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RESEARCH ARTICLE / ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

Terrorism Risk During the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Outbreak Period

Koronavirüs (COVID-19) Salgını Döneminde Toplumsal Kaygı ve Terörizm Riski

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Abstract
The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, causes negative consequences for states in terms of political, economic, sociological, psychological and security. Due to the problems that have occured during the pandemic period, the capacities of states are under pressure. Terrorist organizations aim to put pressure on governments in line with their political objectives by creating anxiety, fear, and panic on the civilian population with their attacks. This study investigates how the COVID-19 process affects terrorism, and tries to answer the question whether there is a relationship between trust in authority and terrorist activities during this period, or not. Just as states were unprepared for terrorism, they were also caught unprepared for the pandemic. The responses of some states to COVID-19 may further broaden public concern and create conditions that are favorable to terrorism. According to the study, it is explicit that this anxiety environment created by COVID-19 is regarded as an opportunity by terrorist organizations, and it is also obvious that the concern among the population is used and led by terrorist organizations. Curfews and travel restrictions also create mitigating conditions for the terrorist threats in most parts of the world during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords
COVID-19, Pandemic, Terrorism, Security, Social Anxiety

Öz
Koronavirüs (COVID-19) salgını, devletler için siyasi, ekonomik, sosyolojik, psikolojik ve güvenlik açısından olumsuz sonuçlar doğurmaktadır. Pandemi döneminde yaşanan sorunlar nedeniyle devletlerin kapasiteleri baskı altında kalmaktadır. Terör örgütleri, saldırıları ile sivil halk üzerinde endişe, korku ve panik yaratarak siyasi hedefleri doğrultusunda hükümetlere karşı baskı kurmayı amaçlamaktadırlar. Bu makale, COVID-19 sürecinin terörü nasıl etkilediğini araştırmakta ve bu dönemde otoriteye duyulan güven ile terör faaliyetleri arasında bir ilişki olup olmadığı sorusuna yanıt bulmaya çalışmaktadır. Devletler nasıl teröre hazırlıksız yakalandılarsa, salgına da hazırlıksız yakalanmışlardır. Bazı devletlerin COVID-19'a karşı mücadelede aldığı önlemler, kamuoyundaki endişeleri daha da artırabilir ve terörizme elverişli koşullar yaratabilir. Çalışmaya göre, COVID-19'un yarattığı kaygı ortamının terör örgütleri tarafından bir fırsat olarak görüldüğü ve halk arasındaki kaygının terör örgütleri tarafından kullanılarak yönlendirildiği de aşikardır. Sokağa çıkma yasakları ve seyahat kısıtlamaları ise COVID-19 salgını sırasında dünyanın birçok yerinde terör tehditleri için hafifletici koşullar da yaratabilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler
COVID-19, Pandemi, Terörizm, Güvenlik, Sosyal Kaygı

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Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has had unprecedented effects on public health, social welfare, economies, and social psychologies around the world. COVID-19 has been the most severe pandemic in the world since the Spanish flu pandemic between 1918 and 1920, which killed about 50 million people. COVID-19 was declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 19, 2020 (WHO, 2020).

COVID-19 challenges state capacities in many ways. State capacity is defined as the institutionalised capability of a state to implement policies that deliver benefits and services to households and firms (Besley & Done, 2022). Government's capacity to make decisions and implement policies plays a pivotal role in strengthening disaster preparedness and improving institutional quality in response to crises (Mao, 2021: 318). Empirical tests using data on epidemic outbreaks in 146 countries since 1995 and on the COVID-19 global pandemic show that state capacity reduces the number of epidemics and enhances the government's response through effective policymaking (Guillen, 2021).

In addition to the economic, social and political consequences of the pandemic, health concerns raised the anxiety in societies to the highest level. There is a social fear on the grounds that COVID-19 is a fatal disease, and there is no available treatment. This fear, combined with the uncertainty about the course of the pandemic, increases people's anxiety. Uncertainty makes it difficult to make decisions about human behaviors. In conditions where individual and social anxiety is high, people can behave irrationally.

The effects and consequences of the pandemic are similar to those that occur after natural disasters. A decline in government capacity due to epidemics and natural disasters can increase the perception of insecurity in the society. Terrorist organizations follow a strategy that will accelerate social anxiety in times of disasters and crises. The strategy to deepen anxiety can manifest itself through tactics such as undermining public trust in the government, creating distrust of the authorities, targeting a particular group, and calling its members to acts of violence (Comerford, 2020: 86-88). Terrorist organizations try to offer their ideologies as a remedy against the anger, fear, and panic caused by the pandemic. Social turmoil, uncertainty, and the global concern caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are seen by terrorist organizations as an opportunity to spread their messages and propaganda. In a period of uncertainty and fear that occurred with the COVID-19 pandemic, terrorists integrate the virus into their propaganda. Terrorist organizations also aim to win the hearts of people as these organizations try to demonstrate their ability to respond effectively to the large-scale crisis instead of governments.

