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Security amid the COVID 19 Pandemic

On 23 March 2020, as the world began to brace itself for the global COVID-19 pandemic, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres issued a call for a global ceasefire, for the world to focus all of its available efforts on confronting the outbreak of the virus.

In the Middle East and North Africa one in five people now live in close proximity to [conflict](#), so the call of the UNSG was particularly relevant for PAM, and President Hon. Karim Darwish immediately issued a written statement of support for this initiative, and echoed the message of the [UN](#). A month later, it is a good time for PAM to reflect on the security situation in the Euro-Mediterranean and neighboring regions, as the pandemic continues to deepen its hold throughout the world.

In Syria, the ceasefire negotiated in early March between Turkey and Russia appears to be largely holding up. The two sides have been carrying out [joint patrols](#) and this has allowed for over 185,000 displaced persons to return to [their homes](#), thereby easing the scope of the humanitarian tragedy in North Western Syria. However, the nearly decade long conflict has resulted in vast damage to the healthcare systems, infrastructure and the economy, and has displaced millions of people, thereby making Syria one of the most vulnerable countries to face the pandemic, especially in places like [Idlib](#).

In the Middle East, the pandemic prompted increased technical cooperation between Israel and Palestinian Authorities, a development which was hailed by [UN](#). However, continued financial support for UNRWA remains essential to address the coronavirus situation in Palestine and neighboring countries, as it is a key healthcare provider for refugees in the region.

In Libya, on the other hand, the conflict continues to escalate despite the call for a ceasefire. The UN has condemned the deliberate cutting of water and electricity supply in Tripoli, as an unacceptable weaponization of essential services during a [pandemic](#). There also have been a number of attacks on hospitals, essential infrastructure facilities, and there are severe food shortages in the country, as a direct result of the [ongoing fighting](#). Immediate cessation of violence in Libya is a must to allow for an effective response to the [COVID pandemic](#).

Terrorism continues to be a major security challenge even in the context of the global health crisis. A week ago, Egyptian security forces neutralized seven terrorists, who were planning attacks on Christian targets during [Easter celebrations](#). ISIL has meanwhile also increased its global activity following a call to its followers, on 19 March, to capitalize on the pandemic chaos and carry out [further attacks](#). The Sahel region has been the most affected, and the spread of jihadist activity throughout Africa has continued, as it is evident by the increase in terrorist violence as far as south to [Mozambique](#).

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The gains made by armed terrorist groups in the Sahel have already caused frustration among state forces, and some are scaling back operations and, as an example, Chad has stated that they will no longer participate in military operations outside of Chad's [borders](#). Furthermore, international counter-terrorism efforts are being directly affected by the pandemic. The EU has equally suspended its counter-terrorism training mission in Mali, after a staff member tested positive for the [virus](#). This situation opens new opportunities for terrorist groups in a region that is fast becoming the new global hotspot for jihadist activity.

From an ideological perspective, the pandemic is likely to bolster the radical views held by various extremist organizations throughout the world. Extreme right-wing groups could blame the pandemic on foreigners and open-borders policies, while religious extremists are likely to portray the pandemic as "God's will" to further their messages, which are often tied with [apocalyptic scenarios](#). As an example, Al-Qaeda published a propaganda text in English, aimed at its western audience, portraying the pandemic as divine punishment for moral corruption, and attempting to recruit people for their terrorist cause by urging them to embrace their [views](#).

Other criminal organizations are also seeking to capitalize on the pandemic. Interpol has raised the level of alert, noting that there is a significant increase on cyberattacks on [hospitals](#), where hackers are paralyzing life-saving systems and demanding ransom payments. In addition to this, since the onset of the pandemic, cyberattacks have targeted government health agencies, testing facilities, laboratories and even the World Health Organization, prompting the UN to extend the call for a global ceasefire also to the [digital realm](#). Increased cybersecurity measures and stronger legal protection against cyberattacks in domestic and internal law are needed to safeguard medical infrastructure in such [times of crisis](#).

PAM remains fully committed to security in the Euro-Mediterranean region and supports a coordinated international approach to the COVID 19 pandemic. In this regard, PAM calls on all countries and parties to:

- Strictly adhere to the global ceasefire;
- Increase international cooperation to ensure a coordinated pandemic response, with a special focus on vulnerable populations affected by conflict;
- Re-enforce international cooperation on counter-terrorism measures and remain vigilant to the evolution of the terrorist threat in the context of the pandemic;
- Strengthen security in the digital sphere to protect medical facilities and other essential infrastructure against cyber-attacks.

As the world faces a common enemy to humanity in the form of a deadly and invisible virus, the situation affords an opportunity to unite in the common goal of defeating COVID 19. By ensuring common security, PAM members can concentrate their efforts on saving lives during this acute time of crisis and rebuilding of affected societies and economies in the coming months. PAM and its Secretariat will continue to play its role in facilitating cooperation in support of a coordinated and effective approach to the pandemic.//

