

# VIRAL EXTREMISM

COVID-19, Nontraditional Threats,  
and US Counterterrorism Policy

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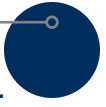
A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JS', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jonathan Schroden, Research Program Director  
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# TO THE READER



At the time of writing—over a year into the COVID-19 pandemic—almost no part of life has gone untouched by the virus, and it is not clear what the next year might hold. Although vaccines are rapidly being rolled out, new strains of the virus are emerging and spreading at a steady rate. Historical perspective gained over time will assess the efficacy of the global response to this lethal virus. What already is clear, however, is that the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the complexities of safeguarding our national security while responding to a global health crisis.

The far-reaching economic downturn, impacts to public health, and disruption of the cultural and social fabric of communities caused by the pandemic have clear implications for our national and homeland security. Militaries around the world have scaled back operations, postponed exercises, and curtailed engagements, and the US National Guard is engaged directly in pandemic response and vaccine distribution. At the same time, feelings of loneliness, disenfranchisement, frustration, and anger—the result of social isolation, economic uncertainty, and the strain of living through a pandemic—have created opportunities for terrorists to exploit both at home and abroad.

This policy brief, developed in collaboration with counterterrorism (CT) experts at CNA, seeks to answer the question of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected domestic and international violent extremist organizations (VEOs), the US CT community, and the ability of US partners to support CT operations. Importantly, it provides a snapshot of how pandemics and other nontraditional threats can drive a cycle of violence in the future. This brief concludes that nearly every facet of VEO activities—environment, operations, resources, recruitment, and strategy—has benefitted from the chaotic and widespread effects of the pandemic. Conversely, US and partner forces tasked with containing the threat posed by terrorist groups have been affected negatively across these same five areas.

We cannot forecast when another pandemic will emerge, but it is critical that our nation effectively prepare for that day. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted gaps in national and global pandemic response plans, the need for immediate and stronger coordination at the state level, and the necessity of federal leadership to contain a virus that crosses borders easily. It also has underlined how our approach to CT strategy must adapt as nontraditional security threats simultaneously affect the US, our allies and partners, and our adversaries.

This pandemic is occurring during a time of shifting paradigms in US domestic and foreign policy, with an increased emphasis being placed on great power competition (GPC), pushing CT out of US foreign policy headlines. The economic consequences of COVID-19 have the potential to accelerate that dynamic as budgets shrink in the coming years and decisions are made to divert funds from CT efforts. Such decisions, however, would be detrimental to our national security, since it is vital for CT and GPC efforts to be pursued in tandem.

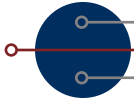
There is much we still do not know about how the COVID-19 crisis will unfold. However, it already has demonstrated that nontraditional threats such as pandemics are critical CT concerns, and we must ensure that our CT strategies take them fully into account. The protection of our national security does not pause during a pandemic.

General James T. Conway, USMC (Ret.),  
34th Commandant of the Marine Corps

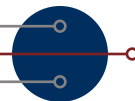
Lieutenant General Mike Nagata, USA (Ret.),  
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**TO THE READER ..... I**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY..... 1**

    COVID-19 Impacts on Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs)  
    and Counterterrorism (CT) Operations .....1

    Implications for US CT Strategy .....2

    Actions the US and US Partners Can Take Now.....3

    The Project Team .....4

    Our Research Questions and Methodology .....5

**FINDINGS..... 6**

    Environment.....6

    Operations.....7

    Resources.....9

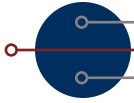
    Personnel .....10

    Strategy.....13

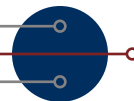
**CONCLUSIONS ..... 14**

**RECOMMENDATIONS..... 15**

**ENDNOTES..... 17**



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### COVID-19 IMPACTS ON VIOLENT EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS (VEOS) AND COUNTERTERRORISM (CT) OPERATIONS

The unfolding COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on the wide-ranging disruption that nontraditional threats such as pandemics can have on the US economy, military, diplomatic corps, and national security apparatus. The US, its partners, and its competitors have tried to curb the spread of the virus by closing schools, workplaces, social gathering spots, and borders. Militaries have scaled back operations, postponed exercises, and curtailed engagements. Economic futures remain uncertain. Low-income workers in industrialized countries have been disproportionately affected by rolling shutdowns and stay-at-home orders, and wealth inequality is increasing.

Social interactions, such as religious gatherings, family celebrations, athletic activities, and concerts have been forced online or suspended. For many, extended periods of isolation and loneliness are a hidden side effect of the virus, with experts predicting a mental health crisis to come. Although the vaccine rollout is underway in many parts of the world, it will be many more months—possibly years—before the entire global population is vaccinated and a return to “normal” becomes possible.

The pandemic, moreover, has affected both violent extremist organization (VEO) operations and US capacity to conduct counterterrorism (CT) intelligence gathering, analysis, and activities. It has increased

COVID-19 has highlighted how pandemics significantly favor VEOs, providing them with a new global landscape of vulnerable populations to exploit.

global instability—political, economic, and social—which will almost certainly benefit terrorist and extremist groups. Jihadi movements such as ISIS and far-right groups such as the Russian Imperial Movement thrive in environments of uncertainty and chaos. COVID-19 has contributed to instability and expanded opportunities for VEOs to recruit and operate.

