

## The Growing Threat of WMD Terrorism

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There are numerous difficulties in the way of attempting a universal definition of Terrorism. This is so because there are a number of political and social contexts that shape Terrorism. Thus the question which arises is how there can be a 'global war on terrorism' when we cannot define as to who the 'terrorists' are? However the United Nations has drafted a definition of the term 'terrorist' but it has been impossible to ratify it as certain states do not agree with it. But for the limitations definitions are necessary.

Terrorism is both a subjective and a pejorative term. This being so, difficulties emerge in attempting to find a definition of terrorism that can be classified as universal. The key problem with defining terrorism is that it is ultimately a moral judgement shaped by social and political contexts and so, definitions will vary depending on these contexts. But how can we have a "global" war on terrorism when there will never be unanimity over exactly who the terrorists are? It has of course been argued that those who are labelled terrorists have been driven to act in the way that they do because it is the only means left to them to tackle "injustice." The argument is that they act out of desperation, and while their actions can be perceived by some as reprehensible there will always be others who support them. The United Nations (UN), of course, recognises the right of "self-determination" and the right to resist oppression – hence it recognises freedom fighters.

The UN has a draft definition of the term "terrorist." However, it has not been possible to ratify it because certain states do not agree with it. They want some wording in the definition to the effect that states themselves can be terrorist actors. These are mostly Arab nations who want Israel to be seen as a terrorist actor. The only state that has ever been accused of being a terrorist is the US itself when it was accused by the International Court of Justice of being a terrorist for its actions in mining Managua Harbour in 1987 during the Contra war in Nicaragua.

For all their limitations, however, definitions are crucial. Without a clear labelling of the "enemy" there can be no global cooperation and such cooperation is vital when the threat is from international terrorist networks. In the past, states would have their own domestic terrorism and knew who the "enemy" was and how to deal with them. Nowadays,

with international terrorism, we can't even say what the threat is, never mind deal with it. The world, therefore, looks to the UN. But if the UN can't define terrorism, who can? Under Resolution 1373, after September 11, 2001, the UN has said who some terrorists are. The Taliban, Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden are all decreed to be terrorists by the UN. As a consequence, we get the rhetoric identifying just about every terrorist on the planet being a member of Al Qaeda because Al Qaeda is deemed unequivocally to be a terrorist organisation.

Terrorist violence is different from other forms of violence in that it targets edifices (symbols) and non-combatants for the sake of some political and social objective. The violence is so shocking because it is often unexpected in terms of both time and location. It occurs too against a background of peace and thus appears in sharp relief. Terrorist are weak; for the weak to have an effect they have to produce acts out of all proportion to their size and hence the need for the spectacular.

It has been suggested that over the last few years there has been a general move away from terrorism inspired by political demands to one apparently driven by more religious and millenarian motivations. If such a sea-change in motivations has indeed occurred and is allied to the increasing availability of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) then, it is argued, new attitudes and counters are required. Contemporary terrorists seem to be operating to a range of motives from exacting revenge against perceived oppressors, through the fulfilment of an apocalyptic prophecy and millenarian aims, to supremacist ideals.

Political terrorism still exists, however, as exemplified by the Basque separatists in Spain and communists in the Philippines. To a degree, the terrorism practiced by Al Qaeda is also political in that there are demands for the US to change policy and leave Arab lands. The Palestinian problem also continues. This is largely political and not religious in nature though the likes of Hamas and Hezbollah bring a religious element to bear. Al Qaeda as a

movement is only peripherally interested in the Palestinian situation; it is not its *raison d'être*.

The end of the Cold War resulted in a decline in political inspiration and funding for terrorist groups that were being used by the two blocs against each other. States in the post-Cold War environment have become reluctant to openly support political terrorism, resulting in a swift move away from political terrorism in a climate where history seemed to have already ended.

Globalisation and the associated rise in international crime emerged as a concern. This rise in so-called super-terrorism by non-state actors who are financially motivated is a particular worry because of the difficulty in obtaining reliable intelligence on these groups. There are also state-sponsored terrorist groups who have the backing of "rogue" states. These groups might be the most dangerous because they will have capability not usually available to other non-state actors. Military superiority on the conventional battlefield has also pushed adversaries towards unconventional alternatives. The very real threat of a rogue state resorting to asymmetric strategy in order to the level the military playing field is difficult to ignore.

