Introduction
The Threat

The global COVID-19 pandemic continues to attract the attention of threat groups. Although conventional means—the gun and the bomb—will remain terrorists' preferred mode of attack, threat groups have expressed an interest in exploiting the virus. Terrorist and extremist groups, cells, and personalities will not let up using what works for their stated purposes. Rather than using tested and proven traditional weapons, will contemporary and future threat groups use bioweapons? Some terrorist and extremist groups, especially the Islamic State and right-wing extremist groups, have shown intentions to weaponize the virus. Unlikely to disappear in the near future, the contagion worldwide reached six and a half million deaths in 2022 and is expected to further increase in 2023.

Modified organisms can certainly be weaponized, but the weaponized versions would not come from a backstreet lab. The infrastructure to produce a sophisticated weapon needs highly trained scientists. Such weaponization would most probably come from government-run programs. The analogy would be nuclear weapons, where terrorists cannot manufacture them but they can get hold of weapons created by governments and use them. Bioweapons are invisible, replicate, and self-perpetuate. Because of the widespread availability of SARS-CoV-2 causing COVID-19 disease, will there be a paradigm shift from traditional terrorism to bioterrorism?

The Context

Coronavirus, known officially as SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19), is an evolving threat. Threat entities have explored and exploited the pandemic to advance their agenda. Although lockdowns inhibited virus attacks in government-controlled areas, terrorist attacks continued unabated in the conflict areas. While government entities and military forces abided by lockdown measures, postponing training and scaling down operations,

insurgent and terrorist groups operated relatively freely and mounted attacks. Both on the battlefields and off the battlefields, threat groups have invested in digital acceleration, maintaining strength and ideological influence during COVID-19.

From disseminating propaganda to raising funds, these threat groups foment racial and religious tension and violence. By engaging in such support activity, terrorist and extremist groups fuel the recruiting momentum. They link up online with like-minded groups and build communities of supporters and sympathizers. Some Islamic violent fanatics argue that COVID-19 is a "Soldier of God," "a divine retribution," and they encourage waging "Corona jihad" to infect opponents. While Muslim fanatics have advocated infecting Muslim officials and non-Muslims, far right groups have urged direct action of deliberately spreading the virus to "non-whites"—mainly minorities and immigrants. Right-wing extremists have mounted cyberattacks on anti-pandemic and health institutions, seeking to accelerate the crisis (UN CTED 2020).

With COVID-19 having developed into a global pandemic, terrorist ideologies and extremist thinking influence the human terrain. Ideologies of violent groups also fuse with the thinking of political parties, bolstering each other. The far right influences a segment of the general population against migrants and immigration as well as people of color and minorities. Muslim threat entities politicize, radicalize and mobilize a tiny segment of communities to use the virus to their advantage and target their adversaries. Muslim threat groups and Islamist parties feed off each other, affirming the terrorism-political nexus.

SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) is easily accessible and relatively low-risk, and it can be rapidly transmitted and inconspicuously spread. Will threat groups as yet weaponize it? Considering that younger and less susceptible assailants can be used to infect older and vulnerable populations, will they deliberately spread coronavirus in target communities and countries? Considering recent developments, concerns of the security and intelligence community are real. Governments and community partners need to monitor evolving ideologies and operational capabilities of a spectrum of threat groups and personalities to mitigate the possibility of COVID-19 attacks.

Understanding the Threat

A small number of threat groups with access to resources have expressed an interest in developing and using biological and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Will the pandemic instigate or inspire

Islamic State and al-Qaeda, the two most powerful insurgent and terrorist groups in the world, to invest in WMD stealth programs?

Since the beginning of the contemporary wave of international terrorism in 1968, there has never been so much virus-related chatter. Terrorist groups worldwide have expressed interest in COVID-19. Rogue actors have already engaged in its malicious spread, particularly within law enforcement and medical research facilities. In the United Kingdom, infected assailants used spit as a weapon on police officers. The spokeswoman for the Police Federation said: "We have seen some vile and disgusting acts by a minority, weaponizing COVID-19 by spitting and coughing at officers. It is therefore absolutely right and proper that the home secretary is clear that those who do so should feel the full weight of the law. Those responsible for weaponizing the virus are the lowest of the low" (Weaver and Dodd 2020). Belly Mujinga, a 47-year-old British railway ticket office worker, died after a man deliberately coughed on her. Transport Salaried Staffs' Association said: "She is one of the far too many frontline workers who have lost their lives to corona virus" (DW, 12 May 2020). In Belgium, where several cases of spitting were reported, offenders could be fined up to €2,400 and could face prison terms of up to two years. If claiming to be infected to scare others, the offenders were subjected to the same penalties (Brussels Times, 31 March 2020). A Pennsylvania woman, Margaret Cirko, 35, coughed and spat on US$35,000 worth of produce and merchandise at a grocery store. Arrested and charged with two felony counts of terrorist threats, one count of threats to use a "biological agent" and one count of criminal mischief. She reportedly said: "I have the virus. Now everyone is going to get sick" (Halpin and Kalinowski 2020). Except for one-to-one infection, it is difficult to weaponize; still it has been a great security concern that an assailant could infect VIPs, security, or frontline officials.

