

Background

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Preventing a Nightmare Scenario: Terrorist Attacks Using Russian Nuclear Weapons and Materials

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Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, Americans have been lucky that there have not been more atrocities on U.S. soil. However, the enemy, while weakened, is far from destroyed.

Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri continue to issue threats against America from their hideouts. Their strength and support base, while diminished, is not eliminated. Other terrorist organizations inspired by radical Islamist ideology are still at large in Europe, the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and (presumably) the Americas, and some of them are willing to use weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to bring down America.

Recent reports about intelligence failures before 9/11 and the Iraq war indicate that there are numerous issues regarding U.S. strategic adversaries that the intelligence community did not handle adequately. Under the new leadership of Directors John Negroponte and Porter Goss, the intelligence community must address these challenges with the innovation and creativity that the issues deserve.

Court proceedings and intelligence debriefings have indicated that al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations planned their operations for up to six years before execution. Several attacks using chemical weapons in Great Britain, France, and Jordan were disrupted just before execution. The current hiatus in attacks against the U.S. homeland may be caused by preparation for massive attacks, possibly involving weapons of mass destruction.

Talking Points

The United States should among other actions:

- Conduct on-site and long-term intelligence penetration of terrorist organizations and neutralize those involved in WMD terrorist operations through covert action.
- Develop deterrence against high-value and symbolic targets that terrorists and their sponsors value and provide ample funding for joint non-proliferation programs, such as the Proliferation Security Initiative.
- Design a public affairs component of the U.S. anti-terrorism policy explaining the importance of joint anti-terrorism actions to the Russian elites, media, and general public.
- Launch a political warfare component, through the intelligence community, to encourage moderate Muslim clerics to issue religious edicts forbidding terrorism in general and WMD attacks in particular.

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To prevent the “sum of all fears” and to counter nuclear terrorism, the United States should:

1. **Expand** its global intelligence network;
2. **Boost** cooperation with law enforcement and intelligence communities around the world;
3. **Provide** ample funding to and expand the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), a global effort that aims to stop shipments of WMD, their delivery systems, and related materials;
4. **Expand** the Nunn–Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program;
5. **Neutralize** those involved in WMD terrorist operations;
6. **Design** a supporting public affairs component of the U.S. anti-terrorism policy;
7. **Launch** a political warfare component via the intelligence community; and
8. **Consider** instituting a monetary reward program for interception of proliferation operations and nuclear terrorist activities.

Radical Islam’s “Religious Duty”

Osama bin Laden has called using weapons of mass destruction against the U.S. a “religious duty.” He has also declared that undermining America’s economic power is his strategic objective. Bin Laden did not confirm or deny pursuit of such weapons in press interviews, but a body of evidence indicates that he has actively sought them.

For example, Ahmad al Fadl, a defector from al-Qaeda, testified in U.S. court that in 1994 he was tasked with procuring a radioactive material, apparently highly enriched uranium (HEU), from a South African source.¹ Ayman al-Zawahiri was spotted vis-

iting Russia for six months in 1996—ostensibly to assist the Chechens to escalate their hostilities against Russia—and spoke publicly about the ease of procuring nuclear materials from the former Soviet republics. In 2002, Abu Zubaydah told interrogators that al-Qaeda knew how to build “dirty bombs” and where to get material for them.²

There are also media reports of al-Qaeda buying or stealing up to 20 nuclear warheads from the former Soviet republics, bin Laden providing \$3 million and large commercial amounts of opium to Chechens in exchange for nuclear weapons or material, and four Turkmen nuclear scientists working to create an al-Qaeda weapon.³ The veracity of these reports cannot be independently evaluated.⁴ In February 2005, Director of Central Intelligence Porter Goss testified that al-Qaeda might possess radioactive material of Russian or Soviet origin.

