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SUBJECT: (Indicators & Warnings) Threat Networks' dynamics during COVID-19 crisis

1. AIM

To assess the evolution of threat networks´ dynamics during the first months (from February to April 2020) of the worldwide critical situation derived from coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and to anticipate their potential further impact over different crisis areas.

2. THREAT NETWORKS' ACTIVITIES

2.a AFRICA

Although the effects from COVID-19 have affected the African continent later & lesser than to Europe, Asia & America, the almost chronic problems derived from unbalanced economy, short development, governmental weakness, social violence & poor sanitary services will most probably make the continent suffer more, deeper & longer from the crisis, which would create a favorable environment for terrorism increase.

2.a.1 Mali/Niger/Burkina Faso

AQ-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) is more active through attacking:
- Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) militants in Mopti region of **Mali** (Dialloubein, Mondoro, Tin Tabakat, Deboye…);
- Malian Armed Forces in Mopti (Dinangourou, Mondoro), Gao (Menaka, Tarkint, Bamba) & Timbuktu (Bambara-Maoudé) regions of **Mali**;
- Malian Security Forces in Gao & Kayes regions of **Mali**;
- Malian politicians in Timbuktu region of **Mali** (Ngaina);
- Dan Na Ambassagou self-defense Dogon militias in Mopti region of **Mali** (Borko, Bandiagara, Ouenkoro);
- Burkinabe Armed Forces in Boucle du Mouhoun & Northern (Sollé) regions of **Burkina Faso**;
- Dogon-ethnicity populations as part of increased Fulani-Dogon mutual violence in **Mali**.

DAESH-affiliated Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) is attacking:
- Nigerien Armed Forces in Tillaberi region of **Niger** (Tamalolo);
- Burkinabe civilians in East region of **Burkina Faso** (Pansi, Dyamondi).

The situation is getting especially worse & worse in **Burkina Faso** during 2020, where both JNIM & ISGS are independently increasing attacks against civilians, security forces, and militias in the Sahel, East, Centre-North and North regions.

2.a.2 Nigeria/Chad/Cameroon

The Anglophone regions in **Cameroon** are suffering violence from Ambazonian separatists, so combats with state forces have been taking place in the Southwest (Fako, Ndian, Kupe-Manenguba) & Northwest (Mezam, Menchum, Bui, Boyo, Ngo-ketunjia, Bamenda).

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Boko Haram (including both Islamic State West Africa & Shekau-Boko Haram factions) has been conducting attacks:
- Over civilians (Mozogo, Mayo-Sava, Mayo-Tsanaga) & Security Forces (Logone Et-Chari, Mayo-Sava) in the **Cameroon**´s Far-North;
- Over civilians in **Niger**'s Diffa region;
- Over civilians (Yobe, Borno) and state forces (Yobe, Borno, Adawama) in **Nigeria**.

The Shekau faction of Boko Haram conducted attacks:
- Over Armed Forces in Lac region of **Chad** (Fouli, Kaya).

2.a.3 Democratic Republic of Congo/Tanzania/Mozambique

Anti-governmental militias are very active in the **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**:
- the Allied Defence Forces (ADF) are extending their actions against civilians in Ituri province, outside their usual range of operations in North Kivu one;
- Cooperative for Development of Congo (CODECO) militants are attacking civilians & governmental forces in Ituri province;
- the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) Hutu ethnic militia has continued fighting against state forces & civilians in North Kivu;
- the ethnoreligious organization Bundu dia Kongo is spreading violence against non-Bakongos in Kongo-Central, including clashes with state forces.

It has been reported the arrival of Jihadist fighters from **Tanzania** to **Mozambique**.

The situation is worsening in Cabo Delgado province of **Mozambique**, where DAESH-affiliated groups are extending their influence, and they have been conducting attacks over civilians & security forces in Quissanga & Muidumbe districts, even a district of the capital (Mocimboa de Praia) has been captured.

The "Renamo Military Junta" (a dissident faction of Renamo) is getting some active in Sofala province.

2.a.4 Somalia/Kenya

Al-Shabaab is ignoring United Nations (UN) calls for a global ceasefire in response to the coronavirus pandemic, so they are increasing the activity through attacks:
- over Somali forces (Lower Shabelle region) and AMISOM forces (Banadir, Gedo, Lower Juba, Middle Shabelle, Woqooyi Galbeed, Lower Shabelle, Hiraan, Bakool & Bay regions) in **Somalia**;
- over civilians & Security Forces in Eastern **Kenya** (Mandera North & Garissa counties);
- over civilians in **Somalia's** Puntland.

Ahlu Sunna Wal Jamaa (ASWJ) has been fighting against Somali state forces in Galmudug state of **Somalia**.

