

## **Terrorism trends and scenarios - 2020/Q2 including the impact of COVID-19**

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Report written in the context of the cooperation with the  
Federal Ministry of Defence.

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## Summary

This report presents an update of the most likely terrorism scenarios of relevance for the Austrian and European security policy as per the second quarter of 2020, as well as developments related to relevant trends and factors impacting terrorism. This issue also considers the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on these trends and factors. The most likely scenarios remain: low-scale CBRN and cyberterrorist attacks; medium- to large-scale jihadi attacks, particularly in the Sahel region and in South-East Asia; and low- to medium-scale lone-wolf attacks by jihadi and right-wing perpetrators in Europe and North America. The pandemic has had a 'positive' effect on low-scale CBRN and cyberterrorist attacks; it has however not significantly influenced the nature and intensity of conventional attacks. Jihadi and far right propaganda and activities have intensified, in part due to the instrumentalization of the pandemic. A number of terrorism related factors have also worsened as a result, in particular economic development and state fragility.

## Hybrid attacks (CBRN & Cyber) scenarios

*The likelihood of low-scale CBRN and cyberterrorist attacks has increased slightly worldwide due to the global spread of COVID-19 and related effects. Medium- to large-scale non-conventional attacks remain possible but rather unlikely.*

Both right-wing extremist and jihadi actors have previously called for the use of CBRN weapons, and plots with chemical weapons have already occurred in Europe.<sup>1</sup> With the emergence of COVID-19, the scenario of bioweapons and biological terrorism has also increased in likelihood. Under normal circumstances, such weapons require a high level of skills and knowledge, as well as access to highly regulated and protected material. COVID-19 has 'equipped' a part of global society with an easy-to-use yet potentially lethal bioweapon.<sup>2</sup> Both in the Arabic world and in the West, calls to weaponize the virus have been on the increase among jihadi and right-wing terrorist groups, raising the possibility of low-scale CBRN plots. There has been a number of instances where Islamist motivated individuals claimed to be infected with the virus and planned to use it as a bioweapon by coughing at rabbis and also at random people in synagogues and supermarkets.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, multiple right-wing extremists have carried out such attacks in the USA.<sup>4</sup>

In the cyber domain, the pandemic has also been instrumentalized in the context of propaganda and 'fake news'. Multiple doctored graphics and info-posters falsely presented as official material by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the USA have been put up in public places, encouraging the public to continue visiting mosques and synagogues, as an attempt to create chaos and make right-wing extremists' target groups refute public health and safety recommendations.<sup>5</sup> In a similar attempt, a British national-socialist movement has been spreading disinformation on Facebook, urging

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<sup>1</sup> Europol (2019): Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2019 (<https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2019-te-sat>); Daniel Koehler and Peter Popella, "Mapping Far-right Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) Terrorism Efforts in the West: Characteristics of Plots and Perpetrators for Future Threat Assessment," Terrorism and Political Violence (2018)

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Weimann and Natalie Masri (2020): The Virus of Hate: Far-Right Terrorism in Cyberspace. ICT ([https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2528/The\\_Virus\\_of\\_Hate#gsc.tab=0](https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2528/The_Virus_of_Hate#gsc.tab=0))

<sup>3</sup> Souad Mekhenet (2020): Far-right and radical Islamist groups are exploiting coronavirus turmoil. The Washington Post ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/far-right-wing-and-radical-islamist-groups-are-exploiting-coronavirus-turmoil/2020/04/10/0ae0494e-79c7-11ea-9bee-c5bf9d2e3288\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/far-right-wing-and-radical-islamist-groups-are-exploiting-coronavirus-turmoil/2020/04/10/0ae0494e-79c7-11ea-9bee-c5bf9d2e3288_story.html))

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Silke, Pool Re (2020): COVID-19 and terrorism: assessing the short and long-term impacts (<https://www.poolre.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COVID-19-and-Terrorism-report-V1.pdf>)

<sup>5</sup> Gabriel Weimann and Natalie Masri (2020): The Virus of Hate: Far-Right Terrorism in Cyberspace. ICT ([https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2528/The\\_Virus\\_of\\_Hate#gsc.tab=0](https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2528/The_Virus_of_Hate#gsc.tab=0))

those infected to visit diverse neighborhoods, especially mosques and synagogues, claiming that exposure to these “is clinically proven to provide short-term and long-term benefits to immune system function.”<sup>6</sup>