In 2003, Sheikh Nasir bin Hamid al-Fahd, a prominent Saudi cleric close to al-Qaeda, provided a comprehensive religious opinion (*fatwa*) justifying the use of nuclear weapons against the United States, even if it killed up to 10 million Americans, under the pretext that the United States is to blame for the deaths of 10 million Muslims.⁵ This cleric and two of his colleagues—Ali al-Khudayr and Ahmad al-Khaladi—have provided “religious” justifications for bin Laden to create mayhem. Bin Laden portrays himself as a pious Muslim who protects and defends other Muslims and wages a *jihād* (holy war) in their name.⁶

Al-Qaeda is an organization that is religiously and ideologically committed to the destruction of the United States and Israel, the subjugation of the West, and the overthrow of existing Muslim and

1. Kimberly McCloud and Matthew Osborne, “WMD Terrorism and Osama bin Laden,” *CNS Reports*, at cns.miis.edu/pubs/reports/binladen.htm (April 11, 2005).
2. Smita P. Nordwall, “Detainee Said to Link al-Qaeda, ‘Dirty Bomb,’” *USA Today*, April 23, 2002, p. A8.
3. Adam Dolnik, “America’s Worst Nightmare? Osama bin Laden and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” PIR Center, September 12, 2001, at www.ceip.org/files/projects/npp/resources/America's%20Worst%20Nightmare%20%20Osama%20bin%20Laden%20and%20Weapons%20of%20Mass%20Destruction.pdf (April 11, 2005).
4. McCloud and Osborne, “WMD Terrorism and Osama bin Laden.”
5. Nasir bin Hamid Al-Fahd, “A Treatise on the Legal Status of Using Weapons of Mass Destruction Against Infidels,” May 2003, at www.carnegieendowment.org/static/npp/fatwa.pdf (April 13, 2005).

Arab regimes throughout the greater Middle East and beyond—from Nigeria to Saudi Arabia to Indonesia. Its proclaimed goal is establishment of a caliphate (khilafa)—a militarized dictatorship based on the *Shari'a* (holy law) and dedicated to conquest of the non-Muslim world (*Dar al-Harb*, literally “Land of the Sword”).

Other radical Islamist organizations share these far-reaching goals and anti-American agendas, including the Lebanese Shi'a Hezbollah and Pakistani Lashkar-e-Tayyiba. Lashkar-e-Tayyiba has links to al-Qaeda, technological sophistication and personnel, and international connections reaching into the U.S. that could help them acquire WMD capabilities.⁷ For example:

- Hezbollah operates Al-Manar, a satellite TV channel, and recently tested a military unmanned aerial vehicle, which flew over Israel. Such low-flying vehicles can deliver warheads to targets otherwise protected against air attacks.
- Hamas, another radical Islamist terrorist organization, succeeded in developing rockets and producing Kassam short-range missiles in the technologically primitive conditions of Gaza's metal workshops and garages.
- Other Palestinian radical organizations have utilized hot air balloons and hang gliders, which can be used to deliver a crude bomb or radiation dispersion device (RDD or “dirty bomb”).⁸

All of these organizations attract a number of engineers and technicians who could facilitate their homegrown nuclear weapons programs. With con-

siderable financial resources at their disposal, they can also recruit engineers and scientists from the thousands who have received education in related fields in Russia, the West, and the Muslim world. Such clandestine programs would be assisted by the wealth of information about nuclear matters available on the Internet.

Furthermore, radical Islamists have ideological, organizational, and operational connections to the military and intelligence establishments of Iran and Pakistan. Iran is suspected by both the Bush Administration and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of managing a clandestine nuclear weapons program. Pakistan is a nuclear power, and anti-American Islamists strongly influence its nuclear establishment and military and intelligence services.

For example, Pakistan was the source of Ahmed Qadir Khan's global nuclear proliferation network, which supplied technology to North Korea, Libya, Iran, and possibly other countries.⁹ And there is strong suspicion that prior to 9/11, Sultan Bashirud-Din Mehmood and Abdul Majid, two senior nuclear scientists from Pakistan who used to work for Khan, traveled to Afghanistan to offer their expertise to Osama bin Laden.¹⁰

Experts believe that terrorists are willing to inflict massive casualties using WMD, capable of doing so despite the technical difficulties of executing such an attack, and capable of either stealing or building a nuclear bomb. The IAEA has documented cases of HEU theft.¹¹

Nuclear terrorism presents at least four distinct kinds of threats:

