



# TERRORISM DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC – COVID 19. EVOLUTIONS AND FORECAST

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In the run-up to the Covid-19 pandemic, the world has witnessed a significant number of conferences, articles and opinions that have revolved around the same topic – RESILIENCE. Undoubtedly, a valid topic of discussion, but which lacked the current pandemic – Covid-19. The complex world we live in is facing a new thorny issue, consisting of a mixture of terrorist threats from ISIS and other terrorist organizations, to which has been added the worldwide virus – SARS-CoV 2 and which triggered the pandemic, which spread rapidly and with a major negative impact on the economies, finances and serious humanitarian problems of those in need. These threats have severely affected the security climate in various parts of the world, affecting all states, territories and the most vulnerable people.

The question is whether the world is ready to live in the new conditions. Do Europe and the rest of the world have a clear roadmap to respond to the new situation? The current situation has become a unique test to verify the unity of the EU and NATO, their capacity and readiness to return to the forefront of terrorism.

**Keywords:** Covid-19; ISIS; terrorism; Middle East; NATO; Europe.

## Why did we choose such a topic?

Obviously, the reason why we chose this topic is determined by the current realities in Europe and worldwide.

We do have to admit that after a period of relative peace and tranquility – mainly determined by the restrictions of movement in relation to the current pandemic, it would be appropriate to understand the need to anticipate and to be prepared for what can be the next phase of the terrorist activities in Europe.

Any professional working within defence, public order and security services has to be proactive and to provide in due time answers to policy makers. In such circumstances, scholars from the field of security and defence must offer answers to few crucial questions, such as: Can we expect a new type of terrorism in the near future? In other words, would we have to face new manifestations of this phenomenon?

In our endeavor, we gathered and took into account information available to public – the so called opened sources. We put together pieces of

information, we analyzed them, we compared them and came to conclusions, which we do consider real and valuable.

There were two possible hypotheses we started from:

**1st.** Terrorism weaker and less attractive to the individuals, both as a movement and as an option for young people.

**2nd.** Terrorism will emerge from the pandemic period stronger and modernized with respect to the means used and the way of perpetrating specific acts.

## What is the current situation?

The Covid 19 pandemic, the latest serious problem in Europe and worldwide, fueled the terrorist rhetoric, and somehow created an advantage for terrorists who did not cease their operations, while security forces had to comply with the states of emergency and alert, which imposed strict specific rules and regulations.

Fighting the coronavirus pandemic crisis and containing its huge negative economic and social consequences is the first objective for governments. People lack money for covering their basic needs and the unemployment rate is increasing at alarming levels.

The question we asked ourselves is related to the way terrorists approached the current crisis

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situation. It has been established that the mandatory wearing of face masks was used by ISIS terrorists in order to return to Europe without being noticed. One relevant example is the arrest of Britain's most wanted ISIS fugitive, Abdel-Majed Abdel Bary. To better understand his profile and the danger he poses, it will be worth mentioning that he had links with the dead British ISIS executioner Jihadi John. Also, it has been assessed that after reaching Spain by boat coming from Algeria, he remained unnoticed for five days, while he intended to commit a lone wolf attack in Barcelona<sup>1</sup>.

According to terrorist propaganda<sup>2</sup>, the current pandemic is a gift of Allah for the so-called true believers and a curse for westerners and non-believers<sup>3</sup>. We have no doubts that there are enough people who do believe that this is a punishment for the westerners and a gift for the true believers and followers of radical Islam. If we consider Afghanistan, where the illiterate rate is huge, access to information is very poor, nevertheless having in place the radical Islam propaganda, this situation can lead to an amplification of the number of youth joining IS-K (Islamic State Khorasan) ranks.

### Middle East

While the situation in Europe improved, in Syria and Iraq nothing is calm or quiet. ISIS is re-emerging mostly in the desert areas and along the border line between the two states.

The U.S. estimates the terror group's force strength in Iraq and Syria as being in between 14,000 and 18,000 Jihadis.<sup>4</sup>

ISIS resurgence is real and proved by multiple deadly attacks. In Iraq, during the month of Ramadan, ISIS perpetrated a number of 260 attacks, killing or wounding 426 people<sup>5</sup>.

In Syria, ISIS terrorist cells starting with April 2020, perpetrated a large number of terrorist attacks, killing – according to Syrian official reports – at least 887 pro-regime fighters. Unofficially, it is considered that the number of victims among Syrian forces supporting Assad regime has actually doubled<sup>6</sup>.

Maybe, we should mention the fact that President Trump's initial announcement on defeating ISIS was not completely justified, as first it seemed that as a state, ISIS lost the battle and disappeared from the map of the Middle East, yet as an ideology, ISIS is far from being defeated.

