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Citation

Veilleux-Lepage, Y. D., Van Steen, T., & Kisyova, M. E. (2022). Terrorism experts' predictions regarding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the activities of violent non-state actors. *Perspectives On Terrorism*, 16(4), 41-58. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3485433>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Source: *Perspectives on Terrorism*, August 2022, Vol. 16, No. 4 (August 2022), pp. 41-58

Published by: Terrorism Research Initiative

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27158151>

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Terrorism Experts' Predictions Regarding the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Activities of Violent Non-State Actors

by Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, Tommy van Steen, and Maria-Elena Kisyova

Abstract

This article seeks to systematically collate the assessments and predictions of terrorism experts through a survey of 142 terrorism experts' evaluations. In light of the recent emergence of a growing number of policy and peer-reviewed publications dealing with the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the activities of violent non-state actors—whether in terms of propaganda, radicalization, violent action, or recruitment and mobilization—this article seeks to evaluate the degree of consensus within the field of terrorism studies on these effects. Because terrorism experts play an important role in the formulation of national security decisions and the shaping of public debates, and their analyses of current and future threats frequently influence policy considerations, this study provides insight into the prevalent attitudes among terrorism experts in the midst of the pandemic. This is important as these prevailing attitudes may shape future research in the field of terrorism studies and subsequently impact governmental policies.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, prediction, terrorism experts.

Introduction

As the world continues to grapple with the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, it is abundantly clear that this crisis will have long-lasting and multifaceted consequences. Following the declaration of a global pandemic in mid-March 2020,[1] and as governments around the world adopted various measures to reduce COVID-19 transmission in their communities, scholars and pundits alike began to contemplate how this unprecedented public health crisis would impact their respective fields of expertise.[2]

Within the field of terrorism studies, a growing number of policy and peer-reviewed publications—along with countless webinars, online symposia, conferences, and discussions on social media—soon emerged. These publications and events revealed perspectives and assumptions regarding the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the activities of violent non-state actors, whether in terms of propaganda, radicalization, violent action, or recruitment and mobilization. Some scholars suggested that extremists may seek to capitalize on the crisis to boost recruitment and mobilization,[3] while others warned about the possibility that COVID-19 and similar biological agents could be weaponized.[4] Experts also described how both far-right extremists and jihadists had taken or would seek to take advantage of lockdown measures and the corresponding increased use of the Internet in order to promote their ideologies.[5] Also postulated was that these actors might employ the COVID-19 pandemic as part of accelerationist and apocalyptic narratives to create a new ideational background for their ongoing ideological struggles.[6] Furthermore, scholars warned of extremist groups utilizing the pandemic to incite violence against ideological enemies.[7] In addition to the existing security concerns posed by far-right extremists and jihadists in North America and Europe, scholars have warned that the reallocation of resources to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic may impede international cooperation against terrorist groups as well as reducing military presence in conflict zones. This by-product of the pandemic, scholars argue, may lead to the establishment of new 'safe havens' in which terrorists can plan and direct attacks against the West with impunity.[8] Others, however, have warned against exaggerating the impact of COVID-19 on violent non-state actors' abilities and motivations. [9]

Considering these wide-ranging debates, and the increased scholarly attention upon the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the activities of violent non-state actors, this study has a dual aim: to systematical-

ly collate the assessments and predictions of terrorism experts, and to measure the degree to which there is consensus within the field of terrorism studies. In order to achieve this aim, we conducted a survey of 142 terrorism experts. A summary of the results of this survey is as follows:

- Far-right terror in Europe and North America and the proliferation of far-right propaganda is—at this time—generally deemed to pose a bigger threat than Islamist extremism;
- Violent non-state actors in the Middle East and North Africa (henceforth MENA) and Sahel region are generally seen as having leveraged the crisis through pro-social activities rather than violence;
- The threat of bioweapons continues to be deemed rather low compared to conventional attacks, despite the increased scholarly attention paid to the subject.

Terrorism experts play an important role in the formulation of national security decisions and the shaping of public debates, and their analyses of current and future threats are frequently incorporated into policy considerations.[10] As such, this study seeks to capture prevalent attitudes among terrorism experts in the midst of the pandemic, given that these might not only shape future research within the field of terrorism studies, but also influence governmental policies.

