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RESEARCH STUDY

# EICTP Policy Brief

**COVID-19 Extremism-Nexus  
A Preliminary Trend Report**

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**EICTP POLICY BRIEF  
COVID-19 EXTREMISM-NEXUS  
A PRELIMINARY TREND REPORT**

## IMPRINT

The European Institute for Counter Terrorism and Conflict Prevention (EICTP) is a research association operating worldwide and with its headquarters in Vienna, Austria. As a non-profit institution the focus of EICTP is on key topics around security policy-related issues. It carries out projects with renowned partners in Austria and abroad, maintains close relationships with high-level research organizations and a network of prominent experts and scholars, offers profound sets of actions, consultations and strategies related to counter-terrorism, hybrid conflicts, and de-radicalization measures and aims at creating policy-related recommendations based on scientific research and expert assessments for decision-makers.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive summary .....	7
Introduction .....	9
Terrorism and extremism transform .....	11
Far-right extremism increases .....	13
Trust into the government erodes.....	14
Terrorist targets are changing.....	16
Economic terrorism .....	16
Psychological operations .....	17
Lynch mobs and social unrest .....	17
Organizations of political Islam benefit from COVID-19 .....	18
The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood re-establishes itself .....	19
Opportunities for subversion appear .....	21
Extremism hinders pandemic response.....	22
Egypt destabilizes.....	23
COVID-19 increases uncontrolled migration .....	24
Anti-Semite conspiracy theories .....	26
Anti-Iranian conspiracy theories.....	27
Anti-Chinese conspiracy theories.....	28
Anti-American conspiracy theories.....	29
New developments that require attention .....	30
Recommendations .....	33



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COVID-19 will transform terrorism and its targets as many extremist movements have realized the importance of critical infrastructure and IT systems. The anger and disenfranchisement that will eventually follow the COVID-19 outbreak will create new forms of extremism, criminality, and violence. In fact, we are already observing new waves of violence in various cities around the world, which might eventually also affect the evolution and adaptation of terrorist groups.

Conspiracy theories are flourishing and mutating online. Especially anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are shared across almost the entire extremism spectrum and "fake news" – originating in the spheres of far-right extremism – may thus also find their way into "Islamic extremism" and vice-versa.

Trust into government also erodes due to conspiracy theories and due to pandemic countermeasures. At the same time, extremist groups are attempting to exploit present weaknesses, which could continue to weaken the trust people have in their governments and dramatically affect security as well as social cohesion. Terrorism and extremism often emerge when people feel excluded from the system, leading to the perception of the government having failed them. Some may ultimately consider violence to be an appropriate approach in order to express their grievances – the most recent violent outbursts i.e. in Lebanon or Stuttgart are concerning examples.

The COVID-19 crisis also provides for new possibilities for extremist subversion by movements and representatives of political Islam, for instance like the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Europe and internationally. Especially in the Middle East the MB has become ever more present on various social media channels and with respect to COVID-19 responses. The same holds true for far-left and far-right movements, some of which – mainly associated individuals – have started to enter political and mainstream spheres as well as political parties (i.e. the "Hannibal Network" in Germany or ANTIFA).

Egypt is a key-factor of stability in North Africa, but its Government has lost credibility and support during the COVID-19 crisis. The Muslim Brotherhood may attempt to regain power and influence (also by violent means), which may cause the destabilization of Egypt. Similar scenarios or developments cannot be excluded throughout the entire region, on the Arabian Peninsula or in sub-Saharan Africa. The situation in Libya may be further reason for concern, especially since the country has become a hub for state-sponsored mass movement of illegal migrants.

Since Turkey's hybrid warfare strategy appears to now include "migration as a weapon" her military presence in Libya raises concerns. Furthermore, Turkey's influence in the sub-Saharan African and Middle Eastern regions might have effects on the internal political landscapes in Europe.

Countries and societies in sub-Saharan Africa continue to destabilize, whilst extremist groups gain regional strength and find new areas of operations. This could lead to a new wave of migration, terrorist safe havens (i.e. Northern Mali) and regional suffering.

Especially a second wave of COVID-19 will amplify the aforementioned key-points and trends described in this report. Furthermore, the impact of an economic recession and economic hardship will be significant and dramatically impact extremist developments.

The police and security services are increasingly becoming a target of violent protestors and rioters. Although some protestors may of course have legitimate goals and reasons for protest (i.e. Black Lives Matter), it remains concerning that unrelated criminals, looters or fundamentalist individuals and groups are starting to hijack such movements and the related demonstrations. The resulting violence, vandalism and looting but especially most recent attacks against the police per se may further accelerate grievances, isolate (moderate) movements and cause rifts within society. Such a development consequently also affects the national and international security landscape.

The current economic hardship and forecasted global economic crisis might cause new social conflicts: high unemployment, the loss of prosperity and fear of the future could trigger major social conflicts and also cause the loss of authority and of government bodies unable to deal with these issues. In a worst-case scenario, a legal vacuum could develop. Such state crises would further increase the economic, political and social pressure in Europe and become great demands of governments to act more credibly, transparently and consequently in order for the societies to regain their trust into the rules of law and official state bodies.



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## INTRODUCTION

In the same way COVID-19 has started to affect most aspects of daily life, it has also started to have an impact on extremism and its transformation. This trend report hence contains some initial observations and tendencies, associated with the COVID-19/extremism-nexus, that will continuously be monitored and updated. For now, the interrelation of far-right extremism and Islamic extremism appears to be rather dominant and will thus be assessed in further detail.

The trend developments in sub-Saharan Africa as well as in Egypt will ultimately have a significant impact on extremism in Europe and on uncontrolled migration, which in turn affects far-right extremism dramatically. This connection must not be overlooked, since in the same way the destabilization of the Sahel region can ultimately also affect the behavior and rise of far-right extremists in Europe (due to migration, refugees, etc.).

