THRIVING ON UNCERTAINTY: COVID-19-RELATED OPPORTUNITIES FOR TERRORIST GROUPS

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POLICY CENTER
FOR THE NEW SOUTH
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Through a wide range of publications, surveys, events, training activities, audio-visual materials and a strong footprint on social media, the network reaches thousands of experts, think tankers, researchers, policy-makers and civil society and business stakeholders every year. While doing so, EuroMeSCo is strongly engaged in streamlining genuine joint research involving both European and Southern Mediterranean experts, encouraging exchanges between them and ultimately promoting Euro-Mediterranean integration. All the activities share an overall commitment to fostering youth participation and ensuring gender equality in the Euro-Mediterranean experts' community.

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As part of this project, five Joint Study Groups are assembled each year to carry out evidence-based and policy-oriented research. The topics of the five study groups are defined through a thorough process of policy consultations designed to identify policy-relevant themes. Each Study Group involves a Coordinator and a team of authors who work towards the publication of a Policy Study which is printed, disseminated through different channels and events, and accompanied by audio-visual materials.

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The aim of the IEMed, in accordance with the principles of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP), the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), is to stimulate reflection and action that contribute to mutual understanding, exchange and cooperation between the different Mediterranean countries, societies and cultures, and to promote the progressive construction of a space of peace and stability, shared prosperity and dialogue between cultures and civilisations in the Mediterranean.

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POLICY CENTER FOR THE **NEW SOUTH**
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The **Policy Center for the New South** (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank aiming to contribute to the improvement of economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and the rest of Africa as integral parts of the Global South.

The PCNS pleads for an open, accountable and enterprising "new South" that defines its own narratives and mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, as part of a forward-looking relationship with the rest of the world. Through its analytical endeavours, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give the floor to experts from the South. This stance is focused on dialogue and partnership, and aims to cultivate African expertise and excellence needed for the accurate analysis of African and global challenges and the suggestion of appropriate solutions.

As such, the PCNS brings together researchers, publishes their work and capitalises on a network of renowned partners, representative of different regions of the world. The PCNS hosts a series of gatherings of different formats and scales throughout the year, the most important being the annual international conferences "The Atlantic Dialogues" and "African Peace and Security Annual Conference" (APSACO).

Content

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a cataclysmic impact on all aspects of the functioning of our world. The relevance of the possibility of the spread of a global virus with the spread of terrorism is not immediately obvious as it is difficult for a direct causal link to be scientifically established. However, taking into consideration how state responses and pre-existing socioeconomic grievances can be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic can lead to innovative findings on how terrorist groups have adapted and conducted their activities during the pandemic. Analysing how the response of states impacts socioeconomic grievances and how it interacts with terrorist activities, the authors have found that the pandemic has impacted the operational and ideological frameworks of terrorist groups in multiple ways. COVID-19 was interpreted as an opportunity to spread extremist propaganda and ideology. The pandemic was presented as an act of God, punishing the ungodly and weakening enemy governments. In terms of propaganda, this virus was presented as a soldier of Allah and was used for online recruitment strategies. Concerning the operational front, poor state responses to the pandemic may have reinforced the legitimacy of terrorist groups among populations as they were continuously used as arguments advancing the agenda of these groups in their areas of intervention. In the first chapter, poor state responses and their interactions with terrorists' activity was analysed especially in the Sahel region where the longstanding fragilities of states have been exacerbated by the pandemic. However, at this stage, a clear correlation between COVID-19 and the increase of terrorist activity is yet to be established. This property of COVID-19 as a crisis intensifier is a strong argument in the last chapter focusing on the Maghreb region: taking into account the various databases and academic viewpoints, this chapter examines the link between the growing popular discontent of the populations of Maghreb countries and the surge of the COVID-19 pandemic. As in the Sahel region, a potent and clear connection between COVID-19 and a possible increase of terrorist activities was contested. The role of state responses and their effect on the surge of terrorist activity was also addressed, especially in the second chapter of this study: for instance, when examining the changing recruitment strategies of terrorist groups in the Mashreq region, strengthening the resilience of the state and society was the viable strategy for countering violent extremism. For the European Union (EU) to achieve this endeavour, this study argues that the EU's efforts need to work on remediating the vulnerability of fragile groups within societies and to consider the core governance fragilities leading to the surge of terrorist activities in the regions covered, namely the Sahel, the Mashreq and the Maghreb.

Exploring the opportunities offered by COVID-19 to terrorist groups in these regions deepens the understanding of terrorist tactics and propaganda strategies. This enables the adoption of a more comprehensive approach with regards to responding to and assisting states on the ground. Policy recommendations derived from this study not only aim to mitigate and assess risks deriving from the

interlinkage between the turmoil caused by the virus and terrorism in the regions, but also focuses on state responses and the assessment of innovative and applicable ways of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) in an uncertain and novel landscape. Indeed, this study does not solely focus on the capabilities of terrorist groups but also explores the different components of the interaction between the pandemic and terrorism. It thus proposes a wider range of recommendations that address both the challenge of mitigating the risks of terrorist activities but also, in the long term, the core factors that increase and encourage the spread of terrorist violence in the regions covered.

Main recommendations:

- Attention should be paid to redirecting existing funding towards COVID-19 responses. Shrinking aid budgets in the medium term can have negative effects further down the line, especially when it concerns programming geared towards service provision in fragile areas.

- Urge European countries to launch on the national level large-scale awareness campaigns that explain how to report suspicious online recruitment related to the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other terrorist groups, and the type of help and protection offered in return. For such campaigns to be effective they should be carried out in cooperation with all stakeholders including local mosques, Imams, Islamic centres, schools, universities, and hacker communities.

- Establish an effective cooperation strategy for the exchange of information and expertise between the countries of the region but also with the EU and the broader international level.

- Encourage an evidence-based approach when it comes to the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis intensifier.

- P/CVE needs to be understood not only as a mere security task but also requires broader efforts and joint solutions with regard to legal migration and sustainable economic growth.

- Dedicate financial support to encourage Iraqi and Syrian Sunni youths to launch small and micro-enterprises, especially in areas destroyed during the war on ISIS.

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Introduction

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Jihadist movements build their specific strategy according to the operational possibilities offered by the field, the tactics that can be executed in view of the training of these combatants, and the logistical availabilities. There is, however, an almost unchanging aspect operating in spite of the circumstances; that is, the doctrine. Jihadist movements, like all ideological schools, base their actions on a normative and theoretical corpus that allows them to explain to the public and their followers the correctness of their causes and justifies the actions taken on the ground. This corpus of theories and norms is made up of a constant and immutable core and of elements introduced according to each context. Does this mean that the Jihadist doctrine is fixed and constant? While its core is, it is continually and opportunely enriched by everything that Jihadist theorists find useful to enable the doctrine to meet the goal. This doctrine also obeys the laws of evolution despite the steadfastness of an almost immutable dogmatic core. Nothing is therefore static in the Jihadist strategy, and the declination of the global strategy into specific and adapted strategies does not concern only the operational side but also the doctrinal aspect. Jihadist strategies therefore do not only rely on invasion and operational actions on the ground. Narratives also have an influence. The Jihadist doctrine is therefore the umbilical cord that links all similar Jihadist groups, despite the differences that may exist in the environments in which they operate. It consists of a body of documents and speeches containing the beliefs, norms and principles that govern the existence of the group.

Propaganda can be seen as a vehicle of doctrine. In insurrectionary movements which wage asymmetric wars, the population is a primary target and influencing public opinion is a major objective. In these asymmetric wars the population is the prize between the insurgents (terrorist groups) and the government institutions. Each party tries to engage it to have the population on its side (de Courrèges et al., 2010). Terrorist propaganda techniques make it possible to legitimise false ideas and fallacious principles obtained by the distortion of the true norms of religion, with the aim of expanding terrorist doctrine; instilling a climate of fear among opponents as a dissuasive tool; and highlighting the pull factors like the appetite for violence and the appeal to fight injustice, which attracts people in the targeted circles – mainly the youth. Terrorist groups have historically exploited upheavals in the world to skilfully exploit them in their propaganda and recruitment efforts, as well as to profit from crises, plagues or anything that weakens the institutions and governance structures. As stated in Ragab's chapter of this study, crises that weaken states and exhaust populations provide supporters of terrorist groups with the opportunity to present themselves as the saviours and the alternative.

As the world is facing an unprecedented global health, social and economic emergency as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been viewed by terrorist groups as a golden opportunity to strengthen the principles of their respective doctrines and fuel the propaganda (Boussel, 2020). First, terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which seek to behave like a state and even to substitute the state, have tried to seize the pandemic to increase this strategy and to fill any

vacuums left by governance institutions. Indeed, these groups have not been reticent to point out the shortcomings of governments in tackling the pandemic, and to engage in extensive propaganda and disinformation campaigns, to strengthen their narrative and increase their online span. The virus has slowly become a global test for almost all governments, putting pressure on health infrastructure and challenging state legitimacy and responses. The measures taken by states to limit the spread of COVID-19 have relied heavily on lockdowns that have forced millions of young people to stay at home. This has reduced daily activities and in most cases the confined found an alternative activity on the Internet to overcome the vicissitudes and boredom of lockdown. The increase in time spent on the Internet due to the lockdown has increased the chances of Jihadists attracting people to their sites. Radical groups have also taken steps to ensure that COVID-19 does not steal their show in the media and have strived to be a part of COVID-19-related news.

Second, and in addition to trying to fill the gap, terrorist groups have tried to feed their doctrinal system. The virtual Jihad must be constantly nourished and constitutes a system with two components: the basic doctrine, made up of dogmas, norms and principles framed within a decontextualised and biased interpretation of the prescriptions of Islam; and current salient events that are exploited through interpretations that confirm these Jihadist doctrinal approaches.

From the first announcements confirming the pandemic nature of COVID-19, terrorist groups have published declarations, articles and *fatwas* that have ex-

plained the extremist point of view of the pandemic and have given instructions to their followers to guard against the virus. However, these documents have not been limited to simply giving prevention advice. Rather, they have conveyed elements of indoctrination. The ISIS flyer entitled *Legal Guidelines for Behaviour in Epidemics* convinces readers that viruses are not contagious by themselves but by the will of God, and one should rely only on God to be saved from disease (Benraad, 2020). Other theologians and theorists of extremism, such as the Jordanian Islamic scholar Dr. Ahmad Al-Shahrouri, have gone so far as to make Jihad an activity that purifies the body and protects it against pandemics. In addition, each instruction is accompanied by a word of the Prophet considered as the reference of this instruction. This approach aims to convince the target audience that Islam had advanced long before the Western world the ways to cure systemic diseases, which in turn affirms the legality and legitimacy of orders, instructions and recommendations given as being in accordance with Sharia law.

Plagues or catastrophes that have befallen the world have often been explained through the centuries in the context of divine wrath and punishment in some religious literature. However, COVID-19 did not spare Muslims and even some Jihadists who consider themselves as the most ardent believers in God. Jihadist theorists have thus found themselves faced with the challenge of explaining how a phenomenon that is supposed to punish the enemies of Jihad also kills Jihadists, who as soldiers of God should normally be spared.

Three words largely represent this idea in Jihadist literature: punishment

The increase in time spent on the Internet due to the lockdown has increased the chances of Jihadists attracting people to their sites

(*Thaa'r*), sanction (*Qissas*) and revenge (*Intiqam*). The effects of COVID-19 are therefore presented as a divine action, which intervenes to take revenge on the ungodly and make them pay for the atrocities they have inflicted on the children of the *Islamic Ummah.* At the very beginning of the onset of the pandemic in China, theorists of extremism blamed the country by labelling COVID-19 as a divine revenge to punish the Chinese for their treatment of Muslim Uyghurs (Stalinsky, 2020). However, when the pandemic spread, they had to correct their rhetoric to consider that COVID-19 is both a retribution for the ungodly and Muslims who have deviated from God and the Prophet and also a trial by which God tests the faith of Muslims and their resilience in the face of adversity.

The virus also serves the cause of radical preachers, who believe that the pandemic sheds light on the importance of certain practices of radical Islam. The hygiene measures that have been recommended to guard against contamination are an opportunity for Jihadists to call for conversion to Islam, a religion where ablution before the five daily prayers is a hygiene measure already well established by Islam.

Against this background, this study aims at examining the potential link between increasing threats of violence and terrorist activity and the spread of COVID-19, and subsequently proposes recommendations for the European Union to better understand and push back terrorist groups' activities amidst the pandemic. The chapters in the study have adopted a particular regional scope related to the impact of the global pandemic on terrorist activity while addressing the topic through different levels of analysis: the **first chapter** examines the impact of the evolving COVID-19 situation in the Sahel region on both levels of extremist violence and responses by local and state authorities, by focusing on the pre-existing conditions that were already in place prior to the outbreak of the pandemic specifically in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. It then examines the potential longer-term implications in terms of the appeal of extremist groups in this context. The **second chapter** discusses the strategies adopted by terrorist groups to recruit new members and followers during the COVID-19 pandemic, with specific focus on ISIS and its affiliated cells in European societies and the Mashreq region, particularly Iraq and Syria. It also aims to highlight the "new" types of terrorism that ISIS has been urging its followers to practise amidst COVID-19. The **last chapter** of this study takes a similar approach of exploring extremist dynamics on the ground and related actors, state responses and policies, as well as the emerging socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic in the Maghreb region. Due to COVID-19 and its accompanying insecurities and travel restrictions, the study predominantly relies on qualitative data from interviews with international experts and local stakeholders, as well as on a broad range of primary and secondary sources, including academic publications, policy papers and newspaper articles.

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COVID-19 in the Sahel: Litmus Test for State Capacity Rather Than Fuel for Extremists

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Introduction

The link between the COVID-19 pandemic and terrorism in the Sahel is far from obvious, yet all too often assumed. From March 2020 onwards, analysts speculated that the pandemic would create opportunities for Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) in the Sahel. VEOs were expected to exploit governance vacuums as state security forces could have been forced to scale down their activities due to lockdowns and the need to provide health services, while foreign military forces, the argument went, could be forced to concentrate on troubles at home. VEOs would then be able to expand their reach.

Moreover, it was believed that structural problems – already sponsoring violence – would be adversely impacted by the pandemic. Economic grievances, discontent with political orders and harsh military responses to extremism were drivers of violence prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. Many speculated that COVID-19 would reinforce these drivers as states would increasingly use violence against civilians, muzzle opposition voices and benefit from weak governance models that allow for corruption and elite capture. This could in turn contribute to the fertile grounds for recruitment of extremist groups throughout the Sahel. But did COVID-19 indeed have this effect? Data analyses on the distribution and intensity of violence and evidence collected in the Sahel for the purpose of this chapter casts doubt on both claims. The reality is that supporting evidence is so far non-existent. Violence throughout the Sahel has continued at a level that was already extremely concerning prior to the outbreak of the virus. COVID-19 has not

led to an increase in the short term. Moreover, the interaction between COVID-19 and structural drivers of violent extremism is multifaceted, non-linear and in the Sahel largely absent. Hence, disease containment measures and extremist activity are so far unrelated, even though effects might become apparent later.

This chapter analyses the ongoing responses to the COVID-19 outbreak in the Sahel, focusing specifically on Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. It focuses on the pre-existing conditions that were already in place prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, the state responses in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, and the potential longer-term implications of the appeal of extremist groups in this context. The study seeks to understand how the evolving COVID-19 situation in the three countries has impacted both levels of extremist violence and responses by local and state authorities.

This chapter is based on ongoing analysis by the Clingendael Institute of the situation in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. It reviews the drivers of VEO recruitment in the Sahel, and analyses data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) on violence since the outbreak of the pandemic. It is also supported by a small number of interviews with experts that work on governance and violent extremism in the Sahel.

The first section presents a number of predictions on the relations between violent extremism and COVID-19. Then a section follows on the spread of COVID-19 in the Sahel. A third section presents data analysis of ACLED. The final section explores the complicated relationship between root causes and

the spread of the pandemic. The piece closes with recommendations for policy and programming.

Fears of COVID-19 further fuelling extremist activity in the region

As the first cases of COVID-19 started to appear in the Sahel while the virus had a catastrophic impact on the Global North, several reports warned that VEOs could take advantage of COVID-19 in the Sahel. These warnings came primarily against the backdrop of communication efforts by the leaderships of extremist organisations, both in the Middle East and in West Africa, in which the virus was portrayed as a punishment for crusader nations (Berlingozzi, 2020). As Süß argues in her chapter of this study, such warnings were also present in the Maghreb region. It was argued that they could use it to strengthen their positions and increase violent attacks. Additionally, warnings emerged about the virus providing fertile ground for recruitment strategies of such organisations. The sections below provide an overview of the key arguments advanced at that time.

As COVID-19 reached Sahelian capitals, warnings were issued that the potential for VEOs to continue exploiting governance shortcomings would increase (Coleman, 2020). The inability of Sahelian governments to provide basic services such as healthcare and security would likely deepen as resources were shifting towards fighting COVID-19 instead of providing basic healthcare services, which were already under strain in a pre-pandemic era. As a result, it was assumed that VEOs would be able to increase their influence in local com-

munities by offering such basic services, relying on the theory that the success of disruptive groups depends on their ability to exploit chaos. The strain on government resources was seen as hampering states' ability to provide basic services to their populations, providing a good opportunity for VEOs to strengthen their local support by offering financial incentives, security and other basic services (Coleman, 2020). Additionally, segments of the population were said to be at risk of being further disenfranchised in the event of state COVID-19 measures enforcement that lack respect for fundamental rights. As Sahelian states rolled out containment measures that in some cases seemed to point to a crackdown on civil liberties, analysts argued that the link between political discontent and extremism might backfire (De Bruijne & Bisson, 2020).