The approach adopted in this study builds on similar work on knowledge production in the aftermath of catalytic changes. For example, in the aftermath of the September 11 (henceforth 9/11) attacks, Czwarno sought to identify the prevalent postulates in pre-9/11 terrorism literature in order to better understand why the academic community failed to warn policy-makers about the possibility of an event on the scale of the attacks.[11] Czwarno points toward ontological, methodological, and conceptual problems, as well as a skewed focus on potential threats posed by China's economic and military rise, and suggests that these created a gap in knowledge about jihadist terrorist groups like al-Qaeda. Similarly, Schuurman[12] and Phillips[13] have argued that terrorism scholarship post-9/11 was largely characterized by a new singular focus on jihadist terrorism, which in turn de-emphasized the threat posed by far-right extremism and terrorism.

Unlike the aforementioned studies, which attempted to identify influential postulates retrospectively, in this study we seek to capture a contemporary snapshot of how the field of terrorism studies has responded to the current public health crisis. Our hope is that this survey will serve as a sort of 'intellectual time capsule' that will capture prevalent assumptions, expectations, predictions and assessments during this public health crisis, which in turn can be used in subsequent studies to trace the evolution of academic thought, research, and public policy concerning terrorism and non-state violence.

COVID-19 and Violent Non-State Actors

A survey of the growing literature on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic reveals the emergence of important debates within the academic community as to how the current pandemic would impact the behavior of violent non-state actors. Broadly speaking, four—at times overlapping—prevailing postulates can be distilled from the published literature; these four postulates in turn serve as the basis for our survey. These postulates focus on both short-term and long-term impacts, with short-term impact mostly occurring during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and long-term impact emerging in the aftermath of the pandemic. These postulates appear within the literature—often without significant attention given to counter-arguments—as commonly held beliefs amongst scholars writing about the impact of the pandemic on terrorism, which in itself is important. Our study sought to test to what degree these beliefs were in fact commonly held amongst terrorism scholars at large.

Postulate 1: In the short term, COVID-19 pandemic mitigation/containment measures have restricted the activities of violent non-state actors.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, governments worldwide have adopted various—and at times, highly restrictive and intrusive—non-pharmaceutical interventions to reduce transmission of the disease. These

range from social distancing measures, school closures, and bans on public events, to the use of security services and technologies to assist in contact tracing.[14] As these non-pharmaceutical interventions were introduced, several scholars suggested that these measures would have the unintended effect of constraining the activities of violent non-state actors.[15]

In the short term, some measures such as social distancing and the increased presence of law enforcement were posited as possibly reducing the likelihood of violent non-state actors being able to successfully carry out mass casualty attacks (such as bombing or vehicle ramming attacks) within crowded and public spaces.[16] Similarly, as a result of reductions in cross-border traffic and the introduction of tighter border controls between states, violent non-state actors would ostensibly face even more difficulties and scrutiny when traveling across international boundaries.[17] Experts have also pointed to the application of domestic terrorism and criminal offenses to sanction individuals found to be intentionally spreading the virus or threatening to do so, as a deterrent measure.[18] While some of these constraints might have a limited impact in dissuading those intent on perpetrating small-scale attacks,[19] the notion that measures to contain the pandemic have a dual effect—both curbing the spread of the disease and reducing the likelihood of an attack by violent non-state actors—is widespread in the literature surveyed.

Alongside more general statements assessing the overall impact on the activity of violent non-state actors, the literature also deals with the specific impact of the pandemic on the ability of these actors to conduct attacks. In this context, there was a tendency to focus on discrete case studies, concentrating on a particular group, region, type, and time of attack.[20] With respect to such studies, several intersecting trends emerge. Considering security risks arising in North America and Europe, experts caution that far-right and far-left extremists, single-issue extremists (anti-vaxxers, racially motivated groups, anti-globalization groups, etc.), and lone actors encouraged by terrorists may exploit the overburdened security context to launch attacks against vulnerable targets.[21] Other risks within the region include Salafi-jihadist organized groups, who may initiate plans for future attacks in the West from terrorist hotspots.[22] In addition, experts have put forward hypotheses regarding the type of attacks that may occur during the pandemic. A survey of the literature on this point[23] mentions the following: the risk of a conventional attack against the general public during the pandemic, especially on medical facilities; the risk of an attack using a biological agent; the risk of an attack using emerging technologies; the risk of a cyberattack on critical infrastructure; and the risk of a conventional attack targeting security officials.

Particular assumptions are made with respect to the activity of violent non-state actors in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sahel. In the short term, the risk of a terrorist attack is frequently tied to existing terrorist groups in the region, where there is a reduction in the ability of security services to combat terrorism as international partners recall troops back home, an issue which has been widely discussed.[24] Long-term risks are tied to the social and economic consequences of the pandemic, which lead to increased recruiting potential of COVID-19 propaganda and of pro-social services offered by terrorist groups in areas of poor governance.[25]

Postulate 2: Violent non-state actors have taken or may take advantage of the uncertainty and confusion caused by the pandemic by adapting their activities to the changing security context.