This article examines how terrorist organizations use the environment of unrest and insecurity that occurred during the pandemic period. It is being investigated how the COVID-19 process affects terrorism, whether there is a relationship between trust in governments and authority and terrorist activities during this period. In the study, the public statements of terrorist organizations and the reports of the official institutions affiliated to the United Nations and independent research organizations were used. In addition, the reports evaluating global terrorist activities and current reports of survey companies are included in the study.

The study is limited to 2020, when the pandemic emerged and affected the world. Therefore, terrorist activities may actually decrease or increase during the period when

the pandemic continues. The economic problems caused by the shaking of trust in governments and the COVID-19 pandemic can create a dangerous structure that terrorist organizations can benefit from. Besides the short-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic that causes global effects, there will be political, geopolitical, social, and economic consequences in the medium and long term. Before examining the relationship between social anxiety and terrorism that arise due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it would be appropriate to touch on the concept of terrorism.

Concept of Terrorism

There are many different perspectives on the definition of terrorism. The definition may differ according to the political view of the statement maker. Alex Peter Schmid has compiled a total of 109 different academic definitions of terrorism (Schmid, 2011). Terrorism emerges as a result of the violent activation of ideas and movements that already exist or are created artificially for a specific purpose. It refers to a state of action that causes great fear and frustration in individuals. Terrorism, on the other hand, is the case of adopting organized, systematic, and continuous acts of violence as a method to change the current situation illegally for political purposes.

Terrorism activity is used to give a message to the targeted community or the world (Waldron, 2004). Although the ultimate goal of terrorism is political, terrorist organizations often justify their actions not only for political purposes, but with universal truths. There is no common definition of terrorism, and definitions of who a terrorist is and who a freedom fighter is are also quite complex. Groups that some societies describe as terrorists can be freedom fighters of another society (Victoroff, 2005). In this study, intentional acts of violence or threats used by non-state actors to achieve political goals against civilians or those who do not participate in the war are considered terrorism (Stepanova, 2008: 12).

Terrorism, which can also be described as the weapon of the weak, is seen as a tool implemented by a smaller number of groups and that may cause the greater part of society to be terrified (Howes, 2011). Terrorism is not just about killing innocent people. It threatens the economies of countries, weakens democratic institutions, and causes instability in their environment (Tilly, 2004). The costs of terrorism can be incurred in a way that harms military, economic or national morale. Terrorist organizations aim to put pressure on governments by creating fear, anxiety, and panic on the civilian population.

Terrorist Conspiracy Theories About COVID-19

Terrorist organizations redesign existing facts and combine them with conspiracy theories to intensify hatred towards specific groups. Terrorist groups produce conspiracy theories about the origin of COVID-19 and use social media to spread these theories. Xenophobic rhetoric reinforces racist, anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, and anti-immigrant social psychology during the pandemic period.

The origin of the virus is linked through conspiracy theories to some governments with hidden agendas, hostile religious groups and ethnic minorities, global corporations or some famous rich. Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg and Microsoft founder, Bill Gates are among the people mentioned in the conspiracy theories about the virus. Famous

investor George Soros and businessman Jacob Rothschild have also been accused in conspiracy theories. Posts using accusations such as Soros virus, Israel virus, CIA virüs, and Bill Gates virus are shared on social media (COVID-19 conspiracies, 2020: 1-7). The claim that 5G technology used in communication causes the virus to spread easily is one of these conspiracy theories.

There are many unfounded rumors that the pandemic is spreading by the minorities in the society. In particular, far-right terrorist organizations blame Jews, minorities, and foreigners for the pandemic. As in the plague pandemic between 1348 and 1351 in Europe, Jews are targeted also in this pandemic. Some far-right groups are increasing hostility against Asians, claiming that they willingly spread COVID-19 (Williams, 2020). There are fake rumors that COVID-19 was spread by Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh or by Jews in the USA. These lies put the social cohesion carefully developed by a number of organizations and state institutions at risk (Rosand, Khalid & Lilla, 2020).

Organizations exaggerate these conspiracy theories for purposes such as controlling world politics or generating income through the sale of vaccines and medicines (Egypt's Official Fatwa-Issuing, 2020). These conspiracy theories undermine the public's trust in official authorities. At the same time, the put forward conspiracy theories lead not to comply with the measures taken against the virus and to create distrust against vaccination. In 2007, it was claimed that polio vaccines were made to spread AIDS and sterilize Muslims. After these conspiracy theories, thousands of people in Pakistan refused to be vaccinated and attacked healthcare workers (Reardon, 2011).

