

## EXTREMISM IN THE TIME OF COVID-19



July 2020



# **EXTREMISM IN THE TIME OF COVID-19**

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JULY 2020



Research Paper

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2020

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## 1. Introduction

The impact of COVID-19 on the world in 2020 has been profound. Across the globe the day-to-day lives of people have changed dramatically and it is unlikely these changes will diminish anytime soon. There has been an extensive range of actions taken in response to COVID, such as ‘stay at home’ orders, including working from home, limitations on movements within and between countries and limited access to various public and private services. The measures restricting personal movement have been adopted to prevent a quick spread of the virus that has had the potential of overwhelming health care systems. Restricting movement has knock-on impacts, however, such as a major downturn in economic activities, stressed supply chains and disruptions to transport networks, amongst others. Both the threats posed by COVID-19 and the impacts it will have on other areas of life appear set to continue for the coming year, if not years.

There is extensive reference to the current situation as being unprecedented. Perhaps for immediate memory the current situation feels unprecedented but it is clear that the world has been impacted before by the global spread of diseases.<sup>1</sup> There has also been global experience with recent financial crises and the detrimental impact brought by the situation and responses to it. Regardless of what has gone before, the current situation is taking its toll on individuals, communities, states and the global system, as if it caught the world by surprise. To paraphrase Albert Camus – the impact of pandemics has long been part of emergency planning, yet it is a struggle to accept the actual onset of the pandemic (‘plague’ in Camus’ work), leading politicians and society to delay responses. When it happens and even though health crises (plagues) are a known factor in our world, they always seem to take us by surprise.<sup>2</sup>

The initial surprise part of the virus has passed but uncertainty about its continuance, possible return and uncertainty about the economic impact all result in continued insecurity for individuals

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<sup>1</sup> “How blind can you be? What history can tell us about today’s coronavirus pandemic,” Interview with Professor Frank Snowden, *Der Spiegel*, 27 April 2020, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/what-history-can-tell-us-about-today-s-coronavirus-pandemic-a-378ebd03-cefb-45a6-bb7a-2db184de81cc>; Anna Russell, “The rise of coronavirus hate crimes” *The New Yorker*, 17 March 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-the-uk/the-rise-of-coronavirus-hate-crimes>.

<sup>2</sup> The full quote from Albert Camus, *The Plague* (trans) “Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world, yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history, yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise.”

and societies. Measures to contain the spread of the virus are being lifted in some places and re-implemented in others, with many governments still struggling to come to grips with high rates of infection and the measures needed to suppress the spread of the virus. The outlook for the world is bleak and questions remain over how governments are responding to the virus. With all of this uncertainty come feelings of distrust, dissatisfaction and division. Feelings of hatred and grievance become more pronounced as people seek to find more certainty and comfort. In this sort of environment extremism in thoughts and actions is able to thrive. Insecurity in times of crisis fuel feelings that someone or something is to blame or that someone or something else is responsible for the negative consequences being felt. These feelings make the messages of extremism a welcome respite from the uncertainty. Regardless of how far-fetched the extremist version of explanations or blame is, people will find messages that suit them in these understandings. Extremists are able to take advantage of uncertainty and to exploit the circumstances in order to gain further support for their ideologies.

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COVID-19 and responses to the pandemic provide numerous avenues for exploitation by extremists, regardless of ideology. In fact the extremists were quick to react and respond to the impact of the virus from February 2020,<sup>3</sup> recognising the potential of the situation before many governments did. The extent to which this exploitation takes hold and furthers the ideologies of particular extremist groups remains to be seen but early indications suggest that extremist narratives are gaining. The pandemic continues to bring new opportunities for extremists to exploit discontent and uncertainty by fostering victim narratives, the distrust of governments, disinformation campaigns, nationalistic feelings and a general resistance to “others”. There is a proliferation and continuation of divisions and hatred and, unfortunately, acts of violence. Not all of this is directly related to COVID-19 but the pandemic has brought to the fore a great deal of negative feelings that have been able to fuel extremism.

This paper discusses how extremists are taking advantage of global uncertainties to further divisiveness and hatred that lead to acts of violence. There is no singular solution to mitigate the extent to which extremists are able to exploit the current circumstances. The ongoing responses to COVID-19 need to assess the extent to which the actions taken further the ability of

<sup>3</sup>“Terrorism and COVID-19: Validation and Opportunity” MOSECON, 27 March 2020, <https://www.mosecon.com/terrorism-and-covid-19-vindication-and-opportunity/>



extremists to amplify their messages. Governments need to take this into account, especially as the long-term impact of COVID-19 is going to create even more uncertainty and distrust across societies. In section 2 the general trends in relation to extremist activities in the context of COVID-19 are set out. This is followed in section 3 by an overview of what is being said by extremists in relation to COVID-19, along with examples of actions being carried out in support of the ideologies. Section 4 examines responses from governments, online companies and the public to highlight the ongoing quandaries in attempts to lessen the impact of extremists. Section 5 concludes with a look to the future for ensuring that responses to COVID-19 do not give extremists even more opportunities to exploit the circumstances in pursuit of their ideologies.

The further growth and development of extremist narratives in the COVID-19 context is a global matter, much like the pandemic itself. It is unlikely that the levels of extremism are going to recede as the health crisis lessens. The ongoing impacts of the crisis will continue and the uncertainties surrounding it will give extremists plenty to work with. It has been suggested that the states best placed to respond to COVID-19 are those with effective capacity, where social trust is high and where leadership has been demonstrated.<sup>4</sup> Similar assessments may be made in relation to the responses towards extremists during and following the COVID-19 crisis. States that are effective in providing support and services, that demonstrate high levels of tolerance and openness to diversity and which provide certainty in leadership will be able to diffuse much of the contextual environment that fuels extremism.

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<sup>4</sup>Francis Fukuyama, “The pandemic and political order: it takes a state,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2020, p. 26.



## 2. General trends of Extremists Exploiting the Circumstances surrounding COVID-19

The idea that extremists are exploiting the current circumstances around COVID-19 should come as no surprise. Extremists are a result of, and exist in, occurring political frameworks. Extremism is a dynamic process in many respects and extremist groups are able to “build on a pre-existing ideological world view and respond dynamically to changing circumstances, with COVID-19 serving as a new ideational battleground for ongoing ideological struggle.”<sup>5</sup> The nature of pandemics assists this exploitation, as a pandemic and the responses to it are very much metaphysical circumstances, providing dimensions going to the core of one’s being that can be exploited easily.<sup>6</sup>

The overall global situation of security is also perilous. In a presentation to the UN Security Council in April, the Secretary General set out key points regarding the impact of COVID-19 upon global security. He began by situating COVID-19 as foremost a health crisis but with far-reaching impacts.<sup>7</sup> He put forth a number of areas of concern, including several matters related to the potential for exploitation by extremists, such as:

- the loss of trust in public institutions when governments are not seen as performing well in response to the virus, including actions by governments that further political tensions;
- the major impacts from the economic fallout, in particular in fragile societies;
- the ongoing uncertainties that allow actors to promote division and turmoil;
- the lack of preparedness globally may inspire the use of bio-chemical attacks;
- the slowdown of conflict resolution efforts at a time when they are most needed;
- the continued threat of terrorism and opportunities that the pandemic provides for more violence;
- the rise of extremist rhetoric and action from hate speech to discrimination, accompanied by strong government response measures that are counterproductive.