Accordingly, there has been an observable uptick in VEO activity in places such as sub-Saharan Africa, West Africa, Iraq, and Syria; in addition, movements such as ISIS and Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) have adjusted their rhetoric by claiming that the virus is divine punishment for unbelievers. In the US, citizen frustration with COVID-19 mitigation efforts drove (thwarted) attacks against public officials in New Mexico, a hospital in Missouri, and police headquarters in Orlando, Florida, and extremists have also encouraged followers to disrupt National Guard activities. In addition to COVID-related violence in the US, rising political unrest, including the January 6, 2021, storming of the US Capitol, has drawn attention to domestic security issues.

Additionally, COVID-19 is affecting US and partner-nation operations, and has the potential to affect readiness negatively. In 2020, many military training opportunities and large-scale exercises were canceled in whole or part, including North Atlantic

This paper reflects a first look at the impact of COVID-19 on violent extremism. Our research is based on verifiable events since early 2020 when the pandemic took hold. To guide policy-making on this critical issue, our goal is to provide a snapshot of where we are today (early 2021) and informed projections on the possible impacts of pandemic and other nontraditional threats.

Treaty Organization (NATO) Defender-Europe 2020, African Lion 2020, Exercise Phoenix Express 20, and Operation Cold Response 2020. COVID-19 mitigation efforts designed to keep service members healthy have slowed or halted deployments, recruitment and training cycles have been disrupted and delayed, and military personnel are being deployed to provide aid domestically.

It is not yet clear how long this pandemic environment—one increasingly hospitable to terrorist groups and adverse to US preparations—will continue. What is clear, though, is the need to reevaluate US CT and countering violent extremism (CT/CVE) policies in light of the challenges posed by nontraditional threats. The body of this report presents options for adapting US CT strategy to better address the current and future pandemics.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR US CT STRATEGY

Approximately one year into this pandemic, evidence strongly suggests that the net impact of COVID-19 on CT operations for US and partner nations has been decidedly unfavorable. Rather, the pandemic strongly favors VEOs, providing them with increased opportunity to exploit vulnerable

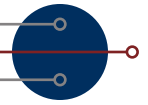
populations and operate with fewer constraints. At the same time, COVID-19 hinders governments, personnel, and organizations engaged in CT activities. Such impacts are not specific to COVID-19, since similar ones will arise should future public health emergencies create environments hospitable to VEOs. An analysis of the current crisis, however, yields the following major themes, capturing how COVID-19 has affected VEOs and CT operations.

**COVID-19 has created more opportunities for recruitment to all types of extremist organizations. It likely will result in notable tactical shifts for VEOs both operationally and financially, and it will amplify the risk factors for radicalization in both industrialized and developing countries.**

As the pandemic continues, VEOs will adapt. For instance, they may attempt to exacerbate feelings of frustration with lockdowns and perceived government failures while exploiting emerging black markets. Targets of opportunity for terrorist attacks increasingly will shift as civilians spend more time at home and large-scale venues remain empty. In addition, VEOs may interfere with the distribution of essential services and resources, or, conversely, seek to establish credibility by delivering medical and social services that local governments

The pandemic strongly favors VEOs, providing them with more opportunities to exploit vulnerable populations and fewer constraints on operations.





struggle to provide. Although it is unlikely that VEOs will meet all demands generated by the COVID-19 crisis for specific populations, their reputations will be burnished if they can provide even basic supplies (e.g., personal protective equipment (PPE), food, water) that a local government cannot.

**COVID-19 will affect all who engage in and support CT and preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) operations.** It is tempting to solely focus on how COVID-19 is impacting US and partner nations' abilities to conduct *direct military* CT operations. However, the pandemic is affecting a far broader ecosystem of personnel, resources, and capabilities (including the intelligence community, the State Department, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and international organizations). It is consequently unavoidable that interagency and multinational efforts in CT or P/CVE will be forced to evolve as contributing nations respond to the domestic demands of COVID-19.

**Violent unrest fed by COVID-19 anger has drawn attention to both domestic terrorist threats and the relationship between international terrorist groups and domestic terrorism.** With the US domestic environment increasingly characterized by partisan division fueled in part by frustration related to COVID-19 response efforts, government agencies have expressed increased concern about the threat of domestic terrorism by extremists originating in the US and/or influenced by groups outside the US.

**COVID-19 impacts—especially anticipated funding cuts—may inadvertently result in the acceptance of a false dichotomy pitting CT against GPC.** COVID-19 has the potential to hasten a shift in priorities away from CT operations and toward a focus on GPC. Although the national security community may currently articulate CT and GPC as discrete threats,

emerging areas of overlap, such as competition for relationships with CT partners by GPC adversaries, may be obscured if both CT and GPC do not continue to be areas of focus.

**The perception that the US has lost credibility as a moral and institutional leader may have a long-term impact on its ability to lead global initiatives in its strategic interest.** A global perception that the US failed to effectively respond to the virus within its own borders, and abrogated its role as a global leader, has undermined US credibility. This perception may lead partners to question the ability of the US to lead on other issues of global importance and/or may create an excuse for nations to refrain from joining US-led efforts.

## ACTIONS THE US AND US PARTNERS CAN TAKE NOW

Given these trends, we recommend the following actions for US and US partners.

