THE

ULTIMATE

TERRORISTS

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Terrorism Today

What if terrorists exploded a homemade nuclear bomb at the Empire State Building in New York City? A one-kiloton nuclear device—tiny by superpower standards—would ignite a fireball 300 feet in diameter that would demolish the Empire State Building and the 20,000 people who work there, leaving in their place a crater 120 feet wide. Much of the building, and everyone in it, would be vaporized by the intense heat. A shock wave would spread out from the blast site, exposing everything in its path to pressure as high as thousands of pounds per square inch. Components of the Empire State Building that had not vaporized would create a storm of concrete, glass, and steel missiles, which would be propelled thousands of feet by strong horizontal winds.

Buildings within 600 feet would collapse, as would the underground infrastructure of subways, wiring, and pipes. Gas mains would rupture, causing widespread fires. A bright light, many times brighter than the sun in the desert at noon, would be visible from neighboring states. People up to a quarter of a mile away would be killed or maimed as their clothing burst into flames from the heat. Those wearing dark suits, as New Yorkers are wont to do, would be particularly susceptible, since dark colors (and synthetics) absorb radiation. Radiation would quickly kill those within half a mile of the blast.

An updraft would suck up dirt and debris, including the crushed remains of the Empire State Building, into a radioactive mushroom

cloud 10,000 feet high and the color of blood, tinted by red and brown nitrous acids and oxides of nitrogen. As it cooled the cloud would turn the white of ordinary cumulus. This grim marker would be visible for miles around.

In the first twenty-four hours radioactive particles ranging in size from fine powder to marbles—and even larger close to the burst point—would descend from the sky. A lethal dose would be delivered to anyone within an area a quarter-mile wide and nine miles long—as far north as the George Washington Bridge, or, depending on the wind, out into New Jersey and Brooklyn. Victims of this "early" fallout would die within two weeks. People as far as eighteen miles away would suffer radiation sickness. Even hundreds of miles downwind, cancer rates would rise, and long-lived isotopes would contaminate the area for years. Small radioactive particles would eventually be deposited over much of the earth. Because the bomb would explode close to the ground, the effects of fallout would be far more severe than at Hiroshima or Nagasaki.

How many people would die? It's hard to say, but the fallout alone might kill up to 100,000—in addition to those killed by blast, heat, or initial radiation close to the explosion. The death toll might easily reach twice that.[1]

But the ramifications for survivors of a nuclear explosion in America would go far beyond the shock and grief, funerals and fallout. Even a tiny nuclear detonation, hundreds or even thousands of times smaller than most of the bombs stockpiled by Russia and the United States, might permanently alter America's cherished balance between civil liberties and public safety. Even an attack with a conventional bomb might have this effect: after the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City many Americans jumped to the conclusion—without evidence—that it had been perpetrated by Middle Eastern terrorists. Arab Americans were subjected to harassment and prejudicial treatment. Four men of Middle Eastern origin were detained after the attack; one of them, a Jordanian American, was forcibly returned to the United States from London.[2]

A nuclear attack, on the Empire State Building or elsewhere, might

evoke a far more extreme reaction. Surviving leaders might feel compelled to reinforce the government's authority to search out and deport foreign terrorists, and might call for measures that would violate civil rights. Phones might be tapped, foreigners' movements monitored. Mosques, for example, might be targeted for surveillance. Rights of free speech and free assembly might be curtailed. There would probably be much more sympathy for FBI snooping, for CIA spying, and for chips that monitor electronic conversations. Citizens might demand an expansion of the military's role in protecting civilians at home.[3] Within days, the American way of life might change substantially.

Even if the terrorists' homemade bomb failed to reach nuclear yield, it would nonetheless spread radioactive contamination, with devastating economic and psychological consequences. Few people would die from the bomb itself. But fear of radiation might cause panic, which could lead to deaths. For example, the radiation would not be high enough to require evacuation, but people might panic and try to leave the city, creating massive traffic jams and possibly accidents.