Various conspiracy theories have furthermore started to mutate and be shared across diverse extremism platforms. They have become a key-factor in the erosion of trust into governments and radicalization. Radical far-right and jihadi groups have realized this trend and have thus also changed their targets accordingly towards economic terrorism, psychological operations and critical infrastructure. With respect to far-right extremists, also increased calls for lynch law could be observed.

Subversive groups like the Muslim Brotherhood are trying to capitalize on the current crisis in Europe, as new possibilities for subversion have emerged. At the same time, the movement is trying to delegitimize the Egyptian Government, which has so far performed rather poorly in handling the crisis.

COVID-19 is certainly transforming extremism and the related trends need to be studied, monitored and assessed continuously in order to prevent violent extremism in the present climate. This is especially relevant since some extremist ideologies and approaches may in fact hinder governmental counter-efforts.



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## TERRORISM AND EXTREMISM TRANSFORM

COVID-19 is transforming terrorism. IS and al-Qaeda are re-establishing and re-inventing themselves in the wakes of COVID-19. Jihadi groups like those two mentioned have embraced the COVID-19 chaos as an opportunity they can take advantage of. Whilst some smaller jihadi groups and offshoots of IS or al-Qaeda have considered it a divine punishment for the "crusaders", for Iran or for how China has dealt with the Uyghur Muslim community, more sophisticated organizations like IS, al-Qaeda, the Taliban or the Shiite Hezbollah have seen a chance to assert their dominance. Especially in west- and sub-Saharan Africa terrorist groups continue to benefit from weak points and will further gain support and strength. Al-Qaeda and IS have started to cooperate in the Sahel region and to extend their regional territorial control. Their respective fighters are coordinating attacks, and areas of influence are being negotiated and divided among them.

COVID-19 will intensify local frustrations, disenfranchisement, grievances, and tensions that have led to the rise of extremism in west- and sub-Saharan Africa in the first place. As the resources of the affected governments are limited and already heavily burdened, the provision of basic security or healthcare for the local populations is very likely to be reduced even further. This provides an opportunity for extremist groups to "bridge the gap" – the Taliban and Hezbollah have already done so elsewhere. In Mali, Niger or Burkina Faso, groups like Dschamāat Nusrat al-Islāmwa-l-Muslimīn (JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) are oftentimes not supported because of their extremist ideologies, but rather due to their ability to provide basic service like security, rudimentary healthcare or in some cases employment. Furthermore, the aspect of community policing, which can provide early warning signs of extremism aside of being a valuable tool in preventing radicalization, has been limited in its effectiveness by the fallout of COVID-19 and by now it mainly enforces curfews. Extremist groups are likely to fill this vacuum, especially since they have managed to integrate themselves into the local communities. This will erode the people's trust in the government being able to provide security. Consequently, COVID-19 has the potential to further destabilize the Sahel region, which will strengthen extremist movements and allow them to pursue their regional goals.

Al-Qaeda and IS have started to cooperate in the Sahel region and to extend their territorial control. The irrespctive fighters are coordinating attacks and areas of influence are being negotiated and divided among them. This trend is likely to continue and may mark the starting point of a wider unification of extremist groups in the region, the establishment of de facto "terrorist states" and/or IS-like caliphates in areas the regional government cannot exercise control (Northern Mali especially) and hence lead to increased migration, suffering and violence.

COVID-19 might lead to governments having to ease their counter-terrorism measures. This could spark the re-emergence of IS and further strengthen other jihadi groups. Especially in Syria, COVID-19 cases could easily go undetected. Many healthcare facilities have been destroyed, millions of people have been displaced and the local economy is heavily burdened. The country's healthcare system also lacks facilities to monitor coronavirus cases, specialized

ventilators or testing equipment. IS will take advantage of this current crisis. Since roughly 10,000 IS prisoners are held in highly crowded, makeshift prisons, they could easily become COVID-19 hotspots. Various diseases have already befallen them. Worsening conditions in these facilities and across the wider region could spark unrest and riots, which would provide IS with a large number of potential new recruits. Social distancing is impossible in these prisons and guards are destined to be overwhelmed with a COVID-19 outbreak. IS' Al-Naba newsletter has already spotted this opportunity and reads: "The Muslims should not pity the disbelievers and apostates, but should use the current opportunities to continue working to free Muslim prisoners from the camps in which they face subjugation and disease."

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## FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM INCREASES

Far-right extremist movements as well as jihadi groups are existential terrorism threats to the West. COVID-19 has exacerbated this trend and far-right extremists as well as jihadi groups and other Islamic fundamentalist movements continue to indoctrinate their audience, spread hate and conspiracy theories, and oftentimes encourage others to take not only political, but also criminal and violent action.

It may not be obvious at first sight, but Islamic extremism is in fact tied to far-right extremism and vice-versa. Both movements justify their actions and ideology with each other and refer to one another in their propaganda. Furthermore, the content on various online extremist platforms significantly overlaps. In the online quagmires of hate, exclusion and incitements to violence one can also observe that military or bomb-making manuals are shared and re-used across the entire spectrum of extremism. Even more concerning is the development of groups starting to find common enemies. This could prompt currently rather dissimilar movements to seek active cooperation, share manuals and knowledge, or to act upon highly similar conspiracy theories, which are already being shared across various extremist platforms.

One far-right Telegram group shared handbooks on manufacturing weapons and instructions on how to build bombs. The video, however, appears to have been originally published by IS, whilst propaganda involving the terrorists Brenton Tarrant or Andres Breivik also circulates in the same group. It also re-posted an IS video on how to build an improvised explosive device (IED) out of TATP explosives, whilst another video feature describes how to make B Type Napalm.

