

ATTEMPTS BY NON-STATE ACTORS TO DISRUPT COVID-19 VACCINATION EFFORTS, DELIBERATELY TRANSMIT THE VIRUS AND PROFIT FROM THE SALE OF COUNTERFEIT VACCINES, THERAPEUTICS AND EQUIPMENT

In the previous article we saw how terrorists and extremists are maliciously using social media to spread disinformation about COVID-19. The present article presents how non-state actors are also seeking to physically sabotage vaccination efforts, deliberately transmit the virus and profit from the sale of counterfeit vaccines, therapeutics and equipment.

Disrupting or sabotaging COVID-19 treatment and vaccination efforts

On 24 March 2020, agents from the United States (U.S.) Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) fatally wounded white supremacist Timothy Wilson before he was able to detonate a car bomb outside of a Kansas City-area hospital caring for coronavirus patients. Wilson was active on at least two neo-Nazi Telegram channels and maintained communication with a U.S. Army soldier who expressed interest in attacking a major American news network and targeting a Democratic presidential candidate. Wilson's last online comment was an anti-Semitic message regarding the origin of COVID-19.

More recently, several attempts have been made by non-state actors to sabotage COVID-19 vaccination efforts. On 24 and 25 December 2020, a pharmacist tampered with over 500 doses of Moderna vaccine at Advocate Aurora Health Hospital in the U.S. State of Wisconsin. Facing charges from the Department of Justice, the pharmacist admitted to removing 57 vials of the Moderna vaccine from cold storage at the Hospital, leaving them out to spoil overnight. According to federal prosecutors, the pharmacist held extremist views including that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were faked.

On 18 March 2021, police in the Netherlands arrested a man on suspicion of plotting a crime with "terrorist intent" for allegedly planning to set off a "firework bomb" at a COVID-19 vaccination centre close to Amsterdam.

On 3 April 2021, two Molotov cocktails were thrown at a vaccination centre in Brescia in Northern Italy where COVID-19 vaccines were stored. Although the explosive devices did not cause serious damage, Italy's Carabinieri military police force stated that the arsonists' intention was to sabotage the country's vaccination campaign by intimidating the population and fueling a climate of uncertainty. As a result of the investigation, the Carabinieri arrested two members of the "No Vax" anti-vaccination movement. According to the Italian National Associated Press Agency (ANSA), one of the two suspects wrote on Facebook shortly after the arson: "If we want to destroy the enemy we must use the same weapon 'fear' and their fear is our unity."

Each of these episodes demonstrates that the risk of violent non-state actors sabotaging COVID-19 vaccination efforts is a real and on-going challenge, one that is likely to become only more acute as vaccination campaigns gain momentum worldwide.

