Covid-19 and Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism:
Challenges and Recommendations

by: Dr. Imogen Parsons and Christopher Hockey

Executive Summary

Early commentary tended to sensationalise the potential impact of Covid-19 on violent extremism and terrorism, speculating that we might see a substantial uptick in attacks. Such claims were likely overstated given that violent extremist groups have been affected by financial and operational constraints in similar ways to governments, as well as having to contend with restrictions imposed by lockdowns. Opportunities have arisen for groups in some areas where governments and security forces are distracted by public health responses, but overall these cases have so far been outweighed by the increased limitations and constraints groups face. We have not so far seen a significant global rise in security incidents as a result of the pandemic.

That said, there are legitimate reasons to be concerned about the medium to long-term consequences of the pandemic. Individual and societal resilience will have been degraded by the protracted global health crisis and its secondary social and economic consequences. Economic downturns do, overall, tend to correlate with a growth in extremism. Online grooming, radicalisation and spread of disinformation will have increased, and future removal of restrictions on movements may mean these efforts translate into an increase in in-person recruitment. Additionally Islamist extremist groups have done their best, while not denying the pandemic, to portray it in ways that boost their support, as well as to capitalise upon both the growing social isolation through lockdowns and resentments created by heavy handed security forces.

At the same time the pandemic also poses risks to extremist groups – particularly those that govern territory – should they fail to manage it well. They are also vulnerable to distraction, to decreased funding and to illness. It therefore seems likely that the landscape that emerges from the pandemic will look different to the one we see now- with some groups degraded and withdrawing, while others expand their following and capability. Lifting of lockdown restrictions may translate this into recruitment and violent action.

Additionally, the vast demands of public health and economic responses mean that many donors have reduced funds available for preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) work. Practitioners are limited by Covid-19 restrictions on movement as well as reduced funding. Should this result in organisations withdrawing, trust may be undermined at a critical moment. Meanwhile the number of people at risk is likely to rise. The case for preventive, upstream action has rarely been stronger, or more challenging.

A fresh look at how to integrate and mainstream P/CVE initiatives into broader development efforts may be needed in order to head off the potential for future increases in violent extremism. This will need to be sensitive to the potential to alienate groups through perceptions of securitisation, as well as not to put development or humanitarian workers at risk. It will also need strong feedback mechanisms for learning and adaptation. This may in the short term also mean reshaping programmes in order to target specific P/CVE risks and priorities such as roll out of vaccines and security sector reform, while also maintaining engagement with at risk groups in order to keep their trust.

Recommendations are:

- To work with P/CVE partners to enable them to adapt programming as necessary in order to maintain engagement and trust with at risk individuals throughout the pandemic, seize opportunities to tackle disinformation and social isolation, and monitor for new at risk groups
- To mainstream elements of P/CVE programming into broader sectoral programmes responding to the primary and secondary effects of Covid-19, including health, education, livelihoods and psychosocial support
- To advocate for governments and security forces to avoid abuses or heavy handed enforcement of Covid-19 restrictions, and take opportunities to adapt security sector reform and training programmes to tackle Covid-19 related challenges such as handling lockdowns and rebuilding trust and accountability
- To increase communications efforts to tackle disinformation and propaganda related to Covid-19, particularly ahead of key potential flashpoints like vaccination roll out

Introduction and Context

A number of alarming reports emerged in the first few months of the pandemic.[1] These suggested that violent extremist organisations were going to take advantage of Covid-19 and predicted that recruitment into these organisations was likely to skyrocket as unemployment rates increased and economies began to fail. The UN's Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) released a statement suggesting that 'violent extremists across the ideological spectrum view the global pandemic as an opportunity for expansion'.[2] Concerns were also raised about terrorist organisations using the pandemic to undermine the state, inter alia in the Sahel. [3]

Arguments have included that those stuck at home behind their computer screens would be exposed to online recruitment narratives- a concern supported by reports of youth in particular being targeted online.[4] Others have pointed out that Covid-19 is exacerbating existing structural grievances and leaving people vulnerable to violent extremist groups.[5] Articles also speculated that non-state armed groups would be able to increase the frequency of their attacks due to the preoccupation of law enforcement agencies on Covid-19.[6]

Some have questioned the scale of the initial fears expressed in the media. Sam Mullins argued that the literature on the pandemic and terrorism 'has been remarkably one-sided'[7]. He stresses that, at least in the immediate term, violent extremist groups are not positioned to benefit. Several authors have noted

[1] Bukarti, B. 2020. 'How Jihadi Groups in Africa Will Exploit COVID-19', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 03 April 2020; Kinyua, F. 2020. 'COVID-19: Setting the stage for radicalization into violent extremism in Pumwani, Kenya', *Europe External Policy Advisors (EEPA)*, 06 July 2020; Mohamed, R., A. Shajkovci, A. McDowell-Smith, and M. Ahmed. 2020. 'Youth, Violent Extremist Recruitment, and COVID-19 in Kenya', *Homeland Security*, 22 June 2020
[2] United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR). 2020. 'Impact of COVID-19 on Violent Extremism and Terrorism'
[3] UN News, 2020, 'Terrorist groups exploiting COVID-19 in Sahel, UN peacekeeping chief tells Security Council', 5 June 2020
[4] see *Moonshot. 2020. 'COVID-19: The Impact of social Distancing on Engagement with Violent extremist Content Online in the United States', 14 April 2020*; Malik, N. 2020. 'Self-Isolation Might Stop Coronavirus, but it Will Speed the Spread of Extremism', Foreign Policy, 26 March 2020; *GCERF*. 2020. Preventing violent extremism during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, 6 May 2020
[5] See for example Estelle, E. 2020. 'Forecast: The African Salafi-Jihadi Movement After COVID-19', Critical Threats, 13 May 2020
[6] Katz, R. 2020. 'Coronavirus Bungling Breathes New Life into terrorist Movements', Daily Beast, 26 April 2020
[7] Mullins, S. 2020. 'Terrorism and COVID-19: Are We Over-Estimating the Threat?', Small Wars Journal, 25 June 2020

that there is no evidence that the frequency of terrorist attacks increased following the onset of the pandemic.[8] It has been pointed out that propaganda alone does not represent action.[9]

The reality at present is likely between these two positions. The concerns expressed are valid, and supported by anecdotal evidence, but actions will take time to materialise. The impact will also vary across different geographical areas and groups. We have yet to see the full effects of the pandemic, socially and economically – as well as how the availability of a vaccine may change dynamics – and the severity of the pandemic's impact on radicalisation may well yet increase.

