EBSCO HOST

Building a Global Network for Security

The Changing Face of Terrorism amid Evolving Tactics and Emerging Trends

The face of terrorism is evolving amid the persistence of jihadist militancy and the rise and expansion of right-wing extremism in the West. One year on, the COVID-19 pandemic has acted more as an accelerant and a facilitator rather than a game-changer for various forms of terrorism across the ideological spectrum. Though there was an explosion of extremist rhetoric based on the coronavirus feeding into the broader misinformation and disinformation space, research indicates that the militant violence downward trajectory which started in 2016 has continued into 2020 as well. Likewise, no substantial variations were observable in terrorist recruitment and financing too. However, the long-term impact of COVID-19 on terrorism is hard to pinpoint. Extremist groups can potentially exploit the post-pandemic economic uncertainties and public disenfranchisement, particularly of youth, to forward their agendas and interests.

One of the key challenges that has gained prominence during COVID-19 is the threat of mixed ideologies where would-be-extremists, mostly self-radicalised, pick and choose disparate elements across the ideological spectrum to vent their anger and frustration. Identifying such individuals and specifying the nature of their threat to national security has been daunting. A case in point is the threat posed by the Involuntary Celibate (incel) movement. United by extreme misogyny or their hatred for women, incel members have moved from the fringes of the far-right extremist movement in the West into the mainstream.

Against this backdrop, this current issue has focused on the evolving and emerging terrorist threats amid uncertainties and confusion created by the COVID-19 pandemic. The first article by **Raffaello Pantucci** examines the actual impact of the contagion on terrorism by looking at four distinct categories: militant violence, ideological narratives, recruitment and fundraising. The author notes that despite loud rhetoric and a plethora of conspiracy theories, the impact of the contagion on pre-existing trends of violent extremism has been somewhat limited. Though terrorist groups, across the ideological spectrum, initially jumped onto the COVID-19 bandwagon by incorporating it in their extremist propaganda

for ideological substantiation and validation, their narratives in subsequent months were more about day-to-day affairs than the coronavirus. Likewise, government lockdowns restricted terrorist groups' physical mobility and fundraising capabilities; yet, no significant change has been visible which could be attributed to the pandemic.

In the following article, **Jacob Ware** casts a spotlight on the threat from the incel (or involuntary celibates) movement in Asia. According to the author, while some extreme-right factions such as the incel have been growing and becoming more mainstream in the West, the threat remains limited in Asia. The incels have metastasised in recent years from a small online support network into a significant subculture of the online "manosphere." The incel rhetoric has also become increasingly misogynistic, sexualised and violent. Although there have been several incel-linked attacks in North America and Europe to date, it remains largely a fringe threat that is isolated to the West. Nonetheless, the author argues that the international reach of online forums, including those pushing extremist subcultures, means the incels could find a receptive audience in some Asian societies. As such, regional law enforcement and security agencies need to be aware of the movement, its ideological and geographical trends and possibilities for incel-inspired violence.

In the third article, **Reuben Ananthan Santhana Dass** assesses the threat of bioterrorism in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. According to the author, the devastating social, economic and physical impact of the global health crisis has potentially reignited interest among transnational extremist and terrorist groups such as the Islamic State (IS), in developing, acquiring and deploying biological weapons. However, while recent technological advances have arguably made the development of such weapons easier, cheaper and more accessible, the author argues it is unlikely that threat groups currently possess the know-how to plan and execute large-scale and centrally-directed bio-terror attacks. But the prospect of lone-actor driven and low-impact bio-terror attacks cannot be discounted. As such, countries need to fortify their bio-defense

capabilities, especially as the pandemic has highlighted numerous preparedness gaps, including in data sharing, medical equipment availability and testing capacity.

Finally, **Prakoso Permono** and **Muhamad Syauqillah** examine the growing incidents of Indonesian pro-IS groups targeting the Chinese Indonesian community. The authors note that while there is a long history of the Chinese Indonesian community being targeted for attacks, there is a lack of official acknowledgment of or research into the problem, even though this has worsened over the last few years and during the pandemic. The authors cite both external and internal factors which have led to a growing number of anti-Chinese terrorist plots in the country. In the eyes of the jihadists, external crises involving overseas Muslims such as the fate of Uyghur and Rohingya Muslims in their respective countries are depicted as oppression by the Chinese or groups broadly associated with Chinese ethnicity. Indonesian jihadists do not distinguish between Chinese nationals and Indonesian Chinese and often target the latter for their retribution. The authors also highlight internal factors such as longstanding socio-economic disparities between the *pribumi* and Chinese communities, which are exacerbated by conspiracy theories which underpin extremist anti-Chinese narratives. In addition to newspaper sources, the authors use court verdicts on convicted Indonesian terrorists and information obtained through interviews to demonstrate the extent of anti-Chinese jihadist activity in Indonesia.

Mapping the One-Year Impact of COVID-19 on Violent Extremism

Raffaello Pantucci

Synopsis

One year since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, looking across militant violence, ideological narratives, recruitment and funding, it is evident that so far the impact of the contagion on violent extremism has been relatively limited. Notwithstanding COVID-19, the downward trajectory of global militant violence which started in 2016 continued through 2020 as well. Likewise, in the ideological realm, after initial incorporation of COVID-19 in their narratives as divine punishment or seeking to demonstrate capability to manage the virus, the subsequent messaging by violent extremist groups was more mundane about day-to-day developments. Looking at recruitment and fundraising trends, no significant change is visible except for the fact that lockdowns and travel restrictions have constrained extremist groups' physical mobility and the ability to collect funds. In conclusion, the article notes that COVID-19 has been more of an enabler and accelerant of existing violent extremist trends but it is difficult to conclude whether, in the post-pandemic scenario (whenever that arrives), it will result in greater violence or if the downward trajectory which started in 2016 will persist.

Introduction

This article investigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on violent extremism since its outbreak one year ago. Notwithstanding vaccination rollouts, large parts of the world are still dealing with the virus as a very immediate problem with no clear end in sight. Methodologically, this fluid situation makes the actual assessment of the virus' impact on violent extremism a difficult task. We are still in the midst of the pandemic, so it

is hard to conclusively assess what its full impact has been as it has not yet been entirely felt. It is already difficult absent the pandemic to draw clear causal links to explain why people become motivated by terrorist ideologies. To try to understand the specific impact of COVID-19 as it is still surging around the world is an even harder task.

In an attempt to sketch out some preliminary understanding on the nature of the impact, this paper will focus on four broad areas of terrorist activity and explore what available research and information indicates about the impact of COVID-19 on violent extremism. First, the paper will explore how terrorist violence has changed over the past year. Then, it will probe the evolution of how extremist ideologies and narratives have coopted, altered or responded to COVID-19. Lastly, it will look at how the coronavirus has impacted terrorist fundraising and recruitment.[1] Though this does not capture the full spectrum and detail of terrorist activity, it does hopefully provide a perspective on the impact of COVID-19 on violent extremism.

The author has consulted multiple reports and databases for this paper, though the information has not always been methodically collected. Where the author is aware of openly accessible databases, they have been used to corroborate analysis or speculative writing that has been produced.

The overall picture is – as might be expected given we are still only in the midst of the pandemic – unclear at the moment. There is some evidence to suggest terrorist groups have profited from the pandemic, but nothing conclusive has been produced yet which shows how it has translated into longer-term material benefit. However, it is highly likely

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[1] The author is grateful for his ICPVTR colleagues' comments during a brainstorming session in late 2020 which helped inform the creation of this list.

that over a lengthier trajectory the impact of COVID-19 will be to make terrorism trends worse, though exactly how this plays out (whether through new ideologies emerging or existing ones getting graver) is yet to be determined.

Violence

Violence is the most obvious indicator to measure the impact of COVID-19 on terrorism over the past year. A number of databases exist looking at conflicts, counting incidents of violence and death. Of course, each of these has its own limitations and focuses on slightly different aspects of the conflict. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) is distinct for having mapped various conflict indicators for a few years. ACLED started in the late 1990s by focusing on Africa; it now appears that most conflict regions around the world have been measured from 2018 until the present, though most of Europe appears to have only been added to the dataset in 2020.[2] While there are other similarly substantial datasets in existence like the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)[3] or the Global Terrorism Database (GTD),[4] neither of these appears to have data through the pandemic period available yet with both concluding in 2019.[5]

The most up-to-date public analysis of violence data during the pandemic year appears to have been produced by the University of Chicago's Chicago Projects on Security & Threats (CPOST). Published in March 2021, the CPOST report draws on ACLED and their own Suicide Attack Database and concludes that across "The Middle East; Sub-Saharan Africa; North

Africa; South-Central Asia (including Pakistan and Afghanistan)", there was a drop in violence in 2020. "All four regions saw attacks fall on aggregate by 5 percent. That fall was sharp in the first six months and rose again in the next six months."[6]

But CPOST's overall conclusion is consistent with ACLED's cumulative annual data that is clear on the broader global trends, which show that by almost every metric calculated, violent activity is down year-on-year between 2019 and 2020. The exceptions to this trend in their data are what ACLED terms as "strategic developments" which show some limited growth and "protests" showing a much sharper rise.[7]
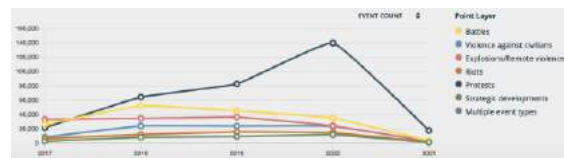

Figure 1: ACLED Overall Numbers. Source, ACLED dashboard (accessed March 2021)[8].

The broader trajectory on most of the violent indicators that ACLED gathers data on shows a downward trend from 2018 (with some exceptions). Removing "protest" data in particular reveals this trend more clearly. Looking at this against terrorism data more specifically, this downward trajectory is corroborated by the Institute for Economics and Peace's Global Terrorism Index (GTI) for 2020. Using data from 2019, GTI reports that "deaths from terrorism fell for the fifth consecutive year, after peaking in 2014. The total number of deaths fell by 15.5 percent to 13,826. The fall in deaths was mirrored by a reduction in the impact of terrorism."[9] CPOST

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[2] "ACLED coverage to date," https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2019/01/ACLED_Country-and-Time-Period-Coverage_updFeb2021.pdf.

[3] Uppsala Conflict Data Program: Department of Peace and Conflict Research, https://ucdp.uu.se/#/.

[4] Global Terrorism Database: START https://www.start.umd.edu/research-projects/global-terrorism-database-gtd.

[5] It is further worth noting that the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) annual terrorism review the Global Terrorism Index draws on data primarily from the GTD meaning it has also not provided any analysis or data for 2020 yet (https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-1.pdf).

[6] "Political Violence: January 1 – December 31, 2020," Review, Chicago Project on Security & Threats, March 2021.

[7] ACLED Full Dashboard: https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard; In ACLED terms, "strategic developments" is classified as events which are linked to politically motivated groups that usually indicate a precursor to possible violence, but do not involve violence, while "protests" are classified as peaceful events. In other words, the two indicators that ACLED sees as having increased during the pandemic are non-violent ones.

[8] ACLED Full Dashboard: https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard.

[9] "Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism," *Institute for Economics and Peace*, November 2020, p, 2.

analysis of ACLED data identifies a similar trend in 2020, highlighting a 5 percent overall decline in violence year-on-year. At the same time, it specifies that in the first two quarters of 2020, this drop was noticeable, but by the third quarter of the year, violence was rising again, and by fourth quarter, the numbers were the same as a year earlier in quarter four.[10]
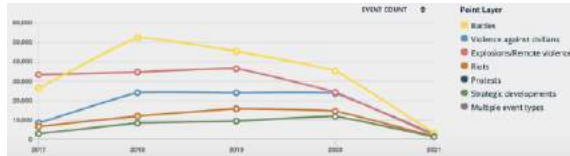

Figure 2: ACLED overall numbers without "protest data". Source ACLED dashboard, accessed March 2021.

The broader fall in violence that ACLED records since 2018 drawing on all conflict data is even sharper when focused just on violent acts. The two data points which ACLED notes as increasing, "protests" and "strategic developments", suggest potential precursors to terrorist violence.[11] In both cases, they suggest that there is a continuing anger, or brewing tensions, which could later express themselves as violence. Anecdotally, in the Philippines there has been some suggestion that groups are using this moment to re-group and refresh,[12] while in Indonesia, there were reports that groups had seen the arrival of

COVID-19 as a signal of impending apocalypse and had consequently stopped their operations and sat at home waiting for the end of days.[13] More frequently, however, reporting has suggested that repeated lockdowns have complicated groups' physical mobility and ability to carry out attacks.[14]

When compared with other available datasets, a generally static picture in violence year-on-year appears. For instance, the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) annual assessment of 2020 shows across regions covered in the report (South, Southeast, Central Asia, as well as the Middle East broadly) that violence year-on-year has reduced or remained the same during the pandemic year.[15] An IS-specific Southeast Asia dataset maintained by ICPVTR shows a year-on-year drop.[16] Noted Middle East terrorism scholar Aaron Zelin's dataset tracking IS-claimed attacks during 2020 in Syria and Iraq has remained relatively static.[17] Likewise, the Deep South Watch, which monitors violence in Southern Thailand, illustrates a dip in terrorist attacks during the first half of 2020, but by the end of the year violence had returned to roughly the same level as 2019.[18] The South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) also recorded a drop in terrorist activity from 2019 to 2020 in South Asia, but it broadly appeared to be on roughly the same

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https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-1.pdf.
[10] "Political Violence: January 1 – December 31, 2020," Review, Chicago Project on Security & Threats, March 2021.
[11] Peaceful protests are events which articulate mass public political anger, while "strategic developments" are activities which groups are undertaking (or experiencing, given arrests are also included within this category) that reflect non-violent action which could be interpreted as preparatory; "Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) Codebook," https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2019/01/ACLED_Codebook_2019FINAL.docx.pdf .
[12] "The Fusion of Offline and Online Interventions against Extremism in the Philippines," *GNET-CENS Workshop Report*, December 16, 2020, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/GNET-CENS-Workshop-2-Philippines-210114.pdf.
[13] "IPAC Short Briefing No.1: COVID-19 and ISIS in Indonesia," *Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC)*, April 2, 2020, http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2020/04/COVID-19_and_ISIS_fixed.pdf.