Deliberate transmission of COVID-19

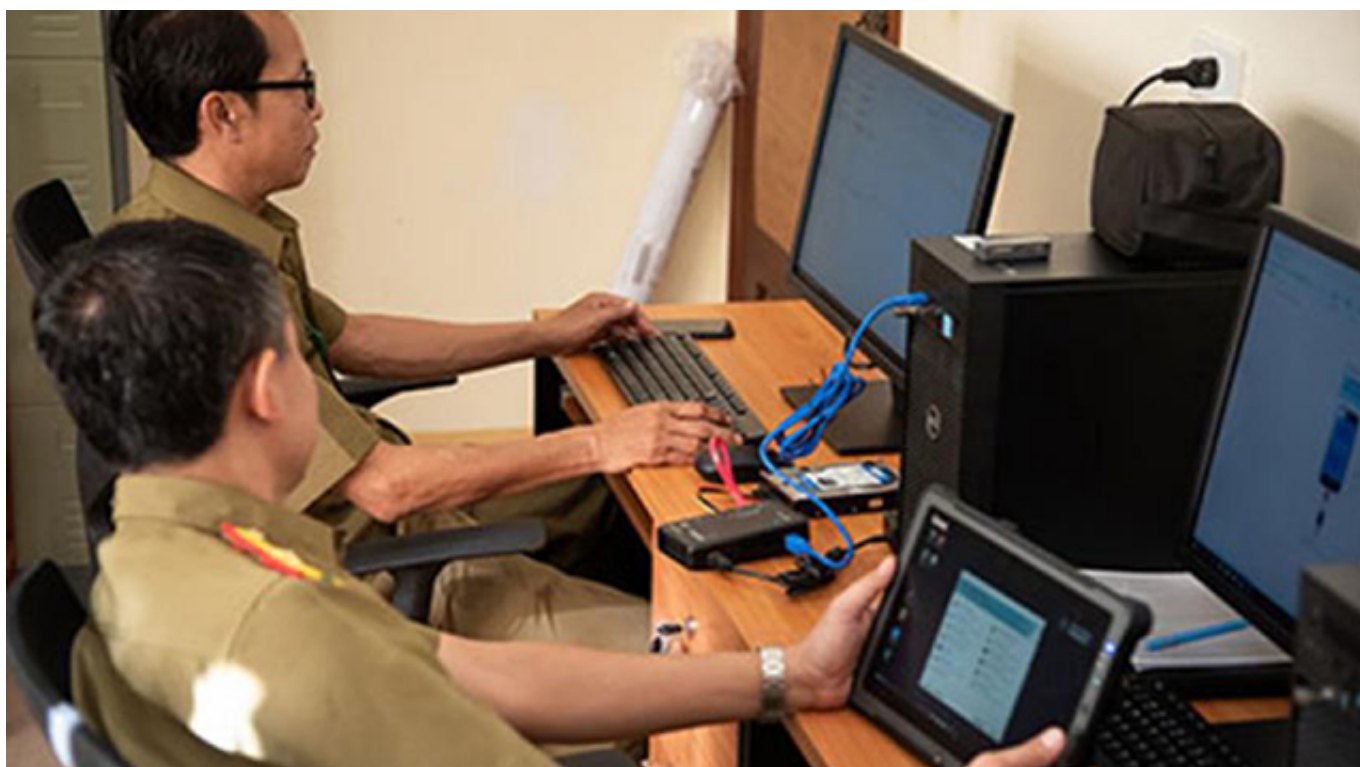


A second risk concerns the possible deliberate transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. To date, there have been numerous cases in which terrorists and extremists have encouraged their followers to spread the virus to infect opponents. For example, right-wing extremist groups, like CoronaWaffen, have incited followers to spread COVID-19 by “coughing on a local minority” and ISIL has described COVID-19 as a “divine punishment of arrogance and unbelief.” Despite these messages, these groups do not appear to have made serious attempts to weaponize the virus by using contagious supporters to infect opponents.

One recent event, although classified by authorities as a “crime of injury” rather than an extremist or terrorist act, nonetheless sheds light on the ease with which COVID-19 could be deliberately spread by non-state actors. Specifically, on 21 April 2021, the National Police in Spain arrested a man on the island of Majorca who went to his workplace and a gym while showing COVID-19 symptoms, infecting 22 people.

Sale of counterfeit COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics and equipment

A third risk concerns attempts by non-state actors to illegally sell or infiltrate legal suppliers with counterfeit or substandard COVID-19 vaccines, medicines or equipment. According to the twenty-seventh report of the United Nations Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, established by resolution 1526 (2004), a Member State brought charges against an alleged ISIL facilitator who had operated a website, FaceMaskCenter.com, accused of fraudulently selling personal protective equipment (PPE), including N-95 masks. Another Member State reported that ISIL cells in the Syrian Arab Republic were seeking to profit from the sale of medicines and equipment needed to treat COVID-19 patients.



@UN Infodemic

There have also been examples of criminal groups that have advertised, sold and administered fake vaccines. On 19 November 2020, Gauteng police disrupted an operation selling fake vaccines and masks operating out of two warehouses at Growthpoint Industrial Park at Bell Street, Meadowdale, Germiston in South Africa.

On 2 December 2020, the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) issued an Orange Notice warning of potential criminal activity in relation to the falsification, theft and illegal advertising of COVID-19 and flu vaccines.

Although the non-state actors engaged in these activities would appear to be primarily motivated by profits, rather than a desire to cause deliberate harm, the sale of counterfeit COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics and equipment could have severe societal consequences. For example, counterfeit vaccines that include toxic ingredients (whether introduced intentionally or unintentionally) could cause significant sickness or death, public alarm and the disruption of government vaccination campaigns.

Francesco Marelli has worked for the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) since 2003. As the Head of Unit, he is responsible for the coordination of activities in the area of CBRN Risk Mitigation and Security Governance that includes the programme CONTACT to enhance capacities of Member States to prevent the trafficking of radiological and nuclear material, and the implementation of the European Union CBRN Centres of Excellence, a network-based initiative that supports 62 countries to reinforce their national chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear policy.

He is also responsible for the Knowledge Center SIRIO in Geneva that assesses emerging risks and identifies, tests and promotes innovative solutions, including in the area of technology such as Big Data, biotechnology, AI and robotics.

He received a PhD from the School of History of the University of Leeds in 2002. He is author of several publications.

R. Alexander Hamilton has worked with the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) since 2012, assuming the post of Regional Coordinator for South East Asia in April 2020.

Within the framework of the European Union Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Risk Mitigation Centres of Excellence Initiative, his work supports Partner Countries in South East Asia to more effectively prevent, detect and respond to CBRN emergencies, whether natural, accidental or deliberate in origin.

Dr. Hamilton holds a Doctor of Philosophy from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) specializing in risk governance and biosecurity. He has published extensively on these subjects, and is a regular contributor to international efforts dedicated to combating biological weapons.