The U.S. Department of Energy predicts that such a bomb would cause very few deaths from cancer. But the economic and psychological costs would be formidable. If a bomb with some six pounds of plutonium exploded in Washington, D.C., 45,000 people might have to stay indoors for an undefined period afterward to avoid being exposed to fallout. And the public's fear of radiation would probably require that authorities clean up an area of about seventy-three square miles. Buildings would have to be scrubbed, topsoil removed, pavement hosed down. The cost would be likely to exceed $100 billion—around a third of the yearly defense budget for the United States.[4]

A terrorist attack using chemical or biological weapons would be far easier to accomplish, and could be equally devastating to public confidence and civil liberties. In recent years terrorists have been acquiring crude chemical and biological agents, and some have plotted or threatened to use them. It would be relatively easy to use them to poison agricultural commodities, infect livestock, or gas passengers on trains or planes.

Biological weapons have the potential to be as deadly as nuclear bombs. For example, 100 kilograms of anthrax, less than the amount

Iraq has produced, could kill up to 3 million people if dispersed under optimal conditions. In comparison, a Hiroshima-type fission bomb with a yield of 12,500 tons of TNT could kill up to 80,000, while a more powerful hydrogen bomb, with a yield of a million tons of TNT, could kill between 600,000 and 2 million. Few if any terrorists are likely to be capable of such attacks, but fear of poisons could make even a small-scale, low-technology incident—the kind terrorists are more likely to achieve—psychologically devastating.[5]

Unlike the effects of conventional or nuclear weapons, however, those of some biological and chemical agents can be reversed. If authorities were aware that an attack had taken place, victims could be treated. For some contagious agents, vaccines might prevent person-to-person spread. But if doctors did not know there had been a biological attack, they might think the victims had the flu, since the early symptoms are similar. By the time victims displayed unmistakable symptoms—perhaps days after the attack—it would be too late to save their lives. In the meantime, if the agent was contagious, thousands of others might be infected by coming into contact with the original victims.

Vulnerable Societies

Successful terrorists will choose their technology to exploit the vulnerabilities of a particular society. Modern societies are particularly susceptible to weapons that are capable of killing many people at one time—weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Their citizens tend to live, work, and travel in close proximity, providing concentrated targets. For the Aum Shinrikiyo cult in Japan, which released poison gas in Tokyo subway cars, gas was an effective weapon not only because of its capacity to inspire fear but also because in Tokyo many people go about their lives close together, especially on the subway.

Despite this concentration of population, many individuals in modern societies are isolated from one another. This creates fertile ground for the breeding of extremists and makes it possible for extremist groups to operate unnoticed. Again the Aum Shinrikiyo case is an example: the Japanese government's failure to detect the cult's plans

suggests the possibility that terrorists may be able to pursue other WMD, even crude nuclear weapons, without being caught.

Americans face an additional vulnerability. First Amendment protections make it legal to advocate using WMD, to disseminate detailed instructions for producing them, and to advise would-be terrorists about how to evade detection.[6] The same Bill of Rights that makes Americans uniquely free also makes terrorism harder to combat. It prevents the government from banning poisoning manuals and makes it difficult for government agents to infiltrate and monitor terrorist groups. The Internet provides an easy way for terrorists to spread information around the world, to recruit, and to plan operations in secret. And Americans' fundamental wariness of government makes it easier to terrorize them; citizens have little faith in the government's ability to minimize fatalities in case of an attack. People who don't trust their government to protect them are more susceptible to panic, and panic may lead to loss of life.