In this paper we therefore consider what Covid-19 means for P/CVE. We look at how extremist groups are adapting their operations, recruitment and communications in light of Covid-19, and at how these trends may develop. We then make recommendations for the Commission's Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG DEVCO) on how to strengthen work in this area. We draw on a review of recent evidence in this area, complemented by interviews with practitioners working on P/CVE programmes and/or policy in Africa and Asia. Interviewees were selected for their expertise and/or current direct field experience in relevant areas.

The paper is structured as follows:
- Structural vulnerability to violent extremism – looking at the extent to which grievances and other drivers of radicalisation are growing as a result of the pandemic, and what this means;
- How violent extremist groups are responding and positioning themselves in response to the pandemic, including opportunities, challenges and risks to their operations and recruitment;
- Practical implications for P/CVE programming and recommendations for DG DEVCO's P/CVE work.

We include programmatic examples throughout, drawn from RUSI's experience and that of other organisations we spoke with.

Structural Vulnerability to Violent Extremism

Structural vulnerability will generally have increased through Covid-19 and is likely to continue to grow. We examine four main factors here: economic downturn, growing authoritarianism/heavy handed security responses, lack of trust in government responses and degraded social cohesion, individual and community resilience.

Economic downturn

The pandemic has led to a major global downturn representing, according to the World Bank, the deepest recession since the second World War. Around 1% of the world's population (60-85 million people) are expected to fall into extreme poverty as a result of Covid-19, with long-lasting effects on human development as education and health services suffer. Areas with a high degree of economic informality are among those hardest hit- including many fragile states affected by violent extremism. Border closures have exacerbated problems by restricting imports. Remittances have also decreased for many who have been put out of work, or are affected by tighter rules on migration.

Covid-19 has both increased inequalities and highlighted those that already existed. Those who prior to the pandemic were already receiving the lowest incomes have been most affected, as well as those who

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[8] Davis, J. 2020. 'Terrorism During a Pandemic: Assessing the Threat and Balancing the Hype', Just Security, 28 April 2020; Mullins, S. 2020. 'Terrorism and COVID-19: Are We Over-Estimating the Threat?', Small Wars Journal, 25 June 2020
[9] Davis, J. 2020. 'Terrorism During a Pandemic: Assessing the Threat and Balancing the Hype', Just Security, 28 April 2020

had the least protection such as informal workers. Due to issues of access, these are often also the populations most likely to miss out during the distribution of relief food- in Somalia and Afghanistan for instance. Covid-19 has placed increased pressure on limited resources and the World Food Programme has predicted an '82 percent increase' in the number of people categorised as acutely food insecure at the end of 2020 compared to the onset of the pandemic.[10] Economic implications may also be felt most severely over the next year or two, and governments will have to start lifting some of the stimulus measures put in place to cushion the initial impact of the pandemic.

Although the offer of income alone is unlikely to be enough to explain recruitment into violent extremist groups in most cases, an economically destitute population is likely to be easier to appeal to and potentially to incentivise.[11] Growing inequality and hardship can fuel a sense of grievance against elites, particularly where economic impacts can be attributed to lockdowns or other mishandling of the pandemic.

Increased authoritarianism and heavy-handed security forces

Government responses to Covid-19 have varied, from 'hard' lockdowns and border closure through to denial. In different ways, each of these responses can create opportunities for violent extremist groups to position themselves in opposition to the state and contribute to the inequalities and grievances that facilitate recruitment.

In several parts of the world, democratic spaces have been compressed by leaders who appear to be exploiting the virus to expand their powers.[12] *Transparency International* demonstrate how Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi 'used the Covid-19 crisis to amend emergency powers'. [13] The fear is that such powers granted during Covid-19 will not be lifted. The pandemic could thus lead to a rise in authoritarianism- a trend likely to be seen in many countries.

Democratic governance and legitimacy have also suffered. By August the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) had recorded election events (including, general, local, municipal and referenda) postponed in 65 countries due to Covid-19.[14] In Somalia, preparations for the elections have been complicated by the pandemic with the central government under increasing pressure to resolve differences with the regional states. In many cases delays are understandable and may be necessary for public health reasons and to ensure participation. However, delays in the democratic process can also serve to undermine the legitimacy of the incumbent government. This has been a concern in Ethiopia, for example, where general elections scheduled for August were postponed due to the virus.[15] Such moves – particularly where governments are seen as weak, corrupt or repressive – can act as a further rallying cry for extremist groups and alienate people from the state.

