In recent years it seems that this platform would have few qualms about using bioweapons, although these attempts have never been fully acknowledged in its propaganda. During the fighting in Iraq and Syria there were purportedly attempts to use chemical mustard gas-based weapons. In 2014 a notebook was discovered belonging to a fighter of the so-called Islamic State, originally from Tunisia, which was reported to contain information about potential bioweapons, specifically ways of spreading bubonic plague using infected animals [30, 71].

In 2016 in Kenya, a bio-terrorist attack was almost carried out by militants claiming to belong to the so-called Islamic State. However the incident was not mentioned in any of the later propaganda materials of the group. Despite the lack of official instructions, lone wolves or associated members inspired by the ideology of the so-called Islamic State, may attempt to spread covid-19. For example in Indonesia, some networks associated with Islamists have called for infected followers to spread the coronavirus towards security forces personnel. In India the media have discussed a group of infected fighters who are allegedly associated with the terrorist network Lashkar-e-Taiba, and who attempted to enter from Pakistan into the Jammu and Kashmir region in order to spread the virus among the local population. Pakistan immediately denied the report. On 16 April 2020 in Tunisia, the authorities announced they had confounded a “terrorist conspiracy” including a group of local jihadists, whose modus operandi was the intention to spread coronavirus among the security forces by coughing and spitting on specific service members [53, 81, 111, 128].

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<sup>1</sup> The so-called “Islamic State” places itself in opposition to both “the West”, pro-Western regimes (including Saudi Arabia and the government in Baghdad), Shi’ites (including Iran and Assad’s Syria), the Kurds, other terrorist-extremist groups in the Levant, as well as Sunni’s who are “lukewarm in their faith” [58,124].

## **Summary**

At present, analyses of the impacts of the covid-19 pandemic on terrorist and extremist environments are greatly needed. Nevertheless, one must distinguish between impacts that are likely to last only a short period of time (on a scale of months), impacts that are likely to effect the mid-term (perhaps only as soon as mid 2021) and those impacts, which are only likely to manifest or endure on a more long-term horizon (even several years after covid-19 ceases to be a security challenge).

From the viewpoint of the security community, the attractiveness of healthcare facilities as targets of terrorist attacks will gradually decrease and it will therefore be possible to slowly reduce their protection. Over time, if the economy recovers, general tension levels will also fall, these being the basis for a susceptibility to radicalisation and opposition to government measures.

If the pandemic returns however (or if there is for example another pandemic of a dangerous mutation of the flu), with a high number of victims, then all these effects will only repeat and, taking into account the psychological aspects, even multiply.

The greatest danger from terrorists making use of highly-infectious diseases as weapons will be in the mid-term. The economic impacts of the pandemic will continue to cause mental stress and potential anti-government anger. In the mid-term, there will therefore be an increased susceptibility of society to radicalisation and anti-government sentiments for economic reasons (while security forces around the world will suffer from a lack of resources). One must expect long-term economic stagnation and a difficult recovery period. This also brings with it a large number of disillusioned and unemployed, largely young people, who may go on to expand the ranks of extremist and terrorist groups. Apocalyptic groups wakened to action by the pandemic may activate their visions of judgement day during this time period.

The covid-19 pandemic has basically affected the entire world and influenced people's lives, the economy and the movement of people and goods in an unprecedented manner, creating certain new possibilities for exploitation of this exceptional situation with new forms and methods of certain sinister practices. The degradation of living conditions has shown to be a fertile soil for the radicalisation of certain segments of a dissatisfied population. From there it is only a step to terrorism, which in these new conditions will take forms that society is so far unused to, and far from prepared against.

Certain methods and approaches developed and tested to minimise the impacts of weapons using certain specific CBRN components, may be used advantageously to protect against covid-19. When eliminating CBRN threats it is therefore also possible to utilise the experience and knowledge gained in the field during the several decades of the cold war. Therefore both protective clothing as well as respirators or masks used to protect against CBRN threats can, after the necessary modifications, provide highly effective personal protection against covid-19.

