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ARTICLE COMMENTARY



## COVID-19: a challenge or opportunity for terrorist groups?

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### ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 contagion has emerged amid a rapidly changing geopolitical environment and technological transformations. These developments have created new opportunities and challenges for terrorist groups. Whereas terrorist groups are struggling to launch conventional attacks during the lockdown, they have a captive young audience on the internet to recruit and radicalise. Similarly, though travel restrictions have limited terrorists' mobility, they are using the time to develop new skills. This article examines the opportunities and challenges for terrorists to provide an assessment of the evolving strategic landscape. The persistence of religious terrorism, despite the weakening of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, alongside the emergence of the far-right terrorism in the West, renders the existing terrorist landscape complex and chronic. While the internet and social media revolutionised terrorist recruitment and radicalisation, emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, drone technology and 3D-printing can potentially change the face of future terrorist violence.

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## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has occurred during a time of rapid geopolitical and technological transformation in which power is shifting from West to East. Arguably, these developments herald the end of the 9/11 era marked by the global war on terror (Rhodes, 2020). The post-9/11 world, notwithstanding the war on terror, is more susceptible to terrorism than the pre-9/11 world. For instance, the West and the U.S. which have remained relatively immune from terrorist attacks, are now grappling with increased terrorist violence, both by jihadists and the far-right (The Soufan Centre, 2019).<sup>1</sup>

This article will examine the evolution of terrorism and the forms it is likely to adopt in the emerging era of great power competition. To understand the future of terrorism, the global terrorist landscape has to be situated at the intersection of an evolving world order and emerging technologies, both of which are being expedited by Covid-19. The short and long-term impact of Covid-19 on terrorism will vary between conflict and non-conflict zones. Within conflict zones, there impact will be

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different between cities where governments have imposed lockdowns, and remote areas where governance is weak and terrorists have territorial control (UNSC, 2020, p. 5). Terrorist acts have recently increased in conflict-zones and decreased in non-conflict zones. In the future, the terrorism and other forms of political violence are likely to increase due to the expected economic recession, growing employment insecurities, and governance challenges (Ibid).

There is currently a debate among terrorism scholars and practitioners on whether the evolving world order, emerging technologies and Covid-19 will provide opportunities or challenges for terrorists. Bloom, Pantucci and Wither have warned not to ignore the terrorist threat as new risks emerge (Bloom, 2020; Pantucci, 2020; Wither, 2020). Contrarily, Neumann and Rhodes consider the pandemic a challenge for terrorists as they have been unable to conduct conventional attacks and draw attention to their causes (Neumann, 2020; Rhodes, 2020). Others see the evolving situation both as a challenge and an opportunity (Ackerman & Peterson, 2020; Avis, 2020, p. 8; United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, 2020). This article will expand on this last stream of terrorism research by synthesising the competing arguments to provide a nuanced analysis of the evolution of terrorism.

No research exists about the impact of past pandemics on terrorism. The Spanish Flu pandemic (1918-1920) was indeed followed by a spate of anarchist bombings in the U.S. orchestrated to oppose World War I (Ackerman & Peterson, 2020, pp. 59–60). However, it is difficult to link these bombings to the pandemic. Presumably, even if the Spanish Flu and Covid-19 can be compared, the global political environment of the two eras is entirely different, and the post-crisis outcomes of the two predicaments may not be identical.

However, if pandemics are considered a form of natural disaster, then there is a body of research on the evolution of terrorism in post-disaster contexts. Bauman, Paul, and Ayalew (2006) identified mixed results from the impact of natural disasters on terrorism. For instance, following the 2004 South East Asian tsunami, the Free Aceh Movement and the Indonesian government signed a memorandum of understanding to resolve the thirty-year-old conflict in Aceh. Simultaneously, the LTTE conflict in Sri Lanka worsened in the wake of the tsunami (Avis, 2020, p. 8).

Using available open-source information, observable patterns and current operational and ideological reactions of various terrorist groups to the pandemic, some trends can be identified. The ways that shifting geopolitical power and emerging technologies intersect with existing patterns of extremism will form the basis of any future terrorist landscape. This article first discusses the opportunities for terrorist groups created by the pandemic. The second section outlines the challenges. The final section discusses trends that will underpin the future terrorist landscape.

