ASWAN FORUM

CHAIR'S SUMMARY

TERRORISM IN THE SHADOW OF THE PANDEMIC

JULY 2020

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THE ASWAN FORUM

Acting in its capacity as the Chairman of the African Union (AU) and the Champion of Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development in Africa, Egypt took the initiative to launch the Aswan Forum for Sustainable Peace and Development in 2019. Owned by Africa, and supported by international and regional partners, the Forum is a high-level, multi-stakeholder platform that brings heads of states and governments, leaders from national governments, international and regional organizations, financial institutions, private sector, and civil society, together with visionaries, scholars, and prominent experts, for a context-specific, action-oriented, and forward-looking discussion on the opportunities, as well as the threats and challenges, facing the continent. It provides the first-of-its-kind platform in Africa to address the "peace-development nexus", while championing African solutions to African problems, including through strengthening the links between policy and practice.

THE CAIRO INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION, PEACEKEEPING AND PEACEBUILDING

Founded in 1994, the Cairo International Center for Conflict Resolution, Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding (CCCPA) is an Egyptian public agency; an AU Center of Excellence in training, capacity building and research; and the Arab world's leading civilian training center on issues of peace and security. It is a major voice of the Global South on a wide range of topics, including conflict prevention and resolution, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), preventing radicalization and extremism leading to terrorism, combating transnational threats, women, peace and security, and climate, security and development nexus.

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KEY TAKEAWAY MESSAGES

- Seven months into the COVID-19 pandemic and **already the health and socioeconomic impacts are not only devastating, but also long-lasting.** By claiming lives and destroying livelihoods, the pandemic is exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities and grievances (poverty, inequality, exclusion, etc.). This is providing fertile ground for militant groups to try to capitalize on people's misery, disenchantment, and fear of being abandoned by governments for their political mobilization and recruitment efforts. Nevertheless, the **long-term effects of COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism and organized crime trends are yet to be seen.**

- **Times of crises, such as the current pandemic, are--first and foremost--a governance challenge. Aside from coercion, the credibility of terrorist organizations in seized territory largely depends on their ability to provide a more efficient alternative to the government.** This is particularly true for border zone communities where state presence is limited or weak.

- **Operationally, most terrorist organizations view the pandemic as an opportunity to regain momentum.** The diversion of government attention and resources to combating the pandemic and enforcing lockdowns has allowed terrorist organizations to increase their attacks, with the aim of regaining or enhancing pre-pandemic operational momentum. However, the ability of terrorist organizations to sustain their recent offensive will rely on many factors, including most notably the spread of COVID-19 among their ranks as well as the ranks of the security forces of concerned governments.

- **Terrorist organizations face the dilemma of granting access to humanitarian and health actors in the territories they control.** In sharp contrast to previous crises (such as the 2011 famine in Somalia), both Al-Shabaab in Somalia and the Taliban in Afghanistan adopted untraditional positions by coordinating with either the government or humanitarian actors to provide aid to communities under their control. Furthermore, Al-Shabaab saw the pandemic as an opportunity to boost its governance credentials by establishing isolation and healthcare facilities, and launching public awareness campaigns.

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- However, in dealing with the current pandemic, apart from providing general sanitary and social distancing guidance, **most terrorist organizations have proven unable to mount the kind of medical or economic relief effort needed by populations under their control.** [1]

- The heavy-handed and overly securitized approach in enforcing lockdowns and curfews by some governments, combined with widespread feelings of anxiety, depression, uncertainty and isolation, is rendering **more individuals susceptible to radicalization, including through digital platforms** where they become easy targets for online recruitment by terrorist organizations.

- **A key to effectively combat terrorism – during the pandemic and beyond – is addressing the root causes and structural drivers that propel individuals to join terrorist groups in the first place.** Poverty, illiteracy, ignorance and feelings of discrimination must be addressed and governments must ensure that funds reach target beneficiaries.

- **Coordination and breaking silos between state institutions is paramount in the fight against extremism in Africa.** Security measures must be complemented with non-security efforts, including criminal justice—founded on respect for human rights and the rule of law.

- **The devastating economic impact of the crisis is forcing many donor countries to reduce or redirect their funding** (to meet immediate humanitarian needs), with a potential adverse impact on the availability of funding for preventing and countering radicalization and extremism leading to terrorism in Africa, including capacity building. This is already compounding the financial crisis facing the United Nations and many international and regional organizations.

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1   For example, no terrorist organization was able to deliver critical medical care, such as intensive care units and ventilators, which are essential for treating critical COVID-19 cases. This also explains their willingness to grant access to national and international humanitarian and medical actors.