A growing number of far-right extremists and Islamic fundamentalists have started to speculate COVID-19 is a hoax or an act of covert warfare (see: Conspiracy theories). Many far-right and Islamic fundamentalists share the view that COVID-19 has been orchestrated by the Jews. As different as those two movements are, both seek to sow chaos and to actively hinder governmental action by any means possible.

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## TRUST INTO THE GOVERNMENT ERODES

Universal trust into the government continues to erode, which provides the soil for extremism and subversion. Anti-establishmentarianism and fear of "Big Government", fed by conspiracy theories, have already led to violent actions. In Europe, fear of COVID-19 being linked to 5G technology has prompted extremists to burn down cellphone towers, whilst in the US a bomb plot was targeted at a hospital preparing for COVID-19 responses. An attempt to derail a train has also been made, whereas some jihadi groups, as well as right-wing extremists, have toyed with the idea of weaponizing the coronavirus. Left-wing extremists, the "ultra-libertarians" or non-conventional groups like the *Reichsbürger* (similar to the "Freemen on the Land Movement") are also indulging themselves in far-fetched conspiracy theories, radical ideas regarding fundamental changes to government, direct resistance, non-violent demonstrations as well as implicit calls to violence and anti-government disobedience.

Intriguingly, what unites these movements are fundamental acts of (increasingly violent) revolts against the established order in the wakes of what has been perceived as a large-scale expansion of the state. For most individuals involved in these movements, their fear is mainly about the expansion of a "distrusted" government. Terrorists are generally sharing most of these views, whereas the actions they seek go beyond disobedience and protest, taking them to the violent extreme or using the crisis in order to strengthen their position.

Hezbollah, the Taliban, or Hayat Tahrir al-Sham have started to showcase their own public health initiatives. The same holds true for criminal groups in Europe or South and Central America (clans, the Mafia etc.). At the core of these initiatives lies the "battle for hearts and minds", recruitment of new members and exercising control over societal segments.

In the aftermath of COVID-19 many communities may find themselves poorer than before the crisis, perhaps abandoned by social services and disenfranchised, which could lead to Islamist separatism. This situation will certainly be exploited by movements of political Islam, for instance the Muslim Brotherhood, since the economic downturn will hit those the worst who are already a target of the Brotherhood's recruitment strategy. The group will undoubtedly capitalize on these circumstances and aim to replace governmental efforts, support and services. A growing wealth-gap, economic hardship and increasing disenfranchisement will play a supporting role in these ambitions.

COVID-19 is also drawing attention to inequalities, which especially extremist groups are likely to exacerbate in the post-COVID-19 economy. This will lead to narratives of disenfranchisement, which extremists of every type are likely to exploit to the fullest, as well as to placing the blame for the crisis on someone else – the government or minorities. A growing tension toward Chinese nationals within the Islamist community - in part rooted in Beijing's treatment of the Muslim Uighur minority - might lead to violent action and anti-Chinese terrorism.

Violent protests against technological developments (burning down 5G towers may be an indicator for such a development), which are slowly displacing jobs, are likely to continue at the same pace of technology advances. In March 2020, for instance, a far-right extremist Telegram channel urged for the destruction of the present social and cultural constructs by revolting against the modern system. The erosion of personal freedoms (quarantines and lockdowns are oftentimes perceived as such) and economic changes as many companies are downsizing their staff and trying to gain more efficiency by shifting towards online work and home-office solutions, may be a catalyst that could trigger bombing campaigns, violence, social unrest as well as cyberattacks. The government and its actions will be partially - if not entirely - blamed for this development.

Aside of the dire economic and social prospects one must note that radicalization frequently happens online. Extremist movements of any type might attempt to capitalize on this trend and increase their radicalization and recruitment efforts in cyberspace as well as enhancing their cyber capabilities. Al-Qaeda has already embraced this trend.

Especially a second wave of COVID-19 would significantly worsen the scenarios described. Currently, many businesses are kept operational by governmental schemes (reduced working hours) and by their own reserves or loans. Once reserves have run out and governmental schemes or stimulation are either used up, cancelled or not available to certain branches anymore, this trend would certainly intensify.

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## TERRORIST TARGETS ARE CHANGING

Various extremist groups, ranging from the far-right to jihadi movements, have recognized the importance of critical infrastructure during COVID-19 and have selected their targets accordingly. In Australia, for instance, a far-right extremist had allegedly planned to disrupt the electrical power grid, whereas a white supremacist Telegram channel also considered power stations to be a suitable target. Furthermore, grocery stores, pharmacies, gas stations, hospitals or COVID-19 testing sites have suddenly found themselves on the target lists of various extremist movements. IS has urged its followers to continue their jihad and to exploit the present situation as well as the overburdened security system. Indeed, the group advocated for attacks on hospitals to cause a collapse of the healthcare system and erode the confidence of the local communities in their governments. IS' al-Naba newsletter reads: "The last thing they hope for today, is that this difficult time will coincide with the preparations of the soldiers of the Caliphate for new strikes on them, similar to those of Paris, London, and Brussels and elsewhere."

Whilst such attacks could cause further chaos during an already highly complex crisis situation, if they are conducted in the Middle East, north-, west- or sub-Saharan Africa, violent extremists might even attempt to fill the healthcare vacuum they themselves have created. Although it has frequently been mentioned and suggested that the COVID-19 virus could be spread deliberately, social distancing and self-isolation measures may render this approach rather impractical on a larger scale. Still, any extremist infected with the virus could potentially become a super spreader and deliberately infect a desired target group. Far-right extremists are already discussing the possibilities of infecting members of religious minorities or members of the police on their Telegram channels. In the UK, a train station worker died of COVID-19 after she had been spit on by a man suspected of being infected with the coronavirus. Even though such approaches may appear rather far-fetched they could at the very least prolong the current crisis, tie up governmental resources and spark wide-spread fear, which is in itself a key-element of terrorism.