Groups have also called for the exploitation of the pandemic in order to increase the effects of attacks on critical infrastructure, as the impact of such an attack in the current situation would be multiplied.<sup>7</sup> With numerous countries imposing severe restrictions on the freedom of movement, low-scale cyber-terrorism (DDoS and similar disruptive techniques) targeting critical infrastructure also became more likely.<sup>8</sup>

## Conventional attacks scenarios

*Conventional attacks scenarios remain the same as in the first three months of 2020: medium- to large-scale jihadi attacks are imminent in the Sahel and South-East Asia, and low- to medium-scale lone-wolf attacks by jihadi and right-wing perpetrators are highly likely in Europe and North America.*

The COVID-19 outbreak has not (yet) had a significant impact on the total number and lethality of conventional terrorist attacks worldwide. The number of attacks and fatalities globally in March (6 attacks 223 fatalities), April (8 attacks 110 fatalities), May (21 attacks, 194 fatalities) and June (3 attacks, 27 fatalities) remained comparable to the pre-pandemic numbers in January (7 attacks, 263 fatalities) and February (12 attacks, 93 fatalities)<sup>9</sup>.

The Sahel remains the most affected region, with multiple medium- to large-scale bombings and shootings recorded in Mali, Nigeria, Chad and Burkina Faso between January and June 2020. The Islamic State’s affiliates have continued their strategy of brutal attacks on security forces and non-compliant locals, with Boko Haram and IS West Africa Province being the most active and lethal groups.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the local AQ-affiliate, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), also continues operations in the region, but keeps a more moderate profile compared to its local IS-rivals. In the Middle East,

<sup>6</sup> Nikita Malik (2020): Self-Isolation Might Stop Coronavirus, but It Will Speed the Spread of Extremism. Foreign Policy (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/26/self-isolation-might-stop-coronavirus-but-spread-extremism/>)

<sup>7</sup> Gabriel Weimann and Natalie Masri (2020): The Virus of Hate: Far-Right Terrorism in Cyberspace. ICT ([https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2528/The\\_Virus\\_of\\_Hate#gsc.tab=0](https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2528/The_Virus_of_Hate#gsc.tab=0))

<sup>8</sup> Mark Scott (2020): Facebook’s private groups are abuzz with coronavirus fake news. Politico (<https://www.politico.eu/article/facebook-misinformation-fake-news-coronavirus-covid19/>)

<sup>9</sup> <https://storymaps.esri.com/stories/terrorist-attacks/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/14/islamic-militants-kill-at-least-60-people-in-north-east-nigeria;>  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/nigeria-borno-state-attack-coronavirus/2020/06/10/0147e06a-ab1b-11ea-a43b-be9f6494a87d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/nigeria-borno-state-attack-coronavirus/2020/06/10/0147e06a-ab1b-11ea-a43b-be9f6494a87d_story.html)

there has been a slight resurgence of the IS; it has exploited the reduced pressure of the international coalition to conduct a large-scale coordinated attack on pro-regime forces as well as a small-scale attack in Iraq, and started to re-gain control over suburbs and villages in Syria and Iraq.<sup>11</sup> In accordance with previous long-standing trends, Afghanistan remains unstable as a result of continuous Taliban attacks. The peace deal is likely to blow up due to internal power struggles among Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah both claiming the Afghan presidency and the lack of willingness on the Afghan side to deliver on a core element of the peace deal: releasing 5000 Taliban prisoners.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the group IS-Khorasan Province keeps carrying out highly lethal attacks<sup>13</sup>, providing an alternative for those Taliban jihadis who were disappointed by the peace deal. Both the Sahel region and Afghanistan are more than likely to remain the primary theaters of jihadi terrorism in the near future, with regular bombings and shootings expected.

In the West, previous trends have continued as well: there have been a number of lone-wolf non-sophisticated attacks, mostly inspired by the IS and perpetrated with knives resulting in a few casualties. France and the UK remain the most affected by this scenario. In the USA, COVID-19-related conspiracy theories have resulted in a few lone-wolf conventional attacks that were also tied to right-wing extremists, albeit with no casualties.<sup>14</sup> In Europe, one far-right plot has been disrupted<sup>15</sup> and the number of right-wing extremists labelled 'particularly dangerous' in Germany has increased.<sup>16</sup>

While the situation of global conventional terrorism is rather unpredictable, trends imply that we may see a slight increase in the number of attacks in the West due to increased mobilization efforts, the psychological effects of the corona virus, and the redistribution of resources in security agencies and authorities that may lead to reduced capabilities in counter-terrorism and reduced vigilance. Furthermore, there may be slight changes in the targets of conventional attacks: with parts of the global society in lockdown, observing isolation practices or being less mobile, traditional soft targets such as packed shopping malls, airplanes, mass events and public transportation would yield considerably less impact if hit, thereby reducing the incentive.

