



Coronavirus: excuse or opportunity?

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CORONAVIRUS: EXCUSE OR OPPORTUNITY?

by Philip Baum

It's hard to believe that just a few months ago we were assessing the shutdown of Ukraine International Airlines flight PS752 following its departure from Teheran, and the responsibility borne by the Iranian regime for the military error, which claimed 176 innocent lives. That was 8 January 2020.

Only a week earlier, on New Year's Eve, China had reported a cluster of cases of pneumonia in Wuhan, resulting in the identification of a novel coronavirus. Within hours, the World Health Organisation (W.H.O.) had established its Incident Management Support Team (IMST) and had placed the organisation on an emergency footing for dealing with the outbreak. By 10 January, the W.H.O. had issued a comprehensive package of technical guidance online with advice to all countries on how to detect, test and manage potential cases, based on what was known about the virus at the time. And, on 12 January, less than two weeks after sounding the alarm, China publicly shared the genetic sequence for what we now refer to as COVID-19. A day later, a case of COVID-19 was recorded in Thailand, the first recorded case outside of China. And so began what has since become an international pandemic...

At the time of writing, there have been more than 1.6 million cases of coronavirus diagnosed, resulting in more than 111,000 deaths. Who knows where we will be in a few months' time? That's already a significant number of people whose lives have been physically disrupted, or ended prematurely, as a result of a virus whose source is not even really known. We believe that the virus, originally carried by bats, somehow infected other creatures – quite possibly the pangolin, regarded as one of the world's most illegally traded mammals and whose meat is considered a delicacy in China. As a result of the uncontrolled sale of such live animals in Chinese markets, the virus made the transition to human beings.

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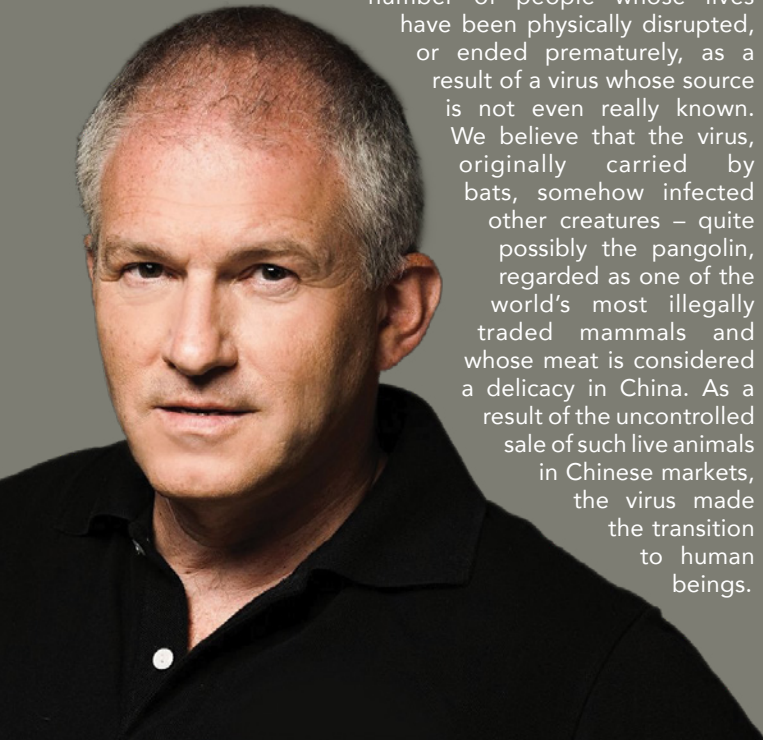
The publicised figures mask the true scale of the epidemic with millions of people not even making it onto the statistics board. I, for one, have clearly been a victim of coronavirus, having spent two weeks with a fever – coughing, hallucinating and, at times, catastrophising – yet, because my breathing was fortunately not seriously impaired, I have not formally been tested. So, from a statistical perspective, I do not exist!

In terms of economic impact, it's far too early to determine the number of jobs lost, businesses closed and investments placed on short-term or permanent hold. Aviation is clearly one sector that is going to suffer for years to come. My fear is that when recovery does commence, security and training will both be areas sacrificed by the bean counters. And yet that would be so short-sighted.

Obviously, we will have to prioritise, but in doing so we must avoid falling into the hidden trap the virus has created. We must ensure that the airport security checkpoints remain focused on the task of identifying those with negative intent. It is not the role of screeners to identify those who may be showing signs of illness; coronavirus must not be allowed to become the next powder, liquid, aerosol or gel. In other words, there is serious danger in allowing our security screening personnel to become distracted by prevailing health concerns. The gravitas of the security implications of the coronavirus rests in the way in which we address – or fail to address – the loopholes that can be exploited by those who wish to target aviation for criminal or terroristic gain.