The forces of globalisation and the changes they have produced has engendered a backlash from conservative elements, notably extremist global jihadis, who see their religious and cultural principles under threat by these new socio-economic forces. The children of many who made good in the growing wealth of the Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, have rejected the opulence and worldliness of their fathers. They have sought solace in religion and struck out against those that seem to threaten their religion. They have the financial clout to finance terror and the ability to do so because their education has given many of them the ability to blend in to western societies and not arouse suspicion. Alienation from societies (both immigrants and domestic) of younger generations mixed with a growing anger at many of the socio-cultural forces make them susceptible to radicalisation. Greater activity by jihadi extremists borne of the successful

revolution in Iran and by mujahideen and later Taliban's successes in Afghanistan also influenced this process.

As for millenarian terrorism, there isn't really any more than before, but some groups may gain access to WMD and the scientists who know how to weaponise them, making them more of a threat now than they used to be before.

Brian Jenkins famously suggested in the 1970s that terrorists want a lot of people watching and a lot of people listening and not a lot of people dead. This does not seem to hold much water in the present context. In fact, terrorists may still want a lot of people watching; they may simply think that they need a lot of people dead in order to get world's attention. The trend seems to be moving away from attacking specific targets and towards more indiscriminate killing. It has been noted that since the 1970s terrorists have been becoming more lethal even though there was a perceptible decline in terrorist violence in the 1980s.

It is in this context that the combination of this new terrorism and the WMD proliferation assumes an altogether new dimension. Traditional terrorist groups will probably not show much interest in WMD, as they are generally driven by political agendas and pursuing the basic aim of recognition by their own government. Nevertheless, there are other groups which may consider the use of WMD, and these include those facing extinction, extreme environmentalist groups, and small terrorist groups that reject society, lack realistic political goals, but miscalculate the consequences of such an attack.

Terrorists in the modern era may soon have greater access to both technical skills and equipment to cause enormous destruction. With the end of the Cold War, there were many Eastern bloc scientists ready to sell their knowledge of WMD to the highest bidder. The distribution of WMD has also been facilitated by the fact that certain states have lost the ability to control the storage and movement of such weapons. To date, most terrorist attacks have been constrained by conventional munitions and delivery systems. However, the

international network of contemporary global terrorists is allowing the transfer of more advanced technologies and training across international boundaries, possibly in a way not seen before. The A.Q. Khan network represented the worst proliferation of WMD technology in the modern era. Modern societies, in particular, are highly susceptible to terrorist attacks using WMD as a result of which they could sustain mass casualties. This vulnerability is mainly due to the availability of the weapons, the porous nature of international borders, the societies in which we live, and a preponderance of densely populated cities. Because of the global proliferation of WMD, the means to carry out extreme acts of violence are more available than they have ever been before.

Several factors have conspired to prevent the frequent use of WMD in terrorist attacks to date, including the key consideration that in most cases the use of WMD will not enhance terrorist chances of achieving their objectives. However, some of these constraints have been gradually eroding thus making terrorists more likely to use WMD in the future. The levels of violence involved in terrorist incidents are progressively increasing, with growing numbers of people who understand the technology involved. The consequences of an attack might include some combination of mass casualties, panic, contamination of real estate, damage to the economy, and possibly to the victim country's strategic position.

There is a very real threat of a terrorist attack involving the use of WMD in the future. This is because the motivations, intentions and capabilities exist and the pressures that seem to have prevented the frequent use of WMD to date are being weakened. Despite this, however, nuclear weapons are the most expensive and difficult to acquire and deliver. A technologically advanced infrastructure is required to manufacture them. Radiological weapons are more likely to appeal to terrorists and so the greatest threat comes from stolen radioactive material being used in a conventional device, thus making nuclear leakage of continuing concern.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has documented around fifteen cases of theft of Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) or plutonium confirmed by the countries concerned. There are additional well-documented cases that the countries involved have not yet been willing to confirm. In many of these cases, the thieves and smugglers were attempting to sell the material to anyone who would buy it and the terrorist groups have been seeking to buy it. A dirty bomb, also referred to as a radiological dispersal device, would be far easier for terrorists to make. Unlike the plutonium or HEU needed for a nuclear bomb, radioactive materials that might be used in a dirty bomb exist at numerous locations all across the globe in both the civilian and military sectors.

Various terrorist groups at different times have been known to be seeking nuclear weapons. Osama bin Laden and his followers have repeatedly attempted to acquire stolen nuclear material and to recruit nuclear expertise. Al Qaeda leadership had met with not only Pakistani nuclear scientists but it also attempted to purchase HEU from Sudan. The Japanese cult Aum Shinrikyo also tried to acquire nuclear weapons in the 1990s before it decided to go for sarin. The Russian intelligence has repeatedly warned that Chechen groups intend to seize nuclear materials and use them to build WMD. Despite various claims, however, there is no convincing evidence that any terrorist group has yet succeeded in getting a nuclear weapon or the requisite HEU or plutonium needed to make one.