Besides warnings about the exploitation of states' shortcomings, the pandemic was predicted to further stretch available security assets in the fight against the virus, and thereby potentially weaken the capacity to respond to domestic security threats (Columbo & Harris, 2020). The argument about extremist groups' opportunistic behaviour was advanced as a potential reason to worry in light of the pandemic as groups might try to exploit disorder and carry out violent attacks or gain territory (Burkati, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2018 & 2020). Such a development could have left Sahelian states more vulnerable to attacks. On such a basis, some predicted that involving security forces to enforce curfews and isolation measures would give room to VEOs to strengthen their positions (Fletcher & Rouget, 2020). This could mean, as a result, that violent ac-

Analysts argued that the link between political discontent and extremism might backfire

tions by VEOs would not be met with the necessary force to contain them (Dahir, 2020). Reports that the Malian army detachment deployed in the areas of Mopti and Tenenkou have abandoned their positions since the beginning of the pandemic further fuelled such concerns as it was believed that it would allow VEOs to re-establish themselves in some of those areas (Diall, 2020). In addition, some argued, the security disengagement could lead to the targeting of critical COVID-19-related infrastructure (Asare-Bediako, 2020).

A similar argument was raised in relation to the presence of foreign troops in the Sahel. It was suggested that there could be a lower level of engagement due to the pandemic. Several think tanks warned about the risk of such international disengagement (Coleman, 2020; Burchill, 2020; Columbo & Harris, 2020). It was argued that countries that were providing support and expertise might decide to focus on their domestic priorities, leaving Sahelian countries even more vulnerable to VEOs. In a similar fashion, analysts pointed out that while peace-keeping missions and international counter-terrorism efforts adjusted to COVID-19 containment measures, it could leave more space to VEOs to carry out violent attacks and gain control over resources (ACAPS, 2020; Edu-Afful, 2020). When delays in the deployment of troops and the altering of rotation schedules were announced, it was argued that they might negatively impact the fight against VEOs (Burkati, 2020). While international operations including the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), Operation Barkhane, the regional G5 Sahel Joint Force, two European Union (EU) training missions

and their operation Takouba in Mali have tried to maintain the scope of their operations, some noted that in general their presence on the ground decreased (Diall, 2020).

Lastly, a concern voiced by some in the wake of the spread of the virus was that VEOs in the Sahel could use the pandemic as an opportunity to recruit and radicalise fighters, based on ideological arguments. COVID-19's spread could potentially be exploited in a narrative where it was portrayed, the argument goes, as a divine punishment against the West and all those who oppress Muslims (Burkati, 2020). Statements made by Al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the Middle East were interpreted by some as a clear intention to utilise the turmoil created by the pandemic to convince more people to join their ranks (Coleman, 2020). There was concern that VEOs in the Sahel could follow this propaganda strategy and use COVID-19 to justify their cause (Columbo & Harris, 2020).

Several months after the outbreak of the pandemic and the issuing of these warnings, the emerging picture is rather that the early rhetoric of VEO leadership has not brought about significant changes on the ground in terms of COVID-19-induced shifts in operational realities or VEOs' recruitment strategies. The next section will first look at the spread of the virus throughout the region by focusing on Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. After briefly introducing the numbers and containment measures, the section will focus on how far these developments are relevant against the backdrop of the known drivers of VEO recruitment, as well as against the evolution of violent incidents in 2020.

COVID-19 in the Sahel

Despite early fears about its potential to wreak havoc on the African continent, the COVID-19 pandemic spread at a relatively slow pace throughout West Africa and the Sahel, especially when compared to its spread in the Global North. The number of infections and COVID-19-related deaths remained relatively low (Worldometer, n.d.-a). It is clear that there are large variations across West African countries due to differing levels of testing capacity and tracing policies. While this makes it hard to directly compare countries within the region and to the Global North, the overall tendency of lower-than-expected infection rates is, nevertheless, clearly visible.

There are various reasons for lower numbers in the Sahel and West Africa: first, the age pyramid of many West African countries shows a distribution opposite to many western countries, where elderly populations were significantly affected by the early spread of the virus. Second, a strong and early public health response by countries mitigated its impact. Third, an experience with recent disease outbreaks such as Ebola and Polio provided a context in which such responses were more readily available (Dusoulier, 2020; IFRC, 2020).

Table1. COVID-19 figures per country

	Total cases	Total deaths	Cases/one million inhabitants	Testing capacity/one million inhabitants
Mali	8,203	339	398	7,083 tests
Niger	4,656	167	188	3,096 tests
Burkina Faso	11,426	134	538	No data available

Source: Worldometer (n.d.-a).

The first cases of COVID-19 virus appeared in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso in the middle of March 2020. The following section will look at the evolution of the numbers of the outbreak as well as the current situation.

Numbers and policies

In **Mali** a total of 8,203 cases of COVID-19 and 339 deaths have been recorded since the beginning of the pandemic.[1] This amounts to 398 cases per one million inhabitants (Worldometer, n.d.-a). The first wave of the pandemic hit its highest numbers in May and June with a total of 51 deaths in May and 916 recorded new cases in June (Johns Hopkins University, n.d.-b). As of late 2020, early 2021, after a long period of low cases being detected, numbers started rising again and were much higher than during the first wave. The month of December 2020, for instance, broke records with 2,380 recorded new cases. These

[1] Sources accessed and numbers as of 11 February 2021.

numbers are believed to underestimate the true spread of the virus in the country. While having an open testing policy which includes asymptomatic patients (Our World in Data, n.d.), Mali has a low testing rate of 7,083 tests per one million inhabitants (Worldometer, n.d.-a). Such rates stand in sharp contrast to countries in the Global North, where rates are usually several hundreds of thousands of tests per one million inhabitants.[2]

During the early stages of the virus outbreak in the country, Malian authorities took drastic measures to prevent the spread of the virus, including border, school and university closures, as well as restrictions on public gatherings of over 10 people (Reuters COVID-19 Tracker, n.d.-b; University of Oxford, n.d.). Measures were significantly scaled down as the number of infections decreased over the summer (Reuters COVID-19 Tracker, n.d.-b). In reaction to a higher case rate, Malian authorities announced a nationwide state of emergency on 18 December 2020 accompanied by new measures including the closure of all bars, restaurants and nightclubs, and gatherings were limited to a maximum of 50 people.[3] Big markets were to close at 6 pm and schools were announced to close for a minimum of two weeks (Jeune Afrique, n.d.).

In **Niger** a total of 4,656 cases of COVID-19 and 167 deaths have been recorded since the beginning of the outbreak in the country, which equals 188 cases per one million inhabitants (Johns Hopkins University, n.d.-c; Worldometer, n.d.-a). The first wave of

COVID-19 hit the country in April with a record 692 new confirmed cases that month, and May followed with a record of 32 deaths (Johns Hopkins University, n.d.-c; Worldometer, n.d.-b). In the following months, the number of cases steadily fell to less than 10 cases a day until the start of the second wave in November. A similar upsurge as observed in neighbouring Mali is ongoing in recent months with higher detected infection rates than in spring. December 2020 saw a record 1,175 new cases and 46 new deaths (Johns Hopkins University, n.d.-c). Despite an open public testing policy (Our World in Data, n.d.), these numbers are expected to largely underestimate the actual spread of the virus. Niger has a testing capacity of 3,096 tests per one million inhabitants, which is significantly lower than Mali (Worldometer, n.d.-a). In reaction to the first wave of the pandemic and in order to slow the spread of the virus, authorities imposed a stay-at-home requirement (University of Oxford, 2020-2021c), a restriction on public gatherings (University of Oxford, 2020-2021b), as well as border and school closures (University of Oxford, 2020-2021d). Measures were lifted progressively in the following months with schools re-opening from June onwards and borders re-opening with screening measures on arrival since the beginning of August (University of Oxford, 2020-2021d). Consecutive months only saw minor changes being implemented, until major new measures were announced mid-December 2020. In light of the second wave with COVID-19 cases rising since the beginning of December (Reuters COVID-19 Tracker, n.d.-c),

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[2] Some examples include Spain (615,316), France (610,094) and Germany (433,132).

[3] Declared until 26 June 2021.

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authorities announced a new school closure (Chahed, 2020), a ban on gatherings of over 50 people and closure of all bars, night clubs and entertainment venues until further notice (IciNiger, 2020).

At the time of writing, **Burkina Faso** had recorded a total number of 11,426 COVID-19 cases and 134 deaths since the start of the outbreak in March 2020. The average number of cases per one million inhabitants in Burkina Faso is 538 (Worldometer, n.d.-a). The country faced a first wave in March and April followed by an increase in cases in September and October similar in numbers. The second wave brings the number of cases of COVID-19 at the time of writing to record highs in the country. December saw a record 3,821 new cases reported, although the number of deaths remained below the reported April threshold of 29 deaths (Johns Hopkins University, n.d.-a). While Burkina Faso offers an open testing policy, it can reasonably be expected that the number of recorded COVID-19 cases largely underestimates the real spread of the virus in the country (Jeune Afrique, n.d.).

During the first wave of COVID-19 cases in Burkina Faso, the authorities required people not to leave their homes and provided a couple of exceptions (University of Oxford, 2020-2021c), put internal movement restrictions in place, restricted gatherings (University of Oxford, 2020-2021b) and closed schools (University of Oxford, 2020-2021a). Schools reopened in June and the stay-at-home requirements became a recommenda-

tion. Since the beginning of August, arrivals into the country are subject to quarantine measures or screening on arrival, and stay-at-home recommendations were lifted in September (University of Oxford, 2020-2021c). Gatherings of over 50 people have been banned. Contrary to other countries, Burkina Faso did not take new measures when facing an increase of COVID-19 cases in September, nor since the exponential surge since December, giving the reported evolution of cases a different trend than in Niger and Mali (Reuters COVID-19 Tracker, n.d.-a).

Main observations

From this brief overview of dynamics, three conclusions can be drawn. First, the COVID-19 pandemic put an additional strain on already fragile public health systems in the three countries under study. The impact, however, was limited to mostly urban areas and remained nearly absent further afield. In such areas the cases recorded, including in the ongoing second wave of infections, remain below the scenarios that were drawn at the onset of the pandemic.

Second, major changes to service provision by state actors have remained relatively limited. There has been some but generally little diversion of large parts of state assets in a response against the COVID-19 outbreak.

Third, there is some evidence that ongoing international development project resources have been diverted away in order to respond to the virus outbreak.[4] Such examples remain

> There is some evidence that ongoing international development project resources have been diverted away in order to respond to the virus outbreak

[4] Crisis Group has signalled such a case in the Mopti region of Mali (International Crisis Group, 2021).

anecdotal, however, and their operational implications are likely to remain limited. Moreover, the institutional logic of many organisations (losing budget if one does not deplete resources) meant that reserved budgets were still spent – though later in the year.[5]

Exploring data on the relation between VEO activity and COVID-19

Although the impact of COVID-19 has been more limited than initially assumed, the pandemic still constituted a major health crisis. So what has been the effect of this crisis on violence in the region?

This question is addressed in two parts. The first part explores levels of political violence on the basis of ACLED data analysis. It finds that, despite the multiple warnings about the potential for increasing VEO activity, there is hardly any quantitative evidence for changes in the patterns of political disorder. Overall levels of violence have been and are still driven by factors not related to the pandemic.

The second part of this section explores indirect patterns – does COVID-19 interact with structural drivers of violence? The overall observation is that there is presently also very little evidence for the effect of COVID-19 on these drivers, although it might still be too early to tell.

Figure 1. VEO violence in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger (January 2016-January 2021)
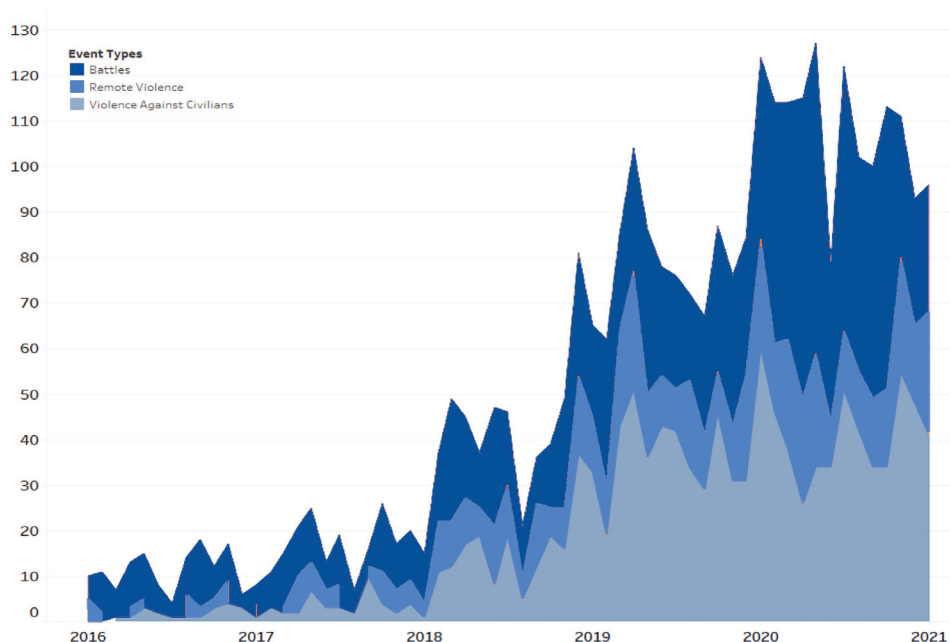
Source: ACLED (2016-2021).

[5] Interviewed researchers pointed to this logic being used by some EU member states in their financial processing of COVID-19 on external aid budgets. Interview with Sahel researcher (personal communication, January 2021).

What quantitative data on political violence in the Sahel tells us

COVID-19 has not had a structural effect on levels of political violence in the Sahel. Figure 1 presents ACLED data from 2016 to early 2021 for political violence in Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali.[6] It is clear that there is a general multi-annual – and thus predating COVID-19 – uptrend in terms of armed clashes, attacks and improvised explosive devices by armed actors in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.[7] Re-running the analysis to only include VEOs as violent actors does not generate different dynamics. Hence, increasing violence in 2020 fits a long-term uptrend without clear outliers.

Figures 2a to 5b present types and perpetrators/victims of political violence

Figure 2a/b. Actor activity and types of violence (October 2019-January 2021)
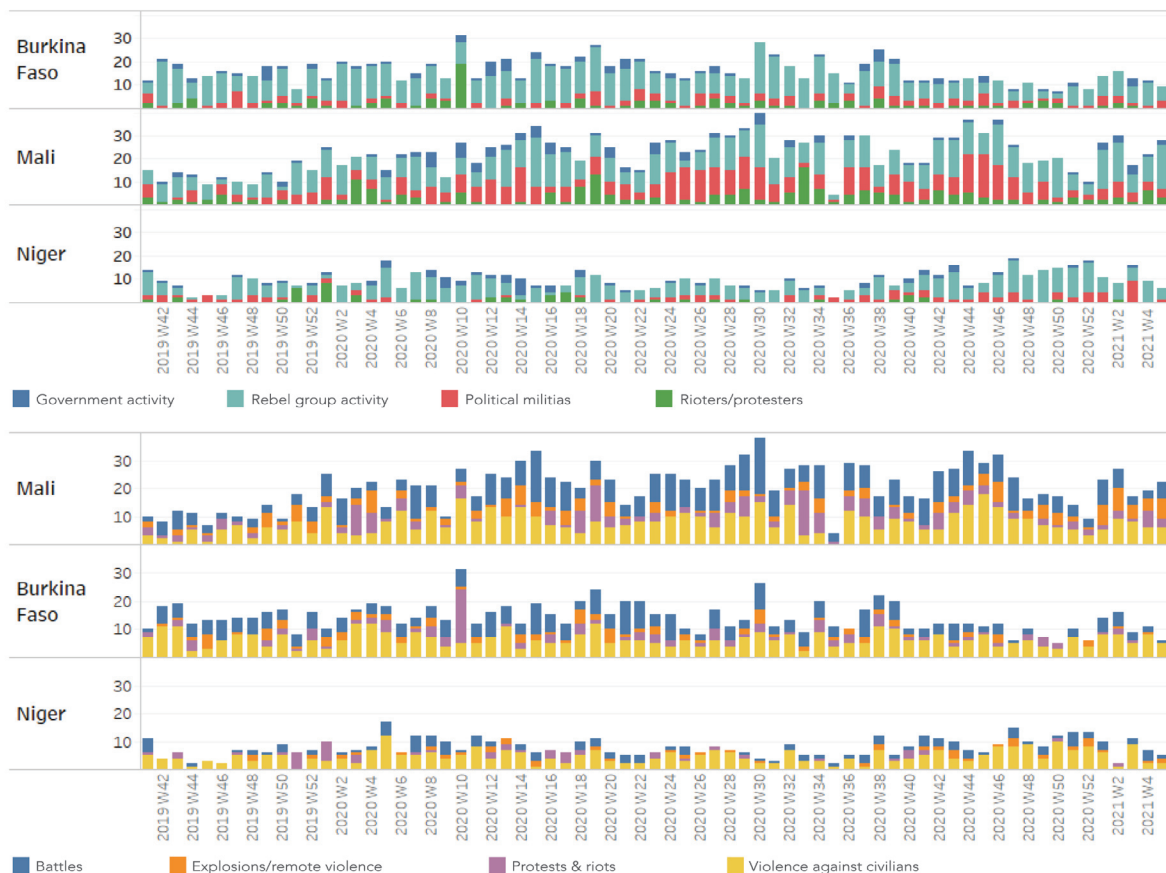
Source: ACLED (2016-2021).