**Amplify the role of prevention in the US CT strategy.** The 2018 US National Strategy for Counterterrorism (NSCT) highlights non-kinetic CT activities more than any of its predecessor documents. Nevertheless, the US must go further and actualize the NSCT's call for a prevention architecture aimed at thwarting terrorist radicalization and recruitment. The impacts of COVID-19 and the ability of VEOs to benefit from a pandemic environment highlight the need for a comprehensive terrorism prevention plan. It is critical that US policy prioritize prevention, intervention, reintegration, and counter-recidivism initiatives, recognizing that the current environment has made a larger group of people vulnerable to radicalization.

**Restructure pandemic response protocols—such as planning, exercises, responses, and recovery—to include CT and P/CVE components, and incorporate nontraditional threats such as pandemics into US CT policy.** The COVID-19 pandemic has made clear that nontraditional threats, such as pandemics, natural disasters, extreme weather, supply chain failure, and natural resource scarcity, have major implications for CT and P/CVE efforts. US policy to address both nontraditional threats and terrorism should emphasize such events create unstable environments in which VEOs can flourish and act.

**Recognize and plan for the impact of pandemics on VEO targeting. This may include countering emergent targets of opportunity while expanding counterterrorist financing (CTF) efforts to shut down funding streams made possible by COVID-19.**

As states enacted COVID-19 restrictions, which included bans on large gatherings, the remaining locations still open became more vulnerable targets of opportunity. In addition, as borders closed and trafficking routes became inaccessible, terrorist organizations were forced to diversify their income streams. These changes necessitate a shift in how the CT community identifies and protects targets of opportunity and counters new VEO funding streams.

**Adapt US CT strategy and policy to reflect the growing threat of domestic terrorism, including both extremists solely originating in the US and those influenced by groups outside the US.** Further integrate Department of Defense (DOD), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and state and local CT information sharing to respond to the growing domestic terror threat and the increased likelihood of domestic radicalization.

**Recommit to partnerships and demonstrate steadfast commitment to bilateral and multilateral engagements on pandemic-related and nonpandemic-related initiatives.** As vaccines are developed and nations across the globe pivot from response to recovery, there is an opportunity for the US to lead, build relationships through collaboration and support, strengthen allies, and reengage with the global community. Recovery activities (e.g., vaccine distribution, humanitarian support, foreign assistance) offer a clear opportunity for the US to work in coordination with allies and international organizations. This engagement also will affirm US commitment to long-standing partnerships critical to responding to future VEO threats.

## THE PROJECT TEAM

CNA is grateful for the support of General James T. Conway, USMC (Ret.), 34th Commandant of the Marine Corps; Lieutenant General Mike Nagata, USA (Ret.), former Director of Strategic Operational Planning for the US National Counterterrorism Center; Vice Admiral Frank Pandolfe, USN (Ret.), former Director for Strategic Plans and Policy (J-5) on the Joint Staff and Assistant to the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff; and Lieutenant General Thomas J. Trask, USAF (Ret.), former Vice Commander of United States Special Operations Command, who bring decades of US CT operational and strategic leadership to this policy brief. To conduct this analysis, these flag and general officers collaborated with CNA analysts who support the defense and security community with analytics on the tactics, techniques, and procedures of VEOs and terrorist groups.

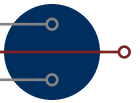


Photo by Staff Sgt. Kimberly Hill, California National Guard

## OUR RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

Our objectives for this brief were to answer the following critical questions:

1. How is COVID-19, a nontraditional threat, affecting the actions and operations of VEOs, US forces, and US partner forces?
2. What are the implications for future pandemic planning and response?
3. Do these impacts require revisions to US CT policy? If so, what revisions should be made?

Because this policy brief is being developed while the pandemic is unfolding, our analysis is largely deductive. Our approach brings together open-source data from reports, articles, and case studies on the impact of COVID-19 on VEO activity, analysis of VEO activity during prior disease outbreaks, and interviews and discussions with CT and pandemic experts. In addition to aggregating work on the wide-ranging impacts of the pandemic, we used these data to

generate informed projections of the future effects of COVID-19 on VEOs, the US, and US partners. Although it will be years before the pandemic's impact on the global economy, public health, and global security can be fully assessed, this policy brief presents a snapshot of the observed and predicted impact of COVID-19—a nontraditional threat—on VEO, US, and partner postures and activities approximately one year into the pandemic.

## FINDINGS

*To highlight the breadth and depth of the observed and anticipated pandemic-related impacts, our findings are organized into five thematic areas: environment, operations, resources, personnel, and strategy.*

### ENVIRONMENT

*The findings that follow capture changes to the political, military, economic, social, information, infrastructure, and physical environment—the operating environment—brought on by COVID-19. The findings highlight how pandemics introduce new vulnerabilities that strain US and US partner capacity.*

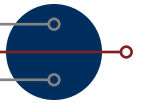
**COVID-19 increases global instability that VEOs may benefit from and amplify.** VEOs thrive in environments of instability and chaos. COVID-19 has threatened the stability of previously secure and insecure countries, creating opportunities for exploitation.

