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Update on counterterrorism amidst the COVID 19 pandemic

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In recent months, the attention of governments and parliaments around the world has been turned towards addressing the health hazards and the socio-economic impact posed by COVID-19. Within this unprecedented reality, relevant agencies recall the importance of remaining vigilant in the face of the evolving threat of terrorism.

Violent extremists and terrorist groups have seized the opportunity presented by the pandemic to strengthen their radical propaganda and, in recent months, significant terrorist activity has been monitored in different regions, throughout the world. This background note examines major trends and issues related to the threat of terrorism, with a geographical focus on Iraq and Syria, the Sahel region, North Africa, and Europe.

Iraq and Syria

The recent political crisis in Iraq, and the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, has provided an opportunity for ISIL to mount a resurgence, with a sharp increase in attacks since March 2020, taking advantage of US troops scaling down their missions and closing bases ahead of schedule due to the COVID19 outbreak²⁷.

Since the death of ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2019, the group has been going through a period of reform and has now re-emerged with a new structure. Geographical sectors of Iraq are now divided amongst new terrorist leaders, and reports indicate some 4000 active terrorist fighters, and an additional 8000 sleeping members, throughout the country¹.

Meanwhile, those ISIL fighters, captured following the territorial collapse of the caliphate, are going through the justice system. A UN team, working in Iraq to support the prosecution of ISIL fighters for their atrocities, is urging the Iraqi parliament to pass a war crimes law. The bill has already been introduced, but its adoption has been delayed by the political crisis and the COVID 19 pandemic². The new law would bring the legislation to international standards governing genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity, which are currently missing from the Iraqi anti-terrorism legislation. The new law would also allow for a more thorough and meaningful pursuit of justice against ISIL fighters for war crimes, and improve the quality of trial process, which is currently being criticised as speedy and untransparent by human rights organisations and the UN³.

Moreover, in North-Eastern Syria, administered by the Kurdish lead "Syrian Democratic Forces"²³, there are still some 10,000 ISIL terrorist fighters held as prisoners, including 2000 foreigners. Given the unstable security situation in the area, and the limited capacity of SDF to hold people in detention, there is a substantive risk of ISIL terrorist fighters escaping prisons, unless a sustainable solution is found to address their fate through proper prosecution, and repatriation as needed. In recent months,

ISIL prisoners already attempted two major jailbreaks by starting prison riots, although the attempts were so far unsuccessful²⁴.

Additionally, there is an unresolved issue of the survivors of ISIL families (women and children), thousands of whom are also foreign nationals. They are being detained separately in make-shift camps in north-eastern Syria, where they lack adequate access to medicine to fight the pandemic and other illnesses, worsening an already critical humanitarian disaster²⁵.

Many countries are reluctant to repatriate their nationals, including orphaned children, despite repeated calls by the UN to do so⁴. Given that radical ideologies in support of ISIL remain prevalent in these camps, there is fear that many of the children could one day become the next generation of terrorist fighters⁵ if they are not rehabilitated and integrated into society⁶.

Sahel

The Sahel is probably the most troubling region for terrorist activity today, as it has seen a remarkable increase in number of attacks and fatalities compared to recent years. According to the UN, in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, casualties from terrorist attacks have increased five-fold since 2016, with over 4,000 deaths reported in 2019 alone⁷. Since the beginning of the COVID outbreak, a string of deadly attacks in the region have taken place, with the latest assault taking place in Niger, with more than 81 civilians killed by Boko Haram in early June⁸.

The success of the jihadist movement in the Sahel region is rooted in the exploitation of local tribal conflicts by global jihadist actors and the perception of limited government legitimacy in the eyes of some populations. In recent months, there have been also a number of documented atrocities committed by state-controlled forces in the region⁸. A poor socio-economic response to the pandemic on the part of the local governments will indeed further increase the acceptance of Jihadist movements, as they increasingly work to undermine official rule. As an example, in Mali, a Salafi-jihadi group was able to disrupt this year's parliamentary elections by kidnaping the candidates²⁹.

In addition to local security forces, France is a key-foreign actor, leading counter-terrorism efforts in the region. Most recently, on 6 June, French troops eliminated the leader of Al-Qaida in Mali¹². However, France operates jointly with the US for its military operations, and there are fears that a looming downscaling of US presence in the area would affect the joint counterterrorism capacity and open the door for even greater terrorism activities⁹.