### **Economic Terrorism**

Al-Qaeda has reinforced its economic terrorism strategy, which has originally been laid out by Osama bin Laden. The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is indeed unprecedented and since America had to adopt a \$2 trillion emergency stimulus package the terrorist group may attempt to increase the economic damage even further. Currently, such a scenario would most likely be linked to an attack on critical infrastructure, transportation, online warehouses (i.e. Amazon), information technology companies, financial services or the pharmaceutical branch. Most importantly, the group would attempt to force governments to dedicate resources towards the protection of certain economic sectors as it has previously done with respect to tourism. Attacking hotels themselves had only a limited economic impact, but actually forcing governments to dedicate resources towards protecting hotels, beaches or the transportation sector has caused significant economic damage. Furthermore, tying up resources additionally



prevented governments from investing into the healthcare system, community projects and alike.

### **Psychological Operations**

The jihadi propaganda pieces issued by IS or al-Qaeda are referring to COVID-19 as the will of Allah. The virus is considered the vengeance on those who have joined in the war on terror. However, the actual content is not new and although the virus is termed the "smallest soldier of Allah" the most recent IS and al-Qaeda propaganda follows the same pattern as its previous publications. Jihadi groups are rather opportunistic and any type of natural disaster, be it a wildfire, tsunami or earthquake, is commonly interpreted as the divine retribution against the crusaders and unbelievers following their 'God's will' narrative.

### **Lynch mobs and social unrest**

Kill-lists or lists featuring so-called "traitors" are becoming disturbingly popular on websites, social media and inside closed Telegram groups. Those lists illustrate a concerning trend and the level of radicalization some (mainly far-right, for now) extremists have reached. Especially radical elements of the so-called "prepper scene" (individuals or groups that prepare – "prep" – for different catastrophic future scenarios) have recently been associated with such lists and although this subculture is commonly of peaceful and non-violent nature, these trends are truly alarming.

In the U.S. some ultra-libertarians, militias and far-right extremist movements, fueled by conspiracy theories, are increasingly calling for violence and have organized armed protests against Gov. Gretchen Whitmer aside of spreading death threats online: "We need a good old fashioned lynch mob to storm the Capitol, drag her tyrannical ass out onto the street and string her up as our forefathers would have.", or "Either President Trump sends in the troops or there is going to be a midnight lynching in Lansing soon.", or "Plain and simple she needs to eat lead and send a statement to the rest of the democrats that they are next."

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## ORGANIZATIONS OF POLITICAL ISLAM BENEFIT FROM COVID-19

Institutions and representatives of political Islam, especially the Muslim Brotherhood and MB-related individuals and organizations, might gain support and legitimacy by providing support during the COVID-19 crisis. Lockdowns and quarantines can be found in Islamic history and culture. Whilst this certainly helps in relating governmental measures to Islamic cultural aspects on the one hand, it may also open the door for subversive activities by such movements.

By strictly complying with the measures, the majority of the Muslim community has so far demonstrated their adherence to the national laws, despite some dissenting voices calling not to be subjected to them. These measures, including the closure of mosques, were also taken by governments of Muslim countries (Egypt, Turkey etc.) and they had been validated by the highest religious authorities in those countries. However, whilst in some cases fundamentalist rhetoric might successfully be refuted this way, one must stress that especially the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe had also aligned itself with Western governments in the past and with respect to integration and deradicalization efforts. It is indeed true that many activities by Muslim institutions and NGOs have certainly been constructive and supportive. Still, it must also be said that many crises Western governments had to face in the past, have also been exploited by the Muslim Brotherhood to gain influence, governmental legitimization and backing.

Whilst some Muslim community leaders across Europe have taken highly supportive measures in line with governmental directives (i.e. banning the rite of washing the dead in the case of coronavirus-related deaths), one must remain vigilant. Previous crises have shown that organizations with an agenda such as the MB had been quick in exploiting them for their own benefit. This danger – and to a certain degree discrepancy – becomes apparent when looking at the MB-rhetoric and their actions in Egypt, which is also where the MB-mother organization is still located.

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## THE EGYPTIAN MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD RE-ESTABLISHES ITSELF

In light of the COVID-19 crisis the Egyptian Government finds itself under increasing pressure, which will certainly benefit the MB-mother organization with new strength and public support. The Egyptian government performed rather poorly in handling the COVID-19 crisis, especially since it initially tried to maintain control over the information landscape. This meant denying the existence of the virus in Egypt, going as far as forcing critical foreign journalists to leave the country and attempting to influence Egyptian media outlets. At the same time the government had begun spraying people with disinfectant at places of entertainment, whilst having to subsidize bakeries too. The overall shortage of protective equipment prompted one internet commenter to write: "...maybe the coronavirus will also agree to infect the government, and thereby save us from it."

By the time the Government finally broke its silence and started to implement a lockdown, it had already lost public confidence in its response to the pandemic. Once the leadership had to admit the COVID-19-related deaths of two senior military officers and quarantine procedures for military personnel in consequence of leaked documents, the worried population had been left wondering if infection rates might have been kept low artificially. In response to the Government's initial failures the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has launched the "One People" campaign in order to tackle governmental actions responding to the coronavirus pandemic. The campaign spokesperson Ahmed Thabet said: "We chose the name 'One People' to emphasize the fact that we belong to the same homeland and share the same future and destiny, and therefore, we must not be divided during the times of adversity...We launched the campaign and we will introduce practical measures with the aim of overcoming all obstacles and challenges."

