

PAPER DETAILS

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BOOK REVIEW:**Terrorism and the Pandemic:
Weaponizing of COVID-19****Authors**

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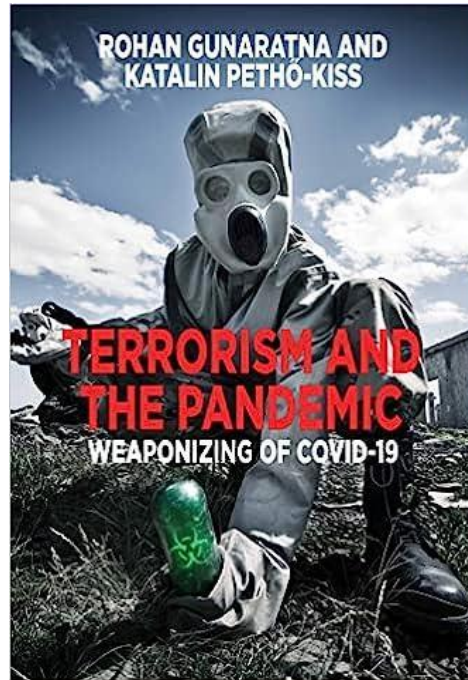
Katalin Pethő-Kiss

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The novel coronavirus, officially named the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19), which the World Health Organization (WHO) declared to have turned into a global pandemic on 11 March 2020, has been witnessed as one of the deadliest viral outbreaks in history. While the virus has not only shown the ability to manifest itself with the new variants the world is also expected to be exposed to such public health crises in the near future. Thus, the repercussions of the contagion across policy realms need to be taken vigorously. Considering the pandemic has substantially altered many conditions in the threat landscape, security studies are bound to be revisited in line with these developments. Particularly, public health emergencies and violent extremism interconnections deserve serious attention in counter-terrorism circles, as not since the onset of the contemporary wave of international terrorism in the 1960s a disease of this scale spread worldwide.

In this context, the book titled “Terrorism and Pandemic: Weaponizing of COVID-19”, written by Rohan Gunaratna and Katalin Pethő-Kiss and published by Berghahn Books in 2023, addresses the implications of the COVID-19 crisis for the security environment in terms of agendas and activities

of violent extremists encompassing a wide ideological spectrum. The authors argue that whilst it may be too early to elucidate the medium- and long-term effects of the contagion on terrorism as a multidimensional and complex issue, inferences can already be drawn from the immediate operational trends detected to identify plausible trajectories of threat elements, in contrast to popular debates about the possibility of biological terrorism through the weaponization of modified organisms which reached a broader audience with the pandemic given the widespread availability of the virus. The book consists of six separate chapters as well as introductory and concluding remarks.

In the introduction, the book begins by raising the question of whether there will be a paradigm shift in the mode of activity, i.e., from traditional terrorism to biological warfare, in view of the presence of threat actors that have incorporated the malicious use of the disease. To this end, it sets the scene for the upcoming discussion by elaborating its methodology that utilized an extensive body of material. Qualitatively, key extremist narratives concerning the contagion, statements on conventional media and posts on online platforms are scrutinized. Quantitatively, terrorist incidents occurred in 2018 and in the period between 11 March and July 2020 are compared on the basis of four main categories, namely, the active terrorist groups, the number of assaults, their targets with their *modus operandi*. Noting that lockdown restrictions regulated differently on the battlefields and off the battlefields, the findings are also considered along these lines. After introducing the analytical framework, the section concludes with the outline of the book.

Under the heading “Evolution of the Threat”, the first chapter is divided into two objectives. First, Gunaratna and Pethő-Kiss aim to provide an analysis of the worldwide terrorist landscape prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. For this purpose, the authors examine the most prevalent threat entities and the security environment in which they had operated immediately before the pandemic to discern the novelties associated with the contagion. They contend that the Islamist and far-right related formations had been the most predominant ones in this respect. Second, the authors look into the academic debates on terrorism to grasp potential political, economic, social and psychological drivers of violence to explore vulnerabilities induced by the COVID-19 crisis that extremists and terrorists can exploit.

The following chapter, titled “How Have Radical Islamists Capitalized on the Pandemic?”, tackles the propaganda and operational trends of fundamentalists in relation to the contagion. On the one hand, the analysis unfolds a diversity in the way that different organizations handled the pandemic: A limited number of jihadists, the Islamic State (IS) and its certain branches in particular, regarded the virus as an act of divine retribution for the supposedly infidel West as well as its allied regimes, and treated it as an

opportunity to launch attacks. Conversely, the majority of groups were concerned about the spread of the virus and encouraged compliance with the quarantine regulations while others saw it as a chance for humanity to recognize its weaknesses and return to Allah. Even the IS changed its initial stance in favor of staying distant from the disease as the crisis having reached its climax. However, the study reveals that the resentment against inadequate policies to deal with the pandemic was a shared sentiment among Islamist formations, regardless of their apparent disunity. In this vein, a noteworthy finding is put forward that some groups undertook state-like responsibilities, including vaccination.

On the other hand, the authors' observation on operational dynamics concerning Islamist terrorism uncovers that the number of strikes increased in conflict zones and decreased in non-conflict regions. They show that all of the categories for targets covers business, educational institution, journalists/media, police, government, NGO, military, religious figures/institutions, private citizens/property, telecommunication, transportation and utilities, the most preferred of which are law enforcement and military agencies. The modus operandi list encloses armed attack, bombing/explosion, hostage taking, assassination, arson and facility/infrastructure assault. Both armed attacks and bombings or explosives are found at the forefront.