Given the combination of the above-mentioned factors, the Sahel region is becoming the next fertile ground for a potential new jihadist "caliphate" project⁹, as previously seen in Syria and Iraq. This would pose a grave danger well beyond the borders of Africa.

It is also worth mentioning that in recent weeks there has been a sharp increase of terrorist activity by ISIL-linked insurgents in Capo Delgado province of Mozambique. This is another low-intensity local conflict exploited by jihadist movements, which has left some 1,300 people dead since 2017¹⁰.

North Africa

In North Africa, the rate of terrorist activity is lower in comparison to their neighbours in the Sahel, and many counterterrorism operations are proving to be successful. However, the region still remains vulnerable to terrorist attacks.

Tunisia saw a suicide bomb attack near the US embassy on 6 March in the capital city, with one police officer dying of his injuries, while Tunisian authorities foiled two additional terrorist plots in the Kasserine region¹¹. In Algeria, security forces foiled a planned suicide attack against a crowd of peaceful protesters in January¹², while ISIL claimed responsibility for an attack on the Algerian border with Mali last February¹³.

In Egypt, in the spring of 2020, security forces prevented a plan for a terrorist attack on Christian targets during Easter celebrations in a Cairo suburb¹⁴, and also carried out a number of successful raids in the Sinai Province against extremist militants¹⁶. However, the terrorists were successful in carrying out an attack that left 10 Egyptian soldiers dead in late April¹⁵.

The civil strife in Libya, centred in the northern part of the country, has intensified since the beginning of the global pandemic. The security vacuum left by years of unrest has led ISIL to establish a strong foothold in the country. Although less prominent than in recent years, there are regular low scale attacks being carried by ISIL affiliated militants, especially in the south of Libya¹⁶. The increasing involvement of foreign actors and mercenaries in the Libyan conflict, the mass proliferation of weapons, the large scale human trafficking and migrant smuggling, and the impact of COVID19 on the population, coupled to the active ISIL presence and the proximity to the many jihadist actors in the Sahel, are all factors contributing to a worsening security scenario in Libya. This situation is of great concern and represents an evolving threat for North Africa and Europe.

Europe

Europe has witnessed a decrease in the number of terrorist attacks in recent years, compared to the peak in 2014. However, a pattern of low-scale and low-tech attacks, such as stabbings or car-ramming continue to portrahit the vulnerability of Europe to jihadist terrorist activity. There have been a number of examples of such attacks in Europe in 2020, with the latest terrorism related stabbing spree taking place on 20 June in the UK, leaving three people dead¹⁷.

In addition, there is also a growing concern of growth of right-wing terrorism, as demonstrated by the February attack that left nine people dead in an apparent targeting of shisha bars in Hanau, Germany²¹.

The issue of de-radicalisation of terrorists in the European justice system and the post-prison monitoring remain a challenge for Europe, as a number of prisoners, once released, have turned to violence, prompting some countries to enact emergency legislation to prevent the automatic release of terrorists¹⁸.

Additionally, the impact of COVID 19 pandemic on countering financing of terrorism and money laundering is important to consider, since the police and the criminal justice systems are targeting more cybercrime and frauds related to COVID19 rather than terrorism financing. Accord to an Europol report, *“organised crime groups (OCGs) remain resilient and are adapting their modi operandi to the current situation, further exploiting secure communication channels and adapting transportation models, trafficking routes and concealment methods and the current instability has led to an increasingly volatile environment for criminal businesses along the supplychain in Europe and appears to have resulted in increased levels of violence among mid-level suppliers and distributors”*¹⁹. Supporting Terrorist organizations during this period of uncertainty is also tempting to terrorism financiers. In that context, it should be noted that on 9 June, *“Europol supported the Spanish National Police (Policía Nacional) in arresting a man in Madrid suspected of transferring money between several European and Arabian countries via the Hawala informal money transfer system with the aim of reintroducing foreign terrorist fighters in Europe”*²⁰.