New York-based Muslim Brotherhood activist Bahgat Saber—with 143,195 followers—called for Egyptians to intentionally infect government officials and state employees in a Facebook post on 1 March 2020. "If you are a soldier, you can go into the defense ministry, and shake hands with all the generals of the military and the police. The same is true with the justice system" (Naar 2020). In a Facebook Live session, Saber said, "If you have contracted corona virus, you should exact revenge! Avenge yourself, avenge the honor of your women, avenge the people who are in prison, and avenge the oppressed people. Go there. Why die alone? When you die, why die alone?" (ibid.). The US House Committee on Homeland Security drew the attention of the US Department of Homeland Security to concerns over white supremacist

groups and radical Islamist groups who sought to use the pandemic "to leverage political deals and accelerate the collapse of society" (Counter Extremism Project 2020). The FBI also issued a report to local police agencies, pointing out that extremist groups "are encouraging one another to spread the virus, if contracted, through bodily fluids and personal interactions" (Middle East Transparent. 28 April 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly transformed a plethora of circumstances in the threat environment. This changing threat landscape determines the thinking and actions of terrorist and extremist groups, networks, and cells. We have summarized our findings on these changes in accordance with two spectrums, namely conflict and in nonconflict zones.

Conflict Zones

Since 11 March 2020, lockdowns and partial lockdowns together with other pandemic restrictions have created a paradoxical effect on the battlefields. In the first four and a half months after the pandemic outbreak, the jihadist threat increased in conflict zones—more specifically in East and West Africa, Iraq, Syria—because of the following reasons:

1. The crisis situation forced governments to divert their resources to save lives and livelihoods. This reallocation has resulted in novel vulnerabilities terrorists have been keen to attack.
2. At the same time, to minimize the risk of infection, international troops were withdrawn from the most critical areas. This seriously paralyzed those enhanced technical capabilities local governments were provided with in their counterterrorism efforts.
3. The only major battlefield where the terrorist threat has not increased with the pandemic outbreak is Afghanistan. The diminished threat in the country at the beginning of 2020 was due to the Doha Declaration, in which the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan Government engaged in negotiations, with US assistance.

Nonconflict Zones

After the World Health Organization declared the spread of COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March 2020, the number of terrorist attacks decreased off the battlefields. However, there was a surge in terrorism with developments in France. On 25 September 2020, a 25-year-old Pakistani man,

Zaher Hassan Mahmood, stabbed two French citizens and seriously wounded another one. The lone wolf attacker was influenced by the 2015 Charlie Hebdo terrorist act, which was perpetrated in revenge for the cartoons of Prophet Muhammad (BBC News, 26 September 2020). Some weeks later, on 16 October 2020, a French teacher, Samuel Paty, was beheaded by Abdoullakh Abouyedovich Anzorov, an 18-year-old Muslim Russian refugee of Chechen ethnicity, days after the controversial cartoons of the Prophet had been shown to his pupils. On 29 October 2020, a 21-year-old Tunisian man, Brahim Aouissaoui, stabbed three French people at a church in Nice. On the same day, French police foiled an alleged Nice-copycat attack near the Saint-Martin's Church in Sartrouville. Near Avignon, in Montfavet, a man was shot dead after threatening police with a handgun on 29 October 2020 (BBC News, 3 November 2020). Within hours of the Nice and Avignon incidents, a guard was attacked outside the French consulate in Jeddah in Saudi Arabia (NDTV, 29 October 2020). On the last evening prior to the lockdown in Austria, a gunman opened fire with assault rifles in six places in Vienna on 2 November 2020. The perpetrator was killed by police while wearing a fake suicide vest. The attacker was identified as Kujtim Fejzullai, an Islamic State supporter who had tried to travel to Syria (BBC News, 3 November 2020).