<sup>5</sup> Milo Comerford and Jacob Davey, “Comparing jihadist and far-right extremist narratives on COVID-19,” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology Insights*, 27 April 2020, <https://gnet-research.org/2020/04/27/comparing-jihadist-and-far-right-extremist-narratives-on-covid-19/>

<sup>6</sup> “Terrorism and COVID-19: Validation and Opportunity,” *op.cit.*

<sup>7</sup> UN Secretary General, “Secretary General’s remarks to the Security Council on the COVID-19 Pandemic,” 9 April 2020, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-04-09/secretary-generals-remarks-the-security-council-the-covid-19-pandemic-delivered>

Taken together the overall context is supportive for extremists to spread their views and to take further action in support of their causes.

The Secretary General's concerns also need to be situated into the global context of ever-increasing online activity and widespread online connectivity. Extremists have been making effective use of the network benefits of online connectivity for a number of years. One of the key responses to the crisis has been the isolation of the population, with lockdowns being imposed around the world. This leaves more and more people at home and online, sometimes completely isolated and providing an almost captive audience. To round this out, the uncertainties being felt around the world as the threat from the virus continues and the unknown future makes individuals more receptive to the extremist ideologies espoused.<sup>8</sup>

Extremists of all forms have used this opportunity to gain support for their narratives and causes. This is done by further ingraining in-group/out-group dynamics, assigning blame on out-groups, making use of disinformation and conspiracy theories and in general attempting to show that their ideological positions are the correct or better ones. It is recognised that this opportunity is not limited to the health emergency caused by COVID-19, as it will continue into the post-COVID world (whatever that may look like - another dimension of uncertainty) as conditions are likely to remain responsive to ideas and actions related to blame and hatred.<sup>9</sup>

During any crisis there is going to be uncertainty leading to blame, divisiveness and animosity. Not all of this constitutes extremism, making it important to clarify what is being examined. Extremism is commonly viewed as a relational concept but this means that whoever controls the central normative and political discourses determines what the outer limits are, that is who is an extremist or what is extremism. This allows anything to be called extremism and typically results in all matters not aligned with one's own world view, be it the state, community or individual, being deemed as extremist in the negative sense. This is not a useful approach to understanding and identifying extremism.

A more constructive definition and approach has been provided by J.M. Berger, with extremism defined as "the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group." The idea of "hostile action" is wide, ranging from insults, discriminatory actions, violence or the elimination of the out-group. As Berger explains, the need for hostile action is "unconditional and inseparable from the in-group's understanding of success." To achieve that level of abhorrence of another group there cannot be any recognition that the out-group and its members are similar in any way to the in-group.<sup>10</sup> This can be taken one step further to identify extremism as a situation when one believes that others (the out-group) are not entitled to any level of respect or recognition as human beings.

It is this denial of equal human dignity and an absence of recognition that others share the same status or inherent nature of being a human being that delineates extremism from dislike or hatred. In regular circumstances two individuals may disagree on something and even have confrontations over this disagreement, but there remains a recognition that each possesses the same moral worth and this limits responses and reactions. When the recognition of equal and mutual human dignity is denied there is no reciprocal recognition of this moral worth or of shared traits that are to be respected. This removes any limitations upon the in-group's hostile actions,

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<sup>8</sup> Michael C. Zeller, "Extremists strive in times of crisis: the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception," *openDemocracy*, 12 May 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/global-extremes/extremists-strive-times-crisis-covid-19-pandemic-no-exception/>

<sup>9</sup> "The coronavirus will increase extremism across the ideological spectrum," Soufan Centre, *Intelbrief*, 13 April 2020, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-the-coronavirus-will-increase-extremism-across-the-ideological-spectrum/>

<sup>10</sup> J.M. Berger, *Extremism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018), p. 44.

allowing for hatred to extend into violence on the basis that the out-group in question is not human. Not all extremism leads directly to violence but this does not make it any less of a concern. It is the foundational elements of extremism, the denial of human dignity and the belief that the in-group's success and survival require the elimination of the out-group that create an atmosphere for justifying the use of violence as legitimate.

The dynamics of extremism are explained by Berger:

As an identity movement lurches toward extremism, the out-group is cast in increasingly negative terms. It is understood first as undesirable and then as an imminent and even cosmic threat. The threat is seen as intrinsic to the out-group's identity—it cannot be solved, it can only be fought, through discrimination, segregation, and violence, sometimes even going as far as genocide.<sup>11</sup>

In the current environment negative terms coming government officials, political leaders, the media, groups and individuals in society directed at various out-groups are more and more prolific. As the uncertainty surrounding the virus continues and the discontent in relation to responses to the virus builds, extremism in words and actions is going to increase.

Extremism was, unfortunately, on the rise prior to the virus spreading.<sup>12</sup> The virus and the measures adopted to lessen its spread give more opportunities for extremists to act and react. Explanations for the virus tend to fit easily within the core messages of extremist groups. This is the case with Al Qaeda, ISIS and others, who speak of the virus being the will of God and how non-believers will be struck down. Of course this overlooks the fact that the virus is not making much distinction between ideological positions and that members of the extremist groups can also be afflicted. White supremacist groups (a highly diverse category) are placing global responsibility for this crisis with members of the Jewish faith, as well as expanding the rhetoric directed at other out-groups responsible for blame to Chinese and Asians more generally.<sup>13</sup> Nationalists are seeing the virus as a conspiracy by one or another state to weaken their home state. Across the ideological spectrum there are calls to action that involve more attacks or fomenting conflict between social groups and rising up against governments or other identified forces, as a means to bring about the downfall of law and order so that the new order based on the extremists' world views can be achieved.

Within the extremist narratives, there is little concern for verifiable facts or coherence in the claims and argument made. Extremists' narratives are commonly fraught with an absence of coherence, based on the expropriation of selective facts strung together to sometimes outlandish lengths. The only objective for the extremist is that the matter being articulated lends support to the overall ideology. The use of disinformation during the pandemic has been massive, used by both governments and private actors. The most obvious use of disinformation has been in the apportioning of blame for the virus upon particular groups or in the creation of various conspiracy theories. 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 to societies.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> J.M. Berger, "Out of many, one: defining the opposite of extremism," in Chertoff and Ralph, eds. *Pluralism in Peril: Challenges to an American Ideal*, Report of the Inclusive America Project, January 2018, p. 91, <https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/2018/01/Pluralism-in-Peril-Final.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Paul van Tigchelt, head of OCAM, Belgium, see Lois Colart "Le patron de L'Ocam: "On n'a jamais oublié l'extrême droite," *Le Soir*, 18 May 2020, p. 15