[6] Definitions: Battles (armed clashes, non-state and government overtake territory), remote violence (air/drone strikes, remote explosives, shelling), violence against civilians (attack, sexual violence, abductions). Data only presents VEO activity.

[7] The list of actors selected in the ACLED database: Ansaroul Islam, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Boko Haram, ISIS, Jamaat Nosrat al-Islam wal-Mouslimin (JNIM), Katiba Macina. Such a confirmation of an existing longer-term trend is also observed by Süß in her chapter on the Maghreb.

around the first wave (March/April 2020) and second wave (November 2020-January 2021) in all three countries. There are some potential visible effects of COVID-19 on political violence levels. However, upon closer inspection, as argued below, none of these effects are really driven by the virus outbreak.

During the first wave there were three small and temporary changes in patterns of violence. In Mali, the number of battles went up from the end of March for about three weeks – most of this activity was executed by VEOs, Jamaat Nosrat al-Islam wal-Mouslimin (JNIM) in particular. However, the increase in activity was temporary and confined to Mopti. In Mopti, it was local dynamics between Dogon and Fulani, two ethnic groups present in the central Sahel, that drove increased JNIM activity. In Burkina Faso, there was a major increase in protests in the first week of March but this was before COVID-19 actually became a problem and restrictive measures were implemented. Finally, in early April 2020, Niger saw a small drop in violence against civilians and activities by non-state actors. However, this drop, which endured for just a few weeks, was confined to the Tillabery region and was a direct result of the French-led Operation Barkhane offensive that kicked off before the pandemic.

Very similar dynamics can be observed for the second wave; apparent anomalies are unrelated to COVID-19 and are driven by endogenous conflict dynamics. The largest change in political activity levels took place in Mali, at the end of November, beginning of December, with a large drop in battles coinciding with new COVID-19-induced restrictions on movement being implemented. However, the drop in violence was driven by a series of local peace agreements between Fulani and Dogon groups. In Niger, violence against civilians increased slightly during the second wave, as did activity by non-state armed groups, but this development fitted a pattern from early September of increased Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) activity in the Tillabery region. No change whatsoever to levels of political violence can be observed in Burkina Faso.

Hence, the trends from 2016 to 2021, as well as weekly levels of violence, show no noteworthy impact on the number of registered incidents during the first and second COVID-19 waves in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. As figure 3 shows, activity by groups associated with JNIM (e.g., Katiba Macina, Katiba Serma, Ansar Dine, Al Mourabitoune) and ISGS activity do not vary with COVID-19. Hence, similar to Süß's findings in this study for violence in the Maghreb, COVID-19 has had no impact on the intensity, distribution and composition of political violence in the Sahel.

Figure 3. Activity by VEOs (January 2019-January 2021)
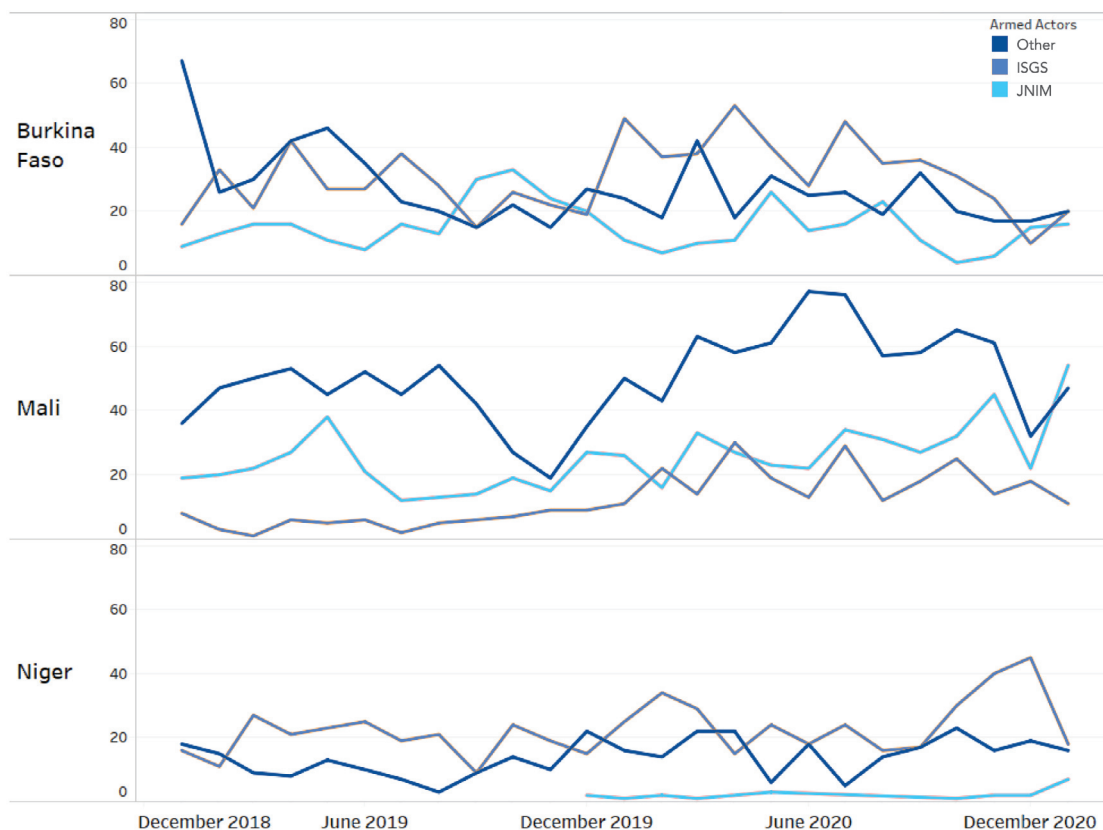
Source: ACLED (2016-2021).

Did COVID-19 impact structural drivers of violence in the Sahel?

The absence of significant immediate and longer-term effects might be explained by the ways in which VEOs operate in the Sahel. They use a range of recruitment techniques to attract new, often young, individuals into their organisations. Those range from socio-economic arguments to tapping into intercommunal or inter-ethnic cleavages, filling in for state absence and protecting against violence from the state, as well as catering to the need for self-fulfilment or prestige or advancing religious arguments. The set of drivers requires context-specific analysis that often needs to take place at a very local level in order to capture the extent to which different drivers are at play in a given situation. The following section will outline these main drivers in the Sahel and briefly discuss the interplay with the virus outbreak.

The effects of COVID-19 on local power structures and local economies

Changes in local power structures are often a key driver of VEO recruitment.

Reports show that Ibrahim Malam Dicko, the founder of the VEO Ansaroul Islam in Burkina Faso, used local frustrations and a sense of inequality felt by young individuals due to their low social status to gather support (Le Roux, 2019, p. 4). In Mali, Katiba Macina's success at the local level has been partly helped by young herders' rejection of local elites and by subverting local power structures. Similarly, the presence of local youths who felt excluded because of their lower social status facilitated their recruitment (Thurston, 2020, p. 157). This suggests that the recruitment rhetoric put forward by VEOs tapped into their feeling of rejection and inequality. It leads some analysts to suggest that part of the appeal of VEOs may originate from promises to restructure social order, an order in which some of the youths do not believe anymore (Thurston, 2020, p. 167). Given the pandemic's relatively low impact in the region, its effects on power structures have so far not become apparent, if there are any at all. Peripheral areas further away from urban centres where most COVID-19 cases were detected – areas where VEOs often operate – are unlikely to feel any impact at all.

Recruitment strategies based on economic arguments might see an impact, as they often provide incentives for joining VEOs. For example, ISGS combatants are encouraged to keep and use the loot from attacks as they please, distinguishing themselves from other groups like Katiba Macina that tend to centralise the management of gained resources. The horizontal mechanism of resource redistribution is a helpful recruitment argument for ISGS (Baldaro & Diall, 2020, p. 77). Additionally, the second large wave of JNIM recruitment coalition in Mali was also partially aided by the prospects of material gains and redistributive policies for their new members (Thurston, 2020, p. 157). Furthermore, some individuals are mainly motivated by self-interest, sometimes alongside other reasons, to join VEOs (Baldaro & Diall, 2020, p. 76). Accounts from the 1980s report that radical groups attracted young individuals across West Africa by offering them social services and by being able to provide them with new social statuses with more authority and responsibility (Ismail, 2013, p. 215).

More recently, Katiba Macina in Mali was joined by individuals for personal reasons. Some were motivated by the reasons outlined above, but others joined following prison breaks believing it was their best post-escape option (Thurston, 2020, p. 158). Young individuals also join armed groups to gain community recognition and respect. A young man from an anti-government group in Timbuktu said, "My source of motivation is the support I receive from my community for the safeguarding of property and people" (Mercy Corps & Think Peace, 2017, p. 14). Economic hardship resulting from the pandemic's impacts on local economies, remittances and state finances might in principle have a longer-term bearing on economic drivers of VEO recruitment. In addition, analysts have argued that shrinking economies in the Global North could have a negative impact on military and development budgets that are used to finance operations and programmes in the Sahel (International Crisis Group, 2021). However, as Süß also argues in her chapter on the Maghreb, such links are far from causal, and interviewed Sahel experts agree that to date such an impact has not manifested itself.

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The effect of COVID-19 on exploiting community grievances

Intercommunal and inter-ethnic cleavages and local grievances are exploited by VEOs to recruit fighters. Existing research based on interviews with customary leaders in the region of Mopti, Mali, confirmed this technique used by ISGS (Baldaro & Diall, 2020, p. 76). Similarly, JNIM has used community-based techniques to exploit local tensions and turn local armed groups into allied groups (Nsaibia & Weiss, 2020, p. 10). Katiba Macina, for example, used the feeling of injustice experienced by many Fulani, especially herders, in the Mopti regions to expand its following (Thurston, 2020, p. 157; FIDH & AMDH, 2018, p. 28). Additionally, Peul villagers and herders seeking "equitable justice" joined the VEO (Thurston, 2020, p. 157). In Burkina Faso, VEOs have used comparable techniques by taking advantage of social cleavages in northern and eastern regions. Responsibility for many deadly attacks carried out by VEOs on religious sites or ethnic groups in the regions are not officially claimed. It is part of a strategy to create confusion, fuel divisions between communities and provoke reprisal from ethnic militias. The insecurity they create allows them to recruit and operate without too much opposition (Lazarides, 2019, p. 3).

VEOs are known to profit from state violence and neglect. According to a former member of the Ansaroul Islam group in Burkina Faso, the denigrating actions of the security forces spurred the first armed attack of the group in 2016, which is widely considered as the birth of Ansaroul Islam (Le Roux, 2019, p. 4). Since then, the group targets state representatives, security forces and public institutions such as schools in a bid to reduce their service provision and reinforce the narrative of state abandonment that the group promotes (Le Roux, 2019, p. 4). Generally, a sense of grievance and limited confidence in the government has been shown to be regionally correlated with a high level of VEO recruitment (UNDP RBA, 2017, p. 68). A United Nations Development Programme report surveyed individuals about their personal "tipping points" for joining a VEO. 71% of respondents reported "government action", including "killing or arrest of a family member or friend" as the specific event that led them to join a VEO (UNDP RBA, 2017, p. 73). Similarly, Katiba Macina was joined by many recruits looking for revenge and protection from Malian soldiers or ethnic militias targeting them and their communities. Previous research in Mali and other African contexts show that individuals seeking protection and revenge from the consequences of the state absence or violence might account for the largest numbers of VEO recruits (Thurston, 2020, pp. 157-58).

VEOs use religious arguments to recruit new members; references to Islam and its presumed precepts are used throughout declarations made by VEO leaders (Baldaro & Diall, 2020, p. 71). However, religion is rarely the driving force leading to individuals joining VEOs, but rather an additional motivation in addition to others (Mercy Corps & Think Peace, 2017, p. 16). Among others, religion is used as a powerful tool for local recruitment and to strengthen internal cohesion (Baldaro & Diall, 2020, p. 71). In 2015, the second wave of recruitment of Katiba Macina in Mali partly relied on religious arguments to attract new members (Thurston, 2020, p. 157). Religion has also been used in the past to gather the support

Intercommunal and inter–ethnic cleavages and local grievances are exploited by VEOs to recruit fighters

of communities by appealing to common values. For instance, in 2012 the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA) recruited in ultra-conservative Salafi villages, particularly one named Kadji, close to Gao (Malo, 2013). A member of MUJWA from Gao explicitly reported that the group "won the confidence of the community through its message and the practice of Islam" (Mercy Corps & Think Peace, 2017, p. 16). The rhetoric around the pandemic being a punishment for non-believers could theoretically be advanced as a sign of ideological interpretation of the pandemic. It is very unlikely, however, that its effects go beyond rhetoric. Several experts interviewed claimed that ideology plays only a secondary role and that the pandemic did not have significant impact on this front (personal communication, December 2020, January 2021).

While it has been argued that the COVID-19 pandemic would have allowed VEOs to exploit local grievances, state violence and religious rhetoric, none of these effects seem to be present. Several researchers interviewed for this study concur that the actual impact of the pandemic on extremist groups on the ground has been minimal, if not non-existent beyond the few examples of rhetoric (personal communication, November and December 2020, January 2021). One researcher confirmed that the pandemic as such has not become the problem that it was projected to be by some but that it did lay bare many of the governance challenges that Sahelian states are grappling with. "There are constraints for the [Sahelian] governments to apply the measures [against COVID-19]. Border closures are hard to enforce, state resources are limited and the way in which the pandemic was originally tackled did not seem realistic. It was a problem because they tried to control it" (personal communication, December 2020). Indications that VEOs are increasingly profiling themselves as service providers are scarce, since apart from sporadic examples VEO actors are not systematically involved in the provision of healthcare in the Sahel.[8] While the effects on service provision remain hard to identify, it is clear that on an operational level not much has changed for VEO activity in the Sahel. The same trends continued to unfold despite the outbreak of the virus, showing that overall the impact remained minimal if not non-existent. Interviewed experts note that areas most affected by VEO activity are also those areas least affected by the virus, which mainly spread in capitals and other larger cities and much less in rural or border areas (personal communication, November 2020).

Conclusions and recommendations

Is there a link between the COVID-19 pandemic and violent extremism in the Sahel? And if so, what are the implications for policy-making on the multiple crises that engulf the Sahel?

Right after the outbreak of the pandemic, pundits speculated how a rapid spread of COVID-19 would aggravate political violence in the Sahel. Analysts claimed that the pandemic would create opportunities for VEOs to exploit gov-

[8] One researcher interviewed pointed out that VEOs have supported healthcare facilities logistically in the Menaka region in Mali. A report from the Tony Blair Foundation found the same for the Gao region (Munasinghe et al., 2020).

ernance vacuums – as states would be forced to retreat due to lockdowns and the need to provide health services – and multinational forces would concentrate on troubles at home. It was widely believed that VEOs would then expand their service provision and reach in various new localities.

Moreover, other analysts argued that many of the structural problems – already main drivers for violence – would be adversely impacted by the pandemic. Key drivers of violence prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, like economic grievances, discontent with local governance provision, harsh military responses would likely be reinforced. Particularly as states would increasingly use violence against civilians, muzzle opposition voices and benefit from elite capture in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, VEOs would reap the fertile grounds for recruitment of extremist groups throughout the Sahel. As elaborated above, the evidence from field research, and analysis of available data on political violence highlight that not one prediction has come to fruition and a number of assumptions have proved to be incorrect.

First, COVID-19 outbreak levels remained at much lower levels than in the Global North. Although lower levels were partly a result of less testing, it is also the case that young Sahelian societies have proven to be more resilient against the rapid outbreak, acted quicker than various European states to counter its impact and had previous experience with responding to outbreaks of contagious diseases that they fell back on.

Second, even when COVID-19 did reach high levels in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger (March/April 2020 and December 2020/January 2021), there was no effect on overall levels of political violence nor on the activities of violent extremist actors. Violence throughout the Sahel continued at a level that was already extremely concerning prior to the outbreak of the virus. COVID-19 did not lead to its increase in the short term. Compared to other West African states, Sahelian societies experienced less repression by governance actors to riots and protests and shrinking of the political space – which admittedly, partly stems from an already limited space because of ongoing conflict. Overall, political violence in the Sahel is driven by dynamics that surpass major crises such as the outbreak of COVID-19.

Third, there has been no interaction between COVID-19 and many of the specific drivers of violence in the Sahel. Interviews carried out for this research and ongoing research in the region on VEOs unequivocally show that COVID-19 has not affected local power imbalances (e.g., generational), local inequality and skewed resource management, inter-ethnic tensions, state violence and neglect and religious appeals. In part, this is because the COVID-19 pandemic is not a reality in many places, and in part because the root causes and drivers of violent extremism tend to be more important than a temporary health crisis, albeit very serious.

