ISIS
POLICY BRIEF
Foreign Policy and Security Studies

Institute of Strategic and
International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia

ISSUE #3–20

Terrorism Landscape in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Muhammad Sinatra
Analyst
Foreign Policy and Security Studies
sinatra@isis.org.my
Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia[1]

20 July 2020

One of the assumptions that have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic is that the pandemic has deterred violent extremist groups from pursuing their sinister agenda. This assumption is false. Even as human activities, mobility and interaction have been limited to a certain degree, there is evidence to suggest that violent extremist groups in certain countries remain active, if not exploiting new opportunities bestowed by the pandemic to further their aspiration and objectives. Like many other countries, Malaysia may be compelled to refocus the resources available to security forces – including those involved in counter-terrorism/counter violence extremism (CT/CVE) – in view of the immediate priorities presented by the pandemic. This policy brief attempts to look at some developments in the terrorism landscape during the pandemic period, which should be within Malaysia's security radar, while also charting some policy options to avert any unintended consequences.

Double Trouble

Developments in other parts of the world could provide a pointer at how the terrorism landscape develops in this pandemic. Despite the introduction of restrictive measures, the pandemic has actually offered a momentum for violent extremist groups to further their agendas.

Firstly, some terror groups continue to engage in pre-pandemic activities, if not amplifying them. Attacks by and arrests of such groups as Boko Haram, Islamic State and Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT) have been observed in the West African region, Afghanistan and Indonesia's Poso. Preoccupation with managing the health and economic crises may impair a state's capacity to assert full control over its territory, which allows more space for violent extremist groups to operate.

Secondly, violent extremist groups have produced COVID-19-related narratives to validate their ideology. Islamic State is a frontrunner in this. The group has labelled the virus as "God's little soldier" sent to punish the unbelievers (including the Westerners, the Chinese and the Shiites), a revenge for its defeat in Baghouz[2] and – most interestingly – a plague (*tha'un*) foretold in *hadith*, which would precede a larger hot cloud catastrophe (*ad-dukhan*) near the end of time. Such narratives that manipulate people's fear, assumption and insecurity in this pandemic climate may continue to flourish for as long as the pandemic is here with us.

Thirdly, violent extremist groups have exploited the pandemic to rehabilitate a chequered image. For instance, the Taliban has been encouraging citizens to follow health protocols, cancelling mass gatherings and providing essentials, thus projecting an image of a responsible state-like actor. Jamaah Ansharul Khilafah (JAK) has also attempted at portraying itself as a benevolent organisation, as it engaged in humanitarian fundraising activities through its network.

Fourthly, the dynamics brought about by the pandemic have also instigated terror groups to learn and adapt. Back to Islamic State as an example, the group has called for more attacks (including by lone-wolf actors),[3] the release of prisoners in Syrian and Iraqi camps, and the refrain from operating in Europe, considering the widespread infection there. It is likely that new trajectories such as these would surface especially if the pandemic is extended and new dynamics emerge more regularly. In a more sinister fashion, concerns have also been raised about the possible weaponisation of the COVID-19 virus as a new mode of terrorism, as evidenced by plans of groups in Tunisia and Pakistan to spread the pathogen.

From these descriptions, it can be surmised that the exploitation by terror groups of the pandemic has produced a double trouble for the authorities – insecurities on health and terrorism fronts must be dealt with at the same time.

Concerns to Malaysia

Malaysia is expected to face new types of challenges from the developments demonstrated above, not only in the way the pandemic alters the modus operandi of the terror groups, but also in how it disrupts local CT/CVE efforts.

---

[2] Islamic State lost its last stronghold Baghouz (located in Iraq) around a year before the pandemic was announced.

[3] Especially as they perceive states to be preoccupied with other pandemic-related imperatives.

Violent extremist groups may seek to solidify their footing if they perceive Malaysian authorities to be too preoccupied with health and economic imperatives at the expense of security ones. Indeed, Malaysia has entered the complex and challenging phase of safeguarding both the lives and livelihoods of its people. In other words, it must prevent the emergence of another wave of coronavirus infections while addressing the inevitable fallout from the global economic slowdown. Such a situation conjures a perception that the government is "too busy" to handle traditional security issues and thus may instil confidence in terror groups to amplify their activities.

The Middle East theatre illustrates this concern to a certain degree as foreign military forces from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and France withdrew from Iraq, triggering an anxiety of a probable Islamic State resurgence in the region. If this were to materialise, supporters and affiliated groups in Malaysia would likely be energised to carry out Islamic State's agenda in the country, such as rallying support or raising funds.

Moreover, there is an implied apprehension that – as the government and donors are preoccupied with health and economic imperatives – funding and support for CT/CVE programmes might be drying up. Financial sources from these entities are likely to be redirected towards efforts to suspend the worst impacts of the pandemic, which might be extended for the next few years due to the looming economic crisis. Although logical, this risks minimising the impacts of CT/CVE programmes, which must run continuously, pandemic or not.

