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Chapter 3 *Jihadist Tactics and Targeting*

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Introduction

On February 5, 2008, US Director of National Intelligence J. Michael McConnell, declared that "al-Qa'ida and other terrorist groups are attempting to acquire chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons and materials (CBRN)," and that "al-Qa'ida will continue to try to acquire and employ these weapons and materials."¹ Just a few days earlier, news reports emerged that Abu Khabab al-Masri—a chemical engineer and high-ranking Egyptian member of al-Qa'ida who had reportedly been killed in a 2006 US airstrike—was now thought to be alive and well and in charge of resurrecting al-Qa'ida's program to develop or obtain weapons of mass destruction.² Described by several intelligence officials as a top explosives expert, Khabab is suspected of having had a role in a plot to attack New York in 2003 with a device called *al-mubtakkar* (or "the invention") to disperse hydrogen cyanide gas in subway cars, potentially killing dozens of people—a strike which, according to former CIA Director George Tenet's 2007 autobiography, Ayman al-Zawahiri cancelled, saying, "We have something better in mind."³

According to one senior US intelligence official, Khabab (whose real name is Midhat Mursi al-Sayyid 'Umar) is now believed to have set up rudimentary labs with at least a handful of aides, and is training Western recruits for chemical attacks in Europe and perhaps the United States, just as he did when he ran the "Khabab Camp" at al-Qa'ida's sprawling Darunta training complex in Afghanistan's Tora Bora region before the attacks of September 11, 2001. Clearly, the very notion that al-Qa'ida's fledgling weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program is moving forward again raised alarm bells throughout intelligence and security communities worldwide, largely due to the assumption that the acquisition by al-Qa'ida of a weapon of mass destruction would lead directly to its use. Steven Flynn, for example, has suggested that it is a question of "when, not if" terrorists will attack the United States with WMD.⁴ However, as a number of scholars have observed, we must question this assumption if we are to gain a true understanding of the nature of the WMD terrorism threat.⁵

Building on the other chapters in this volume that address jihadist strategy, this chapter will examine their attack decision-making, as well as the tactical and operational advantages—and disadvantages—of using CBRN weapons to achieve their strategic and political objectives. The discussion begins by explaining how a terrorist group's tactics and targeting are directly related to its ideology, operational capabilities, and strategic constraints, and why in most cases analyzing these elements together explain why we have seen very few examples of WMD terrorism throughout history. Next, the chapter examines the target selection calculus of al-Qa'ida and seeks to address the question of how jihadists might use WMD if they were to acquire them. We then refine this analysis by focusing on the differing levels of interest in (and potential uses for) CBRN weapons by various elements of al-Qa'ida. Clearly, as other chapters in this volume demonstrate, it is dangerously misleading to assume that all jihadists think and act uniformly about strategy, tactics, and the role of CBRN weapons. Finally, we conclude with some thoughts on what our analysis suggests for further research and strategies to combat terrorism and WMD proliferation.

The Tactical Advantages and Disadvantages of CBRN Weapons

The general consensus among most scholars of international security is that CBRN weapons are sought by terrorists because of various assumed strategic and tactical benefits they offer. For example, as described by Jeffrey Bale in Chapter 1 of this volume, the possession of these weapons raises the profile and bargaining power of the group, and forces a government to take them very seriously. The tactical benefits of CBRN weapons vary widely, of course, as much as the weapons themselves. For example, a stolen nuclear warhead in the hands of a terrorist group brings a much different set of potential benefits than a small quantity of weaponized chemicals like ricin or chlorine gas. A group like al-Qa'ida is unlikely to be interested in a virulent, contagious biological pathogen that causes the slow painful death of indiscriminate millions worldwide, because avoiding counterproductive violence is necessary if they are to be considered a legitimate vanguard of the jihadist movement. Small-scale chemical weapons attacks might be possible (given the relatively easy access to key ingredients). But a nuclear device appears to be the most effective type of WMD to help eliminate US and Western obstacles that stand in the way of jihadists achieving their objectives.