## **Jihadi and Salafi takes on COVID-19**

<sup>11</sup> Hassan Hassan, Center for Global Policy (2020): ISIS in Iraq and Syria: Rightsizing the Current 'Comeback' (<https://cgpolicy.org/articles/isis-in-iraq-and-syria-rightsizing-the-current-comeback/>)

<sup>12</sup> Scott Smith, United States Institute of Peace (2020): Is the Afghan Peace Process Back on Track? (<https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/05/afghan-peace-process-back-track>)

<sup>13</sup> Emily Estelle, The Cipher Brief (2020): Recent Islamic State Attacks Demonstrate its Durability and Resilience ([https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column\\_article/recent-islamic-state-attacks-demonstrate-its-durability-and-resilience](https://www.thecipherbrief.com/column_article/recent-islamic-state-attacks-demonstrate-its-durability-and-resilience))

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Silke, Pool Re (2020): COVID-19 and terrorism: assessing the short-and long-term impacts (<https://www.poolre.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COVID-19-and-Terrorism-report-V1.pdf>)

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-launches-terrorism-probe-over-planned-attack-on-muslims/a-53728943>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2020-06/rechtsextremismus-gefaehrder-deutschland-anstieg>

Jihadi and Salafi groups have instrumentalized the pandemic in a number of ways, some of them similarly to far-right groups (see next section).

A general pattern found among jihadi and Salafi groups is that they *frame the virus positively as God's assistance for the jihadist cause*, not only by killing non-believers, but also by distracting security forces. This narrative is 'supported' by the fact that the main victims of the pandemic are indeed Western countries and the US especially, as well as Iran. Islamist terrorist groups are furthermore exploiting COVID-19 to convince followers that the US and the West are not invincible and that material prosperity is not everything.<sup>17</sup> Instead, it is Allah's will that is said to decide over life or death. However, this development of jihadi groups claiming natural disasters to be the will and punishment of Allah is not new, as it has happened before multiple times.<sup>18</sup> This can be explained by the fact that COVID-19 has largely achieved what jihadi groups were long not able to — that is keeping people in constant fear and completely disrupting life —, hence most organizations have been attempting to claim credit for this 'success' by labelling COVID-19 as their own soldier.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, COVID-19 is portrayed as Allah's punishment on the 'decadent West', crusaders and Muslims who have not fulfilled their duty of jihad<sup>20</sup>, whereas multiple publications by the IS and AQ promise jihadis immunity from the corona virus as well as a place in paradise.<sup>21</sup> Yet another salient point made by Salafi and jihadi groups is that the virus is a punishment on China for its treatment of Uighur Muslims, and on Iran's Shiites for deviating from the true faith.<sup>22</sup>

Another topic is the hyperbolization of the pandemic into an *end-of-times rhetoric* often seen in propaganda publications.<sup>23</sup> As a result, there has been a spike of Mahdi videos<sup>24</sup> on YouTube.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> James Gordon Meek (2020): Terrorist groups spin COVID-19 as God's 'smallest soldier' attacking West. ABC News (<https://abcnews.go.com/International/terrorist-groups-spin-covid-19-gods-smallest-soldier/story?id=69930563>)

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Mike Wagenheim (2020): The Deadly Combination of Coronavirus and Terrorism. The Jerusalem Post (<https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/the-deadly-combination-of-coronavirus-and-terrorism-624218>)

<sup>20</sup> Guy Taylor (2020): 'Manifestation of the wrath of God': Jihadists see coronavirus as call to duty. The Washington Times (<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/mar/26/islamic-state-taliban-al-qaeda-boko-haram-jihadist/>)

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000116913040/corona-als-strafe-gottes-fuer-dekadenten-westen>.

<sup>22</sup> Manjana Sold & Clara-Auguste Süß (2020): The Coronavirus as a Means to an End: Extremist Reinterpretations of the Pandemic. Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) (<https://blog.prif.org/2020/03/30/the-coronavirus-as-a-means-to-an-end-extremist-reinterpretations-of-the-pandemic/>)

<sup>23</sup> James Gordon Meek (2020): Terrorist groups spin COVID-19 as God's 'smallest soldier' attacking West. ABC News (<https://abcnews.go.com/International/terrorist-groups-spin-covid-19-gods-smallest-soldier/story?id=69930563>)

<sup>24</sup> 'Mahdi videos' are videos portraying the messiah who is anticipated to appear before doomsday (day of judgment) since the outbreak of COVID-19.