This is both a domestic and an international issue. In the Sahel, VEOs have been observed attempting to use the pandemic to undermine state authority as governments struggle to respond to the challenge.<sup>1</sup> In the US, a neo-Nazi group encouraged supporters “to incite panic” through such actions as “discharging firearms in cities and putting bullet-sized holes into car windows,” and white supremacists on Telegram, a messaging app, shared instructions explaining how to overwhelm New York City’s text-message-based 311 system by anonymously sending inappropriate photos. They encouraged others to disrupt National Guard efforts by causing panic with firecrackers and homemade explosives.<sup>2</sup>

**COVID-19 has forced many governments—including those of the US and partner nations—to prioritize domestic health and security initiatives related to COVID-19, while also attempting to balance internal and external security threats.**

In the US and Europe, COVID-19 has been accompanied by a rise in hate crimes, placing an increased demand on agencies that might otherwise be engaged in CT efforts. The Asian Pacific Planning and Policy Council’s “Stop AAPI [Asian American Pacific Islander] Hate” program recorded more than 2,500 anti-Asian incidents in the US between March and August 2020, of which almost 9 percent (nearly 225) were physical assaults. People of Asian descent also have been attacked in the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Spain, and Italy.<sup>3</sup> In other parts of the world, the demand for enforcing curfews and other COVID-19-related requirements has strained governmental resources, increasing the opportunity for terrorist action. For example, a riot at an under-resourced Syrian prison resulted in the escape of ISIS militants. Similarly, a decrease in community policing in Nigeria and Sri Lanka has been exploited by militant groups.<sup>4</sup>

**COVID-19 may be used by authoritarian actors to increase or secure power.** Authoritarian leaders around the world could use COVID-19 as an excuse to oppress political opponents and consolidate power. Such actions would complicate US efforts to partner on CT and P/CVE efforts (especially if partner nation security forces committed violations of human rights and triggered the Leahy Law) and could



potentially increase the risk of radicalization in already vulnerable countries.

Concerning examples of such behavior have already been observed. In China, a new system assigns individuals a color based on their COVID-19 risk status, and the locations of those who are labeled red are sent to the police. In Niger, the government extended rules prohibiting protest by citing the risk of COVID-19. And in Hungary, the prime minister asked parliament to extend a state of emergency that increases his power.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, COVID-19 countermeasures, such as contact tracing and the prohibition of large gatherings, can also serve as opportunities to monitor civilian movements and prevent protests.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Donors and NGOs may struggle to provide funding for stabilization programs in vulnerable countries.**

The loss of such funding could result in increased instability, further straining already overextended governments, and creating an environment hospitable to VEOs.

The potential reduction in funding for humanitarian efforts, response and recovery initiatives, market and job growth programs, and infrastructure building efforts in emerging economies is significant. OXFAM, for example, has laid off almost 30 percent of its staff and withdrawn from 18 countries since the start of

COVID-19, and the UK has cut its aid budget by £2.9 billion (\$3.7 billion).<sup>7</sup> With fewer humanitarian support personnel on the ground and less financial assistance from wealthy nations, already vulnerable nations may struggle to maintain security and meet basic needs, especially in places with significant populations of refugees and displaced persons.<sup>8</sup>

## OPERATIONS

*Mitigation efforts designed to reduce the spread of COVID-19, including limiting travel and enforcing social distancing, have created significant challenges for CT activities and disrupted long-standing patterns of behavior. The findings in this category highlight the impact that these shifts will have at the operational level for VEOs, the US, and US partners.*

#### **COVID-19 has led to, and will likely continue to produce, notable tactical shifts within VEO groups.**

Targets of opportunity for terrorist attacks will shift as people spend more time at home. VEOs may attempt to amplify feelings of frustration with lockdowns and perceived government failures, they may feel inspired to explore biological weapons, and they may interfere with the distribution of essential services and resources.

**“On bioterrorism—we are unprepared. The pandemic—and the chaos and disruption seen both locally and globally—may provide an unfortunate template for terrorist groups. Previously the perceived risk of terrorists leveraging biological weapons was low, reflecting a reluctance to engage in this tactic. It is worth exploring whether VEOs’ philosophy may have changed due to COVID-19.”**

*General James T. Conway, USMC (Ret.)*

In the pandemic environment, VEOs likely will find new targets. These could include attacking officials enforcing lockdowns, hospitals and medical centers, and grocery stores and markets.<sup>9</sup> Since March 2020, the following incidents have occurred: (1) a man frustrated with COVID-19 restrictions was arrested for threatening the New Mexico governor, (2) a man in Missouri was killed in a shootout with the FBI when they approached him about a plan to bomb a local hospital out of frustration over the local government's inability to stop the spread of COVID-19, and (3) a man in Florida, frustrated about COVID-19-related job losses, was arrested for planning to attack the Orlando police headquarters.<sup>10</sup> In the UK, the national coordinator of the PREVENT program acknowledged that ISIS supporters were "encouraging people to target the places that appear most vulnerable."<sup>11</sup> VEOs in developing countries also might disrupt the distribution of resources and vaccines.<sup>12</sup> During the cholera outbreak in Yemen, Houthi rebels interfered with the distribution of supplies and vaccines by demanding medical supplies for their own personnel and suggesting that the vaccines were dangerous.<sup>13</sup>

**VEOs may increase their operational tempo to take advantage of instability spurred by the pandemic.**

During the 2016–2020 cholera outbreak in Yemen and the 2019 Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), terrorists affiliated with ISIS gained territory. Following this pattern, existing data show that the number of terrorist attacks has increased in some regions since the outbreak of COVID-19.