6. Kelly Uphoff, “Osama bin Laden's Mandate for Nuclear Terror,” Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, December 10, 2004, at www.jinsa.org/articles/articles.html/function/view/categoryid/1701/documentid/2762/history/3,2360,655,1701,2762 (April 13, 2005).
7. Audrey Kurth Cronin, Huda Aden, Adam Frost, and Benjamin Jones, “Foreign Terrorist Organizations,” Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, February 6, 2004, p. 55.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
9. Anton La Guardia, Ahmed Rashid, and Alec Russell, “The Nuclear Supermarket: Race to Shut Networks Supplying Rogue States,” *The Daily Telegraph* (London), February 6, 2004, p. 1.
10. “Atom Scientists Talked to Bin Laden,” December 12, 2001, *CBS News*, at www.cbsnews.com/stories/2001/10/24/world/main315627.shtml (May 16, 2005).
11. Matthew Bunn and Anthony Wier, “The Seven Myths of Nuclear Terrorism,” *Current History*, March 2005, p. 153.

- RDDs powered by conventional explosives;
- Attacks on nuclear installations such as nuclear power plants;
- Seizure and detonation of intact nuclear weapons; and
- Theft or purchase of nuclear materials to build a nuclear bomb.¹²

The Russian Problem

As sources of unsecured nuclear weapons and material, Russia and the other former Soviet republics remain major proliferation concerns for a number of reasons. First, the Soviet Union was an empire with a strong external perimeter and weak internal safeguards. While the Soviet regime tightly controlled everything that moved across its borders until the late 1980s, internal safety, security measures, and bureaucratic culture were inadequate. This was demonstrated by a series of technological catastrophes in the 1980s and 1990s, the most famous and dangerous of which was the 1986 meltdown of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor in Ukraine.

Nuclear, chemical, and biological material storage facilities often were—and still are—protected by nothing more than a padlock, an impoverished conscript, or a retirement-age guard. Moreover, corruption among general officers, mid-rank officers, and officials is still rampant, and law enforcement is highly selective.

Some generals were removed from the ranks during the Yeltsin Administration (1992–1999) for corruption, gross negligence, and political involvement. However, many others who were no less guilty remained in the ranks. Under the Putin presidency, the Kremlin has declared that the military reform is completed, and even fewer officers were relieved of duty despite major military disasters, such as the sinking of the nuclear submarine *Kursk* and failed missile tests during major maneuvers. There is a pervasive sense in the military and

security services that nobody is responsible for anything and that justice, accountability, and responsibility are not a part of the bureaucratic culture.

Corruption is pervasive. Russian officers and officials have been accused of selling weapons to Chechen militants, allowing armed Chechens to pass unmolested through roadblocks en route to terrorist attacks, attempting to sell nuclear materials from decommissioned submarine reactors in the Northern Fleet, selling vital components of military systems and vehicles, and illegally selling food rations and supplies, leading to malnutrition among the ranks. In such an environment, the sale of nuclear equipment and material—even the sale of working individual weapons—is entirely feasible.

Three contributing factors may facilitate the purchase of nuclear weapons, material, and components in Russia: anti-Americanism, the growing Wahhabi–Salafi influence, and organized crime.

Anti-Americanism pervades the Russian elite from the top down and is escalating in the media. Every international event, from the bombing of Serb forces in Kosovo to NATO enlargement to granting asylum to Chechen militant leaders in the United States and the United Kingdom is interpreted as directed against Russia and aimed at undermining its power.

Most recently, the Russian leadership and media have characterized U.S. support of bloodless revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine as attempts to push Russia out of its sphere of influence in the Commonwealth of Independence States and to install pro-American regimes in these former Soviet republics. A former senior Russian official stated that “U.S. behavior [vis-à-vis Russia] is not that of a friend, but of an adversary... While we need to talk to the U.S., we need to keep in mind that it is an enemy.”¹³ This attitude is echoed in an incessant stream of media commentary and biased reporting

12. William C. Potter, Charles D. Ferguson, and Leonard S. Spector, “The Four Faces of Nuclear Terror and the Need for a Prioritized Response,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 3 (May/June 2004), at www.foreignaffairs.org/20040501faresponse83313/william-c-potter-charles-d-ferguson-leonard-s-spector/the-four-faces-of-nuclear-terror-and-the-need-for-a-prioritized-response.html (May 16, 2005).