In the propaganda of terrorist organizations, it is claimed that the virus was intentionally spread by China or the USA. Terrorist organizations call for revenge by referring to crimes allegedly committed against Muslims in their messages. The al-Shabab group linked to Al Qaeda in Somalia claims that the virus was spread by the crusaders invading the country and the countries that supported them (Harper, 2020). Al-Shabab blames and targets the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) for the spread of the virus, while demanding the expulsion of all foreign powers in the country.

Some terrorist organizations also consider COVID-19 to be a divine punishment that harms the countries they see as enemies. Some organizations view COVID-19 as a divine punishment that originated in China for the mistreatment of Uighur Muslims. Some organizations claim that when the virus began to affect the United States, Americans were divinely punished for their persecution of Muslims. A poster of the terrorist organization ISIS claims that the pandemic destroyed the crusaders' economy. COVID-19 is described as a manifestation of the divine will that hits the enemies, especially the USA, in the ISIS publication Al-Naba (How extremist groups, 2020: 3).

ISIS and al-Qaeda related groups claim that the virus is the "smallest soldier of God" who punishes the infidels who harm Muslims (Meek, 2020). The terrorist organization ISIS draws attention to the deaths caused by the pandemic on its propaganda sites, claiming that this eliminates the false perception that the United States is strong and invincible. Al-Shabab, linked to al-Qaeda, also states that COVID-19 reveals the weakness of countries that claim to be superpowers such as the USA, France, Italy, Germany, and the UK. Al Qaeda announces that the crisis is an opportunity to call people to jihad in God's way and revolt against tyrants like the USA (Burke, 2020).

In its six-page advice on COVID-19, al-Qaeda claims that the spread of the pandemic in the Muslim world was due to moral corruption in these countries. On the other hand, ISIS demands from its members to spread the virus in the Shiite-populated areas in southern Iraq. ISIS newspaper interprets the high incidents of COVID-19 in Iran as a mistake of the Shia faith and a punishment given as a virus by God (Egypt's Official Fatwa-Issuing, 2020).

Security, Freedom and COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a concern about democracy and freedoms. Many countries have to postpone and cancel parliamentary meetings due to the pandemic. Some governments easily ban protests from the opposition while using the pandemic as an opportunity to increase their power. The prohibition of public meetings is one of the main restrictions experienced in the COVID-19 period. Terrorist organizations can use quarantine measures and restrictions on freedoms as propaganda materials.

While some terrorist organizations react to the measures taken against the pandemic, they pretend that these measures are taken against them. In Nigeria, the Boko Haram organization suggests that COVID-19 measures are a new part of the war against Islam. Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau condemns pandemic measures such as the closure of mosques and the suspension of pilgrimage and umrah visits to Mecca (Campbell, 2020).

Strict security measures against the virus have resulted in the curtailment of civil liberties in some countries. Restriction of freedoms means an increase in the power and authority of the state. Many studies show that the failure to respect fundamental rights can increase tensions between authorities and citizens. Quarantine decisions, lockdowns, and restrictions on freedom due to COVID-19 can further increase the reaction against the authority (COVID-19 and Its Impact, 2020). For this reason, the decisions taken by states should be implemented in a way that affects personal freedoms to a minimum.

Technology used to address some of limitations, including by automating the processing of test results or symptom reports and by use of smartphone capabilities to identify and notify contacts instantaneously who are at risk of infection (Braithwaite, Callender, Bullock & AldridgeIn, 2020: 607). South Korea, the government tracks the movements of people who are tested positive and publishes location data anonymously on a public website. Citizens in South Korea must show a QR code to enter churches, restaurants and entertainment venues (Kim & Mah, 2020). China has developed a color-coded health monitoring system that tracks millions of people through Alipay. In China, citizens have to show a health code in almost all public places, including subways, markets and workplaces. It is required to show a QR code about your health in order to enter shopping malls and government offices in Turkey as well. These monitoring tools, which are temporarily used in the fight against the disease, may become permanent after the pandemic. There are concerns that states may become more authoritarian and a world away from democracy after the pandemic and quarantine measures are over.

In order to reduce the social risk and anxiety related to virus carriers, artificial intelligence applications and mobile tracking programs related to travel are put into use. These measures can also improve the monitoring capabilities of states wishing to monitor

terrorist groups. Flight recording elements, such as API and PNR, developed with the aim of combating terrorism, are also used as a tool against the pandemic in many countries. The measures taken against COVID-19 can significantly improve the security capacities of governments in the long term.

