Beyond the Pandemic Effect
Terrorism and Counterterrorism in 2021

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The year 2020 marks a global shake-up in almost every aspect of our societies, and the post-pandemic domino effect is still unfolding. The full impact of the COVID-19 quarantine and lockdowns will only be seen in the long term. So far, some of the immediate impacts have completely changed many of the pre-2020 paradigms while influencing others, such as terrorist and extremist trends.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, terrorist groups have both suffered from the virus just like any of us, but they also grabbed the opportunity and used the crisis as a tool for further propaganda, manipulation and control. As the domino starts to unleash, many long-term effects of the pandemic prove to create direct and indirect facilitating factors for extremism and radicalisation, through perpetuating quarantines, more time spent in the online environment, unemployment, uncertainty, economic struggle, unequal healthcare access or growing conflicts. While some scholars and practitioners rushed to match "COVID-19 and extremism as the perfect storm", we should be cautious in order to neither overestimate nor underestimate those two threats. All in one, 2021 has already brought to the table many challenges that defined some interesting trends unfolding this year.

The Terrorist Threat in 2020: Terrorism vs. COVID-19

Based on data and analysis published by the United Nations, most terrorist groups, regardless of their ideological motivation, have "successfully exploited vulnerabilities in the social media ecosystem to manipulate people and spread conspiracy theo-

Photo: NATO

Some experts fear that the increased time spent on radical websites could lead to more acts of terrorism.

ries" regarding COVID-19 to reinforce their narratives and incite violence. This is a fact that has been observed and underscored since the first months of the pandemic, while the real threat is the increasing vulnerability of available audiences, not the exploitation of the virus per se for existing extremist narratives. Terrorist propaganda has existed in the online realm for a long time and has proven difficult to eradicate or even contain, especially in recent years. The pandemic has not only provided terrorist groups with an interesting topic to play on, but it may have also created the perfect environment for them to test the new means: a vulnerable audience stuck at home during the lockdown, bored, lonely, and uncertain about the future. Nevertheless, the relationship between the pandem-

ic, its lockdowns, and side effects still needs to be discussed to understand its relevance in terms of rising radicalism and terrorist attacks on the global stage.

First of all, we must acknowledge that the Internet has been at the epicenter of extremist propaganda for a long time. The pandemic has forced people of all ages to work and study from home, increasing time spent online and decreasing social contact outside of virtual networks. Experts have warned of an increase in terrorist attacks by perpetrators exposed to extremist content and radicalized during the lockdown. But such an assumption is too simplistic. Moreover, the data have shown no evidence of this predicted rise in terrorism; at least for now. It is true that there is a time lag between radicalization and mobilisa-

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tion to violence, and it is quite common for people to follow this path within a short period of time. But this can also happen over the long term and be triggered by a specific personal event or development on the public stage.

Is there a Lockdown Effect?

In addition to the experts' warnings, we need to further examine the pandemic's impact on terrorism in 2021 and in the years ahead. We also need to understand

social media since April 2020, representing growth of more than 1.4 million new users per day. The amount of money spent on online consumer purchases in 2020 exceeded US$2.4Tr, an increase of more than 25 per cent compared to 2019. Statista reports that the average e-commerce shopper spends more than US$700 per year to purchase consumer goods online. The pandemic has had a significant impact on online travel spending, with annual sales dropping more than 50 per cent between 2019 and 2020.

More Time Spent Online

There is still little research and few data to determine pandemic activity on extremist websites by existing or new members. Researchers at Simon Fraser University found a significant increase in online activity on far-right forums, but no significant increase in membership. Nevertheless, the available data do not conclusively indicate a dramatic increase in the number of people engaging with violent extremist and terrorist content online, nor do they say anything about the

