# Covid-19 and its impact on Terrorism

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## Abstract

The impact of Covid-19 in the global sphere has been profound. The world is battling questions around public health, economy, politics and society. As such, violent ideologies such as terrorism and extremism, have called for expansion. In 2020, terrorist activities have suffered a slowdown globally leading to a flattened curve. Despite that, the United Nations have warned that the pandemic poses a significant threat to the safety, health, and wellbeing of societies and communities around the world. Several reports have warned about violent groups viewing the pandemic as an opportunity for expansion. It is in this context that the paper will look at the social and economic fallout of the pandemic and its effects on terrorism, the current trends concerning extremist and terrorist activities and how the extremist or the terrorist groups have been exploiting the pandemic and its consequent government responses.

**Keywords**: Terrorism, Covid-19, TerroristOrganisations, ISIS, Right-Wing Terrorism

## 1. Introduction

The definition of terrorism is debatable and the international community is still working to adopt a comprehensive definition. At the onset of the report, it is important to note that terrorism is often difficult to distinguish from other forms of political violence and

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violent crime, such as state-based armed conflict, non-state conflict, one-sided violence, hate crime, and homicide. Terrorism is commonly understood to refer to acts of violence that target civilians in the pursuit of political or ideological aims (OHCHR 2008).

In 1994, the General Assembly's Declaration on Measures to Eliminate International Terrorism, set out in its resolution 49/60, stated that terrorism includes "criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes" and that such acts "are in any circumstances unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other nature that may be invoked to justify them." The Security Council, in its resolution 1566 (2004), referred to "criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a Government or an international organisation to do or to abstain from doing any act". Later that year, the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change described terrorism as any action that is "intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants, when the purpose of such an act, by its nature or context, is to intimidatea population, or to compel a Government or an international organisation to do or to abstain from doing any act" and identified a number of key elements, with further reference to the definitions contained in the 1999 International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism and Security Council resolution 1566(OHCHR 2008).Violent extremism has also been rarely defined. USAID defines it as "advocating, engaging in, preparing, or otherwise supporting ideologically motivated or justified violence to further social, economic or political objectives". 'Violent extremism' is usually considered to be a more inclusive term than 'terrorism', although they are broadly synonymous in use (Glazzard and Zeuthen 2016).This paper will be looking at how the emergence of a pandemic like the Covid-19 is impacting extremism. Covid-19 is creating more uncertainty and distrust across societies. According

to Baver, Backer and Willer (2020), disease threat can give rise to discrimination and violence. The bubonic plagueunleashed massive violence in Europe, including the murder of Catalans in Sicily, clerics and beggars in some locations, and pogroms against Jews, with over a thousand communities eradicated (Baver et al 2020). In such a scenario, the paper will look at the social and economic fallout of the pandemic and its effects on terrorism, the current trends concerning extremist and terrorist activities and how the extremist or the terrorist groups have been exploiting the pandemic and its consequent government responses.

## 2. Extremism in 2019

The year 2019 witnessed the risk of Islamic State of Iraq and al Shamam (ISIS) changing dimension with its caliphate demolished, its leader Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi killed, and the organisation becoming more atomised and decentralised. While the organisation became weaker, it now had the potential to spread to other regions and inciting lone wolf attacks (Habbard et al 2019).The year 2019 also witnessed Al Qaeda, founded by Osama Bin Laden in 1988 to wage a global war against the West, with limited means to strike the West. It was operating from a hideout in Afghanistan close to the Pakistan border, but it had morphed into a decentralised network with affiliates from West Africa to South Asia. They had gained ground in conflict-ridden areas in Yemen, Syria, as well as throughout Africa, including Sahel (Hannah and Nada 2020). At the beginning of 2020, it was predicted that state-sponsored terrorism was on a rise. Iran was accused of state-sponsored terrorism and equipping proxy groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah and Kata'ib Hezbollah with advanced military technology such as the unmanned aerial systems, drones, or short-range ballistic missiles (US Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism 2019). Along with that, there has been a continuing uptick in the proliferation of white supremacy extremist organisations. These groups are getting popular in various parts of the world, including North America, Europe, Australia, and are exploiting social media to spread propaganda, recruit new members, and finance their organisations and operations. The year 2019 had seen high profile

attacks, such as the Christchurch massacre in New Zealand, Halle in Germany, and El Paso in Texas(citation) (Clarke 2020)

All of that emboldened white supremacy extremists and neo-Nazis in their propaganda (Clarke 2020). Germany disbanded one of its elite special forces units because it was full of far-right extremists hoarding explosives and ammunition to carry out terrorist acts or overthrow the government. Indeed, a German minister called far-right terror the biggest threat to Germany's democracy. Over the last two years, far-right terrorists have attacked a synagogue, assassinated a politician, and murdered nine immigrants (Kamat 2020). The countries worst impacted by terrorism were: Afghanistan followed by Iraq, Nigeria, Syria, and Pakistan. India stood at the seventh position.