Recommendations

What policy recommendations can follow from a presumed effect of COVID-19 that did not materialise?

1. Firstly, the disconnect between local Sahelian realities and the real effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Global North risks pushing policy-makers into a policy-direction

Overall, political violence in the Sahel is driven by dynamics that surpass major crises such as the outbreak of COVID-19

that could be counterproductive. Whereas the focal points of development cooperation in the region have had to come to grips with an online reality, driven by a need to protect employees, the foreign sponsored military operations have continued relatively unhindered. Analysed data highlights no noteworthy change in the activity of foreign troops. However, the unintended effect is that a securitised response to the Sahelian crises is strengthened,[9] even though the majority of analysts stress the need to address root causes of the crises and compliment military activity with sustained investments in inclusive development programming. What risks aggravating this situation, is that the COVID-19 pandemic has already led to serious reductions of country-gross domestic product (GDP) in the Global North and will lead to shrinking development budgets in 2021 and likely beyond (as these budgets are usually set as % of GDP). This further undercuts the necessary balance between military engagements and actually addressing the root causes of political violence in the Sahel. In that sense, the real and long-term effects of COVID-19 on political violence in the Sahel are yet to play out and be fully understood.

a. Donors should be wary of redirecting existing funding towards COVID-19 responses, and should be aware that shrinking aid budgets in the medium term can have negative effects further down the line, especially when it concerns programming geared towards service provision in fragile areas. The November announcement that the EU is investing an additional €92 million to strengthen the response against COVID-19 in Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Niger and Chad is a welcome development in that regard;

b. The proposed "Team Europe" approach signals a willingness to act coherently across different branches of the EU external policy machinery. Such an approach can be useful in a complex environment like the central Sahel, which is already a crossroads of numerous external security and development interventions. However, attention should be paid to keeping the necessary emphasis on those parts of the approach that lie at the heart of the issues pertaining to violent extremism in the Sahel, including governance and local grievances that may be fuelled by a securitised approach to the problem. The highlighted risks of overly skewing interventions towards security initiatives are a particular reason for concern;

c. Lastly, as the Sahel has become a priority region for many EU member states, importance should be given to long-term investments that do not taper off as expected pressure on external budgets sets in over the coming years. Opportunities exist to consolidate the approach through the funding earmarked for the region in the new Multiannual Financial Framework.

2. Secondly, an implication of the above analysis is a need to isolate

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[9] Such a shift has also been pointed out by other analysts (International Crisis Group, 2021).

policy-making from the hypes and controversies that accompany policy interventions. The COVID-19 pandemic is truly unprecedented and it is understandable that predictions about its impact on VEOs were a form of "battling in the dark". However, early doomsday scenarios reveal a disconnect between the international policy and think tank domain and the actual realities in Sahelian towns and villages. As was the case during the Ebola epidemic, where one of the main lessons was that local communities were often better responders to the crises than the well-meaning outside support providers (De Bruijne & Bisson, 2020), the set of assumptions that informed the initial COVID-19 policy discourse on the Sahel was based on the experiences of the Global North rather than the Global South. From this, policy-makers can learn two lessons:

a. Discussions on the effects of crises but also policy-making more generally require more evidence-based information that is grounded in solid field research. Such research should offer much more attention to the perceptions and views of people in the Sahel. At a time of crisis, it is easy to fall back on speculation yet even more important to continue to invest in solid data collection;

b. There is a continued and sustained need for a sound evidence-based research to allow the explicit testing of assumptions, even when policies are already rolled out. It took months before the initial bleak scenarios were debunked which is too long in a major crisis. Such in-

formation can serve as guidance for crisis modifiers and other flexible financing tools are crucial if interventions that start off with limited information to feed into needs assessments are to be successful. Being able to redirect and challenge assumptions continuously is a challenging but important component of policy-making in the complex socioeconomic and security landscape that is the Sahel.

3. Thirdly, and more generally, the multiple crises in the Sahel prove to be so deep and persistent that even a major health crisis has had hardly any effect on patterns of violence. As this chapter illustrates, political violence in the Sahel is driven by deeply-rooted local problems often linked to governance issues that have been in the making for decades. The absence of a clear link between the COVID-19 pandemic and patterns of extremist violence in the Sahel means that these problems have become autonomous determinants of political violence upon which even crises no longer have an effect. This is also clearly visible from the fact that various development and security coordination mechanisms in the Sahel have had to cease operations and saw donor projects suspended. The fact that severely limited operations have had no discernible effect on violence at best is testimony to the tremendous effort to continue programming under difficult conditions. At worst, however, it might mean that present engagement was insufficient to address and solve the root causes of violence in the Sahel.

The multiple crises in the Sahel prove to be so deep and persistent that even a major health crisis has had hardly any effect on patterns of violence

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Recruitment Strategies of Terrorist Groups in the Mashreq Region Amidst COVID-19

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Introduction

The unprecedented COVID-19 crisis has pushed stories about terrorism into the shadow and motivated some pundits to claim that security institutions are preoccupied with pandemic prevention and relief, and dedicating fewer resources to countering terrorism (Byman & Amunson, 2020). Others concluded that "the curve of international terrorist attacks has indeed been flattened" (Barton, 2020).

These claims do not explain how terrorists during 2020, the year of the pandemic, managed to carry out numerous attacks in Europe, the Mashreq region and North Africa. For example, on 3 November 2020 Austria witnessed a terrorist attack carried out in the name of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (BBC, 2020). Seven terrorist attacks took place in France and were carried out according to the French authorities by "personal Jihadists" who had been radicalised online and were armed with knives (Onishi et al., 2020). In the Mashreq region, ISIS carried out 131 and 228 attacks in Syria and Iraq, respectively, during July-September 2020 (Department of Defence Office of Inspector General, 2020b, p. 19, 23). In other words, these terrorist attacks reveal that terrorism remains a danger to national, regional and global security despite the measures imposed by many governments to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

Against this background, this chapter examines how ISIS has been recruiting new members in Syria and Iraq during the COVID-19 crisis. The main argument is that the pandemic has demonstrated the resilience of the organisation and its ability to survive the crisis by attracting new members to strengthen the organisation and replenish shortfalls caused by the loss of many territories in Syria and Iraq. According to RAND Corporation's model of assessing the dynamic threat of terrorism, terrorist organisations need recruitment pools to maintain their capacity to carry out attacks (Cragin & Daly, 2004). Individuals are the backbone of any terrorist group to survive and operate over time.

The purpose of this chapter is to identify the extremist discourse and communication tools employed by ISIS to reach out to new/old recruitment pools not only in Syria and Iraq but also in European societies. It also aims to highlight the "new" types of terrorism that ISIS is urging its followers to practise amidst COVID-19.

To achieve that purpose, the analysis in the first part of this chapter is supported by phone interviews carried out by the author in November 2020 with Iraqis living in areas liberated from ISIS control and with Iraqi counter-terrorism officials. Due to the pandemic and security situation in Syria, none of the author's attempts to interview Syrians living in the country were successful. However, the author took advantage of the interviews carried out by the Rojava Information Centre in Syria with residents of the al-Hol camp. The timeframe employed in this chapter is 2020, the year of the pandemic.

In addition, the second part of this chapter calls on the European Union (EU) to review its policies and programmes towards countering ISIS and other terrorist groups, and suggests policy recommendations that could help weaken the recruitment capabilities of ISIS in the future.

How has ISIS recruited during COVID-19?

The extent to which ISIS is taking advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic is a debated issue in many policy-making circles. In its May 2020 report, the International Crisis Group cited the statement of a military official in the "Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS" underestimating ISIS' capabilities. The International Crisis Group asked whether ISIS was recruiting. The answer of the military official was the following: "No. Are they putting out a cool video that's being put on the front page of the *Daily Mirror*? No. Are they able to raise money from taxes, oil wells, foreign donations? A little bit, but mostly no. So their strength has to be measured in those terms" (Heller, 2020, p. 1).

The same assessment of ISIS capabilities is widely shared by many Iraqis living in Salah al-Din and Diyala. A Sunni resident of Tikrit believes that "ISIS has lost 90% of its capabilities since the end of its territorial 'Caliphate'" (personal communication, November 7, 2020), while an Iraqi counter-terrorism officer who took part in operations against ISIS believes that "ISIS is struggling for survival" (personal communication, November 12, 2020).

However, that assessment of the organisation's capabilities does not help explain how it is still capable of carrying out a growing number of attacks in Syria and Iraq. As illustrated in figure 1, the last quarter of 2020 witnessed an increase in ISIS terrorist attacks in Syria and Iraq in comparison to the third quarter of the year (Department of Defence Office of Inspector General, 2020c, pp. 14-16).

Figure 1. Total number of ISIS attacks in Syria and Iraq during the second half of 2020 (by quarter)
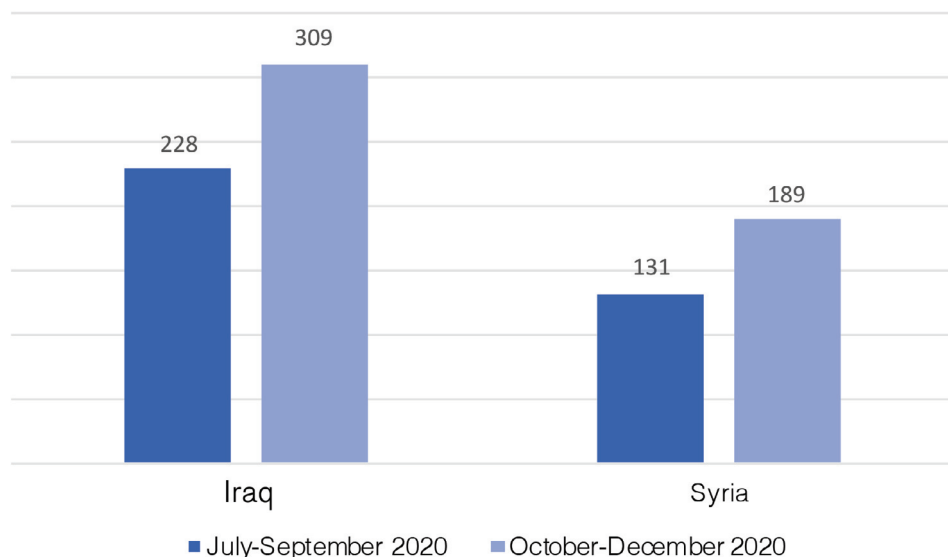
Source: Author's compilation based on data from the Department of Defence Office of Inspector General (2020b & 2020c).

In this context, this chapter argues that examining how ISIS is taking advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic needs to be done with caution for two main reasons. Firstly, the crisis caused by COVID-19 is still developing in an unpredictable way, especially in Syria and Iraq, which have been torn apart by armed conflicts for decades. Thus, any conclusions related to the opportunities created by COVID-19 for ISIS in these two countries are limited to the present chapter's timeframe. The second reason involves the fact that ISIS' capabilities in the Mashreq region are not only defined by the eruption of the pandemic in February 2020, but also by other developments the region witnessed since the last quarter of 2019. This includes the killing of the ISIS founder and leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the ISIS spokesman Abu Hassan al-Muhajir in October 2019, the ongoing war in Syria, and the deepening political and economic crisis in Iraq. Accordingly, overestimating the importance of COVID-19 for the future of ISIS and ignoring other developments leads to unbalanced assessments.

In light of the present cautious assessment, arguing that ISIS has been taking advantage of COVID-19 to continue recruiting new members does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that ISIS will be able to retain its territorial control and recruit foreign fighters from around the world as it did during 2014 and 2015 (see figure 2). Instead, it helps understand the resilience of the organisation and how it is coping with the pandemic without losing the cohort of its 20,000 to 25,000 remnants in Syria and Iraq (Hincks, 2020), and by recruiting new groups of believers in its cause who can turn into fully functioning members at any time. Consequently, the following section analyses the recruitment strategies adopted by ISIS in Syria and Iraq during the pandemic.

Approaches to recruitment

This chapter examines two aspects of ISIS' approach to recruitment during the pandemic (Gerwehr & Daly, 2006). This includes the extremist discourse employed by the organisation and how it builds on socioeconomic grievances caused by the pandemic.

Since the eruption of COVID-19, ISIS has developed a complex approach to communicate with its remnant members and to attract new followers and believers in its cause. The **first component** of this approach is the extremist religious discourse it employs. ISIS frames the pandemic as a "punishment" by God to the infidels and non-believers (Al-Nabaa Magazine, 2020b). These include the Americans, the Chinese, the Shiites in Iraq and Iran, the West in general, and the Sunnis who do not follow its guidance and orders. ISIS' messages underscore that this "wrath of God" cannot be prevented (Al-Nabaa Magazine, 2020e) while urging ISIS followers and members to "obey Allah's command to avoid harm to the soul and harm to others", and to be careful not to become infected by the virus or to transfer it to others. These messages also urge those who contracted the virus to seek medical help and call upon doctors to contribute to the protection of Muslims who may be infected with the COVID-19 virus (Al-Nabaa Magazine, 2020b, p. 10).

The **second component** of ISIS's approach explains the guiding principles of the organisation's operations in Iraq

and Syria amidst the pandemic. ISIS explains that it is in a "war of attrition" with its enemies in Iraq and Syria. Thus, retaining territorial control through a wide range of military attacks, known as *al-Tamkeen*, is not feasible. Instead, its remnant members in Iraq and Syria should pursue two main goals: follow the "hit and run" pattern of attacks against the enemies (Al-Nabaa Magazine, 2020f), and assist ISIS in releasing its members locked in the camps and prisons (Al-Nabaa Magazine, 2020c). This component is very important for the image portrayed by ISIS among its members and followers as it demonstrates the organisation's capability of surviving despite the loss of territories which were previously under its control. This component also undermines the anti-ISIS campaigns that frame it as a weak fragmented organisation, especially after the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

The **third component** defines how newly-interested individuals can join ISIS. Since 10 June 2014, ISIS had encouraged new believers in its cause to travel to Syria and Iraq to practise its version of "*Jihad*". This culminated in more than 25,000 foreign terrorist fighters originating from 81 countries. The largest number of them, as illustrated in figure 2, originated from former Soviet Republics, the Middle East and the Maghreb, as well as Western Europe (Ragab, 2018, pp. 87-88).

Figure 2. ISIS foreign fighters by region of origin (2017)
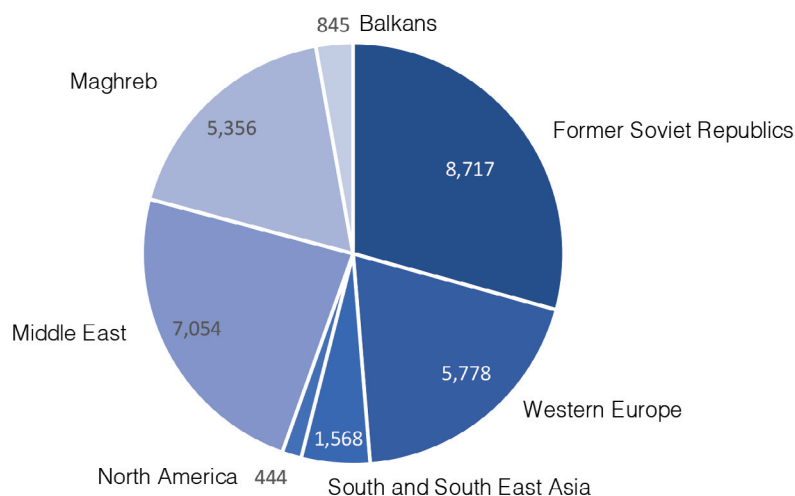
Source: Ragab (2018).

Amidst COVID-19, ISIS has clearly stated in *Akhbar al-Muslimin,* an ISIS-affiliated news website, that for anyone wanting to join its rank, travelling to Syria and Iraq, or carrying out attacks in their country is not required. Instead, they can be recruited as a "second-line soldier" (El-Rassafy, 2012, pp. 21-24). As outlined in many issues of *Al-Nabaa Magazine,* ISIS is calling for the "second-line Jihad", and the "media Jihad" (El-Rassafy, 2012, pp. 21-24). The role of these new members is explained through 24 points in a widely read Arabic book available in *Akhbar al-Muslimin,* entitled *Jihad for those*

who did not attend the Jihad (الجهاد جهاد من لم يحضر). This role includes sharing information with ISIS on its enemies, collecting donations using bitcoins in support of ISIS members who practise the "first-line Jihad" on the battlefield, and showing sympathy with ISIS on social media platforms.

The "media Jihad" supports ISIS by using media tools and technologies. ISIS explains that this type of Jihad should be practised with vigilance so as not to be caught by its enemies. It urges "media Jihadists" to follow the needed security procedures published by the pro-ISIS cyber security group *Afaaq* (Horizons Electronic Foundation) (El-Rassafy, 2012, pp. 21-24).

The complex communication approach employed by ISIS justifies why it has left the urban cities in Iraq to American troops, the Popular Mobilisation Forces, the Peshmerga and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). ISIS strongholds and operating zones in Iraq during the pandemic are becoming primarily rural and mountainous areas in Anbar, Ninewa, Salah al-Din, Kirkuk, Diyala and Baghdad provinces. ISIS members move in small groups of five to 15 terrorists using motorbikes (Department of Defence Office of Inspector General, 2020b, p. 18).

