# Lessons Learned from Covid-19 on terrorism and the Portuguese case in the fight against extremism[1]

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is an extended and adapted version of the communication presented in the OMEV Annual Conference of 2022, "Collective Intelligence in facing Terrorism & Building CVE/PVE Strategies", held at the ICESCO Headquarters in Rabat, Kingdom of Morocco, between 8th and 10th June. Our paper, "Lessons Learned from Covid-19 on terrorism and the Portuguese case in the fight against extremism" aims to present a brief analysis on these two topics. No matter the challenges to counterterrorism, stakeholders should continue to promote multilateralism, fostering holistic responses, while ensuring human rights. Portugal is not immune to the threat and remains vigilant and strongly committed to international rules based order in the fight against terrorism and extremism.

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1- Paper presented at the "2022 OMEV Annual Conference": "Collective Intelligence in facing Terrorism & Building CVE/PVE Strategies" at ICESCO Headquarters in Rabat, Kingdom of Morocco, 8-10 June 2022.

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## Introduction

This paper is structured as follows. First, presents a brief threat assessment overview about the global terrorism landscape. Second, discusses four long-term impacts of the pandemic on terrorism. Finally, address the Portuguese approach in the fight against terrorism and extremism. We decided to focus on this country because there are lack of scientific studies regarding Portugal's counterterrorism approach (this article makes a brief introductory note to this case).

## 1 Threat assessment overview

According to the Global Terrorism Index of 2022, global deaths from terrorist activity have fallen in 2021, being this the fourth consecutive year where deaths remained fairly constant. This is primarily due to the decline of ISIS in Iraq and Syria. However, terrorism still represents one of the most pressing issues to international peace and security. In fact, the number of terrorist attacks remained substantially high all over the world.

However, the threat is distinct between geographical regions. For the last three years, terrorist activity has been concentrated in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Since 2020, safe heavens persisted in the MENA region and the activities of al-Qaeda (AQ) were also a concern. Nonetheless, significant counterterrorism efforts in the Maghreb, operated by Algeria or Morocco, thwarted AQ and Daesh from planning or conducting attacks. In 2021 the Sahel region was the most impacted by terrorism due to the expansion of Daesh's affiliates namely the Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA): deaths in the Sahel account for 35% of global terrorism deaths, compared with just 1% in 2007. Deaths in the MENA region dropped substantially, yet Afghanistan remains the country with the highest impact from terrorism for the third year followed by Iraq and Somalia (UN, 2022; GTI, 2022).

In 2021, ISIS remained the deadliest terror group globally, despite continuing to suffer major leadership losses. This death toll is followed by Al-Shabaab, the Taliban and Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM). In 2022, both AQ and Daesh's capabilities have significantly weakened, although ISIS and its affiliates have gained visibility in Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover (UN, 2022). Nonetheless, it is worth to highlight that one major current challenge comes from the designated Racially/Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists (RMVEs) and not jihadism terrorism (DIA, 2022). According to the Council of Europe, violent extremism means "promoting, supporting or committing acts which may lead to terrorism and strongly oppose to democratic values"

Radicalisation represents the process whereby an individual "increasingly accepts and supports violent extremism" (Council of Europe, 2016, p. 9). Yet, it should be stressed that violent extremism does not necessarily lead to terrorism. As Europol puts it "although all terrorists are extremists, not all extremists are terrorists" (TE-SAT, 2007, p. 9). Extremism is a very serious concern and may use violence but not with the intention of "seriously destabilise the political and social structures of a country" as required for a terrorist offence (Council of Europe, 2016).

Lone actors, the return of foreign terrorist fighters, the use of digital technologies and of CBRN substances appear to have capitalized the attention of counterterrorism authorities over the past years. For example, AQ and Daesh have been calling for lone terrorist attacks in Western countries since 2016, at least. In the EU all terrorist attacks in 2018 were perpetrated by lone actors, and in 2020 all completed jihadist terrorist attacks were also carried out by these non-affiliated individuals (TE-SAT, 2019; TE-SAT, 2021). Far-right terrorism has also been one of the most pressing challenges. In fact, in august 2022, the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, launched a new report where he "highlights a new, emerging form of "far-right" terrorism" (UN Press, 2022a).