A considerable body of literature proposes that terrorist groups operate in environments which are inherently hostile to them and must therefore adapt and innovate rapidly to survive.[26] Similarly, observers of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on non-state actors have detailed various ways in which these actors might adapt and take advantage of the uncertainty and confusion caused by this crisis.[27]

Focusing on the threat posed by violent non-state actors outside of North America and Europe, several scenarios have been envisaged by those experts concerned that governments would shift priorities and resources away from counter-terrorism during the pandemic. In particular, experts noted that violent non-state actors operating in the MENA region may seek to establish 'safe havens' by reclaiming land,[28] may perpetrate large-scale attacks domestically,[29] or may plan future attacks against the West.[30]

Experts also noted that violent non-state actors may take advantage of security lapses at important facilities; for example, at prisons housing terrorists, where governments may struggle with reduced manpower as guards become ill and the virus spreads among inmate populations, leading to riots and potentially jail-breaks.[31] In addition, Ackerman proposes that terrorists may attack facilities with reduced security such as “chemical plants, and facilities that store nuclear, radiological or other hazardous materials” in order to steal raw materials that could be used to produce explosive devices, as well as using the time to improve their technical skills such as bomb-making or cyberattack capabilities.[32]

Experts have also warned that violent non-state actors might seek to increase their perceived legitimacy in areas of poor governance by engaging in pro-social activities in place of local governments, such as community-focused COVID-19 services in the social, health care, and humanitarian sectors.[33] These scholars have cautioned that such actions provide an opportunity for extremist groups to highlight the inadequacies of local government, acquire political legitimacy and, ultimately, increase recruitment and funding.[34] For instance, Coleman argued that in the Sahel region, “support for groups such as JNIM [the al-Qaeda umbrella-affiliate] and ISGS [the recognized Islamic State affiliate] is often separated from the groups’ ideological outlooks” and instead tied to “factors such as the groups’ ability to provide financial or security incentives for membership.”[35]

Postulate 3: The dissemination of extremist content/propaganda during the pandemic is a pressing security concern.

Scholars focusing on the digital realm have suggested that violent non-state actors have also adapted their online activities, in terms of both frequency and content. Several experts have reported a noticeable increase in activity on online extremist platforms, which suggests that extremist groups have successfully drawn greater attention to their ideological propaganda during the pandemic.[36] Research also suggests that extremists have repurposed preexisting prejudices and narratives to fit the crisis, which they use to justify violent aims and opposition toward ideological enemies,[37] thus both facilitating recruitment[38] and inspiring followers to commit attacks.[39]

Most of the literature dealing with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violent non-state actors is concerned with the increased presence and reach of extremist content online. In the United States, for example, online engagement with far-right extremist content is believed to have increased by an average of 13% following the introduction of lockdown measures.[40] Similarly, another study found that a particular white supremacist channel on Telegram had experienced an 800% increase in users during the pandemic.[41] Moreover, Davies and colleagues found that the official declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic by the World Health Organization contributed to significant increases in posting behavior on far-right extremist and incel forums, but had a negligible effect on user behavior on English-language jihadi forums and left-wing forums.[42] When considering the amplified engagement with extremist content, experts allude to the numerous radicalization ‘push factors’ exacerbated by the pandemic, including distress and uncertainty, increased psychological trauma, increased poverty and school closures, and more (unsupervised) screen time during lockdowns.[43]

Scholars have also pointed to the evolving nature of extremist content, examining the ways extremists and jihadists have used conspiracy theories and misinformation in order to project their belief systems through the lens of COVID-19[44] and to reach new audiences.[45] Research on the impact of COVID-19 on far-right extremist propaganda suggests the existence of three prominent themes. Firstly, ethnic minorities—particularly Muslim, East Asian and Black communities—are commonly blamed for spreading the virus, or accused of doing so intentionally. Examples of this narrative have included the use of the hashtag #corona-jihad on Twitter, which began following the distribution of a fake video showing a Muslim man spitting at police officers. It has been estimated that more than 300,000 people engaged with this hashtag and that it has reached upwards of 135 million users on Twitter.[46] This form of propaganda has also included the dissemination of fake news and disinformation showing Muslims licking fruit or coughing at people. Ironically, this

narrative was, at times, coupled with calls to retaliate, such as encouraging supporters to engage in activities which would in turn facilitate the spread of the virus among these ethnic minorities.[47]