The remnants of ISIS in Syria are also moving to rural areas in Dayr al-Zawr and Homs provinces, leaving the urban cities to the Russian Armed Forces, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the United States Armed Forces, and the Assad regime.

Keeping distance and staying away from densely populated cities is on one side the preventive measures ISIS adopted to protect its members from the pandemic following the rule "to avoid harm to the soul and harm to others" (Al-Nabaa Magazine, 2020e). On the other side, the nature of these areas enables ISIS to move freely without being detected by anti-ISIS forces, "evade informants, offer a stage for attacks on local forces, and block the enemy forces from entering these areas" (Department of Defence Office of Inspector General, 2020a, p. 24).

It is worth mentioning that there is a lack of data on the level of infection among ISIS members in Syria and Iraq, and on the number of cases where ISIS members provided healthcare or medication for residents in the rural areas to recover from COVID-19. Instead, many reports outline that ISIS behaviour in rural areas is aggressive and offensive. It depopulates these areas of its residents by force and intimidation (Zelin & Knights, 2020), and exerts pressure on leading communities and tribes to provide safe haven and to weaken its competitors (Abdulla, 2020).

Regarding the grievances caused by the pandemic, including the increasing level of unemployment and poverty (Al-Nabaa Magazine, 2020a), ISIS considers it to be a consequence of "God's wrath" that would further weaken its enemies (Al-Nabaa Magazine, 2020d). Moreover, the organisation did not oppose the measures adopted by the Iraqi and Syrian regimes as well as many countries in the Arab world to prevent the transmission of the pandemic. For instance, ISIS did not call for disobedience following the decision to close mosques and to ban congregational prayers imposed by many governments during the first half of 2020. Instead, it justified it as a necessity to "avoid causing harm to oneself and to others" (Al-Nabaa Magazine, 2020e).

Two reasons explain why the grievances created by COVID-19 are not used by ISIS to attract new followers. First, simply because if it does so it has to offer a way of easing or solving these grievances and this could be beyond the organisation's current capabilities. Also, it could require systematic interactions with the residents of the rural areas that would expose its members to the virus.

Second, ISIS has already taken advantage of grievances caused by the structural weakness of the state in Syria and Iraq since 2014. These grievances continue to provide the organisation with the incubation environment that helps its survival. According to an Iraqi citizen who was living in Mosul during ISIS control, "the government security forces in Mosul were corrupted, they mistreated the residents in the province, stereotyped them as supporters of Al-Qaeda and other terrorist entities, and forcibly collected money from shops and city squares *alSahat* in return for security." He added, "for these reasons, the people of Mosul sympathised with ISIS and portrayed it as the saviour from government forces" (personal communication, November 7, 2020).

ISIS has continued using these same grievances in its discourse amidst COVID-19 to maintain the loyalty of its members and sympathisers including those in displacement camps and detention facilities, and to attract new followers and members from many Sunni communities. For instance, ISIS considers the new Iraqi government, led by Mustafa al-Kadhemy, as a continuation of the sectarian policies that were initiated by the government of Nouri al-Maliky that ruled Iraq during 2006-2014 (Al-Ali, 2014).

Besides, ISIS in Syria is taking advantage of the ineffective counter-ISIS campaign of the pro-Assad regime forces in Homs and Dayr al-Zawr (Department of Defence Office of Inspector General, 2020b, p. 23). In Iraq, it is taking advantage of the weakness of government forces and the widening security gaps between the ISF and other local forces driven by the pandemic, especially in Kirkuk. The COVID-19 restrictions, according to an Iraqi counter-terrorism officer, "led to postponing many coordination meetings between ISF and local forces and the cancellation of raid operations against ISIS" (personal communication, November 12, 2020).

It is worth noting that the lack of coordination between these forces had been reported since 2018 by the Lead Inspector General but "no formal mechanism has been implemented to eliminate the security gap" (Department of Defence Office of Inspector General, 2020b, p. 21). An Iraqi counter-terrorism officer explained further that the "new Iraqi government is overwhelmed with political and economic issues" and is de-prioritising countering ISIS terrorism (personal communication, November 12, 2020).

New generation of ISIS terrorists

Based on the analysis of open-source data, three groups of potential new ISIS members can be identified.

The first group are the civilians and the families of ISIS terrorists in the camps and prisons of Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, 92 camps have been hosting internally displaced people since 2014, as well as families and relatives of ISIS members since 2017 (personal communication, November 12, 2020). The

ISIS has already taken advantage of grievances caused by the structural weakness of the state in Syria and Iraq since 2014

camps are located in the Mosel, Tikrit, Anbar and Kurdistan provinces. The Iraqi government also holds around 19,000 ISIS members in its prisons (DW, May 27, 2019).

In Syria, there are two main camps located on the Iraqi-Syrian border: al-Hol and Roj. Up until April 2020, the total number of residents in the former was 66,000 women and children, and in the latter 4,000 women and children. In the al-Hol camp, there were around 13,500 foreign terrorists while the rest were Syrians and Iraqis (International Crisis Group, 2020).

It is worth mentioning that until the end of 2019, a third camp in Ayn Issa, located on the Syrian-Turkish border, was hosting 13,000 ISIS terrorists along with their families (Al Arabiya, October 14, 2019). During the chaos created by the Turkish invasion of north-eastern Syria in December 2019, 750 ISIS members fled the camp, after which it was evacuated (McKernan, 2019).

ISIS is relying on its members detained in these camps to recruit women and children residing in the same facilities. Fieldwork carried out by the Rojava Information Centre in Syria reveals that the governors of those camps do not separate ISIS members from civilians and the families of ISIS members. This leaves the latter vulnerable to ISIS recruiters (Rojava Information Centre, 2020). An Iraqi Sunni explained that "ISIS members have been keen on brainwashing the minds of the children that have grown up in the displacement camps" (personal communication, November 7, 2020).

Many media reports underline that ISIS members in the al-Hol camp in particular are imposing the same rules of conduct, dressing, and *alHisba* that used to be imposed in ISIS territories during 2014-2015 (Vianna de Azevedo, 2020). ISIS also managed to convince female relatives of ISIS members to teach children about the ISIS cause and make them aware of their duty to fight ISIS enemies once they are released from the camps (Department of Defence Office of Inspector General, 2020b, p. 16). For instance, Asma'a, a 12-year-old Syrian girl living in the al-Hol camp, was taught the ISIS curriculum. She believes that "her enemies are the SDF and anyone who does not convert to Islam." According to the interview documented by Rojava Information Centre (2019, p. 14), she "confirmed her continued loyalty to the organisation."

This is an alarming development as it coincides with the tendency of authorities managing these camps to release many of their Syrian and Iraqi residents for financial reasons. For example, the available daily budget to operate the al-Hol camp is around $730,000, which is not enough to erect new tents to meet the housing needs of the residents, or to meet their basic daily heath needs, or to improve the infrastructure. Also, the authorities are increasingly concerned with the probability of COVID-19 spreading in the camps (Hurley, 2020). Accordingly, the authorities managing the camps in Syria and Iraq are reaching out to tribes and *Mukhtars* to conditionally release the residents from the camps (Al Arabiya, 2020).

ISIS' success in maintaining the loyalty of its members living in the camps and recruiting new members from the incarcerated women and children offers ISIS another tool to infiltrate the towns and villages that they will return to

after leaving the camps. This risks the creation of a new generation of followers accepting ISIS extremist ideology and ready to act in support of the organisation.

The second group are the youths who are still living in Iraq and Syria. According to the United Nations (UN), the total number of Syrian youths living inside the country until 2020 was 3.8 million, representing 21% of the country's population (NRC, 2020). Youths in Iraq represent half of the total population.

Even though the mainstream opinion among Sunnis in Iraq is "overwhelmingly negative" towards ISIS (Department of Defence Office of Inspector General, 2020b, p. 16), the terrorist organisation is nevertheless successfully recruiting from this group. One of the Iraqi Sunnis living in Salah al-Din mentioned that "in my village, ISIS managed to recruit two to three new members shortly after its military defeat" (personal communication, November 3, 2020).

The vulnerability of Sunnis to ISIS discourse deserves thorough research for two main reasons. Firstly, the aforementioned grievances that ISIS took advantage of during 2014-15 remain unresolved and in many provinces deepened. These include the discrimination against Sunnis by the Iraqi government and the economic hardships caused by the continuation of the armed conflicts in Syria that are worsening the living conditions of Sunni youths in particular and blocking them from any opportunities to have a better life.

Secondly, the relationship between Sunni youths and the governments in Syria and Iraq is being redefined in

light of new realities created by the military war on ISIS. The first reality is that this segment of the population has to manage their lives out of the destruction caused by the war against ISIS with limited or no support from the government. The second reality is that, following the ISIS military defeat, the government is incapable of solving the problems of unemployment and internal displacement that are changing youths' lives. Most youths in both countries remain displaced and unable to return to their hometowns, unable to "continue their education or to find a decent job or to feel safe and secure" (NRC, 2020, pp. 13-14). Also, most of the areas liberated from ISIS remain in ruins and have high levels of unemployment and insecurity, and lack basic services.

The Lead Inspector General's report documented that "in Syrian areas under control of the Syrian regime and its Russian backers, the regime was failing to fix the lack of 'basic human requirements' that allowed ISIS to rise in the first place" (Department of Defence Office of Inspector General, 2020a, p. 20). According to Marwan al-Jibrara, the spokesman of the Council of Sheikhs of Salah al-Din, "since 2016 the Iraqi Parliament designated Mosul as a destroyed city, but has not allocated any money yet for rebuilding the city." He also mentioned that ISIS bombed 23 houses owned by his tribe but the government did not offer fair compensation (personal communication, November 7, 2020).

Regarding unemployment, according to the World Bank data of September 2020, the unemployment rate among youths aged 15-24 was 25.17% in Iraq and 21.1% in Syria (World Bank, 2020). These levels are higher than the unemployment rates two years before ISIS

The relationship between Sunni youths and the governments in Syria and Iraq is being redefined in light of new realities created by the military war on ISIS

controlled territories in both countries. According to the World Bank, the rate in 2012 was 16.2% in Iraq and 20.5% in Syria (World Bank, 2020).

Figure 3. Youth unemployment (% of total labor force ages 15-24) in Syria and Iraq (2009-2020)
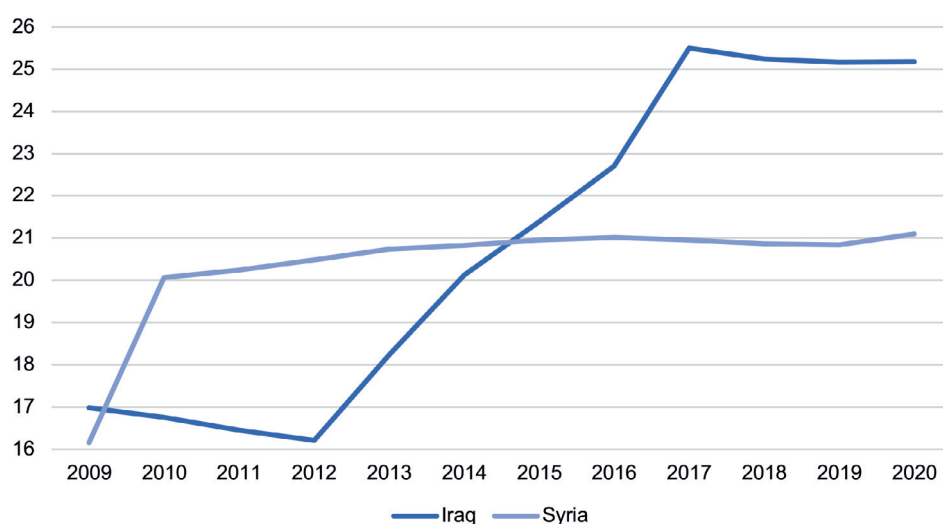
Source: World Bank (2020).

In this context, Sunni youths perceive the government as too weak to defeat ISIS without external help, and too weak to deliver the basic services and to incorporate them as equal citizens to those in power. Consequently, this chapter argues that the attitudes and views of Sunni youths towards ISIS might shift, without necessarily turning them into fully-fledged members. The weakness of the government in controlling some of these provinces and of local security forces defending these areas against ISIS could push youths to seek the protection of ISIS in return for providing a haven for its members, or taking part in illicit commercial and economic activities of ISIS across the borders.

The main motivation for those young people, in this case, could be the economic and financial benefits they can receive from working with ISIS. Also, ISIS itself has a working relationship with its enemies. According to an Iraqi Sunni living in Salah al-Din, "ISIS had economic relations with the Popular Mobilisation Forces and Iranian-backed Shiite Forces between 2014-15" even though it designates them as enemies. According to him, "ISIS managed to smuggle oil into Iran with the help of these forces. It has maintained this relationship until the present time. For example, ISIS terrorists move across areas using motorbikes usually rented from Iranians or Shiites backed by Iran" (personal communication, November 3, 2020).

The importance of financial drivers for Sunni youths to join ISIS was highlighted by Marwan al-Jibrara. He asserted that "ISIS is using money to recruit new members, especially youths suffering from economic hardships" (personal communication, November 7, 2020).

The third group is what the UN Secretary-General António Guterres called the "largely captive audience confined at home" (UN Security Council, 2020). Due to the COVID-19 measures, this group of people are spending long times online, losing their support network after the closure of schools and universities, finding themselves more exposed to the online platforms used by ISIS, becoming more familiar with the organisation's arguments and cause and in some cases sympathising with it. For instance, the United Kingdom's Metropolitan Police Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu has stated that counter-terrorism networks have detected that "children as young as 13 are talking about committing acts of terrorism, against a backdrop of rising extremism during the COVID-19 pandemic" (Grierson, 2020).

The boundaries of this group transcend Syria and Iraq and enable the organisation to keep its global feature by recruiting foreign members, among which are European Muslim citizens who are concerned about how European countries are managing the cases of foreign terrorist fighters locked in the camps in Syria and Iraq. Some of these citizens blame their governments for leaving citizens in the camps "to die or to be killed" because they are Muslims. These feelings have played an important role in motivating European Muslims to join ISIS during 2014-16. Field research conducted during the same period concluded that "European Muslims, especially of the second and the third generations, often feel that – despite governments' inclusive rhetoric – Western societies have not offered them the full respect and equality that they believe

they deserve." According to these field studies, "ISIS appeared to offer them an escape from a nation where being an equal citizen requires abandoning the dictates of one's religion" (Ben-Israel, 2018; Zakaria, 2015).

Such feelings could motivate some young European Muslims to object to these policies by joining ISIS as "media Jihadists", "second-line Jihadists", or practise "personal Jihad" in their countries using unsophisticated weapons as labelled by the French authorities (Onishi et al., 2020). There are a few relevant examples. For instance, in late September 2020, the French police detained 29 people financially contributing to ISIS through a cryptocurrency network. According to media reports, "the network mostly operated via the purchase of cryptocurrency coupons whose references were given to Jihadist contacts in Syria and then credited to bitcoin accounts" (France 24, September 29, 2020).

To reach out to these three groups of potential members during the pandemic, ISIS is using both information technology and face-to-face communication. As was mentioned in the introduction of this policy study, propaganda is an essential tool for terrorist organisations to survive. This explains why ISIS has diversified its online media platforms during the pandemic, becoming the most viral terrorist organisation on the internet. Most of these online platforms are on the dark web, which makes them secured and inaccessible through regular search engines such as Google. Some examples of such on-

line platforms are *Akhbar al-Muslimeen, Amaq, al-Nibras, al-anfal radio,* and *Nashr* news channel on Telegram. Moreover, during the pandemic, ISIS launched the "Sadaqa-Coins" campaign on the dark web to collect the needed fund to cover the expenses of ISIS terrorists in Syria, Iraq and abroad (Zero Trust, 2020).

An increase in ISIS activities on Telegram has also been observed during the period covered by this chapter. According to Telegram's "ISIS Watch" (https://t.me/s/isiswatch), terrorist and chain bots that were suspended during the year 2020 amount to 313,723 compared to 176,290 in the year 2019, which shows an increase of 56.19%.

Figure 4. Total number of terrorist bots and channels banned by ISIS Watch on Telegram (2019-2020)
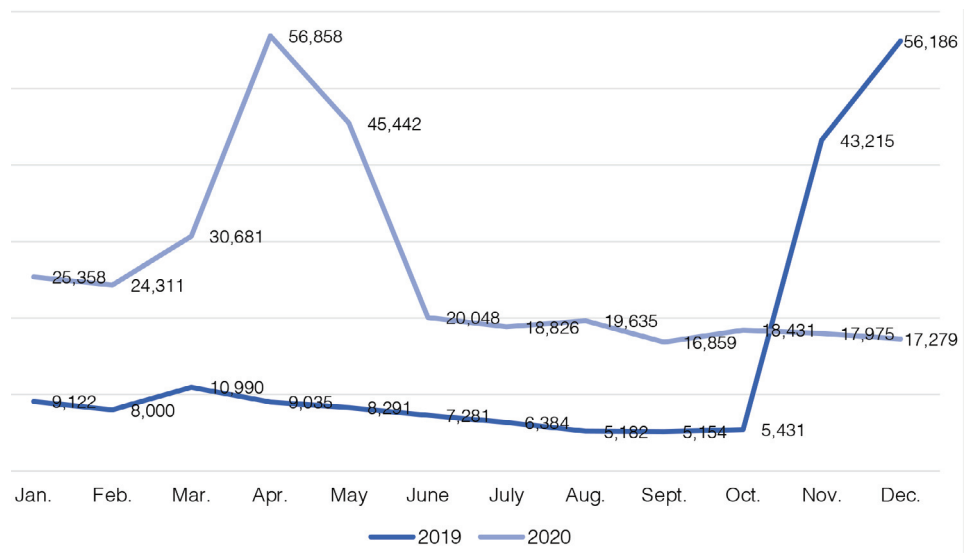
Source: Compiled by Mr. Karim Ammar, National Security Expert and former Director General of the Security Pole for Countering Terrorism and Organized Crime at the Tunisian Ministry of the Interior, based on data from the ISIS Watch on Telegram (https://t.me/s/isiswatch).