<sup>25</sup> Nikita Malik (2020): Self-Isolation Might Stop Coronavirus, but It Will Speed the Spread of Extremism. Foreign Policy (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/26/self-isolation-might-stop-coronavirus-but-spread-extremism/>)

The effects of the pandemic on *lifestyle* has been another frequently discussed theme among jihadists recently. Westerners are called hypocrites for previously criticizing Muslims for wearing veils and the niqab, while now doing the same themselves, and even obliging their society to do so. Salafis are furthermore celebrating the closing of nightclubs and bars.<sup>26</sup>

Similar to right-wing extremists, some radical Islamists have also resorted to *US and Jews related conspiracy theories, often contradicting their other propagandistic themes*. Some, for example, claim the weaponization of the virus by Zionists and by Iran against Syrian rebels<sup>27</sup>, while multiple Islamist extremist groups also blamed the US and/or Jews for designing and deploying COVID-19 as a bio-weapon.<sup>28</sup> While such interpretations deviate significantly from the narrative of COVID-19 as ‘Allah’s soldier’, they fit better into the communication strategy of groups that are more devoted to fighting the West, than to fighting against ‘corrupt’ governments and groups locally and regionally.

The Islamic State has additionally used the situation for a *call to arms*. The al-Naba magazine has claimed that the virus is the soldier of Allah, punishing the sinners and crusader nations.<sup>29</sup> In an attempt to take advantage of the circumstances, the IS urged its sleeper cells and supporters in the West to carry out lone-wolf attacks and exploit the chaos and widespread fear in societies. Other extremist groups echoed this call, as the circumstances may also allow the attacker to get away without being detected or detained<sup>30</sup>, with governments’ and security agencies’ resources being focused elsewhere.<sup>31</sup>

The long-standing differences between the two dominant jihadi organizations — IS and AQ — are clearly visible once again: while the IS maintains an openly violent tactic with a global vision, AQ is trying to win over hearts and minds and focuses on Islamic countries. The IS has called on followers to step up their efforts and attack the West, whereas AQ emphasized calls on Westerners to study Islam

<sup>26</sup> Steven Stalinsky (2020): What Jihadists Are Saying About the Coronavirus. The Wall Street Journal (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-jihadists-are-saying-about-the-coronavirus-11586112043>)

<sup>27</sup> Manjana Sold & Clara-Auguste Süß (2020): The Coronavirus as a Means to an End: Extremist Reinterpretations of the Pandemic. Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) (<https://blog.prif.org/2020/03/30/the-coronavirus-as-a-means-to-an-end-extremist-reinterpretations-of-the-pandemic/>)

<sup>28</sup> Souad Mekhenet (2020): Far-right and radical Islamist groups are exploiting coronavirus turmoil. The Washington Post ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/far-right-wing-and-radical-islamist-groups-are-exploiting-coronavirus-turmoil/2020/04/10/0ae0494e-79c7-11ea-9bee-c5bf9d2e3288\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/far-right-wing-and-radical-islamist-groups-are-exploiting-coronavirus-turmoil/2020/04/10/0ae0494e-79c7-11ea-9bee-c5bf9d2e3288_story.html))

<sup>29</sup> Manjana Sold & Clara-Auguste Süß (2020): The Coronavirus as a Means to an End: Extremist Reinterpretations of the Pandemic. Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) (<https://blog.prif.org/2020/03/30/the-coronavirus-as-a-means-to-an-end-extremist-reinterpretations-of-the-pandemic/>)

<sup>30</sup> Souad Mekhenet (2020): Far-right and radical Islamist groups are exploiting coronavirus turmoil. The Washington Post ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/far-right-wing-and-radical-islamist-groups-are-exploiting-coronavirus-turmoil/2020/04/10/0ae0494e-79c7-11ea-9bee-c5bf9d2e3288\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/far-right-wing-and-radical-islamist-groups-are-exploiting-coronavirus-turmoil/2020/04/10/0ae0494e-79c7-11ea-9bee-c5bf9d2e3288_story.html))

