



VIRTUAL COUNTER-TERRORISM WEEK

6-10 JULY 2020

UN Virtual Counter-Terrorism Week
Remarks by Gilles de Kerchove, EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator
10 July 2020

Check against delivery!

A great vote of thanks to USG Voronkov and his team for arranging the Virtual Counter-Terrorism Week 2020, which comes to a close today. You have certainly demonstrated that human ingenuity flourish when confronted with adversity.

Neither Covid-19 nor terrorism are problems that we can solve alone. Our response must be based on **effective multilateral cooperation centred around the UN**. Both Covid-19 and terrorism require a comprehensive approach informed by expert insights from a range of disciplines, in which the United Nations, international and regional organisations, governments, civil society and the private sector work together.

We are currently facing a health crisis that is unprecedented in our lifetime. This extraordinary crisis requires exceptional measures. Yet we should always make sure that our measures are **proportional** and respect **human rights and fundamental freedoms**, and that **governments can be held to account** for their actions. This applies to counter-terrorism and to the fight against the pandemic alike. Any other approach would be short-sighted and counter-productive, undermining public trust in our motives and in our ability to truly protect our citizens.

While the terrorist threat remains high in many parts of the world, the global pandemic has, to date, not given rise to an increase in the number of terrorist attacks. This may not endure. Da'esh and Al-Qaida are exploiting the health crisis on a large scale in their propaganda, blaming their perceived enemies for the spread of the virus. The pandemic could fuel inequalities and social isolation, undermining individuals' and societies' resilience against terrorist narratives and recruitment drives. **We must prevent the current health and economic crisis from becoming a security crisis as well.** To this end, we should continue to invest in counter-terrorism, including prevention programmes, and seek synergies with other priority areas for action in the framework of the post-corona crisis reconstruction efforts.



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The impact of the pandemic on fragile states, refugees, and internally displaced persons could be very serious. In a spirit of transnational solidarity and multilateralism the EU has long assisted vulnerable partners overseas in their fight against terrorism, for instance in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. We are now assisting partner countries to combat the pandemic. The linkages between both objectives are clear: a mass outbreak of Covid-19 could undermine cohesion in society and the ability of States to protect their citizens, helping terrorist groups to operate and expand. **We should ensure that our counter-terrorism efforts do not impede the provision of humanitarian assistance.** The EU will develop guidelines and good practices for this purpose.

A possible resurgence of Da'esh in Syria and Iraq is a cause for concern. The underlying conditions that led to the rise of Da'esh in Iraq still need to be addressed. **The EU provides humanitarian assistance in the overcrowded camps and through the ICRC to detention facilities in north-eastern Syria,** where the provision of healthcare is already highly precarious. An outbreak of Covid-19 could lead to violent uprisings and fuel terrorist propaganda. Moreover, it is regrettable that this week the Security Council failed to renew **the authorisation of cross-border humanitarian deliveries into the Idlib area,** where a deterioration of the humanitarian situation could lead to terrorist travel beyond Syria's borders.

Violent right-wing extremist hate speech and incitement to violence on the internet has increased dramatically since the start of the corona crisis. Conspiracy theories disseminated by **right-wing violent extremists** falsely blame minority groups for the spread of the virus. To counter the increasingly international threat of terrorism motivated by right-wing violent extremism, the EU has recently agreed a series of actions. These include reinforced cooperation with our partners across the globe.

The Covid-19 crisis has laid bare a disturbing trend in terrorism: **the nexus between terrorist speech, hate speech and disinformation.** Terrorists depend on hate speech to radicalise and recruit followers. They thrive in a climate of suspicion and distrust. Those who deliberately disseminate conspiracy theories create divisions and notions of "us versus them" in our societies, thus strengthening the breeding ground for terrorism. We need to devise creative ways to curtail the spread of hate speech and conspiracy theories on the internet, while fully respecting free speech. This could include public flagging of



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disinformation and reconsidering the role of algorithms in amplifying extremist or sensationalist content at the expense of moderate and mainstream points of view.

This pandemic demonstrates to what extent we have become dependent on ICT and new technologies. We are all anxiously awaiting the arrival of a vaccine, developed in high-tech laboratories. In Europe, there is a lively and healthy debate on the use of apps for tracking and tracing of Covid-19 infections in order to stem the spread of the virus. The digitalisation of security will likely accelerate as a result of the current crisis. **New technologies can bring enormous benefits, but also entail real risks for our security.** Our dependence on ICT equipment at a time of confinement underscores our vulnerability to cyberattacks perpetrated by terrorists or ordinary criminals. Terrorists might increasingly use technologies such as artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, synthetic biotechnologies, 3D printing, blockchain and virtual and augmented reality, and we should be prepared. At the same time, we should equip our law enforcement services with the means to use new technologies to fight terrorism, while respecting fundamental freedoms and the rule of law.

Finally, terrorists have long been interested in the use of a **biological weapon**. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown our society's vulnerability to infections, which might give terrorists further inspiration to weaponise toxins or pathogens. There have even been some reports of violent extremists encouraging supporters to deliberately spread the coronavirus. While poisoned letters can be used with relative ease to attack individual targets, it is not easy for terrorists to effectively deploy a pathogen as a large-scale biological weapon. Still, we must prepare for such a contingency, which would have a massive impact on society. The EU supports partners' preparedness for chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear disasters through the EU CBRN Centres of Excellence Initiative, the Union's largest civilian external security programme.

Let me end by expressing the hope that this terrible crisis will bring something good as well: a renewed impetus for cooperation. That is the only way to defeat the coronavirus, and it is also the only way to win the fight against terrorism.

We look forward to the review of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and to exchange of experience and insights, 'live' at the global meeting of Heads of Counter-Terrorism Agencies in 2021.



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