## **Opportunities for terrorist groups**

Terrorist groups are exploitative and resilient, they not only survive in challenging circumstances but also excel. In fact, adversity is a way of life for the terrorist groups, so it is easier for them to adjust and adapt. Terrorists are currently exploiting the opportunity afforded to them by the Covid-19 to recruit, radicalise and plot attacks.

### ***Ideological substantiation***

Terrorist groups have framed the Covid-19 and the perceived decline of the West into their eschatological or ethno-nationalist narratives for ideological substantiation. Global jihadist groups have invoked divine law, while far-right groups and individuals have forwarded racial explanations of the pandemic and power shift from the West to the East (Warrick, 2020).

Global jihadists have characterised the evolving world order as one of U.S. decline in retribution for the war it has waged against Islam. The pandemic has been described in the jihadist narratives as the 'wrath of God' and 'divine retribution' against the 'infidels' (Meek, 2020). The Islamic State's (IS) narrative around Covid-19 has transformed with the geographical evolution of the pandemic. For instance, when the contagion broke out in the Chinese city of Wuhan, IS termed it as God's punishment on 'communist China' for oppressing the Uyghur Muslims (International Crisis Group, 2020). Subsequently, when the contagion entered Iran, the terror group termed it God's anger on the Shiites for their 'polytheistic practices' (Ibid). Finally, when the coronavirus hit Europe, IS adjusted its narrative to show it as God's revenge against the 'infidels' and 'crusaders' for attacking the 'mujahideen' (Ibid).

Al-Qaeda's (AQ) six-page statement on Covid-19 is a PR-exercise, primarily targeting Western audiences (Avis, 2020, p. 12). AQ invited non-Muslims to study Islam during the lockdown and ponder how the pandemic has brought the most powerful nations of the world to their knees (Ibid). The AQ statement contained a detailed analysis of the economic costs of Covid-19 in the US, and AQ senior leadership in Afghanistan mocked the US failure to provide ventilators for patients in need.

Western far-right groups and individuals have blamed migrant communities, particularly Jews and Chinese, for bringing the coronavirus to Europe. The contagion has provided right-wing extremists with an opening to demand stronger borders, greater protectionism and stringent anti-immigration laws (Summa, 2020). The accelerationist groups within the far-right spectrum view Covid-19 as an opening for recreating a pure white society, which would eventually resurrect White supremacy through a race war. Hence, the accelerationists have advocated for maximising the chaos created by Covid-19 through individual acts of mass violence (Weiner, 2020).

### ***Shadow governance***

In weak states such as Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, Somali and Nigeria, where the writ of the governments is compromised or contested, terrorist groups have tried to increase their ideological appeal by filling the governance void through service provisions. In doing so, terrorists have attempted to win the sympathies of at-risk populations and undercut the governments (UN-CTED, 2020, p. 2).

For instance, in Afghanistan, the Taliban has urged people to observe social distancing, wear masks, use hand sanitiser and visit the nearest hospital if they develop Covid-19 symptoms. The Taliban have also distributed pamphlets in Afghan areas under their control to create awareness about Covid-19. Furthermore, the Taliban restored the international non-governmental organisation's security guarantees in areas under their control and urged them to resume their relief and humanitarian work.

Similarly, the Shiite Hezbollah in Lebanon has stepped in to provide health services where there are gaps in the state's service delivery. Hezbollah has deployed as many as 1,500 doctors, 3,000 nurses and paramedics and around 20,000 activists to respond to Covid-19 health emergency, for instance, through disinfecting public spaces. The group has also deployed 100 Islamic Health Society ambulances and created 32 medical centres in Lebanon (Ackerman & Peterson, 2020, p. 6).

Likewise, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) has enforced social distancing measures in areas under its control in northern Syria and urged people to get tested if they develop Covid-19 symptoms (Clarke, 2020). In the March edition of its newsletter, *Ebba*, HTS cited the World Health Organization's guidelines to people to protect themselves and their families from falling sick (Ibid).