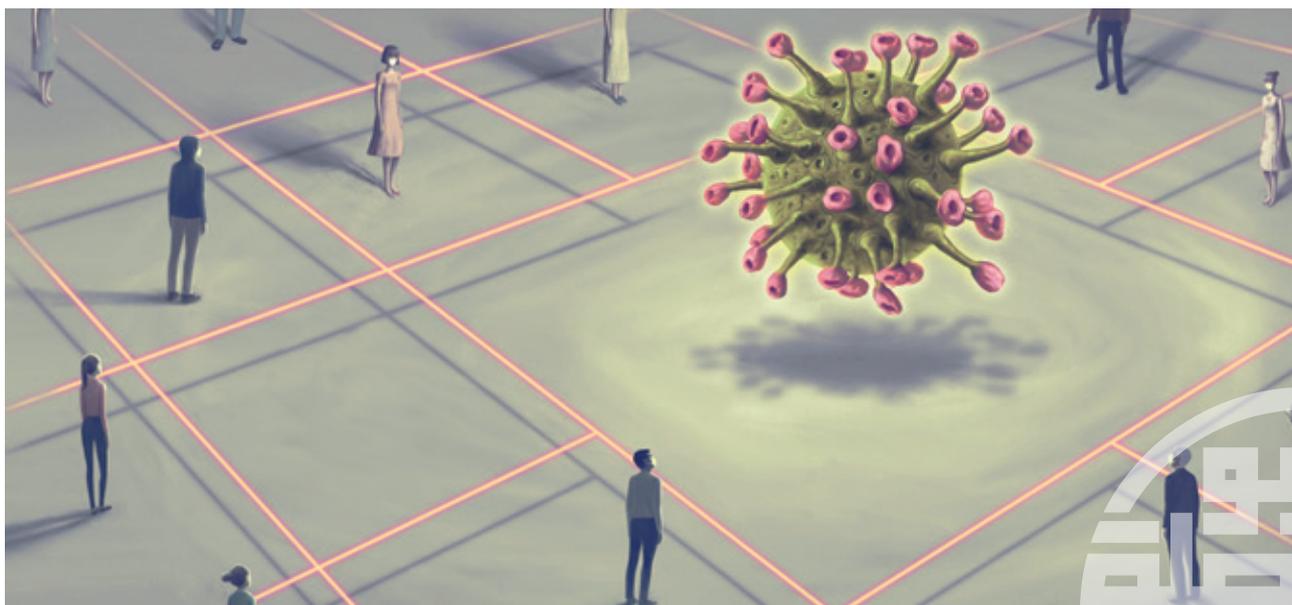
<sup>13</sup> Anna Russell, "The rise of coronavirus hate crimes," *The New Yorker*, 17 March 2020,

<https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-the-uk/the-rise-of-coronavirus-hate-crimes> reporting on information from Stop Hate U.K.

<sup>14</sup> Marc-André Argentino and Amarnath Amarasingham, "The COVID conspiracy files," *Global Network on Extremism and Technology Insights*, 8 April 2020, <https://gnet-research.org/2020/04/08/the-covid-conspiracy-files/>



With the continued uncertainty surrounding developments, more people feel vulnerable, making it more likely that harmful ideas will be taken up if they offer explanations for why things are the way they are. This in turn brings various extremist strands together in regard to the points of reference for their harmful ideas.<sup>15</sup> Belgian security services have identified right-wing and left-wing extremists trying to raise tensions between sections of the population or questioning the authority of the government as a means to create chaos in society.<sup>16</sup> Both sides want to see the downfall of the current system, paving the way for the realisation of their ideological objectives.<sup>17</sup> This results in narratives overlapping, regardless of the core ideology, placing significant demands upon security services. Disinformation in these situations works to fuel multiple narratives, making it difficult to isolate and address the sources of information that are fuelling extremist thoughts. This then leads to reinforcing narratives as groups become caught up in cycles of hatred and blame.



### 3. Divisive Narratives and Calls to Action

Extremists are taking full advantage of the current circumstances in their messaging through the wide range of networks and platforms available. The messaging ranges from explanations for the virus, the placing of blame and responsibility for its spread, descriptions of the impact it will have and recommendations on future action. This final point varies from reinforcing public health messages for slowing the spread of the virus to ideas on how the virus can be used to infect out-groups. In all of the messaging the objective is to fit the virus situation into the existing ideological positions. It does not matter if the messages are consistent, rational or logical. It is the continual process of feeding information into supportive elements of the wider narrative that is the objective of the extremists, in the quest to gain further support for their ideas. Commentators tend to feel that if an ideology expressed by extremists is inconsistent, illogical or even contradictory it should not be taken seriously. Clearly this is not a constructive approach as it is the continual amplification of the message that is important.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/how-are-germanys-coronavirus-protests-different/a-53443502>

<sup>16</sup> VSSE, "The hidden danger behind COVID-19," 21 April 2020, <https://www.vsse.be/fr/le-danger-cache-derriere-le-covid-19>

<sup>17</sup> "COVID-19 disinformation briefing no. 1," *ISD Briefing Paper*, 27 March 2020, <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/covid-19-disinformation-briefing-no-1/>; "Terrorism and COVID-19: Validation and Opportunity," op.cit. Peita Richards, "Call to arms: social media and far-right narratives of COVID-19," *Global Network on Extremism and Technology*, 18 May 2020, <https://gnet-research.org/2020/05/18/call-to-arms-social-media-and-far-right-narratives-of-covid-19/>.

<sup>18</sup> See the useful observations of Christina Ariza, "COVID-19 and the global far right," *TBI Commentary*, 14 April

The extremist narratives being expressed begin with the core beliefs of the ideology, along with adaptive insights regarding the current circumstances that reinforce the core beliefs. As extremism is based on the idea that an out-group is trying to eliminate an in-group, blame must be apportioned for the pandemic. The application of blame allows for the hatred towards the out-group to be directed. If “they” are responsible then “we” can and must take action. The blame dimension is reinforced through disinformation and conspiracy storylines. This dimension provides a drive for the feelings of hatred, as disinformation and conspiracy can be taken to outrageous dimensions.

The outrageous nature of the information and ideas being put out there is perhaps only outrageous to an observer who is not part of the in-group. For the in-group, if the disinformation and conspiracy is effectively crafted it will gain broad support and acceptance by the in-group and may even attract others. Disinformation generally is a substantial part of this overall context and something that extremists have been utilising effectively during the pandemic.<sup>19</sup> Disinformation is another dimension that existed long before COVID-19, but its amplification during the virus is strong. Disinformation has dealt with the source for the virus, blaming it on a wide range of actors from states to individuals, the reasons for the virus, claims about what can be used to treat the symptoms of the virus and the catch-all that the virus is a complete hoax. By the end of March, only a few months into the virus, on the messaging board 4chan, well known for its inappropriate content, 32.5% of the discussion threads created were dealing with COVID-19 specifically.<sup>20</sup> Disinformation feeds easily into the broad range of conspiracy theories and feelings of hatred which keep the extremist narratives moving.<sup>21</sup>

Disinformation is effective as it addresses the emotional insecurity that comes at a time of crisis due to uncertainty.<sup>22</sup> This is particularly true for extremist ideologies based on religion. ISIS, already known for its developed media machine, easily placed the virus into its messaging. In an editorial of al-Naba, the newsletter produced by ISIS, the group welcomes the idea that God had imposed painful torment as “the worst nightmare of the Crusaders” and in particular welcomed the onset of the virus upon idolaters.<sup>23</sup> It goes on with the hope that God will increase the impact of the virus upon unbelievers and save the believers from its impact. The editorial explains that God is “harsh of punishment against the one who rebels against Him, and merciful to the one who obeys Him and stands with Him.” This is all within the ISIS ideology, claiming that God’s will is being carried out according to their views and to avoid punishment from God one must continue to adhere to the ISIS version of the faith. Al-Qaeda adopts a similar tone in attributing the onset of the virus and its impact to God’s will and calls on believers to continue to fulfil their duties and on non-believers to join Islam, which is presented as a religion with practices designed to prevent viruses.<sup>24</sup> Haayat Tahrir al Sham in Syria and al-Shabaab in Somalia also view the virus as being sent by God to kill disbelievers and enemies.<sup>25</sup> There is also some evidence that evangelical Christians are adopting

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<sup>19</sup>The Institute for Strategic Dialogue. ISD is providing a useful briefing series on disinformation <https://www.isdglobal.org/issues/covid-19/>.