Whilst there is certainly no harm in calling for unity, one must put such statements into perspective. Ever since the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohammed Morsi was removed from presidential power in mid-2013 the movement has been engaged in a military conflict against the government, which it wages through the affiliated Hasm Brigade and Liwa al-Thawra. The Muslim Brotherhood is now using this crisis to re-establish itself by attempting to build up public support and distrust in the current government. However, its ambitions for power are very clear, especially since the "One People" campaign did not even specify any next step but mainly focus on seeding distrust and its desire to replace the current government.

The exiled Brotherhood member Bahgat Ali in fact posted a video online, in which he encouraged those who might be infected with the virus to attempt spreading it to members of the security forces, the judiciary and the media. Although he intended to force as-Sisi to publicly recognize the significance of the disease, it still illustrates the true intentions of the Muslim Brotherhood, sticking at nothing to reclaim power.

How the Egyptian government handles the COVID-19 crisis will heavily influence the future development of the Muslim Brotherhood's mother organization, which in turn will affect

international MB branches. So far, the Muslim Brotherhood is regaining public support due to the initial failures of the Egyptian Government, which will also have transnational implications for affiliated parties in neighboring countries and for its international branches. It may not necessarily affect or change the subversive modus operandi of the MB in Europe much, but it will certainly provide the movement with a powerful narrative it can spin in order to recruit new members and gain influence – also outside of Egypt. The MB is seeking to drive recruitment, spread its propaganda and to position itself for the time after COVID-19. The Brotherhood understands that the fallout of the pandemic and the resulting economic downturn will provide it with the opportunity to assign blame to the as-Sisi government and to offer its ideology as a solution.

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## OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUBVERSION APPEAR

In order to substitute for closed mosques, some municipalities and/or individuals may allow or advocate for calls to prayer within communities. This could lead to social tensions and unrest. Several Muslim communities across Germany have asked their municipalities to make public calls to prayer in times of COVID-19, which has been advocated for as a sign of comfort and solidarity (at least for the time of Ramadan). Many cities in Germany are considering this request, especially since churches are also ringing their bells regularly. However, the call to prayer could lead to problematic gatherings in front of mosques, especially if infection protection rules are not observed. For example, in Berlin-Neukölln, Muslims gathered in front of the mosque after the Muezzin's call sounded. Exemptions that had initially been granted had to be partially withdrawn consequently. The following discussion has led to very high expectations on both sides of the debate, creating additional rifts amongst society. Indeed, the most common narrative of these videos was not that religious freedom applies in German (which is already the case), but rather to show how Islamic Germany had become. This does not result in more solidarity but creates additional social tensions and erodes social cohesion. Further, rifts among European societies have led to an ever-increasing far-right movement and especially the aforementioned narrative strengthens extremist positions on both sides, as it continues to drive an "us vs. them" narrative embraced by the far-right as well as by Islamic groups and advocates of political Islam.

The void left by cancelling Friday sermons in mosques has been filled to some extent by Friday sermons offered online. These sermons are not subject to any outside scrutiny with respect to their content and may allow for radical content to be preached depending on the setting and on how many attendees they manage to attract. In the same way some businesses are now recognizing the potential of video conferences, also various extremist groups are embracing the possibility of spreading fundamentalist content online.

Both Islamist and far-right groups are reaching out to potential recruits on social media. Especially young people, children and students, who are confined to their homes and are spending more time online have become much more accessible. Their current frustration and anger may render them to be more vulnerable to online radicalization and recruitment. This is also why al-Qaeda has called upon non-Muslims to study the Quran and convert to Islam while being quarantined in its most recent publication "A General Call for the Masses in the Western World to Embrace Islam".

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## EXTREMISM HINDERS PANDEMIC RESPONSE

Radical ideologies hinder governmental efforts to control the COVID-19 pandemic. Fundamentalist Muslim prayers/imams as well as other religious or sect leaders refusing to socially distance could spread COVID-19 and worsen a potential second wave of the virus. This might lead to resentments against the Muslim community or other religious minority groups in Europe. In general, Muslim communities in Europe have cooperated with the respective authorities and closed their mosques in a united effort. Also, attending prayers and the desire to join a sermon in times of a global crisis must not be understood as extremist or fundamentalist (emphasis added), especially since most other religions share the same spiritual desires. However, refusing to socially distance for religious reasons, whilst endangering others at the same time, might fall into this very category.

Whilst in most cases social distancing rules were accepted and followed (for example in France, where the Grand Great Mosque of Paris had been closed immediately by Chems Eddine Hafiz as a precaution), some voices remained critical of this decision. Imams affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood considered the closure of the Grand Great Mosque to be premature since the virus had not spread widely yet. During a potential second wave those voices may get even louder and thus hinder governmental efforts.

Fighting the COVID-19 pandemic may indeed be considered futile by some imams and mosques. They might argue that Muslims should rely on Allah (*tawakkul*) to protect the righteous. If COVID-19-related lockdowns persist throughout 2020, this approach could make people unnecessarily complacent. For example, whilst governments around the world were already contemplating lockdowns in early-2020 a religious gathering organized by Tablighi Jamaat (an Islamic missionary movement) was attended by 16,000 people. The event led to 670 cases of COVID-19, which was further spread to half a dozen nations.

One of the largest outbreaks of COVID-19 could also be traced back to crowded shrines in Iran, which had been visited by Shiites from all over the world.

Also, Christian churches in France, South Korea or a Californian megachurch, which officials had connected to 71 cases, have been COVID-19 hotspots. Refusing to socially distance is thus certainly nothing unique to the Muslim community. Indeed, Lee Man-hee, the leader of a South Korean Christian sect, who is considered the second coming of Jesus Christ by his followers, will in fact be investigated over the COVID-19 cases linked to his church. After a governmental investigation, it was unveiled that nearly 9,000 of his South Korean churchgoers were showing symptoms of COVID-19.