13. Former Russian official, interview with author, Moscow, March 2005.

that translates into the results of numerous opinion polls in which the U.S. consistently comes out as Russia's primary adversary.

The Russian military forces' posture, new weapons system development (including nuclear and missile modernization), military maneuvers, and foreign de facto alliances (especially with China and Iran) all indicate that Russia views the United States as an unfriendly power. Such anti-Americanism may facilitate illicit transactions involving nuclear weapons or components in which the Russian seller or thief understands that the U.S. is the likely target.

The increasing influence of Salafi-Wahhabi Islam in Russia, home to about 20 million Muslims, may facilitate penetration of the Russian military-industrial complex by collaborators and sympathizers of terrorist organizations or the use by such organizations of Russian Muslims as intermediaries in illicit transactions. Pro-Salafi organizations and preachers in Russia operate with few restrictions. Leading Russian experts on Islam have stated that Saudi Arabian funding sources expend large amounts of hard currency in Russia to buy political influence among politicians, journalists, and other members of the Russian elite.¹⁴

Finally, the influence of organized crime remains pervasive. Russian and post-Soviet organized criminal enterprises are more sophisticated and command more educated personnel than almost any other organized crime structures in the world. Recently, the Prosecutor General of Russia stated that 500 large enterprises are controlled by organized crime, including major oil and gas supply and transportation ventures generating hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue. In many cases, organized crime has merged with legal business and has access to state enterprises, government officials, and a broad range of international contacts. Russian organized crime may be the conduit through which terrorists acquire and ship nuclear components or weapons to their final destinations.

Clearly, the safety and security of nuclear weapons, technology, and materials in the former Soviet Union leave much to be desired. While strategic warheads and missiles on active duty may be reasonably secure, the same cannot be said about tactical nuclear weapons, decommissioned weapons, and stockpiles of highly enriched uranium and plutonium, which can be used to produce improvised nuclear weapons. For example, terrorists could assemble a rather primitive weapon modeled after the bombs that the U.S. used at the end of World War II. Radioactive material from the former Soviet Union—either from nuclear weapons or raw materials for production of weapons—could be used in an RDD.

The Challenges of Non-Proliferation

To diminish proliferation threats from Russia and post-Soviet space, Presidents George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush undertook a number of steps to secure Soviet-Russian WMD, including the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program and pursuing non-proliferation projects with the Yeltsin and Putin governments. This cooperation seems to be working to some degree.

Granted, the U.S. has serious misgivings regarding Russian transfer of light-water reactor technology to Iran, since it may be a cover for more ambitious nuclear weapons manufacturing, but there is little evidence in open sources that Russia proliferates nuclear weapon technology to countries of concern, such as North Korea and Iran. If anything, Pakistan seems to be the main culprit, followed by North Korea and possibly China.¹⁵ Even African countries such as Ghana and the Democratic Republic of Congo are potential sources of radioactive material for dirty bombs.¹⁶ Still, Russia and former Soviet republics top the list of potential proliferation sources due to their geographic size and the sheer number of nuclear weapons (which some estimate in excess of 40,000) and hundreds of tons of weapons-grade material that they possess.

14. Interviews with author, March 2005.

15. La Guardia, Rashid, and Russell, "The Nuclear Supermarket" p. 1.

16. Francois-Xavier Harispe, "U.S. Experts to Analyse Uranium Seized by DR Congo Authorities," Agence France-Press, March 24, 2004.

The Russian stockpile suffers from a number of security issues that need to be addressed, including:

- The lack of reliable accounting and electronically updated (and up-to-date) databases that cover all weapons systems, including tactical nuclear arms, shells, and warheads;
- The mystery surrounding so-called suitcase bombs;¹⁷
- Poor security of some nuclear weapons systems, especially tactical and stored/decommissioned charges;
- The lack of modern means of monitoring, such as closed-circuit TV and motion sensors linked to a computerized monitoring system;
- Inadequate security of highly enriched uranium and plutonium stockpiles; and
- Insufficient security of radioactive materials used for research, medical, and industrial purposes.