### **Cyber recruitment and radicalization**

During Covid-19, worldwide internet data usage has surged between 50 percent to 70 percent. Globally, over 1.5 billion students in 191 countries, no-longer in full-time education, are spending more time online, particularly on gaming platforms. Among these, around 400 million who are directly affected by conflict or violence are most vulnerable (UN-CTED, 2020, p. 1). This online exposure offers terrorists a chance to recruit and radicalise, specifically those under the age of 30 (Avis, 2020, p. 6). According to a UN report, 'a captive audience harbouring anxieties and uncertainties during social distancing potentially provides a fertile ground for radicalisation (Ibid, p. 3).'

Since its onset, Covid-19 has been the most discussed topic on online extremist channels and social media platforms. For instance, in March IS dedicated two issues of its weekly newsletter, *Al-Naba*, to Covid-19 (Basit, 2020). The pandemic has provided a fertile ground for the disinformation-terrorism nexus (Cruickshank & Rassler, 2020, p. 4). A wide array of conspiracy theories and fake news have been circulating on the internet since the outbreak, offering bizarre explanations about the pandemic (Cellan-Jones, 2020).<sup>2</sup> For instance, many far-right groups in the West believe that the radiation from 5G towers spreads the coronavirus. There have been arson attacks on 5G towers, including 50 incidents in the UK and Europe (Fildes, Stefano, & Murphy, 2020).

Conspiracy theories have a history of directly or indirectly propelling terrorist violence and narratives in combination with other individual and environmental factors (Amarasingam & Argentino, 2020, p. 37). The case of QAnon indicates how anti-establishment conspiracy groups and other fringe movements can quickly move from the mainstream into extremism (Ibid, p.42).

### **New funding opportunities**

According to the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the global watchdog for anti-money laundering and counter-terror financing, criminals and terrorists are exploiting Covid-19 and the economic downturn to move into new cash-intensive and high liquidity businesses, especially in the developing countries (Financial Actions Task Force, 2020, p. 10). The governments' decisions to provide social assistance and tax relief packages have also opened new avenues for cybercriminals and terrorists to generate and launder illicit proceeds (Cruickshank & Rassler, 2020, p. 2).

Faced with resource scarcity and difficult economic situations, several developing countries are reallocating their human and financial capital to relief activities which will adversely affect compliance with the anti-money laundering and countering finances of terrorism laws (FATF, 2020, p. 11). This trend is further exacerbated by increased online fraud and misappropriation of government funds (Ibid, p. 5).

Since the Covid-19 outbreak, a plethora of charity organisations has arisen to assist families in need. Extremist and terrorist groups, posing as charity and humanitarian relief organisations, have circulated emails and SMS messages requesting donations.<sup>3</sup> Prospective recipients and donors are also asked to provide credit card information or make payments through their secure digital wallets (FATF, 2020, p. 14). Furthermore, FATF notes that the terrorists are exploiting the weaknesses in business networks to gain access to customer contact and transaction information (Ibid. p. 7). Subsequently, posing as business representatives, they use this information and request payments (Ibid).

### ***The revival of terrorist groups***

The expected reallocation of military and financial resources from groups like AQ and IS to health emergencies could weaken the international cooperation against terrorism (FATF, 2020, p. 3). In turn, this would ease the pressure on several terrorist groups in conflict zones which have been breeding grounds of terrorism since 9/11. Following rocket attacks by Iran-backed Shia militias in the aftermath of General Qasem Soleimani's killing, the US has reduced its military footprint in Iraq (Kohnavard, 2020). Other European nations have paused their training program for the Iraqi forces and recalled their troops (Babb, 2020). This has significantly reduced the anti-IS coalition operations in Iraq (Frantzman, 2020). Concerningly, these developments coincide with a revival of IS in Iraq and a resultant upsurge of terrorist attacks (Magid, 2020).

In Afghanistan, the Taliban declared victory following the February 2020 Doha agreement with the US (Bishara, 2020). Subsequently, the US has reduced its troops in Afghanistan to 8,600 and vacated five military bases in Helmand, Uruzgan, Paktika and Laghman provinces (Tolo News, 2020). Alarmingly, the Taliban have increased attacks since this time to augment their territorial control, while the intra-Afghan peace negotiations face an uncertain future. The US has to withdraw from Afghanistan by May 2021, provided the conditions of the agreement are met. Various UN reports have consistently indicated that the Taliban have not severed their links with AQ (DeYoung & Lamothe, 2020). In such a scenario, US retreat from Afghanistan would turn Afghanistan into a safe-haven for terrorist groups.