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## EGYPT DESTABILIZES

The security situation in Egypt can have direct, medium- and long-term implications on European countries. Any violent confrontation between the government and the public (i.e. escalating protests) will accelerate the deterioration of Egypt's internal security, which has been put under significant pressure by COVID-19. The Arab Spring, which lasted from late 2010 until late 2012, was partially caused by economic despair and political discontent. Today, we see both of these factors re-emerge at a pace the governments in North Africa cannot keep up with. The post-COVID-19 Egypt (as well as North Africa as a whole) will certainly find itself in dire economic circumstance, facing unprecedented unemployment, poverty, security challenges and instability. Protests are certain to happen, especially since many Egyptians have become critical of the as-Sisi government – a development that is currently exploited by the Muslim Brotherhood.

Given the present political climate in Egypt, as well as the rifts between the MB and the government, it remains questionable if both, protestors and security personnel, would remain as peaceful as the Egyptian revolution of 2011. A violent escalation of protests and a deterioration of the security situation could easily lead to wide-spread unrest throughout the country. Hence, government responses could further dynamize the key-drivers for radicalization. At the same time, one can observe jihadi groups attempting to establish themselves throughout North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. These groups – much like the Muslim Brotherhood – are notorious for hijacking causes in order to push their own agenda. The rather bleak security situation in neighboring Libya, Sudan and Gaza could additionally enable the flourishing of extremism in post-COVID-19 North Africa. In the long-term, this scenario would almost certainly lead to higher unemployment, lacking education and ultimately the number of the marginalized will increase, which leads to a self-perpetuating cycle of radicalization and extremism in North Africa.

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## COVID-19 INCREASES UNCONTROLLED MIGRATION

COVID-19 will have a dramatic impact on migration. Especially in the MENA region, economic migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, who are mainly working informally and without a work permit, are currently unable to secure their daily needs due to the imposition of curfews. Rising prices for goods, food, and accommodation, as well as frequent abuses, robberies and overall insecurity, will become a “push factor” and prompt many of them to depart to Europe. Indeed, since Libya has also closed her borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants are likely to consider departing for Europe instead of returning to their home countries, where the economic outlook might be even worse. However, the increased police and military presence on the streets has forced migrants and refugees to stay indoors as of now in order not to be detained. These migrant workers and refugees in North Africa will face the brunt of the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, foreign powers might attempt to exercise pressure on European decision-makers by channeling these migration streams. The aspect of COVID-19 spreading among migrants and within refugee camps might provide them with additional leverage.

The economic, social and security-related impacts on countries in the MENA region and sub-Saharan Africa due to COVID-19 will prompt a new migrating influx. The national governments of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are already under significant pressure trying to combat the increasing threat of extremism and terrorism. Despite the support of around 14,000 UN peacekeeping troops (MINUSMA), roughly 5,100 French soldiers (Operation Barkhane) and the Takuba task force consisting of circa 500 European special forces, extremist groups continue to expand their influence at a pace never seen before. This is also due to poor governance, inter-ethnic tensions and scarcity of resources - these trends are furthermore exacerbated by COVID-19.

The present pandemic (or perhaps a second wave of it) may prompt some European governments to divert their attention and resources towards their own needs or force them to withdraw troops due to the risk of COVID-19 infections. However, despite the continuing criticism of these military missions, a continued regional military engagement has become an indispensable factor in curbing regional extremism. Without this external military support and counter-terrorism expertise, the regional governments of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger will be left in a highly assailable position and are likely to destabilize further.

In the same vein, if NGOs and donors are forced to withdraw their support, personnel and expertise now and due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this will likely result in uncompleted projects and lack of funding. It may either lead to the overall failure of certain essential projects and development aid or to NGOs losing the trust of local communities in the long-term.

Given the local economic hardship, departing by sea may become appealing once the COVID-19 outbreak is under control in Italy and lockdowns are lifted in North African countries. Hence,



in the mid- and long-term, European governments must prepare for a dramatic influx in uncontrolled migration after the COVID-19 pandemic is under control.

Lastly, migration has been used as a "weapon" by Turkey. By now, Turkey does control two of the main migration routes from either the Middle East or Africa towards Europe: the Greek border and parts of the Libyan coastline. An increasing number of refugees and migrants will thus also affect what Turkey considers to be political leverage. Aside of causing harm, death and suffering a destabilization of the region and increasing "push factors" will have a significant impact on Europe's internal politics and security aside of causing rifts amongst an already heavily tensioned society.

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## ANTI-SEMITE CONSPIRACY THEORIES

One theme that is becoming increasingly common among far-right and Islamic-fundamentalist conspiracy theorists in Telegram groups, online forums and on other social media outlets is that the Jews have been responsible for COVID-19 in order to gain from it economically. In the Saudi daily newspaper Al-Watan, an author claimed that COVID-19 had been spread by American and Israeli drug companies in order to increase their profits, which he calls a "virus industry". The Iraqi analyst Muhammad Sadeq Al-Hashemi argued in a TV interview that COVID-19 was an American plot, aimed at reducing the world's population. He claimed that the Jews had in the past also infected the majority of the native American population with Anthrax in order to establish the Jewish homeland, that they had furthermore killed one third of the Scottish population in a similar fashion and that the Rothschild family allegedly owns laboratories tasked with the development of biological weapons.

The Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Jordanian scholar Ahmad Al-Shahrouri claimed that the Jews are more dangerous than COVID-19 and every disease on the planet. As a cure against the virus he suggested remembering the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem and the jihad in order to purify the soul and body. Members of Turkish media outlets have also blamed the virus on the Jews and other political actors. However, the authors claimed that one would be safe from COVID-19 when inside a mosque.