Rival clan militias (Majeerteen & Awramale) had been fighting in in Jubaland and Lower Shabelle regions of of **Somalia**.

2.a.5 Egypt

DAESH in Sinai Wilayat is fighting with Armed Forces in Northern Sinai (Sheikh Zuweid, Rafah, Al Arish & Bir Al-Abd areas), as a consequence of a governmental offensive.

2.a.6 Libya

The conflict (Government of National Accord vs Libyan National Army) continued to escalate during last weeks, but the activity from terrorist groups has not been too relevant.

2.a.7. Tunisia/Algeria

The first suicide VBIED attack took place in Tunis after the last DAESH´s VBIED campaign in mid-2019.

2.a.8 Sudan/South Sudan

South Sudan has been hit by ongoing intercommunal violence in Warrap and Jonglei regions.

In **Sudan**, there was an assassination attempt with explosives against the Prime Minister.

Armed pastoralist groups have carried out attacks on civilian populations in South, Central and North Darfur.

2.a.9 Central African Republic

The Popular Front for the Renaissance of the Central African Republic (FPRC) and the Movement of Central African Liberators for Justice (MLCJ) signed a ceasefire agreement.

2.a.10 Africa - regional assessment

The activity from Threat Networks is not decreasing but increasing in the hot areas of Africa, so several factors could be favoring it:
- reduction in external military support (operations & training) based on COVID-19 preventive measures;
- bigger involvement of Security Forces in related/derived tasks to/from COVID-19 (control, security during demonstrations, self-safety…), which is reducing the effort in countering organized crime, insurgency & terrorism;
- propaganda about the advantage of taking benefit of that crisis, and the consideration of the pandemic as a punishment to infidels by God (based in the relatively low impact over the locals & some cases between the foreign forces/countries), which is making the Threat Networks to consider themselves as protected from the disease;
- Al Qaeda is apparently retaking the influence/operating initiative in several areas of conflict;
- DAESH-related groups are extending their areas of operations, as well as taking benefit of the relative reduction of governmental pressure in order to reorganize themselves.

2.b ASIA

2.b.1 Yemen

Pro-Houthi forces have been fighting in several governorates (Ad Dali, Al Jawf, Hodeidah, Marib, Sanaa, Taizz, Al Bayda).

DAESH forces are conducting attacks over:
- Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Abyan, Al Bayda & Marib governorates;
- Pro-Houthi forces in Al Bayda governorate.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is increasing activity against Security Belt Forces in Al Bayda.

2.b.2 Syria

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is retaking initiative & leadership in Idlib province just taking benefit of the Russian-Turkish agreement on northwest Syria) through:
- disputes with Hurras Al-Din, which are condemned by Al Qaeda as mutual link;
- operations against Syrian Army (SAA);

- attacks over Faylaq al-Sham.

Unidentified insurgency militants are conducting attacks using IEDs around the capital area.

DAESH is increasing attacks in Daraa, Homs, Deir e-Zor & Aleppo provinces.

Syrian defense Forces (SDF) are increasing pressure over DAESH along the Eufrates River to prevent the coronavirus emergency from benefiting their reorganization. DAESH elements in the border with Iraq are increasing their activities, enhancing the risk of moving to Syria to escape from Iraqi Forces' pressure over them.

2.b.3 Iraq

Supporters of Shiite cleric Muqtada Al Sadr ('Blue Hats') have been attacking:
- civilian demonstrators against Al Sadr in Najaf, Kerbala & Bagdad;
- Saraya As-Salam militia in Basra.

Taking benefit of the reduction of foreign forces & Iraqi counterinsurgency operations due to moving forces to control curfew in urban areas, DAESH is evidencing a plan to restore their capabilities in Diyala, Kirkuk, Salahuddin, and Hamrin/Makhoul mountains. Accordingly, DAESH activity has included Security Forces as a target (civilians were the main one till now), and raised/expanded their activity to new areas through attacks against:
- civilians in Diyala, Saladin, Ninewa, Babylon & Ninewa provinces;
- Iraqi forces in Kirkuk, Ninewa, Anbar, and Saladin provinces.

Iranian-backed Shia militias conducted attacks against USA Armed Forces & contractors in Kirkuk & Bagdad provinces; nine of those groups (Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shahuda, Harakat al-Aw-yah, Harakat Jund al-Imam, Harakat al-Nujaba, Ka'taib Imam Ali, Sarayah 'Ashura, Harakat al-Jihad wal-Binah, and Sarayah al-Khorasani) signed an statement to expel USA from Iraqi territory.

Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), Sayed al-Shuhada, Saraya al-Khurasani, and Kata'ib Ansar Allah are increasing their activity in the capital area.