Therefore, we can see first visible signs of its resurgence, proved by the deadly attacks against civilian and military targets.

A special remark has to be made about the massive number of ISIS fighters detained in autonomous Kurdish region from Iraq, who recently tried to escape aiming to join the fight against legitimate authorities. The improvised prisons in Syria and Iraq hold about 10,000 men, of whom about 8,000 are locals Syrians and Iraqis – and the remaining detainees are from 50 other nations like Belgium, Britain, France and Germany, countries which are refusing to accept them or even deprived them of their citizenship just to make sure they cannot return home<sup>7</sup>.

According to other sources<sup>8</sup>, the total number of women and children living in makeshift detention camps in northeastern Syria, on suspicion of being in connection with Islamic State links, add up to approximately 14,000 foreigners who belong to more than 60 countries. To this number we have to add another 30,000 Iraqis living in a section of the camp.

Given this information, we have to remember that during last October, hundreds of ISIS fighters had escaped from detention camps in northern Syria. According to existing assessments, most of Jihadists were able to hide and afterwards regroup in the vast deserts of Syria and Iraq<sup>9</sup>.

As a conclusion, we may say that as long as prisoners are not put on trial and they are detained mainly in makeshift prisons, they are nothing but a ticking bomb. From the legal point of view, they cannot be detained forever. And thus, we may ask ourselves: what next?

Libya just joined the club of the group of states in the area that have security issues. Here, according to different reports<sup>10</sup>, Turkey transferred Jihadists to fight with Field Marshall Haftar's forces<sup>11</sup>, in order to prevent the defeat of the Islamist-backed Government of National Accord. Allegedly, Jihadists are promised several thousands of dollars per month in exchange for fighting along Turkey. The picture is more complex, since we have to admit that according to other reports United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Russia are supporting Field Marshall Haftar in his effort to remove from Tripoli the internationally recognized government<sup>12</sup>. All in all, Islam adepts have received a big and unexpected amount of oxygen.



Under all these circumstances, just briefly mentioned, since there is vacuum of power, ISIS is flourishing and getting back on the battlefield, either through some states sponsors or under its own flag, command and ideology. As mentioned before, some just got a *job* in another battlefield - Libya. According to all evidence, western Libya became a safe haven for terrorist organizations where the AQIM (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) is very active<sup>13</sup>.

An interesting assessment of the US-China commercial war<sup>14</sup> mentions the alleged existence of an understanding between the US and Turkey which allowed the existence of an enclave of ISIS terrorists on the possible Silk Road crossing Iraq and Syria towards Turkey. And this allegedly happened just for blocking Chinese plans for economic expansion. Since we do not have a different statement from the US, we cannot dismiss this possibility which is somehow justified. Moreover, it shows the complexity of the Middle East political-military game.

All these are happening while the US is trying hard to pull out from Afghanistan – somehow being forced to trust and make a deal with the Taliban (one of the dozen terrorist groups operating on Afghan soil), who, in turn, promised to deny shelter and training for any future terrorist group targeting American interests – and also keeping a small number of troops in the Middle East (Syria and Iraq) – probably around 500.

In our opinion, pulling out from the hotspots of the world the troops of the greatest military power – America is a dangerous option which can trigger a chain of negative consequences for Europe and worldwide security.

This proves what the Taliban always stated: "You have the money, we have the time. One day you will have to leave and then we will take over"... Considering the statements issued by the Taliban, the day of taking over the full power in Afghanistan is pretty close. And then, we do estimate that a fratricide war – a typical Afghan war, is going to start. Under these circumstances, terrorists are bound to find a safe haven just as in good old times.

One of the constant concerns of the security services has always been related to what future terrorist attacks will look like, and a special focus has been on biological weapons. The current pandemic

Covid 19 proved, as if it had been necessary, that a biological weapon can be developed and used in the near future, even by terrorist organizations which comprise in their ranks highly educated people also.

### Europe

According to existing reports, there are maybe 1,000 of ISIS terrorists ready to come out from their sleeping cells status and to get into action against constitutional and democratic regimes.<sup>15</sup>

It is obvious that in Spain, Catalonia which is flooded with male Pakistani nationals – most of them having entered unlawfully and without proper identification papers, is the epicenter of coronavirus – Covid 19 and this aspect seems to be also linked with their attitude towards European culture. Thus, it is well known that they disobey the basic rules of protection against Covid 19 and this can be both a sign of lack of consideration towards state authority but also a possible action for supporting ISIS willingness to reconquer the former Muslim territories lost in Iberic peninsula to the European Christians.