## 3. Impact of Covid-19

The United Nations Institute of Training and Research (2020) has stated that the pandemic has brought a significant threat to the safetyand wellbeing of societies and communities around the world. The pandemic has ushered the deepest global recession in the last eight decades (Brookings 2020). The economic fallout has been felt mostly in the developing world and the underdeveloped nations. With rising public health costs and austere Counter-Terrorism budgets, The UNITR (2020) warned that the violent

extremists across the ideological spectrum viewed the global pandemic as an opportunity for expansion. The report talked about the positive trends such as the decreased recruitment activities in public spaces and other offline settings, decreased visibility for violent extremist and terrorist groups in media, and a potential discontent towards leaders of extremist groups. However, there has been increased activity in the online space, especially social media.

## 4. Covid-19 Propaganda

There has also been an increased spread of disinformation, conspiracy theories, and propaganda. Groups have been exploiting moderate political protests or movements to spread extremist narratives, expand their support base, and recruit new members. According to Ackerman and Peterson (2020), during times of crisis, terrorists often exploit the situation and use it for propaganda. This is particularly true amongst anti-government groups on both the far-right and far-left. They take advantage of widespread anxiety and distrust in leadership to promote radicalisation and violence.Economic fallout at times renders state institutions and models of governance weak. Dissatisfaction with government responses can exacerbate anti-govt attitudes that can be exploited by extremist groups. The pandemic-led recession will lead to increased poverty levels providing fertile hunting grounds for terrorist organisations. For example, Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan in the late 1990s and early 2000s became 'happy hunting grounds' for the Al Qaeda to recruit. Africa is quite vulnerable in this regard.  Even before the pandemic, regional conflicts had already created food crises in parts of Africa.

Organisations such as Boko Haram in Nigeria are using the pandemic to strengthen their campaigns of violence. The group is increasing its recruitment to carry out violence in the region (Belinger and Kattelman 2020). During the Covid-19 pandemic, many terrorist groups around the world have sought to capitalise on the coronavirus pandemic, using it to promote their worldviews and to try and draw in new recruits. Some have even masqueraded as healthcare providers, offering advice on hygiene, building quarantine centres and enforcing lockdowns. Pakistan based

terrorist groups Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) have been providing essential service assistance and end up gaining the loyalty of the local population and access to a new pool of recruits. Similarly, in Turkey, the Islamic State recruiters are targeting migrants from Turkmenistan who have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic (Belinger and Kattelman 2020). As good governance breaks down, terrorist movements find the opportunity to embed themselves. Barton (2020) explains that in failing states, the diminished capacity of the state to protect its citizens, and the distrust between citizens and authorities, provides ample opportunities for terrorist groups to exploit grievances and needs. This is the reason around 75% of all deaths due to terrorist activities in recent years have occurred in just five nations: Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Nigeria (followed by Somalia, Libya, and Yemen) (Barton 2020).Recognising that government resources are stretched thin, they have also encouraged their followers to take advantage and launch attacks. Provision of healthcare services and charity presents an opportunity for terrorists to grow their support base and potentially raise additional funds. In the months and years ahead, rising poverty and unemployment, combined with frustration at incompetent and corrupt regimes, may lead to an even greater pool of potential recruits (Mullins 2020).
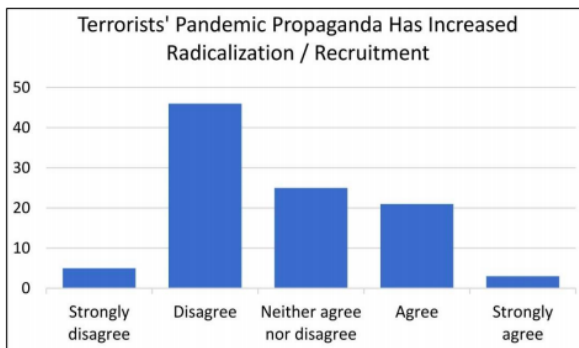


**Figure 1.** Respondents' answers to the statement, "Terrorists are exploiting the coronavirus pandemic in their propaganda. Because of this, we have seen an increase in the number of people becoming radicalized and/or joining terrorist organizations in my country."

*Source: Mullins (2020)*

The UNDP report 'Journey to Extremism' (2020) has found that law enforcement approaches lacking respect for fundamental rights

may provoke tension and could facilitate violent extremist recruitment from disfranchised populations. COVID-19 related lockdowns with limitations of freedoms and local authorities imposing preventive measures through force could lead to further tensions and disfranchisement of parts of the population (UNITAR 2020).

## 5. Preparing for Operations

UNITAR (2020) research further suggests that radicals can use this time to prepare for operations, collecting intelligence, conducting surveillance, and improving technical skills as well as wage cyber terrorism. There has been an increase in extremist activity on the internet, including the number of online "venues" (groups, pages, channels, and so on hosting extremist content) as well as traffic to those sites, which suggests an uptick in the public interest. Al Qaida's Central media outlet, the Al-SahabFoundation issued a statement titled "The Way Forward – A word of Advice on the Coronavirus Pandemic." (Memri 2020)in March 2020. The document urged Muslims to act to free Muslim prisoners, and Muslim scholars to seize the opportunity to promote jihad, support the mujahideen and spread the "correct creed".It exhorted non-Muslims to use the time in quarantine to study and embrace Islam and castigated Western governments (Memri 2020). The ISIS on the other hand "is recommending various health guidelines to its members and supporters … [and] also encouraging them to not show mercy to the western countries … but rather to continue to attack them, and exploit their weaknesses in these times"(Burke 2020). Between the 11th and 17th March 2020, the ISIS launched significant attacks in seven countries: Egypt, Niger, Nigeria, the Philippines, Somalia, and Yemen. In April alone, ISIS launched over 100 attacks in Iraq. The group has recommended that members do not travel to western countries to launch attacks, but those already present should act (Burke 2020). According to Kruglanski et. al. (2020), far-right was responsible for 90% of terrorist attacks in the US compared to 66% in 2019 at the time of writing that article. There have also been right-wing attacks against anti-lockdown protests in Germany. There has also been a

