

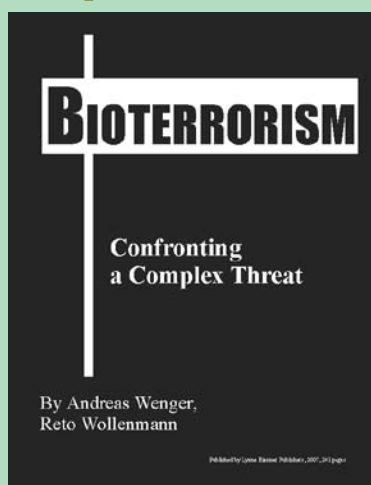
## **Bioterrorism; Confronting a Complex Threat**

**Andreas Wenger and  
Reto Wollenmann (eds.),  
2008, Viva Books Pvt Ltd,  
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The book renders a systemic account of the search for chemical and biological weapons in Iraq ever since its war with Iran in the 1980's i.e. across a period of almost two decades. Pearson offers a comprehensive account of the facts related to the search of chemical and biological weapons in Iraq. The case of Iraq pursuing the production of chemical and biological weapons emerged in the backdrop of the Iraq Iran war and largely within the purview of the cold war.



**H**ow does one link less than 10 instances of a kind of substance used for suspect terror purpose having caused less than 100 causalities over the period of a century to be able to come to any form of meaningful conclusion? Dealing with this question, *Bioterrorism; Confronting a Complex Threat* brings out a debate on a topic, the contours of which remain undefined and uncertain as of now for the community of strategic thinkers and planners. To begin on a good note, this book does justice to its title and subtitle and is able to put on the table, with fair degree of success, various aspects of the issue at hand. What differentiates this book from other literature on this subject is that not only does it spell out clearly the nature of threat as it stands today but also brings out the connection between threat abatement and the threat enlargement that happens in the process. Therefore, it also discusses the philosophical aspects of the links between defence preparedness, threat perception and the actual threat and the moral aspect of budgetary allocations away from more likely scenarios.

The gist of the book's argument is that various aspects of contemporary terrorism have been responsible for the heightened attention being paid to the issue of bioweapons and bioterrorism. It includes the mass casualty pattern of the terrorist activity in the past decade and the anthrax events in the United States in the aftermath of the 9/11. The authors broadly post the question as to can one include the two scenarios and make a case for preparedness against bioterrorism at the cost of other more conventional and more likely threat scenarios.

This book is divided into 3 parts that discuss the issue of the threat of bioterrorism besides the introductory and concluding chapters. The sections include a) Understanding the Threat: Actors and Capabilities, b) Assessing the Threat: Differing Perceptions and c) Managing the Threat: Policy Options. In the introductory chapter Wenger and Wollenmann spell out the scope of the book and in the concluding chapter, Wenger sums up the conclusions drawn by the contributors to this volume.

In the first chapter of the first section, Jeanne Guillemin takes a historical overview of the evolution of the idea of chemical and biological weapons in the broad context of the development of the idea of war and the international norms governing the future conduct of war including the Geneva Protocol. Guillemin also analyses the cold war era and the secrecy accorded to the defence projects that led to the exaggerated threat perceptions and thus heightened activity in the arena of biological weapons. In the next chapter, Milton Leitenberg examines the current threat of bioterrorism. What the author does is that he analyses the statements made by various United States officials and argues that inconsistencies in them has caused the exaggeration of the threat of bioweapons. Leitenberg's analysis is that the framing of the "threat" has been responsible for the overreaction for event preparedness on part of the policy makers and it has generally been the worst case scenarios that the policy makers have chosen to focus on. Malcolm Dando analyses the technological and scientific changes and its significance for bioterrorism in the next chapter. Dando asks for careful scrutiny even of the peaceful state led programs as the results and knowledge generated can be used for harmful purposes. Dando calls for better international cooperation for solving the problem.

Beginning the second section, Peter R. Lavoy looks at the existing knowledge gaps in this field and its impact on threat assessment. Lavoy studies the lack of insufficient data on various state and non-state actors' intentions and capability as well as the lack of definitive information on the previous use of the bioweapons. In the subsequent chapter, Marie Isabelle Chevrier asks the question as to why the conclusions from the experts tend to vary when they study same set of data. The author blames it on the loose use of terminology, lack of quantification, lack of time frame and noncommittal conclusions. Chevrier recommends critical and rigorous analysis to avoid the pitfalls of populist analysis.

In the third section on managing the threat, Anthony H. Cordesman argues that governments should be extremely careful in their threat assessments and response and that the response must focus on more likely scenarios rather than the worst-case ones. He also advises on

balancing the bioweapons defence research and the natural disease research and ensuring more transparency and cooperation. In the next chapter in this section, Iris Hunger says that in order to ensure better preparedness on bioterrorism cooperation must increase and for that to happen the present trend of secrecy must reduce. She notes this tendency in the case of United States in the aftermath of September 11. Hunger argues that in the era of the spread of biotechnology, willingness for cooperation and transparency will differentiate between the good and bad actors.

Now the shortfall—even when the book's title is about bioterrorism, much of the content remains focussed on state led programs on bioweapons. In this sense, it does seem to mix bioweapons agenda of nation states and bioterrorism. Thus, the focus of the book moves from Japan during World War II to USSR in the cold war to Iraq in the Iraq- Iran war era. This might be justified given the lack of data on the subject. However, the authors stop short of defining the conditions under which the state led bioweapons program becomes bioterrorism. Probably this criticism of the book calls for the better definition on bioweapons possession, use and proliferation in order to make the difference between good and bad or rogue states more clear as far as bioweapons are concerned.

Overall it's a good book. It gives the broadest possible view on the issue of bioterrorism and the complexities therein. Even in terms of language, the technicality of the subject does not harm the flow of the book. It can be a useful pick even for the first time reader on the subject.