Behaviour by security forces represents an even stronger flashpoint. Even in places where progress had been made, months or even years of work by law enforcement agents to improve their relationship with communities may have been ruined by incidents of excessive force as government directives were imposed. With a change in priorities, many law enforcement agencies showed little regard for human rights. For example, in Kenya, by June – a little over two months after a curfew was imposed – reports

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[10] *World Food Programme (WFP). 2020. 'COVID-19, Level 3 Emergency: External Situation Report #10', 03 July 2020*

[11] Khalil, J. and M. Zeuthen. 2016. 'Countering Violent Extremism and Risk Reduction: A Guide to Programme Design and Evaluation', *RUSI Whitehall report* 2-16

[12] Gebrekidan, S. 2020. 'For Autocrats, and Others, Coronavirus Is a Chance to Grab Even More Power', New York Times, 14 April 2020

[13] *Transparency International. 2020. 'Will the legacy of OVID-19 include increased authoritarianism?', 29 May 2020*

[14] *IFES. 2020. 'Elections Postponed Due to COVID-19 – As of August 25, 2020'.*

[15] *Quartz Africa. 2020. 'Ethiopia's decision to delay its election for Covid will have consequences for its democratic goals', 18 June 2020*

suggested that 15 people had been killed at the hands of the police.[16] It was also suggested that law enforcement agents may have used Covid-19 as an excuse to target known trouble-makers, with the justification that these individuals are often assessed to be 'at-risk' of recruitment into violent extremist groups. In Nigeria, in the first two weeks of a lockdown, law enforcement officers killed 18 people. Police were said to have harassed, and even raped, women while enforcing the government's measures against Covid-19.[17] Security forces in the Philippines have faced similar criticisms.[18]

Demonstrations have taken place due to the imposition of restrictions on daily life. For example, protests have occurred at markets in Nairobi, Kenya, when authorities have moved in to suspend business activities- at the same time as the economic impacts of the pandemic have begun to bite. 'Anti-state' narratives – including in home-made videos mimicking al Shabaab messaging – have circulated amongst 'at-risk' groups during the pandemic, especially in response to police action.[19] Muslims in Nairobi and Mombasa felt that they were unfairly targeted by localised lockdowns.[20] The coincidence of the government measures with Ramadan added to these frustrations and led to narratives around the suppression of Muslim practices.[21] Similarly, several jihadist groups (including in Somali, Philippines and Indonesia) criticised state measures to close mosques, especially over Ramadan. Other groups in Indonesia also encouraged those in the West to disobey recommendations from national governments.

Lack of trust in government responses

Violent extremist groups have not been reticent to point out the shortcomings of governments. Islamic State supporters in Southeast Asia were especially active in blaming national governments for the health crisis. Groups in the region also encouraged *hijra*, suggesting that joining the Jihadist cause would allow people to avoid lockdowns.

In some cases, a lack of trust in the state will have been entrenched by weak responses to Covid-19, with already weak social contracts put under further strain. *Mercy Corps* identified 'deteriorating state-society relations' as one of the key conflict risks resulting from Covid-19[22]. A survey conducted by the organisation in Iraq suggested that 85% of people were unhappy with the government's response to Covid-19. In Mali, Covid-19 arguably boosted support for the eventual coup with rumours circulating that the government was manipulating the pandemic to gain funding.[23] In the Kenyan context, a corruption scandal over the misuse of funds provided for Covid-19 has reinforced frustrations with the authorities and led to protests.[24]

Additionally, governments have been accused of neglecting certain segments of the population, adding further to existing feelings of disenfranchisement. Those living in low-income areas in India's cities, for example, were hardest hit by the government lockdown.[25] The *International Crisis Group* point out that in Pakistan "Anger at the government and social tensions will mount if citizens sense that the

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[16] *Al Jazeera*. 2020. 'Kenyan police 'killed 15' since start of coronavirus curfew', 05 June 2020

[17] *Al Jazeera*. 2020. 'Women 'abused' by police enforcing COVID-19 rules in Nigeria', 09 September 2020

[18] *Mercy Corps. 2020. 'Advancing Peace in a Changed World: COVID-19 effects on conflict and how to respond', September 2020*

[19] Interview with practitioner, Kenya

[20] *The Star*. 2020. 'State puts Eastleigh, Old town on lockdown as virus cases surge' 06 May 2020

[21] Interview with CVE practitioner, Nairobi

[22] *Mercy Corps. 2020. 'Advancing Peace in a Changed World: COVID-19 effects on conflict and how to respond', September 2020*

[23] *Ibid*

[24] *BBC*. 2020. 'Coronavirus corruption in Kenya: Officials and businesspeople targeted', 24 September 2020

[25] *The Guardian*. 2020. ''We have abandoned the poor': slums suffer as Covid-19 exposes India's social divide', 03 August 2020; *BBC*. 2020. 'India coronavirus: 'More than half of Mumbai slum-dwellers had Covid-19', 29 July 2020

government is not adequately looking after their health and wellbeing. In the past, militant groups have exploited such opportunities to gain local support"[26].

Perceptions will likely build on previous patterns. Populations historically wary of the state are unlikely to welcome government-led testing and vaccination programmes, and disinformation on the pandemic is commonplace. Media reports show very high levels of scepticism and rejection of testing in India's Punjab region, for instance.[27] The potential exists for vaccination campaigns to be politicised and undermined in areas traditionally resistant to medical intervention of that kind, including through spread of conspiracy theories. In other areas it is equally likely that lack of availability of equipment, testing or vaccines may create grievances against the state (while not widespread, some protests have been reported at hospitals in Pakistan, including in Quetta[28]).

Social cohesion, community and individual resilience

Another of the key conflict threats identified by *Mercy Corps* emerging from the pandemic is that of social cohesion. The organisation stresses that Covid-19 has entrenched tensions between pastoralists and farmers in Nigeria and increased reports of xenophobia in both Colombia and Yemen.[29] In India, Muslims have been attacked following rumours that they were spreading the virus. Divisions such as these can become increasingly entrenched, and normalise hatred and even violence toward others.

