IS COVID-19 RESPONSIBLE FOR FACILITATING EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM?
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On January 14th 2021, the Bussola Institute hosted a webinar that examined the impact of COVID-19 and its links to terrorism and extremism. The webinar was based on the research paper produced by Bussola Extremism in the time of COVID-19 published in July 2020. Across the globe, the day-to-day lives of people have changed dramatically, and it is unlikely that these changes will diminish anytime soon. In these difficult times, terrorist attacks have continued as extremist views persist. From the killing of a teacher in France, to Islamic State’s attacks on educational institutions in Afghanistan, to the recent massacre in Nigeria, it is clear that extremist ideologies continue to fuel violence around the world. COVID-19 and the extensive measures taken by governments to minimise the effect of the pandemic have brought a great deal of uncertainty to the world. With uncertainty comes feelings of distrust, dissatisfaction, grievance, and division among and between societies. Together with this, workplaces, shops, and public places are being shut and people are spending more time online. In this sort of environment, extremism is able to thrive.

The pandemic brings new opportunities for extremists to gain further support for their ideologies. They exploit discontent and uncertainty through fostering victimhood narratives, spreading distrust of government, pursuing disinformation campaigns, fuelling exclusionary feelings, and spreading animosity towards “others.” Extremists have been able to link elements of the pandemic to their overall ideology and continually amplify their messages. Our expert panel examined how the current circumstances have allowed extremist narratives to thrive and the measures that can be taken to counter the spread of extremism and terrorism.
THE EXPERT SPEAKERS FOR THE WEBINAR WERE:

Dr. Orla Lynch
Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Associate Dean of Graduate Studies at University College Cork, Ireland.

Dr. Richard Burchill
Senior Research Fellow at the Bussola Institute, Belgium.

Ms. Sara Zeiger
Programme Manager, Research and Analysis at Hedayah, UAE.

Mr. John Dennehy
Secretary General, Bussola Institute.

The webinar was moderated by Mr. John Dennehy, Secretary-General of the Bussola Institute.
The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the world in 2020 has been profound. The day-to-day lives of people have changed dramatically and it is unlikely these changes will diminish anytime soon. An extensive range of actions have been taken in response to COVID-19 such as stay-at-home orders, working from home, limitations on movement within and between countries, and limited access to various public and private services. These measures have had knock-on impacts such as a major downturn in economic activity, stressed supply chains, and disruptions to transport networks, amongst others. Both the threat posed by COVID-19 and the impact it has on our day-to-day lives appear set to continue for a considerable period of time.

A common feature of the impact of the pandemic is uncertainty. There is extensive uncertainty about the continuing impact and evolution of the virus and uncertainty about what measures work to counteract the virus. Uncertainty about the economic impact of responses to the virus is also a major force in people’s lives. In times of uncertainty people tend to seek out answers and clarity in relation to the world around them. There are also heightened feelings of need as individuals worry about personal health and the health of their in-group. Extremists are able to take advantage of uncertainty and exploit the circumstances to gain further support for their ideologies. COVID-19 and responses to the pandemic are providing numerous avenues for exploitation by extremists.

It appears that incidences of terrorist acts have not increased during the pandemic, even though terrorism has continued throughout the pandemic. The ability of police and security services to focus on threats of terrorism has diminished in some ways as resources are being redirected to other matters. Overseas counter-terrorism operations have also experienced a scaling-back in relation to personnel being brought home.

What has occurred during the pandemic is an increase in the divisive and polarised nature of public debate. Much of this has occurred in direct relation to the pandemic and responses but has also been heightened by a range of political and social events surrounding issues of migration, discrimination, policing, economic deprivation, and other social phenomena. The increase in divisive and polarised debate has contributed to, and facilitated, the spread of extremist narratives. Extremists have proven to be adaptive in taking advantage of events to generate support for their ideologies and the COVID-19 pandemic has provided multiple opportunities for extremists to exploit.

A key issue in relation to the attraction of extremist ideologies is the extent to which narratives and ideas contribute to satisfying particular needs in individuals. When people, individually or collectively, feel that their well-being and security is under threat due to any particular circumstances, they will seek out responses that appear to address these matters. During the pandemic there have been fears related to health, denials of the impact of the virus, heightened feelings of distrust, dissatisfaction with government responses, and increasing levels of division among and between societies. Feelings of hatred and grievances have become more pronounced as individuals seek to find spaces where needs can be addressed, resulting in more certainty and comfort for the individual in the face of the pandemic. In this sort of environment extremism is able to thrive, as people will have a tendency to latch onto any explanation that matches the world view most amenable to themselves and their selected in-group, which, in turn, provides more certainty.
Extremists were quick to react and respond to the impact of the virus with narratives attempting to incorporate the pandemic visible from February 2020. In general, the pandemic has been used to reinforce the core narratives of an extremist ideology with the pandemic providing evidence of what occurs if you do not believe the same as the in-group. Extremist ideologies that are derived from religious beliefs speak of the virus being the will of God and how non-believers will be struck down. Of course, this overlooks the fact the virus is not making a distinction between ideological positions and members of the extremist groups can also be afflicted. In response, groups such as Daesh/Islamic State and Al-Qaeda have modified their use of the pandemic in their narratives to reinforce the value of their belief systems and as evidence of the failures of states to protect their populations. Far right/white supremacist extremism narratives have followed a similar development. Their initial use of COVID-19 was for the purpose of apportioning blame among various out-groups and now also entail reinforcing how their ideologies contribute positively in providing protection for the in-group at a time when governments are unable or unwilling to provide protection.