ISIS is also expanding the online libraries that publish its books, audio recordings and videos that explain how to practise the new types of terrorism the organisation is calling for amidst COVID-19, including "second-line Jihad" and "media Jihad". However, not all of these libraries are created by ISIS; some of them are publicly used for non-terrorist purposes like the Internet Archive (https://archive.org/).

Regarding face-to-face communication, it has been observed that it is rarely done in Syria and Iraq because of the risk of pandemic transmission. However, some of the ISIS remnant members are meeting in person, taking advantage of wearing the masks taking advantage of wearing the masks, making it hard to be recognised., making it hard to be recognised. Those meetings are usually held in places the terrorists originally belong to, "where the family supply them and provide cover" (International Crisis Group, 2019, p. 6).

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Conclusions and recommendations

In July 2020, the EU published the *EU Security Union Strategy,* which defines priorities and actions to manage the risk and threats that could weaken European security during the period 2020-25. According to this strategy, terrorism remains a "real and present danger" to European security (EC, 2020a, p. 1). It outlines policies and actions that need to be taken on the national as well as EU level, while emphasising the linkage between internal and external security. It calls for "further steps to develop counter-terrorism partnerships and cooperation with countries in the neighbourhood and beyond" (EC, 2020b), and considers them "essential to improve security inside the EU" (EC, 2020a, p. 2).

The growing capabilities of ISIS in Iraq and Syria during the pandemic that could threaten European security as outlined in this chapter make these two countries potential partners to the EU in countering ISIS threats to European security.

This chapter argues that working on weakening ISIS capability to recruit new members and followers in Syria and Iraq requires strengthening the resilience of the state and society in these two countries. Achieving this endeavour requires the EU to work on remediating the vulnerability of the three identified groups in this chapter as potential pools for ISIS recruitment as follows:

Residents in the camps and prisons

The importance of freeing captured fighters, their families and other civilians from the camps and prisons in Syria and Iraq is increasing for ISIS as many individuals were either already indoctrinated with ISIS ideology prior to their incarceration or have been radicalised during their time locked up. Thereby, they do not require extra recruitment efforts. Thanks to the weak control of these facilities and deteriorating living conditions, a window of opportunity was opened for ISIS to engage with vulnerable individuals to brainwash them into joining the organisation or to be committed to its ideology.

Under pressure created by overcrowding and the COVID-19 pandemic, the authorities running these facilities are becoming weaker and increasingly unable to prevent breakouts from the camps and prisons. The new Iraqi government is working on evacuating the camps and on releasing many of those in prisons, while the SDF in Syria is working on conditioned release agreements with *Mokhtars* and tribal leaders. The existing evacuation plans could give room for foreign terrorist fighters to occupy these facilities as they aim at releasing the Syrians and Iraqis in particular.

This development could put the EU under pressure to adopt policy actions towards European foreign terrorist fighters in Iraq and Syria in accordance with the EU counter-terrorism agenda which calls the European Commission to "support Member States to step up efforts towards ensuring the prosecution of foreign terrorist fighters by supporting work to that end at local, national and international" at local, national and international [levels]" (EC, 2020a, pp. 8-9).

In this context, the EU must adopt policies to prevent or slow the evacuation of those facilities, such as launching a bilateral programme with the new Iraqi government that aims at:

1. Developing a databank of those living in displacement camps and detained in prisons since the military defeat of ISIS.

2. Providing needed security, legal and financial support to improve the capacity of the government to control those facilities.

In the case of the SDF, so far the United States of America is the main western actor playing a role in this matter. Having in mind the threats posed by the camps to European security, it is time for the EU to start discussing what it can do towards these camps. One important issue which might be of interest to the EU is the establishment of an international security regime to control al-Hol and Roj camps. The EU could sponsor that regime along with the United States of America and Russia. The Iraqi government and the Syrian regime are two parties that would make such a regime functional.

The proposed international security regime would review the planned release of ISIS members and families, channel the international fund to improve the living conditions in the camps, apply strict rules that prevent ISIS from controlling the minds of the residents in the camps, and investigate where the residents of Ayn Issa camp went after its evacuation.

In this regime, the Iraqi government is proposed to be the authority designated to screen and prosecute the residents of the camp with the help of the EU.

Also, the EU should work with the *Mokhtars* and tribes in Iraq and Syria to establish local rehabilitation and de-radicalisation programmes for families of ISIS members who fled the camps or were officially released from them.

Sunni youths

Working on strengthening the resilience of Sunni youths is crucial to weaken ISIS in Iraq and Syria. As mentioned previously, this section of the population in both countries is suffering the most from the weakness of state structures, and the military defeat of ISIS is not making the living conditions better but rather worse.

For this reason, the EU needs to work beyond the financial assistance provided to the vulnerable and crisis affected Iraqi families through the International Rescue Committee and other institutions (ECHO, 2018).

The suggested policies for the EU in this regard are the following:

1. Exert pressure on the new Iraqi government to launch a national programme to achieve social justice during the period of post-military defeat of ISIS, offering special and convenient compensations to Sunni youths. This pressure can be done through economic and financial tools.

2. Launch a bilateral political dialogue between the EU and the new Iraqi government that aims at opening more opportunities for the Sunni youths to be represented in the government in comparison to their Shiite and Kurd counterparts.

3. Launch a programme for reconstructing cities and provinces destroyed during the war against ISIS with a defined timeline and budget. This programme would encourage the displaced youths to return to their areas of origin, and would improve their living conditions. It is important for this programme to include capac-

ity-building efforts for local police in these cities, co-define with the Iraqi government and local actors in each region the priorities of public services and infrastructure while building trust between them, and demine and remove explosive hazards.

4. Dedicate financial funds to encourage Iraqi and Syrian Sunni youths to launch small and micro-enterprises, especially in areas destroyed during the war on ISIS.

Online audience

This group, in comparison to the other two, remains undefined. The two main features among the online audience are their increased embrace of the internet as a result of the COVID-19 restriction measures, and their potential for becoming ISIS second-line terrorists or "media Jihadists".

The EU counter-terrorism agenda calls for controlling the online sphere through "the adoption and implementation of the proposed Regulation on addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online. It would allow Member States to ensure the swift removal of such content and require companies to be more responsive in preventing the abuse of their platforms for the dissemination of terrorist content" (EC, 2020a, p. 6).

However, one of the lessons learned from previous years is that removing the content or blocking or shutting down a platform used by ISIS is not a solution as this policy urged ISIS to open new platforms on the dark web and to post its radical contents on non-terrorism platforms. Also, users are becoming keener on using workarounds to skip or invalidate any governmental control on the online sphere.

Consequently, weakening the online influence of ISIS requires the EU to be open to other actions that would help achieve cognitive immunisation of the European users of the online sphere. In this regard, this chapter suggests the following:

1. The EU needs to reach agreements with the corporations controlling the online sphere to flag all ISIS material posted on non-terrorism platforms. Also, it is important to provide to the users tools to flag such contents by themselves. These measures would turn the online users from being victims of online terrorism content into actors aware of how to respond to such content.

2. Urge European countries to launch on the national level large-scale awareness campaigns that explain how to report suspicious online recruitment related to ISIS, and clarify the type of help and protection offered in return. For these campaigns to be effective, they should be carried out in cooperation with all stakeholders including local mosques, Islamic centres, schools, universities and hacker communities.

3. Urge European countries to launch on the national level large-scale campaigns showcasing the cost of lost opportunities upon joining ISIS, and relate it to existing opportunities for youths including employment opportunities, playing a role in the community, and enjoying the support of family and friends.

4. Provide training to government security personnel in European countries on how to use the dark web to combat ISIS and other terrorist organisations in their own cyber domain.

Removing the content or blocking or shutting down a platform used by ISIS is not a solution as this policy urged ISIS to open new platforms on the dark web and to post its radical contents on non-terrorism platforms

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The Pandemic and its Handling as Crisis Intensifiers? Taking Stock of Mobilisation, Terrorism and COVID-19 in the Maghreb

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Introduction

A common argument about the COVID-19 pandemic points to its impact as a crisis intensifier.[1] A recent report of the Munich Security Conference even puts it as a "polypandemic" (Eisentraut et al., 2020), a term that seems to also prove correct regarding Algeria, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia, where it has already posed serious challenges to the respective national economies, healthcare systems and living conditions of its citizens, just to name a few. Relatedly, an intensification of pre-existing grievances and hardships due to the crisis, its consequences and governmental responses seems to be likely. Linked to that and looking at overall Salafi-Jihadist propaganda referring to the pandemic and the virus itself,[2] one could assume that radicalisation and terrorist violence may be on the rise in the Maghreb. However, even if we might assume an effect on (increasing) popular discontent with the political elite and arising opportunities exploited by terrorist groups, actual empirical evidence on the link between COVID-19, terrorism and related mobilisation in the Maghreb states is still scarce.

Based on several databases, academic publications and press articles, as well as experts' assessments,[3] this chapter thus aims to examine this relationship in more detail. In line with the broader scope of the study, it explores extremist dynamics on the ground and related actors, state responses and policies, as well as the emerging socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic. (In what way) do terrorist activities during the pandemic differ from those in previous years? How have the governments handled the pandemic, and to what extent could that be connected to violent mobilisation? What are the potential socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic in terms of future radicalisation and terrorist dynamics? Hence, the chapter focuses not only on direct but also indirect links between terrorism and COVID-19, and thus includes and considers both primary and secondary impacts of the pandemic. By doing so, the chapter argues in favour of widening the debate to not only focus on terrorism itself but rather on the impact of the pandemic on radicalisation and the broader socio-political context.

Due to the topicality of the events and the resulting imperfect data situation, however, only a few effects are observable at the time of writing this study. Thus, in order to draw as plausible and multi-layered a picture as possible, the aim was to bring together as many arguments and as much empirical material as possible. Although many links are not likely to take effect until a later date, this chapter discusses a variety of potential mechanisms. While doing so, the

[2] See also the introduction and chapter by Ragab in this study for a more detailed assessment of this very question.

[3] The author has conducted several online interviews with researchers and also integrated statements from (online) panel discussions on the very topic. All statements have been anonymised and mostly paraphrased.

chapter systematically compiles and analyses the existing empirical evidence, and finally draws conclusions and policy recommendations, particularly focusing on the role of the European Union (EU) in pushing back these dynamics. The recommendations aim to implement new but, first and foremost, to continue existing policies at both the national and international level, among others pointing to sustainable economic growth, strengthening the role of youths and regional and international cooperation, for instance in the area of information exchange, as well as fighting hate speech and extremists' recruitment attempts online. Overall, the pandemic's consequences need to be met with a holistic approach, the chapter argues.

Jihadism in the Maghreb prior to and during the pandemic

It has now been 10 years since the so-called Arab uprisings partly initiated major political changes in the region. As of now, looking at the Maghreb states, we are dealing with four very different settings: from West to East, there is monarchic Morocco, the parliamentary autocracy Algeria, democratic Tunisia and, finally, war-prone Libya. This chapter thus aims to shed light on the topic in four very different contexts.[4] In order to do so, this first section will be dedicated to an assumed direct link between terrorism, radicalisation and the COVID-19 pandemic and will thus take stock of the events and violent dynamics

on the ground. Consequently, it will assess if there has been an actual increase in terrorist activities since the outbreak of COVID-19 as we might expect looking at Jihadist propaganda.

Overall, terrorist activities and dynamics are far from new in the region, since Jihadist groups have been active for decades in each of the four Maghreb states, but undoubtedly in varying intensity and power of impact. In the case of Morocco, the Salafi movement became politicised after 2011 but was unable to win elections. Jihadist forces in the country did not grow stronger; there has been no major terrorist attack in Morocco and a central Jihadist group has not settled until now (International Crisis Group, 2017; Masbah, 2021). According to an expert (personal communication, January 19, 2021), it is accurate to say that there are no structured organisations but rather loose terrorist cells that Moroccan security forces have continuously uncovered. In Algeria, the Salafi-Jihadist movement had become strongly divided into different groups in the course of the civil war of the 1990s, but had proven to be of little political relevance in the 2000s. The most important Jihadist group to date, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, shifted its activities from northern Algeria to the Sahara (to Mali) in the course of the regional changes of 2011 (Werenfels, 2015) and weakened over time. Quietist Salafism,[5] on the other hand, has been said to be finding new appeal, especially among socioeconomically marginalised youths for several years (Boukhars, 2015). Ji-

Quietist Salafism has been said to be finding new appeal, especially among socioeconomically marginalised youths for several years

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[4] Due to lack of reliable data and in order to ensure some degree of comparability, the chapter will not elaborate on Libya in such detail, since dynamics there are just so very different from those in the other three Maghreb states. It will, however, include at least anecdotal evidence on the Libyan case.

[5] Quietist Salafists are said to "abstain from formal politics and reject violence, and advocate the spread and application of their strictly conservative theological orientation in society" (Boukhars, 2015).

hadism and the rise of (violent) radicalisation, however, has been a major challenge in post-revolutionary Tunisia.[6] Since 2011, various violent groups have emerged perpetrating numerous attacks, and thousands of Tunisians have left the country to fight abroad, for example in Libya or Syria. Furthermore, Tunisians have been playing a leading role in Jihadist networks in Europe or have been among the highest ranks of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Torelli, 2017; Zelin, 2020). The dynamics in Libya, in turn, are completely different from those in the other three Maghreb states. As put in a nutshell by Raineri et al. (2020, p. 7), "it is hard to single out extreme and radical views, as social and religious conservatism are widespread, while the prolonged crisis has somewhat normalized the use of violence." Focusing on Jihadist actors, ISIS maintains a designated Libyan branch and has thus been one of the groups that are active on the country's soil. Furthermore, it needs to be acknowledged that the persistent war will probably continue to provide various violent actors with possibilities to act and grow, including Jihadist actors.[7]

Generally, the Maghreb states witness what academics have dubbed an "interplay and tension between the local and global" (Wehrey & Boukhars, 2019, p. 140). On the one hand, Jihadism needs to be understood as a "highly localized phenomenon", but is also very much related to the foreign fighter aspect, as the Maghreb states have been said to be among the highest per capita of persons travelling abroad to fight in previous years (Wehrey & Boukhars, 2019, p. 140). While this raises questions about the potential sources of funding, the effectiveness of border control and the entire departure process and logistics, it is undisputed that violent Islamist groups and their members in all four countries maintain (strong) ties and connections to other groups and movements, even beyond their national borders. While the rise of ISIS (which has been at its height in 2014/15) undoubtedly led to an increase of terrorist violence and radicalisation also in the Maghreb region, Jihadist groups in the Maghreb have become weaker and weaker in recent years, now being "at a low point" (Bayrakdar et al., 2021)[8] – but the underlying grievances remain.

This "low point" was confirmed by experts stating that, except for the Libyan case, radicalisation and the attractiveness of radical groups in the Maghreb have been declining during the last years, pointing on the one hand to the collapse of ISIS' caliphate (making travelling abroad to fight less attractive) and on the other to the successful implementation and realisation of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) measures and programmes[9] (personal communications, January 19 and 20, 2021). Data from the Global Ter-

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[6] For a detailed analysis of Tunisian Jihadism prior to and after the revolution as well as Tunisians' role in the global Jihadist movement(s), see Zelin (2020).

[7] For a more detailed overview on Jihadist groups and counter-terrorism in the Maghreb, see Raineri et al. (2020) and Trauthig (2020) for the Libyan case.

[8] Relatedly, one must also keep in mind that some Jihadist groups have (partly) shifted their activities to other theatres, such as the Sahel, sub-Saharan Africa as well as East Asia – which may be another plausible reason for their relative weakness in the Maghreb.

[9] For more details on respective strategies and programmes in the Maghreb, as well as the role of the EU, see Raineri et al. (2020) and Letsch (2018, on Tunisia).

rorism Database (GTD)[10] depicting the total number of terrorist incidents per year (figure 1) also generally supports this assessment, while at the same time illustrating the very different context of Libya resulting in a much higher level of (terrorist) violence from the outset. Overall, however, it needs to be stated that radicalisation and the attractiveness of radical or terrorist groups are certainly not only reflected in the occurrence of terrorist incidents alone. When combining the depicted rather constant development on a low level – except for Libya, where a decline is obvious – with the experts' assessments and overall literature on the region, a coherent picture emerges.