In this sense, the EU has been exerting significant efforts through its Centres of Excellence [139] and contributing to the response to the covid-19 pandemic by activating their network of communication channels (regional secretariats, national contact locations, national teams) and also by providing the results of projects aimed

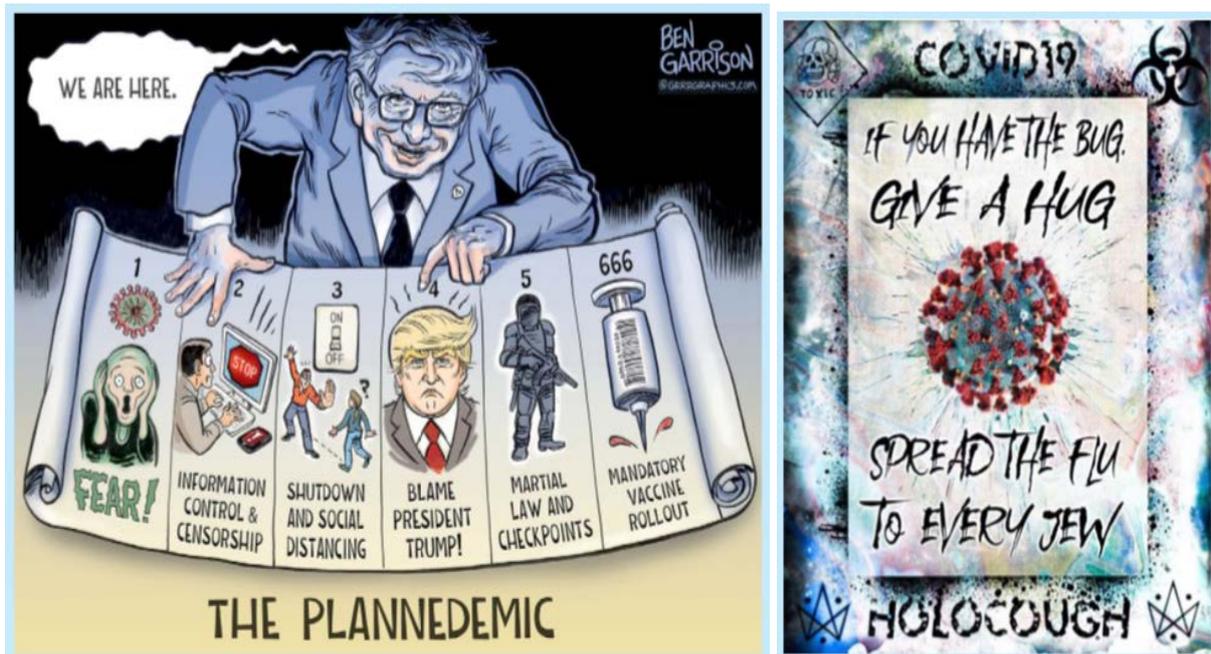
at protecting against CBRN with applications for the fight against the covid-19 coronavirus.

**Dedication:** This work was partially supported through the project “Utilisation of radiation based methods for detection and identification of CBRNE materials”, No. VI20192022171.

**Figure No. 1:** Relevant images concerning reactions to the developments surrounding covid-19 within white supremacist and similar groups in the United States of America. The first case is a de facto parody of the official messaging [134].



**Figure No. 2:** Images taken from the publication “Coronavirus and the Plague of Antisemitism” [31].



**Figure No. 3:** A volunteer medic in Beirut, equipped with a mask with the logo and slogan of Hezbollah [29].



**Figure No. 4:** The bulletin of the so-called Islamic State on the topic “the crusaders’ nightmare” [80].

الافتتاحية العدد ٢٦٦ بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم الخميس ٢٤ رجب ١٤٤١ هـ

