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NOTE

From:	EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator
To:	Delegations
Subject:	**Terrorism in Times of Corona: The development of the terrorist threat as a result of the Covid-19 crisis**

I. Summary

The number of terrorist attacks has not grown significantly since the corona pandemic began and the threat may even have declined somewhat in some parts of the world. This situation may not endure. Ramadan might still spark an increase in terrorist activity, as is the case almost every year. Beyond the month of Ramadan, the corona pandemic could **enhance terrorists' morale, assist in spreading extremist narratives and conspiracy theories, hamper police and military efforts to fight terrorism, and undermine counter-terrorism policies**.

Extremist discourse online regarding the current crisis is already proliferating. Narratives blaming objectified 'Others' (e.g. Asians, Jews, immigrants, Muslims, Westerners, unbelievers) are bound to resonate more when an economic and sanitary crisis causes widespread despair. While extremist discourse already relies heavily on conspiracy theories, the uncertainty associated with the corona crisis will be easy to incorporate in existing narratives.

To date, **right-wing extremists appear to have been particularly shrewd in harnessing the pandemic** to their political objectives. They exploit the current crisis to stigmatise minority groups and spread disinformation. There have even been isolated cases where they promoted the use of the virus as **an easily accessible 'weapon'**, inciting their supporters to deliberately spread it among their enemies. In addition, they have already used the risks associated with online gatherings to carry out **cyberattacks**. 'Accelerationism', the notion that large-scale indiscriminate violence should be used to bring about a race war and societal change, appears more credible and appealing in times of a massive health crisis.

For terrorists of all stripes, the corona pandemic may bring about **an expansion in their target selection**. In the West, right-wing extremists and Jihadists could view attacks on medical personnel and facilities as highly effective, because these would generate a massive shock in society. As the pandemic spreads in the developing world, Jihadists and unaffiliated believers in conspiracy theories could do the same, especially if medical assistance can be linked to the West.

Fragile States and conflict areas are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of the pandemic. The sanitary and health crisis there could aggravate the security crisis there. We must continue to assist fragile States in their efforts to prevent and combat terrorism. **An outbreak in the overcrowded camps and detention facilities in north-eastern Syria would be a disaster**, which could lead to violent uprisings and lend credibility to extremist propaganda.

In Europe the uncertainty and anxiety engendered by the corona pandemic could fuel the emergence of **new forms of violent activism or even terrorism, linked to conspiracy theories, apprehension about perceived governmental overreach, and technophobia**. These forms of violence are often encouraged by right-wing and left-wing extremists.

Finally, terrorists could also benefit from a **diminished focus on counter-terrorism among national governments and regional and international organisations**, which are likely to be distracted by the corona pandemic for months, if not years. At an operational level, **isolated terrorist cells could benefit** as the pandemic might limit room for manoeuvre among armed forces, police and security and intelligence services. A changed political focus and the impending economic crisis may also prompt a re-allocation of scarce resources, leading to **smaller budgets for counter-terrorism**. It would be a serious mistake, however, to neglect counter-terrorism at the expense of other priorities. **<u>We must prevent the current health and economic crisis from becoming a security crisis as well.</u>**

II. Detail

1. Introduction

Following the emergence of the coronavirus in China in December of last year, the world is being confronted with **a health crisis** unprecedented since the epidemic of the Spanish flu a century ago. The officially reported death toll of the coronavirus is currently more than 250 000, but the real number of victims may be far higher. Government measures to halt or slow down the spread of the virus, while saving countless lives, will probably result in a severe economic recession.

The pandemic has only just started and will have an uneven economic impact in different regions of the world. Its effects are also likely to vary over time, waxing and waning as new waves of infection occur. Still, it is already clear that the crisis will have far-reaching geopolitical consequences. At this moment the European continent is affected more than any other part of the world. In the near future economically weaker and politically less stable regions, such as sub-Sahara Africa, will face even starker challenges than Europe as the epidemic spreads.

Terrorists and violent extremists, aiming to change societies and governmental systems through violence, seek to exploit major crises to achieve their objectives. Da'esh for instance emerged after the US invasion of Iraq and became much stronger during the crisis brought about by the Arab Spring. For counter-terrorism practitioners it is therefore important to analyse terrorists' reactions to the current corona pandemic.