Figure 1. Number of terrorist incidents (2010-2018)
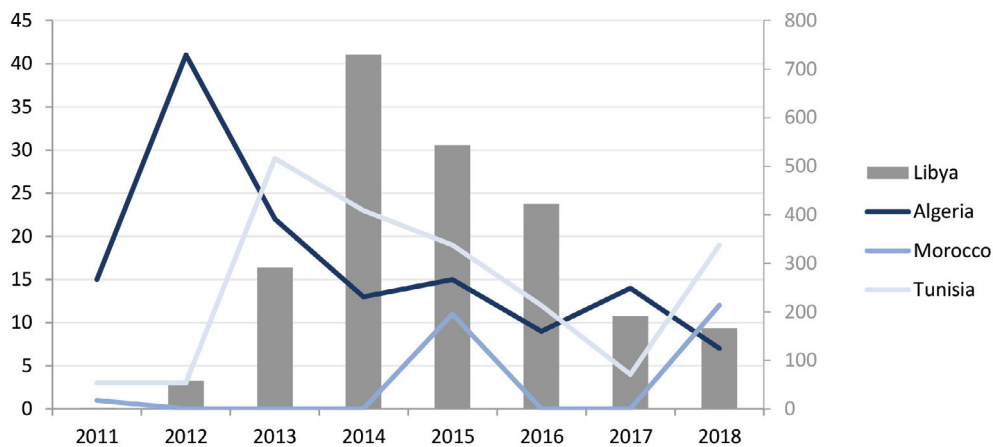
Source: Global Terrorism Database, retrieved on 10 November 2020.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in (early) spring 2020 was quickly accompanied by concerns of researchers and policy-makers about its possible impact on global terrorism and violent extremism (see, e.g., Ackerman & Peterson, 2020; Cruickshank & Rassler, 2020; Mullins, 2020; UN Security Council, 2020). These concerns are rooted in the fact that such groups are generally known for their ability to quickly adapt to new socio-political contexts and make use of them according to their purposes. Furthermore, they routinely use social media for mobilisation and recruitment, and tend to spread their texts, audio or video files online. As pointed out by experts, the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic can already be observed on a discursive level, pointing to Jihadist propaganda and related ideological exploitation, at least as far as the globally most dominant groups are concerned. As explained in more detail in the introduction of this study, both Al-

The influence of the COVID–19 pandemic can already be observed on a discursive level, pointing to Jihadist propaganda and related ideological exploitation

[10] The GTD is an ongoing effort made by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) and "documents more than 200,000 international and domestic terrorist attacks that occurred worldwide since 1970" and is based on media reporting (for further details, see https://start.umd.edu/research-projects/global-terrorism-database-gtd). It represents one of the "classics" and best known databases covering terrorist attacks. As with any database, the GTD comes with peculiarities concerning data collection, coding and underlying definitions that need to be taken into account and that one must be aware of (for a critical assessment, see Sheehan, 2012).

Qaeda and ISIS have referred specifically to the virus and the global pandemic in their official propaganda outlets, for instance dubbing it "a soldier of Allah" (Boussel, 2020; Daymon, 2020).[11] Due to the confinement and the accompanied "widespread clampdown of public life, a major part of social interaction shifts to the virtual world" (Sold & Süß, 2020). This has been true also for the Maghreb states. A large number of citizens have been spending much more time at home and supposedly on social media and potentially been more exposed to radical content online. This might be particularly evident for the youth. Furthermore, "self-isolation is feared to possibly raise the individual vulnerability to extremist narratives and

expedite the spread of extremism, especially via the internet" (Sold & Süß, 2020). Although it has yet to be proven whether the ideological referral to the pandemic and the virus itself in propaganda led to an increased popularity of the respective actors and rising radicalisation, this might represent the most direct and at the same time most visible effect of COVID-19 in the area of (turning towards) violent extremism.

In contrast, when looking at the mere numbers displaying the dynamics and violent incidents in the Maghreb states, the assumption about COVID-19 fuelling terrorism and violent extremism does not seem to have come true, at least for the time being (see figure 2).

Figure 2. Violent incidents by non-state actors regardless of their target as recorded by ACLED, including events depicting clashes between state and non-state actors (2019-2020)
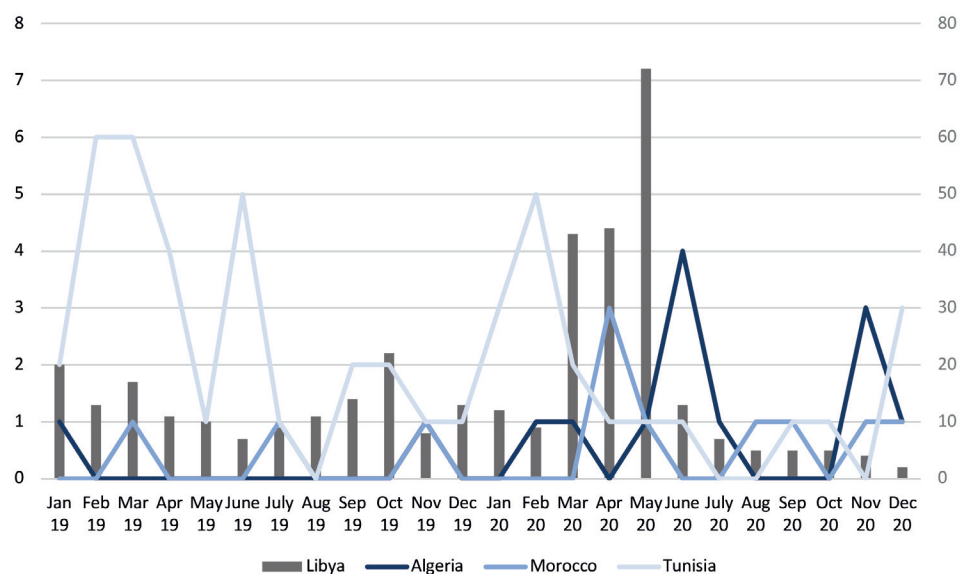
For coding details, see ACLED, 2019; Raleigh et al., 2010.
Source: ACLED Event data (2019-2020).

[11] Relatedly, see the three components of ISIS' recruitment during COVID-19 in the chapter by Ragab in this study.

Since GTD data encompassing the year 2020 is not yet available by the time of writing,[12] data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) has been used to take stock of the violent dynamics on the ground in 2019 and 2020.[13] The figure displays the number of violent incidents by non-state actors regardless of their target, including clashes between state and non-state actors.[14] Hence, the ACLED database presumably includes more events than the GTD. While it needs to be kept in mind, consequently, that the comparability of the two figures is somewhat limited, they nevertheless represent a good basis for capturing larger trends. Putting the particularities of the different datasets aside, it becomes apparent that the quantity of terrorist violence has not increased dramatically but rather remained at approximately the same level. In line with the displayed statistics, experts have pointed out that the decline in terrorist attacks continued in 2020, regardless of the pandemic. Additionally, COVID-19 could also induce a change regarding a different quality of violence (e.g., different attack targets) – while for instance the Netherlands already experienced a blast on COVID-19 test centres in March 2021 that has been called an "attack" by the police (Plevier, 2021), this cannot

be confirmed for the Maghreb states (at least at present).

However, there have been reports about an alleged "terrorist plot" (MEMO Middle East Monitor, 2020) in Tunisia in spring 2020 that was said to be initiated by a known terrorist that had recently been released from prison at that time. By encouraging sympathisers to cough and sneeze on police personnel, the person concerned is said to have used "his influence to indoctrinate followers to try and spread the coronavirus among security forces," particularly targeting those "who are under administrative control" (Jewers, 2020). Even though the plot was uncovered and prevented in time, it demonstrates the potential of instrumentalising the virus for terrorist purposes.

Another interesting aspect is the question of legitimacy that notably refers to (violent) Islamist non-state actors performing governance functions and providing social service and healthcare to those in need. Relatedly, researchers have already pointed out that "Islamic charitable organizations [in the Maghreb] are mobilizing to fill the many gaps not addressed by the government […] providing food to families in need and helping with medical efforts by

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[12] Preliminary data is expected to be made available in the second half of 2021 at the earliest.

[13] ACLED is a non-profit organisation and its database comprises "all reported political violence and protest events" (https://acleddata.com/about-acled/). Like the GTD, ACLED is also built on media articles, which at least ensures a roughly equal starting point for data collection.

[14] "Non-state actors" comprise of the following entities: rebel groups, which are defined "as political organizations whose goal is to counter an established national governing regime by violent acts" (ACLED, 2019, p. 21); political militias, meaning "a more diverse set of violent actors, who are often created for a specific purpose or during a specific time period […] and for the furtherance of a political purpose by violence" (ACLED, 2019, p. 21), as well as identity militias, defined as "armed and violent groups organized around a collective, common feature including community, ethnicity, region, religion or, in exceptional cases, livelihood" (ACLED, 2019, p. 22).

delivering masks to hospitals" (Wehrey et al., 2020, p. 7) – this would also be conceivable for violent Islamist actors and has been done in the past (e.g., Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia was known for its extensive welfare activities in the early 2010s, see Süß & Weipert-Fenner, 2021, p. 15). Yet, it still needs to be assessed how those actors will cope with the expectations and needs of their supporters and those in need, and to what extent this might affect their legitimacy. As pointed out by the experts interviewed, this will be particularly interesting in settings where terrorist groups already maintain territorial control, for instance in Libya. Nevertheless, if measured solely in numerical terms, there is no basis for assuming that terrorist groups have successfully started to take advantage of the pandemic – which is why it is necessary to shift the focus to more indirect implications for radicalisation and terrorism as will be done in the following sections.

The Maghreb states' handling of the pandemic

Research has shown that two of the most decisive drivers for radicalisation and the engagement in (Jihadist) violence are grievances of various kinds, such as socioeconomic hardships – which will be discussed in more detail in the next section – and interactions with the state, particularly referring to repression and state violence (see, e.g., Wehrey & Boukhars, 2019, p. 140). In order to investigate the impact of the pandemic on the latter aspect, this section will thus be devoted to state responses and policies addressing the pandemic, its potential links to (future) radicalisa-

tion and violence and, in this sense, to effects on state resilience, crisis management and arising political opportunities. Have governments taken advantage of the crisis to restrict fundamental freedoms? How might those state interventions be connected to mobilisation and terrorism? Consequently, this subchapter aims at connecting rather general considerations on the repression-mobilisation nexus to empirical evidence on the four countries of interest.

Generally, the coronavirus started to spread across the Maghreb states in spring 2020, specifically through March. Among others, table 1 depicts the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in the region measured by the number of infections per one million inhabitants. Based on this data, Tunisia is by far the most affected by the virus, followed by Libya, Morocco and, lastly, Algeria. Of course, these figures should be treated with caution. Often, sufficient COVID-19 tests have not been available, especially at the beginning of the pandemic (similarly, Europe has massively expanded its test capacities in the course of time) and particularly for citizens located far away from major cities, and/or when citizens have to shoulder the costs for tests themselves. And again, in the Libyan case, there are additional data reliability problems. Despite these limitations, the data indicate some general trends.

The governments in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia quickly imposed several measures, "including suspending all travel, partially demobilizing the workforce, closing mosques, using military and police forces to impose mandatory confinement, shutting down schools and businesses, and banning public gatherings" (Abouzzohour, 2020b,

If measured solely in numerical terms, there is no basis for assuming that terrorist groups have successfully started to take advantage of the pandemic

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p. 51). Besides, there have been reports about the deployment of robots enforcing the lockdown in Tunisia's capital city of Tunis (Arab News, 2020). The Maghreb states are differently equipped when it comes to the efficacy and capability of its healthcare system. While Libya is already burdened due to the persistent conflict, Tunisia is said to have the best system compared to Morocco and Algeria (Abouzzohour, 2020a). In sum, and despite all those interventions, the pandemic poses a severe health(care) challenge to all four countries (for detailed studies of the implemented measures and stringencies, see Abouzzohour, 2020c; Abouzzohour & Ben Mimoune, 2020; Bouoiyour et al., 2020).

Table 1. COVID-19 figures per country

	Total cases	Total deaths	Cases/one million inhabitants	Testing capacity/one million inhabitants
Algeria	129,976	3,497	2,916	5,179
Libya	186,567	3,132	26,816	149,127
Morocco	520,423	9,165	13,947	174,416
Tunisia	350,487	12,839	29,373	125,383

Source: Worldometer (n.d.), retrieved on 4 June 2021.

As is already deducible from the measures highlighted above, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a reinforcement of police structures and surveillance in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, experts state (personal communication, January 19, 2021). This is said to be most visible in the latter case, where the emergence of the Hirak movement already led to such reinforcement, a dynamic that has now intensified in the course of the pandemic. Measured in terms of actual state violence against civilians, however, the year 2020 is not very different from the previous one (see figure 3).

Nonetheless, there are reports about the governments using the pandemic to limit fundamental freedoms and mobilisation (Aissani, 2020; Cherif, 2020; Rachidi, 2020; Saudi, 2020) as well as to "silence dissent and remove voices of the opposition they have deemed a threat", for instance by arresting journalists and cracking down on activists (Allouche, 2020). This is true for Algeria and Morocco, but also for Tunisia, and it is a worrying dynamic. Reactions of the civil society and protest movements remain to be seen, but it is already becoming apparent that particularly the youths are growing ever more frustrated, which is potentially and specifically exacerbated by the "lagging and inadequate public services" (Fakir & Werenfels, 2021, p. 4). Furthermore, those dynamics could possibly also promote radicalisation. Research refers to this as "repression-mobilisation nexus",[15] which entails some ambiguity. On the one

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a reinforcement of police structures and surveillance in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, experts state

[15] State (non-)responses towards (protest) movements certainly can also take different forms, such as "concession and ignoring" (Weipert-Fenner, 2021, p. 7).

Figure 3. Violence against civilians by state actors, including events recorded as remote violence by state actors as well as external military actors (e.g., mercenaries) as recorded by ACLED. Timespan: 1 January 2019 – 1 January 2021.
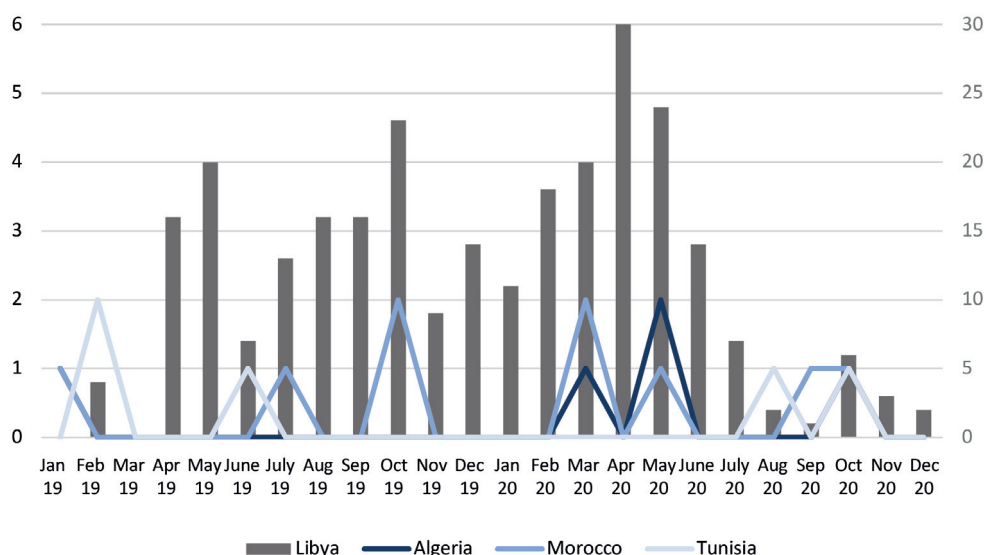
Source: ACLED Event data (2019-2020).

hand, growing repression (at least to a certain threshold) is said to have an escalating effect on mobilisation, pointing to radicalisation of non-state actors. Yet, on the other, it is only a decrease of repression that is said to enable mobilisation and the development of (protest) movements (Della Porta, 1997, p. 122). Thus, repression might affect people's behaviour in at least two different ways (Della Porta, 2013, p. 67). While the future implications remain rather vague, growing popular discontent – even more intensified by the absence of "effective long-term solutions" (Fakir & Werenfels, 2021, p. 6) for the economic crisis – is undeniable. Anyway, with the renewed breakout of protests, for instance in Tunisia – despite an imposed general confinement – around the tenth anniversary of the beginning of the revolution that have been accompanied by acts of vandalism

and looting, but also by reports on police brutality (Al Jazeera, 2021; Amnesty International, 2021; Deutsche Welle, 2021), this topic will certainly remain important.
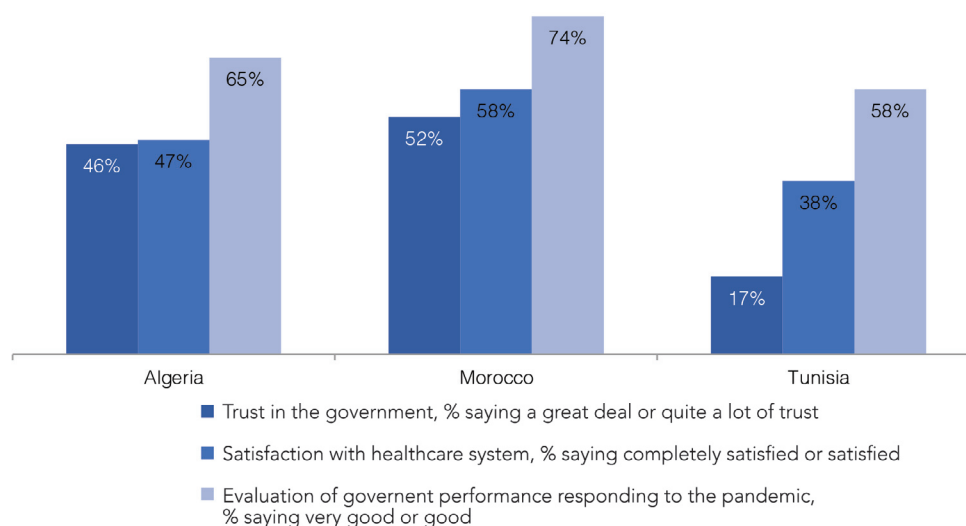
Another interesting aspect concerns the citizens' basic trust in the government and political elite and the satisfaction with COVID-19 policies. What is the impact of the crisis on confidence, which is often mentioned for the Maghreb states, during the pandemic? As illustrated in figure 4 below, trust in the government is the highest in Morocco (52%) – Masbah and Aourraz (2020) confirm these assessments in more detail – followed by Algeria (46%) and then, by a large margin, Tunisia (17%). This order is also confirmed for the other two survey categories, namely satisfaction in the healthcare system and the evaluation

of the government's performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interestingly, the Tunisians' satisfaction with their government's performance (58%) is not much lower than in the other two countries (74% in Morocco and 65% in Algeria). Remarkably, and in line with the general level of dissatisfaction and mistrust, leaders of the Tunisian radical Salafist Hizb ut-Tahrir movement criticised the government "for not acting quickly to impose travel restrictions and close the country off, especially from Italy and France" and "stated in a social media recording, COVID-19's devastation has laid bare the weaknesses of the Tunisian political, economic, and social system" (Wehrey et al., 2020, p. 7).