The Sahel and Western African regions have also witnessed an unprecedented upsurge of terrorist activity both by IS, AQ and their affiliated groups and other local groups such as Boko Haram and al-Shabab (Al-Jazeera, 2020). Continued external support is vital to blunt the growing influence of global jihadist groups in the Sahel (Avis, 2020, p. 18). Some French troops have withdrawn from West Africa, leaving the Sahel region susceptible to terrorist attacks. Likewise, the US has removed its forces from the West African anti-terror coalition, leaving countries such as Burkina Faso in a difficult position (Schmitt, 2019).

### ***Experimentation with bioterrorism***

In the 1990s, terrorists' obsession with bioterrorism ended with Aum Shinrikyo's botched attempts to produce bioweapons (Rosenau, 2001, pp. 289–301). Since then, terrorist groups have employed suicide terrorism as a weapon of strategic choice with a great degree of success. AQ's bioterrorism labs operated by the Malaysian militant Yazid Sufat in Afghanistan were destroyed after the US intervention in 2001 (Larssen, 2010). However, the social disruption, economic damages and mass casualties that Covid-19 has caused can, once again, revive terrorists' interests to invest in bioterrorism (Finaud, 2020). Though the entry-barriers for terrorists to develop bioweapons are high, they are gradually being lowered due to technological advances and the democratisation of scientific knowledge and resources (Cruickshank & Rassler, 2020, p. 11).

Covid-19 may become a blueprint for future bioterrorism (Means, 2020). Terrorists have easy access to bioweapon technology (Cruickshank & Rassler, 2020, p. 7). Indeed, at the individual level, the experimentation with bioterrorism, albeit limited, among the jihadists and far-right groups has continued. For instance, in 2010, a neo-Nazi terrorist from the Aryan Strike Force group was convicted of producing biological agents in a plot to target Muslims and Jews in the UK. (Ong & Azman, 2020, pp. 18–21). Likewise, in 2018, an IS operative of Tunisian descent successfully produced a biological agent (ricin) in Cologne, Germany. He ordered 1,000 castor seeds, the main ingredient used in making ricin, and a coffee grinder and produced the toxic in June (BBC News, 2018).

Even developed nations with advanced healthcare systems have struggled against Covid-19. This fact would not be lost on terrorist groups. Some who were close to producing biological pathogens in the past might reinvest in this tactic in the future. Whether they succeed in achieving this capability remains to be seen (Gunasingham, 2020).

### ***Emerging technologies***

A technology-driven quest for global domination by major powers and deeper internet penetration amid Covid-19 has created unprecedented opportunities for terrorists. Terrorists have a proven track record of adopting new technologies, machine learning, 3D printing and other forms of AI. After an initial trial and error period, terrorists eventually improve their technological skillset. Clarke et al. have identified a four-point sequence in which terrorist groups employ new technologies: (i) early adoption replete with mistakes; (ii) iteration, improvement with the evolution of technology; (iii) breakthrough, increase in the success rate; and (iv) competition, employment of countermeasures by state and tech companies to stop misuse of technology leading to an adaptation re-adaptation cycle (Ross, Clarke, & Shear, 2020).

Terrorists' weaponization of drone technology is a case in point. In 2016, IS dropped hand grenades using drones, killing two Peshmerga soldiers in northern Syria (Neff, 2016). Subsequently, IS formed Unmanned Aircraft of the Mujahideen, a division dedicated to the development and use of drones (Warrick, 2017). In essence, a weaponized drone is as lethal and unstoppable as a suicide bomber (Ware, 2019).

Similarly, the adoption and improvement of AI would enable terrorists to undermine physical security in new ways, making counterterrorism more difficult in the future (Zegart, 2019). For example, terrorists will be able to use autonomous vehicles to

deliver explosives. Moreover, terrorist attacks will cause far more damage, while allowing terrorists to distance themselves from their targets in time and location. AI technology is cost-effective, undetectable, lethal and autonomous (Ross, Clarke, & Shear, 2020).