The possible weaponisation of the virus could present a unique yet detrimental impact to Malaysia. Concerns have been raised over the possibility of terrorists spreading the virus (after having contracted the disease themselves) by making close contact with other individuals, or deliberately applying the virus on the surfaces of bank notes[4] and critical infrastructures (such as transportation hubs). The danger with this new mode of terrorism is that terrorists may not need extensive planning and coordinating efforts that could be picked up by the security sector's radars as it allows any individual to carry out the deeds. If this scenario materialises, it would alter the playing field in the terrorism landscape, thus likely compelling Malaysia's security sector to evolve its conventional CT approach.

Another concern that has been highlighted is the likelihood of a more rigorous spread of extremist influence during Malaysia's Movement Control Order (MCO). It has been pointed out that extremist content has seen a dramatic increase since the beginning of the pandemic, which might be consumed by people who are dealing with the difficulties of obeying the stay-at-home order. Activities, such as the dissemination of ideology, recruitment or fundraising, may have taken place while Malaysian citizens are stuck home

---

during the MCO. While this does not necessarily spell a higher approval rate towards violent extremist groups, it constitutes a concern that should be followed up.

Disruptions to communication and travel may impede Malaysia's attempt to repatriate Malaysian foreign fighters, who are still imprisoned in Syrian and Iraqi camps. The imperative to bring back these Malaysian nationals is especially important in this pandemic, as it amplifies concerns over basic sanitation and hygiene standards in camps, such as al-Hol and Hassakeh. Fear over COVID-19 has reportedly also instigated at least a riot during which several inmates escaped, thereby complicating efforts to repatriate them to their country of origin.

Policy Recommendations

Having acknowledged the possible implications of a fuse between COVID-19 and terrorism threats, some recommendations can be suggested.

The Malaysian government must remain vigilant about the continued presence and activism of violent extremist groups in this period, even as attention, resources and energy are rebalanced towards supressing the pandemic locally. This includes recognising the potential of such groups in exploiting the virus or new realities in the pandemic to further their agenda. Although these groups are mostly seen active elsewhere, this does not necessarily discount the possibility of domestic groups attempting to exploit the pandemic as a momentum to advance their agenda. Without this acknowledgement from the authorities, it will be delicate to undertake any action to counter or prevent terrorism threats that may materialise during this challenging time.

Moreover, **Malaysia's security sector must assume a flexible approach in administering CT/CVE strategies to meet new challenges** that may arise from the groups' exploitation of the pandemic. Their approach, narratives and modus operandi might be altered to suit the new dynamics in this difficult period. These involve not only anticipating the possibility of terrorists weaponising the virus as a new mode of terrorism, but also examining the extent of the groups' social media outreach to individuals staying at home during the MCO. Vigilance must also be maintained during the Recovery Movement Control Order (RMCO) period and beyond, since this perception of a more "relaxed" environment could inspire the terrorists to execute any plan they may have concocted before this.

The security sector as well as the CVE community in Malaysia should also remain cognisant of the global terrorism landscape, which could influence developments inside Malaysia. Special attention should be given to the ways the pandemic has influenced the groups' operation and ideology, as these are likely to feature prominently in the short- to medium-term. Traditionally, violent extremist groups perceive Malaysia as a hub for ideological learning, which means there could be a significant flow of extremism-related information being relayed to and from individuals in Malaysia. As such, developments from elsewhere in the world, from as close as Indonesia to as far as West Africa, could stir some enthusiasm among supporters and sympathisers in the country.

The advent of new realities brought about by the pandemic also **demands for a new baseline assessment of Malaysia's terrorism landscape**. Illustrations and projections drawn here are mostly based on events that have taken place outside the country, not an exhaustive investigation of domestic developments when all attention and energy are being directed at the pandemic. When the peril of the pandemic has largely subsided[5], proper research work on this phenomenon must be commissioned immediately to assist in the security sector's efforts on CT/CVE agenda. Additionally, the product of such assessment could feed to the currently formulated National Action Plan on Prevention/Countering Violent Extremism (P/CVE), which must be finalised as soon as possible.

It is necessary to take stock of CT/CVE programmes that are affected by resource pressures faced by the authorities, foreign donors and partners. Some of these could be put in abeyance while others can continue. It is important to channel resources to programmes that are most critical at achieving objectives in this period, such as the ongoing deradicalisation programmes at prisons. A complete severance of support to these programmes is likely to lead to long-term impacts on Malaysia's terrorism landscape, as the threat is likely to outlast this pandemic.

Last, but not least, **Malaysia's security sector and CVE community must monitor old and new issues that (re)emerged during the MCO as these could instil additional nuances to the narratives of violent extremist groups in the near future**. Emotionally charged issues, such as domestic political contestation and immigrants, are ammunition that could be easily spun by violent extremist groups to solidify their influence in a society that is primarily worrying about the pandemic at the moment.

Conclusion

We simply need to acknowledge that despite the restrictive nature of the pandemic, it has not suspended many of our activities as we find new leeway and avenues to carry on. The same is true for extremist violent groups, many of which are observed to have continued or evolved their activities in the new realities moulded by the pandemic. Much of the data gathered originate from outside Malaysia due to the lack of research activities on Malaysia's terrorism landscape since the COVID-19 issue first arose. Regardless, we can still draw our projections based on developments from outside Malaysia in order to equip the country with the necessary vigilance against a potential double trouble – the fusion between the pandemic and the threat of violent extremism.

---

[5] Around the time when the vaccine has been discovered and distributed – approximately within 12 to 18 months' time.