An important step forward in fighting terrorism in general and ISIS Jihadi fighters who returned from the Middle East especially has been made by the UK. Thus, all convicted Jihadists are no longer released from British prisons following a routine procedure, but rather a strict assessment of the risks they are posing. In other words, the time of formal statements of good will and regrets is over. Also, of the same great importance is the ratification of a new law which gives power to the Police to arrest and detain for a longer period, all suspects of terrorism activities.

France also, is tackling the complex issue of terrorism by following the Agenda of the "No Money for Terror Conference" which was held on 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of April in Paris and had as main objective combating the financing of Al-Qaeda and Daesh (ISIS)<sup>16</sup>.

We cannot ignore a significant detail. The illegal immigration flow into Europe is an issue that requires careful consideration. Thus, according to reports<sup>17</sup>, based on Pew Research Center evaluation, the situation is as follows:

- in France it is estimated that there were between 300,000 and 400,000 immigrants in 2017, and now the number is probably well above half a million;



- in Great Britain there are up to 1.2 million people, out of which a quarter have illegally entered Europe.

There are other potential pending problems due to the acceptance of unattended children on EU territory and the situation caused by Covid 19 pandemic which forced authorities to release from special centers a lot of illegal immigrants without proper identification papers.

### The role of social media

One of the long lasting issue in fighting terrorism is fighting the online terrorist propaganda which is aiming to recruit new individuals and also to incite individuals to act as lone wolfs against so-called legitimate targets (security forces, militaries, employees of international organizations, etc.).

Both social media and mass media are playing a critical role in keeping up and coordinating the terrorist groups and activities. Despite EU regulations forbidding terrorist propaganda, social media worldwide leaves breach spots which allow these kinds of dangerous activities for the public order.

We would not refrain from mentioning that the detrimental aspects inculcated on our security by mass media are probably similar to the ones done caused by some social media. The former is indirectly and unwillingly supporting the terrorist propaganda through keeping on the front page names, pictures, statements and interesting details of the terrorists and their crimes, since we all know the main rule they are following is the "bad news is good news" because bad news sells well and makes audience rating. The latter (social media) often, or better said most of the time, allows the dissemination of propaganda videos inciting to hatred and violent actions, praising acts committed by individuals assumed without any proof as being ISIS members or at least followers.

But what kind of expectations does the International Community have when *Facebook* – a major social media player, is assigning in the oversight board, an individual like Tawakkol Karman who is considered to be a leading figure of *Yemen's Islah Party – a Muslim Brotherhood affiliate*<sup>18</sup>.

A number of videos belonging to *ISIS Amaq News Videos* including an execution of Kurdish deminer have been spread on a number of social media networks as follows: Telegram, RocketChat,

Hoop and at least 10 websites: Amazon Drive, File. Fm, Streamable, Top4top, Dropbox, Mediafire, the Microsoft One Drive, the Internet Archive, Ok.Ru, Mega.Nz,ys later, Mediafire, the Internet Archive, and Ok.Ru.<sup>19</sup>

The pro-ISIS tech group Electronic Horizons Foundation (EHF) launched a new web magazine dedicated to cyber and internet information security addressing smart phones, the Android and iOS operating systems, basic internet security practices, using alternate operating systems, using Tor and VPN to hide IP addresses, and elements related to privacy issues while using social media websites<sup>20</sup>.

During the current coronavirus pandemic, terrorist organizations such as Muslim Brotherhood and ISIS took the advantage of lockdown to spread their ideology aiming to recruit and rebuild their networks<sup>21</sup>. The Euro Fatwa app which was created by the Council of Europe for Fatwa and Research – having its offices in Dublin, has been assessed by security services' European officials as a dangerous application (app), because its development is intended to provide a tool for Muslim Brotherhood to be used for radicalization purposes. The UK already triggered the alarm for security agencies because it is estimating a possible explosion of terrorist violence in the near future.

London Metropolitan Police Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu has raised concerns about the excessive media coverage of terrorist attacks, the so called copycat attacks, because they are aiming for minimizing the potential harm of reporting on terrorism<sup>22</sup> which is opposite to the damaging effects created by this kind of reporting.

We have to point out that, just over the Mediterranean Sea, on its shores, there is an ongoing war and, similarly, based on evidence and analyses, it is estimated that Russia started a new military built up, in order to consolidate its future long lasting military presence in the area.

### Conclusions

The Middle East is literally boiling and ISIS terrorists have become active again on the battlefield, despite losing the territory of the so called *Caliphate*. ISIS is obviously re-emerging, especially in the deserts of Syria and Iraq.

As long as detained Jihadists are neither tried, nor sent back to Europe and they are detained



mainly in makeshift prisons, without having in place proper detention standards (food, sanitation and security), they are a ticking bomb and the fundamentalist Islamic radicalization process is flourishing.