<sup>31</sup> Mike Wagenheim (2020): The Deadly Combination of Coronavirus and Terrorism. The Jerusalem Post (<https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/the-deadly-combination-of-coronavirus-and-terrorism-624218>)



at home instead, then convert to Islam and join jihadis. AQ reinforced this call by claiming that the only way to gain protection from COVID-19 is by converting. Both organizations are also offering informational material on how to avoid and deal with the virus.<sup>32</sup>

In some instances, jihadist as well as Islamist groups<sup>33</sup> *distribute factual information and recommendations* on how to deal with COVID-19 in an attempt to portray themselves as trustworthy organizations that care about their followers, thereby filling the gap left by some governments. In general, most jihadi groups are trying to make their followers abide by WHO guidelines presented under the guise of 'Sharia guidelines', and some are also preparing to provide health care services.<sup>34</sup> In the Sahel, al-Shabaab and other jihadi groups in the region are blaming security forces for spreading the virus while providing health recommendations and education on how to deal with COVID-19 simultaneously, portraying themselves as a responsible authority.<sup>35</sup>

In the Arab world, numerous Salafi and jihadi groups are stoking opposition against governments that are trying to discourage religious gatherings due to COVID-19, denouncing them as defilers of the faith.<sup>36</sup> This was also reflected in Al-Qaeda's position. Al-Qaeda's official statement framed the virus as Allah's fury toward humanity and his punishment on the sinners, yet it also included calls on Muslims to keep fighting morally corrupt leaders of Muslim-majority countries, that 'act against Islam' by trying to prohibit prayers.<sup>37</sup>

## Far right takes on COVID-19

Right-wing extremist actors have capitalized on COVID-19 both in Europe and in the US. Similarly to jihadis, most groups *have been framing COVID-19 as a positive development*, falsely claiming that it will mostly be lethal to women and foreigners, i.e. framing it as the virus advancing their causes by killing their target groups.<sup>38</sup> Closing the borders, even within the Schengen area, is another point that

<sup>32</sup> James Gordon Meek (2020): Terrorist groups spin COVID-19 as God's 'smallest soldier' attacking West. ABC News (<https://abcnews.go.com/International/terrorist-groups-spin-covid-19-gods-smallest-soldier/story?id=69930563>)

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Mike Wagenheim (2020): The Deadly Combination of Coronavirus and Terrorism. The Jerusalem Post (<https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/the-deadly-combination-of-coronavirus-and-terrorism-624218>)

<sup>36</sup> Souad Mekhenet (2020): Far-right and radical Islamist groups are exploiting coronavirus turmoil. The Washington Post ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/far-right-wing-and-radical-islamist-groups-are-exploiting-coronavirus-turmoil/2020/04/10/0ae0494e-79c7-11ea-9bee-c5bf9d2e3288\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/far-right-wing-and-radical-islamist-groups-are-exploiting-coronavirus-turmoil/2020/04/10/0ae0494e-79c7-11ea-9bee-c5bf9d2e3288_story.html))

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Manjana Sold & Clara-Auguste Süß (2020): The Coronavirus as a Means to an End: Extremist Reinterpretations of the Pandemic. Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) (<https://blog.prif.org/2020/03/30/the-coronavirus-as-a-means-to-an-end-extremist-reinterpretations-of-the-pandemic/>)

right-wing extremist and white supremacist groups have been advocating for a long time, and now that it became reality (even though there are clearly no connections between their efforts and the closure of borders), these actors are seizing the opportunity to further advance their cause by further encouraging border closures.<sup>39</sup> In general, right-wing extremist groups in the West are trying to exploit the frustration of society towards the restrictions imposed by governments by pointing out perceived failures and weaknesses, and claiming that they would be capable of providing a better solution.<sup>40</sup>

*Conspiracy theories* in the right-wing context have mostly flourished around topics such as: the purposeful creation and distribution of COVID-19 for economic interests and global control through vaccines; the willful design of the virus to have a particular demographic impact; or the virus as a hoax for various purposes. One of the most popular right-wing conspiracies originates from anti-globalist circles, fearing that COVID-19 was manually designed by large (and often Jewish) corporations, so that compulsory vaccination could be introduced, through which society can be controlled or enslaved.<sup>41</sup> Another iteration of this message is that COVID-19 is a tool of Jews to manipulate the market or to bring about demographic change in North America and Europe by killing white people.<sup>42</sup> Another widespread narrative puts the blame on minorities by claiming that the virus' origin and spread are causally related to their cultural inferiority (e.g. eating and hygiene habits).<sup>43</sup> These have been linked to various anti-Chinese rhetoric and conspiracies, such as the claim that Chinese people purposefully spread the virus or purposefully sell faulty medical supplies to the West.<sup>44</sup> Some of these narratives are supported by President Trump's daily press conferences where he has repeatedly spread racist rhetoric, such as the 'Chinese-flu', and conspiracy theories.<sup>45</sup> Anti-migrant right-wing conspiracies have mainly been dominant in Europe, but not so much elsewhere, whereas fake information is spread about migrants ignoring lockdown measures and rioting with flying ISIS flags, or even trying to invade Europe by exploiting the emergency.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Gabriel Weimann and Natalie Masri (2020): The Virus of Hate: Far-Right Terrorism in Cyberspace. ICT ([https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2528/The\\_Virus\\_of\\_Hate#gsc.tab=0](https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2528/The_Virus_of_Hate#gsc.tab=0))