significant worldwide uptick in cyberattacks, mostly targeting hospitals.There are concerns that the pandemic will provide an opportunity for the militants to win support over people as their governments remain poorly resourced, stretched, corrupt and authoritarian. They are exploiting gaps in security, and the general burdens on societies that the pandemic imposes are pushing forward their ideologies as a cure for fear, frustration, and panic (Bloom, 2020). Terrorist organisations already have the skills to develop a close bond over the internet and to incite people to create violence without ever meeting in person.   There have been unsupervised Internet activity among young people, who could be exposed to terrorist messaging on social media, online chatrooms, or gaming communities (United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, 2020).

## 6.    Re-deployment    of    Forces/    Challenges    for Counterterrorism operatives

According to Mullins (2020), as security forces have been re-deployed to enforce lockdowns or other duties, the short- and long-term risk of terrorism has increased. In response to the pandemic, USAFRICOM implemented a "stop movement"directive and forced health protection procedures. Two multinational exercises were cancelled, "[m]ost security cooperation activities across the continent [were] paused" (Mullins 2020) embassy staff were reduced and USAID missions were severely curtailed. Similarly, the Lead Inspector General Report on Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) in Iraq and Syria documented the fact that training of Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) was suspended, causing more than a dozen Coalition countries to reposition their troops outside of Iraq (Mullins 2020).
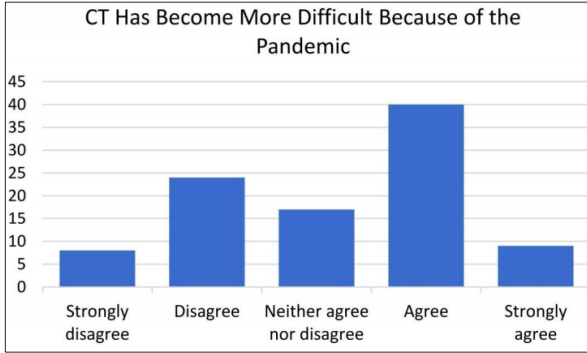
**Figure 3**. Respondents' answers to the statement, "Counter-terrorism has been made more difficult in my country as a result of the pandemic. This is because resources have been diverted, and/or because social distancing has made some counter-terrorism duties harder to do."

*Source: Mullins (2020)*

Operational support for the ISF was also temporarily suspended. This confirms that the pandemic has indeed harmed Counterterrorism in many places. However, some security forces have been able to adapt and closely collaborate with Counter Terrorism partner agencies, domestic and international, despite the disruption caused by changes in work arrangements. There is a silver lining for the counter-terror operatives as there is a possibility for greater information sharing and facilitating intra- and inter-governmental cooperation among regional and Western countries. At the beginning of the pandemic, security forces faced the biggest challenge in accessing classified information during the strictest part of the lockdowns. This has given birth to the possibility of sustainable, locally developed approaches to counter-terrorism that are less dependent on the technical capabilities and sophisticated weapons systems provided by Western states (Brookings 2020). UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team observed that lockdowns in conflict zones have ensured that terrorists are more likely to be able to continue operating as before. Those outside the conflict zones, where States can exert control, are more likely to be affected by restrictive measures put in place to limit the spread of disease. Even within the same country, groups may be affected differently, depending on their composition and respective capabilities(UNSC 2020). Even as extremist and terrorist groups have experienced setbacks and challenges, including lost

opportunities to network and raise funds, decreased state sponsorship, restricted mobility and potentially limited access to the material (due to reductions in cross-border movement of goods), combined with continued pressure from security forces. The lockdowns or curfews as well as other measures put in place to control the pandemic made it harder for the groups to move around.

## 7. Modified Strategies for Attacks

The pandemic has restricted travel and movement of people, and travellers are under increased scrutiny. This can lead to changed tactics in plotting the attacks.

1. New targets such as hospitals and supermarkets: According to the UNITAR (2020), instead of the traditional targets in the public space, new targets can be hospitals and supermarkets. Terrorists may target public health infrastructure. Even as public places are less crowded, hospitals are more crowded. There is a window of opportunity that attackers can take advantage of. According to Politico (2020), the United States security agency, Foreign Bureau of Investigation, foiled a plan of bombing a Missouri hospital treating COVID-19 patients. The potential attacker had been planning an attack for months, which he "decided to accelerate" and to target the hospital because of the pandemic. The Bureau also said he was "motivated by racial, religious, and anti-government animus."