In terms of probability, an RDD attack is easier to execute than a full-scale nuclear fission explosion. As for construction of a nuclear device, an HEU bomb is easier to manufacture than a plutonium bomb, and a crude improvised bomb is easier to build than a military-grade weapon.

That said, however, there is more than a theoretical possibility that terrorists could buy a working warhead and deliver it to the U.S. in one of the millions of shipping containers that enter the country without examination by U.S. Customs. Terrorists could also smuggle such a weapon through a porous land or maritime border, in addition to which they could smuggle components and assemble the weapon in the United States. In terms of who could execute such an attack, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, and Lashkar-e-Tayyiba each may have the necessary technical expertise and motivation to undertake it.

After 9/11, the U.S. cannot view non-proliferation efforts as an “either/or” proposition between focusing on proliferating states and focusing on terrorist organizations. Ignoring either could prove deadly.

Russia and the post-Soviet states deserve as much watching as other potential sources of proliferation such as Pakistan, Iran, and North Korea. Yet the terrorists have already demonstrated their ingenuity by using civilian airplanes and box cutters as weapons of mass destruction. Cooperation with Russian, Ukrainian, Central Asian, and other governments and security services is necessary, but this is difficult for the reasons previously described, including anti-Americanism at the highest levels, corruption, and inefficiency. Nevertheless, realistic policy options need to be developed to prevent nuclear terrorism from taking place.

What the U.S. Should Do

To stem the growing nuclear threat facing the United States, it is imperative that policymakers:

- **Develop** a comprehensive global intelligence network from the current cooperative bilateral arrangements with European, Middle Eastern, South Asian, and East Asian states. Such a network should mesh intelligence gathering, counter-proliferation measures, and special operations to thwart proliferation. It would provide ample warnings to neutralize terrorist organizations at the early planning stages of a WMD attack. The U.S. intelligence community should boost cooperation with law enforcement and foreign intelligence communities to include joint counterterrorist operations. Such operations would include deep, on-site, and long-term penetration of terrorist organizations and neutralizing those involved in WMD terrorist operations through covert action.
- **Task** the Pentagon with developing deterrence against high-value and symbolic targets that terrorists and their sponsors value.
- **Provide** ample funding for joint non-proliferation programs, such as the Proliferation Security Initiative.
- **Cooperate** with Russia and the other former Soviet republics by expanding Nunn–Lugar

17. Two senior Russian officials—the late General Alexander Lebed, President Yeltsin’s Secretary of Russia’s National Security Council, and Yeltsin’s science adviser, Professor Alexei Yablokov—said publicly and testified that such devices were commissioned by the Soviet KGB (Committee for State Security), but their fate is unclear due to the limited time span of such weapons.

funding while boosting the accountability and transparency of these programs.

- **Design** a supporting public affairs component of the U.S. anti-terrorism policy through the State Department Public Diplomacy structure, through the Board of International Broadcasting, and through the nonprofit sector to explain the importance of joint anti-terrorism actions to the Russian elites, media, and general public.
- **Launch** a political warfare component, through the intelligence community, to encourage moderate Muslim clerics to issue *fatwas* forbidding terrorism in general and attacks using WMD in particular. This component should be expanded to include Muslim media in major markets, such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.
- **Consider** a program instituting monetary rewards for interception of proliferation operations and nuclear terrorist activities through U.S. law enforcement and intelligence organi-

zations without creating a prize for unscrupulous foreign officials to simulate such activities.

Conclusion

Fighting against WMD-armed terrorist groups is possibly more challenging than any Cold War task. During the Cold War, there were only two blocs—NATO and the Warsaw Pact—led by strong nation-states with strong chains of command. Now there are multiple players, including transnational movements and other diffuse non-state entities driven by ideologies and religious interpretation that many Americans do not comprehend.

The United States and its allies have no alternative but to combat and destroy these evildoers while preventing them from obtaining and using weapons of mass destruction.

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