<sup>40</sup> Charlotte McDonald-Gibson (2020): 'Right Now, People Are Pretty Fragile.' How Coronavirus Creates the Perfect Breeding Ground for Online Extremism. TIME (<https://time.com/5810774/extremist-groups-coronavirus/>)

<sup>41</sup> Manjana Sold & Clara-Auguste Süß (2020): The Coronavirus as a Means to an End: Extremist Reinterpretations of the Pandemic. Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) (<https://blog.prif.org/2020/03/30/the-coronavirus-as-a-means-to-an-end-extremist-reinterpretations-of-the-pandemic/>)

<sup>42</sup> ISD (2020): Covid-19 Disinformation Briefing No.1 (<https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COVID-19-Briefing-Institute-for-Strategic-Dialogue-27th-March-2020.pdf>)

<sup>43</sup> Gabriel Weimann and Natalie Masri (2020): The Virus of Hate: Far-Right Terrorism in Cyberspace. ICT ([https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2528/The\\_Virus\\_of\\_Hate#gsc.tab=0](https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2528/The_Virus_of_Hate#gsc.tab=0))

<sup>44</sup> ISD (2020): Covid-19 Disinformation Briefing No.1 (<https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COVID-19-Briefing-Institute-for-Strategic-Dialogue-27th-March-2020.pdf>)

<sup>45</sup> Charlotte McDonald-Gibson (2020): 'Right Now, People Are Pretty Fragile.' How Coronavirus Creates the Perfect Breeding Ground for Online Extremism. TIME (<https://time.com/5810774/extremist-groups-coronavirus/>)

<sup>46</sup> ISD (2020): Covid-19 Disinformation Briefing No.1 (<https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COVID-19-Briefing-Institute-for-Strategic-Dialogue-27th-March-2020.pdf>)

COVID-19 related conspiracy theories are also being linked to previous conspiracy theories spread among white supremacist and right-wing communities, such as QAnon<sup>47</sup> and Pizzagate<sup>48</sup>. One such combination is that the virus was produced in a Wuhan laboratory that is also responsible for producing a “drug popular among the global elite, called adrenochrome. Conspiracy theorists explain that the production of the drug requires the ritualistic murder of children to harvest the necessary chemicals.”<sup>49</sup> The American philanthropist George Soros has been increasingly linked to COVID-19 as well, with claims about him being behind the virus as a part of his global plot to take over control.<sup>50</sup> Other popular conspiracy theories primarily promoted by the QAnon community are that the virus is a Chinese bio-weapon, a deep state plot, Trump’s tool to crack down on the deep state through martial law (‘The Storm’), and that the rich have a cure.<sup>51</sup>

Yet another communication strategy of right-wing extremists is to set the agenda of public discourse and shift the debate towards their core objective: an ethnically homogenous society. This strategy has also been widely used during the pandemic.<sup>52</sup> In particular, right-wing extremists exploit COVID-19 by linking the pandemic to the humanitarian crisis on the Greek-Turkish border, thereby implying that refugees fleeing from dire conditions are not to be admitted to Europe, as they pose a health risk.<sup>53</sup>

In this spectrum we also see *calls to arms*. General patterns across the whole spectrum of right-wing extremism are the questioning/contesting the legitimacy of the government and blaming target groups for the virus. Accelerationalism has become particularly popular as a growing effort to hasten the collapse of the liberal-democratic order.<sup>54</sup> Alongside conspiracy theories, there has also been a significant amount of calls for violence and attacks by coughing and initiating physical contact with usual target groups (minorities, Jews, Muslims, law enforcement, liberals, black Americans)<sup>55</sup>, with a few groups

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<sup>47</sup> QAnon is the most popular conspiracy theory currently (meanwhile also in Europe) that claims there is/are (a) secret whistleblower(s) within the ‘deep state’ with a high-level security clearance that call themselves ‘Q’ (Anon stands for Anonymous). Q is claimed to have been leaking highly classified information to the public. The main claim of QAnon is that the Democratic party and the world elite/deep state are running a global human trafficking program, exploiting children for their blood (for adrenochrome) and abusing them sexually in underground labs.

