Novel Terrorist Tactics and Targets

Introduction

The pandemic has disrupted economies and public healthcare systems and has obviously introduced new factors into violent extremists' operational circumstances. Both radical Islamists (Islamic State and al-Qaeda) and the far right have sought to exploit times of uncertainty as well as the social isolation of people facing the crisis, using it as an opportunity to expand their activity by spreading conspiracy theories, calling for attacks, and deliberately infecting others. Extremists have integrated coronavirus into their propaganda, and the pandemic has been used to bolster narratives across all ideologies. Interestingly, right-wing groups have discussed weaponizing the COVID-19 virus more often compared to their radical Islamist counterparts.

After a careful assessment of changes both in the radical Islamist and the far right terrorist threat landscape, this chapter aims to elaborate on how COVID-19 has changed extremists' operational tactics and targets.

Observations with Regard to the Radical Islamist Threat

The pandemic's impact on jihadist terrorism has been highly complex and multifaceted. It has varied also in the short, medium and long term. It may yet be too early to identify what effects the coronavirus will have on violent extremism in the long run. Nevertheless, there is a considerable amount of information suggesting that violent nonstate actors have made operational changes since the pandemic outbreak. Research in the previous chapters was based upon a quantitative assessment of recent radical Islamist-inspired terrorist incidents to provide a snapshot view of new trends. These include, first, the decrease in the number of radical Islamist terrorist attacks both in Europe and in Southeast Asia,

which indicates that restrictive epidemiological measures caused un-due difficulties for jihadist endeavors. Their operational circumstances had to be changed because of factors such as less crowded places, an elevated authority presence, and the unreliability of their supply chains amidst lockdowns. These factors all may have contributed to the challenge of mounting attacks. It is, however, particularly difficult to iden-tify only one factor that explicitly hindered or delayed radical Islamist terrorist groups' operations in nonconflict zones. Still, there has not yet been a significant decrease in the number of completed terrorist attacks. Authorities therefore cannot disregard the associated threat but should rather devote enough resources for countermeasures even during a pandemic crisis. The situation is different in conflict zones, where the outbreak brought solely advantageous circumstances for ji-hadist fighters. On the battlefields, because of the risk of contagion, international troops were withdrawn. Local military forces struggled to counter terrorist operations without their support, thus it is import-ant to make sure international cooperation continues uninterrupted in future crisis situations. With this in mind, training and technological capabilities should be reconceptualized in line with applicable epide-miological restrictions.

Second, as the analyses revealed, in conflict zones, military per-sonnel and facilities have become the most prominent radical Islamist targets since the pandemic outbreak. Not only is there a heightened mili-tary presence but the army's symbolic value has also been elevated since the pandemic outbreak. Accordingly, Islamic State operatives in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Africa continued to strike military compounds and personnel together with police checkpoints and their officers, while the number of attacks on private citizens and businesses markedly de-creased. Lockdowns eliminated crowds of civilian soft targets; there-fore, attacking citizens may have been more difficult for jihadist fighters. These observed changes in radical Islamist targets should urge authori-ties to strategically reorganize their counter-terrorism operations in ac-cordance with regular threat assessments. Another noteworthy example here is Mozambique, where a significant change in modus operandi has emerged since the pandemic outbreak. While Islamic State operatives previously ambushed government institutions and military compounds, after March 2020 the jihadist groups attacked cities, towns, and critical infrastructure, supposedly taking advantage of the pandemic crisis situ-ation (Meir Amit Intelligence 2020).

Third, as recorded, radical Islamist activities in Europe suggest jihadi-inspired individuals may have operated as they did under normal cir-cumstances but mounted unsophisticated attacks. Resorting to armed

assault instead of deploying improvised explosive devices may suppose that the movement of goods was restricted and terrorists' access to operational resources was maybe limited. These findings could be of great importance for counterterrorism agencies to map and better understand radical Islamist supply systems.

Changes in Far Right Threat Groups' Operational Environment

The virus drew the attention of threat groups across the political and religious spectrum. Contrary to public perception, far right groups exploited the virus more than politico-religious formations. The extreme right-wing discourse painted national governments and international institutions as either responsible for or complicit in the spread of COVID-19. Far right commentators from France, Italy, and Spain all claim that official responses to the pandemic have been driven by a supposedly sinister ulterior motive (SITE Intelligence Group 2020). Directed at the private sector, the far right released a clip titled Plandemic to engender public mistrust in health institutions. From disobeying quarantine regulations to organized protests, the extreme right-wing exclamations criticize government measures to impose "authoritarian" control over populations. In addition to vandalizing healthcare workers' vehicles, the far right encouraged those infected to cough on healthcare workers and for nails to be placed in hospital parking lots. Capitalizing on fears, disillusionment, and social tensions, these threat groups shared disinformation with their supporters and potential future recruits on both the deep and dark web.