It is also worth considering how the pandemic may have affected resilience on an individual level, i.e. people's ability to withstand extremist views and resist radicalisation. Through keeping people apart, Covid-19 has arguably worsened siloed thinking and made it more difficult for people to access alternative viewpoints.[30] In such an environment, the gap between 'self' and 'other' expands. This can serve to entrench extremist beliefs, if not lead to extremist action.

While somewhat separate, the effects of this eroding of resilience can be seen in the rise in cases of domestic violence and sexual assault in several parts of the world, as norms – that may already be weak in preventing gender based violence – are placed under further strain and violence becomes more normalised. Lockdowns have forced victims into confined spaces with their abusers. The economic implications of the pandemic have also added to pressures facing families. A survey in Bangladesh showed a significant rise in physical, mental and sexual abuses.[31] Similarly a survey in Sri Lanka suggested that over one quarter of women and children had experienced violence during the lockdown there. In Kenya, a rise in cases of sexual and gender-based violence was termed the 'shadow pandemic'.[32] A GBV hotline in Tunisia received a 700% increase in calls.[33]

It is likely the full impacts on societal resilience have yet to be seen, however. *Mercy Corps* note that the real spike in violence in countries affected by Ebola in West Africa only began between six and nine months after the outbreak.[34]

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[26] *International Crisis Group.* 2020. 'Pakistan's COVID-19 Crisis', 6 August 2020
[27] *BBC. 2020.* 'India coronavirus: Rumours hamper testing in Punjab', 9 September 2020.
[28] *BBC. 2020. '*Coronavirus: Why Pakistan's doctors are so angry', 10 April 2020.
[29] *Mercy Corps. 2020. 'Advancing Peace in a Changed World: COVID-19 effects on conflict and how to respond', September 2020*
[30] Aryaeinejad, K. and B. McGann. 2020. 'COVID-19 and Conflict: Violent Extremism', United States Institute of Peace, 12 May 2020
[31] *DW*. 2020. 'COVID-19 lockdown increases domestic violence in Bangladesh', 12 May 2020
[32] *Daily Nation*. 2020. 'Let's stop the shadow pandemic', 13 May 2020
[33] UNDP / International Alert PVE Toolkit. 2020. 'Risk Management for Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE Programmes – Guidance Note for Practitioners: Supplementary Note to support revision of risk management strategies in context of COVID-19'
[34] *Mercy Corps. 2020. 'Advancing Peace in a Changed World: COVID-19 effects on conflict and how to respond', September 2020*

Impact on Violent Extremist Organisations, and their Response

While violent extremist groups would, in many cases, like to take advantage of the pandemic to boost their legitimacy and recruitment, Covid-19 has also brought new challenges that they have had to contend with. This is further reason that increases in recruitment and in attacks are likely to be delayed. These challenges also mean that some restructuring of the landscape of violent extremist groups is likely over the coming years, as groups face different opportunities and challenges.

This section therefore covers: the operational and financial challenges faced by violent extremist groups – as well as, to an extent, by government security forces; violent extremist groups' use of propaganda and conspiracy theories; the rise in virtual/online recruitment; and how some groups have set up Covid-19 responses rivalling the state's.

Deepening operational and financial challenges

The pandemic comes at a time when some groups had already been facing their own challenges. Al Shabaab, for instance, is not necessarily in a position at this time to exploit the pandemic. Firstly, leadership disputes were reported in early 2020 over control of the group's finances.[35] Added to this, persistent US drone strikes have limited the militant group's ability to bring fighters together for large scale offensives, and killed several senior militants over the last year.[36] This was not an organisation that went into the pandemic in a state of strength. Similarly, in Mali, France announced in June that it had killed the head of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb- a significant blow to their operations in Sahel.

Operational challenges have been deepened (or created, for groups who were doing well) by the pandemic. The funding networks behind violent extremist organisations are often intrinsically linked to the economies of the nation-states in which they are geographically situated. Thus, any stagnation in the legitimate economy will likely take its toll on the extremist organisation's finances as well. Al Shabaab, for instance, taxes farmers, demands protection fees from businesses, and takes a cut from the illicit trade in charcoal, sugar and most other foodstuffs.[37] The global economic downturn will also hit their income from diaspora remittances. A recent survey of security practitioners showed only 9% of respondents believed that terrorist groups had been able to raise more funds than usual, while 68% disagreed- suggesting that this trend is widespread.[38]

Operating in areas outside of their control during the peak of the pandemic, extremist organisations will have faced similar challenges to others. Lockdowns and restrictions on movement, with an increase in the presence of law enforcement officers along roads and borders, have made face-to-face recruitment very difficult, as well as limiting their ability to carry out attacks. Moreover, many of the impacts of the pandemic will affect violent extremist organisations as much as everyone else.[39] Indeed 'terrorists, like everybody else, can and do get sick, as do their family and friends'.[40]

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[35] *Daily Nation*. 2020. 'Shabaab leaders split over funds control', 27 March 2020; *Garowe Online*. 2020. 'Somalia: Al-Shabaab leaders rocked in wrangles over control of finances', 28 March 2020; 'Somalia: Al-Shabaab's Supreme Leader Replaced Due to Sickness, Somalia Spy Agency Says', 30 August 2020

[36] *VoA*. 2020. 'US Drone Strike Kills High-ranking al-Shabaab bomb-maker in Somalia', 21 August 2020

[37] Hockey, C. and M. Jones. 2020. 'The Limits of 'Shabaab-CARE': Militant Governance amid COVID-19', CTC Sentinel: 13 (6), June 2020

[38] Mullins, S 2020. "Assessing the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism: Practitioner Insights", Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies

[39] Taneja, K. and R. Pantucci. 2020. 'Beware of terrorists offering COVID19 aid', Observer Research Foundation, 17 April 2020

