

## Chapter Four

### WMD Terrorism: Hype or Reality

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One of the most challenging tasks for any analyst or policymaker is to assess the validity of a threat that has not yet fully emerged. Such a determination is the foundation of deciding the level of resources that should be devoted to countering it and consequently not devoted to meeting validated and present needs. To act early may well head off a threat or, at least, lessen its consequences when it does finally emerge. When the threat potentially has the ability to inflict mass casualties on your own civilian population and perhaps alter the very shape of a free society then the requirements of leadership demand that such a threat be given serious thought. On the other hand, to act early may well waste resources on the worst case nightmares of the chronically paranoid and drain resources away from those that must contend with the day-to-day gnawing away of a hundred less dramatic, but already present, real emergencies.

We find ourselves today faced with just such a dilemma with regard to the potential use of weapons of mass destruction<sup>2</sup> by terrorists. The description of the horrors that may await us as nuclear, chemical or biological weapons fall into the hands of terrorists have become the staple of Hollywood, pulp fiction and, now, serious analysts.<sup>3</sup> The Deutch- Specter Commission Report ranks “Terrorist use of weapons of mass destruction against the United States or its allies” as first among “the most serious threats facing the United States.”<sup>4</sup> Thoughtful studies are being undertaken of how the country should prepare to respond to the challenge that such threats would represent, real budget decisions are being made, and new capabilities are starting to be deployed. On the other hand, the empirical evidence for believing that there is a threat of WMD terrorism seems to be as elusive as the challenge of preparing for it is daunting. Terrorist acts remain principally confined to specific

countries and regions—Sri Lanka, Colombia, Algeria, the Middle East—and even in these areas the preferred weapon of choice remains an improvised high explosive device. While attacks on Americans have shown an increase in the last few years, terrorist incidents, in general, are less widespread than two decades ago.<sup>5</sup>

Against this set of “facts”, some have wondered whether WMD terrorism is not just the latest hype to come along as fertile imaginations are exercised in an environment lacking in real enemies or an American over reaction to a series of tragic, but isolated attacks. This group asks, “Where is the threat—Is it real?”<sup>6</sup>

While analysis under conditions of extreme uncertainty is never easy, there are guideposts to which one should pay attention, although these guideposts are derived as much from our failures as our successes. First, among these is *suspect the trends*. Trend analysis and databases are valuable, but dangerous, tools in the hands of analysts. At best they are a guide to the past and can show us what the future will be like if it chooses to conform to the past. If, however, the problem is that “the future is no longer what it once was”<sup>7</sup> then trend analysis and databases become the blinders that keep analysts from seeing discontinuities and transforming events. The IRA as a terrorist threat between 1940 and 1957 would have been judged a non-existent threat, a conclusion that a decade later would have been found woefully un insightful. All too often, we in the analytical and policy communities ignore the most obvious limitation of databases and the trends they project. Databases only collect what we either can or choose to measure and ignore what we know we cannot or choose not to measure. For example, many look at the most widely available databases on terrorism and say they can find no evidence of a growing terrorist interest in using any of the weapons of mass destruction. Yet we should all know that these databases only collect terrorist attacks or attempted attacks that are reported in the public press. Terrorist actions that are thwarted outside of the glare of the press and that for reasons of continued operational necessity must remain unreported are not recorded. Other

information that may be gained through national collection means of ongoing discussions and planning of terrorist groups and state supporters, if it exists, has to be closely held. Public statistics have, at times, mislead even informed academic analysts to assert that the IRA and PLO could not be as skillful opponents as governments were asserting because these bombers were frequently blowing themselves up as they attempted to assemble and place their bombs. Little did outside analysts know at the time that governments were engaged in active measures to ensure that defective bomb-making material was entering into the terrorist inventory and that special techniques were deployed around vulnerable areas to disrupt devices before they could be planted. The statistics were wrong and consequently so were the conclusions of those who relied upon them as a guide for drawing conclusions.