However, from an operational perspective, it is important to note that the actual use of CBRN weapons by terrorists has yet to produce any real tactical or long-term strategic benefits for those responsible. Given that emulation and copycat behavior is commonplace throughout the terrorist world,⁶ it is very instructive that of the rare historical cases of WMD terrorism, none have been repeated or emulated by other terrorist groups. For example, in 1984, a cult led by the Bhagwan Shri Rajneesh used a biological agent to contaminate several restaurant salad bars in a plot to influence a local election near the town of The Dalles, Oregon. Soon after, steady streams of patients were reporting to local physicians and hospitals, with symptoms ranging from nausea and diarrhea to headache and fever. In total, 751 fell ill, but there were no fatalities. Two members of the group were prosecuted, and there is no evidence that the cult has since committed a similar act of violence. Furthermore, it is important to note that no other group has tried to emulate this tactic, despite its relative technical simplicity.

In June 1990, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) became the first insurgent, guerrilla, or terrorist organization to stage a chemical weapons attack when it used chlorine gas in its assault on a Sri Lankan Armed Forces camp at East Kiran. As Bruce Hoffman notes, this attack was relatively crude: several large drums of the chemical were transported from a nearby paper mill and positioned around the camp's perimeter, and when the wind currents were judged right, the attackers released the gas, which wafted into the camp.⁷ More than 60 military personnel were injured, and the LTTE captured the facility. However, though this was part of the first round in a renewed military offensive, the LTTE did not use a similar weapon in subsequent attacks, in part due to revulsion among their core supporters and constituencies.⁸

Chlorine is a fairly common chemical, particularly in industrialized societies where it is used for a broad range of applications, from municipal sewage treatment plants to plastics and other industries. Recently, insurgents in Iraq tried to use chlorine gas in a small number of their attacks against US and coalition forces, but the practice was short-lived, probably because of the same disadvantageous results that the LTTE encountered and because overall the casualties from those attacks were not significantly greater than what we have seen from conventional roadside and suicide bombings. Thus, with limited tactical benefits or returns on investment, combined with the increased risk to a group's own operatives and supporters, using this form of WMD may not be as attractive to jihadists as some observers have assumed.

In another example, Aum Shinrikyo—a Japanese religious cult—launched an attack in March 1995 on the Tokyo subway using sarin gas, killing nearly a dozen people, injuring approximately 1,000 others, and sending 5,000 to hospitals for checkups. Their objective in this attack was to disrupt an anticipated effort by law enforcement authorities to arrest members of the group, which is why they attacked subway lines leading to many government ministries. This attack was similar to their use of sarin the previous year in Matsumoto against judicial officials who were involved in a judicial proceeding against them.⁹ Here again, the tactic has not yet been replicated by jihadists or other groups, despite the recipes and instructions for manufacturing sarin that are widely available on the Internet. As a weapon, sarin will garner a group or an individual some level of media attention, but it has a limited capability for generating the kind of strategic effect that would help them achieve their overall objectives (for a more detailed description and analysis of Aum Shinrikyo, see Chapter 5 on Chemical Weapons).

More recently, when Bob Stevens, a tabloid photo editor in Boca Raton, Florida, died of anthrax in the months following the 9/11 attacks, he became the first US casualty in a new era of bioterrorism threats. In the days and weeks to follow, four others succumbed to anthrax after handling tainted mail—two postal workers in Washington, DC, a New York City hospital stockroom employee, and an elderly Connecticut woman. At least 17 others fell ill but survived the still-unsolved post-9/11 bioterrorism attack.¹⁰ Here again, a tactical and operating model has been offered for jihadists seeking to deploy *Bacillus anthracis* against their enemies, and yet to date none of them have. One could argue that the security measures put in place after October 2001 have much to do with it. However, worldwide there remain a plethora of vulnerabilities and opportunities for jihadists to acquire and use *B. anthracis*. Thus, perhaps the more likely reason that we have not seen follow-on attacks anywhere else, by jihadists or others, is that as a weapon this agent yields very limited (if any) strategic benefits and a low return on investment. It is not contagious, requires careful handling and sophistication to transform the spores into a weaponized, deliverable form, and has other disadvantages which, when compared with other items on the menu of weapons options at the jihadists' disposal, render it less attractive.