[40] Davis, J. 2020. 'Terrorism During a Pandemic: Assessing the Threat and Balancing the Hype', Just Security, 28 April 2020

The corollary to this is of course that the pandemic has in some places led to reduction in security operations – in some areas, such as Mali and the Lake Chad Basin. In Nigeria, the pandemic has exacerbated the overstretch of the armed forces as the military took on the additional responsibility of enforcing lockdowns across the country.[41] Boko Haram attacks have been attributed in some cases to taking advantage of these opportunities. Falls in oil prices are likely to put even further strain on governments in Nigeria and Chad especially, which then face difficult choices between security and social expenditure (with decreases in the latter also potentially creating future grievances). International security and training missions may also have slowed or stopped. Half of the practitioners in a recent survey believed that counter-terrorism had become more difficult due to the pandemic.[42]

Covid-related propaganda and conspiracy theories

To date, Islamist extremist groups do not appear to have majored in promoting substantial disinformation around coronavirus. Perhaps surprisingly, and in strong contrast to far-right extremist groups, neither ISIS nor Al Qaeda have sought in their communications to downplay the pandemic or to call it into question.

It is nonetheless worth reviewing the positions posited by both the formal propaganda outlets of Jihadist organisations, and the less coordinated online chatter amongst supporters.[43] The most common narrative was that Covid-19 was a 'soldier of Allah', sent as punishment for the disbelievers as well as for 'the obscenity and moral corruption' in the Muslim world.[44] Al Shabaab called for Muslims to rejoice because the 'disbelievers' were being punished for their treatment of Muslims. The Islamic State suggested the pandemic was divine retribution in particular for the Chinese government due to their treatment of Uighur Muslims.[45] Other Islamic State-aligned groups proffered that the virus was punishment for 'Western' military operations and the deaths of Muslims in Baghouz and Mosul. Southeast Asian entities said that it was retribution for the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Boko Haram and al Shabaab have portrayed piety as giving protection against the disease. High levels of mortality among elderly populations in the West have also been cited as evidence of moral decay by Al Qaeda. If or when Covid-19 starts to affect members or even leadership of these groups – as is said to be the case for the Taliban and al Shabaab – these narratives may become harder to sustain and may start to undermine the legitimacy of the groups themselves. However, as Western societies appear, for reasons including demographics, to be more immediately impacted by Covid-19, the balance of advantage may remain weighted towards extremist groups.

A second common theme in Jihadist propaganda included calls for supporters to increase the frequency of attacks, while states were vulnerable due to their preoccupation with Covid-19. This message was especially common in Southeast Asia. An Islamic State media outlet produced a commentary in early September suggesting that Covid-19 – combined with other natural disasters – would facilitate the resurgence of the Islamic State.

Jihadist groups have continued to celebrate the impact of Covid-19 on the economies of some of the world's most powerful nation-states. For instance, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in August

[41] Campbell, J. 2020. 'Beyond the Pandemic, Boko Haram Looms Large in Nigeria', 11 June 2020
[42] Mullins, S 2020. "Assessing the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism: Practitioner Insights", Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies
[43] *SITE Intelligence Group* produced weekly reports on Jihadist group responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic between March and May 2020
[44] *MEMRI*. 2020. 'Al-Qaeda Centra: COVID is Divine Punishment For Sins Of Mankind; Muslims Must Repent, West Must Embrace Islam', 01 April 2020
[45] Azman, N.A. 2020. ''Divine Retribution': The Islamic State's COVID-19 Propaganda', The Diplomat, 24 March 2020

rejoiced the struggles facing the struggles facing the US and other 'Western' states. Later in the month, an Islamic State aligned media outlet said that Covid-19 would help the 'monotheists' defeat their enemy. The narrative remains consistent and may continue given the continued economic damage to the West.

There remains further significant potential for extremist groups to exploit the pandemic to spread disinformation, to deepen divisions within societies and undermine the state further. Conspiracy theories are likely to become ever more common, and will undoubtedly adapt to future, as yet unknowable, events. The start of vaccination campaigns is, though, likely to be a particular flash point.

From face-to-face to virtual recruitment

It appears that Covid-19 will increase the pool of potential recruits in many parts of the world and contribute to the process of recruitment.[46] A practitioner in Kenya argued the pandemic has served to "lay the foundations" for recruitment by creating an "enabling environment" for recruiters in which grievances had been exacerbated and in which people "were more willing" to listen to anti-state narratives.

But even with all the necessary conditions there is still a role the violent extremist group must play. An individual may be vulnerable to 'radicalisation', but a recruiter may still be required to take advantage of that vulnerability. The logistics of recruitment have undoubtedly been made more challenging by Covid-19. But the pandemic does not mean that face-to-face meetings have entirely stopped. For instance, a practitioner in Kenya stated that people were still able to meet at '*maskanis*' despite the Government's directives on gatherings. It was said that videos were shared at such sites. This remains largely unchanged from before the pandemic.

it is also likely that recruitment is taking place online, and that online grooming is increasing. In many parts of the world – including across the Horn – most recruitment has historically taken place face-to-face. An organisation that is used to recruiting in person will not necessarily find it easy to immediately switch to an online approach in which the right audience is approached, but with time may become more effective. For instance, one interviewee suggested that they had seen some evidence of attempts by al Shabaab to increase their online activity, particularly targeting social media accounts.

