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“WMD” TERRORISM - HOW SCARED SHOULD WE BE?

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Executive Summary:

- **“WMD” is a political term, not an analytical one. It mixes up very different weapons; some that would have little effect if used by terrorists, and some that would have catastrophic effects.**
- **The more dangerous the type of weapon, the more difficult it is for terrorist groups to obtain those weapons.**
- **It is important to understand the differing reasons why terrorists have not chosen to use “WMD” in the past, in order to make useful threat assessments.**
- **With radical jihadi groups, the symbolic value of suicide attacks as a demonstration of faith seems as important as the effects of the attack. If this changes it could increase the interest of jihadis in “WMD”.**

The United States National Security Strategy of 2002 notes on page one that the US is now: “menaced less by fleets and armies than by catastrophic technologies in the hands of the embittered few”. The European Union’s Strategy Against the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) states in its first paragraph that their proliferation is: “a growing threat to international peace and security”, and that: “[t]he risk that terrorists will acquire chemical, biological, radiological or fissile materials and their means of delivery adds a new critical dimension to this threat”. The two most influential actors in international politics today have put the idea of “WMD-terrorism” at the heart of their security thinking. Are they right to have done this?

Defining the terms

Firstly, it must be said that the term “weapons of mass destruction”, despite being defined in a number of places, remains essentially a political term that is used and abused in various ways. Most often WMD is taken to mean what are also referred to as unconventional weapons: chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons (CBRN). These four classes of weapons have radically different effects and therefore should not be conflated together under the rubric of “WMD”. To class an improvised radiological device – a “dirty bomb” – alongside the most powerful Cold War-era

thermonuclear weapons is rather like putting a child's catapult and a modern military howitzer in the same class because they both fire projectiles. Nevertheless, the phrase "WMD" (and as a result "WMD-terrorism") has become all pervasive, and the muddying of the greatly differing dangers presented by these classes of weapons makes academic analysis of this issue difficult, whilst making life easy for those who wish to engage in the politics of fear.

In a related way, there is still no internationally accepted definition of terrorism. Within international organisations there seems to be a move away from allowing "terrorism" to include what many would call state-terrorism. Yet this has implications for the discussion of WMD-terrorism, for if we include state-terrorism under the definition of terrorism, then the worst case of "WMD-terrorism" would be the Iraqi government's assault on the Kurdish town of Halabja in 1988 using chemical weapons where it is estimated that 5000 people died. If we choose not to include acts by state authorities, and limit terrorism to non-state actors, then the worst case of "WMD-terrorism" would be the 1995 attack on the Tokyo metro using sarin nerve agent by the Aum Shinrikyo cult that killed 12. The difference in scale of these two attacks is clearly large.

It is, therefore, perhaps best to leave the question of states using unconventional weapons against their own population (or even the populations of other states) out of the discussion of WMD-terrorism. When defining terrorism as solely a product of non-state actors (although this does not exclude state-sponsored terrorism) it helps to maintain analytical clarity and to ensure that we are discussing the same issue that is regularly being cited by states and international organisations as the pre-eminent security threat. It also means that we are talking about a predominantly potential threat: the number of cases of non-state actors using or trying to use unconventional weapons is not particularly large, and none of the attacks that have been carried out can be said to have been successful when compared to what the instigators hoped to achieve.

Assessing the Risk

In this light it is important to ask why terrorists have not used unconventional weapons more than they have. The answer lies in understanding both capability and motivational dimensions that would be involved, and how both of these factors limit the likelihood of terrorist attacks with unconventional weapons.

Capability: Different types of unconventional weapons need differing skills to build and use. An approximate guide to the difficulty in producing such weapons is as follows, with the most straightforward first:

- **Radiological.** A radiological dispersal device (RDD or "dirty bomb") is radioactive material packed around a conventional explosive. There are thousands of different radioactive sources that could potentially be used (from industry, hospitals etc.) making this the most likely form of "WMD" attack. Fortunately many radioactive sources do not present great risks if used in an RDD (and would be less dangerous than the explosion itself), and highly radioactive sources that would be dangerous in an RDD are much more difficult for terrorists to get and to handle safely.