In the third chapter, titled "How Far Right Extremists Exploited the Coronavirus Crisis", Gunaratna and Pethő-Kiss investigate right-wing threat narratives and operational conditions in response to the contagion. In terms of propaganda activities, the authors notice an elevated digital presence as well as an enlarged support base during the pandemic. An aversion to the governmental failures in crisis management is also ascertained across all these entities, in spite of their significant variety. The authors remarkably demonstrate that unlike their politico-religious counterparts, some groups went beyond such criticisms by charging national authorities and international organizations with being responsible or complicit in the spread of the virus.

Regarding the terrorist incidents related to the far right extremism, the analysis finds out that the frequency of assaults decreased, but the numbers of completed attacks remained the same. The entire range of targets includes private property, military and law enforcement entities, public spaces/general public, critical infrastructure, immigrants, countries with high population density and unstable economy, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) camps and agents, grocery stores, black Americans and political representatives/governments. Public spaces or general public as well as government and military forces are traced as the prominent categories. The mode of assaults contains armed attacks and preparation for them, misinformation campaigns, deliberate infections, anti-quarantine rallies, the

release of toxic gases, depriving medical care and alternative ways to stoke tensions, the most favored among which are armed assaults and anti-lockdown protests.

Titled as “Beyond the Radical Islamist and Right-Wing Threat”, the fourth chapter analyzes messages and activities of other violent extremist entities in the shadow of contagion. The authors unveil that almost all organizations integrated the COVID-19 crisis into their agenda. They notably display that these groups, despite their differing stances, concurred with the complaints about the official responses to the pandemic. Although the authors detect terrorist incidents were rare for them, they warn against alarming resurgences with the contagion among other extremist formations, for instance, the consequences of the disruption bolstered radical left-wing discourses compared to just before the pandemic outbreak. However, the study anticipates that the threat of Islamist radicalism and/or far-right ideologies as well as their visibility in terrorist acts will be much higher in the near future.

In the fifth chapter, entitled “Novel Terrorist Tactics and Targets”, Gunaratna and Pethő-Kiss evaluate their observations to clarify the novel vulnerabilities that the contagion has brought to the threat environment. The authors assert that the impact of the corona crisis on terrorism is very difficult to crystallize and yet to see. To illustrate this, they point to several factors point to explain the significant increase in jihadist terrorist activity in conflict areas, including like the large withdrawal of security forces or the coincidence of the outbreak with Ramadan, when IS announced that rewards for an attack would be multiplied. Nevertheless, they maintain that immediate operational trends regarding methods and targets of terrorist acts in the context of the pandemic can already be tracked. In this respect, they emphasize the utmost importance of a coordinated and timely multi-agency response to manage public health crises through both credible scientific knowledge and reliance on expert opinion for preventing extremist voices from being heard louder.

On the other hand, the authors recognize that the extremists have developed hostility towards Asian minorities regarding the emergence of the virus in China. Besides, they underline that although official entities have usually been traditional targets for terrorists acts, there occurred an incredible increase in attacks against them, indicating the intensified symbolic value of governmental and military agencies together with social discontent. They also highlight that far-right movements in particular took advantage of existing grievances in the general public to recruit new members. In addition to organizing or participating in rallies against lockdown measures, another salient tool combined with social isolation in non-conflict regions is the online dissemination of misinformation circulated around conspiracy theories and pseudoscience related to the pandemic. Even healthcare workers as well as

vaccine and medical treatment facilities became the object of hate. Last but not least, it is interestingly revealed that far-right entities showed more intention to weaponize the coronavirus than the jihadists. This groundbreaking finding needs to be paid attention by counter-terrorism analysts and operators, which overwhelmingly associated biological and other weapons of mass destruction with the latter group.

The sixth chapter, titled “Future Trajectories for Emerging Radical Islamist and Far-Right Trends”, addresses the discussions on the risk of biological terrorism. First of all, the authors highlight the obstacles to use the virus as a biological weapon for causing mass deaths such as the inability of the SARS-CoV-2 to transmit after a relatively short period of time, the low lethality of it for younger generations and epidemiological measures like restrictions on mass gatherings and new rules for hygiene practices. Besides the aforementioned, only a few of the threat entities with access to resources appear to be interested in biological warfare. The authors also contend that although there are limited examples of calls for deliberate infections against perceived adversaries, the virus attacks are found to be exceptional. Moreover, the chapter underlines the serious infrastructure barriers to producing a modified organism for non-state actors, particularly such highly fragmented ones. In sum, the authors claim that the concerns about the malicious spread of the COVID-19 disease seem to have been exacerbated and traditional means, firearms, explosives and armed attacks, will remain the viable tools for terrorists. They further emphasize that the acquisition of a more powerful modified organism could increase the willingness of such groups.

In the conclusion, Gunaratna and Pethő-Kiss put their assessments and recommendations in a nutshell. All in all, the authors attempt to give a balanced reading of the possibility of biological terrorism rather than overemphasizing or downplaying evolving threat elements. Aside from this debate, the book makes an invaluable contribution to the literature at least for two reasons. Not only does it identify new security concerns and arrangements in case of manmade or natural catastrophes which need to be reconsidered by counter-terrorism circles, such as the safety of frontline officials. But also, it sheds light on the implications of the pandemic, in particular, and unmanaged crises, in general, for the threat landscape by demonstrating that regardless of deep differences and competing ideologies, the propaganda activities of extremists converge significantly in the criticisms against the respective failures of political systems. Nonetheless, the methodology of the book, which involves the data on extremist and terrorist movements around the world, has difficulties in capturing the peculiarities of the violent ideologies that essentially require more in-depth analysis. Nevertheless, the snapshot provided by the book is highly beneficial

as an introductory base for audiences and professionals interested in studying terrorism in the context of public health emergencies.

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