2.b.4 India/Pakistan/Bangladesh

The activity from Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) groups in Jammu & Kashmir in **India** is decreasing due to the governmental operations against them.

Politically motivated attacks on population & leaders continued in **Bangladesh** and **India**.

In India, violence during nationwide demonstrations from minorities (mostly Muslim one) continue against the Citizenship Amendment.

After Indian authorities linked several cases of COVID-19 to a Muslim missionary group that held its annual conference in Delhi in early March, an intense propaganda & fake news campaign by Hindu nationalists is promoting hate & Islamophobia (e.g. "#CoronaJihad" & #TablighiJamatVirus hastags in Twitter) against Muslim minority in India.

In **Pakistan**, organized violence involving domestic rebel groups (Jihadist & Baloch nationalist groups) is increasing in Balochistan; the group Baloch Liberation Tigers (BLT) is especially active in attacks against industrial/railway facilities & Security Forces.

Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) conducted attacks against civilians & fights with Security forces in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of **Pakistan**.

2.b.5 Afghanistan

There is an assassination campaign against leaders of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) & Hizbul Ahrar groups.

The USA-Taliban peace talks were finally unsuccessful, and the Government´s call to commit to a complete ceasefire in light of the coronavirus crisis has been denied by Taliban as well.

Fights between Taliban and Afghan security forces have been intensified in about 26 provinces (especially in Logar, Kandahar, Takhar, Balkh, Zabul, and Urozgan ones), and Taliban have gained terrain in Ghor & Badakhshan provinces.

Taliban cleared the province of Kunar of DAESH-related forces.

DAESH in Khorasan Wilayat (IS-K) has been conducting some attacks over civilians (religious minorities) & USA forces, and it is expected the group may mount some kind of resurgence in occasion of COVID-19 disorder.

2.b.6 Kazakhstan

There is an increase in clashes between Dungan Muslim ethnic group & Kazakhs.

2.b.7 Turkey

Across the border with **Iraq**, factions from the Peoples' United Revolutionary Movement (HBDH) and the Civil Protection Units (YPS) attacked:
- factories in Izmir, Van, and Istanbul provinces;
- Security Forces in Van province.

2.b.8 Lebanon/Palestine/Israel

There was an increased number of incendiary devices launched from the Gaza Strip in southern **Israel**, as well as several rockets.

2.b.9 Indonesia

Clashes between state forces and the West Papua National Liberation Army (TPNPB) were reported in the Papua region.

There is an increase of violent activity by Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT).

2.b.10 Myanmar

The United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA) increased fights with state forces in Rakhine & Chin state.

The Shanni Nationalities Army (SNA), comprised of ethnic Shanni, clashed with the military in the Sagaing region; these are the first violent actions from SNA since 2017.

2.b.11 Thailand

Separatist violence has been driven against civilians in Pattani and Narathiwat provinces.

The *de facto* ceasefire declared by the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Melayu Patani (BRN) continues to hold.

2.b.12 Philippines

The clashes between Philippine state forces and the New People's Army (NPA) continue, as well as the fights with the Jihadist Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF).

2.b.13 Asia - regional assessment

The activity from Threat Networks in most of the regions of Asia is maintaining their status, except for the potentially worrying intent to take benefit from COVID-19 crisis that DAESH is driving in **Iraq** & **Syria**, along with the resurgence of Taliban operations in **Afghanistan**.

2.c AMERICA

2.c.1 Nicaragua

Politically motivated attacks on opposition leaders continued in **Nicaragua**.

In the North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region, clashes between settlers & indigenous communities took place.

2.c.2 Guatemala

Attacks against civilians increased, mostly based on land-conflicts between communities.

2.c.3 Mexico

In **Mexico**, the number of reported fatalities stemming from violence targeting civilians (including government officials) by armed groups and gangs increased in comparison to previous months.

On the other hand, the violence between gangs has decreased (except for "*Jalisco Nuevo Generación Cartel*" (CJNG) versus "*Los Viagras*" & "*Cárteles Unidos*" in Michoacán & Guerrero), while armed clashes between state forces and gangs have suffered an increase.

Members of different gangs are trying to supersede the state through the distribution of money & food, and the imposition of parallel curfews to local population.

2.c.4 Costa Rica

Terraba & Cabecar indigenous groups are regularly facing attacks by land-grabbers in the south of the country.

2.c.5 Brazil

In Rio de Janeiro city, clashes between the "*Terceiro Comando Puro*" (TCP), the "*Comando Vermelho*" (CV), and different militia groups are taking place.

The civilian protests across multiple cities in opposition to President & the strikes of security officers are letting space to the increase of criminal networks´ activities.

The number of attacks on civilians perpetrated by drug trafficking groups and police militias slightly increased.