INTRODUCTION

Terrorism continues to be a major threat to international peace and security. The coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this threat, by compounding grievances that leave communities and individuals vulnerable to extremism leading to terrorism on one hand, and offering terrorist organizations and other non-state actors new opportunities to enhance or regain momentum on the other. [2]

During the last few months, terrorist groups have been stepping up their efforts to fill the governance void in communities where the state is either weak or nonexistent. These have included the provision of medical services and humanitarian aid. [3] Furthermore, based on the belief that the pandemic provides them with an opportunity to "strike harder and operate more freely," [4] terrorist organizations have capitalized on the diversion of state resources to mitigation and recovery efforts. [5]

Equally troubling is the likely impact of the devastating socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic in providing breeding grounds for extremism leading to terrorism. Only months into this crisis, it has already pushed millions of people out of work, exacerbated inequality, and increased the vulnerability of communities and individuals to extremism. Efforts by governments to curb the spread of the virus, such as lockdowns, social distancing and curfews have encouraged people to move to digital platforms where they can become targets for online recruitment. [6]

Widespread feelings of depression, uncertainty and isolation have also rendered individuals more susceptible to radical ideologies.

Against this backdrop and acting in its capacity as the Secretariat of the Aswan Forum for Sustainable Peace and Development, CCCPA hosted a virtual expert workshop titled: **"Terrorism in the Shadow of the Pandemic"**, on 6 July 2020.

The workshop aimed to take stock of the devastating socioeconomic, political and security implications of the COVID-19 crisis on terrorism and extremism. It also reviewed evidence of how terrorist organizations across Africa are strategically and operationally capitalizing on the pandemic to increase their operations, enhance territorial gains, and augment recruitment efforts. The workshop brought together a select group of experts and practitioners from a wide spectrum of professional backgrounds, including counterterrorism; preventing extremism; disarmament, demobilization and reintegration; development; and transitional justice, as well as researchers and representatives from national governments and regional economic communities and regional mechanisms, for an informed, forward-looking and action-oriented discussion.

This Chair's Summary captures the key messages and recommendations emerging from the workshop. It highlights the critical dimensions of emerging trends in terrorism and organized crime in response to the coronavirus pandemic, with a particular focus on how the crisis has manifested on the security landscape across the African continent.

2   "Secretary-General's remarks to the Security Council on the COVID-19 Pandemic [as delivered] on 9 April 2020," United Nations Secretary-General, last accessed on 14 June 2020 – https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-04-09/secretary-generals-remarks-the-security-council-the-covid-19-pandemic-delivered

3   Colin P. Clarke, "Yesterday's Terrorists Are Today's Public Health Providers," Foreign Policy (blog), last accessed on 14 June 2020 – https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/08/terrorists-nonstate-ungoverned-health-providers-coronavirus-pandemic/

4   Mina al-Lami, "Jihadists See COVID-19 as an Opportunity," GNET (blog), last accessed on 14 June 2020 - https://gnet-research.org/2020/06/01/jihadists-see-covid-19-as-an-opportunity/

5   "Extremist Groups Stepping up Operations during the Covid-19 Outbreak in Sub-Saharan Africa," Center for Strategic and International Studies - last accessed on 14 June 2020 - https://www.csis.org/analysis/extremist-groups-stepping-operations-during-covid-19-outbreak-sub-saharan-africa

6   Nikita Malik, "Self-Isolation Might Stop Coronavirus, but It Will Speed the Spread of Extremism," Foreign Policy (blog), last accessed on 14 June 2020 - https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/26/self-isolation-might-stop-coronavirus-but-spread-extremism/

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

The Impact of COVID-19 on Global Terrorism and Organized Crime Trends

As acknowledged by the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, **it is still too early to assess the full extent of the implications of the pandemic on the global terrorism landscape, highlighting how the pandemic has laid bare the international community's vulnerability to "new and emerging forms of terrorism."** [7]

Operationally, most terrorist organizations view the pandemic as an opportunity to regain momentum. The diversion of government attention and resources to combating the pandemic and enforcing lockdowns has allowed terrorist organizations to increase their attacks, with the aim of regaining or enhancing pre-pandemic operational momentum. However, the ability of terrorist organizations to sustain their recent offensive will rely on many factors, including most notably **the spread of COVID-19 among their ranks, as well as the ranks of the security forces fighting them.**

Not all terrorist groups are responding similarly to the pandemic. While some are addressing its repercussions, others are dismissing it altogether. Terrorist groups have also had to face the choice between maintaining violence levels or reducing them and enabling access to aid for affected populations. Boko Haram is opting to ignore social distancing measures, has resumed operations and is organizing prayers at mosques. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria first argued that COVID-19 is just a hoax, but later on adopted measures specifically urging its followers to adopt precautionary measures such as handwashing and wearing facial masks.