Source: author

**General assumption of COVID-19 vs Terrorism direct effect in 2020**

whether existing trends in terrorism and counterterrorism emerged because of the pandemic or whether they were simply amplified by the short- and long-term effects of the COVID-19 crisis, while their roots go back much earlier than December 2019. As outlined in previous reports, the COVID-19 pandemic was expected to create a perfect lineage of events related to the terrorist threat. Therefore, the lockdown imposed to stop the spread of the virus is believed to expand the target audience and increase their vulnerability to extremist propaganda. As a result, more people will tend to respond to the terrorist message, engage with online groups, and become further radicalized, leading to an increase in terrorist attacks in both the short and long term. The pandemic lockdown has indeed increased the use of the Internet for various purposes: Work, education, leisure, and social networking. Based on data published in the April 2021 Global Digital Overview, there are over 4.72 billion Internet users in the world today, 332 million more people than in April 2020, and the average global Internet user spends nearly 7 hours online each day. Social media usage also continues to grow, with 4.33 billion users worldwide in April 2021, representing 55 per cent of all people on the planet. The number of social media users has also increased by 13.7 per cent in the last 12 months. More than 520 million new users have joined

As the online audience expands and time spent in the virtual environment increases, the propaganda of all terrorist groups expands, leveraging the COVID-19 theme. Although the audience has become broader and more diverse, its susceptibility to extremist propaganda is questionable. For the vast majority who do not already sympathise with violent extremists, terrorist content is unlikely to change their pre-existing attitudes. More time on the Internet does not automatically increase the risk of radicalization. However, in the case of individuals who have a slight inclination toward the extremist path, the "side effects" of lockdown and along with visiting extremist online channels can facilitate the user's isolation from the surrounding context and inclusion in closed "echo chambers" of like-minded individuals where extremist beliefs and attitudes can be further reinforced. This path can lead to radicalization, but is not a recipe for an act of terrorism.

duration or depth of that engagement. The data may also be deceptive, as searching for extremist content on Google is not in itself evidence of radicalization. Moreover, Google routinely redirects this traffic to counter-extremist materials, which is why many people are presented with counter narratives designed to avert their radicalisation. In addition, investigations cannot distinguish the activities of users or track users who have multiple accounts on different platforms.

Certainly, terrorist groups have increased their online presence, especially among right-wing and anti-government groups on social media, but that does not necessarily mean an increase in the number of followers and supporters. An analysis of these groups' online activities would demonstrate a wide variety of themes and narratives, not all of which include calls to violence. Many of these groups are little more
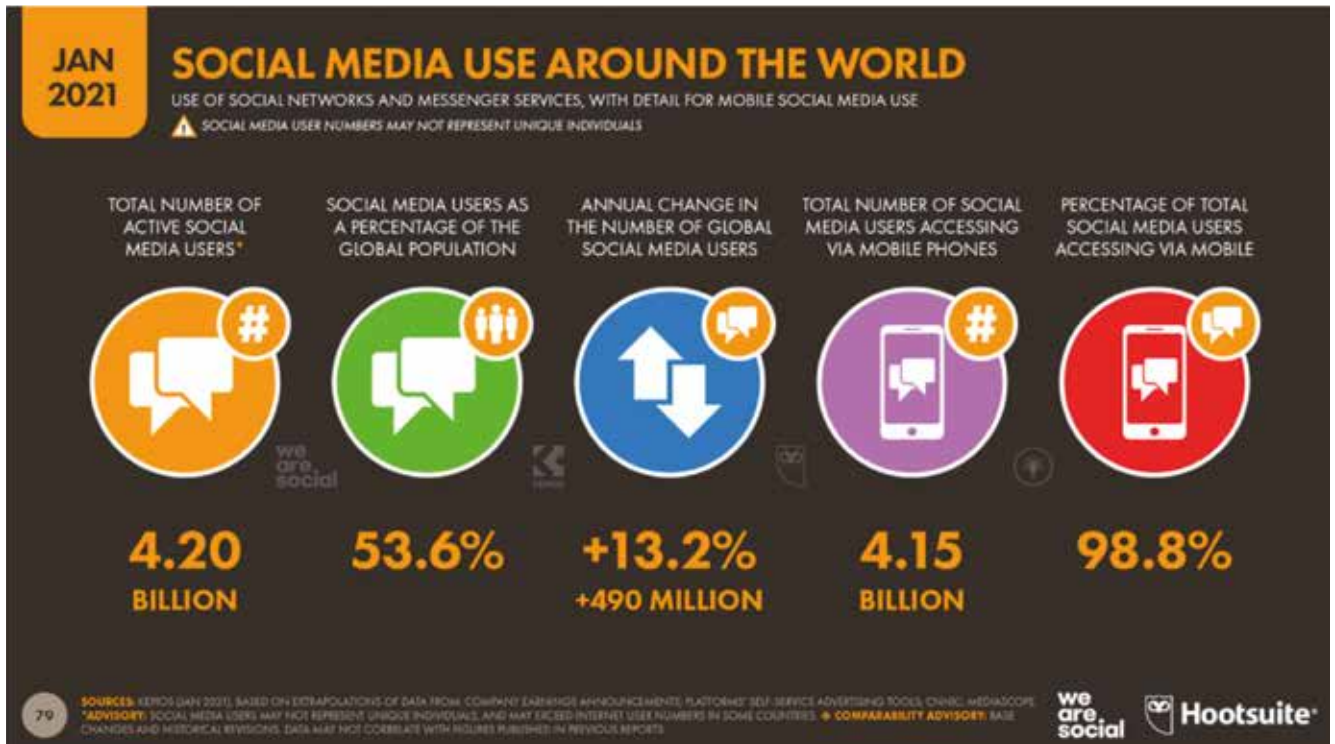
than subversive discussion forums, with inconsistent messages and vague goals that form an interesting network of symbioses. It is too early to define the extent to which all of these groups and their propaganda pose a risk for radicalisation and participation in terrorism. In the case of networks that openly promote violence, social media companies have continually evolved their strategies to shut them down as quickly as possible, and there are now more efforts than ever to counter terrorist and violent extremist activity online. Therefore, the presumed "missile effect" of the "shutdown - vulnerable audience - increased online engagement - increased radicalization - terrorist attacks" line of impact has yet to be proven.