## Challenges for terrorist groups

### *No publicity*

Terrorism is propaganda of the deed and terrorists require an audience to highlight their political objectives (Felming, 2008; García, 2018, pp. 27–35). According to Richardson (2006), terrorists want 3Rs: (i) revenge, for atrocities, imagined or real, committed against their communities; (ii) renown, publicity to draw attention to their grievances and demands; and (iii) reaction, the response from counter-terrorists to generate sympathies among their constituents.

However, for the first time since 9/11, Covid-19 has stolen media focus from terrorist groups and their activities (UNSC, 2020, p. 6). From a propagandistic standpoint, this must be frustrating for terrorists who have dominated the airwaves since 2001. Over the past 20 years even minor news related to terrorism has found space on the front pages of newspapers and TV news headlines (Mitnik, 2017).

The psychological impact of terrorism is to intimidate and terrorise people while drawing attention to their causes. However, the pandemic is scarier than terrorism, (Ibid). In fact, to some extent, even terrorists are afraid of catching the coronavirus (Ibid). IS, in its initial communique, advised its worldwide supporters and sympathisers to refrain from travelling to countries affected by Covid-19 (The Hindu, 2020).

### *Fewer conventional attack opportunities*

Aside from conflict hotspots where terrorism continues unabated, Covid-19 has reduced the attack opportunities for terrorist groups in stable countries. Though terrorists have vociferously advocated for weaponizing the Covid-19 pandemic response, this has not translated into a significant spate of terrorism (Ackerman & Peterson, 2020, p. 65.). Both jihadists and far-right terrorist groups have tried to attack hospitals, critical infrastructure and security personnel deployed to enforce lockdowns through vehicular ramming, stabbing and coughing.<sup>4</sup>

Presently, the lack of large-scale gatherings at public places, as well as the closure of airports, parks and entertainment avenues, has deprived terrorists of conventional targets (Ackerman & Peterson, 2020, p. 65). While states gain legitimacy through governance and service delivery, terrorists stay relevant through attacks. The frequency and scale of attacks are the main factors by which to judge the strength or weakness of a terrorist group (Tilly, 2004, pp. 5-13).

### *Travel restrictions*

The imposition of lockdowns and travel restrictions have disrupted terrorists' operational planning, mobility, networking and finance-related activity, particularly that of IS (UNCTED, 2020, p. 2). *Hijrah*, migration, has remained a significant cornerstone of IS

recruitment and radicalisation strategy (Toguslu, 2019, pp. 94–120). The same restrictions have reduced the number of potential targets globally (UNSC, 2020, p. 3).

Though improvement in border controls and immigration checks had reduced the flow of the foreign terrorist fighters (FTF) to the Middle East and Africa, limited scale illegal movement has continued through human traffickers and smuggling networks. However, due to Covid-19, even illegal travel to terrorist destinations has mostly stopped. Similarly, the mobility of the far-right activists who moved around Europe has also been affected.

## The evolving terrorist landscape

The existing terrorist landscape is chronic and chaotic, where a cross-fertilisation of different ideologies is resulting in hybrid trends. Some groups and individuals are practicing violence for idiosyncratic reasons while imitating terrorism, while others have ideological or ethnic motivations against particular communities.

Alongside the religiously inspired wave of terrorism, which started in 1979, an ethno-nationalist wave spearheaded by Western far-right groups has matured, complicating the existing terrorist landscape. The internet and emerging technologies could further add to the lethality and longevity of the current wave of terrorism (Auger, 2020, pp. 87–97). In the post-Covid-19 world, some new forms of violence such as anti-establishment protest movements, violent environmental activism and anti-technology groups may also emerge (Pantucci, 2020).

The religious wave of terrorism has weakened as AQ and IS have retreated, but it persists and seems to be once again expanding (Laqueur & Wall, 2018, p. 234). The growth of AQ and IS affiliates in size and number in different parts of Asia and Africa accounts for the resilience of the religious wave. In contrast, the emergence of new forms of religiously inspired non-Islamist terrorism has added to its expansion. For instance, a Hindu-nationalist para-militant group, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, has become politically influential in India (Ramachandran, 2020, pp. 7–9), while Buddhist extremist groups operate in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand (Gunasingham, 2019, pp. 1–6).