The second prominent theme framed non-pharmaceutical interventions such as lockdowns and strict social distancing rules as proof of government overreach and infringement of civil liberties. This theme was generally coupled with conspiracy theories. While no particular conspiracy theory appears to dominate, scholars have remarked that the most widespread theories include that COVID-19 is a plot to decimate or control the world population (attributed to various actors, including Bill Gates, the United Nations, or George Soros),[48] that the virus was caused by the proliferation of 5G telecommunication masts,[49] or that the pandemic was caused by a Chinese or Israeli bioweapon which was deliberately released for geostrategic or financial reasons.[50]

The third prominent theme relates to the notion of accelerationism: apocalyptic ideas are projected through the lens of the pandemic in order to create a new ideational background for ongoing ideological struggles. [51] Commenting on the proliferation of neo-Nazi propaganda on one far-right extremist platform, Kingdon notes that “the COVID-19 pandemic provides accelerationists with the argument that as conflict resulting from the virus is inevitable, potential recruits should be inspired to seize this as an opportunity for them to make the first move in the fight for a total Aryan victory.”[52]

The literature focusing on jihadist propaganda relating to COVID-19 has similarly suggested that groups like Islamic State have sought to co-opt the pandemic as an ally in fighting their enemies, and have encouraged Muslims and non-Muslims alike to adhere to their stricter interpretation of Islam as a form of protection from the virus.[53] Scholars have also remarked that, in addition to calling for ideological adherence, jihadist propaganda has routinely called on followers to take advantage of overburdened security capabilities to launch attacks.[54]

Postulate 4: Counter-Terrorism/Counter Violent Extremism (CT/CVE) sector de-prioritization will produce security gaps with regards to violent non-state actors.

The fourth postulate that can be distilled from the literature on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violent non-state actors relates to the extent of counter-terrorism and counter violent extremism initiatives, measures, and programs. Indeed, several scholars have raised concerns that the pandemic and efforts to contain it may hamper the ability of states to disrupt emerging plots and tactics.[55] In Europe and North America, in light of the diversion of security forces, law enforcement, and intelligence services to help enforce non-pharmaceutical interventions, some experts have warned that the state may be left underprepared to deal with the threat posed by violent non-state actors.[56] This argument is possibly best articulated by Ackerman and Peterson, who remark that “[the] ongoing situation will reduce capabilities and introduce friction into the counter-terrorism process (e.g., with analysts teleworking or suffering personal stresses), thus making it more likely that a crucial warning indicator or piece of intelligence could fall through the cracks.”[57] Similarly, some scholars have expressed concerns that potential substantial cuts in national counter-terrorism and counter violent extremism budgets may result in reduced funding for capacity building and long-term programming.[58]

Experts focusing on counter-terrorism outside of North America and Europe have also raised concerns about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the ability of states to counteract and respond to terrorism. Such concerns seem to focus largely on the MENA and Sahel region, where Western states are heavily involved in training initiatives and international security assistance missions, which may be scaled back due to limited resources (including lack of healthy troops due to infection with/quarantine due to exposure to COVID-19) or changing political priorities in the face of the crisis.[59] The potential scaling back of Western involvement is often feared as detrimental to the stability of the MENA and Sahel region (which depends on continuing international cooperation, training of local security forces, and leadership in military contributions) and is therefore often viewed as potentially paving the way for either a resurgence of violent non-state actors or the establishment of safe havens for them to operate in.[60] It is also feared by experts

that this would, in turn, allow terrorist groups operating in the region to “better prepare spectacular terror attacks and escalate campaigns of insurgent battlefields worldwide,” and to recruit more adherents to realize their aims.[61]

Methodology

Building upon the four overarching postulates presented above, we set out to examine the degree to which terrorism experts agree with these postulates and to better understand how these viewpoints might shape the wider security field. In order to achieve these aims, we set up a large-scale expert survey. The survey comprised 29 questions, split into four sections: I. General Impact of the Pandemic on the Practices of Violent Non-State Actors (4 questions); II. Security Risks: Europe and North America (13 questions); III. Security Risks: Middle East, North Africa and the Sahel Region (9 questions); IV. Demographic Questions (3 questions).

Dissemination and Participants

Our target population for the survey were individuals who had published between 1997 and 2020 in three leading terrorism journals: *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, and *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. Of the 1,691 individual authors who met these criteria, we were able to find the email addresses of 1,497 individuals.[62] We were unable to find the email addresses for 194 individuals; the most common reasons for this were that the individual had retired (and thus no longer had an institutional email address), had passed away, or was now working outside academia and had a minimal digital footprint.