[14] "The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism: Update," *UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate*, December 2020, https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CTED_Paper_The-impact-of-the-COVID-19-pandemic-on-counter-terrorism-and-countering-violent-extremism_Dec2020.pdf.
[15] Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses, Vol.13, No. 1, January 2021, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CTTA-January-2021.pdf - there are exceptions to this, like Myanmar where the report suggests an "intensification" of violence (p. 34). In other cases, the data is less categorical, but the characterization is of problems over 2020 that have either remained the same or reduced in violence.
[16] Closed database maintained by ICPVTR, February 2021.
[17] Aaron Y. Zelin, *@azelin*, February 2, 2021, https://twitter.com/azelin/status/1356361479881183234.
[18] "Summary of incidents in Southern Thailand January 2021," *Deep South Watch Database*, February 15, 2021, https://deepsouthwatch.org/en/node/11973.

pattern as the fall from earlier years. There was a more pronounced drop in SATP's figures for Afghanistan, but this is likely attributable to the US-Taliban deal signed in February 2020.[19] An exception to this trajectory can be found in Europe, where according to research by the International Center for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) in the Hague, there was a spike in violent Islamist incidents in Europe in 2020 – though the rates of casualties or incidents remain in the low double digits.

Critically, there is little evidence to show that COVID-19 had a material impact on militant violence – trajectories over the year were for the most part with some specific drops which might be linked to restrictions on movements or activity that came from COVID-19. The spike in Europe of violent Islamist attacks still requires greater research and understanding, but there has been very little evidence presented that COVID-19 might have been a driver in some way. Rather, it is possible that the incidents might in part have been inspired by each other and broader social tensions (amongst different communities, as well as in the form of extreme right-wing violence) in Europe.

Ideologies

An absence of violence does not equate to an absence of threat. There are many reasons why violence could have gone down and it is not clear that they are necessarily linked to COVID-19. Some experts even note that lulls in violent activity are in fact more dangerous moments as it is during these moments that groups are able to prepare and plan for more attacks away from security services' attention.[20] Clearly, extremist groups have brought COVID-19 related ideas and

commentary into their narratives. However, the degree to which these narrative shifts have materially changed group capabilities or how long these narrative shifts will last is hard to assess.

There has been a lot of writing and analysis on how violent Islamist groups have talked about COVID-19, blending it into their worldviews or talking up the opportunities that it might afford them. There have even been examples of cells talking about trying to weaponise COVID-19 in some way – for example, a cell linked to IS in Tunisia was discussing coughing and spitting at security forces,[21] while Indonesian authorities reported overhearing a cell harbouring similar intentions.[22] However, there is little evidence indicating that COVID-19 has materially changed extremist ideologies.

For example, in its regular six-monthly report on IS(IL), Al Qaeda and associated individuals' activity, the UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team notes:

"IS(IL) continues to emphasise the "divine punishment of arrogance and unbelief" narrative regarding the pandemic that it adopted in March 2020, and to exhort followers to attack the enemy while counter-terrorist defences are supposedly weakened. (It should be noted that some Member States have observed a shift in recent months away from the "divine punishment" narrative as the pandemic's impact has spread.) However, no developed IS(IL) strategy has evolved for the pandemic. This includes weaponisation of the virus by using contagious supporters to infect opponents, which was mooted within IS(IL) in March but has not progressed as a practical proposition."[23]

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[19] "Number of terrorism related incidents year wise," *South Asia Terrorism Portal*, March 14, 2021, https://www.satp.org/datasheet-terrorist-attack/incidents-data/southasia.

[20] "What Happens Now? Terrorism and the challenges of counter-terrorism in the next decade," ICPVTR Webinar by Suzanne Raine, Affiliate lecturer, Centre for Geopolitics at Cambridge University, January 27, 2021, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/event/icpvtr-webinar-on-what-happens-now-terrorism-and-the-challenges-of-counter-terrorism-in-the-next-decade-by-suzanne-raine/#.YC9oFHczZ5w.

[21] "Terrorists plotting COVID-19 contamination attack on Tunisian security forces arrested," *North African Post*, April 17, 2020,

https://northafricapost.com/40082-terrorists-plotting-covid-19-contamination-attack-on-tunisian-security-forces-arrested.html.

[22] "Adjustment and Resilience: Preventing Violent Extremism in Indonesia during COVID-19 and beyond," *UNODC and Guyub Project*, February 2021, (primary author Cameron Sumpter), https://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/Publications/2021/indonesia/Main_COVID_CT_Indonesia_PRINT_EN.pdf.

[23] "Twenty-seventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities," *United Nations Security Council*, February 3, 2021, https://undocs.org/S/2021/68.

The Monitoring Group's commentary on al-Qaeda is focused on the high level of leadership attrition that the group has suffered, with little evidence of the group focusing much on the pandemic. The group in fact waited until late March to issue some comment on the pandemic, and this was largely a broad commentary on how badly the west was handling the virus.[24] Later comments focused instead on the fact that western governments had failed to protect their elderly and infirm, though much of al-Qaeda's commentary during this period seemed focused on proving their leader was alive or that they were not going to be negatively affected by the fact that the Taliban were seeking to strike a deal with the US in Afghanistan which would specifically eject them from Afghanistan.

Affiliates of al-Qaeda commented about the pandemic, and in some cases suggested that they were going to offer healthcare to help local affected communities, but it was not clear how useful or realistic this was.[25] According to UN reporting, al-Shabaab found itself obliged to provide some response after local communities and followers highlighted their failure to effectively respond.[26] Syrian Hayat Tahrir al Sham has continued to support the Salvation Government in the parts of Northern Syria where they exert control and have offered reporting on COVID-19, as well as limited medical care service.[27] And in any case, it was clear that the groups were simply seeking to advance a narrative of offering themselves as alternatives to the state in tune with their broader visions of their goals, rather than something new.[28]

In contrast, extreme right-wing groups in the West not only talked a great deal about the pandemic but even changed their behaviours or ideologies to absorb COVID-19 related narratives.[29] US and UK authorities separately noted an uptick in threats towards Jews and attacks using COVID-19.[30] In some cases, there has been credible evidence that this surge in right-wing propaganda has resulted in forms of violence. The most obvious example of this is the growing instances of violence against 5G masts, emerging from conspiracy theories related to the development of such masts and the spread of COVID-19.[31] In the US, narratives around COVID-19 restrictions became caught up in anti-federal government discourses, inflaming already angry groups.[32] In April 2020, an individual tried to derail a train in the Los Angeles Port Yard in an attempt to stop a US Navy vessel bringing aid to other parts of the country.[33] In Australia, there were reports that

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[24] "Al-Qaeda invites 'Western nations' to Islam amid COVID-19," *BBC Monitoring* reporting Rocketchat messaging service in Arabic, April 1, 2020, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c201l1q3.

[25] "The Limits of Shabaab-CARE: Militant Governance amid COVID-19," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol.13, No.6, June 2020, https://ctc.usma.edu/the-limits-of-shabaab-care-militant-governance-amid-covid-19/.

[26] "Twenty-seventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities."

[27] "Coronavirus and The Salvation Government – Hay'at Tahir al-Sham," *Jihadology.com*, March 1, 2021, https://jihadology.net/coronavirus-and-the-salvation-government-hayat-tahir-al-sham/.

[28] Kabir Taneja and Raffaello Pantucci "Beware of terrorists offering COVID-19 aid," *Observer Research Foundation*, April 17, 2020, https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/beware-of-terrorists-offering-covid19-aid-64731/.

[29] "Member States concerned by the growing and increasingly transnational threat of extreme right wing terrorism," *CTED Trends Alert*, July 2020, https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CTED_Trends_Alert_Extreme_Right-Wing_Terrorism_JULY.pdf.

[30] "COVID-19: How Hateful extremists are exploiting the pandemic," C*ommission for Countering Extremism*, July 2020,

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/906724/CCE_Briefing_Note_001.pdf and "Lauder: National Guard must protect Jews from Neo-Nazi coronavirus threat," *Jerusalem Post*, March 25, 2020 https://www.jpost.com/International/FBI-Neo-Nazi-groups-encouraging-spread-coronavirus-to-police-and-Jews-622006.

[31] Amongst the many conspiracy theories circulating was one which linked the expansion of 5G to the spread of the virus – in part technophobia, in part anti-Chinese sentiment. The result has been a spike in destruction of 5G infrastructure (usually masts) in parts of Europe in particular, though also in North America; Michael Loadenthal, "Anti-5G, Infrastructure Sabotage, and COVID-19," *GNET Insight*, January 19, 2021, https://gnet-research.org/2021/01/19/anti-5g-infrastructure-sabotage-and-covid-19/.

[32] Blyth Crawford, "Coronavirus and conspiracies: how the far right is exploiting the pandemic," *The Conversation*, September 15, 2020, https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-and-conspiracies-how-the-far-right-is-exploiting-the-pandemic-145968.

[33] "Train Operator at Port of Los Angeles Charged with Derailing Locomotive Near US Navy's Hospital Ship Mercy," *US Department of Justice*, Central District of California, April 1, 2020, https://www.justice.gov/usao-cdca/pr/train-operator-

the local branch of the Proud Boys was using anti-lockdown protests as opportunities to specifically attack police.[34] Australian security forces repeatedly pointed out that they had seen an increase in their far right activity during COVID-19.[35] UK authorities also expressed concern about young people being radicalised as they were stuck online during lockdowns,[36] a concern which might have materialised in the growing numbers of teenagers being charged with extreme right terror offences.[37]

In some instances, however, far right groups have sought to use the pandemic as an opportunity to instead push themselves further into the mainstream and used the pandemic as an opportunity to show their civic mindedness. In Ukraine, the Azov Movement and its offshoots have sought to offer training videos for people caught in lockdowns, support for those who are unable to get their shopping or need other forms of assistance.[38] This approach is similar to the modus operandi of violent Islamists who offer themselves as aid or healthcare providers during the pandemic. The key difference being that the violent Islamists need to control the territory in which they are doing it, while the extreme right (in Ukraine at least) are doing it within the broader societies in which they live. The idea is to generate more sympathy for their cause, rather than demonstrate governance capability.

Beyond these two core ideologies, it is very difficult to discern much of a change in other ideologies or groups as a result of COVID-19. In part this is due to a lack of data and research, but also as it is not even very clear that COVID-19 has produced the specified change in the two principal ideologies to receive attention. The extreme right was ascendant prior to COVID-19, while violent Islamists have always held eschatological narratives and sought to demonstrate governance capabilities. The only discernible shift in violence that could be credibly linked to COVID-19 is from the extreme right that has incorporated the pandemic into its radicalising narratives more convincingly and with greater impact than violent Islamists. The fact that the far right in the US has managed to penetrate the mainstream, and that conspiracy theories have now developed such a wide-ranging impact including driving people towards terrorist violence, opens the door to future potential ideologies.[39]

At the same time, it has to be remembered that the year 2020 was also the final year of the Trump presidency. This is important to bear in mind as with President Trump in the White House, the world's most powerful leader was using his platform to provide oxygen to elements of the extreme right narrative – be this in terms of his tendency to fail to condemn the extreme right in the United States[40] or re-tweet far right extremist material.[41] Rather than being a fringe

port-los-angeles-charged-derailing-locomotive-near-us-navy-s-hospital.
[34] Michael McGowan, "Australian Proud Boys sought to combat-trained supporters to arrest police at COVID lockdown protests," *Guardian*, February 15, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/feb/15/australian-proud-boys-leader-sought-combat-trained-supporters-to-arrest-police-at-covid-lockdown-protests.
[35] Samaya Borom, "Increased visibility of Far-Right movements in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic," *GNET Insights*, September 24, 2020, https://gnet-research.org/2020/09/24/increased-visibility-of-far-right-movements-in-australia-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/.
[36] Caleb Spencer, "Coronavirus: children may have been radicalised in lockdown," *BBC News*, June 30, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-53082476.
[37] Lizzie Dearden, "Boy, 14, started making bombs during lockdown after watching ISIS propaganda, court hears," *Independent*, September 29, 2020, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/terror-plots-uk-teenage-boy-eastleigh-bottle-bombs-isis-online-radicalisation-b693441.html.

[38] Michael Colborne, "For the Far Right, the COVID-19 crisis is a PR opportunity," *Fair Observer*, April 13, 2020, https://www.fairobserver.com/region/europe/michael-colborne-far-right-coronavirus-pandemic-assistance-covid-19-crisis-pr-news-10109/.
[39] Raffaello Pantucci, "After the Coronavirus, Terrorism won't be the same," *Foreign Policy*, April 22, 2020, https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/22/after-coronavirus-terrorism-isis-hezbollah-5g-wont-be-the-same/.