To all of the above, we have to add an aspect that is alarming everybody: the centers for radicalization and recruitment of future jihadists are in fact the camps where families of detained Jihadists are living in extremely poor conditions, in the desert areas. We are talking about a population of more or less 70,000 people: wives and children – who may serve as a strong base for recruitment.

An adversary of NATO and the U.S. (Russia)<sup>23</sup> is working hard to build up an air exclusion zone – A2/AD (the so called *bubble*) just above the Mediterranean Sea, which will trouble the access for NATO south flank forces.

In Europe we do have a strong number of ISIS terrorist cells, ready to be activated; to this we have to add a huge number of terrorists ready to be released from the European penitentiaries, many of them known for their terrorist intentions they swore to materialize just the next day after being released.

In front of all these challenges, the European economies seem to be close to bankruptcy, lacking the technical and human capacity to tackle all these numbers of terrorists and we can even state that the leadership of EU Commission is far from being strong enough to respond to current challenges. A good example in this regard can be the first unprofessional and selfish reactions to the current pandemic which placed under serious question mark the EU member states' unity and solidarity.

It really seems that after the pandemic is over, the 2nd hypothesis (terrorism will emerge stronger and modernized with respect to the means used and the way of perpetrating their acts) is going to be the valid one, which is due to be confirmed by the coming events.

What could be the shapes of near future terrorism?

First of all, we have to accept that terrorist ideology will not disappear in the near future.

One of the arguments is that, for example, somebody always led the ISIS, no matter how many leaders were annihilated by the U.S. Led Coalition wherever in the theaters of operations in the world.<sup>24</sup>

We can predict that using social media for disseminating alarmist news or hiding the truth

related to the current pandemic and the new viruses might trigger social unrest that will eventually turn into serious disorder and turmoil, to the detriment of public order and security.

This will match with the current proven propaganda offensive conducted by a NATO and US adversary, aiming to destabilize the internal order of not only the Western societies but also of the new Eastern democracies if they are member of NATO and the EU, by focusing on the so-called lack of interest and solidarity of the economically developed member states towards new members, with weaker economies.

We can also predict that, since the social media providers do not act properly regarding terrorist propaganda, this will still exist and get more sophisticated in terms of messages, graphics and calls for Jihad. If we agree that the audience for this kind of propaganda will find, for a number of years to come, a huge number of unemployed young people, then we can see the ingredients for having a recrudescence of terrorism in Europe. Recruitment through an especially designated computer application is certainly an alarming episode of the evolution of terrorism<sup>25</sup>.

Can we exclude from the equation the fact that Europe has a big number of illegal migrants, among whom there were cases of proven foreign fighters hidden among them? To that, we have to add the local extremists-right wing, neo Nazis, xenophobes and all other members of this growing family.

Developing and using a biological weapon by terrorists is in our opinion a credible threat. The current pandemic proved the narrow limits of our readiness to fight a global health problem.

Cyber attacks on critical infrastructure recently proved one more time to be an alternative to traditional terror attacks. Thus, in Israel, the installations used for providing drinkable water to local consumers have been targeted by a cyber attack aiming to increase to a lethal level the chemicals used originally for the treatment of drinking water. Consequences could have been devastating. The fact that allegedly, a state sponsor (Iran) was behind the cyber attack is less important. The important issue is that this cyber attack proved to be possible.

The use of bitcoin for covering the funding of terrorist organizations became a recommended tool by their leaders themselves due to the fact that the origin of transaction cannot be determined.



Identity theft is also a recommendation of terrorist leaders and is aiming to provide a new identity for former Middle East Jihadi fighters, in order to support their effort to return to Europe, as it has recently happened in Spain.

The employment and sending the ISIS former fighters from the Middle East in battles which are taking place in different parts of the world could prove to be a new episode of evolution of state-sponsored terrorism.

Destroying crops by setting them on fire, right before harvesting time, as the case was in Iraq, can be extended to forests and minerals (oil, gas exploitation and transport pipes)<sup>26</sup>.

According to a report<sup>27</sup> related to the existence of Facebook live meetings organized by ISIS, "It is only a matter of time before these pre-existing sophisticated networks start to take advantage of the experience ISIS operatives to conduct terror attacks within the United States". Probably the moment chosen for answering the request made by the American organization "Black lives matter" to reduce the funds allocated to the Police is a completely wrong one, which is going to have a negative impact upon public safety in America, which is going to have – in turn – a global impact, too.

Also, it is mentioned that "the U.S. group is one of 15 communities of ISIS supporters the researchers have identified in regions like the Middle East, Europe, Turkey and Africa. These groups, which are also interconnected, contain at least 1,000 unique members located in 96 countries around the world."

Thus, the final conclusion is that terrorism will get stronger and modernized with respect to the way of perpetrating its acts.

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