Major international organisations, as the United Nations, highlight the impact of Covid-19 on the global terrorist landscape, both for counterterrorism authorities and terrorist groups. In the West, particularly, the pandemic coincided with the decline of terrorism attacks, but the results are quite ambiguous. For example, according to Europol (2021), in the EU area it "remains unclear" whether the decline indicates "reduced terrorist activity or it is a result of changes in the operational capacities of public authorities during the pandemic" (TE-SAT, 2021, p. 6).

## 2  Lessons learned from Covid-19 on terrorism

Terrorists want to provoke mass casualties but Covid-19 restrictions on public life limited such opportunities. However, terrorist activity did not decrease: terrorists were also keen to promote fear and chaos. Amongst other impacts, we highlight four main long-term impacts of Covid-19 on terrorism in different dimensions: (1) propaganda; (2) new technologies; (3) bioterrorism and (4) ongoing conflicts.

(1) Propaganda. The new coronavirus is an instrument of propaganda for terrorists. Since the outbreak, extremists from both left and right, as well as jihadists, sought to capitalize and weaponize the pandemic for their political purposes, including radicalization and recruitment. For right-wing extremists the pandemic was an opportunity to push for their

xenophobic, racist, anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant agenda. They are doing so by creating chaos and promoting fear through the dissemination of conspiracy theories about the virus or by blaming foreigners and ethnic minorities. Furthermore, some right-wing extremists, named "accelerationists", violent neo-Nazis who want society to crumble, see the pandemic as a "necessary step". Jihadists also sought to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic for propaganda purposes, "framing the disease in line with their longstanding narratives" (TE-SAT, 2021, p. 42). ISIS and al-Qaeda took advantage for the increased vulnerability of societies. For example, ISIS "portrayed the pandemic as a punishment from God for his enemies an incited followers to perpetrate attacks" (TE-SAT, 2021, p. 21). The Wilson Centre (2020) also reported that the Islamic State blamed Shiites for the first cases of coronavirus in Iraq (apud AOAV, 2022).

**(2) New technologies (cyberspace).** Lockdowns provided fertile ground for the malicious use of new technologies. Cyberspace, in particular, has been exploited for political and ideological purposes. Restrictions on freedom of movement prompted a shift in terrorist groups' modus operandi: from the physical to the virtual world. The pandemic not only encouraged networking between terrorists, but also accelerated the spread of propaganda in multiple virtual platforms. Lone actors were especially prone to self-radicalisation, while being exposed to disinformation and conspiracy theories from right-wing extremism in particular. This intense activity had also an impact in radicalisation and recruitment of youth and vulnerable people with mental health issues. This is a greater challenge for counterterrorism because sometimes is not clear what motivates terrorist violence.

**(3) Bioterrorism.** Bioterrorism, or the use of pathogens for terrorist purposes, is not a new theme for counterterrorism authorities. However, Covid-19 drawn new attention to the weaponization of biological agents and raise fears about the future of a possible biological warfare (CTC, 2022). The anthrax plot in the US, in the aftermath of 9/11, showed the dangers of a possible CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear) attack. More recently, in 2018, European authorities dismantled three attempted biological attacks in France, Germany and Italy, and there is evidence of Daesh's propaganda calls for the use of CBRN substances in terrorist attacks[3] (TE-SAT, 2016; TE-SAT, 2019). Biological terror attacks

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3- In 2022, the Washington Post revealed: "U.S. officials learned through electronic surveillance in 2014 that Salih al-Sabawi - Iraqi chemical weapons expert who was later known within ISIS as Abu Malik - was working to produce powerful new weapons using highly lethal botulinum toxin and ricin, while also pursuing plans to make weaponized anthrax. Sabawi's intention (…) was to create a large stockpile consisting of multiple types of chemical and biological agents to be used in military campaigns as well as in terrorist attacks against the major cities of Europe" (Warrick, 2022).

are still controversial amongst the specialists but some hazardous substances continue to be sold through online. Therefore, terrorist groups might take lessons from the current events. The Council of Europe Committee on counter-terrorism has already warn against the risk of bioterrorism (Council of Europe, 2020) and the UN has also warned for developments in biotechnology and artificial intelligence that could prompt the use of biological agents as weapons (UN, 2020).