[40] David Smith, Lois Beckett, Maanvi Singh and Julia Carrie Wong, "Donal Trump refuses to condemn white supremacists at presidential debate," *Guardian*, September 30, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/29/trump-proud-boys-debate-president-refuses-condemn-white-supremacists.
[41] "Donal Trump retweets far-right group's anti-Muslim videos," *BBC News*, November 29, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-42166663.

ideology, it became associated with the mainstream, an intoxicating elevation which may also help explain the level of fury and activity around the global extreme right. Seen in this light, COVID-19 may have simply been further fuel into an already inflamed global situation.

Recruitment and Fundraising

Very little published data has been released highlighting the impact of COVID-19 on terrorist group recruitment. There has been some reporting around the impact on terrorist fundraising. The UN Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team February 2021 report provides some references to member states noting changes in fundraising patterns. Specifically, they point to enhanced difficulties of transporting money across borders due to travel restrictions complicating money transfers. But at the same time, the report indicates a growing level of use of cryptocurrencies and online transfers suggesting the impact might be mitigated through alternative cyber-routes.[42] Showing how these issues can intersect with COVID-19 specifically, there was the reported case of an ISIS fundraising network that was selling fake personal protective equipment (PPE) online.[43]

These concerns echo those articulated by the Eurasian Group on combating money laundering and the financing of terrorism (EAG), though very few cases were provided to illustrate the particular terrorism financing concerns.[44] These findings were in turn similar to those generated by the Financial Action

Task Force (FATF)'s report, which again mentioned terrorism financing as a potential issue and highlighted how charitable money flows in particular could be abused by terrorist organisations.[45] Both the FATF and EAG reports, however, pointed to the far greater risk coming from COVID-19 related fraud, be it in terms of fake (or non-existent) medical equipment, as well as abuse of COVID-19 relief packages offered by governments.[46] A sense of the potential scale of the fraud involved is illustrated by the UK case, where some reports suggested that as much as half of the £46 billion being doled out by the government could be lost to defaults and fraud.[47] While theoretically some of this money could have been taken by terrorists, no clear examples have been presented yet of this taking place in the UK or elsewhere.

Looking at more specific examples of where these threats intersect, the UN Monitoring Team report also points to a decrease in maritime kidnapping for ransom in the tri-border Southeast Asian region between Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.[48] However, this contrasts with reporting by the International Maritime Bureau's Piracy Reporting Centre (IMB-PRC) which reports that there has been an increase in maritime piracy, with a particular growth in the Philippines and the Singapore Strait.[49] IMB-PRC does not specify whether there is a link to terrorism in this criminal activity, but the contrast to the UN report underscores this is an area where there is inadequate research at the moment.

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[42] "Twenty-seventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities."
[43] USA vs Facemaskcenter.com and Four Facebook Pages, Case 1:20-cv-02142-RC, Filed 08/05/20 https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1304296/download.
[44] "Information Note: Concerning the COVID-19 impact on the EAG countries AML-CFT efforts and measures taken to mitigate the ML/TF risks stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic," Eurasian Group (EAG), https://eurasiangroup.org/files/uploads/files/%D0%9C%D0%B5%D1%80%D1%8B_%D0%B2_%D1%81%D0%B2%D1%8F%D0%B7%D0%B8_%D1%81_COVID-19/Information_note_on_COVID-19_measures_eng_rev4.pdf.
[45] "Update: COVID-19-related Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing," *FATF*, December 2020,

https://www.fatf-gafi.org/media/fatf/documents/Update-COVID-19-Related-Money-Laundering-and-Terrorist-Financing-Risks.pdf.
[46] "Update: COVID-19-related Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing."
[47] Daniel Thomas and Stephen Morris, "A giant bonfire of taxpayers money: fraud and the UK pandemic loan scheme," *Financial Times*, December 20, 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/41d5fe0a-7b46-4dd7-96e3-710977dff81c.
[48] "Twenty-seventh report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team submitted pursuant to resolution 2368 (2017) concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and associated individuals and entities."
[49] "Maritime piracy hotspots persist during 2020," *Hellenic Shipping News*, February 1, 2020, https://www.hellenicshippingnews.com/maritime-piracy-hotspots-persist-during-2020/.

Recruitment is equally challenging to track. While repeated reports show an increase in online activity, especially amongst extreme right wing groups[50], it is not yet clear whether this is pulling through to recruitment. UN reporting indicates how Eurasian member states have reported groups using the pandemic as an opportunity to offer individuals support and money, something which increases popularity and recruitment.[51] In most cases, however, the reporting is non-specific, suggesting that groups are increasing their propaganda and this theoretically translates into more recruits. However, there have been no evidence-based reports showing this link successfully delivering new recruits in practice. There is repeated reporting and discussion around the threats from the increased amount of time that people spent online during the pandemic and the increased opportunities this presented for online radicalisation, but so far there has been no evidence-based assessment of what the actual impact was.

Many of the specific cases of terrorism linked to COVID-19 that have emerged during the pandemic are in fact individuals who had been involved or interested in extremist activity prior to COVID-19. For example, an early prominent attack which was linked to the pandemic in the US against a hospital focused on COVID-19 care was undertaken by an American extreme right wing adherent who had long been on FBI radars.[52] Even the very young followers in Europe who have emerged through arrest and conviction during this past year appear in many cases to be young men who had already been active on extreme right

wing forums pre-pandemic.[53] COVID-19 related lockdowns may have been an accelerant towards more violent online rhetoric or given groups greater opportunities to reach out to captive audiences online, but so far it is not clear if it has translated into more violence from them. Overall, it is still inconclusive how terrorist group fundraising and recruitment have been impacted yet and whether the increased online rhetoric or activity has resulted in material change to groups' coffers or numbers.

Conclusion

A year into the pandemic, it remains entirely unclear the exact impact that COVID-19 will have on violent extremism in the longer-term. It is clear that it has affected groups' behaviour and action in the same way that it has affected everyone else, but it is not clear that it has materially changed things in a way that is utterly unique to the pandemic. Previous natural disasters have produced contradictory comparisons. For example, the Spanish Flu of 1918 was followed by a spate of anarchist violence which did not appear linked to the pandemic, while the 2004 Asian tsunami helped bring peace to Aceh and accelerated violence in Sri Lanka.[54] A RAND study from 2011 which sought to apply some methodological rigour to the question found that there was in fact an increase in terrorism-related death in the wake of natural disasters.[55] The same report explored the impact of natural disasters on government capacity to respond to terrorist threats and showed a dip in capability following the disaster which groups take advantage of, but

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[50] "Member States concerned by the growing and increasingly transnational threat of extreme right wing terrorism," *CTED Trends Alert*, July 2020, https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CTED_Trends_Alert_Extreme_Right-Wing_Terrorism_JULY.pdf.

[51] "The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism: Update," *UN Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate,* December 2020, https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/CTED_Paper_The-impact-of-the-COVID-19-pandemic-on-counter-terrorism-and-countering-violent-extremism_Dec2020.pdf.

[52] Pete Williams, "Missouri man planned to bomb hospital during pandemic to get attention for white supremacist views," *NBC News*, March 31, 2020, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/missouri-man-planned-bomb-hospital-during-pandemic-get-attention-white-n1172346.

[53] Lizzie Dearden, "Boy, 14, started making bombs during lockdown after watching ISIS propaganda, court hears," *Independent*, September 29, 2020, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/terror-plots-uk-teenage-boy-eastleigh-bottle-bombs-isis-online-radicalisation-b693441.html.

[54] Abdul Basit, "COVID-19: a challenge or opportunity for terrorist groups?" *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism,* Vol. 15, No. 3, October 2020, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/18335330.2020.1828603?needAccess=true.

[55] Claude Berrebi and Jordan Ostwald, "Earthquakes, Hurricanes and Terrorism: Do Natural Disasters Incite Terror?" *RAND Working Paper*, 2011, https://www.rand.org/pubs/working_papers/WR876.html.

within two years authorities are usually able to regain the upper hand.[56] This suggests something to pay attention to once the pandemic has been definitively brought under control.

At the moment, the most noticeable change in behaviour to have been generated by the pandemic has been the acceleration to prominence and wider acceptance of the use of violence to advance conspiracy theories. While at the moment this violence is an irritant, it is a first step on an escalatory path. Furthermore, the indicators in ACLED data that protests and groups' preparatory action has persisted and even grown during the pandemic, suggest that while COVID-19 seems to have acted as an inhibitor of major terrorist activity during the first pandemic year, it has most certainly not gone away and might even be biding its time rather than in retreat. COVID-19 has in fact appeared to be something of an enabler and accelerator of existing trends and threats. The key question which has yet to be addressed is whether this means that terrorist violence will continue on the downward trajectory that most indicators appeared to show over the past few years, or whether in fact the COVID-19 pandemic will result in an increase in threats. In the longer-term, it is likely that COVID-19 will help foster a new wave of ideologies, though whether the pandemic is entirely to blame might be difficult to conclude. The end of the pandemic will expose a world which is likely to be even more divided than before, alongside a likely global economic recession. All of which will create a context in which the threat picture from terrorism might start on a gradual path upwards again in contrast to the trends over the past few years.

About the author

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[56] Ibid.

Beta Uprising: Is there an Incel Threat to Asia?

Jacob Ware

Synopsis

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid in Western countries to the "incel" movement. Taking their name from a portmanteau for "involuntary celibate", incels have been responsible for several violent attacks across the United States and Canada since 2014, leading to rising calls for counterterrorism measures to be implemented against the community. The incel movement is ideologically malleable, reflecting several themes more naturally seen amongst elements of the far-right, and it has adapted to - and likely strengthened from - the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. For now, the threat to Asia remains limited, but security services should be on guard against the ideology's potential attractiveness to the young male Asian population.[1]

Introduction

In November 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic reached new, devastating heights, the media in Toronto, Canada was consumed with the trial of Alek Minassian, perpetrator of a car ramming attack nearly three years earlier that claimed 10 lives on one of the city's busiest streets.[2] A Facebook post discovered shortly after the attack revealed that Minassian was a member of the so-called "incel" community - a largely online group of males who rail against sexually promiscuous men and women, while lamenting their own perceived biological, social and sexual shortcomings. Minassian was the tip of the spear of the small fraction of incels that have turned violent - a terrifying case study of the

dangers of ignoring the community and its potential for violence.

This article argues that the incel terrorism threat, though perhaps intensifying in North America and Europe, remains contained in Asia. However, there are sufficient warning signs of an escalation in far-right and so-called "manosphere" violence, a potential danger that security services should at least be aware of. The article first analyses incel ideology and traces the history of the movement, before assessing its applicability in Asia. The article then also unpacks incels' reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, before concluding by evaluating the long-term implications of the threat.

What Are "Incels"?

The term "involuntary celibate" was first coined in the 1990s, after a Canadian woman established an online support community for those struggling for romance.[3] Early members recall the first communities fondly, as "a welcoming place, one where men who didn't know how to talk to women could ask the community's female members for advice (and vice versa)."[4] In the decades since, however, the initial purpose has been steadily eroded, and the term, as well as its portmanteau "incel," has been increasingly hijacked by a community of young men frustrated by their inability to find sexual partners. By 2018, the incel movement had grown to tens of thousands of followers on internet forums, and rhetoric on the sites had grown increasingly misogynistic, sexualized, and violent.[5]

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[1] The author thanks Yebin Won for reviewing an earlier version of this article.
[2] See, for example, Liam Caset, "Alek Minassian van attack motivated by fear of new job, court hears," *Global News*, November 19, 2020, https://globalnews.ca/news/7471810/psychiatrist-testimony-toronto-van-attack-trial/.

[3] Ben Zimmer, "How 'Incel' Got Hijacked," *Politico*, May 8, 2018,

https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/05/08/intel-involuntary-celibate-movement-218324/.
[4] Zack Beauchamp, "Our incel problem," *Vox*, April 23, 2019.
[5] Justin Ling, Jill Mahoney, Patrick McGuire, and Colin Freeze, "The 'incel' community and the dark side of the internet," *Globe and Mail*, April 24, 2018, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-the-incel-community-and-the-dark-side-of-the-internet/.