If not for these developments in France, the downturn trend in terrorist incidents would have continued. However, the attacks in France precipitated anger among Muslims and fury among extremists and terrorists, leading to a spike in the threat in Europe and beyond. It was the continuation of the Charlie Hebdo incident but more specifically linked to the trial, which had been scheduled for 6, 9, 10 and 11 November 2020 (France 24, 2 November 2020). French president Emmanuel Macron's support for the right to caricature Prophet Muhammad further heightened the anti-France sentiment across the fundamentalist Muslim world. The shooting in Austria illustrated the extremist networks' ability to respond to current events in a timely manner. Although the number of terrorist incidents increased in Europe in the second half of 2020, this trend was still well below the year prior to the pandemic outbreak.

In the United Kingdom and in the European Union, supporters and sympathizers of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have stepped up their recruitment and radicalization activities since the pandemic outbreak (Waduge 2020). The insurgent and terrorist group fighting for a mono-ethnic homeland in Northeastern Sri Lanka was defeated by the Sri Lanka security forces in May 2009. The militant separatist group was notorious for conducting the largest number of suicide attacks before the advent of the Islamic State (CISAC 2020). LTTE members currently

residing in Western Europe are, however, of great security concern. The premier front in France, Tamil Coordinating Committee (TCC) held an event on 27 November 2020 to commemorate their leader Velupillai Prabhakaran's 66th birthday in the La Chapelle area. Organized annually by the LTTE international network, radical Tamils participate in the Mahaveer Day to mark their dead, including their suicide attackers. According to the Sri Lankan Embassy in France, French police had removed posters put up in La Chapelle on the days leading up to the event (Tamil Guardian, 28 November 2020). In parallel, pro-LTTE activists celebrated the martyrs day in the United Kingdom. Photos taken at the ornate and impressively prepared event show 10–30 LTTE sympathizers commemorating their dead at a warehouse in Balham, South London on 27 November 2020. Reportedly, the British police closely monitored the happenings (Nivunhella 2020).

Changes in Modus Operandi

The pandemic's impact on terrorism is highly complex and multifaceted. Its medium and long-term effects are yet to be seen. Nonetheless, the immediate operational changes it has induced can already be tracked. Restrictive epidemiological measures have introduced novel challenges in extremists' and terrorists' operational circumstances. Off-the-battlefield lockdowns have resulted in challenges to mounting an attack but also hindered well-established supply chains. Resorting to armed assault instead of deploying improvised explosive devices may suppose that the movement of goods was restricted and terrorists' access to operational resources was perhaps limited during lockdowns. These findings could be of great importance for counterterrorism agencies to map and better understand extremists' supply systems.

In conflict zones, the crisis offered radical Islamist fighters highly advantageous novelties. Without the support of international troops, local security forces have been struggling to counter terrorist operations. The heightened level of military presence, as well as the symbolic value of security forces during a crisis, have made military personnel and facilities their number one targets. Although, we need to mention here the exception of Mozambique. While Islamic State operatives previously ambushed government institutions and military compounds, supposedly taking advantage of the pandemic crisis situation since March 2020, radical Islamist groups have attacked cities, towns, and critical infrastructure (Meir Amit Intelligence 2020). In line with this, the Mozambique port Mocimboa da Praia was also captured by the Islamic State (Bowker 2020).

Propaganda Activities

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on terrorists' and violent extremists' online agitation acts. Intensified right-wing extremist activities have been striving to capitalize on the pandemic since the outbreak. Rigorous virus propaganda by both radical Islamists and right-wing groups have incited violent acts, and they have attempted to recruit in the digital realm. While the number of potential online audiences substantially increased because of the pandemic restrictions, these restrictions had serious operational consequences for the right wing offline. Consequently, demonstrations as traditional means for recruitment and building transnational connections with like-minded groups were eliminated. It is, again, yet to be seen how these threat groups can recover from the loss of these cross-border links.

At the time of the pandemic outbreak, extremists increased their propaganda activities in the digital world. They incorporated COVID-19 into their narratives and posted more frequently on their existing websites. Both radical Islamist and far right groups were determined to exploit the elevated online public presence. As the findings of our study show, to bolster their agenda, they circulated conspiracy theories, incited violence, and attempted to recruit new members. Interestingly, however, despite the initial intensity of extremists' and terrorists' actions in the cybersphere, the number of posts significantly decreased as the pandemic spread further.

Nonetheless, there are serious issues that remained great security concerns. First, the unsupervised Internet activity of the younger generation requires particular attention. Being exposed to radical online content in a highly unstable crisis situation may generate a super-susceptible audience for threat groups (Kruglanski et al. 2020). Second, the pandemic induced an enhanced level of politicization in many societies (Aatresh 2020). It was feared that this may accelerate polarization and ultimately engender more violence. Finally, another important consideration here is that, historically, crisis situations have generally made people turn to religion (Sherwood 2018). There is a risk that those who begin to engage in religious ideologies may fall victim to radicalization.