Analysis shows that violent attacks in sub-Saharan African hot spots increased by 37 percent from March to April 2020, and that ISIS increased attacks in sub-Saharan Africa, West Africa, Iraq, and Syria, while continuing to operate in the Maldives, the Philippines, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Egypt.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Boko Haram has increased attacks in West Africa and has asserted control over new territory in Mozambique.<sup>15</sup>

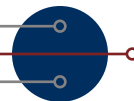
At the same time, an April 2020 DHS memo warned of an increase in domestic terrorism in response to COVID-19.<sup>16</sup>

**Many opportunities for the CT community to collaborate in person—ranging from local roundtables, to military exercises, to diplomatic exchanges—have been canceled.**

Although some of these activities have been replaced with online alternatives, this shift may ultimately degrade the quality of collaborative efforts and result in partner nations having fewer skills to engage in effective CT and P/CVE efforts.

COVID-19 has limited in-person collaboration between the US military and key allies: the NATO Defender-Europe 2020 military exercise was canceled, Mobile Education and Training Teams for the second half of 2020 and first quarter of 2021 were canceled, and a significant number of large-scale exercises were canceled (e.g., African Lion 2020, the African maritime Exercise Phoenix Express 20, Operation Cold Response 2020 in the Arctic tundra, and US-Israel missile defense exercise Juniper Cobra 20).<sup>17</sup> The United Nations (UN) General Assembly also was held remotely, and many other interfaith dialogues, community gatherings, and local initiatives that inform, amplify, and implement CT and P/CVE efforts have been canceled or postponed.<sup>18</sup>

**COVID-19 may result in changes to operational decision-making without concurrent shifts in the underlying security issues that drove the original decisions.** Competing demands for military personnel because of COVID-19 have resulted in forces being withdrawn or relocated from forward locations without changes to the environment that drove their original deployments. This dynamic has the potential to weaken ongoing CT efforts and decrease access to vital intelligence.



US forces, for example, were withdrawn from Iraq because of COVID-19. British forces scheduled to deploy to the Sahel were held at home. Furthermore, British Army Training Unit Kenya, an organization “which provides counterterrorism training and other skills,” was called back to the UK. Ireland similarly recalled its troops participating in a UN peacekeeping mission in Mali, despite the UN call to freeze rotations. And the UN suspended international peacekeeper deployments for months, disrupting missions to seven countries, including Mali, the DRC, and South Sudan.<sup>19</sup>

**Ongoing multinational efforts engaged in countering terrorism and violent extremism may struggle to maintain current levels of personnel and resources, given domestic demands for pandemic response.** This is likely to degrade the ability of these organizations to operate effectively.

For example, analysts have speculated that nations contributing to such efforts as the Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram and the African Union Mission to Somalia may be forced to reduce their contributions as they struggle with domestic crises.<sup>20</sup>



UN Photo/Tobin Jones

## RESOURCES

*The financial impact of COVID-19 will be felt by all nations, and experts indicate it will take years for the global economy to recover. At the same time, disruptions to global supply chains and ravenous demand for previously unremarkable items (e.g., hand sanitizer, PPE) have created a series of resource crises around the world. The findings below address how the cost of responding effectively to COVID-19 may negatively affect the US and partners CT efforts while creating opportunities that benefit VEOs.*

**VEOs may use the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to bolster the legitimacy of their organizations by delivering medical and social services that local governments struggle to provide.** Although VEOs are unlikely to be able to fully meet all demands of the COVID-19 crisis, pandemics create opportunities for them to make inroads with even limited resources. The legitimacy of VEOs is already in some degree linked to their ability to control, manage, and distribute resources. If VEOs are able to provide basic supplies (e.g., PPE, food, water) when and where governments cannot, doing so may contribute to their legitimacy.

This is a tested VEO tactic. Al-Shabaab, for example, distributed food and medical supplies during a 2017 famine in Somalia while blaming both the regional government and the international community for their failure to act.<sup>21</sup> In the current crisis, a similar pattern is unfolding.<sup>22</sup> As one report noted, representatives from Tahrir al-Sham, ISIS, and al Qaeda have “sought to demonstrate the efficacy of an ‘Islamic’ response to coronavirus, heralding the effectiveness of their counter-measures through highly visual propaganda of well-managed hospitals and campaigns to clean mosques.”<sup>23</sup>

**COVID-19 has created new black markets**

**that VEOs can exploit.** Although the disruption of supply chains and reduced ability to travel may disrupt VEOs' capability to obtain food, weapons, and other goods, access to new black markets may mitigate some of these losses.

VEOs have been observed attempting to take advantage of the PPE black market, and analysts have noted that the explosion of online activity correlated with stay-at-home orders has increased the potential targets that VEOs might exploit via hacking and theft.<sup>24</sup> In August 2020, the US Department of Justice (DOJ) announced that it had disrupted an ISIS facilitator's efforts to sell counterfeit PPE via a website available to potential customers globally. In fact, one customer in the US had attempted to purchase N95 masks from the website for hospitals, nursing homes, and fire departments. As the DOJ noted, the disruption of this effort "averted the further victimization of those seeking COVID-19 protective gear, and disrupted the continued funding of ISIS."<sup>25</sup>

**The need to direct resources toward the medical and economic demands of COVID-19 has the potential to reduce funding to national security programs.** This action may result not only in an unintentional pivot away from CT and P/CVE efforts (as well as stabilization operations) but also in a short- and long-term degradation of CT and P/CVE operations and capacity worldwide.