Trends in Terrorism

Western societies enjoy extraordinary military and economic power today. But the "clash of civilizations" between "the West and the rest" predicted by Samuel Huntington is unlikely to take place exclusively—or even principally—on the battlefield. Some potential adversaries, Secretary of Defense William Cohen warned in 1997, believe that their only way to fight America, given U.S. military superiority, is to use WMD against U.S. troops or civilians. Violent Islamic extremists have already recognized that they cannot defeat the United States in a conventional war, but that they can impose significant pain through acts of terrorism. Right-wing extremists and other domestic groups are also likely to participate in this "clash."[7]

Islamic fundamentalists, Huntington observes, do not subscribe to the western belief in separation of church and state. Nor do they value the Enlightenment ideals of liberalism, human rights, equality, and the rule of law. The "rest" that oppose the West are inspired by radically different views of the relative importance of rights and respon-

sibilities, liberty and authority, and equality and hierarchy, and of the relations between the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, and husband and wife.[8] The observations apply equally to home-grown extremist groups such as Christian Patriots (antigovernment white supremacists who subscribe to a doctrine known as Christian Identity, believing that blacks are subhuman and that Jews are the descendants of Satan).

During the 1970s, 8,114 terrorist incidents were reported around the world, resulting in 4,798 deaths and 6,902 injuries. During the 1980s the number of incidents increased nearly fourfold, to 31,426, with 70,859 deaths and 47,849 injuries. From 1990 to 1996 there were 27,087 incidents, causing 51,797 deaths and 58,814 injuries. The number of deaths due to acts of terrorism varies from year to year, but there is a clearly increasing trend. Between 1970 and 1995, on average, each year brought 206 more incidents and 441 more fatalities.[9] In 1996 the number of international incidents declined, but, according to the State Department, deaths and injuries continued to increase.

The 1990s were marked by several positive developments, along with some negative ones. The collapse of Communism dealt a severe blow to traditional left-wing terrorist groups: they are now bereft of sponsors, safe havens, and training camps in Europe. Countries such as Cuba, North Korea, and Libya, formerly engaged in supplying terrorists with training, weapons, or funds, have reportedly renounced this role. And there are encouraging signs that Palestinian groups and the IRA are choosing political alternatives to terrorist violence.[10]

On the negative side, Iran remains deeply involved in acts of terrorism committed by its own agents or by surrogate groups. Iran and Syria may have been involved in a June 1996 bombing of a U.S. military housing complex in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, which killed nineteen Americans. Egypt has accused Iran of backing the Egyptian Islamic militants who attempted to assassinate President Mubarak in 1995. Sudan is also suspected in connection with this incident. Sudan provides paramilitary training as well as refuge for a number of extremely violent Middle Eastern groups, including the Abu Nidal organization, Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas, and Gama'at al-Islamiyya. A Sudanese national pleaded guilty to complicity in a foiled plot to bomb the

United Nations and other New York City targets and claimed that a Sudanese official had offered to provide access to the U.N. building. Afghanistan currently hosts Osama bin Laden, a wealthy Saudi alleged to have financed the attack and believed to provide support for a broad group of violent Middle Eastern extremists. Several Middle Eastern terrorist groups have supporters inside the United States who might abet acts of terrorism on U.S. territory.[11]

The emergence of ad hoc radical fundamentalist Islamic groups, such as the multinational group involved in the bombing of the World Trade Center, is a particularly troubling development. These groups operate on a global scale and claim to act for Islam. According to the U.S. State Department, they have sources of funding around the world and are knowledgeable about modern explosives and weapons. Ad hoc groups can form quickly, need no headquarters, and have no recognized leaders; these characteristics make them more difficult to track and apprehend than members of established groups.[12]

Terrorist groups motivated by religious concerns are becoming more common. Of eleven international terrorist groups identified by the Rand Corporation in 1968, none was classified as religiously motivated. By 1994 a third of the forty-nine international groups identified were classified as religious. Religious groups are more likely than others to turn to WMD.[13]

The United States may have contributed to terrorist violence by training and financing the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan's war with the Soviet Union in the 1980s, leaving "thousands of highly trained Islamic militants who dispersed, [taking] with them an ideology of violence and revolution." One expert on Islamic extremism warns that "the mercenary groups of terrorism," under the influence of religious zealots in Iraq, Algeria, Libya, Sudan, and Iran, are "becoming more fanatical . . . The mullahs are convinced they are suffering from a situation for which they are not responsible. All the failures they made avoiding enlightenment, by avoiding technological revolution, they blame on the West. They will go to war because of this."[14]