2.c.6 Colombia

Dissident groups from Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) have been attacking former FARC members, unionist leaders, social leaders, and indigenous people

in the departments of Nariño, Chocó, Santander, Caquetá, Huila, Valle del Cauca, and Antioquia; those groups were fighting with military forces in Meta, Antioquia and Cauca departments too.

There were some armed clashes between Gulf Clan (a right-wing paramilitary group) & military forces in northwest Colombia.

On the other hand, the National Liberation Army (ELN) is strongly increasing their violent actions in Cauca Department.

Clashes were reported between ELN members and the Gulf Clan in Chocó department, aiming for control of territories and criminal markets in the region.

2.c.7 Venezuela

Suspected members of the "*Colectivos*" (paramilitary groups backed by the government) were involved in several attacks over political rivals.

Armed clashes between Venezuelan soldiers and the National Liberation Army (ELN) took place in Apure state.

2.c.8 Chile

The conflict between Mapuche militias and Chilean authorities intensified.

2.c.9 America - regional assessment

The activities from Threat Networks in America are estimated as not too affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.d EUROPE/OCEANIA

Except from some minor violent activities conducted by isolated individuals/local cells, the activities from Threat Networks seem not to have been influenced by the COVID-19 disorder.

2.e PROPAGANDA

There are two main dynamics to get potentially considered as relevant indicators regarding the propaganda activities by Threat Networks during COVID-19 crisis:

- the blame of the spreading of Coronavirus pandemic over "the enemies of Islam" (e.g. Al-Shabaab in Somalia), the consideration of COVID-19 as a divine punishment over those not following the true message (e.g. China due to the policy on Uyghurs, Non-fully Islamic governments in Muslim areas…) or the promotion of Jihadist attacks (… and freeing Jihadist prisoners) during that crisis taking benefit of the situation/distraction of forces (e.g. DAESH, AQ…);

- the resurgence of Al Qaeda related propaganda (and the consistent increase in their operations…) in their intent to retake visibility & legitimacy over DAESH after their loss of terrain/influence in Iraq & Syria (e.g. the activity by "Tabath News Agency" in a quite similar propagandistic line than the one followed by DAESH media agencies…).

It is relevant to get aware that the Taliban has used the contagion as a public relations exercise to win public sympathies, gain political legitimacy and portray itself as more humane compared with DAESH, which has taken a totalitarian view of the coronavirus.

On the other hand, Far-right extremist groups have called the pandemic a hoax, and floated the falsehood that the crisis is being orchestrated by Jews or China, while trying to take

benefit from the economical crisis to promote discontent & hate against minorities/foreigners in their own societies… or even recommending the use of COVID-19 infection as a weapon of choice.

3. <u>ASSESSMENT</u>

- The most critical areas (e.g. Sahel, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Nigeria/Cameroon, Mozambique, Somalia…) are suffering a relative increase in the activity from Threat Networks.

- Most of the Threat Networks could take benefit of the pandemic to reorganize themselves, and to reoccupy territories from where they were removed by governmental/multinational efforts.

- The deep economic consequences from COVID-19 pandemic are going to reduce the potential resources to get employed in counter insurgency & counter terrorism, which would offer an opportunity to grow up & increase power/influence to threat Networks.

- In poorly or ungoverned spaces of weak states, Threat Networks will most probably try to bolster their credentials by offering aid, security, and some semblance of governance to local communities during & after the pandemic effects.

- In developed countries, the mobilization of law enforcement agencies to enforce lockdowns, to ensure the public's compliance with safe distancing measures, to control public demonstrations, and to assist with the public health emergency could expose them to low-level terrorist acts, while maybe distracting them from directly facing terrorism.

- As the safe distancing/lockdown measures have increased the time people spend on social media, this has coincided with a surge in extremist propaganda on social networks to peddle conspiracy theories and misinformation aiming to lure potential recruits, so threat Networks could potentially exploit people's fears and expectations to advance their ideologies.

Accordingly, the relative lack of intelligence regarding Threat Networks during COVID-19 crisis should never be considered as an indicator of reduction in the activities from Threat Networks or even of their negative affection to national or allied interests.

It should time to react against Threat Networks´ propaganda through countering messages & removing it from social media environment; a sustained social media monitoring, coordination with technological companies, and a refined regulation about the use of technologies/Internet are going to be essential to mitigate the exploitation of digital technologies by Threat Networks.

The governments/forces in crisis areas should get supported with intelligence, military assistance, surgical operations & training by the international community. Additionally, international supportive measures to mitigate the post-pandemic economic impact over that crisis areas should get materialized, along with supporting weak states in the improvement of public policy & governance delivery is also essential to prevent Threat Networks´ exploitations of success.

Approved on the 04th of May 2020

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