Policy Recommendations

The elevated level of digital presence inherently requires special attention from authorities. Building upon these novel operational circumstances, effective mechanisms and collaborations are to be developed. Detecting and moderating or removing radicalized online content is

only one side of the problem. Governments and publicly trusted voices explicitly and publicly communicate that these posts are harmful for young people. At the same time, the younger generation should be taught to think critically when encountering potentially radicalized ideologies. Over-politicized online narratives as well as misinformation campaigns have significantly diminished the credibility of government communications. In order to restore the trust in governments, effective strategic campaigns should be implemented to diminish the power of extremist narratives.

The pandemic has introduced novel responsibilities for both law enforcement and military agencies. The enforcement of newly adopted epidemiological restrictions has resulted in a shift of security agencies' priorities. This reallocation of tasks has redirected scarce resources from counterterrorism efforts. COVID-19 has exacerbated state-level considerations, and this may undermine the success of global and transnational achievements. All in all, we cannot let the pandemic ruin already established international counterterrorism instruments and partnerships. Efforts should be fortified to maintain previous achievements in the field.

The pandemic drew attention to new types of security threats. Given the increased significance of medical facilities and grocery stores, their value as potential terrorist targets has also increased remarkably. In line with this, security arrangements of these types of facilities should be re-evaluated. It is also feared that the devastating consequences of COVID-19 may encourage individuals to seek innovative ways to carry out acts of bioterrorism. More specifically, there is a pressing need to develop capacities to counter deliberate attempts to infect others. One noteworthy example here may be an alert from the Federal Bureau of Investigation back in April 2020. The FBI issued the report to inform local police agencies about extremist groups' recommendations from their Telegram channels on how to spread coronavirus to law enforcement and minority communities (Middle East Transparent, 28 April 2020).

Outline of the Book

Following this introductory chapter, the book is organized into seven parts. Chapter 1, titled "The Evolution of the Threat," is a review of the past, the present, and the likely future of terrorist threats. This discussion maps the global threat landscape at the time the pandemic was declared and examines active violent extremists and terrorist entities

both immediately before and after the outbreak of COVID-19. This section includes radical Islamist as well as right-wing agendas and incidents in conflict and nonconflict zones. Later in the chapter, a concise outline of prevalent academic standpoints and debates on COVID-19's impact on terrorism is put forward. This review aims to introduce the scholarship by mapping and exploring noted academics' contributions and the current status quo on the pandemic's impact on terrorism and violent extremism. In the final section, we identify and analyze potential political, social, economic, and psychological causes of terrorism in the context of COVID-19, and public health crises in general, to evaluate whether such emergencies create novel vulnerabilities terrorists can exploit.

Chapter 2, titled "How Have Radical Islamists Capitalized on the Pandemic?" endeavors to provide a better understanding of novel trends and dynamics in Islamist terrorism since the COVID-19 outbreak in China. Accordingly, radical Islamist narratives are first extensively elaborated. Secondly, changes in the volume and nature of radical Islamist threats are tracked. To do this, the threat landscape between 11 March and 31 July 2020 is contrasted with attacks that emerged in the same period in 2018. The comparison is based upon four perspectives: the number of attacks, their targets together with their modus operandi, and the active radical Islamist terrorist groups in the respective geographic regions. The discussion covers countries in both conflict zones (Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, East and West Africa) and nonconflict zones (Southeast Asia, Europe, United States). In the concluding section, the role of Ramadan 2020 in radical Islamist activities is assessed.

COVID-19 has offered a unique opportunity for far right extremists to capitalize on the pandemic and thereby advance their malicious efforts. To gain a better understanding of how the associated threat has evolved since the outbreak, Chapter 3, titled "How Far Right Extremists Exploited the Coronavirus Crisis," has examined far right operations, incitements, and propaganda activities between 11 March and 31 July 2020 in both Europe and North America. By examining these groups' applied tactics and narratives, insights into far right extremist groups' operations can be investigated. The concluding section of this chapter has been devoted to Australia- and New Zealand-based right-wing extremist activities.

The pandemic has been used to bolster narratives across all extremist ideologies. Chapter 4, titled "Beyond the Radical Islamist and Right-Wing Threat," scrutinizes the activities of other extremist entities such as radical left-wing groups as well as ecoterrorists.