Far-right terrorism has surpassed jihadism as the main terrorist threat to the West (Brennan, 2019). Two factors give the far-right movement a transnational character. First, its ability to network and make a common cause despite a myriad of groups operating within the diverse spectrum. Social media has facilitated this networking process. The second, the far-right has displayed violent credentials (Auger, 2020). Since the 2011 attack by Anders Breivik in Norway, far-right terrorists have enhanced their tactics. This was evident in the 2019 Christchurch mass shooting and Halle synagogue attack. The participation of far-right activists in the Ukraine conflict has enhanced the operational and combat exposure of far-right terrorists (Meger, 2019). Though the far-right movement will remain confined to the West, given its anti-minority position, it will in all probability, generate Islamophobia that will in turn, feed Salafi jihadism.

Terrorism continues to be the weapon of the weak and dispossessed; hence alienated youth, particularly in the developing countries, will continue to employ this tactic to advance their goals. Around 50 percent of the world's population is under the age of 30. Of these, more than 90 percent are living in developing countries and many in conflict areas, with greater exposure to technology and social media. This demographic

factor and its interplay with emerging technologies will have profound implications on the evolution of terrorism. Furthermore, terrorism emerges when governance fails (Laqueur & Wall, 2018, p. 242). So, conflict hotspots such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Nigeria, among others, will continue to be incubators of terrorism.

Globally, there is widespread dissatisfaction with how governments have handled the pandemic. This could cause the emergence of anti-establishment movements of alienated youth (Cruikshank & Ressler, 2020, p. 2). Even the most developed nations with state-of-the-art healthcare systems have struggled against Covid-19. Terrorism flourishes best in areas where significant mistrust exists between a government and its population (Ibid). Terrorists may observe the weakening dependence on government-provided services and information and increased reliance on information provided by social media and use this to their advantage (Ibid).

## Conclusion

The political and socioeconomic disruption caused by Covid-19 and subsequent reallocation of human and financial resources from counter-terrorism (CT) and preventing/countering violent extremism (PCVE) efforts underscores the fragility of international cooperation against global terrorism. The retreat of the US and Western forces from different conflict zones around the world is already underway. This, coupled with emerging technologies, will have profound implications on the future of terrorism.

Given expected funding cuts, there is a need to reassess the existing global CT and PCVE frameworks to ensure sustainability and continuity of the fight against terrorism and extremism. Empowering local actors and encouraging local solutions that are innovative and cost-effective can offer a way forward. An international institution like the UN should keep: (i) CT and PCVE on the international diplomatic agenda, (ii) ensure regular interactions and sharing of best practices between local, regional and global partners and training of the trainers, as well as (iii) some financial assistance to keep local civil society organisations engaged in PCVE work.

## Notes

1. For instance, there has been a 320 percent increase in the far-right attacks in the West in the last three years. Moreover, since the Christchurch mosques shooting by a neo-Nazi militant Brenton Tarrant, large scale attacks by far-right terrorists have become common place in the West.
2. For instance, right-wing extremists believe that the governments are using the guise of lockdowns and contact tracing to detect and control the pandemic to spy on their communities and usurping their rights through increased control and suppression. Similarly, several Islamist movements believe that the lockdowns, which include closure of worship places, as a conspiracy to undermine the Islamic norms and practices. Further, Islamists argue that the pandemic is punishment of God for deviating from the Islamic teachings. So, the way to get rid of Covid-19 is to return to the mosques, pray together, repent and ask for forgiveness.
3. It has also been observed that fraudsters posing as World Health Organization officials have asked people to click on malicious links which reveal their usernames and passwords.
4. For instance, a Tunisian jihadist who had to report at the local police station every week plotted to cough on his reporting officer. But, due to the social distancing measures at the police station his plot failed. Similarly, in Missouri, USA, a white supremacist plotted to

attack a hospital treating coronavirus patients. Likewise, a railway engineer tried to ram his train into a US Navy ship hospital anchored at the Los Angeles Port assisting with the Covid-19 response. He believed in a conspiracy that the government was trying to segregate people in the garb of Covid-19 and his attack would expose the real intention behind Covid-19 lockdown measures.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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