The Council of the European Union met in Brussels in June 2020 to assess the threat posed by terrorism and concluded that the level of threat remains high²¹. The Council also noted with concern the situations in MENA region and the Sahel, emphasizing that terrorism is a highly interconnected threat that is known to easily spread across borders. The Council also highlighted the importance of international cooperation and investments in capacity building. In June, almost simultaneously, NATO launched a comprehensive reference curriculum to strengthen the national counter-terrorism capacities of the members of the Alliance²².

PAM Action

On 30 June 2020, PAM, together with its key counterterrorism partners, OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the UN Office on Counterterrorism, is organising a joint Parliamentary Web Dialogue to take stock of the latest terrorism and violent extremism trends.

The meeting will serve as a dynamic platform for representatives of over 65 national parliaments to engage in a focused debate to achieve a shared understanding and approach to security, including on the absolute need to ensure the exchange of views on counter-terrorism efforts during the present and future phases of COVID-19 pandemic. Together with senior experts from the OSCE, the League of Arab States and national security services, the event will strive to reinforce parliamentary co-operation at this critical juncture.

The outcomes of the meeting will allow PAM to better fine-tune its counterterrorism programmes and chart a plan of action for the coming months.

¹ <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/isis-2020-new-structures-and-leaders-in-iraq-revealed/>

² <https://apnews.com/dea85263c829ab189c3e9ad92a53bf63>

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25504&LangID=E>

²³ <https://rojvainformationcenter.com/2020/03/kurdish-led-northeast-under-lockdown-as-syria-announces-first-coronavirus-case/>

²⁴ <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/isis-prison-riot-ends-after-talks-in-north-east-syria-1.1014412>

²⁵ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/virus-fears-spread-camps-isis-families-syria-s-north-east>

⁴ <https://reliefweb.int/report/canada/canada-urged-repatriate-orphaned-five-year-old-girl-held-syrian-camp>

⁵ <https://www.pri.org/stories/2020-04-20/isis-families-held-syrian-camps-face-uncertain-futures-now-coronavirus-also-looms>

⁶ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/fragility-northern-syria>

⁷ <https://unowas.unmissions.org/briefing-security-council-report-secretary-general-activities-united-nations-office-west-africa-7>

⁸ <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/10/africa/boko-haram-faduma-attack/index.html>

⁸ <https://acleddata.com/2020/05/20/state-atrocities-in-the-sahel-the-impetus-for-counter-insurgency-results-is-fueling-government-attacks-on-civilians/>

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- ⁹ <http://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20200128-france-calls-us-not-withdraw-sahel-anti-terror-force-mali-burkina-faso>
- ⁹ <https://cgpolicy.org/articles/isis-in-africa-the-caliphates-next-frontier/>
- ¹⁰ <https://acleddata.com/2020/06/16/cabo-ligado-weekly-8-14-june-2020/>
- ¹¹ <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/north-africa/2020/05/11/Tunisia-foils-terrorist-plot-targeting-its-military-Defense-Ministry.html>
- ¹² <https://www.ft.com/content/857f588c-7ede-4967-ba8b-903503520242>
- ¹² <https://af.reuters.com/article/algeriaNews/idAFL8N29Z6G2>
- ¹³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-algeria-security/islamic-state-claims-algeria-border-attack-idUSKBN2051NY>
- ¹⁴ <https://www.dw.com/en/firefight-in-egypt-leaves-seven-suspected-militants-police-officer-dead/a-53127619>
- ¹⁶ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/23/c_139082026.htm
- ¹⁵ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/06/egypt-army-operation-sinai-terrorism-attacks.html>
- ¹⁶ <https://eyeonisisinlibya.com/>
- ¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-53129046>
- ¹⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/end-to-automatic-early-release-of-terrorists>
- ¹⁹ http://www.politicheantidroga.gov.it/media/2676/eu-drug-markets_covid19-impact_proof-2_wm.pdf
- ²⁰ <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/individual-arrested-in-madrid-for-transferring-money-to-syria-to-fund-return-of-foreign-terrorist-fighters-to-europe>
- ²¹ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44446/st08868-en20.pdf>
- ²² https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_176304.htm
- ²¹ <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-and-right-wing-extremism-the-new-dimension-of-terrorism/a-52442936>
- ²⁷ <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/05/07/politics/isis-coronavirus-iraq-syria/index.html>
- ²⁹ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/africa-file/april-14-2020-africa-file-the-covid-19-pandemic-will-strengthen-the-salafi-jihadi-movement-in-africa>