Meanwhile, Al-Shabaab in Somalia and the Taliban in Afghanistan have adopted untraditional positions by using the pandemic as an opportunity to boost their governance efforts. They have been proactively delivering aid to local populations, and even inviting international humanitarian organizations to operate in areas under their control.

Terrorist groups have grappled with how to position themselves during the crisis vis-a-vis the government and the populations in the areas they control. Due to constricted government resources and diminished state capacity to deliver basic goods and services in some areas, groups could potentially gain massive political capital by filling this vacuum and providing aid to affected communities. However, as of yet, there have not been any noteworthy examples of terrorist groups being able to deliver advanced medical care and equipment to those in critical condition.

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[7]   "Terrorist Groups Must Not Be Allowed to Exploit 'Fragilities' Caused by Global Health Pandemic," 6 July 2020 – UN News, last accessed on 13 July 2020 – https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/07/1067751

In Africa, terrorist groups have exploited the pandemic to step up their military operations and expand their territorial footprint. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database, **violent attacks in sub-Saharan Africa increased by 37 percent** between mid-March and mid-April––the one month period after the World Health Organization declared the virus a global pandemic on 11 March 2020.

Terrorist groups have also exploited the pandemic in their propaganda to mobilize support. African affiliates of the **Islamic State and al-Qaeda** tailored a general message claiming that the pandemic is a manifestation of God's wrath against the West, and have localized this message to different contexts in Africa. **Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin** stated that COVID-19 is a punishment for France's operations in the Sahel, while **Boko Haram**'s leader, Abu Bakr Shekhau, stated that the restrictions imposed by the Nigerian government, such as physical and social distancing was an upfront assault on Muslims, urging his followers to resume prayers at mosques. [8]

Terrorist groups in Africa continue to destabilize the Sahel region and fuel inter-communal violence. This is evident in the **Liptako Gourma region,** [9] which has witnessed an uptick in attacks by extremist groups linked to both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, pushing further south and taking control of more territory. **Chad** has also witnessed its deadliest attack to date by Boko Haram, which resulted in the killing of almost 100 soldiers. [10]

Moreover, **Niger has lost a huge number of troops due to assaults carried out by the Islamic State.**

In **Mali, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin attacked Tarkint military outpost in the Gao region in the north, killing 29 soldiers.** [11] Insurgents have also kidnapped Malian opposition leader Soumaila Cisse, who remains in their custody till today. [12] Furthermore, over 100 peacekeepers from the **UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)** have been infected with coronavirus, exacerbating an already extremely challenging security situation as armed groups are attempting to capitalize on the health emergency.

In **Burkina Faso, threats have spread from the north to the east and southwest regions of the country.** Some of the areas that were previously under the control of the G5 Sahel forces are now no longer accessible as terrorist groups have taken over control. **Djibo town has been under siege** for a number of weeks during the period of the pandemic, which has hampered civilian access to humanitarian and medical aid. [13]

However, despite the aforementioned reports of heightened military operations and attacks by terrorist groups since the onset of the pandemic, **the medium and long-term impacts of such attacks cannot yet be discerned. This is due to the as-of-yet undetermined effect of the pandemic on physical capacity and resources on both sides.** For example, Burkina Faso's army, already ill-equipped and struggling to stem violence, has been hampered by the virus itself.

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8   "Boko Haram's Shekau Labels Anti-COVID-19 Measures an Attack on Islam in Nigeria," Council on Foreign Relations, last accessed on 13 July 2020 – https://www.cfr.org/blog/boko-harams-shekau-labels-anti-covid-19-measures-attack-islam-nigeria

9   Tri-border area between Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali, which has been particularly prone to attacks by extremist groups linked to both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

10   "Boko Haram Kills Almost 100 Soldiers in Seven-Hour Attack in Chad," 25 March 2020 – France 24, last accessed on 13 July 2020 – https://www.france24.com/en/20200325-boko-haram-kills-almost-100-soldiers-in-a-seven-hour-attack-in-chad

11   "CrisisWatch: April Alerts and March Trends 2020," 31 March 2020 – Crisis Group, last accessed on 13 July 2020 – https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/april-alerts-and-march-trends-2020

12   "Malian Opposition Leader Kidnapped Ahead of General Elections," 26 March 2020 – France 24, last accessed on 13 July 2020 – https://www.france24.com/en/20200326-malian-opposition-leader-kidnapped-ahead-of-general-elections

13   "French, Spanish and African Leaders Meet to Combat Extremism," The Washington Post, last accessed on 13 July 2020 – https://www.washingtonpost.com/

While it continues its basic operations in the north and along the border in the Liptako Gourma region, it has a few trained medical staff and the troops have no personal protective gear or other preventative supplies, and the vast majority remain in their barracks as a protective measure.