Harnessing antiestablishment and social discontent, far right groups and supporters targeted Muslims, Jews, and Asians—especially ethnic Chinese—at lockdown protests. Singaporean law student Jonathan Mok suffered a coronavirus-related racist attack by a group of boys in London on 24 February 2020. After calling Mok "Corona virus" and shouting "I don't want your Corona virus in my country," one of the boys punched him in the face (The Straits Times, 6 March 2020). Neo-Nazi activists encouraged followers to deliberately infect groups, including Jewish minorities (Dearden 2020b), while a forum urged those who were diagnosed with the virus to cough into their hands and touch "things that will have high contact traffic [such as] door handles, handrails, restrooms, sink taps, etc." Others suggested infected individuals withdraw hundreds of dollars in small bills, contaminate them, and then "hit up major stores in lots of different cities." To expand their

base, most far right groups promoted white nationalism (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

In February 2020, an online content aggregator published the following on a far right Telegram channel: "the black swan event" is an opportunity "to destabilize the kike economy [implying a Jewish-controlled economy]." It urged supporters to create "the necessary conditions under which revolution is possible." "The glorious Happening is upon us," read the post, referring to a race war and stoking racism toward "Asians" (CoronaChan 2020). The far right channel published a list of "accelerationist goals" to be achieved by pushing racial and political narratives about the outbreak. "We need to #1 racialize it and #2 politicize it. In the coming weeks I anticipate hundreds of chinks racial slurs for a person of Chinese descent and urbanites to be confirmed infected in the USA" (CoronaChan 2020). The far right identifies its accelerationism goals as:

1. Praise the arrival of the WuFlu Pandemic loudly so the Jew media takes notice;
2. Stigmatize Asians to exacerbate racial tensions and create fear;
3. Celebrate the climbing death counts and laugh at the suffering of the shitlibs in the cities;
4. Make comparisons to the End Times to further spread panic;
5. Encourage making necessary preparations so the store shelves clean out and the markets crash. (CoronaChan 2020)

Extreme far right activists also discussed how to turn the virus into a bioweapon.

"What to do if you get COVID-19 . . . Visit your local Mosque!, visit your local synagogue!; spend time in diverse neighborhoods! spend the day on public transport!" (ADL 2020).

Motivated by "racial, religious and anti-government animus" (Levine 2020), Timothy Wilson, a 36-year-old white supremacist, planned to detonate an explosives-laden vehicle in the parking lot of Belton Regional Medical Center in Cass County, Missouri, United States. Two days earlier, Wilson visited the hospital property and conducted a dry run. Starting 30 January, he bought explosives—two five-pound bags of urea and sixty pounds of ammonium nitrate and another type of fertilizer. Wilson also planned to hit an elementary school with African American students, a power grid, bridges, a nuclear plant, Islamic centers in Missouri, a synagogue in Arkansas, the Walmart headquarters, and the University of Kansas Hospital in Kansas City. Wilson committed suicide on 24 March 2020 as FBI agents attempted to arrest him. Nota-

bly, Wilson had served in the navy and had received the "E" Ribbon, Good Conduct Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Iraq Campaign Medal, Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, and Coast Guard Special Operations Service Medal (Kosnar and Helsel 2020).

After the Christchurch attack in 2019, the number of far right violent attacks in the West had surpassed the number carried out by Muslim threat groups (Nguyen and Miller 2020). With the social dislocation and radicalization that the pandemic brought, the far right sought to exploit COVID-19 to grow its support base, from North America to Europe and Australia. To garner media attention, right-wing extremists publicly identified COVID-19 as a "Chinese Virus" and welcomed the pandemic.

In continental Europe, the uncertainty surrounding coronavirus led to a boom in conspiracy theories on social media. With people spending more time online, there was a rise in engagements with Telegram groups spreading conspiracy theories about vaccines, contactless payment, and 5G masts (The Straits Times, 1 May 2020). "5G has remained a core Corona virus conspiracy topic for actors on the far right and far left alike, who posit that the cell towers are part of a plan by the faceless 'elite' to spread COVID-19" (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

Far right movements exploited the pandemic for their malevolent purposes using all possible means. Firstly, they promoted their ideology to recruit new members. Secondly, in the chaos caused by the pandemic, one associated Telegram channel incited its members to racialize and politicize the crisis to destabilize the economy and accelerate the collapse of society. By mobilizing their members, their endeavor was to spread fear. The British far right, as well as neo-Nazi activists, called on their members diagnosed with COVID-19 to deliberately infect certain minority groups (Jews and Muslims) by targeting their houses of worship and other frequently visited places. Besides the calls for physical attacks, right-wing activists misused cyberspace in another innovative way with so-called Zoombombing. Far right Telegram channels in the United Kingdom also attempted to organize an anti-lockdown protest. Simultaneously, antigovernment and anti-law enforcement narratives have been constantly at the forefront of far right propaganda.