<sup>20</sup> “COVID-19 disinformation briefing no. 1,” *op.cit.*

<sup>21</sup> Julien Belliache, “Online antisemitism in times of COVID-19,” *Global Network on Extremism and Technology Insights*, 21 April 2020, <https://gnet-research.org/2020/04/21/online-antisemitism-in-times-of-covid-19/>

<sup>22</sup> “Terrorism and COVID-19: Validation and Opportunity,” *op.cit.*

<sup>23</sup> A full translation of the editorial is provided by Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “Islamic State editorial on the coronavirus pandemic,” 19 March 2020, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2020/03/islamic-state-editorial-on-the-coronavirus>

<sup>24</sup> Statements provided by ; Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil, “Terrorism and coronavirus: hyperbole, idealism, and ignorance,” *Fikra Forum*, 28 April 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Terrorism-Extremism-Coronavirus-ISIS-Al-Qaeda-Resurgence-COVID-19>

<sup>25</sup> Andrew Hanna, “What Islamists are doing and saying on COVID-19 crisis,” Wilson Center, 14 May 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/what-islamists-are-doing-and-saying-covid-19-crisis>; “How extremist groups are responding to COVID-19,” *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change Snapshot*, 11 June 2020, <https://institute.global/policy/snapshot-how-extremist-groups-are-responding-covid-19-11-june-2020>.



COVID-19 as part of their belief in an apocalyptic event necessary for the end of the world salvation, or at least connecting outbreaks of COVID with non-adherents to their version of faith.<sup>26</sup>

The blame dimension in messaging cuts across the ideological spectrum of extremism. In India extremist Hindu nationalists have placed blame and responsibility for the virus upon the Muslim population.<sup>27</sup> Anti-immigration groups in France and Germany have circulated information that Muslims have been spreading the virus on purpose and that the source of the virus has been tied to asylum and immigration centres.<sup>28</sup> Government officials are also responsible for targeting a specific out-group (China) in apportioning blame for the virus,<sup>29</sup> leading to a potential increase in attacks upon individuals identified as being part of that group.<sup>30</sup> The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps has increased its propaganda efforts to further anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, placing responsibility for the virus with Israel.<sup>31</sup>

Following on from blame, there are attempts by extremists to get supporters to take action against the identified out-group(s). White supremacist groups have called on followers who are infected to spread the virus in minority communities and amongst law enforcement officers.<sup>32</sup> ISIS has directed its followers not to travel to Europe, as it is a highly infected area, but has called on supporters already in Western states to launch attacks and to support prison breaks to release more supporters.<sup>33</sup> Al-Qaeda takes a different approach as it calls on believers to increase their efforts to bring about more converts to Islam and that those with wealth should offer more support for their cause. Far right extremists, along with far-left extremists, are actively calling for actions that bring about the downfall of society. Such calls, usually described under the term “boogaloo,” are about fomenting violence in society between differing groups, or about massive levels of violence generally in a way that overstretches the police and security forces. With societal collapse and chaos adherents believe that a new world can be built. Monitoring reports showed that by mid-April 125 Facebook groups were actively supporting the boogaloo idea, with more than 63% created between February and April. The overall membership of these groups was put at over 72,000 individuals, even though single individuals could belong to more than one group. The other concern is that half of these people were new members, showing how the COVID-19 context has the potential to attract new followers.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See the analysis by Marc-André Argentino on his Twitter feed -

<https://twitter.com/4ngl3rf1sh/status/1241416017978560512>.

<sup>27</sup> Eviane Leidig, “‘#CoronaJihad’: How the far-right in India is responding to the pandemic,” 15 April 2020, *GNET Insights*,

<https://gnet-research.org/2020/04/15/coronajihad-how-the-far-right-in-india-is-responding-to-the-pandemic/>

<sup>28</sup> VSSE, “The hidden danger behind COVID-19,” *op.cit.*; Paul Peachy, “German far-right exploits COVID-19 to rally anti-Muslim fervour,” *The National*, 17 May 2020, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/europe/german-far-right-exploits-covid-19-to-rally-anti-muslim-fervour-1.1019963>

<sup>29</sup> Raffaello Pantucci, “After the coronavirus, terrorism won’t be the same,” *Foreign Policy Argument*, 22 April 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/22/after-coronavirus-terrorism-isis-hezbollah-5g-wont-be-the-same/>

<sup>30</sup> Josh Campbell, “FBI concerned about potential for hate crimes during coronavirus pandemic,” *CNN*, 21 April 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/21/politics/fbi-hate-crimes-coronavirus/index.html>.

<sup>31</sup> “How extremist groups are responding to COVID-19” *op.cit.*

<sup>32</sup> ADL, “White supremacists respond to coronavirus with violent plots and online hate,” 26 March 2020, <https://www.adl.org/blog/white-supremacists-respond-to-coronavirus-with-violent-plots-and-online-hate>.

<sup>33</sup> Aymenn Al Tamimi, “Coronavirus and official Islamic State output: an analysis,” *GNET Insights*, 15 April 2020, <https://gnet-research.org/2020/04/15/coronavirus-and-official-islamic-state-output-an-analysis/>

<sup>34</sup> “Extremists are using Facebook to organise civil war amid coronavirus,” Tech Transparency Project, 22 April 2020, <https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/extremists-are-using-facebook-to-organize-for-civil-war-amid-coronavirus>

This should come as no surprise, for in times of uncertainty people will be drawn in by ideas and information, regardless of their accuracy, that appeal to their emotions. Then extremists can further the narrative into ideas for action and encourage listeners to take action in support of the extremist ideology.<sup>35</sup> The increase in extremist rhetoric and messaging has led to increased violent acts in support of extremism. In the US state of Missouri an individual attempted to carry out an attack on a hospital in March, on the first day of the lockdown there. That individual had been under surveillance by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and was motivated by the boogaloo idea and possessed extremist views around race and religion, as well as having a strong anti-government position.<sup>36</sup> An Asian family was attacked in the US state of Texas in the belief that they were spreading the virus.<sup>37</sup> A man in the US state of Massachusetts attempted to commit arson on an assisted living facility with Jewish residents as a direct result of participation in online message boards.<sup>38</sup> Exploiting developments in technology and the increase in online activity, there are reports of anti-Semitic groups interrupting Zoom events, including religious ceremonies.<sup>39</sup> White supremacy groups have been holding online "marches."<sup>40</sup>

It is not entirely clear if all of the extremist violence in 2020 is directly connected to COVID-19. In relation to violence attributable to ISIS, Al-Qaeda or the Taliban, such acts appear to be part of the ongoing planning process. At the same time, as extremist groups are opportunists and will take full advantage of changes in the behaviour of security services or global coalitions in order to exploit more chances to carry out violence.<sup>41</sup> There is a particular concern about the increase of violent attacks in Africa, as both ISIS and Al-Qaeda have been increasingly active there.<sup>42</sup> This is an area where the multinational coalitions against terrorism

“ in times of uncertainty people will be drawn in by ideas and information, regardless of their accuracy, that appeal to their emotions. Then extremists can further the narrative into ideas for action and encourage listeners to take action in support of the extremist ideology. ”

<sup>35</sup> "COVID-19 disinformation briefing no. 2," *ISD Briefing Paper* 9 April 2020, <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/covid-19-disinformation-briefing-no-2/>.