NGOs and charities that have traditionally funded P/CVE initiatives have already cut funding because of budgetary concerns and a desire to redirect funds

As the pandemic weakens the ability of governments to secure and distribute supplies and resources to their populations, VEOs have an opportunity to increase their legitimacy through the provision of basic provisions and medical supplies.

toward COVID-19 relief.<sup>26</sup> Although this shift may be temporary, it also may herald a more permanent orientation away from CT and P/CVE funding initiatives. The same pattern, moreover, may occur at the national level, with military budgets being cut to pay bills incurred by the COVID-19 crisis.<sup>27</sup>

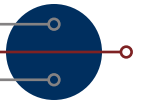
**PERSONNEL**

*The findings below discuss how COVID-19 is affecting populations vulnerable to recruitment by VEOs, raising the potential for radicalization, as well as altering how military, civilian, and intelligence professionals engage in CT.*

**COVID-19 has amplified the risk factors for radicalization in both industrialized and developing countries.**

Analysts and experts have generated a long list of risk factors for radicalization that are exacerbated by the current pandemic. This list includes, but is not limited to: more time spent online, decreased supervision in the form of teacher oversight, increasingly toxic and extremist online content, increased feelings of economic uncertainty, growing anger because of perceived government failures, greater frustration because of seemingly oppressive government responses, increased isolation from friends and feelings of loneliness, and higher levels of stress.<sup>28</sup> It is, as one scholar noted, "a perfect storm for recruitment and radicalization."<sup>29</sup> This issue is not limited to developing or vulnerable countries; as one study noted, US "engagement with violent extremist content online in states with extended stay-at-home orders grew 21 percent in early April 2020 compared with the eight previous months."<sup>30</sup>





**VEOs will exploit the COVID-19 crisis to further their ideological and political agendas, and will integrate current events into existing narratives to substantiate their predictions and calls to action.**

Perceptions of poor government response to COVID-19 may increase VEO recruitment. Such increased recruitment actually may become more acute in democratic nations where both COVID-19 rates and expectations of government performance are high. These perceptions may, by extension, make these countries uniquely vulnerable to extremist ideologies and violent radicalization.

they are responsible for.” The Houthis have claimed COVID-19 is a US bioterror weapon, and a far-right website called on extremists in Finland to blame the financial crisis caused by COVID-19 on immigrants and “globalist criminals.”<sup>31</sup> The leader of the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement wrote that he felt “great excitement” about COVID-19 because it could lead to a “national uprising.”<sup>32</sup>

In addition, far-right groups are using the pandemic to justify attacks against minority ethnic communities inaccurately labeled as responsible for the spread of the disease. And both Islamist and far-right extremists

The factors that characterize a world caught in the midst of a global pandemic— isolation, perceived government failure, stress, and increased time spent online—are uniquely troubling from a radicalization perspective, and, while no single factor will be a direct cause of radicalization to violence, the aggregate is cause for significant concern.

A few examples of this trend follow. ISIS initially asserted that the virus was a punishment for China in response to its mistreatment of Uighar Muslims. However, as the virus spread, ISIS began to describe it as a punishment from God for the West, with one ISIS supporter describing COVID-19 as a “soldier for Allah.” JNIM claimed that it was a punishment for French forces because they support CT operations in Mali. Boko Haram’s leader claimed that government measures to contain COVID-19 were part of a war on Muslims, and al Qaeda described it as a punishment from God that “exposed the brittleness of a global economy dominated by the United States” and highlighted the “callousness” of Western leaders who “are least concerned about the health of the societies

have described government responses to the pandemic as a war on the people, suggesting that the pandemic is a harbinger of a new world.<sup>33</sup>

**COVID-19 has increased the pool of individuals vulnerable to recruitment and radicalization in both the short and long term.** The environment created by the COVID-19 crisis has not only amplified the risk factors for radicalization—time spent online and feelings of anger and frustration—but has also increased the number of people experiencing factors for radicalization.

For example, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 3 percent of US school-aged children were homeschooled. Six months into the pandemic,

in August 2020, data indicated that 93 percent of US school-aged children had engaged in some type of distance learning.<sup>34</sup> In some instances, this practice has led to unsupervised access to the internet, decreased parental or teacher oversight, increased feelings of loneliness, and/or increased access to extremist or violent content. Critically, this issue is not unique to the US (since more than 90 percent of countries globally have adopted some type of remote learning since the pandemic began). Nor is it unique to school-aged children, given the increased rates of unemployment and government stay-at-home orders.<sup>35</sup>

**VEOs will be forced to compete with COVID-19 for headlines.** Since March 2020, COVID-19 has dominated the headlines. This situation affects VEOs, which derive their influence and power from their ability to spread fear. The impact of this shift is difficult to assess given the lack of access to internal VEO discussion on the topic. Although this shift in media attention may decrease VEO influence and power by depriving them of the capacity to control the media cycle, pandemic-dominated headlines may compel VEOs to engage in more gruesome or deadly attacks to wrest back this control.

Although there is not yet evidence to suggest that a desire to break through COVID-19 coverage motivated the attacker implicated in the stabbing deaths at the Notre Dame Basilica in Nice in October 2020, the near beheading was so sensational that it temporarily displaced both global COVID-19 and US election coverage.<sup>36</sup>

**COVID-19 outbreaks on US vessels and at military installations have the potential to compromise US readiness.** Outbreaks can reduce the pool of healthy service members available for duty, and the *risk* of COVID-19 outbreaks (and the attendant need to protect US service members from this risk) necessitates

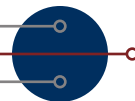
the adoption of safety provisions that can introduce delays in terms of deployment and response.