Modern incel ideology centers on the "blackpill" theory, essentially the "acceptance" that society is "fixed" against incels due to perceived genetic inferiorities such as facial features. Incels believe they are unable to overcome those disadvantages, leaving them rooted to the bottom rung of society.[6] Once they have accepted the "blackpill," incels primarily rage against "Chads" and "Stacys," who represent youthful sexual promiscuity. "Chads" are conventionally attractive, muscular men who keep all the "Stacys" to themselves, while "Stacys" are conventionally attractive young women who give all their attention to "Chads" and ignore those subsequently left as involuntarily celibate. Incels, in turn, sometimes refer to themselves as "beta males," if not even further down the societal ladder.[7] Incels are part of the broader "manosphere" - an online conglomeration of various often-violently misogynistic extremist movements, all advocating varying degrees of male supremacism.[8]

The dehumanising of women is a key tenet of the incel ideology. In April 2019, an incels.co member posted - in a forum titled "if you could design your perfect society, how would you deal with women?" - that women should "be property of men they [sic] would be used to breed until they age to the point where they can no longer reproduce at which point they will be put to death."[9] The movement's most notorious member, Elliot Rodger, similarly noted in his manifesto that "[women] are beasts," and that "beasts should not be able to have any rights in a civilized society."[10] According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, "to an incel, sex is a basic human right for all men." By this token, "women who deny them that right are committing a heinous - and punishable - crime."[11] Therein lies the involuntary celibate political ideology: Incels perceive themselves as sexual Marxists of an oppressed social class, and "if the root of the problem is an unfair social system, then there needs to be a revolution to change it."[12]

The dehumanising of women, as well as other races, ties the incel movement to the emerging far-right. Interracial relationships - indeed, race-mixing more broadly - are for instance an important grievance. Forum posters often share news stories of interracial relationships around the world, highlighting them as evidence both that women are incapable of making their own choices and that other ethnicities are inferior, even to "blackpilled" incels. For instance, after a white Canadian woman was murdered by her Muslim boyfriend in July 2018, an incel thread blamed the woman for her death, on the basis that she "could not resist fucking a muslim [sic]."[13] The links between the incel movement and America's resurgent alt-right has been reflected in the incel movement's terrorists, with the Southern Poverty Law Center even describing Rodger as the first "alt-right killer," largely due to his thoroughly racist manifesto.[14]

At one point, lamenting an African-American acquaintance's sexual prowess, Rodger said "how could an inferior, ugly black boy be able to get a white girl and not me? I am beautiful, and I am half white myself. I am descended from British aristocracy. He is descended from slaves."[15] Incel online forums are also rife with racist language. Asian and Indian incels are referred to openly as "ricecels" and "currycels,"[16] and Asian women are often

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[6] Beauchamp, "Our incel problem."
[7] Zack Beauchamp, "Incel, the misogynist ideology that inspired the deadly Toronto attack, explained," *Vox*, April 25, 2018, https://www.vox.com/world/2018/4/25/17277496/incel-toronto-attack-alek-minassian.
[8] Manoel Horta Ribeiro, Jeremy Blackburn, Barry Bradlyn, Emiliano De Cristofaro, Gianluca Stringhini, Summer Long, Stephanie Greenberg, and Savvas Zannettou, "From Pick-Up Artists to Incels: A Data-Driven Sketch of the Manosphere," *arXiv*, January 21, 2020.
[9] "If you could design your perfect society, how would you deal with women?," *Incels.co,* April 12, 2019, accessed April 12, 2019.
[10] Elliot Rodger, *My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger* (2014), p 117.

[11] Rachel Janik, "'I laugh at the death of normies': How incels are celebrating the Toronto mass killing," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, April 24, 2018, https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/04/24/i-laugh-death-normies-how-incels-are-celebrating-toronto-mass-killing.
[12] Beauchamp, "Incel."
[13] "This is what a Muslim can get in Canada," *Incels.co,* July 23 2018, accessed April 12, 2019.
[14] Keegan Hankes and Alex Amend, "The Alt-Right is Killing People," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, February 5, 2018, https://www.splcenter.org/20180205/alt-right-killing-people.
[15] Rodger, *My Twisted World*, 84.
[16] "Gender Ratio Gap in China/India," *Incels.co,* March 20, 2019, accessed April 12, 2019.

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derided as "noodlewhores."[17] In fact, it is no accident that incel rhetoric is so laced with racist symbolism. The rapprochement between incels and the white supremacist movement has been strategically and deliberately pursued by the far-right through overlapping forums, and for many, "the gateway drug that led them to join the alt-right in the first place wasn't racist rhetoric but rather sexism: extreme misogyny evolving from male bonding gone haywire."[18]

Fringes of the incel movement have mobilised to real world violence, and to date, North American incels have committed at least eight confirmed attacks of varying levels of direct political motivation, resulting in almost 50 deaths.[19] The most notable incidents are Rodger's 2014 assault on the streets of Isla Vista, California, which killed six individuals, and Minassian's aforementioned rampage along Toronto's busy Yonge Street in 2018. Perhaps most concerningly, incidents of incel violence seemingly increased in 2020 - with at least three significant incidents in North America in just the first half of the year.[20] Most notoriously, an incel, claiming to target couples and wanting to kill 10 victims, attacked a mall in Glendale, Arizona, in May 2020. Three were injured. A Toronto teen who stabbed a woman to death that February was charged with a terrorism offense for his incel-inspired attack, and in June 2020, a Virginian incel was injured while attempting to construct an explosive device.

Incels have been responsible for a relatively small percentage of terrorist attacks in North America over the past several years, with far-right terrorism (which some analysts consider to include incel violence) dominating.[21] However, incel terrorist attacks have typically been rather deadly compared to other forms of extremism. The three most obvious acts of incel "terrorism" - Elliot Rodger's attack at Isla Vista, Alek Minassian's Toronto rampage, and a 2018 shooting at a Florida yoga studio - averaged six fatalities.[22]

Incels in Asia?

Over the past few years, there has been increasing attention paid to the spread of Western extremisms into Asia. In one recent assessment, terrorism scholar Kumar Ramakrishna concluded that "[white supremacist terrorism] could be assessed as a limited threat to Asia – for now," while admitting that other factions of the far-right have been evidently active.[23] In January 2021, a Singaporean 16-year-old was arrested for plotting an attack modeled on Brenton Tarrant's twin attacks at Christchurch, New Zealand mosques in 2019.[24] The arrest prompted one expert to predict that Singapore's authorities would now implement "measures to prevent 'alt-right' thinking, or reciprocal radicalisation of the type seen in the West, from taking root."[25]

Other analysts have more narrowly debated the possibility of the rise of Asian inceldom, arguing that the international reach of online forums and pervasiveness of misogyny means "an Asian incel network could find a receptive audience, not only among the youth, but among older age groups raised under

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[17] Beauchamp, "Our incel problem."

[18] Aja Romano, "How the alt-right's sexism lures men into white supremacy," *Vox*, April 26, 2018, https://www.vox.com/culture/2016/12/14/13576192/alt-right-sexism-recruitment.

[19] For a list of attacks, see Bruce Hoffman, Jacob Ware, and Ezra Shapiro, "Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 43, no. 7 (2020): 565-587.

[20] For incidents in 2020, see Jon Lewis and Jacob Ware, "Spring Provides Timely Reminder of Incel Violence—And Clarifies How to Respond," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, August 28, 2020.

[21] See Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Nicholas Harrington, "The War Comes Home: The Evolution of Domestic Terrorism in the United States," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, October 22, 2020.

[22] Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro, "Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence."

[23] Kumar Ramakrishna, "The White Supremacist Terrorist Threat to Asia: A Preliminary Assessment," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 12, no. 4 (June 2020): 7, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26918075?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

[24] Aqil Haziq Mahmud, "16-year-old Singaporean detained under ISA after planning to attack Muslims at 2 mosques," *Channel News Asia*, January 27, 2021, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/16-year-old-singaporean-detained-isa-planned-attack-2-mosques-14052400.

[25] Shashi Jayakumar, "Singapore: The Lure of the Far-Right," *Global Network on Extremism & Technology*, February 2, 2021.

more patriarchal norms."[26] It is also important to note that many incels are non-white, undermining the white supremacist undertones inherent in the ideology. Elliot Rodger, despite his boastful claim "to have descended from British aristocracy," was half-Malaysian, and Alek Minassian, the deadliest attacker to date, is of Armenian and Iranian descent. Black and Latino incel-related attackers, meanwhile, have opened fire in schools and universities in the United States[27] - not to mention Virginia Tech shooter Seung-Hui Cho, a South Korea-born gunman who perpetrated one of the deadliest mass shootings in U.S. history, and who incels frequently applaud as an ideological ancestor.[28] Echoing the concerns of other scholars, Raffaello Pantucci and Kyler Ong have also argued that "male anger is an issue in Asia which might ultimately start to see Incel ideas as meshing with their broader rage and even present a useful outlet. Violence could be the result."[29]

There is also already evidence suggesting that the incel movement is globalising. Incel forums display surprising internationalism, with contributors, and the topics they discuss, spanning an array of nationalities.[30] Further, several major attacks outside North America have been linked, albeit indirectly, with the community. In July 2016, for instance, an 18-year-old far-right fanatic killed 10 people, including himself, in a shooting in Munich, Germany. He had been part of an online community which included incels.[31] The

perpetrator of the March 2019 mosque shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, meanwhile, had frequented forums and sites popular with incels, and at the very least moved in the same online circles.[32] And the perpetrator of the October 2019 shooting at a synagogue in Halle, Germany, had embraced incel language, and may have been at least partially driven by the more personal frustrations reflected within the incel community.[33] In the United Kingdom, meanwhile, authorities succeeded in 2019 and 2020 in disrupting two plots of would-be incel terrorists seemingly of Asian origin or ethnicity.[34] One of them, a 22-year-old who was born in Indonesia but spent most of his life in Singapore, had stabbed a police officer in an earlier incident, hoping to commit "suicide by cop."

In Asia, there is additionally a rising presence of "manosphere" networks not necessarily linked directly to incels. In South Korea, for instance, the social networking site Ilbe has allowed extreme anti-feminism to flourish online, prompting public debates over the merits and legality of content moderation and deplatforming.[35] And the recent Nth Room case, a digital sex crime operation run on Telegram, rocked South Korea in 2020, offering another painful reminder of the toxicity and danger of male supremacism and its prevalence on social media.[36] Both provide early, pressing warning signs that law enforcement and politicians should not ignore.[37]

[26] Joseph Franco, "Preempting Incel-Inspired Violent Extremism in Asia," *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, July 30, 2020.
[27] Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro, "Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence."
[28] Robyn Pennacchia, "'Beta Males' Want To Kill Women Because They Can't Get Laid," *Bust*, 2016, https://bust.com/feminism/15551-beta-males-want-to-kill-women-because-they-can-t-get-laid.html.
[29] Raffaello Pantucci and Kyler Ong, "Incels and Terrorism: Sexual Deprivation As Security Threat," *RSIS Commentary No. 176*, October 6, 2020, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/CO20176.pdf.
[30] See, for example, "In Eastern Europe to get laid you need a social circle," *Incels.co,* March 19, 2019, accessed April 12, 2019; "Women living in Japan discuss Height in dating," *Incels.co,* September 26, 2018, accessed April 12, 2019; and "This is what a Muslim can get in Canada," *Incels.co,* July 23 2018, accessed April 12, 2019.
[31] Martin Bernstein, "Das Netzwerk der Todesschützen," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, May 15, 2018.

[32] Phil Brandel, "'I joined an incel group and what I found was surprising,'" *News.com.au*, March 19, 2019.
[33] Daniel Koehler, "The Halle, Germany, Synagogue Attack and the Evolution of the Far-Right Terror Threat," *CTC Sentinel*, 12, no. 11 (December 2019): 16.
[34] See "Middlesbrough fantasist Anwar Driouich jailed for explosive substance," *BBC*, March 27, 2020; and "Man on terrorism charges claims he wanted to 'commit suicide by cop,'" *Herald*, December 11, 2020.
[35] See Kelly Kasulis, "Inside Ilbe: How South Korea's angry young men formed a powerful new alt-right movement," *Mic*, September 18, 2017; and Jo He-rim, "Blue House says possible to shut down far-right website Ilbe," *Korea Herald,* March 26, 2018.
[36] Nicole de Souza, "The Nth Room case and modern slavery in the digital space," *Lowy Institute*, April 20, 2020, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/nth-room-case-and-modern-slavery-digital-space.
[37] Erika Nguyen, "South Korea Online Sexual Abuse Case Illustrates Gaps in Government Response,"

In a *New York Times* article discussing the Christchurch attack and appropriately titled "a mass murder of, and for, the internet," Kevin Roose describes how "people become fluent in the culture of online extremism, they make and consume edgy memes, they cluster and harden. And once in a while, one of them erupts."[38] That description could apply to any incel attack, and helps explain why the threat now transcends borders. Analysis of incels has centered on the United States and Canada because North America has suffered the most devastating violence. But, the so-called "incel rebellion" is clearly an increasingly global movement. And if incel rhetoric is to be believed, the threat could intensify, with more attacks to come.

Incels and COVID-19

There is little doubt the coronavirus crisis has significantly altered the threat landscape as it concerns incels. Developments can relatively neatly be classified in three categories: how incels have reacted to the pandemic, how incels will benefit or suffer from the pandemic, and how the incel movement will impact the post-pandemic world.

The reaction of incels to the pandemic has been, generally, welcoming. Reactions range from hoping the virus kills sexually successful people - "Corona must be on our side since it will probably kill chads and rosties the most, since they can't stop partying and having sex with strangers"[39] - to just happiness that so-called "normies," like incels, are karmically now stuck at home, with no romantic prospects.[40] In one article, scholar Sara Brzuszkiewicz sees the coronavirus as fitting neatly into the incels' "external locus of control" - the belief that one's life and fortunes

are controlled by factors outside one's own control. COVID-19, then, is seen as just another unconquerable assault on incels and their existence; only this time, it also affects the lives of those who incels usually assume to be happy, carefree, and sexually promiscuous.[41] However, there are also those who fear the return to normality. "Vaccines coming soon, sadly," one November 2020 poster lamented. "Now I won't have a good reason to lie to myself why being in my room all day is okay."[42]

It is also worth noting that the current global predicament lends itself directly to radicalisation - record numbers of young people spending an unprecedented amount of time online, away from real-world friends, often with little-to-no parental supervision, in an age of great political polarisation and disinformation.[43] Coupled with that comes the reality that extremism is growing increasingly international, with so-called "domestic terrorism" increasingly crossing borders, and radical ideologies rapidly spreading through the common marketplace of ideas provided by social media.[44] The incel community exists almost entirely online, which enhances the prospect of pandemic lockdowns contributing to a significant rise in popularity for virtual extremist networks. The challenging living conditions brought on by the pandemic only intensify the lifestyles already lived by many incels.