<sup>48</sup> The Pizzagate is closely related to QAnon: the community thought after the leaks of Podesta’s emails that this trafficking is taking place in particular restaurants, including a pizzeria.

<sup>49</sup> ISD (2020): Covid-19 disinformation briefing no. 2 (<https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Covid-Briefing-2.pdf>)

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.doew.at/erkennen/rechtsextremismus/neues-von-ganz-rechts/archiv/maerz-2020/die-extreme-rechte-in-zeiten-von-corona>

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2020-03/afd-rechtsradikale-coronavirus-verfassungsschutz-gefahr>.

<sup>54</sup> Lydia Khalil, Joshua M. Roose (2020): Countering extremism in the midst of coronavirus. Lowy Institute (<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/countering-extremism-midst-coronavirus>)

<sup>55</sup> ISD (2020): Covid-19 disinformation briefing no. 2 (<https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Covid-Briefing-2.pdf>)

even calling for attacks on critical infrastructure, including soft targets, such as hospitals<sup>56</sup> or public transportation.<sup>57</sup> In New Jersey, a neo-Nazi media group called on followers to sow panic among those socially isolating by discharging firearms on the streets.<sup>58</sup>

As recent incidents have shown, these calls do not always go unanswered, and social media communities can play a significant role in mobilization. Furthermore, the threat posed by such communities is grave: even if only a few people actually comply with these calls and act violently, the outcomes can be devastating. At the end of March, the FBI shot and killed an individual previously labelled as a potentially violent extremist as he was preparing a bombing on a hospital treating COVID-19 patients in Kansas City. Hours before being shot by the FBI during an arrest attempt, the individual posted anti-Semitic messages online on Telegram claiming that Jews were behind COVID-19. The message also included racist remarks against African American people.<sup>59</sup>

## Accelerationalism and the Boogaloo boys

A conspiracy theory called accelerationalism has been spreading particularly quickly in the USA during the COVID-19 outbreak, with its central element being the call for hastening societal collapse, so that white supremacists can be brought to power in the US government.<sup>60</sup> However, this narrative had also been mentioned earlier by the Christchurch perpetrator in New Zealand, as well as the neo-Nazi terror group Atomwaffen, implying that it has already made its way to Europe and New Zealand as well.<sup>61</sup> Accordingly, most far-right groups - both in the USA and Europe - have been trying to capitalize on the opportunity created by COVID-19, visualizing and fantasizing a potential for the long-awaited collapse of society as we know it today.<sup>62</sup> For this purpose, these groups have distributed calls to actively spread the virus to create mass disorder, that can then be exploited.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Andrew Silke, Pool Re (2020): COVID-19 and terrorism: assessing the short-and long-term impacts (<https://www.poolre.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COVID-19-and-Terrorism-report-V1.pdf>)

<sup>57</sup> ISD (2020): Covid-19 disinformation briefing no. 2 (<https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Covid-Briefing-2.pdf>)

<sup>58</sup> Souad Mekhenet (2020): Far-right and radical Islamist groups are exploiting coronavirus turmoil. The Washington Post ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/far-right-wing-and-radical-islamist-groups-are-exploiting-coronavirus-turmoil/2020/04/10/0ae0494e-79c7-11ea-9bee-c5bf9d2e3288\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/far-right-wing-and-radical-islamist-groups-are-exploiting-coronavirus-turmoil/2020/04/10/0ae0494e-79c7-11ea-9bee-c5bf9d2e3288_story.html))

<sup>59</sup> ISD (2020): Covid-19 disinformation briefing no. 2 (<https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Covid-Briefing-2.pdf>)

<sup>60</sup> Billy Perrigo (2020): White Supremacist Groups Are Recruiting With Help From Coronavirus – and a Popular Messaging App. TIME (<https://time.com/5817665/coronavirus-conspiracy-theories-white-supremacist-groups/>)

<sup>61</sup> ISD (2020): Covid-19 disinformation briefing no. 2 (<https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Covid-Briefing-2.pdf>)