We can observe that certain narratives keep reoccurring and have been used in support of a wide variety of ideological objectives. Right-wing extremists and white supremacists draw attention to ethnic minorities as the source of the disease. Neo-Nazis in Germany accelerated the spread of conspiracy theories with regard to COVID-19 and put themselves forward as a defender of the deprived by providing assistance for the elderly. Meanwhile, radical groups in Europe torched 5G

telephone towers, falsely believing that radiation from these telecommunication masts may play a role in spreading the virus.

Protests are right-wing extremists' main arena for recruiting new members. The far right managed to adapt to the consequences of lockdowns and stay-at-home practices in a timely manner. Accordingly, they increased their presence in cyberspace to bolster conspiracy theories and reach out to vulnerable individuals. The general restrictions on mass gatherings may have seriously disrupted their efforts to maintain their international relationships with other right-wing extremist entities, with cross-border links of crucial importance in spreading their ideologies, inciting violent acts, making acquaintance with new members, and obtaining funding sources.

Emerging Organized Crime Threat

The pandemic has yielded another important criminogenic factor that requires particular attention. With the approval and global distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, new organized criminal networks emerged. Criminal organizations have attempted to "infiltrate and disrupt supply chains" (INTERPOL 2020) by the falsification, theft, and illegal advertising of these vaccines. Mexican organized crime groups have reportedly established manufacturing laboratories for fake vaccines (Sullivan 2021). Pfizer confirmed that it had identified bogus COVID-19 vaccines in Mexico and Poland (Miles 2021). The number of advertisements for stolen or counterfeit vaccines on the dark web increased by 300 percent in the first three months of 2021 (CNN, 23 March 2021), while the sale of fake vaccines grew by 400 percent (Miao 2021).

This vibrant black market has created an acute problem in countries with a lower availability of COVID-19 vaccines (Alarabiya, 10 April 2021; Williams 2021). In a joint operation with INTERPOL, South African and Chinese Police disrupted an international fake vaccine criminal network in early March 2021. The trafficking incident involved a shipment of approximately 2,400 doses of counterfeit vaccines across continents. During the raid in China, 80 suspects were arrested at the manufacturing premises (Craig 2021); meanwhile, two people were arrested in South Africa. Counterfeit vaccines were also being distributed underground in the Philippines (Cabato 2021). According to a study by the Economist Intelligence Unit (2021), widespread vaccination in developing countries may not be achieved until 2023. In line with this, people under the control of armed groups need to be taken into account (Gillard 2020). It is hoped that in India lessons learnt from the dire

shortages of vaccines (ABC News, 28 April 2021) mean the government will make efforts to fortify its stockpiles in future and in accordance with the ever-changing threat landscape.

The demand for proof of vaccine status generated an elevated level of interest in acquiring counterfeit vaccine cards. These cards were created to order upon the buyer providing the necessary personal data to the vendors (CNN, 23 March 2021). Additionally, INTERPOL's Cybercrime Unite revealed that of "3,000 websites associated with online pharmacies suspected of selling illicit medicines and medical devices, around 1,700 contained cyber threats, especially phishing and spamming malware" (INTERPOL 2020). Additionally, three Baltimore men were detained in February 2021 for operating a fraudulent Moderna website (De León 2021). A "global standardized system for traceability, from product manufacture to patient treatment" for vaccines may be an applicable guarantee of authenticity (Stone 2021). Experts have also urged upgrading the security arrangements around coronavirus vaccination centers, considering the elevated level of terrorist threat at such facilities (Dearden 2020a).

New Threats to the Food Industry

COVID-19 severely disrupted the global food system (Committee on World Food Security High Level Panel of Experts 2020; Stirling Haig et al. 2020). Travel bans, economic restrictions and reduced food purchasing power due to job losses resulted in fundamental changes (Howard and Simmons 2020). Food insecurity led to protests in multiple regions (Hayden 2020). Although transmission is most likely to occur through close contact with infected people, concerns emerged over contaminated food (Food Safety Authority of Ireland 2020) as a result of terror groups. Infected radicals were encouraged to deliberately contaminate food and drink by coughing in supermarkets (Elliott 2020). Threat groups urged people infected with coronavirus to lick fruit and vegetables in the local grocery store and put them back (Janes 2020). A Neo-Nazi group proposed infecting items, possibly food, and shipping them to a country with a "high population density . . . like China." They also suggested cutting the cooling system and power lines of grocery stores, putting cyanide in soda, and "cough[ing] into the potato salad at whole foods." Another Neo-Nazi group suggested infected supporters walk through the supermarket coughing, specifically on kosher items (SITE Intelligence Group 2020). Likewise, Islamic State urged Indian fighters to poison the food and drinks of "nonbelievers."

Taking all this into consideration, risks should be re-evaluated (Nakat and Bou-Mitri 2021) and counterstrategies applied to address these novel implications.

Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter has attempted to summarize the changes COVID-19 has introduced into radical Islamist and far right violent extremists' operational circumstances. By looking at the dynamics in the threat landscape, trends in their operational tactics and targets have been identified.

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