This note explores the following questions:

- Will the corona crisis **exacerbate support** for terrorism and violent extremism?
- To what extent do terrorists and violent extremists exploit the crisis in their **propaganda**? How do they fit the crisis in their political narrative?
- Do terrorists change their **modus operandi** as a result of the pandemic? Do they even attempt to **'weaponise'** the virus?
- Do terrorists adapt their **choice of targets** as a result of the corona crisis?
- Does the crisis engender **new forms of terrorism and violent extremism**?

Some repercussions of the pandemic, such as its effects on terrorist propaganda, are already clearly discernible, but others remain murky at this relatively early stage of the crisis. Inevitably, therefore, this paper remains tentative. **The objective of the paper is to discuss likelihoods and possibilities on the basis of past patterns and recent new evidence; it does not claim to be a highly accurate prognosis.**

2. Propaganda and support for violent extremism

To increase their support base violent extremists use people's insecurities, vulnerabilities and grievances, creating a simple narrative which 'explains' problems by **blaming outsiders**. 'Infidels' or 'apostates' serve as scapegoats for Jihadists, members of ethnic and religious minority groups for right-wing extremists, and 'class enemies' and 'capitalists' for left-wing extremists.

The corona crisis will likely exacerbate social and economic grievances and therefore create **a fertile environment for discourses which assign blame** and offer simple 'solutions'. As people are confined at home they **spend much more time online than usually**, increasing the potential impact of disinformation and extremist propaganda. Due to increased levels of social isolation, vulnerable people (such as adolescents and individuals struggling with mental health problems) could become an even more likely target audience for extremists. Feelings of uncertainty and concern about the future could also make violent extremist narratives more appealing. For example, the recent return of rioting in the suburbs of Paris may be a first indication of more widely felt feelings of discontent in Europe as a result of the lockdown that could be exploited by terrorists in their propaganda.

The Islamic month of **Ramadan** began on 23 April. During that period the psychological effects of confinement measures impeding religious celebrations could be exploited by Jihadist terrorist organisations. The same risk applies to the temporary suspension of religious pilgrimages by governments in the Middle East. Attempts by individual Muslims in the West to flaunt lockdown measures during Ramadan are likely to be exploited and amplified by right-wing extremists.

Jihadist propaganda

Da'esh and **Al-Qaida** have both commented on the pandemic in their official publications. Da'esh has devoted several articles to the corona crisis in its official newsletter Al-Naba'. In the 225th edition of Al-Naba', Da'esh advised its followers to avoid areas of contagion. In Al-Naba' 226, Da'esh incited its supporters in the West to **take advantage of the current crisis to stage attacks**. It pointed out that military, security and medical resources and personnel are being redeployed as a result of the pandemic, thus creating opportunities for strikes. The article also calls on its supporters to seize this opportunity to **liberate extremist detainees** from prisons. Core Al-Qaida's public reaction has been more muted, calling the virus "God's invisible soldier", highlighting the vulnerability of the Western-led global economic system and inviting Westerners to convert to Islam.

Elements within **the Iranian regime** claim that the virus is a **Western or Zionist biological weapon**, designed to kill Iranians in particular. This sort of rhetoric has been echoed by Shiite extremist militias in Lebanon and Iraq. Conversely, **Iran's early exposure to the pandemic has been used extensively by Da'esh in its propaganda**, which claims that this constitutes God's punishment visited upon the Shiites, who are also accused of spreading the virus among Sunni Muslims.

Jihadist organisations routinely depict Western culture, and other non-Muslim societies, as in inexorable decline despite their seeming technological, economic and political strength. They currently present the corona epidemic as **evidence of this decline**, especially since most Muslim-majority countries (except for Shi'a-majority Iran) thus far appear to remain relatively less affected. To bolster morale among their supporters they have repeatedly stated the epidemic is **God's revenge** against his enemies. Da'esh first pointed to China's oppression of its Uighur Muslim minority and, when the virus started to spread in the West, the battles at Sirte and Baghuz as having provoked God's ire.

As the pandemic starts to hit Africa, South Asia and the Middle East (including the camps and prisons where Da'esh supporters are held in north-eastern Syria) this sort of **messaging will likely evolve**: the pandemic may no longer be construed as God's punishment of the West, but as a **Western project to infect Muslims**. As the pandemic spreads in the developing world just when it starts to abate in the West, it may be convenient for extremists to frame the pandemic as a disaster imported from the former colonial powers and to blame Westerners living in their regions, including Western aid workers, for spreading the virus. Groups like Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram, whose ideology is already deeply xenophobic, will be able to seamlessly fit such narratives in their own propaganda. **An outbreak in the overcrowded camps and detention facilities in north-eastern Syria**, where the provision of healthcare is already highly precarious, could lead to violent uprisings and lend credibility to extremist propaganda. There have already been violent uprisings in one of the prisons in north-eastern Syria where FTF are held.