**(4) Ongoing conflicts.** According to the UN (2022), "there is limited evidence of any correlation between the pandemic and a change in the intensity of terrorist violence". However, political instability and conflict remain the primary drivers of terrorism and terror groups continued to exploit grievances (IEP, 2022). Terrorist groups, from Daesh to al-Qaeda and right-wing groups, exploit vulnerable societies to cause further violence and chaos. This was the case of Sahel region. Moreover, there are terrorist groups that can simultaneously be classified as insurgents groups which can further exacerbate the conflict environment. Humanitarian emergencies will thrive, causing pressing security dilemmas to national states. In December 2022, UN member-states "emphasized that the threat of terrorism is affecting an increasing number of Member States across most regions, which may exacerbate conflicts and undermine affected States' security, stability, governance and socioeconomic development" (UN Press, 2022b).

## 3  The Portuguese Case

Historically, Portugal has been a target from domestic and international terrorism. On the domestic realm, it has suffered from left-wing terrorism due to the violent activities of the FP-25, an extremism organization created in 1980, in the aftermath of the Carnation Revolution of 1974. This organization operated until 1991, and perpetrated several bomb attacks and assaults, which resulted in the death of 17 people and several wounded, including 4 security officers. On the international realm, some extremist and terrorist groups also perpetrated a few of terrorist attacks in the territory, especially during the 80s and the 90s, namely against diplomatic agents and other elite figures.

Since the 2000s Portugal has not suffered from any terrorist attack. Currently, jihadist terrorism and ethno-nationalist/separatist terrorism (focus in ETA) are the two main types of terrorism monitored in Portugal. Although Portugal adopts an holistic approach and monitors different types of terrorism and extremisms, jihadist terrorism is the top priority for the Portuguese authorities for a number of reasons: (1) Portugal is a western country and is a member of international organizations as

NATO or the UN; (2) Portugal is an European country, member of the European Union; (3) Portugal has strategic interests in geographical areas, as the MENA region, which are targeted by terrorist groups as Daesh and its affiliates. Nonetheless, and despite the historical link to al-andalus, Portugal is not a primary target of Daesh. Portugal is also a security provider and contributes to the missions of the UN and the EU, besides being a member of *The Global Coalition Against Daesh* since 2015 (RASI - Portuguese Annual Internal Security Reports, 2001 - 2021). Taking into account these risk factors as well as the European and international context, the Portuguese authorities state that Portugal is not immune from terrorist attack, either from jihadist groups or any other terrorist organisations.

In the spectrum of political extremisms, the right-wing is the most worrisome for a number of reasons. First, the extreme-right is specifically regarded as a threat to national security. Second, its discourse and activities are similar to other extremist groups in European Union, including of terrorist nature. Third, the neo-Nazi offspring of the Portuguese extreme-right has been particularly active in the country over the years. In 2020, authorities identified a new right-wing extremism group in Portugal. Finally, recent journalist investigations revealed that the Portuguese extreme-right has links with other neo-Nazi groups in Europe, including the extreme-right in Ukraine. During the pandemic, the Portuguese extreme-right exploited its effects in the virtual world, following the same behavioural pattern of similar right-wing groups. Online, they spread disinformation and conspiracy theories and offline, tried to reconnect, but had weak mobilization capacity (RASI - Portuguese Annual Internal Security Reports, 2001 - 2021).

Portugal regards terrorism and extremism as serious threats to international stability and vehemently condemns extremism in all forms. Our counterterrorism strategy (of 2015) abides by the UN and UE principles and Portugal is fully committed to international law, human rights and multilateralism. Portugal is involved in various international fora and strongly supports bilateral, international cooperation and collective intelligence to fight against these menaces. In this regard, we should highlight the bilateral relationship between Portugal and Morocco. North Africa is a region of special interest for Portugal for its geographical proximity, cultural and historical ties. Morocco, in particular, is a reliable and close partner in important cooperative forums as the 5 + 5 Dialogue (The Western Mediterranean Forum) and the G4 (SGMAI, n/data). In both we join efforts, share know-how and work together to promote security within the Mediterranean region to fight against shared threats as terrorism, amongst others.

## Conclusion

To conclude, and to quote Jonathan Evans, a former Director General of MI5 (2007-2013), "risk can be managed and reduced but it cannot be realistically be abolished". No country is immune to terrorism or violent extremism and the pandemic has had a profound impact on the global terrorism landscape. Therefore, as the UN notes, "counter-terrorism approach must remain high on the international peace and security agenda, with partnerships widened and strengthened" (CTED, 2021). Stakeholders should strive to promote responses based on a hybrid set of criminal and military measures, while stressing the need to ensure human rights. Fostering multilateralism and promoting collective intelligence, as our conference main theme suggests, remain key assets to address security challenges.

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