In each of these cases, the WMD terrorist attack failed to achieve any recognizable objectives other than to sicken or kill a relatively small number of people and garner media attention. This review of the historical record thus raises questions about what real tactical or strategic benefits can be derived from the use of these weapons—especially compared with the more popular and comparatively easier-to-deploy conventional explosives. Indeed, according to the 2008 Threat Assessment of the Director of National Intelligence, “the use of a conventional explosive [will] be the most probable al-Qa‘ida attack scenario because the group is proficient with conventional small arms and improvised explosive devices and is innovative in creating capabilities and overcoming security obstacles.”¹¹

Jihadists are not stupid; they will not invest substantial money, personnel, and other resources toward the acquisition and use of weapons whose strategic benefit is questionable, particularly when there are significant disadvantages associated with these weapons. For example, from the perspective of tactical deployment, CBRN materials pose many risks to operatives throughout the planning and preparation stages of an attack. A lack of familiarity and comfort with toxins, pathogens, or radiological materials could expose would-be perpetrators to greater operational risks than they may be willing to accept (assuming that they are aware of such risks and do not take precautions to mitigate or protect against them). In any case, many of the elements and materials necessary for these weapons are expensive and regulated through various domestic licensing systems and export control regimes, making it difficult to acquire

them without attracting the attention of local authorities. Further, these central elements are notoriously difficult to weaponize and deploy effectively, and the highly specialized knowledge required for a successful WMD attack is rare among terrorists. Overall, there are a lot more things that can go wrong with CBRN weapons than with conventional explosives. With all these considerations, the return on investment in CBRN is seen as lower than that associated with conventional, homemade explosives like those used in Bali, Madrid, London, and so many other jihadist attacks in recent years.

Finally, terrorist groups must consider the ideological and strategic ramifications of using WMD. By definition, terrorist groups are willing to use some level of violence in pursuit of their objectives, ranging from a desire for religious governance (e.g., Islamist militants seeking to establish a caliphate where Shari`a law reigns supreme) to Maoist-style communism (e.g., the insurgencies in Peru and Nepal). However, terrorists also generally seek to avoid counterproductive violence, so from a strategic standpoint weapons of mass destruction may not be all that useful.

Indeed, there are relatively few political ideologies that articulate a need for the end of the world, or at least the end of all mankind, and thus relatively few groups are seeking weapons and targets that would achieve this scale of tactical objective. Examples of those which might include extreme environmentalist cults like the Church of Euthanasia and the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (both of which call for the elimination of the human race in order to save the planet), and apocalyptic (doomsday or final judgment) cults. In fact, there is a threshold of catastrophic terrorism (based on the amount of death and destruction caused), a threshold which relatively few groups have crossed. Among the groups that have crossed the threshold of catastrophic terrorism (or at least intend to if given the capability and opportunity), most appear unconstrained by earthly considerations, and instead see themselves as fulfilling the mandate of a higher power—in essence, the threat they pose is limited solely by the weapons they can acquire. A common thread among these groups is the need for mass destruction and death (indeed, the elimination of all humans, in some cases) in order to bring about a better world envisioned and articulated through some form of catastrophic ideology. Most commonly, this future utopian world is envisioned through the lens of some type of religious interpretation. Among these, the most prominent in recent years has been Aum Shinrikyo, whose leader Shoko Asahara came to believe that a catastrophic world war was imminent, and that only his followers would survive.

Jihadists recognize the risk of being portrayed in the same category as these fringe apocalyptic groups. Indeed, al-Qa`ida and many of its affiliated groups are quite concerned with monitoring and controlling their public image. These considerations exert an impact on the WMD calculations of jihadists—clearly, they are not seeking the end of the world, but rather, they want their Salafi-Islamist vision of the future to dominate world affairs. Despite what some ill-informed observers in the media suggest, jihadists are not stupid; they will not invest time, money, personnel, or other resources in a weapon that is unlikely to yield positive results, and may even negatively affect their image and support among key constituencies.

Overall, despite globalization and numerous technological advances over the past decade, it is noteworthy that we have not seen more (and more successful) attacks using weapons of mass destruction. Indeed, based on the predictions of the past decade, we should be awash in terrorist attacks using improvised chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear weapons by now. But we are not, and for several good reasons, including the limited availability of CBRN materials, the relatively rare ideological justification for their use, the limited tactical and strategic benefits they offer, and the many operational disadvantages that are associated with a WMD attack.