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Groups, such as ISIS, are likely to want to seize the opportunity such wayward thinking presents. As security teams are asked to fulfil non-security functions – and this is especially true for military personnel – there will



be gaps created in our traditional defences. Redeployed personnel, operating in unfamiliar roles and environments, concentrating their efforts on tasks they have not been trained for could be excused for taking their eye off the ball... but those who manage them have no excuse. With society already paralysed, it is incumbent upon the industry to think like our adversaries and recognise that, as much as we all look forward to the industry's revival, traditional threats will remain.

Those with extreme political agendas will not feel sorry for the industry because it is suffering; those with a proclivity to pick up arms and go on the attack will only see the economic turmoil we are experiencing as something to further exploit; and some of those who we might have hoped would have been grateful for early release from prisons will be secretly savouring the fresh opportunities they have been presented with to participate in acts of hate-filled crime.

The economic chaos in which we find ourselves will be perceived as 'deserved'. Worse still, the zealots will claim that it is divine intervention, further empowering brainwashed foot soldiers to embark upon missions to sacrifice themselves. As society struggles with its new normal – how to queue up for and visit a supermarket, how to take exercise, how to utilise public transport, or how to visit a doctor's surgery – imagine the impact of a terrorist attack on one of our cities and the added fear created by having to respond in a time of social distancing.

Overall, throughout these early days of the pandemic we have witnessed the best in human nature, as communities rally together and neighbours support those most in need. We have seen, in the main, cross-party political cooperation and sense of purpose. There's no such thing as good timing for a pandemic – and certainly from a Western perspective one could argue that, with the UK & EU only weeks into their Brexit separation and the United States being led by a Commander-in-Chief who is broadly regarded as being the laughing stock of the rest of the world, there's every reason to claim that these are the worst of times – yet there are reasons to be grateful.

From a health perspective, the vaccine, whenever it appears, is likely to be the fastest developed antidote to future infections ever created. Our means of communication are enabling business and social interaction to flourish. The concept of Zoom meetings, let alone WhatsApp groups, were an anathema to most a decade ago. Social media platforms have shown their strengths – and their weaknesses. Whilst many have taken to Twitter to express themselves positively, I have been disgusted by the tens of thousands of people who feel it is appropriate to denigrate. This was exemplified following the hospitalisation of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson with COVID-19. Love him or loathe him, most people, including opposition leaders of all parties, realised that this was a time to set aside politics and to do nothing more than wish a fellow human-being – who just happened to be leading the British fight against the virus – a speedy recovery. Yet there were all too many voices revelling in Johnson's misfortune and even wishing him ill, joyous that he was at death's door. It would be easy to argue that these sick individuals have nothing to do with aviation security, but I beg to differ. Aviation continues to face the traditional organised terrorist threats, but it also has to counter the actions of a multitude of loose cannons who either espouse

xenophobic ideologies, ply their trade in self-adulation at the expense of the majority of law-abiding passengers, or who are convinced that life seems to be nothing more than one big conspiracy theory – and they are the saviour.

In terms of pandemic planning, we have generally been caught wanting. No airport should have struggled to equip its staff with personal protective equipment. We may not have been expecting COVID-19, but we certainly ought to have been prepared to manage a chemical or biological weapons incident. Yes, the reality of responding to a crisis should promote a reassessment of emergency response plans, but there were far too many entities actually drafting their initial pandemic response plans in February of this year – that's nothing short of embarrassing. And, most importantly, how many airlines and airports are going to get to the end of the crisis and still argue that they have insufficient time to dedicate to training?

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Security managers often bemoan the fact that they cannot carry out the exercises they want; as an example, practising the response to a marauding firearms attacker carrying out an action within the airport terminal. They are always told that exercises have to be table-top in nature because no terminal can be closed down due to the disruption such exercises might cause. Now, of course, the excuse is the need to maintain social distancing. The question is whether we are always going to cite excuses for our inaction – no budget, no time, no space, no threat – or whether we, as security professionals, are going to treat COVID-19 as an opportunity, rather than solely as a costly pandemic?

For almost 20 years, articles and conference papers have all too frequently started with the words, "Ever since the tragic events of 9/11". We use the date as justification for new ways of thinking; however, our declarations that 'the world changed that day' simply serve to emphasise how exceptionally poor our risk management had been up to this point. Should we really have been so surprised by 9/11 – and should there have been such a monumental change in attitude – when the security services had been warning of us of this type of attack for many years beforehand?

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COVID-19 is now going to be our new milestone. But do we want 2020 to be cited as an excuse for lack of progress or as an amazing opportunity to truly develop and test out a more robust security system? Your call. ■