The attempts to assign blame for the pandemic are typically followed by calls to action in support of the extremist ideology. The limits on overseas travel have not directly impacted calls for action. Daesh/Islamic State initially encouraged supporters not to travel to areas where the virus was widespread but did provide strong encouragement for followers to carry out attacks where they are. Far right/white supremacist groups told adherents who had tested positive for the virus to travel to ethnic neighbourhoods in order to infect people, or to attempt to infect the police and security services. Both right- and left-orientated extremist groups have called for action against the instruments of the state in the hope of bringing down existing government systems and allowing for their new forms of government to emerge. This has led to extensive acts of violence against state authorities.

Extremists have made extensive use of misinformation and disinformation across multiple media platforms to spread their narratives. Extremists are well established in the use of media and the pandemic has provided further opportunities to manipulate the news and information that is circulating. Within the extremist narratives, there is little concern for verifiable facts or coherence in the claims and arguments made. Extremists’ narratives are commonly based on the expropriation of selective facts strung together to sometimes outlandish lengths. The primary objective for the extremist is that the matter being articulated lends support to the overall ideology. Not all disinformation is directly connected to extremism, but it can be exploited to frame extremist narratives. The continual production of disinformation leads to various conspiracies and blame being absorbed into others, which even if it does not lead to direct violence remains damaging, as it increases polarisation within and between societies.

It is well established that there is no clear path to extremism, which makes it difficult to draw any clear and direct link between the pandemic and the rise of extremism. The uncertainty surrounding the pandemic has exacerbated existing needs or created new elements of need in the desire for well-being. Extremists have taken advantage of this situation by adopting denunciations of out-groups or public authorities, placing the blame and responsibility for the pandemic upon others.
The use of disinformation and misinformation during the pandemic has been massive, with both governments and private actors having responsibility for its circulation and for failing to take effective action to address its circulation. The problems of disinformation and misinformation, in particular their use on social media, existed prior to the pandemic. The pandemic has provided multiple avenues for exploitation by extremists. The uncertainty in early 2020 regarding the origin or nature of the virus kept experts guessing for a number of months. This led to competing claims over the best means for slowing down the spread of the virus as well as criticisms being levelled in response to the measures taken, matters that will continue to be the subject of public discussion for a considerable period of time.

It has been shown that across social media misinformation and disinformation thrive as they are widely circulated. The events taking place in Washington, DC on 6 January, including acts of violent extremism, demonstrates how misinformation and disinformation plays a significant role in fostering extremism. It appears there is something in the human condition that facilitates the distribution of lies or negative emotions such as blame or outrage. The interconnectedness of the world has been a major factor in how information about the pandemic has spread and it appears that, when information is distorted or works to fuel polarising positions, it travels more widely and is capable of having a more profound impact. Extremists realise this and the creation of narratives has taken full advantage of disinformation and misinformation surrounding the pandemic. An area of particular concern is how disinformation and misinformation have contributed to extremist narratives becoming more mainstream in public debate.

OVERCOMING THE INFLUENCE AND IMPACT OF EXTREMISM

The world will continue to feel the impact of the COVID-19 for a number of years. At present, even with the introduction of vaccines, the virus continues to thrive. Governments continue to implement a range of measures to prevent the spread of the virus. Even when the virus is under control, the negative economic impact of the pandemic will be felt for a considerable period of time. This will continue the feelings of uncertainty being felt and will perpetuate a range of human needs that extremists will be able to exploit.

The threats from extremism and terrorism are not easily overcome. Action has to ensure that those who have extremist beliefs do not move to violent action as well as addressing the ideologies that fuel the extremist beliefs being held. There needs to be multi-stakeholder responses involving public authorities, private actors, and community-based initiatives. The objective must be focussed on addressing the needs individuals face that are exacerbated during times of uncertainty. There is no single response possible and any action taken needs to be formulated to achieve long-term results. This can be achieved through multilevel cooperation among stakeholders, ensuring the necessary resources to support societies, and providing the skills and knowledge that works to build resilience in people, thereby making extremist narratives less attractive.

Going forward, governments, international organisations, civil society and other necessary stakeholders need to focus on improving and enhancing the following factors in addressing extremism -

Cooperation – Working together between and across societies and states is essential for addressing the root causes of extremism and for formulating effective responses. Increased cooperation that focusses on listening and understanding different experiences with extremism works to inform practical measures to counter the impact of extremist narratives. A leading example of the value of cooperation is Hedayah, the international centre of excellence for countering violent extremism.
Support – The economic impact of COVID-19 has the potential to be more detrimental than the impact of the virus itself. States and societies are struggling to offset the shutting down of economic activity or to obtain vaccines. In order to ensure that these circumstances do not escalate, thereby allowing extremists to exploit the circumstances, states and international organisations need to ensure that overseas development and humanitarian aid continues and is not decreased.

Skills – It is widely accepted that building skills in support of resilience effectively supports countering extremist narratives. By providing individuals with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to understand and evaluate the information surrounding the pandemic much can be done to address the impact of extremism, in particular disinformation and misinformation. The OECD’s Global Competence Framework provides a structure in this regard, emphasising the value of shared human dignity and the value of empathy when viewing the world. Measures of this nature not only build resilience; they also empower individuals in rejecting extremist ideologies.