

COVID-19 and its Impact on Global Terrorism Trend

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Honorable Chairs, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, greetings from United Arab Emirates and thank you very much for the opportunity for me to talk about a really important topic which is 'COVID-19 and its Impact on Global Terrorism Trend.'

I will focus specifically on the terrorism trend and my friends were talking about its impact on counter violent extremism and terrorism. So briefly, we all are familiar, the pandemic has presented opportunities and challenges for everybody in this world today. And specially it has also presented opportunities and challenges for terrorist groups around the world. Now, if you look at the last few months seemingly there is an apparent decrease in the number of terrorist attacks at global scale in the recent months. But actually, it is not necessarily a positive indication. If you followed the news, we have seen attempted attack against hospital that was treating COVID-19 patients in America and also in Tunisia there was an incident where two men were arrested over plot to infect the Tunisian security forces with COVID-19. At the moment all across academia is premature to establish any sort of interlinks between terrorism and pandemic. But Red Cross has shown that attacks by Al-Qaeda and Islamic State of Daish in Sub Saharan Africa increased by 37% between mid-March 2020 and mid-April 2020. And also, there had been general increase in Islamic State activities in Iraq and Syria. And also there has been an increase in hate crimes that is in America.

So first, I will talk about the opportunities that COVID-19 has given to terrorist groups around the world. The very first and foremost important factor is the increase in captive audience. So now with the lockdown and the instruction of the movement especially youth are spending much more time online, there has been an increase in

unsupervised internet usage, I mean kids who are at Home doing online learning is a positive thing but the down side to this is there is an increase in unsupervised internet usage by the youth. And according to a report that was published by organization called Moonshot CVE based in United Kingdom, this is an organization for counter terrorism propaganda online. So, their report says that there has been 13% increase for white supremacies content on google across America at the beginning of April. And especially lockdowns have been placed for modern cadence the average of the google search of extremist contents amounted to 21%. And the number of right-wing extremist groups on social media has also increased in the West in the past few months and also North America study the relationship between online activity and radicalization in the past few months there has been increased in cyber-crime.

The second factor or the opportunity that is now available for the terrorists as a result of COVID-19 is increase drivers which further terrorist propaganda and narratives. So, first COVID-19 has impacted on governance, social polarization, economy all of these will affect how extremist ideologies were constructed and disseminated. So just in general many individuals continue to stay uncertainty and isolation and some countries even witnessed political instability. So, this kind of situation is exactly what terrorists drive on. So, what the terrorists do is they integrate the COVID-19 situations and chaos into their narratives and propaganda and they are basically exploiting kind of events for their purposes. So, this means they have narratives they make differences among enemies, they are wing forcing hatress towards particular ethnic or religious groups and some terrorists groups are calling for action to conduct terrorist attacks during this time and lots of time it is conspiracy theory. And for example, in the

case of Salafi or Jihadist groups how they interpreting and exploiting the pandemic?

So, the COVID-19 according to them they are acting as soldiers of Allah and pandemic is representing a great play which is mentioned in Hade or signaling the prophesied end of time and coming of Islamic messiah. And for groups in Islamic State in particular they are calling for action to do terrorist attacks and calling for release captured militants and families from the prison in Iraq and Syria. On the other hand, we have groups such as Al-Qaida for them they are using this opportunity in different way. In calling for terrorist attacks they are inviting people to use this time to stay at home to study Islam during lockdown and quarantine period and prepare themselves spiritually and physically and Al-Qaeda specifically say their followers not to conduct any attacks. So there are differences even within the ideology of Jihadist Salafist organizations.

Now we have white supremacy groups. For them COVID-19 is a perfect opportunity to increase their hate speech towards Asian. Especially because COVID-19 came from Wuhan. And also, they are twisting the story now and they are blaming Jews for spread of COVID-19. So essentially their narrative is extremely racist, semantic, Islam-forbid. And some of them even link the spread of COVID-19 to the spread of Chinese 5G technology. So they are twisting in making story just to fit their narrative. Even the far-right groups are incurring their supporters if the supporters get infected they will visit local mosques, visit local Jewish synagogues, spread time at the public transport and spread time public places to spread the threat or virus to other people.

On the other hand, we have groups like left-wing interest groups that blame capitalism for the COVID-19 pandemic and call for action for them is destroy businesses to accelerate the capitalism downfall. So we can see how so many different organizations with different ideology are twisting narratives exploiting the situation to suite with their own propaganda purposes.

The other trend we see is terrorist groups now with COVID-19 are engaging in pro-social activities. And this is especially applicable in failed states. Because in failed or weak states the capacity of the government to protect its citizens and the trust between the citizens and the authorities provide enough opportunity to terrorist groups to exploit the grievances and needs. So, they try to promote anti-state violence, they are trying to decrease the government's legitimacy.