It is difficult to assess trends in the volume of people leaving to join violent extremist organisations, and even more difficult to prove that those joining violent extremist entities are doing so for reasons connected to Covid-19. Even so, there is little evidence, for example, to suggest that recruitment into al Shabaab has increased as a result of the pandemic. Indeed, it is difficult to find – even anecdotal – examples of individuals who have travelled to Somalia from Kenya citing the pressures of the pandemic as their main motivation. Most commentators globally appear to agree at present that there has not been a significant increase in recruitment into violent extremist groups as a result of the pandemic.[47]

Citing a 2017 German study, Mullins suggests that the real impact of Covid-19 on recruitment practices may not be seen for some time to come.[48] The study suggests that almost a third of those from Germany who travelled to join Islamic State in Syria only made the move more than two years after the start of

[46] Khalil, J. and M. Zeuthen. 2016. 'Countering Violent Extremism and Risk Reduction: A Guide to Programme Design and Evaluation', *RUSI Whitehall report* 2-16; Khalil, J., J. Horgan and M. Zeuthen. 2019. 'The Attitudes-Behaviors Corrective (ABC) Model of Violent Extremism', Terrorism and Political Violence

[47] Interview with CVE practitioner, Nairobi; Mercy Corps 2020

[48] Mullins, S. 2020. 'Terrorism and COVID-19: Are We Over-Estimating the Threat?', Small Wars Journal, 25 June 2020

the 'radicalisation process'. Drawing on the Attitudes-Behaviours Corrective (ABC) model, it is likely that attitudes are being impacted by the pandemic, even if behavioural changes (the physical move to join a violent extremist organisation) are yet to be observed. Recruiters were said to be "very good at playing the long-term game". If the pandemic has led more to seek out extremist propaganda online, then these individuals may remain a flight risk over several years.

A further factor that may be relevant to recruitment is that a number of countries, particularly in the Middle East, have chosen to release 'low risk' prisoners in order to reduce and manage the risk of Covid-19 spreading within prisons (see e.g. Avis 2020) - and indeed have been encouraged to do so by organisations such as the ICRC and Human Rights Watch. While these generally exclude those charged or convicted with terrorist offences, there are concerns that this number may include low-level violent extremist offenders who the authorities were struggling to convict. While there is no evidence yet that this has been problematic, some of these individuals could conceivably join violent extremist entities.

Violent extremist groups as health providers

Aware that it provided an opportunity as well as a practical challenge, those jihadist groups governing territory arguably found themselves in an especially tricky position, concerned about their own reputations amongst those within areas they govern. Alongside the more predictably rhetoric, some Jihadist groups issued pragmatic advice on hygiene and recommendations for avoiding infection. The most widely circulated examples of efforts by Jihadist organisations to provide their own practical responses to the pandemic came from the Taliban. The group established quarantine centres, ordered personal protective equipment (PPE), and managed government hospitals.[49] Taliban leaders were keen to publicise their efforts and persistently insisted that they were better positioned to deal with the crisis than the Government in Kabul, arguing that the Afghan authorities merely sought to steal foreign funds. Elsewhere, al Shabaab formed a committee dedicated to dealing with the pandemic and provided a testing and isolation facility in its stronghold of Jilib, Somalia.[50] Although the Somali based organisation insisted that Muslims should celebrate Covid-19 as a punishment meted out on disbelievers, they recognised that pragmatic steps needed to be taken to protect individuals in areas under their control due to the fact that the 'crusaders' had brought the virus into Somalia.

However, this strategy – which builds on earlier efforts by both groups to establish legitimacy through territorial control – is not without its own risks. Even where the internationally-recognised state is unable to offer appropriate healthcare or to mitigate the economic impacts of the pandemic, jihadist organisations are not necessarily in any better a position.[51] By trying to fill a gap left by the government and failing, jihadist groups may negatively impact perceptions of their legitimacy.[52] *An International Crisis Group* report, for instance, stated that "in spite of a rather well-organised public relations campaign addressing Covid-19, [the Taliban] appear to have mandated very few sweeping public health measures, and reports suggest that some of their preventive activities are fraudulent"[53]. The Taliban's motive was undoubtedly in part to influence the peace process as much as for local legitimacy, but it will be hard to sustain the former without the latter.

[49] NBC News. 2020. 'Taliban leverages coronavirus crisis to burnish is image as violence in Afghanistan surges', 23 May 2020
[50] Al Jazeera. 2020. 'Al-Shabaab sets up coronavirus treatment centre in Somalia', 14 June 2020
[51] Hockey, C. and M. Jones. 2020. 'The Limits of 'Shabaab-CARE': Militant Governance amid COVID-19', CTC Sentinel: 13 (6), June 2020
[52] Aryaeinejad, K. and B. McGann. 2020. 'COVID-19 and Conflict: Violent Extremism', United States Institute of Peace, 12 May 2020;
*International Crisis Group. 2020. '*COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch', 24 March 2020
[53] *International Crisis Group.* 2020. 'COVID-19 in Afghanistan: Compounding Crises', 6 May 2020

At the same time, community workers have also stepped into this gap. In some cases, P/CVE workers have engaged in door-to-door campaigns to inform communities about the virus, provide hand-sanitisers to vulnerable communities, or engaged in debunking of Covid-related disinformation. While they generally lack the resources available to governments or organised extremist groups, their efforts may nonetheless help to reduce the space for extremist groups to boost their own popularity and legitimacy by filling some of the gap left when governments do not fulfil their responsibilities.

Practical Considerations for P/CVE Programming

Both the virus itself and state measures to contain it have made the implementation of P/CVE work difficult. Challenges experienced by two large-scale programmes across eastern Africa included:[54]

- Bans on gatherings made face-to-face meetings impossible for several months. Several activities were moved onto digital platforms or carried out via phone networks in response, but discussing sensitive subjects online can lead to additional concerns and it is difficult to build trusting relationships without face-to-face meetings. Additionally, not all beneficiaries have access to the necessary technology. One upside however may be that one on one phone calls are not inhibited by the peer pressures that can be experienced in larger focus group discussions.
- Restrictions on travel due made it more difficult to monitor developments in affected communities without being able to physically travel there, and meant some elements of programmes had to be suspended.
- With law enforcement overwhelmingly focused on implementing government regulations, training activities were difficult to organise.
- When activities resumed, additional costs were incurred due to the need for PPE and sanitiser.