Another containment measure received a relatively large amount of media attention. In spring 2020, it was reported that many detainees were re-leased from prison across the Maghreb states, simply out of the certainly justified concern that the virus would spread too quickly in the overcrowded prisons, which would result in a disaster (Boukhayatia, 2020; Crétois & Kamel, 2020; Reuters Staff, 2020). Looking back at the dynamics in Tunisia directly after the revolution in 2011, there has been a general amnesty setting many condemned radicals free. Among others, this measure at that time paved the way for the relative success of extremists and radicalisation in Tunisia by providing radical Islamist preachers who were released from prison, with the opportunity to openly call for a violent struggle against the existing order. Even though an interviewed expert agreed on the fact that the releases in spring 2020 were not related to terrorism conviction and that those detainees would generally be separated from other detainees, a small uncertainty could remain.

Figure 4. Trust in and satisfaction with government performance in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia based on Arab Barometer data (Wave VI, part I, conducted from July to October 2020)

- ■ Trust in the government, % saying a great deal or quite a lot of trust
- ■ Satisfaction with healthcare system, % saying completely satisfied or satisfied
- ■ Evaluation of governent performance responding to the pandemic, % saying very good or good

Note: Libya has been left out due to the lack of survey data.
Source: Abufalgha (2020).

While the early release undoubtedly represents a correct and comprehensible step in fighting the virus, the individual experiences from imprisonment and possible contacts with radical actors and ideas may nevertheless affect future dynamics regarding violence and radicalisation. However, this challenge also arises completely independently from the COVID-19 pandemic and this policy in particular.

Overall, terrorist groups and individuals are of course affected by the implemented measures and policies just like other citizens. As mentioned above, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia have reacted relatively quickly and closed their borders to prevent the virus from spreading any further. This restriction of the freedom of movement combined with intensified surveillance may certainly limit the violent actors' capabilities and pose a challenge particularly for transnationally operating groups, as pointed out by experts (e.g., personal communication, January 20, 2021). In this respect, COVID-19-related measures have proven useful in terms of counter-terrorism, being not entirely dissimilar from regular counter-terrorism measures anyway.

Again, Libya is a special case given the ongoing war. Generally, the crisis management and containment of the pandemic has been and still is a huge challenge for the country, given "its limited resources and the internationally recognized government's lack of control over the country" (Abouzzohour, 2020a). Under these conditions, its "flawed public health response to the pandemic" and the "Libyan authorities' abysmal track record in service provision and crisis management" (Badi, 2020, p. 24) are not surprising. For the question at stake, it would be interesting to explore if and

how terrorist groups in Libya fulfil healthcare tasks and provide social services in general.

In sum, and as of writing, there are more questions than answers. On the one hand, one could assume that while the governments' attention lies in the containment of the pandemic and since trans- and international activities have become more difficult and restricted than before, Jihadist groups in the Maghreb could possibly concentrate their (violent) activities even more on the local context. This threat, however, seems to be contained because of their relative weakness. On the other hand, one interviewed expert stated that terrorism generally relies on attention and only fulfils its purpose if it attracts as much attention for as long as possible. Cynically speaking, would an attack or related activities thus even be worth the risk and effort at the moment? It would be interesting to find out whether this might be a (better) explanation for the absence of the anticipated increase in terrorist activity during the pandemic.

Socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic: the "fertile ground" for radicalisation?

Overall, considering socioeconomic marginalisation and related hardships as one of the potential drivers for radicalisation and the engagement in violence or terrorism is far from new. Although radicalisation needs to be understood as a highly complex and individual process with various factors at play, socioeconomic aspects such as unemployment, personal wealth and

Radicalisation needs to be understood as a highly complex and individual process with various factors at play

related (self-)perceptions and emotions may be contributing factors for radicalisation, at least in some cases. This relationship, however, is far from being as simple as the alleged equation "poverty = (rebellion or even) terrorism" – such direct links, sometimes even associated with a causal notion, were already rejected in the early 2000s. Since then, academics have been focusing on more indirect relationships.

Studies on the socioeconomic dimension of Islamist radicalisation in North Africa (for an overview, see Süß & Aakhunzzada, 2019; Süß & Weipert-Fenner, 2021) have already illustrated that socioeconomic factors might have an impact on different forms of radicalisation. Among others, they potentially play a role by paving the way for individual motives for radicalisation or by contributing to the delegitimisation of the state, as well as by providing opportunities for non-state actors to recruit followers by offering social services. Last but not least, (radical) Islamist actors also use this as a motif in their propaganda and harness it for mobilisation and recruitment purposes.

Based on these general arguments, this section will once again shift the focus from an immediate, direct impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to the possibly "fertile ground" that the pandemic provides for the terrorist groups to exploit.[16] In this respect, it will discuss the "elephant in the room" and take a closer look at the broader context and emerging socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic, namely worsening national economies and unemployment in the

four countries of interest. As pointed out by the interviewed experts, the pandemic's socioeconomic consequences in the Maghreb states might represent the most "real" challenge and most legitimate question regarding the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on terrorism and radicalisation, and is yet one of the most difficult ones to assess for the time being.

While we still lack precise data for the year 2020, it has already become clear that the Maghreb's economies have been hit hard by the lockdowns, the travel restrictions and the subsequent breakdown of (international) tourism as well as falling oil prices. Recent estimations and forecasts predict a worsening of economic indicators such as the general economic growth rate (measured by gross domestic product [GDP] per capita) and unemployment rates (see table 2). For instance, in Tunisia, where economic growth and recovery have been a severe challenge since 2011, GDP is said to diminish by 7% and is expected to only recover partly in 2021 (for details on the Tunisian case, see Makni, 2020; Mousez, 2020; PNUD, 2020).

The pandemic's potential economic impact on Morocco is also said to be great, since "it is expected to affect all vital sectors such as tourism, industry, trade, and finance", and is even more bolstered by a predicted drought (Amagour, 2020). Algeria's economy, as in Libya, is suffering due to falling oil prices (Mechakra, 2020). Hence, although all Maghreb states are and will be equally affected by the economic crisis, also be-

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[16] Investigating this link certainly does not imply an assumed causal relationship. Rather, the aim is to elaborate on the possible long-term effects of the crisis and its impact on mobilisation (into violence).

Table 2. Socioeconomic indicators (2019-2021)

	Algeria			Morocco			Tunisia		
	2019	2020	2021	2019	2020	2021	2019	2020	2021
GDP growth (annual %)[1]	0.8	-5.5	3.2	2.2	-7.0	4.9	1.0	-7.0	4.0
Unemployment rate (%)[2]	11.4	14.1	14.3	9.2	12.5	10.5	14.9	16.2	-

Notes: Data for 2020 and 2021 are projections, since numbers for 2020 are still based on estimations and those for 2021 are to be understood as forecasts. Libya is excluded due to missing and unreliable data.
Sources: [1] IMF (2020, p. 58); [2] IMF (2020, p. 58), World Bank estimates.

cause they all depend on global trade in some form, the challenges they are facing are quite different. To put it briefly, "Morocco and Tunisia, whose economies rely on tourism, will struggle as travel restrictions persist. Hydrocarbon-exporting Algeria and Libya will suffer as oil prices drop" (Abouzzohour, 2020a; for Libya see Rivlin, 2021).

More generally, it does not come as a surprise that the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for (small) businesses, tourism and everyday life hits the Maghreb states hard. Furthermore, the region has been struggling for years with severe socioeconomic challenges, such as high inequality and public spending (Abouzzohour, 2020b, p. 51), large informal economies and high unemployment especially among the youth, which is referred to as the "Achilles Heel of the Maghreb" (Zoubir, 2017, p. 2). It is only natural that there are no reliable numbers for the pandemic's consequences for those working in the informal sector – comprising "more than half" of the total labour force in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia (Gallien, 2018, p. 3), in Libya maybe even more – who may be severely affected by the confinement

(see UNDP et al., 2020 for the Moroccan case). While the full extent of the pandemic's impact will only become apparent in the coming months and years (personal communication, January 19, 2021), a major economic crisis that may last for a longer period of time has already been predicted (Dabrowski & Domínguez-Jiménez, 2021).

Despite social scientists usually shying away from predictions, it does, in sum, not seem far-fetched to state that Jihadists and radical groups in general could potentially benefit from the severe socioeconomic crisis emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. It may be common sense to consider socioeconomic hardships and marginalisation as one of the possible backgrounds or drivers for radicalisation and (the engagement in) terrorism, and as pointed out by another chapter in this study (Claes et al.), recruitment strategies based on such narratives could potentially be effective. (Socioeconomic) marginalisation often results in grievances and frustration and thus might take effect, in some cases, on the motivational level for engaging in violent extremism. For the radical groups, socioeconomic factors play a role when it

comes to the provision of services for their supporters and the local populace (see, e.g., Süß & Weipert-Fenner, 2021). On this basis, it seems only logical that the pandemic is likely to drive these dynamics further. For the time being, however, one can only speculate, and only time will tell how strongly the circumstances will have affected national economies and related socioeconomic dynamics as well as their role in radicalisation and terrorism on the ground.

Conclusions and recommendations

The chapter has demonstrated that there is so far only little proof of a direct link between terrorism and the COVID-19 pandemic that goes beyond the level of propaganda and ideological referral. Widespread concerns about the pandemic leading to an increase or a general change of tactics or intensity in terrorist violence in the Maghreb region have not materialised – at least for the time being and taking stock of the events of 2020 for which data is available. More indirect relations that also take factors such as the governments' crisis management and related implemented policies as well as the arising socioeconomic consequences into account, however, reveal possible future influences on radicalisation and violent extremism. Hence, opportunities for terrorist groups that have been opened up by the pandemic are not necessarily immediate and obvious, but rather mediated, and might only take full effect in the coming months and years.[17]

Taking a closer look at mechanisms and drivers of radicalisation, this becomes even more apparent. While radicalisation surely needs to be viewed as the highly complicated process that it is, injustice and related (socioeconomic and political) grievances as well as interactions with the state, first and foremost through repression, are both acknowledged as crucial drivers for radicalisation. Relatedly, (violent) Salafism, and in this sense also radicalisation, have been accurately called "a portal into the frustrations of a youth population" (Wehrey & Boukhars, 2019, p. 142) in the Maghreb. As a consequence, the COVID-19 pandemic and its fallouts have not initiated any truly new dynamics, but rather need to be considered as potential "intensifier[s] of drivers, rather than as a driver in itself" (Connekt, 2020, p. 4) that fuel pre-existing grievances and pave the way for future radicalisation tendencies.

In order to address these challenges, actions need to be taken in at least two (interconnected) areas: first, concerning P/CVE and radicalisation, and second, regarding the reinforced socioeconomic challenges, in line with the engagement in development cooperation and sustainable growth. While the recommended policy measures address both the national and international level, it needs to be stated that international cooperation is the only possible way to effectively face the combined challenge represented by the COVID-19 pandemic and terrorism. Against this background, the following recommendations can be formulated:

Injustice and related (socioeconomic and political) grievances as well as interactions with the state, first and foremost through repression, are both acknowledged as crucial drivers for radicalisation

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[17] The chapter on the Sahel states in this study (authored by Claes et al.) comes to a similar conclusion, while arguing at the same time that extremist activity in the Sahel has been rather unaffected by COVID-19 until now.

1. Anti-terror efforts including information exchange in the Mediterranean rightly have long been understood as a joint task requiring cooperation on equal terms (Council of the EU, 2020; TAP News, 2021).[18] This is absolutely vital and the correct strategy both from a scientific and a more practice-oriented perspective, since transregional challenges such as terrorism and radicalisation in turn also require transregional efforts and solutions. Terrorist incidents in recent years have shown that the transnational exchange of radical ideas and actors across the Mediterranean is strong. Relatedly, the Sahel-Maghreb (in)security nexus could become particularly important in the future. To curb sources of financing for terrorist groups, efforts should be focused on the fight against illicit trafficking of goods and weapons in particular, but at the same time keep "the social and economic drivers of smuggling in the COVID-19 environment" (Herbert & Gallien, 2020, p. 2) in mind.

2. More generally, and in order to insist on the effective implementation of United Nations (UN) resolution 1373, which has recently been strengthened by a statement by the UN Security Council (2021), public institutions and civil society organisations should be provided with the financial and organisational means to accomplish their mission. Relatedly, but on a more national level, civil society should be continuously encouraged in the formulation, development and implementation of a national strategy to combat violent extremism and prevent radicalisation. At the same time, law enforcement and intelligence services should be monitored (nationally and/or internationally) to ensure citizens' rights. Furthermore, strengthening resilience at the local level and fostering education by giving importance to alarming school drop-out rates seem to be promising approaches.

3. Youths have a crucial role to play in this respect, which is why the role of young people as agents of change should be recognised and strengthened. Their key role in Maghreb societies regarding mobilisation and processes of change has become clear again and again in the course of the last decade, pointing to the Arab uprisings in 2010/11 or the Hirak protests in Algeria, just to name two of the many examples. Granting youths more responsibilities, providing them with more opportunities and ensuring their inclusion in politics and policies could help reduce frustrations and (perceived) marginalisation.

4. Additionally, and while one of the key principles of the EU's approach in countering terrorism to date, among others, already includes the "[m]isuse of the internet and new technologies for terrorist purposes" (Council of the EU, 2020), the online dimension of radicalisation will certainly become even more important with ongoing lockdowns. It seems, therefore, all the

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[18] Relatedly, see Ragab's chapter in this study for details on the *EU Security Union Strategy.*

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more important to thwart hate speech on social networks, to develop alternative and counter narratives and to strengthen P/CVE efforts online, but also offline. In sum, it is not possible to respond using an exclusively national approach to tackle these dynamics. Exchange of information and cooperation between the countries of the region, but also with the EU and the broader international level should be promoted and strengthened.

5. With regard to the pandemic's socioeconomic consequences and the probably upcoming economic crisis in the Maghreb, the EU's response should first and foremost include a continuous willingness for sustained support. Experts have made a strong point about the necessity to continue existing cooperation and engagement. Even though Europe's attention and possibly also financial resources might be more concentrated on its own local context, not reducing economic support and investments in the Maghreb is said to be of crucial importance. Beneficial measures to counter the economic crisis could be the support of companies in danger and the provision of (temporary) financial solutions for securing people's regular income. Furthermore, it should not be the time for renewed debts but for quick and unbureaucratic support – an example

being the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s "debt service relief to member countries facing the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic" (IMF, 2021). However, looking at the case of Tunisia, although international financial institutions "have toned down demands for structural reforms [, …] even control of wage bills or certain energy subsidies deemed necessary by the IMF appear to be politically highly sensitive, if not unfeasible" (Fakir & Werenfels, 2021, p. 5).

6. Lastly, future approaches must better link these two areas, since the pandemic's consequences need to be met with a holistic approach. P/CVE needs to be understood not only as a mere security task, but also requires broader efforts and joint solutions with regard to legal migration and sustainable economic growth. Existing cooperation should thus be continued, if not enhanced – even if, and perhaps especially because, the COVID-19 pandemic entails interregional and global consequences. We need to foster interregional solidarity and cooperation in these challenging times, not only but also because the EU and the Maghreb, as its direct southern partner, are so strongly connected geographically and thus confronted with challenges that may have repercussions in the (near) future for both sides of the Mediterranean.

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project
EU	European Union
GDP	gross domestic product
GTD	Global Terrorism Database
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JNIM	Jamaat Nosrat al-Islam wal-Mouslimin
P/CVE	preventing and countering violent extremism
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
VEO	Violent Extremist Organization