COVID-19 and Online Risks

When evaluating the interaction of the COVID-19 pandemic and terrorism, it is necessary to look at the short-term, medium-term, and long-term consequences. Terrorist organizations are getting prepared for the post-pandemic with propaganda and recruitment activities. Terrorist organizations use the internet and social media extensively as part of their recruitment activities. Terrorist organizations also fuel social anxiety and fear through social media.

Posts containing pro-ISIS messages on the pandemic on Facebook and Twitter have been viewed nearly half a million times (Colliver & King, 2020:18). ISIS uses the paid advertising system to highlight its own messages among social media posts about COVID-19. More than one million posts regarding the pandemic within the Telegram network contain violent elements that praise terrorism and make minority groups hostile (Comerford, 2020: 86-88).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of people have become unemployed in many countries, and millions of students have been deprived of education. In this period, in addition to working from home, education turned into online with the closure of schools. Young people are more vulnerable to the propaganda of terrorist organizations, as they spend more time online as a result of lack of job opportunities and schools being closed. Online education provides terrorist groups with new opportunities to communicate with potential members through various social platforms. Terrorist organizations direct their own propaganda to these students through uncontrolled websites. Studies show that unemployed and extremist students are more likely to attack with chemical and biological weapons. Jobless and student extremists were each roughly 15 times as likely to pursue chemical and biological weapons relative to employed violent extremists (Guarrieri & Meisel, 2019).

Combating Terrorism During the Pandemic Period

Pandemics are considered among national threats and risks in many countries, such as the USA, China and the UK before COVID-19 (Pantucci, 2000). Despite this, many developed countries have remained insufficient to respond to the pandemic. The COVID-19 crisis reveals the lack of health systems and response mechanisms of countries. In many countries, responses to traditional security concerns are faster and stronger than responses to the pandemic. The number of people who lost their lives in the pandemic due to the deficiencies in the health system has reached incomparably high numbers with those who lost their lives in terrorist attacks. The number of people who lost their lives in the US September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks is approximately 3.000 people. In December 2020, the number of Americans who died in one day due to COVID-19 exceeded 3.000. The total number of deaths related to COVID-19 in the UK exceeded 67.000 in December 2020. This figure is approximately 20 times more than the total number of people who died as a result of terrorism in the UK from 1970 to 2017 (Malik, 2020).

Governments are also concerned that the virus could be spread by terrorists. In the United States, former Deputy Minister of Justice Jeffrey Rosen announced that those who intentionally spread COVID-19 would be prosecuted under federal terrorism laws (Gerstein, 2020). The US Department of Homeland Security also warns that terrorists could benefit from the pandemic. The US Department of Homeland Security's statement warns that terrorists may try to exploit public concerns about the spread of COVID-19 (Mallin & Margolin, 2020).

In some publications of the terrorist organization ISIS, it is suggested that security forces are busy and weak due to the COVID-19 outbreak and that this situation should be used as an advantage. It is claimed in ISIS media that the pandemic caused chaos, and it is claimed that a security vacuum has arisen in the states. ISIS claims that the Egyptian army has weakened due to the lack of support from its Western allies due to COVID-19, and the organization targets the Egyptian army for attack (Reframing Islamic State, 2020: 28). It is stated that the operations and military training of the army have decreased due to the pandemic, and this is an advantage. The terrorist organization ISIS takes advantage of the disorder caused by the pandemic and gives instructions to attack the weakened states.

There is also a process of concern and awareness in states regarding pandemic and terrorist connections. Countries do not want to send their troops to areas where the disease is likely to spread. In fact, countries are recalling their soldiers they sent to other countries in order to provide security in the fight against global terrorism. International cooperation and education activities against terrorism have been stopped or reduced due to COVID-19. This situation seriously affects the counterterrorism power of countries with weak security capacities. Counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel region in Africa are adversely affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. Governments in the region are supported by approximately 14,000 UN peacekeepers to combat terrorism. Soldiers from 13 different European countries who support governments such as Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger can return to their countries for their own needs during the COVID-19 period (Coleman, 2020). The US Africa Command has cancelled two major exercises with African allies. Some members of the coalition forces formed against ISIS have announced that they will withdraw troops from Iraq due to fear of the spread of COVID-19. Most coalition members, including France and Spain, declare that they will suspend the training of Iraqi soldiers and return to their countries due to the risk of contamination.

The COVID-19 pandemic is causing policymakers and the public in all countries to quickly reorder their priorities. While health issues for governments rise to the top of the list, the fight against terrorism is being taken to the background. While health problems come to the fore as a national security priority, countries prefer spending on health sector instead of military. Governments are delegating their military capacity to assistance to strengthen public health operations. This situation makes countries more vulnerable to terrorist attacks.