On March 30, 2021, the survey was sent by email to the 1,497 aforementioned individuals. Of these emails, 73 bounced or failed to send due to outdated contact details. In addition, six individuals responded directly to decline participation in the survey. The most common reason given for this was that, although the individual had previously published in a terrorism studies journal, they felt their expertise lay outside this field of study. The survey was open for completion during the period of March 30, 2021–May 7, 2021. During this time, three reminder emails were sent to potential respondents encouraging them to participate.

In total, 218 individuals responded to the survey. Of these, 76 were excluded from the data for one of two reasons. The primary reason for exclusion was that a respondent had begun the survey but failed to complete it. The survey required respondents to answer all substantive questions and did not allow questions to be skipped, with the exception of questions related to respondent demographics (i.e., gender, location, employment). The second reason for exclusion, which accounted for 13 cases, was that the respondent failed an attention check question. The goal of attention check items is to ensure that people who complete a survey are paying attention to the questions when answering them, as a potential danger of survey research is that respondents give random answers to the questions in order to get through the survey, rather than providing genuine answers. By adding an attention check, we sought to quickly gauge whether respondents might have stopped paying attention. The attention check consisted of an item in a matrix question which stated “Please select ‘Disagree’ on this line.” Any participant who did not select “Disagree” was considered to have failed the attention check and was removed from the sample before analysis.

After accounting for incomplete responses and failed attention checks, the data set comprised 142 completed surveys. Of these 142 participants, 99 were male, 40 were female, and 3 did not indicate their gender. In terms of geographic spread, 47.2% were employed in North America, 38.7% in Europe, 7.7% in Australia and Oceania, 2.8% in the Middle East, 2.1% in Africa, and 1.4% in Asia. Given that all participants had authored at least one article in a leading terrorism and violent extremism journal in the last 24 years, it is not surprising that most of the participants selected “academia” as their current place of employment (N=112). However, a small number of participants came from think tanks (10), government (5), law enforcement (3), industry (1), and other organizations (11). The median completion time of the survey was 13 minutes.

Note that, compared to previous surveys that systematically collected expert opinions and assumptions on

other topics within the field of terrorism studies, our survey has a larger sample size. For instance, a similar survey was published by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, which gathered inferences regarding counter-terrorism professionals' views on the usefulness of academic insights for their work; this survey had a total of 59 responses.[63] Another similar inquiry conducted to investigate the state of terrorism research in 2011 gathered 66 responses.[64]

Results

Postulate 1: In the short term, COVID-19 pandemic mitigation/containment measures have restricted the activities of violent non-state actors.

To determine how respondents felt about opportunities for attacks by violent non-state actors during the pandemic, we asked: "To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Generally speaking, the measures taken to restrict the spread of the virus (for example lockdowns, mandatory quarantines, social distancing) have constrained the activities of violent non-state actors." There was a lack of clear agreement on this statement: only half of experts tended to somewhat agree (N=65, or 45.8%) or strongly agreed (N=6, or 4.2%) that containment measures have had a constraining effect. Those who agreed to any extent (N=71, or 50%) were asked a follow-up question where they had to distribute 100 points among several given measures, allocating more points to those they considered to be more restrictive. This approach allowed respondents to weigh the impact of several different measures taken to restrict the spread of the virus. The most points were awarded to restrictive travel regulations (average 37 points), closely followed by social distancing measures (average 35 points), with smaller effects attributed to the increased presence of law enforcement (average 21 points). The new pandemic-related offenses intended to deter violent non-state actors from mounting attacks were seen as the least restrictive (average 8 points).

When asked which type of violent non-state actor would pose the greatest threat to Europe and North America during the pandemic, the participants responded as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Which of the following violent types of non-state actors pose the greatest threat to Europe and North America during the pandemic?

Type of violent non-state actor	% of respondents
Violent right-wing organized groups	50.7%
Nonaffiliated right-wing/left-wing extremists	19%
Single-issue extremists (anti-vaxxers, racially motivated crimes, antiabortionist groups, anti-globalization groups, etc.)	13.4%
Salafi-jihadist organized groups	8.5%
Violent left-wing organized groups	3.5%
Nonaffiliated Islamist extremist	3.5%
Other forms of existing violent non-state actor violence	1.4%

Following this question, participants were asked to allocate 100 points between five types of possible attacks in North America and Europe, allocating more points to those they viewed as more likely to happen. The most points were allocated to a conventional attack against the general public (average 35 points) followed by a conventional attack targeting security officials (average 27 points). Substantially fewer points were allocated to a cyberattack (average 20 points), followed by an attack using emerging technologies (average 12 points). Surprisingly, the fewest points were allocated to an attack using a biological agent (average 6 points). Overall, the responses to these questions indicate that most of the experts consider containment measures to have restricted violent right-wing groups the least, as well as having the least impact on those who seek

to conduct conventional attacks. The fact that these two groups are often one and the same reinforces that there is consensus that violent right-wing groups conducting conventional attacks are those least restricted by COVID-19 measures. An alternative interpretation of these results is that experts have generally assessed far-right extremism as posing the greatest security risk at this point in time, and that the COVID-19 crisis may not have had a bearing on this assessment.