Understanding the advantages and disadvantages of CBRN weapons is necessary in order to appreciate the difficulties that jihadists have in rationalizing their acquisition and use. Indeed, as the next section of this chapter illustrates, there are relatively narrow parameters within which jihadists consider WMD attacks useful.

Jihadist Motivations and Rationale for the Use of WMD

A terrorist group's tactics, weapons choices, and targeting are directly related to its ideology, operational capabilities, and strategic constraints. Generally speaking, the jihadists' vision of the future requires them to overthrow what they consider to be "apostate" regimes in the Middle East and replace them with governments that rule by Shari'a law, but only until the Islamic caliphate can be reestablished to rule over the entire Muslim world. Attacks against Western targets (such as those that have been carried out against New York City and the Pentagon, London, and Madrid) are necessary because it is through alliances with powerful, industrialized Western nations that these apostate regimes are sustained. It is here that we see the jihadists' overarching rationale for the use of CBRN weapons—they are perceived as offering them the power necessary to achieve their political objectives.

Saudi Cleric Shaykh Nasir ibn Hamid al-Fahd attempted to religiously legitimize the use of WMD by stating that laws and treaties established by infidels against the use of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons have no standing in Islamic law; that pronouncements of historical Islamic jurists legitimate the use of CBRN weapons and provide exceptions to the prohibition against killing women and children; and that the cumulative damage American bombs have caused to Muslim lands over many years justifies the kind of retaliation that can only be produced by a weapon of mass destruction. Whether the target is foreign or domestic, their interest in a WMD attack is predicated on the notion that America and the West have it coming; a WMD attack is necessary to "even the score." Similar rationalizations have been offered by other ideologues within the movement, such as when Abu Mus'ab al-Suri said in 2002, "Let the American people—those who voted for killing, destruction, the looting of other nations' wealth, megalomania and the desire to control others—be contaminated with radiation."¹² More recently, in September 2006, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir—a leader of al-Qa'ida in Mesopotamia—encouraged his fellow terrorists to consider testing these weapons in Iraq: "The field of jihad (holy war) can satisfy your scientific ambitions, and the large American bases (in Iraq) are good places to test your unconventional weapons, whether biological or dirty, as they call them."¹³

For members of al-Qa'ida, the acquisition and use of WMD is necessary to annihilate the enemies of Islam. They rationalize the need for these weapons as part of a power/capability/force multiplier calculation within the context of the larger socio-political vision being pursued. According to statements made on various jihadist web forums, supporters of the global salafi-jihadist movement want and expect a "spectacular" event even bigger than 9/11. Ibn Ladin, al-Zawahiri, and their immediate leadership cadres no doubt recognize that al-Qa'ida is in competition with other "voices" in the Muslim world, and a catastrophic terrorist attack will allow them to claim center stage. They also understand that intentional state sponsorship of a WMD attack is unlikely, but believe that if such weapons are made available, then Allah must intend for them to be used in the service of jihad. The question, then, is how they envision using these weapons in the event that they someday, somehow possess them.

The Role of WMD within Al-Qa'ida's Target Selection Calculus

In recent years, jihadists have chosen targets largely related to public transportation (subways, commuter trains, airports, ferries, and airlines), commerce (hotels, office buildings, cafes, nightclubs, etc.), and civil authority (government offices, police stations, etc.). What does this tell us about their potential for conducting a WMD attack? As mentioned earlier, it is dangerously misleading to assume that all jihadists think and act uniformly about strategy, tactics, and the role of CBRN weapons. Certainly there are patterns and commonalities from which general themes can be inferred. But most of what we know about jihadists' strategic objectives—and the tactical and operational means by which they seek to achieve these objectives—is drawn from documents disseminated by key ideologues and thinkers within the al-Qa'ida movement. Thus, a careful assessment of al-Qa'ida's own operational manuals and literature provides a valuable case study for how jihadists choose their targets.

To begin with, the primary strategic objective of the network has direct relevance for the question of targeting: to “bleed” (exhaust) the United States economically and militarily, both by directly causing inordinate economic losses and forcing the US to spend excessive amounts of money to protect its vast infrastructure. According to al-Qa'ida's main literature and manuals, the United States derives its considerable military power and political influence from its superior economy. It is believed, therefore, that disrupting the American economy will in turn defeat the US as an opponent and end its military hegemony and presence overseas. Impeding Western economies is, therefore, as one al-Qa'ida member aptly stated, “the most dangerous and effective arena of Jihad, because we live in a materialistic world.”¹⁴ Consequently, al-Qa'ida cells are encouraged to attack targets with high economic value that will result in serious economic losses in the United States.