Though the outbreak on USS Theodore Roosevelt drew early attention to the spread of COVID-19 on ships, military bases are also relatively high-risk sites with “a combustible demographic mix of young and older people in a dense institutional setting,” and high caseloads have been observed on bases across a number of states.<sup>37</sup>

**Domestic COVID-19 demands have decreased the number of active duty personnel available to engage in CT and operations.** A smaller number of military, peacekeeping, and NGO personnel relative to pre-COVID times could increase environmental insecurity and instability in partner countries.

The US military has played “a significant role in providing triage support to state and federal government civilian agency capacities...[and] the National Guard and the US Army Corps of Engineers have deployed assets, including medical equipment, field hospitals, multiple hospital ships [including USNS Comfort and USNS Mercy], and personnel to address the domestic carnage that COVID-19 has left in its wake.”<sup>38</sup> Also, in late August 2020, reports suggested that nearly 20,000 National Guard members, in all 50 states, were contributing to the COVID-19 response, and by December 2020, National Guard members were distributing vaccines in 26 states.<sup>39</sup> Although these deployments are critical, they disrupt preexisting plans and decrease the pool of personnel available for non-COVID-19 military activities.

**The cancellation and delay of recruitment and training cycles have carryover effects for force readiness and CT preparedness.**<sup>40</sup> The impact of COVID-19 on recruitment and training is significant: US military academies have adopted online learning, the onboarding of new US military recruits has been



disrupted and adjusted, the German military has been instructed to work from home if possible, and the French defence minister warned that “each month that passes without recruitment is the equivalent of an army regiment missing.”<sup>41</sup> Though the long-term impact is unclear, delays to recruitment and disruptions to training will undoubtedly have an impact on future US and partner nation capacities to commit properly trained personnel to CT and P/CVE missions.

COVID-19 crises, typically have limited resources, and may not share US priorities. As a result, it is possible that the current pivot to COVID-19 priorities will negatively affect the current portfolio of US CT and P/CVE efforts being pursued both unilaterally and multilaterally around the world.

**The US may experience a loss in regional and global influence (and subsequent deterioration in its ability to execute the US strategic agenda) because of a widespread perception that it has mishandled its response to the COVID-19 crisis.**

## STRATEGY

*The strategic implications of COVID-19 and how they will affect CT and P/CVE are discussed below.*

**Mid- to long-term terrorism-related objectives currently being pursued by the US and US partners risk being deprioritized in favor of short-term COVID-19 crisis response.**

Although the global reallocation of resources to deal with the COVID-19 crisis is unquestionably important, these changes have the potential to degrade existing counterterrorism and P/CVE efforts over time.

As analysts at the Brookings Institution noted, “Reduced Western attention to managing CT coordination, compounded by reduced foreign aid, would greatly increase the need for local partners to manage regional multilateral cooperation.”<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, local partners are facing their own

“Whether it’s guiding resources or creating environments, COVID has created huge opportunities for China and Russia.”

*Lieutenant General Thomas J. Trask,  
USAF (Ret.)*

The international perception of a poor US response to COVID-19—in combination with the decision not to assume a global leadership role as it has done in the past—may diminish US influence on a wide array of issues of global concern, including US efforts in the CT sphere.

The widely publicized COVID-19 outbreak on USS Theodore Roosevelt, statistics showing that the US is home to a disproportionate percentage of COVID-19 infections, and the US decision to suspend support of the World Health Organization (now reversed by President Joe Biden) have negatively affected global perceptions of American moral authority and global leadership.<sup>43</sup> Although it is difficult to quantify the impact of these events, a loss in regional and global influence (particularly if paired with an increase in regional or global influence via a “mask diplomacy” initiative undertaken by a country like China) could significantly impair the ability of the US to persuade partners to take up their own CT-related initiatives and priorities.

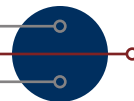
“A self-imposed dichotomy of CT vs GPC is a red herring and an intellectual road to nowhere. Sovereign states are failing to realize that they have to do both; the consequences of failing at either CT or GPC are strategically debilitating.”

*Lieutenant General Mike Nagata, USA (Ret.)*

## CONCLUSIONS

*The following conclusions emerge from the above thematic findings:*

- 1. The impact of COVID-19, and likely many nontraditional threats, significantly favors VEO recruitment.** COVID-19 likely will increase opportunities for VEO recruitment globally. The environmental shifts in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic—including unsupervised time spent online, perceived existential threats, personal disenfranchisement, and anger and frustration with poor governance—are all conducive to VEO recruitment.
- 2. The financial and health impacts of COVID-19 have the potential to diminish CT and P/CVE operations and capability.** The financial cost of responding to the COVID-19 crisis will require a rebalancing of domestic and international priorities in the US and across US allies. COVID-19 has the potential to affect the health, training, and capability of all who engage in and support CT and P/CVE operations—military, civilian, intelligence, and the supporting establishment.
- 3. COVID-19 and other nontraditional threats may fundamentally change US strategic objectives from a priority focus on international terrorism to a greater emphasis on countering domestic terrorism.** This shift toward addressing domestic concerns underlines the need for a comprehensive strategy for preventing radicalization, especially in the US.
- 4. A funding crisis precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic may set up a false dichotomy between CT and GPC.** COVID-19 has the potential to hasten the shift away from CT operations to a focus on GPC through a reallocation of funding over time. Specifically, the combination of decreased funding, the perception of decreased terrorism threats, and the perception of increased GPC threats may lead to a reprioritization.
- 5. The perceived US loss of credibility may have a long-term impact on the ability of the US to lead global initiatives in its strategic interest.** However, as the vaccine rollout gains traction, the US has a substantial opportunity to strengthen its international reputation and redevelop its partner relationships.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