In response to these concerns, many activities have been postponed, with those that can best be conducted remotely prioritised. Efforts have been made where possible to delegate tasks to local partners, although this also meant reduced control over the expenditure of project funds. These challenges will be common across the sector, along with wider development and security interventions. Other more specific challenges exist for P/CVE. For instance, a UN report also suggests that 'the suspension of visitation rights has[…] negatively impacted prison-based reintegration programmes'.[55]

In contrast, in countries where governments have sought to deny the pandemic or to claim it has not reached their country, international organisations have faced a delicate balancing act between responding appropriately (including in terms of communications and staff safety) and maintaining their permissions to operate[56].

Most significantly, Covid-19 has led to budget cuts to P/CVE activities from some donors as funds are reprioritised towards immediate response activities. The funding needed to tackle the secondary effects, including the humanitarian consequences, will be vast. While there is clearly an overlap between these areas of work, there will be gaps, particularly in the most targeted areas of P/CVE work. Such shortfalls come at a delicate time considering the impact of Covid-19 on the drivers of violent extremist recruitment.

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[54] REINVENT and CREATE (both UK funded)
[55] United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), June 2020
[56] Interview with security practitioner

Ultimately, it is likely that the pandemic will indeed increase the vulnerabilities of those at risk of recruitment. It could also weaken states and their abilities to deal with violent extremist groups. Funds will be needed to help tackle violent extremism. However, COVID-19 may well lead to donors reconsidering how programmes are designed. One possibility is that funds are used to support larger sectors of society in addressing some of the underlying structural drivers, rather than targeting the small number of individuals considered most at risk. This could see P/CVE practitioners being brought in as part of health, employment or education programmes, rather than working on standalone projects- just as conflict experts are used to make development programming conflict sensitive. Alternatively, P/CVE could be incorporated into broader peacebuilding and governance programming. While not necessarily leading to cost savings, this may create opportunities for greater synergies and help to mitigate and manage future as well as current risks of radicalisation.

There have been some good examples, expanded on below, of programmes and P/CVE workers adapting to prioritise Covid-19 related activities, such as increasing awareness of Covid-19 and to counter misinformation and disinformation, and providing practical support to communities. These can and should be built upon, as set out in our recommendations.

Recommendations

To work with P/CVE partners to enable them to adapt programming as necessary in order to maintain engagement and trust with at risk individuals throughout the pandemic, seize opportunities to tackle disinformation and social isolation, and monitor for new at risk groups

The principle advice a P/CVE practitioner in Kenya had for donors was not to 'abandon people':[57]
"For as much as P/CVE programming has struggled to prove success and be meaningful, I do think that recruiters can pick up on the fact that funding stopped. People pulled out of activities; people were basically abandoned."

Those 'at-risk' need support now more than ever and this is not the time to pull out. Civil society organisation (CSO) partners reported to the authors that delays in funding have been 'terrible' after significant progress had been made. The practitioner stated that there is a feeling that 'recruiters stay, but CSOs come and go' and that this served to reinforce recruitment narratives[58]. Maintaining trust will be critical for the effectiveness of P/CVE programming, and this means working with implementing partners to ensure that they are able to keep engagement going as far as possible throughout Covid-19, even if some activities are scaled down or adapted. For instance, some practitioners repurposed programme funds to purchase PPE equipment and carried out activities to raise awareness of the virus, using existing networks. The CREATE programme also repurposed some funds to a four-month programme working on Covid-19 communications, the use of radio, and the provision of a fact-checking service.

While we also recommend broadening of scope of P/CVE approaches to take into account broader impacts of Covid-19, there does remain some benefit to separating downstream (secondary/tertiary level P/CVE) activities to target a select few individuals who are identified as 'at risk'. These are the sorts of individuals who will often be missed by programmes tackling society-wide infrastructure or economic grievances, and may need individual attention.

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[57] Interview with CVE practitioner, Nairobi
[58] *Mercy Corps.* 2020. 'Advancing Peace in a Changed World: COVID-19 effects on conflict and how to respond', September 2020

We would further recommend careful monitoring of trends around violent extremist groups given the potential for reshaping of the landscape, and of the impacts of prison releases and of suspended rehabilitation programmes. In these cases, more targeted programming is still needed, and should be maintained or resumed as far as possible, with due consideration given to whether adaptations are needed to take account of the changing wider context (see next recommendation).

To mainstream elements of P/CVE programming into broader sectoral programmes to respond to primary and secondary effects of Covid-19, including health, education, livelihoods and psychosocial support

Our assessment also suggests that – budget constraints and priorities notwithstanding – early intervention to support growing populations at risk would be recommended, to prevent grievances from taking seed and growing. This need is particularly acute where extremist groups might otherwise fill the gap left by the withdrawal of government services- which, as seen above, a number have already done.

Mainstreaming P/CVE into broader development work is not new – it was called for by the EU Council conclusions of June 2020[59], and is an approach encouraged by the P/CVE trainings RUSI delivers with EU funding. The Covid-19 crisis strengthens the rationale for an integrated approach of this kind. Practitioner interviews suggested it was 'flawed' to separate out the reasons a small group or individual might be identified as 'at risk' from the broader structural – especially economic – challenges facing a community. As such, a practitioner interview suggested that P/CVE programmes should a) seriously consider cash transfers, at least "in the immediate term", and b) look at linking beneficiaries to longer-term employment opportunities or internship schemes as "they go through a mentorship or trauma healing programme".