Right-wing extremist propaganda

Right-wing extremists expressing views on internet platforms have been focused on corona since the start of the pandemic. In March and April, **right-wing extremists have been capitalising on the corona crisis more than on any other issue**.

Paradoxically, violent right-wing extremists blame political correctness for the late introduction of measures to stop the spread of the virus, but simultaneously oppose confinement measures as an attack on personal freedom and as a covert way for governments to exercise greater control over the population. They routinely ascribe the spread of the virus to open borders and lenient government policies on migration. **Conspiracy theories accusing the Chinese, American or Israeli governments of deliberately manufacturing and spreading the virus** are commonplace. The most extreme right-wing groups and individuals have welcomed the crisis as **an opportunity to bring about an impending 'race war'**.

Right-wing extremists commenting online and offline **assign blame for the epidemic on minorities**, who are frequently described in dehumanising terms ('parasites', 'vermin', etc.). Asian people are accused of creating and spreading the virus, and calls for retribution are rife. Jews have also been blamed for the emergence of the virus. One conspiracy theory popular among violent right-wing extremists cites the reported development of a vaccine by an Israeli company as evidence for a Zionist plan to silence opponents of 'the Jews': they are said to be plotting to present themselves as the saviours of mankind after deliberately manufacturing the virus and then 'inventing' a vaccine. Some right-wing extremists decry a perceived lack of respect among Muslim and immigrant communities for the lockdown measures, and a perceived lack of enforcement of these measures on the part of governments out of fear of appearing racist.

Left-wing extremist propaganda

European left-wing extremists, whose activities are mainly detected in Greece and Italy, have been paying extensive attention to the corona crisis, even creating a dedicated website (plagueandfire.noblogs.org) for this purpose. Just like violent right-wing extremists, they **blame governments for the crisis**, vehemently criticising them (as well as the 'capitalist system' as a whole) for underfunding healthcare services. Confinement measures are presented as a convenient method for governments to achieve greater control over their populations. There have been some calls on left-wing extremists platforms and websites to exploit the pandemic and the widespread use of face masks to **plunder businesses**. Left-wing extremists have also publicly supported prison riots in Italy, which broke out in the context of the corona crisis.

3. Attack methodologies and target selection

The corona crisis could *conceivably* both **enhance** and **hamper** terrorists' abilities to carry out attacks. Redeployment of security staff and reprioritisation among security and police services may, for instance, result in lower levels of vigilance which could be exploited by terrorists to prepare and stage attacks. The obligatory wearing of face masks could help terrorists evade detection. On the basis of past behaviour and known intent, it is also plausible that terrorists would attempt to 'weaponise' the corona virus itself to spread disease. Teleworking during the confinement period increases vulnerability to cyberattacks. In a time of widespread social distancing, medical facilities and supermarkets are among the very few locations that host large gatherings of people, positioning them as a target for terrorists to inflict mass casualties.

Curfews, lockdowns and border controls could, on the other hand, limit terrorist capabilities to stage large-scale, sophisticated attacks on harder targets, such as security forces and critical infrastructure. Simple, unsophisticated attacks on soft targets may be less likely as a result of government measures prohibiting large crowds at public transport hubs or entertainment events. Attacks on churches, mosques and synagogues also appear less likely as long as lockdown measures last.

Jihadist Modus Operandi

The global pandemic **has not sparked an increase in the number of Jihadist terrorist attacks**. On the basis of reports from its CT experts in Delegations across the world, the EEAS even reports that the pandemic appears to have a dampening effect on the terrorist threat.

In parts of Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and South East Asia, the terrorist threat seems to be stable, with threat patterns similar to those observed before the onset of the corona crisis. The threat in the Sahara/Sahel region and in Mozambique is growing, but this escalation already began in 2019. Da'esh was already rebounding in Syria and Iraq before the start of the pandemic.

In Europe, trends observed before the current crisis (a gradual decline in the number of Jihadist attacks and a clear growth in the volume of right-wing extremist propaganda, notably online) appear to endure. Since the start of the crisis, only France has witnessed two terrorist attacks, and there were important arrests of Da'esh members in Spain and Germany: A prominent Da'esh-affiliated individual, who had entered the country as an illegal immigrant, was arrested in Spain. The breaking up earlier this month of a Da'esh attack cell in Germany, which was in direct contact with Da'esh operatives abroad, is particularly significant. There are no indications however that the current pandemic influenced the suspects' attack plans.