2. Intentional spreading on a smaller scale: Followers of extreme right-wing terrorist groups have been encouraged to conduct attacks using the virus as a weapon and intentionally spreading it. Although at a small-scale, there have already been reported threats and incidents of weaponising their illness and intentionally infecting others (UNITAR 2020).

3. Large scale bioterrorism attacks: In the past, several cases have come to light in which groups like RISE, Aum Shirinyko, and so on have planned to use germ warfare on people. There have been stories of individuals and members of groups attempting to weaponise agents of bubonic and pneumonic plague.

According to research, intentional disseminating of dangerous pathogens to infect people is possible for perpetrators who are less concerned with their safety. In the wake of Covid-19, homegrown terrorists are getting ideas about how to weaponise the virus (Politico 2020).

4. Seizing an opportunity to launch attacks/ gain lost grounds: Leading ISIS figures have called to seize the opportunity and launch attacks, while countries are busy fighting the pandemic. Most terrorist groups are taking African and Middle Eastern countries like Libya, Chad, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and others as their hubs and operational base. As these nations' authorities and security forces focus their capabilities on curbing the coronavirus spread, terrorist groups would utilise such a window period to harness their abilities (Global Security Review 2020). Notably, there has been an increase in terrorist activity in conflict zones of Africa and Iraq in the first half of 2020. There has also been ISIS re-grouping and increasing activity in Iraq and Syria (Global Times 2020). The attacks probably took advantage of the local authorities scaling back the number of troops on the ground due to the coronavirus pandemic.

## 8. Activities of Terrorist Groups During the Pandemic

Groups like the ISIS, Boko Haraam, Al Qaeda have used the pandemic to step up attacks across different conflict theatres. In 2019, the United States and allies had succeeded in dismantling the ISIS caliphate and killed its leader Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi. However, 2020 has seen a resurgence of the group amid instability in the Middle East with the pandemic.

## 9. The Rebirth of ISIS

According to Harding (2020), the ISIS has regenerated with a strong presence across at least 11 countries with military-grade weapons and large fighting factions in six African, three Middle East and two Asian countries. More than 10,000 fighters are operating in Syria and Iraq and several thousand are estimated to have joined

the group's regional affiliates. At the height of its reign, more than 40,000 fighters were part of the ISIS. That number has come down but it still presents a massive threat to the region and beyond. In April 2020, the ISIS launched new offensives in Iraq and Syria as Covid-19 distracted the US-led coalition and local security forces. These included suicide bombings, night-time ambushes of security forces and assassinations.

Using well-practised camouflage skills, a force of 300 extremists slipped across the Ravuma River to invade Tanzania in mid-October. Within hours, the gunmen overwhelmed the local security and entered the small town of Kitaya, murdering citizens at will. The assault demonstrated the growing boldness and ability of the IS Central Africa Province, which is based in Mozambique with ambitions to establish itself across the region (Harding 2020). The number of ISIS attacks that had dropped sharply in 2018, started picking up since the second quarter of 2019. There has been a 94% increase in attacks from  Q1 of 2019 to Q1 of 2020. ISIS has shifted its tactics from basic kidnapping and shake-downs of local officials to more brazen car bombs, roadside ambushes, sniper attacks and suicide bombings of police and military forces. It has been conducting attacks in several Iraqi provinces. Even though the pandemic's impact on funding and finances are unclear, the threat of cybercrime as a funding source has increased (Business Standard 2020). According to Harding (2020), the ISIS is seeking to establish bases across sub-Sahara Africa in countries such as Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Nigeria.
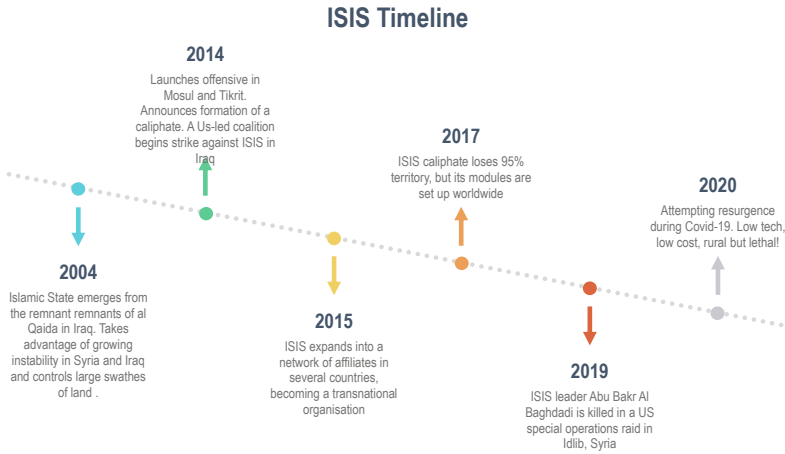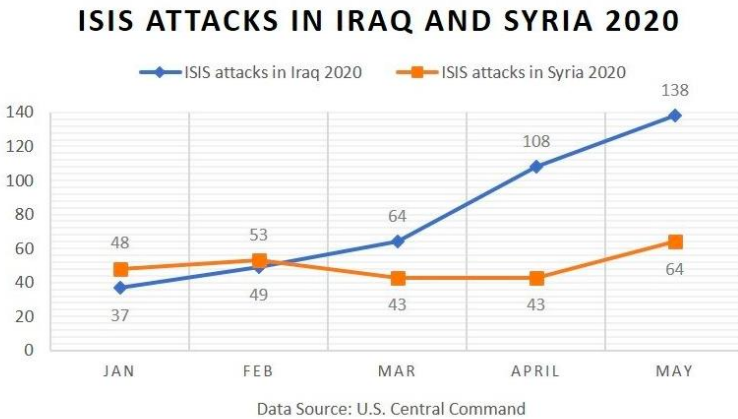
## ISIS Timeline