The discussion in Chapter 5, titled "Novel Terrorist Tactics and Targets," elaborates on the changes COVID-19 has introduced into violent extremists' operational circumstances. First, both the radical Islamist and the far right threat landscape are assessed. Building upon this analysis, observations on how the pandemic has changed extremists' operational tactics and targets are put forward.

Chapter 6, titled "Future Trajectories for Emerging Radical Islamist and Far Right Trends," has two purposes. First, the chapter takes account of future trajectories for both the emerging radical Islamist and far right trends. Second, the challenges associated with novel threats are examined.

With the attempt to establish an accurate picture of the terrorist threat landscape, this book's findings could serve as a basis for amendments to be made in counterterrorism strategies both in conflict and nonconflict zones. In the Conclusion, titled "Policy Recommendations," the implications on future counterpolicy actions are put forward.

Two datasets are annexed to the book. The first delineates the key radical Islamist and far right messages on the pandemic, and the second provides statistics on terrorists' and extremists' COVID-19-related activities.

The introduction has set the scene for the upcoming discussion in the book. The story starts in the early months of 2020. We guide the reader through the terrorist threat landscape at the time of the pandemic outbreak. To better understand the evolving security arrangements and ongoing insurgent dynamics in conflict and nonconflict areas, we strive to detect novelties in terrorist and extremist agendas and modus operandi. An extensive examination of emerging incidents after 11 March 2020 seeks to answer the questions this introductory chapter has raised. Drawing on these implications, we will highlight where we need to re-evaluate counterterrorism policies and constructs.

Conclusion

This introductory chapter has attempted to take account of changes in the terrorist threat landscape since the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Novelties in modus operandi, the most relevant terrorist attacks, and propaganda activities both in conflict and nonconflict zones have been examined. Building upon our assessments, implications for future counterpolicies have been presented.

References

Aatresh, Aishani. 2020. "Science, Society, and Security: Politicization in the Age of COVID-19." *Harvard Political Review*, May 30.

Bowker, Tom. 2020. "Battle Looms in Mozambique over Extremists' Control of Port." *AP News*, 25 August.

Halpin, James, and Bob Kalinowski. 2020. "Hanover Township Woman Charged in Gerrity's Supermarket Coughing Episode." *The Times-Tribune*, 26 March.

Kruglanski, Arie W., Rohan Gunaratna, Molly Ellenberg, and Anne Speckhard. 2020. "Terrorism in Time of the Pandemic: Exploiting Mayhem." *Global Security: Health, Science and Policy* 5(1): 121–32.

"Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam." 2020. Stanford CISAC website. Retrieved May 2022 from https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/liberation-tigers-tamil-elam#:∼:text = July percent208 percent2C percent202015-,The per cent20Liberation percent20Tigers percent20of percent20Tamil percent20Eelam percent20(LTTE) percent20were percent20a percent20militant,armed percent 20forces percent20in percent20May percent202009.

"Member States Concerned by the Growing and Increasing Transnational Threat of Extreme Right-Wing Terrorism." 2020. United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, CTED Trends Alert. Retrieved May 2022 from https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org.se curitycouncil.ctc/files/files/documents/2021/Jan/cted_trends_alert_extreme_ right-wing_terrorism.pdf.

Naar, Ismaeel. 2020. "Coronavirus: Muslim Brotherhood Activist Calls on Egyptians to Infect Officials." *Al Arabiya English*, 18 March.

Nivunhella, Sujeeva. 2020. "Pro-LTTE Activists Organize Grand 'Heroes Day' Commemoration in the UK." *The Island*, 29 November.

Sherwood, Harriet. 2018. "Non-Believers Turn to Prayer in a Crisis, Poll Finds." *The Guardian*, 14 January.

"Spotlight on Global Jihad April 7–22, 2020." 2020. The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center website. Retrieved May 2022 from https://www .terrorism-info.org.il/en/spotlight-global-jihad-april-7-22-2020/.

"Tech and Terrorism: Online Extremists Exploit Coronavirus Pandemic to Incite Violence and Encourage Terrorism." 2020. Counter Extremism Project website. Retrieved May 2022 from https://www.counterextremism.com/press/tech-ter rorism-online-extremists-exploit-coronavirus-pandemic-incite-violence-en courage.

Waduge, Shenali. 2020. "LTTE Has Taken Murder, Extremism and Mayhem to the West." *Sinhala Net*, 8 October.

Weaver, Matthew, and Vikram Dodd. 2020. "Coronavirus Outbreak Police Examine CCTV Footage of Suspect Who Spat at UK Rail Worker Who Later Died." *The Guardian*, 13 May.