In the same vein, the reopening period, which will vary from country to country, will be rife with dangers, with pandemic-related stressors possibly leading to violence. In the most serious incel-related incident of 2020, Armando Hernandez opened fire at Westgate Entertainment District in Arizona after becoming enraged at an AMC theater being

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Human Rights Watch, March 26, 2020, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/26/south-korea-online-sexual-abuse-case-illustrates-gaps-government-response.

[38] Kevin Roose, "A Mass Murder of, and for, the Internet," *New York Times*, March 15, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/technology/facebook-youtube-christchurch-shooting.html.

[39] Anh V. Vu, "The Pandemic as Incels see it," *Cambridge Cybercrime Centre COVID Briefing Paper* #5, August 4, 2020.

[40] Sarah Manavis, "Incels are celebrating lockdown because attractive people can't have casual sex," *New Statesman*, March 24, 2020.

[41] Sara Brzuszkiewicz,, "Incel Radical Milieu and External Locus of Control," *The*

International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) Evolutions in Counter-Terrorism, Vol. 2 (November 2020): 14.

[42] "Ngl corona virus is pretty fucking based," *Incels.co*, November 30, 2020, accessed December 1, 2020.

[43] Eric Rosand, Khalid Koser, and Lilla Schumicky-Logan, "Preventing violent extremism during and after the COVID-19 pandemic," *Brookings Institution*, April 28, 2020.

[44] Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware, "The Challenges of Effective Counterterrorism Intelligence in the 2020s," *Lawfare*, June 21, 2020, https://www.lawfareblog.com/challenges-effective-counterterrorism-intelligence-2020s.

closed.[45] His attack targeted couples at the mall. Frustration at shutdowns - as well as anger at "normies" during the return to normality -will provide new dangers. Indeed, one team of scholars at the University of Cambridge noticed "a significant increase in murderous fantasies during the pandemic."[46] Law enforcement and intelligence agencies must exercise extra vigilance to ensure those fantasies are not acted upon in the coming months.

There have always been sexually frustrated and alienated young men around the world, but the internet has revolutionised their ability to coalesce and mobilise - the internet has highlighted their grievances, and brought them closer together.[47] And now, the pandemic has only strengthened many of those grievances, and multiplied the time the believers spend in virtual interaction. That is a dangerous mix, and governments around the world should be on alert.

Conclusion

While the threat to Asia seemingly remains limited for now, some incels have ambitions, at the very least, of a global revolution. "Do you mean like an incel caliphate?" one forum user pondered, responding to an August 2018 thread debating a possible incel revolution. He added: "Like instead of ISIS it will be incels who make terror attacks all around the world? If so, then i think it has already begun and it will be more powerful in Future [sic]."[48] Similarly, a November 2018 thread titled "This world needs to be cleansed" featured a commenter noting that "I'd rather live in a dystopia that [sic] what we have now. Human society & western culture needs to be destroyed and then rebuilt or reset."[49] If aspects of the incel community's rhetoric is to be believed, there are darker days ahead in the efforts to combat incel violence.

The involuntary celibate movement has metastasized from a small online support system to a substantial subculture of the online "manosphere," which is increasingly turning to terroristic violence to spread its message and seek revenge for perceived wrongdoings. For now, it remains a fringe threat, isolated to the West - but Asian law enforcement and intelligence agencies should be aware of the movement, its ideological and geographical trends, and the possibility for violence. Governments, including those in Southeast Asia, can take steps towards countering online extremism by encouraging tech companies to take more responsibility for harmful content online, and by helping protect young people from radicalisation by encouraging internet literacy and easy access to mental health resources, both online and offline.

About the author

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[45] Joshua Bowling and Perry Vandell, "Westgate shooting: Who is Armando Hernandez Jr.?" *Arizona Republic*, May 23, 2020, https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/glendale/2020/05/23/westgate-shooting-who-armando-hernandez-jr/5237382002/.
[46] Vu, "The Pandemic as Incels see it."
[47] Perrie Samotin and Lilly Dancyger, "Incels: Breaking Down the Disturbing, Thriving Online Community of Celibate Men," *Glamour*, April 26, 2018.
[48] "When do you think the beta uprising shall commence?" *Incels.co,* August 1, 2018, accessed April 13, 2019.
[49] "This world needs to be cleansed," *Incels.co,* November 19, 2018, accessed April 13, 2019.

Bioterrorism: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic

Reuben Ananthan Santhana Dass

Synopsis

COVID-19 has cast a spotlight on another potential global threat - that of bioterrorism. Several extremist and terrorist groups, including the Islamic State, Al Qaeda, and some far-right groups around the world, have sought to exploit the ongoing pandemic to promote their worldviews and recruit into their networks. The devastating impact of the virus, which has been acknowledged by these terrorist groups, has also reignited their interest in acquiring, developing and using biological weapons. Recent technological advancements have made the development of biological weapons easier, cheaper and more accessible. This has raised fears of threat groups being more capable of developing and deploying a virus of similar ilk in the near future. Against this backdrop, this article assesses the threat posed by bioterrorism in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the bio-agents that could be exploited by various threat groups, as well as potential lessons that can be gleaned from the pandemic, which may be useful in dealing with a future bioterror threat.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has claimed more than 2.5 million lives, with more than 100 million cases of infection recorded worldwide since its outbreak in China in December 2019. The pandemic's impact has gone far beyond the disease itself, with far-reaching consequences for societies and economies around the world. In Singapore, the government is recovering from the country's worst ever economic recession on record.[1] Unemployment and job retrenchment rates have soared over the past year. According to statistics from the Ministry of Manpower, there were approximately 26,570 retrenchments in 2020 compared to 10,690 in 2019.[2] This represents the highest recorded number of annual retrenchments in Singapore in over a decade.

The devastating social, economic and physical impact of the pandemic has also raised questions about the consequences of a virus of similar ilk potentially being used deliberately as a weapon by a violent actor. Terrorist groups can see the havoc that the virus causes, and might potentially draw inspiration for future attacks. In this regard, advancements in the field of biotechnology, have given rise to the threat and possibility of future genetically engineered biological agents that could have a similar or worse strategic impact on the world.

What is a biological weapon?

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines a biological weapon (BW) as "microorganisms like virus, bacteria, fungi, or other toxins that are produced and released deliberately to cause disease and death in humans, animals or plants."[3] Any number of biological agents can be utilised as BWs, and are typically divided into three categories; bacteria such as anthrax; viruses such as ebola and smallpox; and toxins such as botulinum and ricin.[4] Bacteria and viruses can

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[1] Tang See Kit, "Singapore's GDP Expected to Shrink between 4% and 7% as 2020 Growth Forecast Cut Again on COVID-19 Impact," *ChannelNewsAsia*, May 26, 2020, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/ worst-recession-gdp-forecast-cut-again-covid-19-12767948.

[2] Ministry of Manpower, "Summary Table: Retrenchment" (Singapore, January 28, 2021),

https://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Retrenchment-Summary-Table.aspx.

[3] World Health Organisation, "Biological Weapons," 2020, https://www.who.int/westernpacific/health-topics/biological-weapons.

[4] Duraipandian Thavaselvam and Rajagopalan Vijayaraghavan, "Biological Warfare Agents," *Journal of Pharmacy and Bioallied Sciences* 2, no. 3 (2010): pp. 179–88, https://doi.org/10.4103/0975-7406.68499.

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be categorised as disease causing pathogens that have a self-replicating property, which enables them to keep spreading after an attack/release under low initial concentrations.[5] In contrast, toxins are poisonous substances produced by living organisms which, while not having a self-replicating property, have high toxicity and lethality.[6]

A BW consists of three major components - a payload (biological agent); munition that keeps the agent stable and virulent; and a delivery system.[7] BWs may be disseminated by air (aerosols), injection, food or water or through a zoonotic vector, where the agents are transmitted from animal to humans.[8]

History of Intent of Terror Groups

In recent decades, terrorist groups have repeatedly attempted to acquire, develop and carry out bio-attacks. This comprises groups across the ideological spectrum, including right-wing, jihadist, ethno-nationalist, and various fringe movements. The chart below illustrates the number of bioterror incidents that have occurred in the period between 1990-2017.
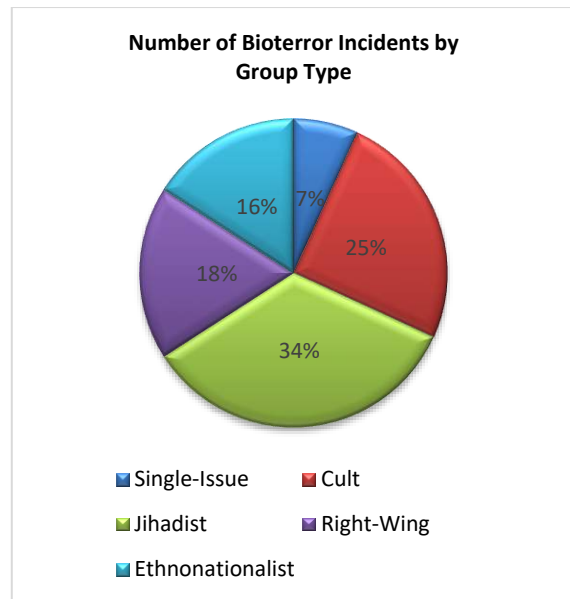

Figure 1: Number of bioterror incidents by group type compiled from National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), "Profiles of Incidents Involving CBRN and Non-State Actors (POICN) Database" (University of Maryland, 2018). [9]

As Figure 1 shows out of the 44 recorded bioterror incidents between 1990-2017, the highest proportion (34% or 15 incidents) of bioterror incidents, has been perpetrated by jihadist groups. This is followed by cult (25%, 11 incidents) and right-wing (18%, 8 incidents) groups. However, to date, there has not been a successful large-scale attack using a biological agent by a terrorist group. This may be due to the technical complexities and expertise required to weaponise biological agents.

A three stage process is typically involved in the development of a biological weapon: acquisition; synthesis (growing and multiplying of the bio-agent to sufficient quantities and genetic modification); and

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[5] Ophélie Guillouet-Lamy, "COVID-19, a Biological Weapon? A Guide to Biological Weapons to Answer That Question," *NCT Magazine*, 2020, http://nct-magazine.com/nct-magazine-may-2020/covid-19-a-biological-weapon-a-guide-to-biological-weapons-to-answer-that-question/.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Guillouet-Lamy; Liudvikas Jagminas, "CBRNE - Evaluation of a Biological Warfare Victim," *Medscape*, December 26, 2018, https://emedicine.medscape.com/article/830992-overview#a8.

[8] Guillouet-Lamy, "NCT Magazine May 2020 - COVID-19, a Biological Weapon?"

[9] The chart was produced by this author upon analysis of the data from the University of Maryland's START Centre POICN database. A bio-incident, as per the POICN database classification includes protoplot (an event where there is no evidence of an actual plot but events have occurred that may lay the groundwork for a plot), plot, attempted acquisition, possession of a non-weaponised agent, possession of a weapon, threat with possession, attempted use of agent and use of agent.

delivery.[10] Whilst the first stage of acquisition is relatively attainable, particularly in the case of plant-based agents such as ricin and abrin, the latter two stages are harder to achieve as the synthesis and delivery of bio-agents require controlled environmental conditions, proper equipment and advanced technical capabilities. Thus far terror groups have failed to go beyond the second stage of BW development due to the technological barriers and difficulties in obtaining the necessary equipment and conditions needed to synthesise and deliver the agent.
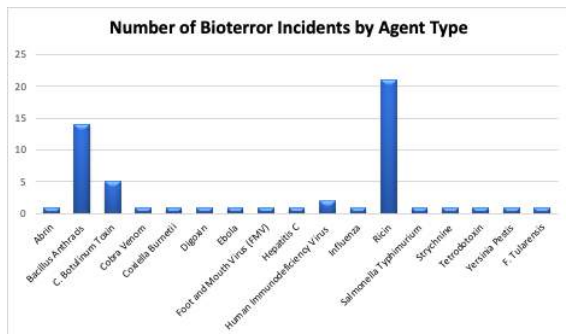
Figure 2: Most frequently used biological agents compiled from National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), "Profiles of Incidents Involving CBRN and Non-State Actors (POICN) Database." (University of Maryland, 2018).[11]

As shown in Figure 2, the most frequently used biological agent in bioterror incidents over the same period is ricin. This may be due to ricin being an agent of low complexity and requiring only a low level of knowledge and

equipment for acquisition.[12] It is also relatively easy to procure. Further, ricin is produced from a plant-based source such as castor oil beans, which are readily available, while the toxin itself can be isolated in a simple laboratory setup like a household kitchen with makeshift extraction equipment.[13] The most recent case involving an attempted ricin attack was that of a Canadian woman who attempted to send ricin-laced letters to the White House and a number of government offices in Texas in September 2020.[14]

Jihadist Groups' Pursuit of Bioterror Capabilities

Jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda (AQ) and Islamic State (IS) have actively pursued the use of biological weapons for over two decades. In 1999, AQ initiated an anthrax development programme under the direct purview of then AQ deputy leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri.