In addition, about 43% of participants agreed with the statement **“While ISIS has called on followers in the West to exploit the chaos and conduct attacks, jihadists are likely to wait until after the pandemic ends to do so.”** Taking into account that half of the respondents agreed that violent right-wing organized groups are the main security threat to North America and Europe during the pandemic, it appears that participants may consider COVID-19-related measures as impacting the modus operandi of jihadists in the West specifically. As such, the results in this section demonstrate that support for Postulate 1 is found only with regard to the impact of pandemic mitigation and containment measures on jihadists and their ability to conduct attacks in North America and Europe in the short term, perhaps due to the restrictive measures placed on international travel at the time of the survey.

Postulate 2: Violent non-state actors have taken or may take advantage of the uncertainty and confusion caused by the pandemic by adapting their activities to the changing security context.

Postulate 2 suggests violent non-state actors are adapting to the changing security context. To examine this, respondents were first asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement: **“Generally speaking, violent non-state actors have taken advantage of the uncertainty and confusion caused by the pandemic.”** Around 60% of participants tended to agree with this statement, while 25% disagreed and 15% did not have an opinion.

As with Postulate 1, those who agreed with the statement (N=85, 59.8%) were asked further clarification questions. These respondents were presented with several extremist activities and were asked to distribute 100 points among them, allocating more points to those they considered more successful. Participants allocated the most points to the ability of violent non-state actors to draw greater attention to their ideological propaganda (average 45 points), then to recruiting more adherents (average 36 points); the fewest points were allocated to mobilizing adherents to commit violent attacks (average 20 points).

Another common theme in the literature are extremist and terrorist tactics which make use of the local and global upheaval in order to achieve certain gains. All participants (N=142) were asked to distribute 100 points among common terrorist tactics which they believe will have the most success in the long term. Table 2 shows the average points allocated per activity.

In line with the previous result, 74% of participants agreed with the proposition that terrorist groups in the MENA region would effectively mobilize followers by conducting pro-social activities. Such legitimacy-building activities are also considered to be somewhat—but considerably less—effective when conducted by extremist groups in North America and Europe: while 43% of participants agree that **“some extremist groups have been effective in mobilizing followers by engaging in pro-social activities (e.g., providing medical or social services) during the COVID-19 pandemic,”** 35% neither agreed nor disagreed and 22% disagreed.

The results in this section demonstrate that there is a higher consensus for Postulate 2 than for Postulate 1. On average, more agreement can be found for the proposition that violent non-state actors have taken advantage of the uncertainty and confusion by the pandemic than for the idea that their activities have been restricted. Results for Postulate 2 also demonstrate that there is support for the idea that extremists and terrorists have adapted to the pandemic by engaging in pro-social activities, with experts perceiving that groups in the MENA region have been more effective than those operating in the West.

Table 2: Which of the following activities might be undertaken by violent non-state actors within the Sahel and MENA region during the pandemic?

Type of extremist activity	Average points allocated
Terrorists will try to increase their perceived legitimacy in areas of poor governance by engaging in pro-social activities (i.e., providing medical services).	22
Terrorists will take the time to regroup and learn new skills.	17
Terrorists will take advantage of weakening international coalitions to reclaim land.	16
Terrorists will exploit the disruption caused by the pandemic to perpetrate attacks within the MENA/Sahel region.	16
Terrorists will exploit the disruption caused by the pandemic to launch attacks against the West.	10
Terrorists will use the compromised security of prisons and detention centers to free fighters and followers.	10
Terrorists will use compromised security as an opportunity to loot weapons bases.	9

Postulate 3: The dissemination of extremist content/propaganda during the pandemic is a pressing security concern.

The third postulate relates to the expert consensus regarding the dissemination of extremist content linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this respect, questions were split between narratives likely to prompt change by extremists in North America and Europe on the one hand, and by terrorists in the MENA and Sahel region on the other hand. Of the questions concerning the impact of extremist narratives in North America and Europe, most agreement was found for the statement that “**narratives blaming the spread of COVID-19 on specific minority groups have contributed to a rise in racially motivated hate crimes in North America/Europe**” and the notion that the dissemination of COVID-19 misinformation and conspiracy theories has led to a wider endorsement of violent extremist narratives in the region (for each statement, 84% of experts agreed). Seventy-two percent of experts lean toward agreeing with the statement that “**the high exposure to extremist content during lockdown(s) has contributed to a higher number of people undergoing a process of cognitive radicalization in North America/Europe.**” Lastly, there was no agreement as to whether the rise in online extremist content has led to an increased incidence of violent attacks.