The following excerpts from *Sawt al-Jihad* (The Voice of Jihad), al-Qa'ida's official publication in Saudi Arabia, underscore the network's primary strategic objective of weakening the United States economically by forcing it to expend enormous sums of money on protecting its vast infrastructure, as well as by attacking its economic assets directly:

What else is there to say about September 11?

Since September 11th America has been spending billions of dollars to protect its infrastructure and interests around the world... The attacker determines the timing of the strike. He will carry a concentrated strike one time at a weak point and then sit in ambush again. So the enemy will look for a gap and close it, this is not necessarily where he was hit but all other similar targets. So striking the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania means protecting every American embassy in the world. Striking the [USS] *Cole* at sea means protecting all American assets in the seas. Diversifying targets means protecting all American things in every land that may have terrorists!!

If the enemy used his economy to rule the world and hire collaborators, then we need to strike this economy with harsh attacks to bring it down on the heads of its owners. If the enemy has built its economy on the basis of open markets and free trade by getting the monies of investors, then we have to prove to these investors that the enemy's land is not safe for them, that his economy is not capable of guarding their monies, so they would abandon him to suffer alone the fall of his economy.

This is about Jihad against the crusader enemy, so what about the September 11th operation? Hijacking planes is a well known tactic, which was used by various fighters and freedom fighters, so what's new about this operation? People used to hijack planes and consider them a target, but those who are willing to put in the extra effort turned these planes into a method only, a projectile shot in the heart of the enemy....The enemy used to protect his external interests and spend exorbitant sums for this protection, so he was surprised when he was struck inside his borders. The enemy used to protect a thousand interests outside his country, now he has to protect a million interests inside his country that need continuing protection!! The attack on the Trade Center forced America since that day to spend billions to protect the huge economic infrastructure that runs the American economy. Using planes in this attack has forced America to spend billions to protect the planes and airports in all possible ways. This protection is not limited to the hundreds of American airports but also to every airport in the world. Anyone related to the aviation field is spending excessive amounts to guard air travel; the matter has reached protecting the skies....This is how America was transformed after one strike, protecting all that can be struck, as they guard all that can be used to strike with!! This related to armed protection. As for surveillance, now America monitors everything, it even needed to change its laws and to give up on what it used to pride itself of civil rights and personal freedoms. It has violated all previous taboos searching for terrorists.¹⁵

In October 2005, Abu Mus'ab al-Najdi, a Saudi al-Qa`ida affiliate, published a short manuscript that emphasized the network's strategic objective of attacking economic targets. In a seven-page document entitled "Al-Qa`ida's Battle is Economic not Military," he outlines in great detail the rationale behind attacking soft targets of high economic value by noting the following:

The Islamic nation [*umma*] has entered through al-Qa`ida's war with America a new period that is different from all the other periods experienced by Muslims against their enemies. This period is based on the economic war due to the peculiar nature of the adversary in this ferocious battle. Usually, wars that are based on military strength and victory belong to those who are militarily superior on the battlefield. But our war with America is fundamentally different, for the first priority is defeating her economically. For that, anything that negatively affects their economy is considered for us a step in the right direction in the path to victory. Military defeats do not greatly affect how we measure total victory, but these defeats indirectly impinge on the economy, which can be demonstrated with breaching the confidence of capitalists and investors in this nation's ability to safeguard its various trade and dealings.

In light of this matter, the difficulty and ease of the task becomes apparent. In addition, it becomes apparent why additional al-Qa`ida strikes inside the United States have been delayed. When thinking about military strikes, it is not difficult to carry out an attack that would kill a good number of American civilians, but in my opinion this is a waste of resources without much benefit. However, when directing these resources against economic targets, it is more effective and can get us many steps closer toward victory. An attack that kills a large number of Americans cannot

achieve a tenth of this effectiveness. This reveals the importance of the blessed September 11th attack, which is not that it killed a large number of infidels, but what is more important is the economic effect that this strike achieved....I will not be exaggerating if I said that striking the Pentagon was purely symbolic and had no noticeable effect on the course of the battle. It is symbolic for it shows the Americans that their foremost military facility can be destroyed by a handful of individuals, which is a blow to their morale and a point of pride for the Islamic peoples who have been drowning in defeat for many years.