**2014**
Launches offensive in Mosul and Tikrit. Announces formation of a caliphate. A Us-led coalition begins strike against ISIS in Iraq

**2017**
ISIS caliphate loses 95% territory, but its modules are set up worldwide

**2020**
Attempting resurgence during Covid-19. Low tech, low cost, rural but lethal!

**2004**
Islamic State emerges from the remnant remnants of al Qaida in Iraq. Takes advantage of growing instability in Syria and Iraq and controls large swathes of land .

**2015**
ISIS expands into a network of affiliates in several countries, becoming a transnational organisation

**2019**
ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi is killed in a US special operations raid in Idlib, Syria

*Image Credit: Created by author*

## ISIS ATTACKS IN IRAQ AND SYRIA 2020

ISIS attacks in Iraq 2020     ISIS attacks in Syria 2020

| | JAN | FEB | MAR | APRIL | MAY |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Iraq | 37 | 49 | 64 | 108 | 138 |
| Syria | 48 | 53 | 43 | 43 | 64 |

Data Source: U.S. Central Command

Apart from Iraq and Syria, there have been fears of attacks by the ISIS on several US and European healthcare targets that are in the pandemic frontline (The New Indian Express 2020). ISIS has called for their fighters to attack lightly guarded camps in Syria and free the ISIS prisoners. In May, the ISIS prisoners took control of a prison holding as many as 5000 captives before they were suppressed. In March 2020, German authorities arrested four suspected ISIS members allegedly planning an attack on American military facilities with explosives. They reportedly first planned to

attackTajikistan but later shifted their target to Germany, including US Air Force bases in the country and persons deemed critical of Islam (Stripes 2020). An ISIS group publication 'Voice of Hind' in India has called for supporters to spread the pandemic. UN's Analytical Support and Sanction Monitoring Team had warned that the ISIS's Indian affiliate (Hind Wilayah), which was announced in May 2019, has between 180 and 200 members, and significant numbers of operatives are in Kerala and Karnataka. The report also underlined how Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) could have between 150 and 200 members from Bangladesh, India, Myanmar and Pakistan. The group has also been exploiting the pandemic by ramping up its online recruitment drive. This can lead to the threat of attacks by 'lone wolves' actors inspired online.

## 10. The Insurgents in the Sahel Region

In the Sahel region, the conflict has carried on for eight years with no signs of abating. In 2019, more than 4000 killed, 1 million forced to flee their homes (United Nations 2020). Halfway through 2020, the number of reported fatalities in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger has either neared or surpassed the full total for each country in 2019. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project indicated that the number of violent events in the Sahel linked to militants ballooned from 147 in mid-2017 to 999 in mid-2020. This has been due to multi-directional violence being pursued by militant groups, state forces and ethnic-based militias (ACLED 2020). The number of food-insecure people in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger has risen by 1 million to 4.8 million since the start of the outbreak (FAO 2020). Many now live in unsanitary, cramp refugee camps with limited access to water. The conflict is at high risk of spilling into the neighbouring countries and destabilising the region. Even though Sahel will not pose a transnational threat to other countries like the US and Europe, the issues of collective security and migration do come to fore.
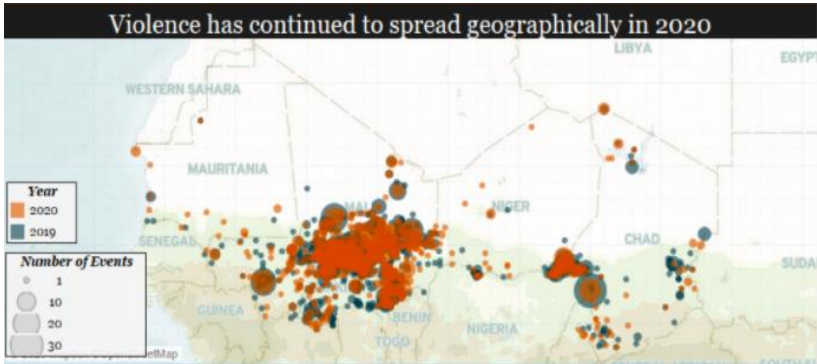
Source: ACLED (2020)