- **Chemical.** A chemical attack at its simplest could be the release of toxic gas caused by attacking an industrial facility, or releasing a chemical that has been stolen from its legitimate users (as the LTTE – the 'Tamil Tigers' – did in the early 1990s when they used chlorine stolen from a paper factory against the Sri Lankan military). Non-state groups have made more advanced chemical weapons – most notably Aum Shinrikyo's attack on the Tokyo underground with sarin nerve agent, but this was a product of millions of dollars spent on research by technically skilled cult members and they still failed to find a way to disperse it effectively.

- **Biological.** The anthrax used in the attacks in the US in the autumn of 2001 appears to have come from the US government bio-weapons research programme itself. This shows the ever present possibility of weapons being diverted by an 'insider', but non-state groups' attempts at using biological weapons have been less successful. Aum Shinrikyo failed to weaponise anthrax despite spending millions of dollars on research and being undisturbed by law enforcement. The only successful use of a biological weapon by a non-state group before the 2001 anthrax attacks was by the Rajneeshees cult

in Oregon that in 1984 spread food poisoning in a town by contaminating salad bars with salmonella. Nevertheless, the rapid advances in the biosciences in even the last five years means a proliferation of the skills and knowledge that could be for terrorist ends, and this means that for biological weapons the past may not be a good indicator of future trends.

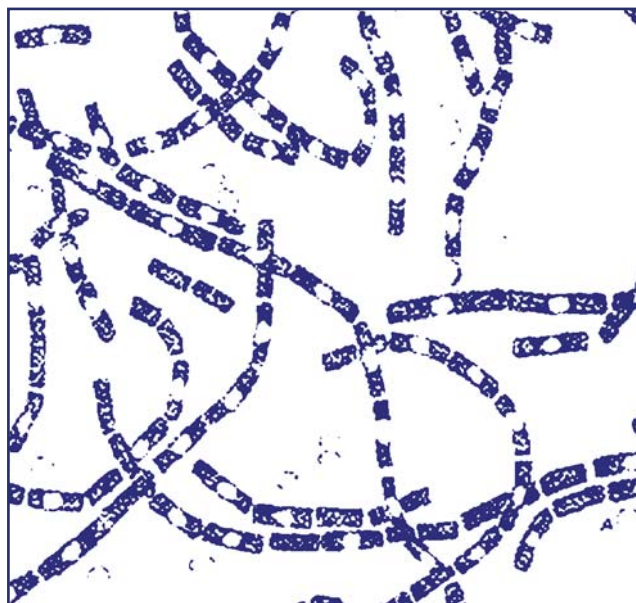
- **Nuclear.** The engineering skills and equipment needed to build the simplest form of nuclear weapon, a “gun” style bomb using highly enriched uranium (HEU) are said to be not particularly great – theoretically being within the ability of a well organised group . But – and it is thankfully a very big “but” – getting HEU is very difficult. A number of state programmes have either failed or made very slow process in enriching uranium, and the amount of infrastructure, time and resources necessary puts it out of the reach of any non-state group. This leaves non-state groups with only the possibility of either buying or stealing a readymade nuclear weapon or enough HEU to make one themselves. There is clear evidence from the mid-1990s that Osama bin Laden sought to do this, but was on a number of occasions swindled by confidence tricksters who sold bin Laden something other than Uranium . There are still concerns about the security of some stocks of fissile material in some countries, and more work needs to be done securing them, but it is reassuring that bin Laden failed in the mid-1990s when he was much freer to move and do business and when the internal situation in the ex-Soviet area was less stable and secure than it is now.

Motivation: the factors that would determine a non-state group’s decision to seek or not seek WMD can be split in three different levels:

- **Tactical.** Certain types of unconventional weapon might be used purely because the opportunity presents itself, or that the situation leaves few other options. This was clearly the case when the LTTE used chlorine; they were simply running short of conventional weapons. It is possible to imagine that an attack on an industrial facility with the aim

of releasing toxic chemicals could be carried out simply as a way of ‘amplifying’ a conventional attack. At the same time tactical considerations may well dissuade terrorist groups from trying to use more exotic weapons as they may simply prefer to follow tactics that they know are likely to succeed .