The first phase of AQ's anthrax program involved the attempted acquisition of pathogenic strains of anthrax by Abdur Rauf Ahmed, a Pakistani microbiology researcher with the Pakistan Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (PCISR).[15] Ahmed had used his professional capacity as a researcher to attend international conferences on biological weapons, and visit laboratories known to be developing anthrax. Through these activities, he reportedly sought to obtain information, resources and possibly acquire a pathogenic strain of anthrax for AQ.[16] However, Ahmed was largely unsuccessful, going only as far as providing AQ with a crude mock-up of a biological lab.[17]

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[10] Federation of American Scientists, "Introduction to Biological Weapons," 2013, https://fas.org/programs/bio/bwintro.html.

[11] The chart was produced from analysis of data by this author using the University of Maryland's START Centre POICN database.

[12] 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, p. 17, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1500365.

[13] Jennifer Audi et al., "Ricin Poisoning: A Comprehensive Review," *JAMA* 294, no. 18 (November 9, 2005): pp. 2342–51, https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.294.18.2342; Frank Gottron and Dana A Shea, "Ricin: Technical

Background and Potential Role in Terrorism" (Congressional Research Service, 2004).

[14] "Woman Arrested at US-Canada Border for Poison Mailed to White House," *BBC News*, September 21, 2020, sec. US & Canada, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-54221893.

[15] René Pita and Rohan Gunaratna, "Revisiting Al-Qa`ida's Anthrax Program," *CTC Sentinel* 2, no. 5 (2009).

[16] Ibid.

[17] Joby Warrick, "Suspect and A Setback In Al-Qaeda Anthrax Case Scientist With Ties To Group Goes Free," *Washington Post*, October 31, 2006, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2006/10/31/suspect-and-a-setback-in-al-qaeda-anthrax-case-span-classbankheadscientist-with-ties-to-group-goes-freespan/eeb4e5a1-9d08-4dfa-bccc-5c18e311502a/.

Following Ahmed's failure, AQ initiated a second phase of the programme in 2000, when Zawahiri engaged former Malaysian Army captain Yazid Sufaat to develop anthrax.[18] Sufaat, then a member of the AQ-affiliated Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), had been recommended to the AQ leadership by then JI leader in Southeast Asia, Riduan Isamuddin (Hambali).[19] Sufaat, a biochemistry major from the US, would spend several months setting up a biological laboratory in Kandahar, Afghanistan, and conduct research into the cultivation of anthrax.[20] Following the US' military invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 the programme would be disbanded. Sufaat then moved to Bogor, Indonesia, where he tried to revamp the anthrax programme, but ultimately failed.[21] Sufaat would subsequently serve a string of prison sentences on terrorism charges in Malaysia before being released in November 2019. He remains under surveillance by the Malaysian authorities.

IS has likewise held a keen interest in carrying out BW attacks. However, it is unclear if IS had a centralised BW program like AQ. IS' BW plots have mostly involved lone actors and autonomous cells. In 2014, a laptop belonging to Tunisian IS member Mohamed S., which was recovered in Syria, revealed a 19-page document containing various methods of developing BWs, weaponising the bubonic plague from infected animals, and instructions on releasing virus laden grenades into densely-populated areas.[22] Mohamed was a chemistry and physics university student in Tunisia.[23]

In 2016, authorities in Kenya apprehended an IS cell consisting of four medical interns at a local hospital, who had planned on carrying out "large-scale attacks" using anthrax.[24] The cell was also involved in active recruitment and radicalisation efforts but it is unclear if they had procured anthrax. Two years later, German police foiled a terrorist plot involving Tunisian IS member Sief Allah. He had planned to carry out a biological attack using ricin in Cologne, Germany. Sief had received instructions from an IS member in Syria. While a failed plot, this was the first instance in which an individual had successfully produced the biological toxin (stage 2 of weaponisation), with police later recovering 84.3 milligrams of already produced ricin from Sief's house.[25]

In October 2019, Indonesian police thwarted a suicide attack plot involving a cell linked to pro-IS group Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) in Cirebon, West Java. They had planned to use the biological agent abrin, which is found in rosary pea seeds.[26] Indonesian counter-terrorism unit Detachment 88 found explosives together with the abrin poison during raids, which they believed was meant to be incorporated into suicide bombs targeting the Cirebon Police Headquarters.[27]

Among far-right extremists, Koehler and Popella have documented 16 bio-incidents from 1970-2017.[28] The authors observed that far-right linked bioterrorism is predominantly a lone-actor phenomenon, in comparison to other plots that involve a larger organisational structure.[29] Analysis of the Profiles of

[18] Pita and Gunaratna, "Revisiting Al-Qa`ida's Anthrax Program."

[19] Ibid.

[20] International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, "Yazid Sufaat Profile," 2015.

[21] Pita and Gunaratna, "Revisiting Al-Qa`ida's Anthrax Program."

[22] Harald Doornbos and Jenan Moussa, "Found: The Islamic State's Terror Laptop of Doom," *Foreign Policy*, August 28, 2014, https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/28/found-the-islamic-states-terror-laptop-of-doom/.

[23]Ibid.

[24] Ty McCormick, "Foiled Kenya Anthrax Plot Hints At Islamic State's Scramble For Africa," *Foreign Policy*, May 4, 2016, https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/04/foiled-kenya-anthrax-plot-hints-at-islamic-states-scramble-for-africa/.

[25] Florian Flade, "The June 2018 Cologne Ricin Plot: A New Threshold in Jihadi Bio Terror," *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 7 (August 2018): pp. 1–4.

[26] Vidia Arianti, "Biological Terrorism in Indonesia," *The Diplomat*, November 20, 2019, https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/biological-terrorism-in-indonesia/.

[27] "Polri: Bom Pengantin Di Cirebon Berdaya Bunuh 100 Orang," CNN Indonesia, October 15, 2019, https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/2019101518 4405-12-439754/polri-bom-pengantin-di-cirebon-berdaya-bunuh-100-orang; "Densus 88 Sita Cairan Kimia Di Rumah Terduga Teroris Cirebon," CNN Indonesia, October 15, 2019, https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/2019101507 0001-12-439508/densus-88-sita-cairan-kimia-di-rumah-terduga-teroris-cirebon.

[28] Koehler and Popella, "Mapping Far-Right Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) Terrorism Efforts in the West," pp. 6-7.

[29] Ibid, p. 20.

Incidents Involving CBRN and Non-State Actors (POICN) Database from the University of Maryland also shows that 75% (6 out of 8) of bio-incidents involving far-right groups were perpetrated by lone actor/autonomous cells, whereas the figure was 40% (6 out of 15 incidents)[30] for jihadist groups.

In October 2001, soon after the 9/11 attacks, the US faced an anthrax attack, in which five people died and twenty-two others were infected with anthrax. This followed a series of anthrax laced letters being sent to five media offices and two US senators.[31] The attacks were perpetrated by microbiologist and biodefence researcher Dr Bruce Ivins, who had no real political motivations but nevertheless was referred to by the 2011 Norway attacker, Anders Breivik as a "right-wing, Christian, cultural conservative."[32] Subsequently, there has been a number of other bio-incidents involving white supremacists primarily involving ricin.[33]

Increased Threat Due to Technological Advancements

In recent years, advances in science and technology have made it easier and cheaper to produce biological agents, which could be developed into BWs. In turn, this has prompted fears that post-pandemic, bad actors could view biological weapons as a cost-effective means to launch attacks. One such field is synthetic biology (SynBio), which encompasses biological systems engineering.[34] Recent SynBio advancements

have potentially reduced the cost and technical skills required to engineer highly lethal biological agents.

One of these advancements is a gene editing technique known as Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats or CRISPR. This technique is akin to using a pair of scissors or a pencil to alter and modify - in theory - the DNA sequences of biological systems.[35] Prior to CRISPR, gene alteration would require sophisticated equipment and hence was prohibitively expensive. Today, simple DIY CRISPR kits are available commercially for less than $150.[36] In 2018, the United Nations (UN) highlighted the potential threat posed by CRISPR techniques in developing more effective biological weapons and the proliferation of these so-called "DIY biological labs."[37]

The inherent characteristic that allows for the purposeful engineering of the biological system is modularity, or the ability to separate and recombine separate components of a system.[38] The genetic material (DNA or RNA) of a system, which contains all the information for the system's proper functioning, can be removed from one pathogen and inserted into another as a means of altering its function.[39] Modularity enables a measure of predictability in altered systems, while allowing for the various functions of the system to be tweaked and manipulated.[40]

SynBio techniques have been used to successfully create viruses. In 2002,

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[30] National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), "Profiles of Incidents Involving CBRN and Non-State Actors (POICN) Database." Analysis done by this author.

[31] Karmon, "The Radical Right's Obsession with Bioterrorism," p. 14.

[32] Ibid, p. 15.

[33] Koehler and Popella, "Mapping Far-Right Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) Terrorism Efforts in the West"; Karmon, "The Radical Right's Obsession with Bioterrorism."

[34] Allen A. Cheng and Timothy K. Lu, "Synthetic Biology: An Emerging Engineering Discipline," *Annual Review of Biomedical Engineering* 14, no. 1 (2012): pp. 155–78, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-bioeng-071811-150118.

[35] Andrea Howard, "The Pandemic and America's Response to Future Bioweapons," *War on the Rocks*, May 1, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/05/the-pandemic-and-americas-response-to-future-bioweapons/.

[36] Amrit P. Acharya and Arabinda Acharya, "Cyberterrorism and Biotechnology," October 20,

2017, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2017-06-01/cyberterrorism-and-biotechnology.

[37] United Nations, "Terrorists Potentially Target Millions in Makeshift Biological Weapons 'Laboratories', UN Forum Hears," UN News, August 17, 2018, https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/08/1017352.

[38] J. Kenneth Wickiser et al., "Engineered Pathogens and Unnatural Biological Weapons: The Future Threat of Synthetic Biology," *CTC Sentinel* 13, no. 8 (August 2020): p. 3, https://ctc.usma.edu/engineered-pathogens-and-unnatural-biological-weapons-the-future-threat-of-synthetic-biology/.

[39] Wickiser et al., p. 3; Antoine Danchin, "Scaling up Synthetic Biology: Do Not Forget the Chassis," *FEBS Letters* 586, no. 15 (2012): pp. 2129–37, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.febslet.2011.12.024.

[40] Wickiser et al., "Engineered Pathogens and Unnatural Biological Weapons," p. 3.

researchers at the State University in New York succeeded in chemically synthesising the complete poliovirus genome,[41] the recipe of which is available freely online.[42] In 2005, another group of American researchers succeeded in reconstructing the 1918 influenza pandemic virus.[43] The entire process was carried out in a regular laboratory setting using standard equipment available in university biology laboratories. Additionally, the methods employed were not beyond the capabilities of an amateur biologist.[44] In 2016, a group of Canadian researchers constructed the horsepox virus using genetic information solely obtained from a public database.[45]

In a broader sense, Wickiser et. al. observed that the "techniques used to propagate bacteria and viruses and to cut and paste genetic sequences from one organism to another are approaching the level of skill required to use a cookbook or a home computer."[46] SynBio has also enabled the development of binary bio-weapons including, for example, weapons consisting of two agents which are harmless on their own but become lethal when combined.[47] In future, the prospect cannot be discounted that malicious actors might be able to develop the components, store them separately and bring them together in a biological munition prior to delivery.[48] Largely, however, there has been no known evidence of terror groups exploiting these technologies to plot attacks as yet, and the challenges to develop bio-weapons remain formidable.

Yet these advancements arguably reduce the technological barrier, and could be taken advantage by terrorists in future to perpetrate attacks, particularly in instances when lone actors/autonomous cells possess some technical knowledge. The three potential capabilities of SynBio that warrant the highest level of concern are in the re-creation of known viruses; the manufacture of harmful biochemicals; and the genetic modification of existing bacteria into more lethal forms.[49] This is in contrast to the creation of novel bio-agents, which remains technically a very difficult task.[50]

Threat Assessment

Several experts, including terrorism scholar Andrew Silke, have warned that the current pandemic "may lead to a resurgence in interest among terrorists for using such weapons."[51] This is partly due to the devastating impact of COVID-19, which highlights the lethality and potentially far-reaching consequences of a bioterror attack involving a novel biological agent.

Terrorist groups such as AQ and IS continue to retain an interest in using biological weapons. In a recent pro-AQ magazine published in November 2020 titled 'Wolves of Manhattan', AQ had called on its "wolves of Islam" to hand out "poisoned masks" to unsuspecting individuals in streets or stations.[52] IS too recently released a poster titled 'The Biological Terror', via an online blog, which called on supporters to carry out attacks by spreading poison in food and at gatherings.[53] Terrorist cells in Indonesia have planned poison attacks previously.

[41] Jeronimo Cello, Aniko V. Paul, and Eckard Wimmer, "Chemical Synthesis of Poliovirus CDNA: Generation of Infectious Virus in the Absence of Natural Template," *Science* 297, no. 5583 (August 9, 2002): 1016–18, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1072266.
[42] Wickiser et al., "Engineered Pathogens and Unnatural Biological Weapons," p. 3.
[43] Ibid, p. 4.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Kai Kupferschmidt, "How Canadian Researchers Reconstituted an Extinct Poxvirus for $100,000 Using Mail-Order DNA," *Science*, July 7, 2017, https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/07/how-canadian-researchers-reconstituted-extinct-poxvirus-100000-using-mail-order-dna.
[46] Wickiser et al., "Engineered Pathogens and Unnatural Biological Weapons," p. 5.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.