A List of Risk Factors

On the other hand, the lockdowns may add to the list of potential risk factors for radicalization: insecurity, social isolation, unemployment, mental illness, social, psychological, and geopolitical circumstances. Regardless of whether they increased during the lockdown, none of these factors is necessary or sufficient for someone to turn to terrorism, and they lose their intuitive appeal when we consider how many people have similar experiences and yet do not turn to extremism, violent or otherwise. Considering that the pandemic has already resulted in losses and trauma, disruption of daily living habits, psychological suffering, and generally high levels of insecurity in vari-

ous areas, the short-term psychological effects of this crisis include panic, anxiety, frustration, boredom, and a pervasive sense of loneliness. In addition, the economic, social, political, and cultural consequences of the pandemic at the macro level could create or amplify a range of negative states of mind, including inward-looking emotions and, more to the point, outward-looking emotions (such as contempt, anger, resentment, and hatred), which at the micro level could make a greater number of people more susceptible to extremist narratives. At the individual level, personal trauma, such as job loss, could create insecurity and despair. All of these elements, compounded by the pandemic, may lead to vulnerability of online audiences and make some easy targets for extremist propaganda. Therefore, the assumption that the lockdowns will create a vulnerable audience that will engage with increasing extremist online propaganda and become further radicalised and capable of planning and executing a terrorist attack is in fact dependent on many different variables. In other words, the lockdown and the short- and long-term effects of the pandemic may create vulnerabilities in the growing target population, and based on existing and intensifying grievances, some may further engage and radicalise. But there is no direct pathway linking the COVID-19 crisis to radicalisation and, by extension, an increase in terrorist attacks. The pandemic may have helped spread the extremist message and reach a larger

audience since the early months of 2020, but this will not become apparent for years to come and will require a higher level of vigilance on the part of national and international authorities.

Furthermore, beyond the "lockdown – online radicalisation" debate, one year into the pandemic, the security focus has also shifted towards the health sector. While the West has been battling COVID-19, salafi-jihadi groups have been planning a resurrection in Iraq and Syria, while extending their bonds in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Many of the fake caliphate's lost soldiers have gone underground and have even travelled to other conflict zones or to their Western countries, waiting for the right time to act. Many of the current unrests around the globe have common actors in the persons of the foreign terrorist fighters that were previously engaged in Syria and Iraq. Furthermore, right- and left-wing terrorist groups have also increased their online and physical activity, while sending their representatives to conflict zones such as Syria and Ukraine. The domestic terrorism threat has become a widely acknowledged threat, pushing for more rules and regulations to be passed in order to counter the spread of right- and left-wing extremism. Still, beyond any of the trends discussed, we must understand that, as our society goes through fundamental change, every element of our global system gets its own reset; and terrorism might also get its turn soon, if it has not started already. ■