So, what do we do? The terrorist group step up the delivery of essential services and promote relative effectiveness of health and social care efforts. For example, they provide more essential health care services on behalf of the government, they call to social distance, they promise safe passage of health care workers, they disinfect public places organize or distribution. And they do all these charitable social activities which states are failed and provide for their people. This actually boost their reputation and can clearly see the propaganda value of such efforts as an opportunity to broaden their supports in long-term. Another opportunity we see is weaponization of COVID-19 or there has been increased prospect of engaging in terrorism as very viable and attractive tactic in the future. Now the world is seen how much of chaos virus spreads and for terrorists this is extremely attractive ideal because of psychological and social economic impact it is caused.

And also, we can see a modified target selection. So traditionally terrorist groups like to conduct attacks in crowded areas where people used to gather. For example, markets, public squares, places of worship. But now due to restriction of movement and people are staying at homes now target selection of terrorist groups might change. It might be replaced by targeting critical infrastructure such as hospitals, supermarkets inside people intend to go more. And final point we see the the opportunity for terrorist groups is that terrorist financing. Of course, they need money to run their businesses. So, this is likely to

continue on the guide on humanitarian relief operations. We have seen even in Sri Lanka the LTTE how they used to bring funding's abroad and they used to collect money using humanitarian relief organizations to fund terrorist activities. In the same way the terrorists used COVID-19 they collect financing under the guise of humanitarian relief operations against the pandemic.

Now I want to shift talking about challenges and the teachings which the pandemic has paused or giving to the terrorist groups. First, there is limitations of operation around. As I said earlier the lockdown and the restriction of freedom of movement of the people, it is harder for terrorists to move across and conduct operations and because of few of time and space. Because that moment of people means that any suspecting terrorist that is conducting surveillance or doing some special purchases or they launching attacks is much easier to identify. And this is something we see right now in the Gaza Strip. Now Hamas the terrorist organization is now much less active on the ground because they know that they cannot be identified now with the less people outside. And also, this has reduced the effectiveness of common terrorist practice such as stabbing, bombing or vehicle borne IED blasts. And also, there is a decrease for restrictions in international travel. So therefore, there is a decrease in foreign terrorist fighters that travel Syria or everywhere just in general.

The second challenge for terrorist is negative impact on resources. So the destruction of the global, regional and national supply chains terrorists is struggling to access food, medicine and money and weapons. And there has been general restrictions with the moment of people and goods which has deprived terrorists from revenue from acquisition or extortion.

And finally, there has been negative impact on popularly. So now with the media, national security agenda, government level everything is dominating by the COVID-19 pandemic. So nationally there has been a reduced media attention to terrorist attacks. Now this is not good

for terrorist because terrorists need that media attention. So, this means is that because that there is less media attention and with the reduced capability the terrorist attacks they can become more extreme and more violent in order to grab attention. So, resulted with attack on maternity hospital in Afghanistan just few months back in 2020 resulted drastic very violent extreme attack. So, we can see that there is negative impact on popularity because such types of attacking are actually initiate potential consequences.

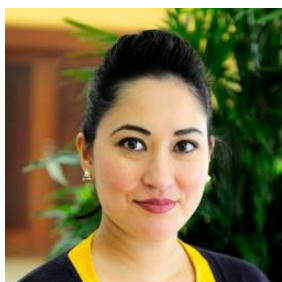
Just as a concluding remark, what is the implication of all of this for Sri Lanka in particular. Now while Sri Lanka has a much low infection rate compared to other countries around the world, Sri Lanka still faces challenges due to the "new normal" created as a result of COVID-19. Now extremism of all types thrive under the current situation and Sri Lanka is no exception to the rule. And now today especially we see the news that PCoI on Easter Sunday attacks are going on, and reports are coming out. With all of these we see lots of blame-games are happening from the people of the previous administration. But all of these is also going to affect and undermine the stability of current the administration because this type of instability and blame-games are something that terrorists love and they can thrive on for propaganda purposes. And also, not to mention I am based in United Arab Emirates and being in the Middle East I saw lots of Middle Eastern media outlets negatively had criticized about the cremation of the Muslims. The Muslims who have died from COVID-19 Sri Lanka. And that was in news in Middle East. These kinds of things can also fuel extremist narratives against Sri Lanka. That is the perfect sort of platform which terrorists can exploit.

In conclusion, I would like to say that COVID-19 has been strategic destruction for the law enforcement agencies. But on the other hand, let's not forget terrorism more than COVID-19 terrorism is a pandemic. So, we are dealing with enemy that is more immortals that constantly capable to evolve and adopt into different circumstances. So, although we are unlikely to see

immediate effects and the efforts of terrorist groups and radicalization is happening now during COVID-19 we can see them during lengthy economic stagnation of countries all over the world and for post pandemic recovering period. So, with this I would like to conclude my presentation.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Author Biography



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previous appointments include Senior Lecturer at the Department of Strategic Studies, Faculty of Defense & Strategic Studies at General Sir John Kotelawala Defense University Sri Lanka; Research Fellow at the School of Law and Government, Dublin City University, Ireland; Researcher at the Centre for Transnational Crime Prevention, University of Wollongong, Australia, and Associate Research Fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.