If trend analysis can mislead, what other guideposts are out there to help the analyst or policymaker understand whether they may be facing a dynamic situation in which the wisdom of the past is best left to understanding the past, not guiding the future? While certainty is impossible and ambiguity will always remain—at least until the blinding event occurs that makes an only theoretical possibility real<sup>8</sup>—there is one fundamental approach and nine guideposts that should be examined. The analytical posture must be one of constantly probing our world to see if there is an answer to the ritual question of “*why is tonight different from all other nights*”? In our zeal to describe and explain, we in the analytical community sometimes forget we have a more fundamental duty to test the world of our data for its surprise potential. In the world of terrorism and specifically the potential of WMD terrorism let me suggest nine guideposts that should be constantly assessed. These are:

1. Are the fundamental **capabilities** and/or access to new WMD-related capabilities of terrorists changing? Are they seeking to acquire new capabilities that would fundamentally alter their ability to threaten American interests?
2. Are the fundamental factors that **motivate** terrorists to take actions and that shape the types of actions they are willing to undertake changing?

3. Is the **intent** of terrorists with regard to what they hope to accomplish with attacks on American interests changing?
4. Are there significant United States **vulnerabilities** that open the possibility to terrorist attacks with WMD that, if successful, could provide a terrorist group a **decisive advantage** to accomplishing its objectives?
5. Are the **consequences** of a terrorist use of WMD likely to produce consequences that will deprive the United States of the ability or will to undertake actions to defend its interests or those of its allies or that will require actions that will alter American society in a significant manner?
6. Are the political, technical and military **barriers** to terrorist use of WMD falling?
7. Are their **new potential terrorist groups or state supporters** of terrorism emerging?
8. Are effective **response capabilities** to terrorist use of WMD so low that their absence could itself become an added inducement to the use of WMD by terrorist?
9. Has there been an increase in **motivational models—either real or in popular culture**—of terrorist use of WMD that might serve as a patterning or copy cat guide to further use of WMD by terrorists?

It would take a more extended study than there is time or space here to provide a detailed assessment of each of these guideposts against our knowledge of the evolving terrorist threat. On the other hand, even a quick scanning of these against easily available open source information is disquieting.

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union have opened a floodgate of information, technology and skilled personnel all too familiar with WMD. New means of communications, particularly the Internet, have made possible long-distance, hard-to-detect collaboration and difficult to trace financial exchange mechanisms. New suppliers have arisen and non-proliferation regimes are becoming increasingly ineffective.

Beyond changing capabilities, the motivations for terrorism seem to be undergoing some fundamental changes. The classical understanding of terrorism involved the use or threat of use of violence in pursuit of political

aims with most terrorists being motivated by either political or ethno-nationalist aims, and in either case, violence was carefully calibrated to advance a goal that almost always involved a rearrangement of political power. To this mix more recently has been added quasi-religious and millennialist groupings with less clear aims and fewer constraints on their use of violence. Additionally, there appears in several regions to be a falling of constraints on violence and a rise of a culture of death where the affirmation is “I die I am.” The despair on the streets of Algeria, Sri Lanka and in parts of the Middle East should warn us that old constraints on violence may not be an adequate guide to the future. And before we become too optimistic about the early signs of success in removing old reservoirs of terrorism in southern Africa and Ireland, events in the Balkans should remind us that we are also creating new reservoirs—or maybe better put, refilling very old ones.

Just as motivations are changing, so are the professionalism, technology and level of cooperation among terrorists. From pipebomb to car bomb to truck bomb all filled with more energetic explosive material the ladder is being climbed. While many of the devices and attack plans remain crude, where the terrorism continues over time the lesson is that the terrorists have become more sophisticated to counter improvements in the countermeasures of governments. In Ireland, Israel and wherever the narco-criminal gangs operate one can plot a steady upward curve of measure and countermeasure as the forces of society and terrorists struggle for dominance.

A hard lesson for those schooled in the formal military strategy and intelligence norms of the Cold War is that the prime importance of assessing and validating threat before developing requirements and subsequently capabilities is not applicable to terrorism. Terrorists go to vulnerabilities. Or put another way, vulnerabilities attract terrorists. Embassies in East Africa may seem a long way from the Middle East, just as Lockerbie, Scotland is a long way from Libya or Iran, but to a terrorist their attraction is that they are not inside the “moat” of highly valued assets that are carefully guarded.