In the first six months of 2020, there have been 34 armed engagements between Al Qaeda-affiliated Jama'ah Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the ISIS in Greater Sahara (ISGS), or the Greater Sahara faction of Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) leaving 300 militants dead (ACLED 2020). According to the data by ACLED (2020), a dozen soldiers were killed in northern Cote d'Ivoire, near the border with Burkina Faso in June. In Mali, JNIM militants and Fulani militias have conducted incessant attacks against Dogon villages. In Chad, militants of Jama'atu Ahlis-Sunna lid-Dawati wal-Jihad (JAS), or Boko Haram, carried out the deadliest attack ever recorded in Bohoma, killing at least 92 soldiers. Many more attacks have been taking place in the northernmost border regions of Benin, Togo, Ivory Coast, and Niger. Along with that, there has been an increase in extrajudicial killings by the local force. In the first six months of 2020, government forces in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger killed 585 civilians, according to data collected by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (2020). With regards to the pandemic, the narrative of Jihadist groups has revolved around the idea that COVID-19 is a divine punishment targeting the 'unbelievers' in the West (Azman 2020), which was reinforced by the fact that the first confirmed cases in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso were all 'imported' from Europe. Moreover, due to the pandemic and shortage of transport and equipment for the security forces as well as travel restrictions, terrorist organisations in the Sahel region and the Horn of Africa are poised to get stronger. The

groups will capitalise on the pandemic to carry out attacks against the national and international forces. An example in this regard is the strengthening of groups like the Boko Haram in  Cameroon, Chad and Nigeria. The Chibok abduction of 200 girls in Apr 2014, prompted its rise as one of the most lethal terrorist organisations. Boko Haram promotes a version of Islam that considers western education as "Haram". Around 3 million people have been displaced in more than a decade of terrorist activities by Boko Haram (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2020).Boko Haram condemned lockdowns and social distancing and closing of pilgrimage in Mecca and congregational prayers (Campbell 2020). It has also been luring the young Nigerian population to come to Sambisa forest- the shelter of the Boko Haram group stating that it is a safe haven against the pandemic. Boko Haram's propaganda has seen an uptick and is going to affect the population. The group is also expected to damage any relief initiatives to counter Covid-19.