<sup>36</sup> Steve Vockrodt, "FBI records detail Cass County man's plot to bomb hospital, 'kick start a revolution,'" *The Kansas City Star*, 15 April 2020, <https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/crime/article241910061.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Hannah Allam, "A perfect storm': extremists look for ways to exploit coronavirus pandemic," 16 April 2020, NPR Special Series, <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/16/835343965/-a-perfect-storm-extremists-look-for-ways-to-exploit-coronavirus-pandemic>

<sup>38</sup> Department of Justice, "East Longmeadow man charged with attempted arson at Longmeadow assisted living residential facility," 15 April 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-ma/pr/east-longmeadow-man-charged-attempted-arson-longmeadow-assisted-living-residential>

<sup>39</sup> Julien Belliache, "Online antisemitism in times of COVID-19," *op.cit.*

<sup>40</sup> Paul Peachy, "German far-right exploits COVID-19 to rally anti-Muslim fervour," *op.cit.*

<sup>41</sup> "How extremist groups are responding to COVID-19" *op.cit.* Michael Knights, "How the Islamic State feeds on coronavirus," *Politico*, 8 April 2020,

<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/04/08/how-the-islamic-state-feeds-on-coronavirus-175192>.

<sup>42</sup> Jalloh Abu-Bakarr, "Increased terrorist attacks in Africa amid coronavirus pandemic," *DW*, 9 April 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/increased-terror-attacks-in-africa-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/a-53066398>



have scaled back some of their operations as a result of the virus, perhaps providing opportunities for extremists to act.<sup>43</sup> There are possible longer-term consequences of international support being withdrawn as it allows violent extremist groups such as ISIS to reassert control over territory.

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The actions of extremist groups in response to the virus is not only in the form of violent attacks. In situations where extremist groups provide basic services in society, the extremists themselves are the source of social support and protection.<sup>45</sup> In relation to the virus, where governments are already unable or unwilling to provide effective services,<sup>46</sup> extremist groups can continue with their societal support measures and take on new ones, further gaining trust and legitimacy. Hezbollah is an example of this, as it has long provided a range of social services to the populations it controls. In response to COVID-19 Hezbollah announced its plan for provide health care through the hospitals and clinics it operates, reinforcing its role as a public service provider. Of course, this provision by Hezbollah has to be put in the context of their extremist ideology as the measures were described as part of the wider war it was conducting and the medical staff were called "Islamic resistance medics."<sup>47</sup>

Even though many extremist groups will not have the resources to provide the intensive health care needed to treat the coronavirus or similar maladies, they are still able to capitalise on public health and safety campaigns.<sup>48</sup> In this they become a trusted voice, supporting the local community in a time of crisis, perhaps even supporting this with extremist rhetoric and disinformation. These smaller measures will go a long way to build trust and further connections with communities that will continue to look to the extremist groups for support in other matters. In Syria, HTS closed schools and mosques, markets and public spaces, transferred patients to Turkey, instructed supporters to take personal action such as observing social distancing and not shaking hands, thereby trying to show a semblance of government.<sup>49</sup> In Yemen, Ansar Allah, which is in control of government functions in parts of the state but where the infrastructure is unable to handle a pandemic, has taken action such as closing schools and promoting health campaigns, ironically using information from the US Centres for Disease Control.<sup>50</sup>

It is not necessary for the information and actions provided by extremist groups to be accurate, provided it resonates with the local population. For example Boko Haram has stated that it rejects government measures for social distancing, a view that may help the group to gain the community support that it currently lacks, as social distancing and lockdown measures are proving very unpopular.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, as the virus does not discriminate, such measures may also result in a worsening of the situation. If extremist groups such as Boko Haram reject social distancing, or if ISIS says that mosques should remain open, rejecting the government mandated

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<sup>43</sup> Julie Coleman, "The impact of Coronavirus on terrorism in the Sahel," *Perspectives*, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, April 2020, <https://icct.nl/publication/the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-terrorism-in-the-sahel/> lack of health infrastructure

<sup>44</sup> Michael Knights, "How the Islamic States feeds on coronavirus," *op.cit.*

<sup>45</sup> Michael C. Zeller, "Extremists strive in times of crisis: the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception," *op.cit.*

<sup>46</sup> Andrew Green, "If African governments won't act, the people will," *Foreign Policy*, 6 May 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/26/if-african-governments-wont-act-the-people-will/>

<sup>47</sup> Rebecca Collard, "Hezbollah prepares for its next war: against the coronavirus," *Foreign Policy*, 31 March 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/31/hezbollah-prepares-next-war-coronavirus-covid-19-lebanon/>

<sup>48</sup> Colin P. Clarke, "Yesterday's terrorists are today's public health providers," *Foreign Policy*, 8 April 2020,

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/08/terrorists-nonstate-ungoverned-health-providers-coronavirus-pandemic/>

<sup>49</sup> Andrew Hanna, "What Islamists are doing and saying on COVID-19 crisis," *op.cit.*; Aaron Zelin, "The jihadi-backed Salvation Government and COVID-19 in northwest Syria," *ISPI Commentary*, 15 May 2020,

<https://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/jihadi-backed-salvation-government-and-covid-19-northwest-syria-26152>

<sup>50</sup> Dylan Nicholson, "COVID-19 an opportunity for terrorists or a threat to their existence," *Defence Connect Key Enablers*, 29 April 2020, <https://www.defenceconnect.com.au/key-enablers/5995-global-terror-and-covid-19>

<sup>51</sup> Audu Bulama Bukarti, "How is Boko Haram responding to COVID-19?," *TBI Briefing*, 20 May 2020,

<https://institute.global/policy/how-boko-haram-responding-covid-19>

health measures, they may become directly or indirectly responsible for spreading the virus around the communities they seek to influence, leading to resentment or rejection.<sup>52</sup> Hezbollah is already facing this. It is reported that even after Lebanon closed its airports Hezbollah was arranging flights from Iran, the location of the most serious initial widespread virus outbreak after China. This led to accusations that Hezbollah cared more about Iran than the local community.<sup>53</sup> The ability of extremist groups to sustain themselves as service providers in the long-term is limited, particularly in relation to COVID-19 which is having substantial medical impacts now and is likely to create even more substantive economic difficulties. This will place extensive demands on extremists as service providers, demands that may not be met.<sup>54</sup>

Concerns have also been expressed about extremist groups attempting to capture the coronavirus for use in a possible bioweapon attack. The Council of Europe issued a warning on this.<sup>55</sup> The use of biological agents by extremists is not new. Aum Shinrikyō in Japan had chemical and biological materials at the core of their tools for terrorist attacks, even, it is reported, trying to obtain the Ebola virus - and the group did carry out a terrorist attack with sarin nerve gas. With the coronavirus it is unlikely that any extremist groups could effectively culture or utilise the virus and the potential dangers are likely outweigh any benefits.<sup>56</sup> However vigilance should remain regarding the ability of extremist organisations with the capability to create or obtain biological agents<sup>57</sup> The initial impact of COVID-19 upon health care systems will present potential models to emulate for extremists seeking to use violence. As part of the overall responses to the current pandemic keeping a serious eye on the power of biological agents should not be overlooked.