Civilian society in a democratic polity is the most vulnerable of all areas and the hardest to protect without changing the norms of society.

The largest generic vulnerability of the United States is that our complex federal system has left us with emergency responder forces that simply do not scale to even rudimentary WMD events. Police, fire and emergency medical services are locally derived and often staffed with a substantial number of volunteers.<sup>9</sup> Local politics and budgets limit cooperation among many of these forces. Equipment and training requirements are derived from the daily burden of emergency events that such units face. When criminals acquire new weapons—military-style automatic weapons—or new tactical skills—encrypted communications and interception equipment—the local forces have faced major problems in responding. The economics of health care has led to a substantial reduction during the last decade of hospital beds in every metropolitan region of the United States. Mass casualties of either civilian populations or responder forces are not requirements that these forces generally have been scaled or trained to meet.

We are in a period when the overwhelming military might of the United States is becoming clear even to the slow learners among the world's miscreants. Frontal assaults on interests that the US define as important invite a high level of conventional destruction and the opponents' conventional counters are unable to inflict significant losses—even when “significant” may be defined as in the less than 100 category—on the United States and its allies. Two developments seem inevitable. The overwhelming dominance of the United States will foster greater resentment. Secondly, nations will seek courses of action that will allow them operational freedom from US conventional attack or, at least, the ability to inflict significant losses on the United States if it does attempt to frustrate their ambitions with military actions. Terrorism, and particularly, mass casualty terrorism, is a logical counter for such states. Chemical, biological and radiological terrorism offers tremendous difficulties of attribution—that is proving who really carried out an attack. Biological terrorism even has the added difficulty of determining or

proving that one is really under attack and not simply seeing a natural disease outbreak.

Popular culture—movies, novels, video games and Internet chat rooms—are awash with chemical, biological and nuclear terrorism. The Secretary of Defense is threatening on Sunday television the population of the United States with a five-pound bag of sugar/anthrax in the hands of the Iraqis. We are vaccinating our military against anthrax and the Foreign Service is to follow. The Aum Shinrikyo, in this case a real terrorist group that reads like bad fiction, loosens a Sarin nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway. The President of the United States, in response to a popular novel, openly convenes an expert group of government and outside experts and then announces a \$10 billion dollar program to respond to the threat of biological terrorism. Russian defectors tell us of the biological horror that the Soviets had planned to unleash on the West. The world having eliminated smallpox as a public health disease decides not to eliminate the last remaining cultures of the disease out of fear that someone may have cheated and we will need these stocks to cope with terrorists equipped with smallpox. Only a blind, deaf and dumb terrorist group could have survived the last five years and not been exposed at least to the possibility of the use of WMD while the more discerning terrorists would have found some tactically brilliant possibilities already laid out on the public record.

This all too quick look at the guideposts to analytical surprise suggests to this author that there is sound reason for believing that attempts at mass casualty terrorism deserve to be taken seriously. Terrorism in any form is extremely difficult to identify, track and counter. Data over the last several decades continue to show that approximately 90 percent of identified terrorist groups last less than one year and that only about 50 percent of those that make it beyond one year last a decade. Terrorism is to a large extent a “pop-up” target of loners and groups at the extremes of society. Short duration, isolated individuals and groups pose serious problems for intelligence and law enforcement. If they are embedded within US society there are significant

legal and political hurdles to even monitoring their activities prior to criminal actions.

In this period where analytical warning can, I think, reasonably be given to policymakers that mass casualty terrorism looms as a real possibility, what are the priorities for government action? Let me get the obvious ones out of the way first, not because I believe they will really work, but because I think we would be extremely remiss if we did not attempt to gain some advantage from them. Actions that can deter and prevent terrorist use of WMD do need to be stepped up. Such actions include better intelligence—principally human intelligence—targeted against terrorists; better forensic and detection capabilities so that we can quickly and with high confidence understand from where a terrorist attack has originated and been supplied; and removing the obvious vulnerabilities such as those that leave US Embassies and American businesses abroad as easy targets and make US ports of entry and borders inviting welcoming points for WMD devices.

