

Researchers investigate the impact of COVID-19 on terrorism

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Anti-lockdown protestors stand in front of the Ohio Statehouse on May 1, 2020.
Credit: [\(Wikimedia Commons\)](#)

While government leaders are focused on fighting COVID-19, the threat of terrorism has not gone away. In fact, homeland security experts have warned that violent extremists may seek to take advantage of the fear and disruption around the pandemic to further their agenda and recruit new members.

Gary Ackerman, an associate professor in the College of Emergency Preparedness, Homeland Security and Cybersecurity (CEHC), who specializes in terrorist ideology, recently teamed up with CEHC graduate student Hayley Peterson to explore both the challenges and opportunities that the COVID-19 crisis presents for [terrorist organizations](#).

Their observational report was published in last month's edition of *Perspectives on Terrorism*.

"During times of crisis, we often see terrorists exploit the situation and use it for propaganda," said Ackerman. "This is particularly true amongst anti-government groups on both the far-right and far-left. They take advantage of widespread anxiety and distrust in leadership to promote radicalization and violence."

"Lots of people do not realize that many extreme groups reside, or least operate, in our societies," added Peterson, who earned a dual undergraduate degree in Emergency Preparedness, Homeland Security and Cybersecurity (EHC) and Human Biology in May. "Recent lockdowns, social distancing and other disruptions to [daily life](#) due to COVID-19 have presented an interesting case study to analyze how terrorists respond to a [global crisis](#)."

The 15-page report introduces and discusses a "top 10" list of COVID-19's most significant current and potential impacts on terrorist activity. The list ranges from terrorists leveraging an increased susceptibility to radicalization and inciting a rise in anti-government attitudes to engaging in pro-social activities and even reconsidering the utility of bioterrorism.

Although there could (and likely will) be short- and medium-term impacts, Ackerman and Peterson argue the pandemic's long-term economic damage is more likely to create the heightened [psychological](#)

[stress](#) and anger against the government that could lead to radicalization at dangerous levels.

"The greatest danger from terrorists utilizing COVID-19 itself as a weapon will arise after the first wave is over, but before a vaccine is available," said Ackerman. "More importantly, it is during the years following the end of the pandemic, which many project will be a lengthy economic stagnation and recovery period, that the gains made through current [terrorist](#) efforts to radicalize, recruit and engage in pro-social activities are likely to bear fruit."

More information: Terrorism and COVID-19: Actual and Potential Impacts. [www.universiteitleiden.nl/bina ... man-and-peterson.pdf](http://www.universiteitleiden.nl/bina...man-and-peterson.pdf)

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