Further exploitation of the circumstances by extremists is emerging via a range of disruptions in the form of political protests related to other causes that are also occurring around the world. In some cases the events are not a direct result of COVID-19 but clearly the matters are related, representing high levels of animosity towards governments and sowing distrust in society. As events have escalated extremist narratives have adopted new domains of grievance in an effort to garner further support. Greater attention needs to be given to how governments respond to concurrent disruptions. In some cases if the government, or officials, appear to be supporting certain extremist groups this will further divisions in society and expand the influence of extremist groups and demonstrate the acceptance of extremist ideologies in society.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Hanin Ghaddar, "Hezbollah's corona quagmire: an opportunity to empower the LAF," Washington Institute Policywatch 3293, 31 March 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollahs-corona-quagmire-an-opportunity-to-empower-the-laf>

<sup>54</sup> Kateira Aryaeinejad and Bethany L. McGann, "COVID-19 and conflict: violent extremism," USIP, *The Olive Branch*, 12 May 2020, <https://www.usip.org/blog/2020/05/covid-19-and-conflict-violent-extremism>.

<sup>55</sup> "Covid-19 pandemic: the Secretariat of the Committee on Counter-Terrorism warns against the risk of bioterrorism," Council of Europe Newsroom, 6 May 2020, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/counter-terrorism/-/covid-19-pandemic-the-secretariat-of-the-committee-on-counter-terrorism-warns-against-the-risk-of-bioterrorism>

<sup>56</sup> Lydia Khalil, "COVID-19 and America's counter-terrorism response," *War on the Rocks*, 1 May 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/05/covid-19-and-americas-counter-terrorism-response/>.

<sup>57</sup> UN Office of Counter-Terrorism Virtual Counter-Terrorism Week, "Interactive discussion 1: responding to the threat of bio and cyber terrorism," 6 July 2020, [https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/cn\\_day\\_i\\_interactive\\_discussion\\_i\\_emeerging\\_threats.pdf](https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/cn_day_i_interactive_discussion_i_emeerging_threats.pdf).

<sup>58</sup> Shannon Reid and Matthew Valasik, "Why are white supremacists protesting to 'reopen' the US economy?," *The Conversation*, 28 April 2020, <https://theconversation.com/why-are-white-supremacists-protesting-to-reopen-the-us-economy-137044>





## 4. Responses to extremism

The diversity of extremist narratives currently circulating complicates the formulation of effective responses. It is recognised that governments are primarily focused on responding to the health crisis brought on by COVID-19. Responding to other developments in society being impacted by COVID-19, in particular the economies, is emerging as a key area for attention. In times of crisis responses need to be focussed and backed by sufficient resources, even if this means moving resources from other areas of action. Effective responses have occurred in situations where the messages from governments were sufficiently clear, followed by actions that not only upheld restrictions but were also directed at support for the population through measures such as access to free health care and testing. A number of the GCC states demonstrated effective responses to COVID-19 that left little space for extremists to exploit. When responses from governments are, in the view of particular groups, insufficient or too aggressive, it allows extremist narratives to further feelings of grievance, hatred and victimisation.

Governments have taken a range of measures limiting the ability of individuals to carry out day-to-day activities, including lockdowns, to keep people at home for most of the day. Different states are implementing and enforcing these measures to varying levels and degrees. It has been an area where extremists are able to reinforce their narratives by claiming to be the primary victims of the measures, while making claims that particular out-groups are able to violate the health measures with impunity.<sup>59</sup> These claims, commonly held by white supremacists, direct extremist rhetoric at both the out-group, typically minorities, and the government. Governments that have been able to provide relatively clear information in the circumstances and have based decisions on the necessity to protect health have been able to limit the ability of extremists to further their narratives.

Particular in-groups will highlight any government decision as being contrary to the needs and desires of that particular group. The failure of governments to protect citizens has already been used by extremist groups to support victim narratives and to foster feelings of illegitimacy.<sup>60</sup> To respond effectively to crises governments need to focus on ensuring high degrees of public trust as well as providing actions that enhance security and minimise tensions.<sup>61</sup> Sometimes these are

<sup>59</sup> Paul Peachy, "German far-right exploits COVID-19 to rally anti-Muslim fervour," *op.cit.*

<sup>60</sup> Colin P. Clarke, "Yesterday's terrorists are today's public health providers" *op.cit.*

<sup>61</sup> Peita Richards, "Call to arms: social media and far-right narratives of COVID-19" Global Network on Extremism and Technology, *op.cit.*

contradictory trends in practice, which furthers uncertainty or shows preferences for particular groups over others.

The situation in the USA demonstrates how in a time of crisis government responses need to be more inclusive and supportive rather than divisive and confrontational. The current US administration has been keen to push the narrative that China is responsible for the virus or for shortcomings in addressing the spread of the virus. This apportionment of culpability contributes to extremist views seeking to blame others. The levels of competing information coming from different branches of government contributed to deep levels of uncertainty, leading to claims about COVID-19 being a conspiracy and that health-based restrictions were an infringement upon individual well-being. This allowed for a diverse range of extremist positions to gain support through selective engagement with the discourse being used. Added to this, disagreement between levels of government (federal, state, city) led to confrontations between personalities, which again were exploited by extremists seeking to further divisions in society.

The situation generally became tenser towards the end of May with continued resistance to health-based restrictions. An unrelated event led to widespread protests across the country, sometimes descending into violence. This led to political polarisation both in government and society, with opposing narratives (simplistically portrayed as a conflict between left and right political positions) fuelling each other's discontent. The US Federal Government began to increase the use of the security forces, including elements of the military establishment, to protect property, disband protests and make a show of force. This is an unfortunate response, typically undertaken by weak regimes, and always results in increased discontent that the extremists can utilise. Furthermore the government called for more laws on extremism and terrorism in order to target unspecified groups, both foreign and domestic, who were deemed responsible for all of the unrest. This is another common tactic in regimes that fear for their own position – placing blame on vague entities that cannot be identified but working to distort explanations and responses in a way that hopefully favours the regime.