Second, and with far greater urgency than we have shown to date, we must begin to assemble and exercise the resources that will allow us to manage the consequences of attempts at mass casualty terrorism. If we cannot prevent—and I do not believe we will be able to—attempts by terrorists to use WMD then it is essential that we be able to respond to such attacks in a manner that lessens their impact, reassures our citizens that government can respond to such attacks effectively and without having to distort the fabric of a free society and take away from the terrorists any sense of accomplishment. Much more assistance must flow directly to helping local police, fire and medical responders better equip and scale their efforts to the challenges of mass casualty terrorism. They need more and better equipment and more realistic training that allows them opportunities to learn how to cooperate across jurisdictional boundaries and to maintain operational effectiveness even when their own ranks may be suffering from unprecedented casualties, for example, from the effects of biological attack. The Federal response force must overcome its own jurisdictional fragmentation and rivalries. Perhaps

even more difficult, we must learn how to bring to bear the considerable resources of the US military in support of managing the consequences of mass casualty terrorism while at the same time respecting the Constitutional and political realities of a federal democracy. It is tempting to believe that the military's obligation to defend the United States stops at the border—and actually should be pursued as close to the border of a foreign attacker as possible. And this is certainly one obligation and one that is not likely to disappear. On the other hand, if mass casualty terrorism on some scale that is quite possible does occur, it is likely that only the US military will have the organization, logistical capability and trained manpower necessary to reinforce the local responders. However, for this capability to become real and effective, this is a mission that must be accepted, resourced and exercised with local responders. This is not yet adequately the case.

Finally, we have significant gaps in equipment and technologies necessary to make a response to mass casualty terrorism manageable. These gaps include: chemical and biological detectors that actually work in real field conditions in the hands of actual emergency responders; quick and accurate analytical techniques for the attribution of the source of attacks; decontamination techniques that meet the needs of actual environments where attack will occur; protection equipment that is affordable and that does not significantly reduce the operational effectiveness of those using it; protection gear for civilians under attack; protection technologies that can be incorporated into buildings and transportation nodes that reduce their vulnerability to attack; and much better medical therapeutics that provide protection against a wide range of biological agents and treatment for those who have been attacked.

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<sup>2</sup> The term “weapons of mass destruction” itself is a hindrance to clear thinking. WMD emerged as a term of Cold War rhetoric used by the Soviet Union to try to limit US military options in the European theater before entering the general lexicon as short hand for nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. In the context of terrorism, the better general term would be “weapons of mass casualties” and in addition to nuclear, chemical and biological weapons should include radiological dispersion devices and information attacks.

<sup>3</sup> A brief sampling include: Richard Preston, *The Cobra Event*; K.C. Bailey, *Death for Cause*; Richard Falkenrath, Robert Newman and Bradley Thayer, *America’s Achilles’ Heel*; CSIS, *Wild Atom: Nuclear Terrorism; Combating Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction* ; Deutch-Specter Commission Report *Combating Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction*; Ken Alibek with Stephen Handelman, *Biohazard; Biological Weapons: Limiting the Threat*, Edited by Joshua Lederberg.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, v.

<sup>5</sup> US Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism*.

<sup>6</sup> In this paper, I have made a conscious decision not to set forth the data on how horrific the use of smallpox, anthrax, sarin, VX, etc could be in an urban environment. This has been already well done in some of the earlier cited studies and in others to which I have contributed that are not available for general circulation. The immediate issue for this paper is not how horrible the use of WMD would be, but rather whether this is a threat for which the US must take extraordinary steps to prepare.

<sup>7</sup> This is variously attributed to Yogi Berra and the French essayist Paul Valery.

<sup>8</sup> It should be remembered that in the months immediately prior to Pearl Harbor, Naval Intelligence had issued a finding, based on a review of the best available evidence, that it was technically impossible to successfully drop torpedoes from airplanes in an anchorage as shallow as Pearl. After the attack it became clear that the Japanese had not found some magical way to violate the laws of physics, but that the US Navy had simply not been able to understand the laws of physics.

<sup>9</sup> In 1999 there were approximately 1,082,000 firemen in the US of which 225,00 are professional and 860,000 are volunteers. We have in the US about 680,000 local police, about 600,000 sheriffs, 640,000 emergency medical technicians and 724,000 physicians.