States were allocating more resources to the fight against terrorism and other threats than the pandemic before COVID-19. This balance is likely to change, given the pervasive impact of COVID-19 compared to terrorism. This may undermine efforts to combat terrorism. Decisions to prevent a new pandemic can make it difficult for security officials to maintain the attention and budget they need.

Public Relations of Terrorist Organizations During the COVID-19 Period

COVID-19 poses a greater threat to sovereign states than terrorist organizations. As a result of budgetary pressure, states need to allocate their limited resources to protect society against the virus. States may fail to solve the problem in the short term with existing organizational models and may fail to fulfill their responsibilities to their people. Dealing with the pandemic is not just a medical mobilization, it is a serious public order activity.

Terrorist organizations can act to strengthen public relations during the pandemic period. These organizations claim that they can provide health services during the pandemic in the absence of official institutions. Terrorist organizations present themselves as a responsible political actor through such services. Some of these organizations provide aid, such as food and clothing to the public in addition to health services during the pandemic period. Terrorist groups are trying to gain the trust of people with basic needs and food aid.

The COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to promote the idea that in crises, terrorist organizations can replace and fulfill the role of official government. When weak governments in Africa and the Middle East cannot provide sufficient support for their people against the pandemic, terrorist organizations try to seize this opportunity. For example, the Al-Shabab organization in Somalia claims to have treated COVID-19 in a center it established (Al-Shabab sets up, 2020). After focusing on the health sector, states should allocate post-pandemic resources to economically weak regions. Otherwise, terrorist groups may provoke people living in areas with insufficient government services against the state. As states try to deal with Covid-19, terrorist organizations can seek opportunities to exploit fears, increase anxiety, and mobilize their supporters.

Terrorism During the Pandemic

It may be necessary to look a little longer to assess whether COVID-19 has mitigated terrorist attacks. Despite the media's focus on COVID-19, most terrorist organizations have not abandoned their own attack plans. The terrorist organization ISIS carried out attacks in Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, Egypt, Niger, Somalia, Yemen, Nigeria, and the Philippines in March and April (Kruglanski, Rohan, Molly & Anne: 2020). It can be stated that the number of terrorist attacks decreased during the pandemic period that continued throughout 2020. However, considering the figures for 5 years, the number of terrorist attacks has decreased after the peak in 2014 due to ISIS.

The report of the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) reveals that terrorist organizations are trying to take advantage of the COVID-19 outbreak to expand their activities and jeopardize the credibility of governments. In the report of UNICRI, it is stated that terrorists may want to spread the virus by going to the places where the enemy religious and racial minorities live (Stop the Virus Disinformation, 2020: 10). One of the biggest concerns is the potential attacks of terrorists using weapons of mass destruction (Kruglanski & Fishman, 2006: 205). Some terrorist organizations intentionally encourage their members to spread COVID-19 and use it as an indirect biological weapon. The fatwas of terrorist organizations, ISIS and Al Qaeda calling on their members who caught in COVID-19 to act as "biological bombs"

are published. In these calls, members of the terrorist organization are requested to spread the disease among the enemies of the organization (Stop the Virus Disinformation, 2020: 11). The PKK compels its infected members to be suicide bombers like other similar terrorist organizations do (Gemici, 2020).

The Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) has published its 2020 Global Terrorism report, which examines terrorist movements in the world and the effects of terrorism on countries. According to the report, there was a 15 percent decrease in terrorist attacks in 2019 compared to the previous year. Decline in terrorist attacks since 2014 reaches 59% (Global Terrorism Index, 2020: 4). According to the report, the number of people who lost their lives from terrorism in the last 5 years in the world has decreased. During the COVID-19 period, especially in Africa, Nigeria, and Chad Boko Haram's terrorist attacks increased, while attacks linked to the terrorist organization ISIS were observed in Mozambique (Global Terrorism Index, 2020: 2). The total number of terrorist attacks recorded in Nigeria in the first six months of 2020 is more than the total of attacks recorded in 2019. In September 2020, ISIS made an important gain regarding the claim to establish a caliphate in the country by seizing a strategic port in the north of Mozambique. According to the 2021 Europol report on the Terrorism situation in the EU, there were 57 terrorist attempts in the EU in 2020, compared to 55 in 2019. A total of 449 arrests on suspicion of terrorist offences were reported to Europol in 2020. This number was significantly lower than the one in 2019. It is unclear whether this drop is due to reduced terrorist activities or is a result of diminished operational capacities of law enforcement due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Terrorism in the EU: 2021). The pandemic had a significant impact on levels of conflict and violence. The level of civil unrest rose in 2020, fuelled in large part by responses to government's measure designed to stop the spread of the coronavirus. Over 5,000 pandemicrelated violent events were recorded between January 2020 and April 2021. In the past year, 87 countries recorded an improvement in peacefulness, while 73 countries recorded a deterioration. Three countries recorded no change in their overall score (Global Peace Index: 2011)