[49] National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Biodefense in the Age of Synthetic Biology* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2018), p. 4, https://doi.org/10.17226/24890.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Andrew Silke, "COVID-19 and Terrorism: Assessing the Short-and Long-Term Impacts" (Pool Re Solutions, May 5, 2020), p. 12.
[52] MEMRI, "Article In New Pro-Al-Qaeda Magazine 'Wolves Of Manhattan' Urges 'Lone Wolves' In The West To Exploit Coronavirus Pandemic By Handing Out Poisoned Masks, Burning Cars Of 'Crusaders,'" November 30, 2020, https://www.memri.org/jttm/article-new-pro-al-qaeda-magazine-wolves-manhattan-urges-lone-wolves-west-exploit-coronavirus.
[53] "Jannah World," December 14, 2020, https://kebabshawarmajannah.blogspot.com/2020/12/blog-post.html.

In 2011, a militant cell in Jakarta planned to kill policemen by poisoning their food in a canteen using ricin.[54] Five years later, another attempt was made by a terrorist cell in Indonesia to deliver cyanide-laced food to police officers.[55] At the other end of the ideological spectrum, far-right groups have actively called on their members to exploit the novel coronavirus as a bio-weapon, urging infected members to spread the virus amongst Jews and minorities by hugging, coughing and contaminating currency notes.[56] However, there have been little indications thus far that these calls have been adhered to by far-right elements.

At present, it is unlikely that transnational terror groups such as AQ and IS have the physical and technical capability to mount large-scale, centrally-directed bio-attacks. Apart from leadership at the strategic level, the use of bio-weapons on a large scale is dependent on, among other factors, the existence of safe havens, the ability to acquire bio-agents at the operational level, and having the necessary technical capabilities to develop these agents into weapons at the tactical level. Such prospects have been significantly diminished, following the loss of territory, leadership and technical capabilities that both groups have experienced, as a result of several major counter-terrorism operations in their previous strongholds in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria.
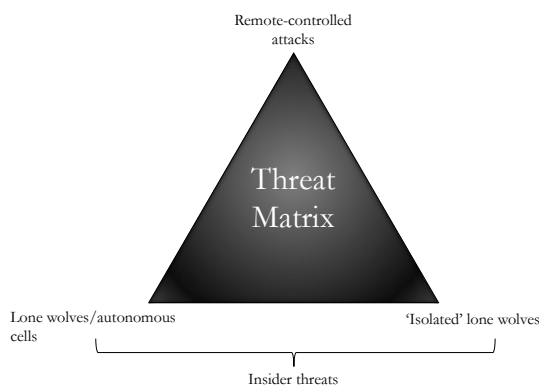

Figure 3: Threat Matrix

Nonetheless, as evidenced by the terrorist attacks in Europe in late 2020, there has been a clear shift in general attack trends from large-scale centrally directed attacks like 9/11, to smaller scale "pin prick" attacks involving 'isolated' lone wolves who are self-radicalised and do not have links to wider extremist networks.[57] As such, authorities need to be wary of lone-wolf perpetrated, low casualty attacks involving crude bio-agents such as ricin, that have high psychological but low physical impact, and are inspired rather than centrally directed.

The three main threat categories include: lone actors/autonomous cells who are remotely directed by terrorists with technical know-how (2018 Cologne); lone actors/autonomous cells who have the technical knowledge and capability (2016 Kenya) and 'isolated' lone wolves. The latter two categories may involve insider threats, including individuals affiliated with research institutions who have access to materials and technical knowledge.

Policy Recommendations – The Need for Robust Bio-Defence

Overall, conventional attack methods such as knife and vehicular attacks, and the use of IEDs, will continue to pose the larger terrorist threat compared to bio-attacks, mainly due to the difficulties surrounding the weaponisation of bio-agents. Yet the need for governments around the world to increase their bio-preparedness and fortify their bio-defence capabilities has taken on added urgency since the onset of COVID-19. The pandemic has highlighted preparedness gaps in several areas, including in data sharing, communication, medical equipment availability and distribution, travel

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[54] Arianti, "Biological Terrorism in Indonesia."
[55] "Indonesian Police Warn of Poison Terror Attack," *The Jakarta Post*, February 15, 2016, https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/02/15/indonesian-police-warn-poison-terror-attack.html.
[56] Abdul Basit, "The COVID-19 Pandemic: An Opportunity for Terrorist Groups?," *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* 12, no. 3 (2020).

[57] Raffaello Pantucci, "End of Al Qaeda Era?," *RSIS Commentaries*, December 3, 2020; Norimitsu Onishi, Constant Méheut, and Layli Foroudi, "Attacks in France Point to a Threat Beyond Extremist Networks," *The New York Times*, November 6, 2020, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/06/world/europe/france-attacks-beheading-terrorism.html.

management and pandemic testing.[58] Governments have also had to ensure their healthcare systems are well-resourced, in addition to developing adequate surveillance and rapid response capabilities.

In these efforts, swift inter-agency cooperation between law enforcement, defence, medical and public service agencies is required. An example of this is Singapore's inter-agency cooperation between the Ministry of Health and the Singapore Police Force in contact tracing, following the onset of COVID-19 in the country in early 2020.[59] Further, governments must also channel resources into research and development as well as ensure the availability of an updated stockpile of vaccines against emerging diseases and antidotes against bio-agents such as ricin.

In the realm of disrupting attacks, the main threat still stems from lone actor/autonomous cells who draw inspiration from terror groups such as AQ and IS. As such, security services should implement measures to keep lone actors isolated, including by closer monitoring of social media spaces and networks of key individuals, arresting cell leaders and cutting off chains of command.[60] Closer scrutiny of e-commerce platforms known to be used by extremists for the procurement of precursor agents for possible BWs is also required.[61]

In part, this will require law enforcement collaborating with online platforms to develop better monitoring systems to detect, flag and report purchases of precursor materials, as part of disruption measures to thwart attack plots.[62] Such electronic surveillance proved vital in the 2018 Cologne ricin plot, where British intelligence had detected, flagged and relayed information to Germany's Federal Intelligence Service, or BND, with regards to the online purchases of at least 1,000 castor oil beans and a coffee grinder on Amazon by Sief Allah, for the purposes of producing ricin.[63] Governments should also collaborate with academic institutions to regulate the

research space, particularly those involving high-risk subject matters such as SynBio, to guard against potential misuse by 'extremist' insiders. In sum, the threat of bioterrorism must be taken seriously, and the development of robust bio-defence mechanisms are necessary, in order to mitigate against future bio-threats.

About the author

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[58] Global Preparedness Monitoring Board, "A World in Disorder" (World Health Organization, 2020), p. 33.
[59] Li Yang Hsu and Min-Han Tan, "What Singapore Can Teach the U.S. about Responding to Covid-19," STAT, March 23, 2020, https://www.statnews.com/2020/03/23/singapore-teach-united-states-about-covid-19-response/.
[60] Daniel L. Byman, "How to Hunt a Lone Wolf: Countering Terrorists Who Act on Their Own,"

Brookings (blog), February 14, 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/how-to-hunt-a-lone-wolf-countering-terrorists-who-act-on-their-own/.
[61] International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, "Terrorism Financing in Southeast Asia" (Singapore, May 2020).
[62] Ibid.
[63] Flade, "The June 2018 Cologne Ricin Plot," p. 2.

Pro-IS Indonesian Militant Groups and Supporters: Targeting of Chinese-Related Communities

Prakoso Permono and Muhamad Syauqillah

Synopsis

This article explores the logic underlying the targeting of ethnic Chinese Indonesians or other Chinese-related identities by Islamic State (IS)-linked militant groups in Indonesia, which have risen in significance over recent years. Three factors are highlighted to explain the targeting of Chinese Indonesians in Indonesia: i) a long history of anti-Chinese sentiments within the Indonesian society; ii) sentiments against Chinese-related identities caused by the Uyghur situation and the Rohingya crisis; and iii) the increased intensity of the Indonesian pro-IS elements' anti-Chinese rhetoric and propaganda during the present COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, it is assessed that Chinese Indonesians, as well as communities that are broadly perceived to be Chinese-related, are among the most vulnerable targets in Indonesia and will likely continue to be targeted by pro-IS Indonesian militants and other jihadist groups in the future.

Introduction

Research on pro-IS Indonesian terrorist groups' targeting of ethnic Chinese Indonesians is scarce.[1] This is in spite of the credible threats the Chinese Indonesian community faces from local terrorist groups.

Terrorism scholars and the Indonesian government have neither paid sufficient attention to the vulnerability of Chinese Indonesians to terrorist attacks, nor underplayed the issue in the public domain. Presumably, the government does not want to publicly raise the issue for fear that it may cause panic and heighten concerns among the Chinese Indonesian community.[2] Indonesia's anti-terror unit Detachment 88 has consistently identified the general public, police officers and government facilities as potential terrorist targets.[3] In contrast, the Chinese Indonesian community had not been specifically identified as a potential jihadist target.[4]

Terrorist threats to Chinese Indonesians are not new and can be traced back to the 1999 Plaza Hayam Wuruk bombing by *Angkatan Mujahidin Islam Nusantara* (AMIN).[5] Slightly more than two decades later, after the coronavirus outbreak in Indonesia in 2020, the terrorist threat to the Chinese Indonesian community has likely rejuvenated. A discussion organised by the Centre of Radicalism and Deradicalization Study (PAKAR)[6], an Indonesian NGO that studies terrorism, highlighted the potential terrorist threat to Chinese Indonesians following the onset of the pandemic.

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[1] There is limited literature available on this topic. Prior to this paper, we could only find related issues on a policy brief published by Institute for Policy Analysis for Conflict (IPAC) following the Coronavirus outbreak which mentions a failed terrorist plot by pro-IS Indonesian militants to attack foreign Chinese workers in Banten. See, COVID-19 and ISIS in Indonesia, IPAC Short Briefing No. 1, April 2, 2020, http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2020/04/Covid_ISIS.pdf.

[2] Interview with former Indonesia National Counter-Terrorism Agency's (BNPT) high ranking official, November 2020.

[3] Interview with Indonesia's Anti-terror Unit Detachment 88's member, November 2020.

[4] Ibid.

[5] "Bombing linked to Islamic," Asia Pacific Solidarity Network (APSN), April 23, 1999, https://www.asia-pacific-solidarity.net/news/1999-04-23/bombing-linked-islamic.html.

[6] Amy Chew, "Terror attacks feared ahead of Chinese workers returning to Indonesia," South China Morning Post, June 4, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3087408/terror-attacks-feared-chinese-workers-return-indonesia-amid.

The longstanding socio-economic disparity between the non-Chinese and Chinese Indonesian communities, has been one of the primary reasons for animosity and extremist rhetoric against the latter. The perceived different treatment towards local and Chinese foreign workers, as well as the pervasion of anti-Buddhist and anti-Chinese sentiments generated by the crises in the Rakhine State and Xinjiang[7] respectively, are some reasons that have made the community a prime target for jihadist groups. While these factors warrant in-depth study, this paper argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the aforementioned factors that were often used by extremist groups to vilify the Chinese Indonesian community. To devise effective countermeasures, it is crucial for the Indonesian law enforcement agencies to understand and acknowledge the potential threats the community faces.

The Global Context

To understand why Chinese Indonesians and groups perceived to be somewhat linked to China are being targeted by terrorist groups in Indonesia, it is first necessary to consider IS' position on China. One of the essential driving factors in recent years is the Chinese government's policies and treatment of the Uyghur Muslim minority in China. The Uyghur situation has drawn considerable attention and outrage in the Muslim world and from Western countries. Of particular concern are the potential human rights violations against the Uyghur community. Using the Uyghur crisis as a pretext, IS declared a so-called holy war against China in July 2014.[8]

In a message released on July 1, 2014, the self-proclaimed Caliph and then chief of IS, Abu Bakar al-Baghdadi, called for a jihad in the holy month of Ramadhan, which referenced China. His message stated that "the *umma* of Islam is watching your jihad with

eyes of hope, and indeed you have brothers in many parts of the world being inflicted with the worst kinds of torture … Muslims' rights are forcibly seized in China, India, Palestine, Somalia, the Arabian Peninsula, the Caucasus, Sham (the Levant), Egypt, Iraq, and Indonesia, … So, raise your ambitions, O soldiers of the Islamic State. For your brothers, all over the world, are awaiting your rescue and anticipating your brigades."[9] Whether by design or otherwise, it is interesting to note that China led the list of countries the IS identified as oppressors of Muslims. This July 2014 speech was one of the first speeches of the then IS leader, which became a rallying call for jihadists, including those in Indonesia, to act by establishing pro-IS groups locally, and engaging in violence against the identified enemies.

Other jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda have also portrayed China as a common enemy of Muslims. Accordingly, China-focused rhetoric started to flourish within these two global jihadist organisations' extremist narratives.[10] Recently, IS rhetoric has shown a shift from anti-Western rhetoric to anti-China propaganda, primarily focusing on alleged Chinese suppression of its Muslim Uyghur population. Various anti-Chinese conspiracy theories that sought to blame China and the Chinese people for deliberately spreading the coronavirus further fuelled jihadist narratives against Chinese Indonesians.[11]

Plots against the Chinese Community in Indonesia

Even before the COVID-19 outbreak in Indonesia, Chinese Indonesians were targeted by pro-IS Indonesian jihadist groups. In their social media platforms, these groups and their supporters referred to ethnic Chinese and Chinese Indonesians as infidels, enemies of Islam, communists, and therefore liable to be killed.[12] Such hateful narratives

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[7] Ahmad Kusairi, "Teroris Ancam Etnis Tionghoa di Indonesia," ruangobrol.id, June 6, 2020, https://ruangobrol.id/2020/06/06/fenomena/teroris-ancam-etnis-china-di-indonesia/.