Furthermore, some **African countries have closed off their borders**, such as the border between Mali and Mauritania, leading to the **postponement of security operations**. African governments have further been pressured by the urgent need to respond to the pandemic itself. In Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia, governments have deployed their own **militaries to enforce lockdowns and curfews**. Relatedly, Troop Contributing Countries have also decreased their military and police contributions outside their territories; most notably, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) has seen a reduction in troops. **The impact of such on the security and political landscape will only be fully grasped when the pandemic has subsided.**

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The Centrality of Governance and Breaking Institutional Silos

Times of crises, such as the current pandemic, represent a governance challenge. The legitimacy and credibility of terrorist organizations in seized territories largely depends on their ability to provide a more efficient alternative to government. This is particularly true for border zone communities where state presence is limited or weak. Thus, there must be a deliberate effort to improve engagement and dialogue at the communal, local and national levels, as well as the inclusion of religious leaders, traditional authorities and civil society organizations to validate and address their concerns.

It is equally important for governments to invest in cultivating relationships of trust between security forces and local communities.

Furthermore, coordination and breaking silos between state institutions is paramount in the fight against extremism in Africa, especially during the time of crises. This includes complementing security measures with non-security approaches, including preventive and development efforts, and upholding criminal and transitional justice—founded on respect for human rights and the rule of law.

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The Pandemic's Lasting Health and Socioeconomic Implications

The health and socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are not only devastating, but also long-lasting. Government revenues and capacities will be limited for years to come. Together with the massive economic downturn caused by the pandemic, and people being pushed into poverty, it is foreseen that a full recovery will only be possible when a vaccine is made available as a public good. In light of such constricted government resources and huge economic stimulus packages being passed, **it is imperative that governments monitor funds being allocated correctly, leaving no space for corruption and ensuring that assistance reaches target beneficiaries.**

Moreover, the global economic impact of COVID-19 is likely to have a negative impact on international funding for capacity building, particularly in Africa. States reorganizing and reconsidering international aid spending, which is key to preventing and countering extremism conducive to terrorism programming, as well as reconsidering contributions to multilateral armed forces and institutions, will likely pose a challenge to multilateralism, already exacerbated by the pandemic.[14]

The complexity of the aforementioned challenges makes it imperative for African states to devise context-specific responses on both the short -and long-term. Peace and security, development, humanitarian, health and criminal justice actors should ensure that their responses are aligned across the peace continuum, not only to address the immediate implications of the COVID-19 crisis, but to also address structural vulnerabilities and gaps that exacerbate other security threats such as terrorism and extremism. In this regard, the pivotal role played by African governments and communities in leading and owning the process cannot be emphasized enough.

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14   "The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism, counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism." – Publications, United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee (blog), last accessed on 13 July 2020 -
https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/resources/publications/#a552f9ea3f055ce0a

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BEYOND COVID-19: REFLECTIONS ON THE WAY FORWARD

The COVID-19 pandemic should be viewed, first and foremost, as a governance challenge: A challenge that is laying bare existing structural and institutional vulnerabilities, with terrorist groups vying to be viable competitors for alternative governance. Competition around governance between the state and non-state armed groups has reached a far greater level than before the onset of the pandemic. Recognition of this by governments is essential for long term planning and execution of government responses in a manner that does not only respond to immediate needs, but also lays the ground for sustaining peace.

Investing in prevention: By magnifying existing vulnerabilities and grievances, the pandemic serves as a strong reminder of the imperative for a preventative approach based on good governance and inclusive sustainable development that addresses the root causes and structural drivers of extremism leading to terrorism. Preventive efforts at the local level need to focus on strengthening community cohesion and the social contract. In this regard, interventions must be context-specific and tailored to the specific needs of local communities.

A people-centered whole of society approach: Governments must exert a deliberate effort to engage with communities and win their trust. Participatory approaches that entail dialoguing with religious and tribal leaders and civil society are paramount in the planning and implementation of national and communal interventions. Local actors are the first line of defense, especially in border areas and places where the state is weak. Inclusive politics, policies and decision-making processes are critical to addressing real and perceived grievances, and preventing their mobilization to violence. In this regard, inclusivity must not be regarded as a box-checking exercise, and local actors should be fully and effectively included as agents of change within the context of broader post-COVID-19 recovery efforts.

A whole of government approach: It is imperative that states undertake integrated, coherent and coordinated policy responses that leverage the complementary mandates, resources and expertise of various government institutions. This requires political will and leadership to bridge the institutional silos that hamper effective coordination across state institutions in their fight against terrorism, particularly with regards to the fragmentation between the military and criminal justice systems.

Existing regional tools and structures should be operationalized to support national efforts: African member states should make use of existing African instruments and tools, such as the AU transitional justice policy framework, which put forward the imperative for truth seeking and reparation to support national efforts in the fight against terrorism.

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