**Violence in Nigeria Between January 2020 and July 2020**
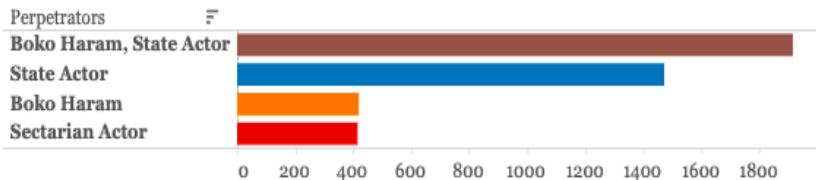


**Impact of Boko Haram Conflict:  Countrywide deaths: Nigeria**
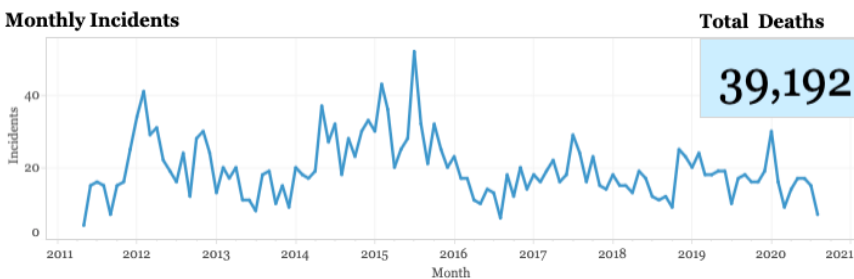


*Source: Council of Foreign Relations (2020)*

## 11. Terrorism in South Asia

The impact of Covid-19 in South Asia is less feared than other conflict-ridden zones. In Afghanistan, the crisis played a role in rearranging priorities. Taliban's response to the pandemic was different from its counterparts—ISIS and AlQaida. The Taliban and the Afghan government agreed to cooperate to stem the spread of the virus, and this led to a reduction in violence in the urban areas of the country. In other areas, the Taliban are not publicising their attacks. The Taliban not only reduced violence but also agreed to a complete truce in provinces most affected by the coronavirus. The armed group is also encouraging people with COVID-19 symptoms to go to government hospitals for tests, exercise social distancing and maintain proper hygiene (Al Jazeera 2020). They allowed the World Health Organisation and the Red Cross to operate and guaranteed their security. The Taliban cancelled several public events and set up quarantine centres (Kapur and Saxena 2020). Covid-19 has presented opportunities for intra-Afghan cooperation. However, observers have dismissed the Taliban's efforts as a propagandistic attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the Afghan government.  The pandemic may end up giving the Taliban a legitimacy not only at local and state levels but also internationally(Kapur and Saxena 2020). Notably, ceasefires have been offered only in afflicted areas under its control, and not in government-controlled areas, which appears more like a play to consolidate power. There are 6,500 Pakistani nationals among foreign terrorists operating in Afghanistan and the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) are playing a key role in bringing foreign fighters into the war-torn country (UNSC 2020). These groups continue to support the Taliban against the government. With South Asia's food insecurity poised to grow due to drought, poor economic conditions and now the pandemic, these terrorist organisations are approaching the people in the name of providing them relief assistance. In return, they gain the loyalty of the local population and recruit them as foreign fighters to operate in Afghanistan and Indian administered Kashmir (UNSC 2020).
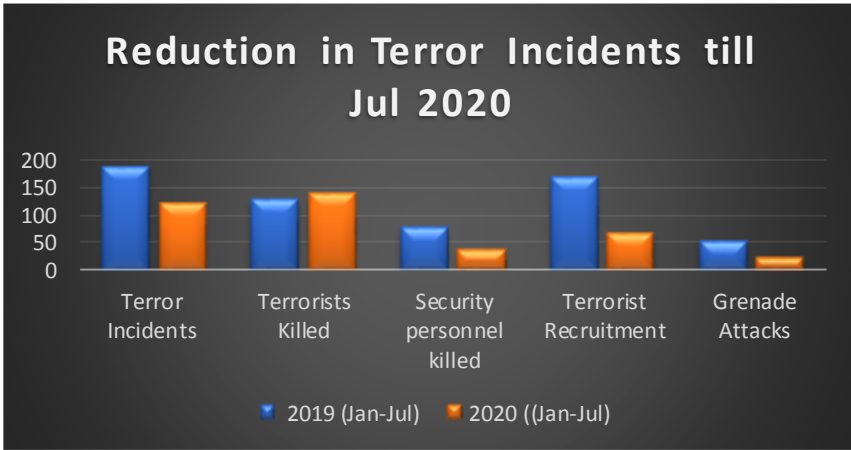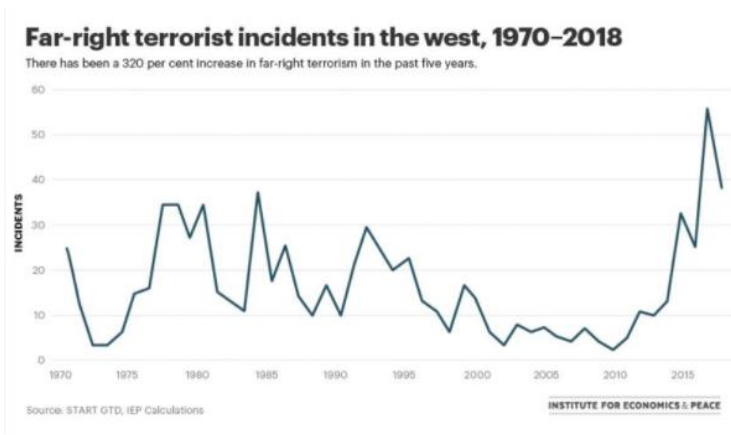
In India, Pakistan sponsored terror-related violence has decreased by 36% in the first half of 2020.  The number of active terrorists presents right now in Kashmir Valley has come down to below 200.However, according to reports in April 2020, over 300 terrorists are waiting at 16 launchpads—Leepa valley, Athmuqam, Dudniyal, Neelam valley, and so on across the LoC to sneak into India (Mint 2020). Pakistani agencies are helping the terrorists infiltrate into India through the International Border (IB) and the Line of Control (LoC) (DNA 2020). There have been reports of Indian army sustaining casualties in the Keran sector and Handwara encounters at the hands of the foreign terrorists and Kashmiri boys trained in Pakistan (Philip 2020). According to reports, the terrorists trained in Pakistan were advanced in training, weapon handling andradicalisation than their Indian counterparts. There has also been an emergence of new terror groups such as the Resistance Front (RF). The Indian security forces have dubbed it as a front of LeT, working together with other militant outfits—JeM, Al Badr, Hizbul Mujahideen and is new only in its name. According to news reports, after the abrogation of Jammu Kashmir's special status, Pakistan decided to increase the pitch of militancy in Kashmir. Indian officials have stated that the RF has been created to give Pakistan deniability from action under the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) (Masood 2020).  The group has an active online presence. The aim is to rebrand the existing cadres of terror groups

operating in Kashmir as a "non-religious" rebellion. According to other news reports (Kaul 2020), a new terror group on the dark web, named 'People's Anti-Fascist Front (PAFF)' released a forty-three-second video showing an arrow hitting a Swastika sign. Three terrorists wearing masks and brandishing AK-47 rifles appear in the video warning fresh terror attacks against those who help Indian security forces (Kaul 2020). During the pandemic, Indian military troops have been involved in carrying out relief and recovery operations in Jammu and Kashmir. Army's deployment in Covid-19 response adds to the security strain. Sprouting of new terror outfits that have the support and blessings of LeT and Hizbul Mujahideen would translate to greater interoperability between different terror groups. According to reports, there has also been an increase in local recruitment in the valley in the aftermath of Burhan Wani's death, something that Pakistan's ISI is exploiting to show terrorism in Kashmir as an indigenous struggle rather than Pakistan's export. There has also been a return of public funerals in Kashmir, despite the ongoing pandemic. Indian intel reports have also stated that Pakistan is conspiring to carry out attacks in Punjab (Gupta 2020). Pakistan is reportedly engaged in supplying arms through drones in Punjab with the help of Khalistan terrorists. In the last few months, the Punjab Police and the Border Security Force (BSF) have detained several gangs and terrorists who were found involved in the conspiracy of drones. According to intel reports, upgraded versions of drones are being used to carry much larger quantities of firearms in every sortie (Gupta 2020). A new group named 'Referendum Front (KKRF)' has been formed reportedly, in which efforts are also being made to join the Khalistan supporters and Kashmiri separatists living abroad (Zee News 2020). It should also be noted that terrorists may seek to exploit gaps and weaknesses in counter-financing terrorism systems while they assume that resources are focused elsewhere.