Meanwhile Christian Patriots are growing in number. They are also showing signs of interest in biological weapons. Survivalists and white supremacists were implicated in three separate cases involving

biological agents in 1995. In March two members of the Minnesota Patriots Council were arrested for producing ricin with which to assassinate a deputy U.S. marshal who had served papers on one of them for tax violations. In May, just six weeks after the Aum Shinrikiyo incident, Larry Wayne Harris, a former member of neo-Nazi organizations, bought three vials of *Yersinia pestis*, the bacterium that causes bubonic plague, which killed nearly a quarter of Europe's population in the mid-fourteenth century. Harris had ordered the bacteria from the American Type Culture Collection, the same organization that sold biological agents to Iraq. No law prohibited Harris or any other American from acquiring the agent. But Harris had misrepresented himself in his purchase order, and he was convicted of mail fraud. In December a survivalist was arrested for trying to carry 130 grams of ricin across the border into Canada. Agents who searched his house found castor beans, from which ricin is extracted, and three manuals on poisons.[15]

Why Now?

Five interrelated developments have increased the risk that terrorists will use nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons against civilian targets. First, such weapons are especially valuable to terrorists seeking to conjure a sense of divine retribution, to display scientific prowess, to kill large numbers of people, to invoke dread, or to retaliate against states that have used these weapons in the past. Terrorists motivated by goals like these rather than traditional political objectives are increasing in number.

Second, terrorists' motivations are changing. A new breed of terrorists—including ad hoc groups motivated by religious conviction or revenge, violent right-wing extremists, and apocalyptic and millenarian cults—appears more likely than the terrorists of the past to commit acts of extreme violence. Religious groups are becoming more common, and they are more violent than secular groups. Religious groups committed only 25 percent of the international terrorist incidents recorded in the Rand–St. Andrews Chronology in 1995, but they were responsible for 58 percent of the deaths. George Tenet, then Acting Director of the CIA, warned in 1997 that "fanatical" terrorists pose an

"unprecedented threat" to the United States, and that a growing number of groups are investigating the feasibility of chemical, biological, and radiological weapons.[16]

Third, with the breakup of the Soviet Union, the black market now offers weapons, components, and knowhow. The Soviet nuclear-security system was designed during the Cold War to prevent Americans from stealing secrets, not to prevent theft by insiders. And that inadequate system has largely broken down. Hundreds of tons of nuclear material, the essential ingredient of nuclear weapons, are stored at vulnerable sites throughout the former Soviet Union, guarded only by underpaid, hungry, and disheartened people. Some of it is stored in gym-type lockers, secured with the equivalent of bicycle locks. At least eight thefts of materials that could be used to make nuclear weapons have been confirmed. Worse yet, the weapons themselves may be vulnerable to theft or unauthorized launch. While Russia's 6,000 long-range strategic weapons are protected by locks, making it impossible— at least in principle—to launch them without high-level authority, thousands of smaller tactical weapons have less sophisticated protection or no locks at all, making them both easier to steal and easier to detonate. Since many of Russia's nuclear custodians and weapons scientists are now unpaid or unemployed, they may eventually give in to financial pressures by selling their expertise or their wares abroad (see Chapter 6).

Fourth, chemical and biological weapons are proliferating, even in states known to sponsor terrorism. Some governments, including China, Russia, and North Korea, are exporting equipment that, while ostensibly intended for benign purposes, could be used to manufacture WMD. Iraq is an example of a state known to sponsor terrorism (see Chapter 7) that is developing chemical and biological weapons. Iraq has also used chemical weapons in acts of state terror against its own citizens. Despite its military defeat in 1991 and its commitment to destroy its WMD under U.N. inspection, Baghdad has allegedly threatened to use WMD against Britain and other nations, and it has the potential to do so. The situation in Iraq shows how difficult it is to prevent the proliferation of WMD. Preventive war did little to root out Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, and the most intrusive inspection

regime ever devised has left inspectors guessing, especially about Iraq's biological weapons program.