[8] Mordechai Chaziza, "China's Middle East Policy: The ISIS Factor," *Middle East Policy* 23, no. 1 (2016): 25-33.

[9] Kyler Orton, "The Leader of the Islamic State Explains the Caliphate's Vision," Kyle Orton's Blog, July 2, 2014. https://kyleorton1991.wordpress.com/2014/07/02/the

-leader-of-the-islamic-state-explains-the-caliphates-vision/.

[10] Uran Botobekov, "Al-Qaeda and Islamic State Take Aim at China," The Diplomat, March 08, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2017/03/al-qaeda-and-islamic-state-take-aim-at-china/.

[11] Mohammed Sinan Siyech, "Why China is becoming a target to jihadist hatred, like the US," September 16, 2020, https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3100914/why-china-becoming-target-jihadist-hatred-us.

[12] Interview with a former jihadist, September 2020.

have also continuously been delivered by some pro-IS Indonesian militant ideologues in their religious study sessions.[13] In addition to newspaper sources, **the following information are based on** court verdicts of convicted Indonesian terrorists – most of whom supported IS – from 2013 to 2020. These terrorists belonged to the *Jama'ah Ansharut Daulah* (JAD), *Mujahidin Indonesia Barat* (Mujahidin of Western Indonesia or MIB), and *Azzam Dakwah Center* (ADC).

From 2013 to 2020, there were 16 planned terrorist attacks which targeted Chinese or Chinese Indonesians, including bomb attacks, shootings, burning of properties and *fa'i*[14] (stealing money or assets from disbelievers). Based on 15 court verdicts we studied, the terrorist plots spanned across four main Indonesian islands, namely, Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi and involved around 44 Indonesians, most of whom are IS supporters. The majority of the plots were foiled and only two which had little impact, and did not garner much public attention, were executed.[15] While the number of attacks may seem small, the authors believe that the plots indicate the threat to the Chinese Indonesian community is dynamic and could escalate.

There are two broad and inter-related underlying factors that explain the jihadist motives to target Chinese Indonesians. First, the Rohingya crisis[16] and Uyghur Muslims' situation in Myanmar and China respectively which appear to be emotive issues for jihadists. Regardless of the credibility of some of the information on the plight of Rohingya and Uyghur Muslims, jihadist narratives have

tended to blame essentially anyone they believe to be of Chinese heritage for the plight and oppression of these two groups of Muslims. Jihadists do not make a distinction between Chinese nationals and Chinese Indonesians and rationalise the targeting of Chinese Indonesians as a form of revenge against China for its perceived role in the defeat of IS in the Middle East. The plots to burn a shopping centre in Jakarta's China Town and a Chinese Indonesian owned business just outside the capital city in 2013 were, for instance, revenge attacks motivated by the perceived role of the Chinese in the oppression of the Uyghurs and Rohingya Muslims.[17] As such, the motivation for targeting Chinese Indonesians has both a local and global dimension. In this light also, some of the revenge plots in Indonesia could be directly related to al-Baghdadi's message against China in 2014. As observed by others, it is one of IS' strategies to have its affiliates attack on its behalf and start new fronts to divert attention away from IS central in Iraq and Syria.[18]

Second, the socio-economic and political climate in Indonesia. The socio-economic disparities between Chinese Indonesians and those who claim themselves as *pribumi* or native Indonesians have aggravated hatred toward Chinese Indonesians. Some of the proclaimed motives for the targeting of the Chinese Indonesian community were the Chinese community's economic ascendancy and their alleged efforts to revive communism. The high-profile blasphemy case of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama alias Ahok[19], the former Governor of Jakarta in 2016, has also been

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[13] See North Jakarta Court's verdict against Ade Supriadi, Nomor 459/Pid.Sus.Teroris/2019/PN Jkt.Utr; North Jakarta Court's verdict against Iwan Wahyudianto, Muh Ruly Satory, Emiel Fitria Nur, Muhammad Sopian, Nomor 304/Pid.Sus.Teroris/2019/PN Jkt.Utr.

[14] *Fai* is a terminology commonly used among Indonesian jihadists to refer to the stealing of properties, money and valuables from their perceived enemies. This form of theft often happens at small stores, gas stations and banks. The funds collected from the theft are used to fund jihadist activities. See Muhammad Haniff Hassan, "Robbery in the Name of Jihad," IDSS Commentaries 27, (2005).

[15] The two successful attacks took place in 2016 using molotov bombs and throwing of rocks at a Chinese Indonesian owned restaurant and a local minimarket in Central Java. See East Jakarta Court's verdict against Sumarno,

No.:478/PID.Sus/2017/PN.Jkt.Tim.; South Jakarta Court's verdict against Oman Rochman al Aman Abdurrahman, Nomor 140/Pid.Sus.2018/ PN.Jkt.Sel.

[16] While the Rohingya crisis is primarily a Myanmarese issue, in jihadist narratives, the Chinese and Burmese Buddhists are presented as the same or similar communities.

[17] See East Jakarta Court's verdict against Chatimul Chaosan, Nomor: 384/PID/SUS./2014/ PN.JKT.TIM.

[18] Harleen Gambhir, "ISIS Global Intelligence Summary," *Institute for the Study of War*, May 10, 2015, http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/isis-global-intelligence-summary.

[19] Former Jakarta Governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, who is an ethnic Chinese Christian, was charged with blasphemy for allegedly insulting a Quranic verse about inhibition to vote for non-Muslims in elections during the 2016 Jakarta election.

used in the extremists' narratives.

The alleged blasphemy triggered a mass protest rally in Jakarta titled "*Aksi Bela Islam*" (Defend Islam Action) by segments of Indonesia's Muslim community. The rally marked the re-emergence of anti-Chinese sentiments. The case of Ahok, who is perceived to have committed blasphemy by insulting a Quranic verse, pushed some Indonesian IS supporters to plot attacks. The plots included plans to bomb a Chinese establishment in Solo, conduct shootings in a Chinese neighbourhood in Medan, and attack a local Chinese restaurant in Central Java.[20] Another similar blasphemy case involving a Buddhist Chinese Indonesian accused of ripping off the Quran in 2016, also triggered Indonesian IS supporters to attack the latter's business and house.[21]

Anti-Chinese Conspiracy Theories Among Indonesian Society

Other triggers for targeting Chinese Indonesians are based on conspiracy theories and false propaganda about China and the Chinese Indonesian community which resonate among the wider Indonesian society, instead of just among the jihadist following. For instance, the 2017 call for jihad against Chinese Indonesians in West Java and Jakarta were based on Indonesian pro-IS groups' conspiracy theory that President Joko Widodo is a Chinese puppet. Another was that Indonesia will be controlled by the Chinese communists conspiring with the Shi'as in Indonesia. Pro-IS Indonesian supporters also claimed that the reclamation of Jakarta Bay was a sign of Chinese dominance in Indonesia. This policy, issued by Ahok during his term as the governor, was perceived to only benefit Chinese investors and wealthy

Chinese Indonesians.[22] Indonesian IS supporters also believe that China's presence in the South China Sea is a threat to Islam in Indonesia.[23]

The Chinese Indonesian community has also been the target of hoaxes and disinformation, particularly at times of political unrests.[24] Some Indonesian politicians have repeatedly used the economic rhetoric against the Chinese community. This stereotyping of the Chinese Indonesian community runs deep and may be shared by a significant proportion of the general population. A survey conducted in 2017 during the peak of anti-Chinese protests in the country, showed that 48.4 percent of Indonesians believe that Chinese Indonesians "only care about their kind".[25] 46.3 percent thought that Chinese Indonesians "are too greedy and ambitious" and almost 60 percent perceived Chinese Indonesians as "more likely to be wealthy than the *pribumi*".[26] Further, 41.9 percent agreed with the statement that Chinese Indonesians "have too much influence in Indonesian politics".[27] These sentiments raise concerns that existing anti-Chinese sentiments could be manipulated to radicalise more segments of the wider Muslim community in Indonesia.

COVID-19 and the targeting of Chinese Indonesians

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the issue of targeting Chinese Indonesians re-emerged among Indonesian jihadists. The narratives to launch jihad against China's interests in Indonesia and the Chinese Indonesian community can be found in the jihadist propaganda online networks. Based on Detachment 88's data[28], from March 2020 to December 2020, there were 228 terrorist suspects arrested by the police across

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[20] See South Jakarta Court's verdict against Oman Rochman, Nomor 140/Pid.Sus/2018/PN.Jkt.Sel.
[21] See East Jakarta Court's verdict against Sumarno, No.:478/PID.Sus/2017/PN.Jkt.Tim.; South Jakarta Court's verdict against Oman Rochman al Aman Abdurrahman, Nomor 140/Pid.Sus.2018/ PN.Jkt.Sel.
[22] See North Jakarta Court's verdict against Saidi, Nomor 288/Pid.Sus.Teroris/2019/PN JKT.Utr.; North Jakarta Court's verdict against Iwan Wahyudianto, Muh Ruly Satory, Emiel Fitria Nur, Muhammad Sopian, Nomor 304/Pid.Sus.Teroris/2019/PN Jkt.Utr.
[23] See North Jakarta Court's verdict against Iwan Wahyudianto, Muh Ruly Satory, Emiel Fitria Nur, Muhammad Sopian, Nomor 304/Pid.Sus.Teroris/2019/PN Jkt.Utr.

[24] Quinton Temby, "Disinformation, Violence, and Anti-Chinese Sentiments in Indonesia's 2019 Election," *Yusof Ishak Institute* 67 (2019): 3-7.
[25] Charlotte Setijadi, "Chinese Indonesians in the eyes of the pribumi public," *Yusof Ishak Institute* 73 (2017), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2017_73.pdf.
[26] Ibid., p 6.
[27] Ibid., p 8.
[28] Interview with former Indonesia National Counter-Terrorism Agency's (BNPT) high ranking official, November 2020.

Indonesia, and one of the plots in Batang, Central Java by Indonesian IS supporters targeted the Chinese Indonesian community.[29]

By propagating anti-Chinese sentiments, Indonesian jihadists seek to legitimise their actions and gain popularity and relevance within the society. Based on the author's interviews and through digital ethnographic works on Indonesian IS supporters' social media networks during the pandemic, the following rhetoric against Chinese Indonesians were found. One was that China was trying to resurrect communism through the COVID-19 pandemic. Another was a hoax belief that China will build a military base in Indonesia. These theories were used by jihadists to justify their claim that China and Chinese Indonesians were enemies of Islam.[30]

The anti-Chinese sentiments, already a traditionally sensitive issue, have become a nation-wide issue in Indonesia today. The so-called communist revival in Indonesia is a trending issue within the Islamic community as communism is portrayed as an imminent threat to the national polity and Islam. A bill proposed by the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR) regarding national ideology guidelines excluded a resolution that serves as a legal basis to ban communism in Indonesia.[31] This then drew public protests in Jakarta and other cities. Going forward, concerns remain that similarities between Indonesian IS supporters' rhetoric against Chinese Indonesians and trending issues among Indonesia's mainstream Muslim community, could increase the appeal of jihadist narratives and facilitate terrorist recruitment among the latter.

Conclusion

As discussed, there are at least two factors that make Chinese Indonesians targets of pro-IS Indonesian radical groups. First, the external global contexts where Muslims are perceived to be oppressed, such as the Uyghur and Rohingya crises, which are continuously fuelling the spirit of revenge among Indonesian extremists. Second,

longstanding local anti-Chinese sentiments among some Indonesian pribumis, which are frequently surfaced due to economic disparities, political contestations with ethno-religious rhetoric and strong religious and racial sentiments in the society. The authors believe that the threat to Chinese Indonesians and other related targets will not likely decrease if the factors outlined above continue to persist. Besides the real danger posed to Chinese Indonesians, jihadist targeting of the larger Chinese community will also likely affect tourism in Indonesia, which is expected to resume once the spread of the virus is brought under control. In addition to Chinese tourists, tourists from Southeast and East Asia who may mistaken to be Chinese, may also be targeted.

To respond to this threat effectively, it is vital that the government pays particular attention to enforcing strict laws against hate speech, political populism, hoaxes, or propaganda toward non-Muslim communities that are either disseminated by supporters of IS or other jihadist groups, or even by individuals who are not members of violent extremist groups. Besides addressing the problems of economic disparities among communities, the government, together with civil society, should also actively promote social harmony, cohesion, and peace within the society to mitigate some of the negative sentiments discussed.

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[29] Ibid.
[30] Interview with a former jihadist, September 2020.
[31] Abdurrachman Satrio, "Indonesia's obsession with ideology: the case of the Pancasila bill," *Indonesia at*

Melbourne, July 13, 2020, https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/indonesias-obsession-with-ideology-the-case-of-the-pancasila-bill/.

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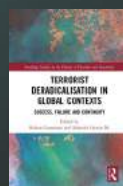
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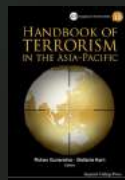
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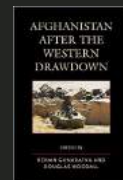
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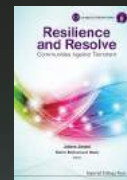
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