This suggests that stronger links between P/CVE and livelihoods programmes are needed. However, rather than advocating bespoke cash transfer programming for 'at risk' individuals, we suggest looking at targeting criteria to ensure that they are sufficiently inclusive such that these groups can be included. In times of humanitarian crisis it is in any case increasingly seen as good practice to flex and expand beneficiary lists to take account of changing levels of need[60]. Such an approach may also have P/CVE benefits, as well as reducing the risks of 'rewarding' those at risk of radicalisation over those who do not show any such tendencies. Lessons can also be learnt from disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programming in terms of ensuring that appropriate linkages are made between reintegration initiatives and future economic opportunities, in order not to create further frustration and disappointment that might increase rather than decrease the chances of radicalisation.

There are also clear risks and opportunities in health programming. Care needs to be taken in order to avoid creating risk for healthcare providers, or to undermine health campaigns by politicising messaging. But those leading these campaigns need to be mindful of the potential for violent extremist groups to propagate disinformation surrounding Covid-19, and design careful communications campaigns to mitigate the impact of this (see also last recommendation). Planning for vaccination campaigns will need particular care, with strong community engagement and communications through trusted mediators ahead of roll out of the vaccine. Mental health and psychosocial interventions could also be usefully integrated with P/CVE work to tackle effects of social isolation throughout lockdowns, with appropriate referral mechanisms in place through P/CVE programmes.

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[59] https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44446/st08868-en20.pdf
[60] See for instance O.Brien et al, 2018. 'Shock-Responsive Social Protection Systems Research: Synthesis Report', OPM, January 2018.

There is also a potential role for education here. A recent RUSI paper[61] found that the evidence base for education initiatives in P/CVE is limited, tending to focus on output measures rather than long-term outcomes, and pointed out a number of risks in this area. Nonetheless, it also pointed to the potential for knowledge based interventions to convey positive values and help to build social cohesion, while critical thinking and dialogue may develop inclusion and tolerance (with which may come greater resilience to extremist views for instance). It highlights the importance of skilful facilitation and carefully designed interventions.

To advocate for Governments and security forces to avoid abuses or heavy-handed enforcement of Covid-19 restrictions, and take opportunities to link P/CVE to security sector reform (SSR) programmes and training

Heavy handedness by security forces is one of the strongest potential drivers of recruitment to violent extremist armed groups, with Covid-19 related restrictions increasing this trend. We recommend seeking opportunities to link P/CVE to security sector reform initiatives. One example may be that RUSI consider adapting the P/CVE training we currently receive EU funding for to address lockdown principles and practices. There may also be further opportunities to add this into other trainings as well- for instance where the EU is already leading international training missions (EU Training Missions, or EU Capacity Building Missions). This sort of addition has been done in the past with international humanitarian law, human rights and in some cases (as part of the UK PSVI initiative) with preventing sexual violence.

The REINVENT programme that RUSI is part of in Kenya provides a further example of this, having had to reduce its budget due to wider pressures on the donor, and responded by adjusting its plans to focus on the spike in violence against women and girls and on rebuilding police-community relationships, alongside longer-term work on structural changes. Examples of activities carried out include helping the police write standard operating procedures for responding to Covid-19 and for child protection in the context of Covid-19, facilitating dialogue between communities and security officials, and longer-term work on police accountability.

Training or even wider SSR initiatives alone will of course not be sufficient, with political and military/police leadership commitment also needed to ensure that change is driven through and leaders/commanders are held to account for any breaches. While not within DG DEVCO's control, it will be vital that engagement with governments does stress this point and advocate for equitable treatment of different groups and respect for human rights for all.

To increase communications efforts to tackle disinformation and propaganda related to Covid-19, particularly ahead of key potential flashpoints like vaccination roll out

Given the scale of disinformation we are already seeing on Covid-19, and the potential for extremist groups to use this to gain support, communications efforts must be part of our recommendations. Where possible we would also recommend efforts to tackle social isolation, given this is a major factor in increasing vulnerability to radicalisation.

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[61] Wallner C. 2020. 'Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism through Education Initiatives: Assessing the Evidence Base', RUSI Occasional Paper, 2020

Some P/CVE partners we spoke with are already being asked to increase their communications work, and shared lessons on how best to do this. Examples have included producing regular Covid-19 reports for project staff and sharing them with mentors and mentees in P/CVE mentorship programmes. In tackling misinformation, one CVE programme working across eastern Africa argued that it was important that stakeholders were involved from outside CSOs, including local community influencers who had access to those 'at-risk'. These individuals were identified through a mapping exercise and were able to guide critical thinking and avoid condemning narratives in ways that would be counterproductive.[62] This recommendation is likely to hold true for other areas as well, given some (albeit anecdotal) evidence suggests that using communications interventions are stronger when they recognise and respond to relational dynamics, and that use of credible messengers appears promising.[63] In one example, a programme team brought in a specialised partner who helped them train communities on developing media content, including fact checking and developing critical thinking skills. By giving at risk communities a voice and allowing them to talk about their lives, this approach also helped to reduce the sense of social isolation

Evidence also suggests that communications are more effective when accompanied by interventions, as isolated communications can create a cognitive gap between the message and lack of action.[64] This again suggests linking P/CVE work, especially communications, to broad sectoral programming, including public health responses. In doing so it will be important to think through both the potential intended and unintended consequences as conspiracy theories and propaganda adjust to take into account changing circumstances and events, and to work through local mediators as far as possible to deliver messaging.

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[62] Interview with CVE practitioner, Nairobi
[63] Jones, M, 2020, 'Through the Looking Glass: Assessing the Evidence Base for P/CVE Communications', RUSI Occasional Paper, 2020
[64] Ibid