The survey further prompted participants to distribute 100 points among a set of far-right extremist narratives, allocating more points to those they viewed as having been more effective in motivating individuals to take concrete action. Table 3 displays the average number of points allocated to each far-right narrative. These results are congruent with the current prevailing focus on narratives spread by far-right individuals online. However, it is important to note that while these narratives are frequently espoused by far-right extremists, they are not unique to them.

Table 3: Which of the following right-wing extremist narratives have been most effective in mobilizing individuals?

Type of far-right extremist narrative	Average points allocated
The state is using the pandemic as an opportunity to infringe on civil liberties.	43
Migrants and minorities are spreading the virus.	27
The virus is an opportunity to further the demise of the economic and political system through violence, in line with an accelerationist agenda.	18
5G communication technology is to blame for the spread of the virus.	12

In addition, the survey queried participants about their opinion on the effectiveness of various jihadist narratives. Respondents were asked to assess the potential of jihadist narratives by again distributing 100 points, allocating more to those which particularly prompted individuals to plan and/or carry out attacks. The results in Table 4 show the average points that were allocated to each jihadist narrative.

Table 4: Which of the following jihadist narratives have been most effective in mobilizing individuals?

Type of jihadist narrative	Average points allocated
Terrorist groups have called on followers to wage global jihad and take advantage of overburdened security capabilities to launch attacks.	31
Terrorist groups have used the pandemic to justify their apocalyptic and end-of-time narratives.	27
Terrorist groups have labeled the virus the 'invisible soldier' of God and called on practicing Muslims to adhere to their stricter interpretation of Islam.	24
Terrorist groups have accused the Western world of angering God and called on non-Muslims to convert to Islam.	18

While most experts would agree that narratives calling for violence are the most effective, there is no consensus on whether there is a connection between the ideological propaganda of jihadi groups and their level of violence. Overall, this contributes to a diluted consensus with regard to jihadist narratives, in contrast to a higher overall agreement on far-right extremist narratives and their impact. Therefore, there is on average more support for Postulate 3 when far-right extremist narratives and the corresponding security concerns are considered.

Postulate 4: Counter-Terrorism/Counter Violent Extremism (CT/CVE) sector de-prioritization will produce security gaps in responses to violent non-state actors.

The fourth and final postulate covers whether the de-prioritization of CT/CVE programs as a result of the focus on COVID-19 containment may produce security gaps which extremists can exploit. Prompted by the literature review, the questions in this section address security gaps in the MENA and Sahel region and their implications for long-term security, both of the region itself and for that of North America and Europe. One potential factor in the creation of security gaps in relation to COVID-19 is the hampered international military cooperation across the MENA and Sahel region. About two-thirds (63%) of the experts agree that the pandemic has been a cause for the declining counter-terrorism cooperation across the region. In connection with this statement, the survey explored several implications. First, we queried participants on whether they think the gains made against terrorist groups prior to the pandemic will be lost due to shifting national priorities in the MENA and Sahel regions, respectively. The results indicate a trend toward agreeing that gains will be lost across the region. Furthermore, the survey explored whether the reduction of foreign military presence in the MENA and Sahel region as a result of the pandemic will increase the security threat

to North America and Europe. The data suggest that the experts are split into two camps: those who believe that there will be a change, and those who do not. Table 5 demonstrates this segmentation, as well as the view of participants that, if the level of threat does increase, it will only be in the long run.

Table 5: *Expected change in threat level in North America and Europe as a result of the reduction of foreign military presence in the MENA and Sahel region*

Yes, in the short run (pending containment of COVID-19).	5.6%
Yes, in the long run (after all restrictions are lifted in North America and Europe).	46.5%
No, there will be no change in the level of threat.	37.3%
The threat will be reduced, rather than increased.	10.6%

To further understand the factors behind these perceptions, participants were asked to rank several security implications encountered in the MENA and Sahel region according to which of them pose the greatest threat to North America and Europe. The results of this categorization indicate that **the highest threat is posed by the declining international cooperation against foreign terrorist groups in the MENA region**, followed by the shift of law enforcement and intelligence agencies' attention away from threats emerging from the MENA region and toward the domestic COVID-19 situation. Less importance was attributed to the exposure of Western security forces to COVID-19 or their redeployment to undertake auxiliary tasks at home (e.g., assisting law enforcement and/or medical staff).