It is more difficult to ascertain the full extent of the world-wide proliferation of chemical and biological weapons (CBW) as it is easier to hide the evidence of related programmes. Nevertheless, there has been a steady growth in the number of countries developing the capabilities, despite international treaties aimed at preventing proliferation. These weapons present better opportunities for the non-state actor as weapons capable of causing mass casualties can be manufactured in the smallest of production sites, using materials that are increasingly and legitimately available world-wide.

Chemical and biological weapons offer some intrinsic advantages over nuclear. They cannot be detected by traditional anti-terrorist sensor systems. There can be a time lag between an agent being released and the effects on the victims appearing, thus allowing the terrorist to escape. Some agents lack a clear signature which may enable to disguise the cause of death. They could be used in small demonstration attacks that would indicate both the capability and the resolve to carry out further attacks. Chemical and Biological weapons are capable of inflicting mass casualties and could instil terror into a nation. Finally, they are relatively easy and affordable to produce or acquire, particularly in comparison with nuclear weapons. Between the two, however, it is likely that biological weapons will become the weapon of choice for terrorist groups in the future. Their lethality, even in small quantities, makes them highly potent whereas chemical weapons are not easy to store and their dissemination is weather dependent against outdoor targets.

Given the complexities involved, it is not surprising that most states are struggling to come up with coherent policy responses to this threat even though the debate on the use of WMD has been an issue of topmost priority ever since the Tokyo subway attack. The Japanese authorities failed to prevent the Tokyo attack, despite numerous warning signs, because of a combination of poor domestic intelligence, a lack of WMD terrorism precedents, and Japan's sensitivity to religious freedom.

Dealing with the problem of WMD terrorism can be achieved in two ways. The first is to establish plans that will reduce the likelihood of an attack, and the second is to reduce the impact of an attack should one occur. An effective solution would strike a balance in allocating resources and efforts between the two. Low level initiatives can be undertaken that do not require significant financing. Efforts to reduce the likelihood of an attack must persuade the traditional terrorist not to go down the line of WMD terrorism, and to make sure that those committed to using WMD

do not have the opportunities to acquire or use them. Intelligence organisations will play a crucial role, and international cooperation remains a fundamental requirement. There is an urgent need to enhance the capabilities of detection equipments. To ensure the consequence management phase is effective in reducing the impact of an attack, robust coordination between emergency responders must be established. Adequate resources must be made available to deal with the situation, and in particular the medical services must have plans to cope with surge capacity.

A coherent approach, therefore, is needed to be developed across all departments and at all levels. An overarching strategy and policy is the need of the hour to unify the many diverse agencies involved including the Ministries of Home, Health, Defence and External Affairs as well as the intelligence agencies and local authorities. Moreover, a national database should be created to determine the availability of all specialist personnel and equipment including those from the civil sector, thus allowing regional response teams to be activated and deployed rapidly to an incident. Strategic analysis must be conducted to establish risk management criteria, evaluate the effectiveness of the current response arrangements, estimate casualties and identify the critical capability shortfalls, especially with regards to equipment and training.

Given the financial constraints faced by various government departments, it is essential that central government funding be allocated to procure detectors, monitors and protective and decontamination equipment for first responders and medical teams. Similarly, additional resources must be invested in a national training programme, initially for emergency services in all major cities and subsequently extended to the whole country. There will never be enough resources to protect all of the people all of the time, so the response must strike a balance that is affordable in the short-term but does not place national security at risk in the long-term. Further research and development of vaccines, antibiotics and medical countermeasures should be undertaken and, based on casualty estimates

the Ministry of Health should consider stockpiling these in major cities. Joint exercises should be undertaken at regular intervals and expanded to practice all levels in consequence management using realistic scenarios. The Ministry of Defence should have a number of specialists and wherever possible these should be fully integrated into planning and exercises. The threat of WMD terrorism is steadily increasing and sooner or later an incident, no matter how small, could prove disastrous if a nation remains poorly prepared. Waiting for such an event to prompt a properly funded response programme is irresponsible. WMD terrorism is a low-probability, high-consequence threat that demands that the government not only invests in preventive measures but also undertakes extensive and comprehensive consequence management planning and preparation.