COVID-19 could play a role in mitigating the terrorist threat in the short term. It is considered that the pandemic can reduce the desire of terrorists to act and to launch an attack. The economic problems caused by COVID-19 have probably deprived many terrorist organizations of their source of income. Terrorist organizations may have more difficulty in finding resources such as money and weapons while planning an attack during the pandemic period. However, as governments focus on the pandemic, terrorist organizations can take advantage of this situation and access new funding sources. The failure of governments to counter COVID-19 leads to a decrease in confidence in the financial system, which in some countries causes cash outflow from the banking system. These unrecorded financial resources can be exploited and used by terrorist organizations (The impact of the COVID-19, 2020: 2).

Terrorist organizations can find support for their activities by manipulating humanitarian campaigns (COVID-19-Related, 2020: 10). In the period of COVID-19, there is a risk that terrorist organizations exploit people's goodwill and aid distributed. Terrorist organizations have been trying to benefit from every disaster that has occurred in Indonesia for the last two decades. It is stated that protective equipment and aid donations

for healthcare workers can be seized by organizations that support ISIS in Indonesia (IPAC Short Briefing, 2020).

The US-led anti-ISIS coalition reports that it has provided $ 1.2 million of supplies to hospitals and prisons in Hasakah and Shaddadi, which are under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces in northern Syria, to be used against the COVID-19 outbreak. The US Department of Defense is planning a total of $ 200 million in arms and equipment assistance to the Syrian Democratic Forces (U.S. Central Command, 2020). Turkey considers the SDF's core component YPG as a terrorist group, inseparable from the PKK. The PKK has also been designated as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the U.S. and the EU.

The COVID-19 pandemic also creates mitigating conditions for the terrorist threat in most parts of the world. If terrorist organization leaders cannot protect their members against COVID-19, if they are unable to provide care to members of the organization who are sick, these members may turn against the terrorist organization, and the organization may dissolve (COVID-19 and Its Impact, 2020). In the period of COVID-19, terrorists can get sick and need health care like everyone else. In some regions, resources transferred to terrorist organizations in proxy wars may decrease during the pandemic period. As a precaution to the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries close their borders to foreigners. International travel restrictions and increased border security are hampering the movement of terrorist actors, including foreign terrorist fighters. Curfews and travel restrictions within the country make it difficult for terrorists planning attacks. Curfews and quarantines prevent terrorists from moving, recruiting, and raising money (Eleventh report, 2020).

The supply chain, which has been disrupted by the pandemic, also negatively affects terrorist organizations. Disruption of global, regional, and national supply chains makes it difficult for terrorist groups to access food, medicine, Money, and weapons (Eleventh report, 2020). Physical distance measures are applied in almost every country in the world. The lack of crowds in social life makes the bomb attacks carried out by terrorist organizations much more ineffective. While the measures taken to combat the virus prevent the crowds from gathering in the squares, this reduces the number of potential targets for terrorists. Therefore, measures are being increased against terrorist organizations that want to target hospitals and markets (COVID-19 and Its Impact, 2020).

Media has become an indispensable tool for terrorist groups in order to raise social anxiety and fear (Pfefferbaum, 2003: 177). Violent groups have less coverage due to the greater focus of the media on COVID-19. Media focus on COVID-19 during the pandemic may deter terrorist organizations from attacking (Davis, 2020). One of the most important goals of terrorism is to instill fear in society. However, if any terrorist attack does not attract attention in the society and does not come to the social agenda, there is no point in carrying out this attack for terrorists.

States that have been successful against the COVID-19 pandemic and adopt asymmetric methods as strategies can see the pandemic as an opportunity to contain terrorist organizations (Özcan, 2020: 94). 809 terrorists were killed in the internal security operations carried out by the Turkish army against the PKK in 2020. Participation in the

terrorist organization PKK has reached the lowest level in history. The number of terrorists participating in the organization, which was over 5,000 per year in 2014, decreased to 130 in 2019 and 52 in 2020 (Gemici & Boztepe, 2020).

Social Anxiety and Terrorism During the Pandemic

Besides its social, political, and economic consequences, the COVID-19 pandemic is fundamentally a health crisis. There is a high level of anxiety about this health crisis as it directly threatens people's lives. The spread of the virus from China to the whole world in a short time, its lethal nature and the unpreparedness of the health systems of the states for such an pandemic resulted in the combination of anxiety, fear, and panic in societies. A new study published in the Lancet, a medical journal, attempts to quantify the impact of COVID-19 on mental health. The authors estimate that cases of depression rose by 53m globally as a consequence of the pandemic, 28% above pre-pandemic levels; cases of anxiety increased by 76m, a 26% rise (COVID-19 Mental, 2021).