In conclusion, there is support for the proposition that CT/CVE de-prioritization will pose security threats as far as the response to terrorist actors in the MENA and Sahel region is concerned. It is evident that experts consider the declining international cooperation to represent a security concern for both the West and for regions with terrorist hotspots, with potentially negative consequences for the battle against terrorism in general.

Concluding Remarks

The value of examining the expert consensus on COVID-19 and violent non-state actor activity lies in understanding the ways expert opinions shape future academic research, government policy, and public discussions in this area. In this respect, the results reveal several interesting trends in relation to the impact the pandemic has had on violent non-state actors, which hinge on the particular region in question, the type of actor, and the nature of the risk.

First, the results suggest that there is an emerging consensus that violent right-wing organized groups represent the greatest threat to Europe and North America during the pandemic. In addition, some experts consider the activities of Salafi-jihadist organized groups to be particularly restricted by COVID-19 measures within the region, as indicated by the partial agreement that jihadists are unlikely to stage an attack in the West until after the pandemic ends. In connection with this finding, the results further confirm existing expert claims that travel restrictions will impede terrorist mobility across international boundaries.[65] Along these lines, reports have suggested that terrorists may choose to alter their operational methods and/or increase violent extremist activities in states of origin,[66] suggesting a dual effect of COVID-19 restrictions which depends on the type of actor involved.

Different results emerge when considering terrorist groups across the MENA and Sahel region. When probed about the ways in which terrorists will adapt to the pandemic, experts predominantly agree that terrorists will be most successful in recruiting more followers in the long term by conducting pro-social activities. Support for this hypothesis is present even when experts are asked to compare pro-social activities with other types of terrorist activity, such as attacking the West, reclaiming land, or freeing fighters and followers from prisons in the region. While several authors have cautioned against overestimating this threat, arguing that health care provision is a difficult task even for the best groups,[67] the results highlight the danger of public

health campaigns launched by jihadi groups. As Clarke notes, these activities have been used by terrorists to at least “highlight the ineptitude of Western governments’ responses, suggesting deliberate negligence and a lack of concern for their own citizens.”[68] In sum, the results of the survey indicate that experts consider health care provision to be one successful pandemic-related activity of Salafi-jihadists in areas which exhibit poor governance and scarce health infrastructure.

In some regards, the results of this survey differ from scholars’ assessments in the existing literature on the risks that may arise from violent non-state actor activity in North America and Europe during the pandemic. While the survey respondents have corroborated assessments of the ability of violent non-state actors to draw greater attention to their ideological propaganda,[69] an interesting revelation pertains to the perceived dangers of weaponizing biological agents.[70] Compared to the risk of a conventional attack, a cyberattack, or an attack using emerging technologies, experts continue to consider the risk of an attack using a biological agent to be the lowest.[71]. This reflects previous thinking about the low likelihood of such attacks. This implies that the pandemic has, perhaps surprisingly, given the mayhem caused by the spread of COVID-19, had little impact on experts’ fears about biological agents being used by terrorists. Meanwhile, the risk of a conventional attack against the general public was found to be most plausible. This result shows that, despite increased scholarly attention upon the subject, experts continue to consider more traditional means of inflicting physical and psychological damage on societies to represent a higher threat during the pandemic.

Despite the valuable insights highlighted in this study, several limitations must be mentioned, which in turn present opportunities for further research. First, more than 80% of the participants in this survey are employed within North America and Europe. While the study seeks to address this challenge by centering the majority of inferences on this region, further investigation of opinions of experts working in the MENA and Sahel region may highlight a different range of perspectives. Second, in the survey questions, regions and countries are grouped together that may in fact no longer share a common perspective on rising violent non-state actor threats. The latest reports suggest a split between the threat perception of policy-makers in North America versus Europe: while the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in the United States advises that “racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists and militia violent extremists present the most lethal domestic violent extremist threats”,[72] the European Union law enforcement agency, Europol, finds that EU Member states “assess that jihadist terrorism [is still] the greatest terrorist threat in the EU.”[73] Subsequent studies may therefore choose to treat the pandemic-related violent non-state actor threats separately for each geographical region, and thereby also better understand how this divergence affects international cooperation against terrorism. Related to this, while the survey sought to understand experts’ opinions on the consequences of the pandemic for counter-terrorism efforts, including for global coalitions against international terrorism, it did not examine external considerations which may have affected the CT/CVE sector. Further research may therefore probe the implications of pandemic-related political and socioeconomic impacts that will affect violent non-state actor activity both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada award number 895-2015-1000 and the Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security and Society (TSAS). All opinions are exclusively those of the authors and do not represent those of the funders.

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