## 12. Right-wing Extremism

According to the Global Terrorism Index report (2020), right-wing extremism has been growing in frequency. Between 2002 and 2014, far-right incidents never accounted for more than 14 per cent of

total attacks in the West. However, that number grew to 40 per cent in 2015, and had risen to 46 per cent by 2019. Similarly, the proportion of deaths attributed to far-right groups and individuals rose from 26 per cent in 2014, to 82 per cent in 2019 (Global Terrorism Index 2020:62). Far-right terrorist attacks increased by 320 per cent over the past five years in North America, Western Europe, and Oceania. In 2018, total deaths attributed to far-right groups increased by 52 per cent to 26 deaths. The trend continues into 2019, with 77 deaths attributed to far-right terrorists up until September.



**Far-right terrorist incidents in the west, 1970–2018**
There has been a 320 per cent increase in far-right terrorism in the past five years.

Source: START GTD, IEP Calculations                    INSTITUTE FOR ECONOMICS & PEACE

During Covid-19, there has been a rise and revival of groups such as the Boogaloo movement, QAnon, and the Ku Klux clan conspiring to cause violence in the United States (Clark 2020). Studies have suggested that the right-wing extremists and white supremacist groups are adopting the same ISIS-favoured ways to attract and radicalise their members online. Researchers looked at several groups with various beliefs, structures, and intensities, including the 'Atomwaffen Division', a fairly closed neo-Nazi group, and the 'Not Fucking Around Coalition' (NFAC). NFAC is a heavily-armed, anti-government group with a strong central, charismatic leader who produces podcasts and daily messages for members. They contrast with the Boogaloo Bois, a decentralised movement with no strong leadership, held together in the shared conviction that social tension in the United States along racial and economic lines will lead to violent upheaval and a second civil war

— while wearing Hawaiian shirts (Defenseone 2020). A rise in right-wing extremism in the United States has forced the Foreign Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to call out a domestic terrorism threat. According to the FBI, racially motivated violent extremism, mostly from white supremacists made up the bulk of the agency's current domestic terrorism investigations (ORF 2020). In the United Kingdom, right-wing extremism has grown in the Covid-19. Around a quarter of individuals referred to de-radicalisation services had ties to right-wing ideology — 10% greater than those with Islamist leanings. The far-right have been utilising conspiracy theories and right-wing propaganda to radicalise the unemployed and homebound (DW 2020). Germany has also released its first nationwide report into rightwing extremism in the security services. Not only right-wing violence but right-wing propaganda is also on a rise. There have been many conspiracy theories, blame games and propaganda around Covid-19. At the end of August, far-right extremists tried to storm the German parliament protesting the country's pandemic restrictions.There are neo-nazi websites or blogs such as The Daily Stormer, Gates of Vienna that falsely claim that the pandemic is being exaggerated and minorities tend to get preferential treatment. Conspiracy theories have ranged from pandemic being dubbed as "a population control tool" to 5G being responsible to spread the Covid-19 (Jain 2020). American conspiracy site 'Info wars' has claimed that lockdown coordinated by the "tyrannical" UN and WHO, led by China. There have been calls for marches against lockdown in the US states. In India, the right-wing used the pandemic to attack the Muslim population after the Tablighi Jamaat incident led to a spurt in confirmed Covid-19 cases. More than 3,00,000 tweets used the hashtag #CoronaJihad between March 8 and April 3 (Jain 2020). The propaganda around the rise and spread of Covid-19 will see far-right groups advocating anti-government, anti-immigrant, anti-minority violence.

## 13. Conclusion

As the Covid-19 spreads globally, there are wide-ranging responses from governments and several communities. In this scenario,

terrorism and extremism are also evolving, posing challenges for governments and civil societies alike. The pandemic has resulted in a global recession, lockdowns, unemployment, and spiking public health costs—that overstretch and discredit government actions. Dealing with these will have a bearing on the foreign aid, security, and counter-terrorism budgets, allowing terrorist operations to expand their influence and carry out operations without much challenge from the nation-states. Terrorists while restricted from carrying out international operations, will be adept at carrying out localised operations as borders become more pronounced and counter-terrorism exercises become weaker. The presence of the internet is allowing transnational terrorist organisations like the ISIS, Al Qaeda, LeT, as well as the right-wing extremists to reach out to young, unemployed, poverty-stricken, disgruntled youth and prompt them to undertake lone-wolf attacks or radicalise others in their zone of influence. This has been looked as a national security concern and governments, in turn, will become more likely to use their authority to crackdown dissent – legitimate or otherwise. There are challenges for terrorist organisations as well. The presence of a pandemic has pushed terrorism out of the news cycle. However, this will prompt them to carry out more pronounced attacks to remain in public memory. It, therefore, becomes pertinent for national governments to identity this imminent threat while tackling the social and economic consequences of the pandemic. Nation-states need to create new means of information sharing and policy coordination for intra- and inter-governmental cooperation and honing of counter-terrorism capabilities.

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