As a result, the US administration announced plans to label unspecified groups as “terrorists” and to bring the force of law upon their actions. It is clear that the increased use of legal measures to stop terrorism is ineffective and it is highly problematic when the reach of terrorism laws is used to target political opponents.<sup>62</sup> The USA also attempted to expand its existing laws on terrorist acts to include purposely infecting others with the virus.<sup>63</sup> The US Attorney General stated that the virus can be seen as a biological agent and its use in an attack could invoke federal terrorism laws. This is a clear overstretch in the legal constructions of terrorism, as existing criminal laws would cover any actions regarding purposeful infection.<sup>64</sup> Such attempts to stretch the law on terrorist acts further will likely fail as meeting the necessary legal requirements for a terrorist act will not be met.<sup>65</sup>

Social media companies have been coming under pressure in relation to moderating extremist content for some time now. This is due to the extent to which extremists have been able to harness the networking power and potential of online activity. Extremists have always made full use of

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<sup>62</sup> Richard Burchill, “Legal Constructions of Terrorism,” in Stohl, Burchill and Englund, *Constructions of Terrorism: Interdisciplinary Approaches* (University of California Press, 2017), pp. 138-150.

<sup>63</sup> Nikita Malik, “In the United States coronavirus coughing attacks may be prosecuted as terrorism,” *Forbes*, 14 April 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nikitamalik/2020/04/14/in-the-united-states-coronavirus-coughing-attacks-may-be-prosecuted-as-terrorism/#c31fee42a883>

<sup>64</sup> Lydia Khalil, “COVID-19 and America’s counter-terrorism response” *op.cit.*; Manal Cheema and Ashley Deeks, “Prosecuting purposeful coronavirus exposure as terrorism” *Lawfare*, 31 March 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/prosecuting-purposeful-coronavirus-exposure-terrorism>.

<sup>65</sup> Lydia Khalil, “COVID-19 and America’s counter-terrorism response” *op.cit.*



innovations in mass media and social media has “uniquely empowered extremist movements.”<sup>66</sup> This empowerment has truly come to the fore in the COVID-19 context.<sup>67</sup> Extremists’ narratives are proliferating across different platforms and are taking advantage of the “hospitable environments” provided.<sup>68</sup> Social media companies are attempting to take action, in particular in relation to disinformation, but the results have been mixed.<sup>69</sup> In a time of crisis such as this, access to information and communication should be a positive advantage in disseminating accurate and helpful information. But in a clear example of the capabilities of extremists to exploit a situation, the furthering of extremist narratives through divisiveness and hatred has been the more prominent feature.

Going forward, mitigating the impact of extremism in the context of COVID-19 is not going to come from government approaches based on securitisation or law and order approaches. Social media companies cannot be expected to identify and remove all extremist content. Effective responses for mitigating the influence of extremist ideologies need to come from multiple actors, from government, to private actors, to local communities. The objective to be pursued should be the reinforcement and increased recognition of our shared humanity in the face of a pandemic. As the virus and its impacts are not likely to dissipate in the near future it is imperative to ensure that responses do not continue to fuel extremism.

“Effective responses for mitigating the influence of extremist ideologies need to come from multiple actors, from government, to private actors, to local communities.”

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<sup>66</sup> Berger, *Extremism, op.cit.*, p. 149.

<sup>67</sup> Mark Scott and Steven Overly, “Conspiracy bingo: transatlantic extremists seize on the pandemic,” *Politico*, 12 May 2020,

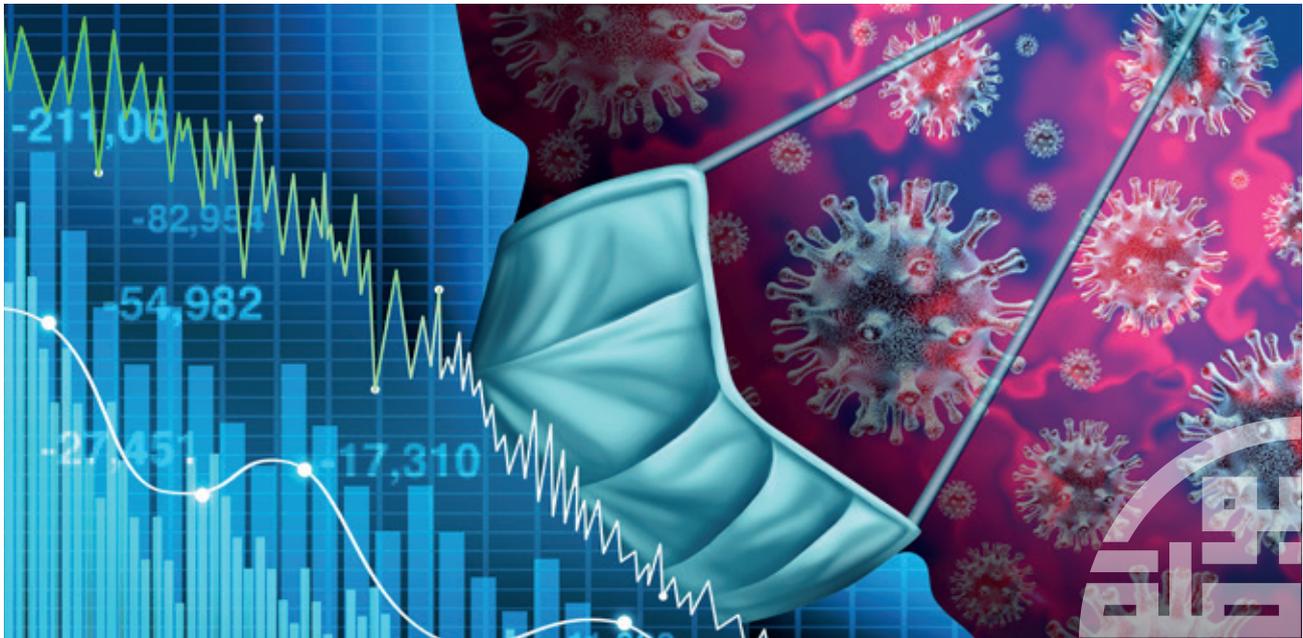
<https://www.politico.eu/article/far-right-conspiracy-theorists-coronavirus-covid19-pandemic-lockdown-protests/>.

<sup>68</sup> Marc-André Argentino, “Digital platforms and extremism 2: electric boogaloo” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology Insights*, 8 June 2020,

<https://gnet-research.org/2020/06/08/digital-platforms-and-extremism-2-electric-boogaloo/>.

<sup>69</sup> Chloe Colliver and Jennie King, “The first 100 days: coronavirus and crisis management on social media platforms,” *ISD Report*, 15 May 2020, <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/the-first-100-days/> See “Extremists are using Facebook to organise civil war amid coronavirus,” Tech Transparency Project, 22 April 2020,

<https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/extremists-are-using-facebook-to-organize-for-civil-war-amid-coronavirus>.



## 5. Suggestions on the way forward.

The ongoing evolution and impact of COVID-19 will keep uncertainty around us for the foreseeable future. The question of how long restriction measures can remain in place, or the impact of the reintroduction of restrictions if the virus resurges, are uncertainties facing governments and societies. At present it appears that both governments and societies are seeking to move beyond the virus and attempt to return to normality. What impacts this will bring remain to be seen, but extremists will continue to make use of the situation in support of their ideologies.