The great social changes experienced can cause one to feel insecure. People may feel weaker if they think they don't have the resources to remove uncertainty. Anxiety is even higher in people who feel weak and helpless. People want to reduce or manage uncertainty, and this can lead to thoughts about extremism, or even extremism (Hogg, Kruglanski & Bos, 2013). According to the uncertainty-identity theory, along with the insecurity experienced, uncertainty can motivate people to identify with different groups. In this period of uncertainty, the behavior of extremist groups can become attractive to people. In times of uncertainty and anxiety, people can identify with different groups with strong and directive leadership (Hogg, 2014).

People are motivated to reduce uncertainty about their lives. For people, decreasing uncertainty means removing anxiety about their own lives. In situations of high uncertainty, anger, and social anxiety, extremist views may find more support among people (Hogg, 2014). Anxiety about one's own eventual death may also be one of the factors contributing to supporting terrorism under favorable conditions (Kruglanski & Fishman, 2006). People who are members of terrorist organizations can reduce the uncertainty in their lives with their group identity. Under conditions of uncertainty, people can try to identify with such extremist groups (Hogg, 2014: 339).

The uncertainty and chaos caused by COVID 19 are widely exploited by terrorist organizations. These groups are trying to use people's concerns such as loss of freedom due to COVID-19. The terrorist organization ISIS is aware of the negative impact of the pandemic on social anxiety and draws attention to this. In Al-Naba, the media organ of ISIS, it is pointed out that the fear of virus infection affects its enemies more than the virus itself (Contending with ISIS, 2020). During this period, terrorist organizations follow tactics such as complain, react with crime and violence. The intense social anxiety caused by the COVID-19 crisis has been used by terrorist organizations around the world to spread hatred, conspiracy theories, and anti-government sentiments to incite new attacks (Report of the Secretary-General, 2020: 125).

Economic Anxiety During the Pandemic

The economic difficulties experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic are compared with the 1929 World Depression. The economic recession in 2020 caused sharp

declines in employment, similar to the Great Depression. While the Great Depression continued for about 4 years, the economic contraction in 2020 returned to growth in 2021 (Wheelock, 2020). With the economy shrinking due to the pandemic, people are becoming more anxious about the future while becoming unemployed. In addition, people feel lonely and weak during lockdowns. Terrorist organizations exploit the sense of belonging to a community in order to make these unemployed people feel safe (Kruglanski, et al., 2020: 122) Terrorist organizations provoke acts of violence against the authority by using the reactions of people with their economic difficulties.

The pandemic affects socially low income groups more negatively. Millions of people working with low wages in the service sector around the world have become unemployed. These people in economic difficulties are more open to the propaganda of terrorist organizations. People who are unemployed, without income and therefore angry with the state become potential members of terrorist organizations. Low class people tend to belong to one group more than others. Therefore, people with low income may choose to join a group to reduce uncertainty in their lives (Reid & Hogg, 2005). When people become members of a group or acquire a group identity in an environment of uncertainty such as an pandemic, their anxiety in their minds may decrease (Jonas, 2014). According to the uncertainty-identity theory, people can identify with groups with distinctive attitudes and behaviors. Groups can change the attitudes, beliefs, norms, and behaviors of their new members (Hogg, 1993).

The new conditions created by the pandemic create economic uncertainty. Uncertainty is a situation that increases anxiety in social life and economy. Surveys conducted during the pandemic period reveal that the biggest social concern is experienced in the economy. The majority of people living in developed and developing countries do not expect the economies to recover quickly when the COVID-19 quarantine process ends. The majority of people in 10 of the 15 countries participating in the global survey conducted by the Ipsos company with 29 thousand people in April 2020, do not think that the economy will recover quickly when the pandemic is over (Many think it's, 2020).