<sup>62</sup> CJ Werleman (2020): How coronavirus could escalate Europe's far-right terror threat (<https://www.middleeast-eye.net/opinion/how-coronavirus-could-exacerbate-europes-rightwing-terrorism-crisis>)

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*

In the USA, another closely related right-wing term is ‘boogaloo’, referring to an impending civil war. Supporters of this theory claim that COVID-19 could enable and accelerate the breakout of a 2nd US civil war. Users have been sharing tactical advice related to boogaloo, such as how to cover and conceal during a shooting. Some groups spread messages claiming that there is evidence for boogaloo becoming imminent: the American society is suddenly stockpiling (‘prepping’), supporting gun rights and closing borders, which are all supposed to be signs of an incoming civil war.<sup>64</sup> Another pattern is the gamification of the desired civil war, whereby people can gain points by carrying out violent acts during the civil war. Such points are awarded through ‘game cards’; an example for that is a ‘quest’ to contract the virus and lick doorknobs at local IRS offices.<sup>65</sup> The boogaloo narrative is spread by many different communities in the USA, such as libertarians, gun right activists, white supremacists and antigovernmental nationalists.

## Economic development

The economic crisis in Europe created an ideal scenario for right-wing extremist groups, that can easily exploit the situation by promoting anti-globalist, anti-establishment messages and putting the blame on the system that has ‘once again’ failed its citizens. At the same time, terrorist groups are expected to capitalize on this crisis by providing alternative sources of income and a sense of purpose in life to potential recruits under the condition of joining the group. Such sentiments are further exacerbated in countries with larger Muslims and immigrant population. With the rising number of calls for violence, tensions and hostility are only expected to increase.<sup>66</sup> As the 2008 financial crisis has proven to cause a large spike in right-wing extremism, the West may be “sitting on a powder keg”<sup>67</sup> considering the predictions of an incoming economic crisis that is expected to be on a scale the world has not seen since WW II.

In Africa, the COVID-19-shock is expected to hit the economy in three waves according to the OECD: in the short-term, trading will decrease and Chinese investments will be reduced; then demand will collapse due to the lockdowns in the EU and other OECD countries; and in the long-term, supply shortages are expected on the whole continent, which will further impair domestic and intra-African trade.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> ISD (2020): Covid-19 disinformation briefing no. 2 (<https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Covid-Briefing-2.pdf>)

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> CJ Werleman (2020): How coronavirus could escalate Europe's far-right terror threat (<https://www.middleeast-eye.net/opinion/how-coronavirus-could-exacerbate-europes-rightwing-terrorism-crisis>)

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-and-africa-socio-economic-implications-and-policy-responses-96e1b282>

This will likely lead to even higher (youth) unemployment, possibly driving people to extremist groups that offer them jobs and income.

## Fragile states & civil wars/insurgencies

The first cases of COVID-19 have already been reported in the Sahel (Nigeria has been hit particularly hard)<sup>69</sup>, Somalia<sup>70</sup>, Afghanistan, Yemen<sup>71</sup>, Libya and Syria, yet with poor testing capacities, numbers are highly inaccurate. These already fragile states may struggle to enforce lockdowns or isolation measures due to issues of weak governance. Water scarcity and access to drinking water also add to the difficulties of these countries in dealing with the virus, and their health sectors are largely understaffed and short of resources.

While most terrorist groups and insurgents have suspended operations, some — such as the Taliban and Libyan rebels — continue their attacks, further pushing fragile states towards collapse under the pressure of COVID-19. Such a scenario would have a significant impact on terrorist activity by creating a power vacuum to be filled. It has also been argued that state capacities to fight terrorism in Africa will be weakened, as armies are tied up in the fight against the pandemic<sup>72</sup>.

In light of these developments, the following aspects should be considered in devising security policy responses:

- The focus should shift towards recognizing and combating extremist narratives, disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories, as cross-sectional material for the three main concepts that are key for homeland security: terrorism, cyber attacks and disaster control.
- Precautionary measures should be taken for terror attacks involving biological weapons as well as for attacks on alternative, highly frequented targets.
- International interventions should increasingly focus on capacity- and institution-building.

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/swac/coronavirus-west-africa/>

<sup>70</sup> Somalia also ranks the worst at RAND's infectious disease vulnerability index (IDVI).

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/14/covid-19-yemen-perfect-storm>

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/the-year-of-the-rat-how-the-coronavirus-is-changing-the-world-a-78fcd01f-8316-4bd1-8eb4-ca30ef956ff7>