*The Biden-Harris administration has inherited a national security sector not only beset by a pandemic but also undergoing a strategic transition. Since 9/11, the US national security community has largely focused on the threat of international VEOs; now its attention is shifting to GPC as well as domestic terrorist movements. Although this dynamic highlights changing national security concerns, it risks underestimating the growing threat of VEOs and the impact that COVID-19 has had on the risk of terrorism globally and domestically. In light of these significant challenges—and those that future nontraditional threats will likely pose—we offer the following recommendations for US CT strategy.*

### 1. Link nontraditional and traditional threats in US national security

**planning.** Specifically, incorporate strategy, actions, and training for pandemics and other nontraditional threats into US CT policy. Similarly, restructure response protocols for nontraditional threats—such as pandemics—to include CT and P/CVE components in recognition that pandemic environments favor VEOs. Nontraditional threats, such as pandemics, natural disasters, extreme weather, supply chain failures, and natural resource scarcity, have historically not been incorporated into CT and P/CVE planning and exercises. Similarly, nontraditional threat responses do not often consider the impact on VEOs. Moving forward, the relationship between nontraditional threats (such as pandemics) and US CT and P/CVE efforts should be acknowledged in strategic planning. This might include recognizing

“Global pandemics and other unexpected, disruptive events increase fear and uncertainty in the international environment. Such conditions are conducive to strengthening violent extremism.”

*Vice Admiral Frank Pandolfe,  
USN (Ret.)*

that some partner nations will be especially vulnerable to the impact of nontraditional threats, appreciating the impact of nontraditional threats on VEO targeting, or expanding CTF efforts to include additional funding streams.

### 2. Amplify the role of violent extremism prevention in US CT strategy.

The 2018 US National Strategy for Counterterrorism highlights non-kinetic CT activities more than its predecessor documents. However, the US must go further and actualize the 2018 NSCT’s call for a prevention architecture to thwart terrorist radicalization and recruitment. It is critical that US policy emphasize and prioritize prevention, intervention, reintegration, and counter-recidivism initiatives at all levels of government in recognition that the pandemic is hospitable to extremist ideologies and has made many people vulnerable to radicalization. For example, this effort might include an increase in resources directed toward strategic communications initiatives to counter VEO

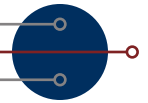
recruitment efforts.

3. **Adapt US CT strategy and policy to reflect the growing threat of domestic terrorism, including both extremists originating in the US and/or those influenced by groups outside the US.** DOD has been the lead agency for external CT efforts, but as the terror threat evolves and becomes increasingly domestic, DOD should look for ways in which it can support domestic CT efforts. For example, an effective domestic approach will require better information sharing between DOD, DHS, state, and local CT officials.
4. **Apply agile, innovative, and flexible tools developed for fighting COVID-19 to countering radicalization. Two areas in which such tools could be applied are counter-disinformation and bioterrorism monitoring.** COVID-19 disinformation has galvanized counter-disinformation efforts and, in the process, opened new avenues to potentially countering VEO disinformation. For example, social media companies, incentivized by a need to reduce COVID-19 disinformation, have developed an increasingly robust capacity for stopping its spread. Similarly, post-COVID-19, improvements to systems designed to monitor increasing risks to public health during global pandemics could also be adapted to monitor risk for bioterror attacks.
5. **Recommit to partnerships and demonstrate steadfast commitment to bilateral and multilateral engagements on pandemics and other initiatives.** As nations across the globe pivot from COVID-19 response to recovery, there is an opportunity for the US to lead this effort, to rebuild relationships through collaboration and support, to strengthen allies, and to reengage with

the global community. These recovery activities—including vaccine production and distribution—offer a clear opportunity for the US to work in coordination with our allies and international organizations, which will reposition the US as a strong partner. Moreover, this engagement will affirm our commitment to long-standing partnerships critical to responding to future VEO threats.

6. **Avoid inadvertently embracing the false dichotomy between GPC and CT; incorporate a diversity of expertise working on both GPC and CT to avoid pendulum swings in funding and policy.** The US needs to recognize the relationship between GPC and VEO threats. Terrorism is a force multiplier for a willing GPC adversary, and great power adversaries can use CT operations to develop relationships and gain access and influence in areas of strategic US interest. A US failure to renew training efforts or execute a robust prevention program, for example, leaves partner nations susceptible to the influence of Russian and Chinese CT and P/CVE programming. This situation not only reduces US intelligence collection capabilities and regional influence but also simultaneously increases the intelligence collection capabilities and regional influence of our GPC adversaries.

*The true impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will not be known for years, but even at this early stage, lessons can be learned and policy adjustments made in order to enhance our national security. It is not necessary to wait for a comprehensive COVID-19 after-action report to make such changes. It is best to start now adjusting our CT strategies and policies to be more effectively prepared for countering nontraditional threats such as pandemics.*

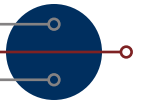


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