- **Strategic.** What a terrorist group aims to achieve will affect its choice of weapon. Terrorism is ultimately symbolic violence; even groups which are identified as ‘religious’ have political agendas, and the level of violence is selected to try and achieve these aims without creating a damaging response. Often this response could be the loss of support from what the group sees as its natural constituency. Nationalist and separatists groups have clearly shown this: a good example was the Omagh bombing of August



1998 in Northern Ireland, where the numbers killed were so high that the dissident republican group that carried out the attack lost virtually all support, even from the strongly republican. The potentially huge casualties that could be caused by some kind of WMD attack could have similar effects. Indeed al-Qaeda decided not to attack a nuclear power station with a plane on September 11 because they could not be sure what the ultimate results would be.

- **Ideological/theological.** One major driving force towards using WMD seems to be a fascination with the weapons themselves. The leader of the Aum Shinrikyo cult, Shoko Asahara, wrote poetry about sarin nerve gas and believed that just the use of these weapons would hasten Armageddon. If a group becomes fascinated with the weapons themselves, as opposed to the likely effects of those weapons, this suggests a very real danger. Interestingly, the reverse seems to have been true in the case of al-Qaeda where, according to Ayman al-Zawahiri, they only became interested in unconventional weapons as a result of the fears continually expressed by American officials and experts of the danger of terrorists using such weapons . Up to this point it was clear that al-Qaeda

saw traditional methods as the most appropriate for reaching their goals. There may also be theological considerations for jihadi groups as to whether the use of WMD can be justified according to the Quran. One radical Saudi scholar has written a fatwa legitimising the use of nuclear weapons against the US, although many Muslims do not regard the fatwa as valid.

The future

The word “terrorism”, as used in the western world, is rapidly becoming synonymous with extreme Islamic militancy – as typified by al-Qaeda. Yet the common presumption that a terrorist fighting for God is more likely to be willing to use WMD, does not seem to have been born out so far: is this likely to change? In considering this, attention should be focused on the tactic most often connected to jihadi attacks: the use of suicide attacks. Jihadists see suicide attacks as martyrdom and, hence, the ultimate demonstration of the strength of their faith. They believe that it is this demonstration of faith that will awaken the Umma – the Muslim nation – not necessarily the effects of the attack. The symbolism of being willing to die is as important, if not more so, than the effects of the attack itself. Therefore suicide attacks using conventional explosives (or hijacked aeroplanes) so far suit al-Qaeda’s ideology and world view perfectly: easy and reliable to organise, they show the strength of their faith to other Muslims and encourage them to join the jihad, whilst simultaneously creating fear amongst their enemies. In this sense, al-Qaeda and related groups have not needed WMD.

The attacks in Madrid in March 2004 were therefore noticeable for the fact that they were not suicide bombings. This suggests that the effects of the bombing seem to have taken precedence over the symbolism of the method of the attack. Interestingly the group that carried out the Madrid bombing have been linked to Abu Musab al-Suri, a dual Syrian/Spanish citizen who has served as both an ideologue and an instructor for al-Qaeda in its camps in Afghanistan pre-2001. Al-Suri in a lengthy book, recently published on the internet, has argued that the guerrilla warfare that al-Qaeda and its affiliates are involved in, in Afghanistan and Iraq, is not a profitable use of their sparse resources. Instead jihadis should use focused attacks that create large amounts of fear in the enemy. Clearly the 9/11 attacks fit this concept, but so too does the Madrid attack, with

the added feature that had the Spanish police not caught the perpetrators they could have struck again. What makes al-Suri’s work particularly noticeable is that he is directly critical of bin Laden for not using WMD, as he believes that this is the only way to ultimately defeat the US. It is not certain how influential al-Suri’s work is and whether he has followers who might try to operationalize his strategy; but it is feared that his call for the use of WMD, and for highly targeted attacks where the outcome of the attack is more important than a willingness to martyr oneself in the process, might be appealing to a new generation of European or Europeanised Muslims who have been attracted to the radical jihadi ideology, yet whose experiences in individualistic western societies makes them less keen on martyrdom.

Finally, it should be remembered that despite the horror of 9/11 the only clear attempt to use unconventional weapons was by a non-state group – Aum Shinrikyo – with no connections to radical Islam. Whilst so much attention remains focused on al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups, there remains a chance that very different groups could even now be researching WMD.

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