Turkish people see the economy as the biggest problem in the pandemic process. A research on this subject was published by Ipsos in October 2020. According to Ipsos' survey, the rate of those who are afraid of being unemployed is 94% in the lower income group. According to the research, the ratio of those in the upper income group who are afraid of being unemployed is 70% in Turkey (Toplumun Büyük Çoğunluğu, 2020). Konsensüs Research survey conducted in November 2020 showed that 46.5% of respondents view unemployment as the biggest problem in Turkey. In the research, terrorism ranks fourth in the list of problems with 22.7%. (Türkiye Gündem Araştırması-51, 2020: 87). ANAR made a survey in May 2020 that included the question "Except Covid-19 what is the most important problem in Turkey?". 77.6% of the people participating in this survey conducted by the company gave economy as the answer. In ANAR's research, the rate of those who call the same question terror and security the most important problem after COVID 19 remains at the rate of 3.7% (Korona Virüsü Salgını, 2020: 16). With the pandemic, economic concerns are at a high level in countries, while the terror concern in the society decreases to much lower levels.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic is increasing social anxiety and undermining the public's trust in its inadequate state against the disease. Outbreaks cannot trigger a conflict in society on their own. However, the conditions created by pandemics and the way states respond can cause anxiety, unrest, and violence in society. Terrorist organizations increase anxiety in times of crisis, and as a result, the public may question the legitimacy of the government. For this reason, governments must establish mechanisms to keep people in the system by reducing the economic effects of the pandemic. If governments provide adequate social and economic supports in addition to health services against the pandemic, people can be prevented from excluding themselves from the system and turning to radicalization. Terrorist organizations target certain groups, especially minorities and foreigners, in times of crisis and incite violence. Since terrorist organizations use conspiracy theories in this process, it is very important for the administrations to communicate the correct information to the public.

Terrorists are trying to include the virus in their agenda and are trying to take advantage of the pandemic. However, in the long run, it is already difficult to assess what kind of impact COVID-19 has on the intensity of terrorism around the world. It will be useful to carry out new studies on this subject in the upcoming years because this study is limited to 2020. While trying to understand the terrorist threat in the period of COVID-19, it is necessary to consider both the exacerbating and mitigating conditions of the pandemic. For example, in the Ebola pandemic between 2014 and 2015, it was observed that social and political violence increased in West African countries (Wood and Thorin Wright, 2020). Although there was an increase in ISIS activities in Syria and Iraq during the COVID-19 period, it may be wrong to directly associate the fluctuations in terrorist activities with COVID-19. This kind of analysis can cause confusion between causation and correlation. In addition, another security concern that comes up with COVID-19 is bioterrorism. Following the devastating economic and social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, terrorist organizations' interest in biological and chemical weapons may increase.

States should consider that while dealing with the pandemic in the short term, the society may be adversely affected in the long term due to economic and social difficulties. The economic problems that arise with the pandemic can provide an environment that terrorist organizations can use in the upcoming periods. Economic crises, social polarization, loss of trust in authority, anxiety, and uncertainties offer terrorist organizations wide opportunities in the long run. Some countries have had to reduce their counter-terrorism operations during the pandemic period due to decreasing budgets and changing priorities. It is considered that terrorists will try to take advantage of this security gap. Risks may increase due to reduced operations in conflict zones where the fight against international terrorism is carried out.

Sometimes terrorist organizations declare a ceasefire in times of disaster. In such periods, indirect negotiations are held between governments and organizations. There is a possibility that similar negotiations between governments and organizations to contain the spread of COVID-19. With an optimistic point of view, at the end of the negotiations, a compromise can be reached in conflicts that last for years. For example, the tsunami

disaster in December 2004 accelerated the process that led the Indonesian Government and the Free Aceh Movement to peace. The Free Aceh Movement suffered military, social, and economic difficulties after the tsunami in which approximately 200 thousand people lost their lives. After the pressure on delivering aid to the region in a healthy way, the Free Aceh Movement preferred to negotiate instead of conflict. Free Aceh Movement supported aid efforts with the unilateral ceasefire announced after the tsunami (Schiff, 2013). For international cooperation against COVID-19, existing conflicts between states should also be suspended. If peace efforts increase and conflicts can be prevented, states can concentrate on the pandemic and fight against terrorist organizations that try to take advantage of this environment. In this way, the social anxiety that has increased with the pandemic may not experience terror anxiety.

Just as states were unprepared for terrorism, they were also caught unprepared for the pandemic. The responses of some states to COVID-19 may further broaden public concern and create conditions favorable to terrorism. Governments should lift strict measures that limit their freedoms against COVID-19 after the pandemic. Decisions such as continuing to use mobile surveillance methods or continuing to restrict freedoms after the pandemic can reduce trust in the state. A perception about the authoritarian structure of the state can create a social environment where terrorist organizations can be fed.

Just as terrorism is a major and immediate concern for society, COVID-19 is similarly a social concern. Moreover, while the social anxiety caused by terror remained limited to the area where the attack took place, the anxiety that came with the pandemic spread all over the world. Therefore, just as terror creates a social trauma, the pandemic creates a social trauma in the same way. However, the solution is more difficult as the problem is not limited to a single region and spreads to the whole world. Countries' non-cooperative behavior against a common threat, especially health equipment and vaccines, creates global uncertainty and security gap. This leads to the widespread international exploitation of COVID-19 by terrorist organizations. Global efforts are also required to solve the pandemic, as the problem is global. While international solidarity against the pandemic gains importance, the collaborations made in this period can both prepare a ground for efforts to combat global terrorism in the future and reduce social concerns.

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