The economic impact of the pandemic is already being felt, which is one of the reasons that governments and societies are seeking to end the health-based restrictions which may cause further disruptions in society. Indicators are suggesting that an economic downturn globally is likely, regardless of any measures taken at this stage.<sup>70</sup> The economic impact of COVID-19 is going to be multi-dimensional and will have a significant impact on the continued spread of extremism. In particular the immense levels of public spending to support health care systems, to maintain employment levels, to provide public support due to job losses and to maintain particular sectors of economic activity, mean that less money is available in other areas. The global economy has not fully recuperated from the economic crisis ten years ago. Research has shown that following major financial crises, extremism, in particular far right ideologies, grows.<sup>71</sup> The research shows that during and following financial crises uncertainty in society grows and that people are more easily taken in by extremist rhetoric. Extremists can easily take advantage of circumstances through “the repurposing of pre-existing prejudices and narratives to fit the crisis.”<sup>72</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Information on this is widespread, samples can be found at “The economic impact of COVID-19: can policy makers avert a multi-trillion dollar crisis?,” UNCTAD Press Release, 9 March 2020, <https://unctad.org/en/pages/PressRelease.aspx?OriginalVersionID=548>; World Economic Forum, “5 charts that show the global economic impact of coronavirus” 31 March 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/03/take-five-quarter-life-crisis/>; The Economist Intelligence Unit, “Sovereign debt crises are coming,” 2020, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/sovereign-debt-crises-are-coming/>; EIU, “COVID-19 to send almost all G20 countries into a recession,” 26 May 2020, <https://www.eiu.com/n/covid-19-to-send-almost-all-g20-countries-into-a-recession/>

<sup>71</sup> Manuel Funke, Moritz Schularick, Christoph Trebesch, “Going to extremes: politics after financial crises, 1870-2014,” *European Economic Review* (2016), pp. 227-260. The research only examines electoral democratic systems.

<sup>72</sup> Milo Comerford and Jacob Davey, “Comparing jihadist and far-right extremist narratives on COVID-19,” *op.cit.*

A prime area of attention going forward will be ensuring that marginalised and disposed groups do not drift further away in society. Domestically fewer resources will be available for monitoring extremist groups. The EU's Counter-Terrorism Coordinator has warned that "The massive amount of money that will be spent to address the economic, social and healthcare consequences of the virus risks being at the expense of security. We must prevent the one crisis ending up producing another."<sup>73</sup> Governments are in a dilemma as the economic stimulus needed to get economies back into positive growth is going to require cutbacks in other areas over the long-term.

With demands for national public spending likely to remain high, support for counter-terrorism efforts overseas mean that force commitments are unlikely to be at the same levels in the coming years.<sup>74</sup> This may open an opportunity to move away from current trends in overseas counter-terrorism, where military/security responses or the funding of stand-alone projects are the norm, and instead focus attention and resources on long-term community building measures that work to minimise divisiveness.<sup>75</sup>

Economic deprivation, real or perceived, is understood to be a primary factor in fuelling grievances and the hatred of others.<sup>76</sup> If unemployment persists, especially among the younger sections of populations, there is a clear demographic for recruitment extremists. If disinformation about who is or is not benefiting from economic measures continues to pro-liferate in the media then more and more people will begin to identify with the extremist messages.

Particular focus needs to be on minimising job losses and ensuring that social safety nets do not give way due to austerity measures. If COVID-19 has put the world in

“ Economic deprivation, real or perceived, is understood to be a primary factor in fuelling grievances and the hatred of others. ”

<sup>73</sup> Luke Baker, "Militants, fringe groups exploiting COVID-19, warns EU anti-terrorism chief," *Reuters*, 30 April 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-eu-security/militants-fringe-groups-exploiting-covid-19-warns-eu-anti-terrorism-chief-idUSKBN22C2HG>

<sup>74</sup> Chloe Cornish and Asmaa al-Omar, "ISIS operations increase in Iraq as coalition withdraws," *Financial Times*, 9 June 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/abbdcd29-fe66-4be2-b35e-efcfca536ce1>; Julie Coleman, "The impact of Coronavirus on terrorism in the Sahel," Perspectives, The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, April 2020, <https://icct.nl/publication/the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-terrorism-in-the-sahel/>

<sup>75</sup> Julie Coleman, "The impact of Coronavirus on terrorism in the Sahel" Perspectives, *op.cit.*; Andrew Silke, "COVID-19 and terrorism: assessing the short- and long-term impacts," *Pool Re Commentary*, 5 May 2020, <https://www.poolre.co.uk/solutions/risk-awareness/covid-19-and-terrorism-report/>; Ivano di Carlo, "In chaos, they thrive: the resurgence of extremist and terrorist groups during the COVID-19 pandemic," *European Policy Centre Commentary*, 5 May 2020, <http://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/In-chaos-they-thrive-The-resurgence-of-extremist-and-terrorist-group~32c800>.

<sup>76</sup> Jonas R Kunst and Milan Obaidi, "Understanding violent extremism in the 21st century: the (re)emerging role of relative deprivation," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 35 (2020), pp. 55-59.

unprecedented times and there is no return to “normal” then perhaps this is an opportunity to rethink economic responses in a way that supports sustainable peace and development more generally and in a way that leads to fewer feelings of marginalisation and that undermines grievance claims. This is unlikely as governments appear to favour big numbers when dealing with economic recovery, rather than focussing on the sustainable solutions at the local level that are widely beneficial.

As the economic impact takes hold and uncertainty continues, extremist narratives will be able to connect with a wide range of emotions and grievances, possibly leading to violent action. The repurposing of existing narratives will continue, including redirecting hostility to various out-groups as fits the context. This then leads to cycles of reinforcing extremism in which hostile acts by one group become part of the narrative for hostile acts in return, and this is not a healthy condition for society. Efforts need to focus on furthering understanding and tolerance and not fomenting divisions. The continuing use of divisive language, polarising rhetoric and blame will continue to damage social cohesion.<sup>77</sup>

While there have been positive examples of cooperation and support at all levels, it appears more likely that feelings of anger, disillusion and contempt for others will continue to fuel extremist views.<sup>78</sup> Attention needs to be given to the lived experiences of people, as this is where extremist groups can penetrate, either through service provision and support or by providing supportive messages that people will grasp on to. This requires leadership that looks to the longer term, that places an emphasis on the lived experiences of individuals in society and that ensures support. One example comes with the EU funded project on Strengthening Resilience to Violence and Extremism (STRIVE), conducted in cooperation with Hedayah, the international centre for excellence on countering violent extremism, based in Abu Dhabi, UAE. This programme has resulted in extensive education, training and information tools and resources to support efforts at the local level.<sup>80</sup> Measures of this nature need to receive continuing support through continued global cooperation to ensure that the COVID-19 crisis does not result in further crises due to the growth of extremism.

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<sup>77</sup> “COVID-19 and its impact on racism and hate crimes,” Soufan Centre, *op.cit.*

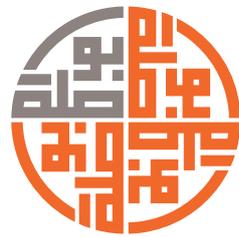
<sup>78</sup> Raffaello Pantucci, “After the coronavirus, terrorism won’t be the same,” *op.cit.*

<sup>79</sup> United Nations, A UN Framework for the immediate socio-economic response to COVID-19, April 2020, pp. 29-31; Michael C. Zeller, “Extremists strive in times of crisis: the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception,” *op.cit.*

<sup>80</sup> Hedayah, “STRIVE global program,” 11 March 2020, <https://www.hedayahcenter.org/programs/eu-strive-global/>.







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