Da'esh and Al-Qaida continue to incite supporters to conduct attacks, but **Jihadist media have, to date, largely refrained from recommending the use of the virus as a weapon**. There has been incident in which a Jihadist extremist appears to have planned to 'weaponise' the virus. On 16 April 2020, the Tunisian Ministry of Interior claimed to have foiled a plan conceived by an extremist to spread Covid-19 among security forces.

While Da'esh and Al-Qaida attack planning appears to remain unchanged in the short term, they may **benefit from the corona crisis in the longer term**. As the pandemic might diminish Western countries' willingness to send troops to conflict areas, and as it might limit Western troops' room for manoeuvre, for instance in Iraq, pressure on terrorist organisations would decrease. Da'esh propaganda has explicitly highlighted this development in its media outlets as an opportunity to gain an advantage.

Since the fall of the territorial Caliphate, Da'esh may be particularly well positioned to survive the pandemic. Scattered combat groups in the desert, which have little contact with the population in cities, are less likely to face infections. This strategic advantage may be exacerbated as regular armed forces become involved in the fight against the spread of Covid-19. The corona crisis could also hinder the collection of information on the activities of armed terrorist groups in conflict areas.

At a more strategic level, the corona crisis could lead to the **further weakening of fragile States**, for example in Africa, where scarceness of resources will force governments to choose between providing healthcare to their people, supporting their economies or combating terrorism. These stark choices could give rise to additional grievances and thus increase support for Jihadist groups. Some of these groups had already before the onset of the corona crisis appropriated the position of providers of essential services to the population in some areas, substituting the state. Thus, the pandemic could give them an opportunity to strengthen their roots in local communities, especially if the crisis also results in diminished aid budgets among foreign donors.

Violent right-wing extremist activities

Since the Covid-19 outbreak was first reported in December 2019, some EU Member States report an increase in **hate speech and violent incidents** involving people who are perceived to be of Chinese origin. In North America, there have been a number of incidents linked to violent right-wing extremism, in line with trends observed before the start of the corona crisis.

Among the diffuse crowd of violent right-wing extremists online, there have been some calls for the use of the corona virus as **a weapon to attack opponents**. US federal investigators have warned that white supremacist chats on Telegram have discussed using Covid-19 as a bioweapon, encouraging members to infect Jews and non-white people. American right-wing extremists have also called on infected individuals to "hug a Jew" or to cough on members of minority groups. In the United Kingdom as well, some right wing extremists have been encouraging the weaponisation of the virus. This has included calls to target mosques, halal food shops, synagogues, the police and elected officials, suggesting people who think they are infected to cough or wipe their hands on door handles to spread the disease.

Violent right-wing extremists are already using risks associated with the lockdown to carry out **cyberattacks**. A religious service of a London synagogue on Zoom was interrupted by extremists posting anti-Semitic material.

There is some evidence for **an expansion in target selection** among violent right-wing extremists as a result of the pandemic. On 26 March 2020, FBI agents shot and killed a white supremacist in the US while trying to arrest him for plotting to use a car bomb to blow up a local hospital treating Covid-19 patients. He had initially considered to blow up an African-American school, mosque or synagogue, but with the onset of the epidemic he reasoned that blowing up a hospital would allow him to kill more people and cause greater panic.

4. New forms of violent extremism

The corona crisis has given rise to all sort of **conspiracy theories**. Some of these theories are conceived and disseminated by known violent extremists and terrorist groups, notably online. The pandemic has also sparked conspiracy theories that have no link to existing extremist ideologies (although extremists are often quick to appropriate them). One of these theories, which gained particular currency in the United States, says that the Chinese government created the virus as a biological weapon.

A conspiracy theory which has sparked arson attacks on telecommunication masts in Europe, **claims that the spread of Covid-19 is caused or strengthened by 5G technology**. Stories have been disseminated online claiming that Wuhan was a test site for 5G. As a result of these claims, which are spread on 'free speech' message boards such as 8kun but also in some mainstream media, masts have been set on fire in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. The motivation behind this sort of attack is linked to a movement of **technophobes** (with indirect links to right-wing and left-wing extremists) which is present in other European countries as well.

Finally, an expansion of the scope of government action and (perceptions of) increased surveillance aimed at containing the pandemic could be exploited by **anti-government activists**, such as extreme libertarians in the United States and anarchists in Europe. As a result, there could be a growing risk of violent action against perceived government intrusion.