Effect of COVID-19 on Violent Extremism and Terrorism in Digital Spaces

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The disruption and devastation created by the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide, be it in terms of loss of human life, economic uncertainties, health crisis or unemployment, is unprecedented. The impact of COVID-19 can be experienced in all aspects of life across the globe. One such aspect, which is the focus point of this article, is the impact of COVID-19 on online violent extremism and terrorism. The recent report by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) titled, "*Impact of COVID-19 on Violent Extremism and Terrorism*" mentions the negative trends occurring in the cyber domain[1]. The first of these is a spike in the dissemination of 'disinformation, conspiracy theories and propaganda'. The objective is to sabotage governments' functioning and spread misinformation to hamper the governments' efforts to fight the pandemic[2]. Moreover, the surge in online recruitment activities by violent extremist and terrorist groups, is posing a new challenge to the already embattled governments. The objective of these online activities is to identify disgruntled unemployed population living in isolation due to lockdown and radicalise them[3]. The lockdown enforcement measures have created discontentment in certain sections of the public, which can be exploited by violent extremist and terrorist groups for online recruitment[4].

In order to counter the negative effects of the COVID 19 which are being taken advantage of by the violent extremist and terrorist groups, the report has suggested a few strategies[5]. Firstly, to design a robust system to counter negative propaganda against the governments and agencies involved in fighting the pandemic[6]. Secondly, to counter online recruitment by violent extremist groups, it suggests initiation of online resilience campaigns, bringing workable solutions for unemployed youth and involving youth and online influencers to design and promote these campaigns[7]. Thirdly, to counter cases where enforcement agencies use force that affects human rights. Communication channels

between the citizens and law enforcement agencies should be established so that a shared understanding can be created between them[8].

Reinforcing similar views, a recent report by the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has made an alarming revelation. As per the report, there is an emerging correlation between COVID-19 isolation caused due to lockdowns happening globally and rise in online violent extremism related activities. According to the report, people remained in 'extended isolation'. They could be exposed to '*increased exposure to violent extremists who are using social media, including disinformation spread on social media, to attempt to radicalise others to violence*'[9]." The officials anticipated that due to isolation and high consumption of digital content, people are expected to be more vulnerable to fake news, disinformation, misinformation, conspiracy theories and radicalism. This gives an opportunity to propagators of online violent extremists and non-state actors to manipulate the opinion of masses[10].

From an Indian perspective, the September 25, 2020 statement by the Indian First Secretary, Permanent Mission of India to the UN in Geneva, Pawan Badhe reinforces a similar view. In his statement during the debate on "Human rights situations that require the council's attention", Pawan Badhe stated that, "*The increased presence of people online and on*

social media has been targeted by terrorists to disseminate misinformation through hate speeches, fake news and doctored videos. The intent has been to entice and establish links with vulnerable individuals and recruit them in their cadres[11]."

It is to be noted that the "uncertainty and global anxiety" created by the pandemic has given an opportune moment to these groups to aggravate population agony and amplify propaganda against governments[12]. There are evidences which suggest that the pandemic has invigorated the terrorist and extremist groups who are exploring possibilities to take advantage of vulnerabilities of their target population. In recent times one can see how ISIS groups tried to 're-shape' the narrative related to COVID 19. From calling it "a 'soldier of Allah' that was sent to afflict the *'oppressive crusaders and their hirelings among the Zionists and apostates*' to calling "*Muslims to protect themselves through physical precautions and prayer*"[13].There are signs that in coming times these groups might reconstruct narratives and strategy keeping COVID 19 as one of its focus points[14].

The challenge emerging from the use of social media to target the vulnerable sections of society by extremist groups taking advantage of their weak psychological situation may not be seen in isolation. It needs to be seen in continuation of the consistent use of internet and social media but international terrorist groups

like ISIS to target vulnerable people. The lockdowns resulting from COVID and restricted physical movements coupled with general feeling of dismay and isolation has only exacerbated the already existing proclivities of those drawn towards the extremist narratives. There is a possibility that many fence sitters might get influenced by the extremist propaganda on social media, particularly if they are suffering from job loss or broken social relations resulting from COVID.

To conclude, a major threat to the well-being of populations worldwide has been created by COVID-19 deadly virus in the form of the rise of online violent extremism, which escalated during lockdowns. It is evident that the terrorist and extremist groups are taking advantage of this global pandemic to destabilise the political structures and peace and harmony in society. The presence of digital connected spaces is giving them a golden opportunity to exploit the emotionally and financially distressed populations.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

[1] Impact of COVID-19 on violent extremism and terrorism. (n.d.). UNITAR. https://unitar.org/learning-solutions/publications/impact-covid-19-violent-extremism-and-terrorism

[2] Ibid (n-1)

[3] Ibid (n-1)

[4] Ibid (n-1)

[5] Ibid (n-1)

[6] Ibid (n-1)

[7] Ibid (n-1)

[8] Impact of COVID-19 on violent extremism and terrorism. (n.d.). UNITAR. https://unitar.org/learning-solutions/publications/impact-covid-19-violent-extremism-and-terrorism

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