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## ANTI-IRANIAN CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Extremists have especially embraced the theory suggesting that COVID-19 is a divine punishment for the Shiites and Iran. The scholar Sheikh Abdul Rahman Dimashqia, who resides in the UK, assessed the reason for this punishment to be the Shiite understanding of Aisha (the third wife of the Prophet) having ruled the consumption of rats permissible. He furthermore suggested that Iran had deliberately sent infected people into Sunni cities in the region. Such bizarre theories are also shared by violent extremists. A Syrian jihadi commander for example claimed that Iran could weaponize COVID-19 patients and use them against jihadi groups in Syria. Also, the IS Al-Naba' newsletter from the 27th of February 2020 linked the COVID-19 outbreak in Iran to "sinful" Shiite believers.

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## ANTI-CHINESE CONSPIRACY THEORIES

With respect to anti-Chinese conspiracy theories, it is commonly suggested that COVID-19 must be a divine punishment for how Beijing has dealt with the Uyghur Muslims. According to the Tunisian cleric Bechir Ben Hassen, who resides in France and blamed China for the virus, COVID-19 is "a soldier in Allah's army". The Shi'ite scholar Hadi Al-Modarresi also assessed that the spread of COVID-19 is a divine punishment against the Chinese for their disrespect towards Islam. The Islamic scholar Mohammad Abbasi held a sermon in a mosque in New Jersey in which he also stressed that COVID-19 is divine retribution for the treatment of the Uyghur Muslims and that the virus should be "the least they [the Chinese] should suffer." The Canadian imam Hussein Amer, who is a member of the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated Muslims Association of Canada, also supported this theory.

Another theme suggests COVID-19 to be an act of biological warfare either against China or conducted by China. Some Arab journalists, including the columnist Hussein Saqer, have consequently compared COVID-19 to the avian flu or swine flu and suggested they were created and spread by America for economic reasons. In the same vein, some authors have linked the virus to US economic and psychological warfare against China. The Iraqi analyst Sabah Al-Akili went as far as suggesting that COVID-19 had been spread through electronic files by the US as a part of a war against China.

Such absurd conspiracy theories can also end up in the realms of jihadism. The jihadi cleric Abdallah Al-Muhaysini consequently also accused China of attacking the Uyghur Muslim population by spreading COVID-19 to East Turkestan. It is needless to point out that a conspiracy theory that may have originated on far-right social media channels in America is able to cause real-life violence in a different part of the world.

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## ANTI-AMERICAN CONSPIRACY THEORIES

The Egyptian journalist Ahmad Rif'at reasoned that the US deliberately selected Wuhan as a target because a large number of Americans decided to leave the city immediately after the outbreak. He went on to further accuse a CNN reporter for leaving the city prior to the COVID-19 outbreak and for not staying there in order to report. He presented these "facts" as a proof for American involvement. Similarly, the Iranian researcher Amir Mousavi suggested that COVID-19 had been created in a laboratory as part of an American conspiracy. He assessed that the US certainly has a cure for it but had so far refrained from releasing it so that maximum damage to China and Iran could be caused and in order to benefit from it economically. Mousavi considered the fact that the US had offered aid to Iran in exchange for accurate information on COVID-19 as an indicator for America intending to study the behavior of the virus so that it could be used in biological warfare.

Lastly, the political science professor Sadek Al-Naboulsi also suggested COVID-19 to be an act of American biological warfare against China in order to harm the country economically.

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## NEW DEVELOPMENTS THAT REQUIRE ATTENTION

Politically or ideologically different – if not opposed – extremist groups might find common enemies (i.e. the government, the police, a certain minority etc.) and join forces, cooperate, or at least share information or divide out their spheres of influence. Some tendencies could already be observed and parallels to historical examples can be drawn.

The most obvious scenario might be found when looking towards the far-left and Islamist extremists. Historically, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Red Army Faction have cooperated and found common grounds and enemies. Especially those two types of extremist groups share similar sentiments, world views and goals: criticism of the US foreign policy (commonly termed US imperialism), the capitalist economic system, migration, criticism of the police or racism and Islamophobia, etc. Intriguingly, even jihadist groups like IS share some of these views. However, especially protest movements like “Black Lives Matter” – in itself a justifiable and reasonable protest movement, which has sadly been hijacked by criminals and extremists – can draw the attention of the far-left and Islamic groups.

The fallout of COVID-19 and particularly high unemployment rates, criticism of the economic situation as well as the government and blaming “the system”, “capitalism”, “elites” or “the state”/“the police” as a whole could possibly unite these movements and continue to divide society and its sub-groups. Far-left terrorism may re-emerge and possibly lead to the kidnapping and execution of individuals, which has been the modus operandi of jihadi groups for years.

Whilst it remains unlikely that extremist groups like the far-right or Islamic fundamentalist will seek any cooperation in the near future, they are benefiting from each other’s propaganda and military handbooks already. They have also found anti-Semitism to be a common denominator. It cannot be entirely ruled out that pragmatic forces within these movements could seek more active cooperation in the future (most probably not in Europe but in the US). Especially a recession, economic hardship and widespread unemployment would likely shift the attention of far-right ideologues as well as Islamic extremists towards those whom they already blame for most of the problems in the world: the Jewish community.

Both would obviously have to “bend” their ideologies, but it is not like this has never happened before. Indeed, Islamic extremists ideology and the Nazi ideology have found a common enemy in the past (the Jews during World War II), whilst also Nazi Germany promoted an alliance with the “Muslim world” in order to confront the former Soviet Union, America and the Jews together.