Fifth, advances in technology have made terrorism with weapons of mass destruction easier to carry out. For example, the Internet allows terrorists to recruit from a larger pool of potential sympathizers and to communicate instantaneously. Advanced fermenting equipment makes it easier to optimize the growth of biological organisms, and new technologies for coating microorganisms make dissemination less difficult. (But technology also makes terrorism easier to thwart; see Chapter 8.)

Despite these developments, terrorists' use of weapons of mass destruction is likely to remain rare. Few terrorists will be capable of using these weapons except in small-scale incidents, and few will want to kill tens or hundreds of thousands of people. It is useful to think of the danger in terms of the concept of expected cost: the product of the probability of an event and its consequences. While the probability of WMD terrorism is low, its expected cost—in lives lost and in threats to civil liberties—is potentially devastating. Government officials will be remiss—and will be blamed—if they do not take measures to reduce the likelihood and severity of the threat.

Definitions

The killing of soldiers and nearby civilians [is] to be defended only insofar as [it is] the product of a single intention, directed at the first and not the second. The argument suggests the great importance of taking aim in wartime, and it correctly restricts the targets at which one can aim.
—Michael Walzer, 1977

Hundreds of definitions of terrorism are offered in the literature. Some focus on the perpetrators, others on their purposes, and still others on their techniques. But only two characteristics are critical for distinguishing terrorism from other forms of violence. First, terrorism is aimed at noncombatants. This is what makes it different from fighting in war. Second, terrorists use violence for a dramatic purpose: usually to instill fear in the targeted population. This deliberate evocation of dread is what sets terrorism apart from simple murder or assault.[1]

I define terrorism as an act or threat of violence against noncombatants with the objective of exacting revenge, intimidating, or otherwise influencing an audience. This definition avoids limiting perpetrator or purpose. It allows for a range of possible actors (states or their surrogates, international groups, or a single individual), for all putative goals (political, religious, or economic), and for murder for its own sake.[2]

WMD terrorism involves the most modern—and the most extreme—forms of random violence. Nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons are *inherently terrifying*: in most scenarios for their use, the fear they would cause would dwarf the injury and death. Dread of these

weapons creates its own dangers: if victims panic and attempt to flee, they may spread contamination and disease still further.

These weapons are also *inherently indiscriminate.* Conventional weapons can be used either discriminately, to harm only soldiers, or indiscriminately, to harm noncombatants. While in principle chemical weapons can be exclusively used on the battlefield, and nuclear weapons can be used in counter-force strikes to target the enemy's weapons systems, in practice WMD harm noncombatants. It is impossible to aim at a particular target; only the most sophisticated militaries can use these weapons in open areas without putting noncombatants at risk.[3]

The effects of these weapons are also *inherently random.* The radius of injury depends on conditions that are impossible to control or to predict with certainty. The movement of aerosols, the virulence of microorganisms, the susceptibility of victims, and the spread of fallout all depend on exogenous variables like meteorological conditions and terrain. These weapons' fear-inspiring, all-encompassing, unpredictable nature is what makes them consummate instruments of terror (see Chapter 3).

Defining terrorism is more than an academic exercise. The definition inevitably determines the kind of data we collect and analyze, which in turn influences our understanding of trends and our predictions about the future. For example, the U.S. State Department analyzes only international terrorist incidents, that is, incidents involving citizens of more than one country. And the definition employed by the U.S. government confines terrorism to politically motivated violence. Although the FBI has recently started collecting data on domestic incidents in the United States, no government organization collects and analyzes data on all terrorism around the world. The lack of comprehensive data makes it impossible to analyze broad trends in terrorism, or to use empirical evidence to predict what kinds of domestic terrorists are most likely to be attracted to weapons of mass destruction.

How we define terrorism profoundly influences how we respond to it. If terrorism is always a crime (as distinct from war), then the Justice Department and the police are responsible for combating it, and it is legally difficult to call on the military in incidents on U.S. territory,