النبا

أسوء كوابيس الصليبيين

سَلَطَ اللهُ تَعَالَى شَيْئاً مِنْ عَذَابِهِ الْأَلِيمِ عَلَى أُمَّةٍ مِنْ خَلْقِهِ، أَكْثَرَهُمْ -وَلِلَّهِ الْحَمْدُ- مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ، فَفَعَلَ فِيهِمْ الْخَوْفُ مِنَ الْوَبَاءِ أَكْثَرَ مِمَّا فَعَلَهُ الْوَبَاءُ نَفْسَهُ، فَأَعْلَقَتْ دِيَارَهُمْ وَعَطَّلَتْ أَسْوَاقَهُمْ وَنَشَاطَاتَهُمْ، وَحَبَسَ كَثِيرٌ مِنْهُمْ فِي بِيوتِهِمْ وَبَاتُوا عَلَى شَفَا كَارِثَةٍ اِقْتِصَادِيَّةٍ كَبِيرَةٍ، نَسَأَلُ اللهُ أَنْ يَزِيدَ فِي عَذَابِهِمْ وَيُنَجِّي الْمُؤْمِنِينَ مِنْ ذَلِكَ كُلِّهِ، إِنَّهُ شَدِيدُ الْعِقَابِ، لَنْ عَصَاهُ، وَحَمِيمٌ

بفترة تهدأ فيها حركة المجاهدين، أبشع الجرائم بحق المسلمين في كل مكان، وتسكن خلالها نازُ الثأر في نفوسهم على بل هم مستمرين حتى الساعة في قصف ما أجرموا بحق المسلمين خلال السنوات ببيوتهم وقتل أبنائهم في خراسان ووسط الماضية، ويحلمون بأن يرأف الموحدون إفريقية والصومال وغيرها، فضلاً عن بحالهم الذي يزداد سوءاً يوماً بعد يوم، تقديمهم الدعم لأوليائهم من المشركين خاصة مع ظهور بوادر "أزمة مالية" لفعل ذلك في أماكن أخرى، فهم وكما قال هي أشد من تلك التي أصابتهم قبل عقد ولا دمة وأولئك هم المعتدون [التوبة: ١١]. قال الامام الطوسي رحمه الله: لا

ولهذا كله، فإنهم يسعون جهدهم اليوم لتقليل احتمالية شن المجاهدين لهجمات عليهم داخل بلدانهم الصليبية، أم

**Figure No. 5:** Illustration of protective garments for the elimination and mitigation of detrimental health effects which are the result of a) CBRN and b) covid-19 [140,141].



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## **S U M M A R Y**

The study aims to bring readers closer to the issue of highly contagious diseases (especially COVID-19), especially if this aspect is in some way correlated with the issue of CBRN (in this case with emphasis on biological agents). As far as the topic is relatively new, there are already several interesting foreign or transnational studies that deal with the issue. A total of ten main studies and a number of others to which these studies refer were presented to domestic audiences in an annotated manner. Attention is paid primarily to the role that the current pandemic plays in relation to the radicalization of the public and its possible inclination towards terrorism and violent extremism.

**Keywords:** Pandemic Covid-19, CBRN, protection of persons, misuse of coronavirus, radicalization, terrorism, violent extremism.

## **R E S U M É**

*SABOL, Jozef; KRULÍK, Oldřich: COVID-19 A JEHO DOPADY NA TERORISMUS A NÁSILNÝ EXTREMISMUS*

Studie si klade za cíl čtenářům přiblížit problematiku vysoce nakažlivých chorob (zejména pak COVID-19), zejména pokud je tento aspekt nějakým způsobem korelován s problematikou CBRN (v tomto případě s důrazem na biologické agens). Nakolik se jedná o téma relativně nové, již nyní existuje několik zajímavých zahraničních či nadnárodních studií, které se problematice věnují. Celkem deset hlavních studií a množství dalších, na které tyto studie odkazují, bylo komentovaným způsobem představeno domácímu publiku. Pozornost je přitom v první řadě věnována roli, kterou současná pandemie sehraává ve vztahu k radikalizaci veřejnosti a jeho možnému příklonu k terorismu a násilnému extremismu.

**Klíčová slova:** Pandemie Covid-19, CBRN, ochrana osob, zneužití koronaviru, radikalizace, terorismus, násilný extremismus.