This ideological basis could potentially be exploited by both groups in light of their growing anti-Semitism. Nazi Germany also politicized the Quran and the concept of jihad in order to achieve its political ends and although the far-right rhetoric and jihadi propaganda are currently at odds with each other, they may re-discover somewhat of a common history.

With respect to ideology, the jihadi movement is of course much less pragmatic than the far-right, i.e. the quest for a worldwide caliphate - but at the same time most groups and especially their leaders have also demonstrated reason, pragmatism and flexibility, which is commonly not reflected in their propaganda but becomes more obvious when studying the internal workings of jihadi groups. For example, the Sunni al-Qaeda once received training by the Shiite Hezbollah prior to 9/11, and currently one can observe a cooperation - if not a merger - between al-Qaeda-affiliated and IS-affiliated groups in sub-Saharan Africa. They remain enemies in the Middle East.

Terrorists are pragmatists and although it may seem highly unlikely for groups at such extreme ends of the spectrum - who are currently also issuing threats against each other - to join forces or cooperate anytime soon, it may be enough for now, if some elements decided to share their manuals, bomb-making instructions etc. online or in the dark-web for everyone else to download them. In fact, they are already studying each other's propaganda and manuals.

Such a "black swan" event, involving a cooperation between the far-right, far-left and fundamentalist Islamic groups, may truly appear unlikely. However, in light of the most recent observations it can also not be fully excluded - perhaps not on a movement-wide level but with respect to certain elements and sub-groups.





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## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Governments and their security services must remain vigilant.**

New terrorism threats are emerging that need to be addressed and countered. Critical infrastructure as well as IT systems have re-appeared on the radar of terrorist groups. It is comparatively straightforward to enhance security in these areas. However, extremists have also started to target social stability and security through various terrorist means, hijacking of other causes or subversion. Countering these threats and dangers will require a broader strategy and continuous engagement with various extremist and moderate sub-groups of society.

### **Executive bodies must strike a well-informed balance between suppression, dialogue and strategic communication.**

The police and security services have become the targets of extremists. However, increasing tensions might accelerate dangerous dynamics and isolate various far-right, far-left and Islamic movements - effectively pushing them further into radicalization. At the same time, criminal activities (looting, vandalism, various forms of extremism etc.) cannot be tolerated and executive branches are well-advised to continue suppressing such activities - especially since violent acts committed by migrants against the police appear to be increasing too. Such actions can add to a delegitimization of the rule of law and to clan/gang criminality, parallel societies or other extremist/criminal activities. In order to avoid this, the executive branch may want to strike a balance between suppression, dialogue and active counter-messaging/strategic communication.

### **Uncontrolled migration must be curbed in order to stop the "weaponization of migration".**

The security situation in North Africa continues to degrade and migration has become a "weapon" used by actors like Turkey. Austria and her European neighbors must consider these developments and adapt their migration- and foreign policies accordingly. Although there is no doubt that many migrants are indeed entitled to asylum, refugee status and protection, it is important to recognize that this exact situation is considered a tool of political leverage by Turkey and to some extent regarded as a de facto "weapon" that could destabilize Austria and her European neighboring states. In times of economic hardship, unemployment and heightened political, social and security-related tensions, unleashing this "weapon" might have highly concerning security implications, deepen existing rifts within society and lead to unrest, increased recruitment by fundamentalist groups (i.e. Muslim Brotherhood) and violent acts by far-right, far-left and Islamic extremists. An uncontrolled migration influx - as a "weapon" or as a result of the destabilization of North African or sub-Saharan African countries - will, one way or the other, have dramatic consequences for Austria and her security.

### **Subversion by extremist groups increases and must be addressed.**

Subversion - conducted by movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, other extremist organizations, supporters of political Islam or by various foreign actors - has become a significant threat to democracy and democratic values. Subversive action must continuously

be countered by various means in order to maintain social security, especially in times of the COVID-19 pandemic, since new possibilities for subversion are emerging.

**Legislative branches may want to re-evaluate and re-structure the legal basis and the funding mechanisms of Islamic institutions in Austria.**

Especially with respect to subversion by the Muslim Brotherhood and the financing of mosques and activities by foreign actors or MB-affiliated organizations and institutions, the legislator may want to consider the present situation an opportunity to re-structure the legal basis and the funding of various Islamic associations and institutions in Austria or related to Austria. The current system has proven to be dysfunctional in this regard and should urgently be re-assessed.

**A broad strategy needs to be well-informed.**

Continuous engagement with the ongoing developments, fundamentalism and terrorism must be a prime goal. In times of heightened security tensions, deepening rifts amongst society and increasing violence, radicalization and extremism, a broad strategy is needed that encompasses monitoring, research and counter-messaging, additional to the operational activities of the executive and legislative branches of government.

**The global (media) attention must try and focus on all possible or imminent threats equally to be able to act in time.**

COVID-19 shows that the global public focus is exclusively on the current pandemic and its consequent events, which might give rise to the danger of overlooking other imminent (as well as non-imminent) dangers or threats. It is imperative that any threat, be it on a state national level, European or international, is monitored and dealt with sensibly and immediately, and that appropriate precautions are taken in time – even though the global media might be focusing on other "events" and developments. Networked thinking, strategic foresight and consistent action are necessary instead of reactively responding to current events.

**Governments should work together internationally and actively in order to try and solve crises together.**

Cooperation on a multi-national level with moderate states in conflict regions and collaboration as equals (instead of European condescension) regarding situation assessments and conflict solving is imperative. A more active foreign policy toward solution-oriented strategies is more successful if it is based on trusting networks and cooperation. Also, development aid must continue to flow to support conflict regions, and the education of the youth must be a stronger future focus. Economic sanctions will only damage civil societies, especially middle and working classes, and considerably slow down the building of more stable, social long-term structures.





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