An operation targeting a field of infrastructure in a new country that does not have a history of countering these operations is considered as bleeding (exhausting) to the greater enemy America and the targeted nation itself. It is so because these nations will be required to protect all similar potential targets, which results in economic exhaustion (bleeding)....For example, if a hotel that caters to Western tourists in Indonesia is targeted, the enemy will be required to protect all hotels that cater to Western tourists in all countries, which may become a target of similar attacks. You can say the same thing about living residences, economic establishments, embassies, and others.¹⁶

An assessment of al-Qa'ida's targeting rationale reveals that the network's most likely targets will be facilities of high economic value in the United States and Europe. Although the network's literature does not specify which precise sectors it intends to target, such facilities would most likely include financial districts and buildings, airports and planes, train and bus stations, ports and ships, subways, shopping malls, hotels, resorts, tourist attractions, sports arenas, entertainment centers, and embassies. For many of these types of targets, the interconnected, network-centric infrastructures within which they are situated would lead to a ripple effect of any WMD terrorist attack. That is, an attack on a critical component of a country's transportation infrastructure would impact upon such things as power distribution, food and water supply chains, waste management, the domestic retail sector, and so forth. As noted earlier, tactical decisions include "return on investment" considerations, and thus if jihadists were to acquire a weapon of mass destruction, it would likely be deployed in such a manner that our interconnected infrastructure vulnerabilities would amplify its effect. This would especially be the case if jihadists were in possession of only one or a few CBRN weapons, and would want to maximize the potential benefits derived from using them.

In addition to "bleeding" the United States economically, attacking American targets in Muslim countries is also aimed at discouraging alliances between the United States and regional "apostate" governments. As described above, according to al-Qa'ida's own training manuals and literature its primary targets are Western facilities of high economic value, in addition to Western corporations and Western individuals conducting business in Muslim countries, and targets related to the oil and tourism industries, either locally or in the West.

The rationale for attacking economic targets is also articulated in al-Qa'ida's urban guerrilla training manual entitled "Military Sciences—Targets Inside the Cities." In this manual, which is aimed at instructing jihadist formations on the tactics for conducting operations inside cities in the Muslim world, author Abi Hajir 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Muqrin - a former al-Qa'ida

commander in Saudi Arabia - specifically tells his students to concentrate their attacks on economic targets. He states:

The objective of attacking these targets: breaching the security and climate of stability that is necessary for economic growth, such as the bombing of oil pipelines in Iraq which has made it less appealing for foreign corporations. At the very least it prevents a secure climate that is needed for robbing the assets of Muslims.

Additional objectives include:

Removal of foreign capitalists from domestic markets; also negative economic consequences on their native lands, as occurred very quickly following the blessed strikes in Madrid which affected the entire European economy. Among these double strikes that affect the economy of the Crusader or Jewish or apostates regimes.

Among the Examples of Such Strikes:

- striking Jewish Crusader investments in Muslim lands.
- striking international corporations.
- striking international economists and business experts.
- striking imports from crusader nations through military means (as occurred in the bombing and burning of certain American restaurants), or through political means like boycotts.
- striking raw materials stolen from Muslim lands, such as the strike on the French oil carrier or the strikes on Iraqi oil pipelines. These kind of economic strikes are determined by the high leadership who wait for the appropriate time and place.
- assassination of Jews who work in business and disciplining those who cooperate with them economically following a proper warning. Only those who are proven to be collaborating apostates should be assassinated.¹⁷

In addition to attacking targets of high economic value, al-Qa'ida also aims at deterring Westerners from carrying out business in the Muslim world. According to statements by the network, Western commerce has led to corrupt and "apostate" regimes in Muslim countries (especially Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco—the home countries of many al-Qa'ida members). As demonstrated in the past several years, al-Qa'ida has routinely attacked Western targets (including hotels and resorts) in Muslim countries such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and Indonesia. While killing people indiscriminately may not always be in the jihadists' best interest (as was demonstrated, for example, by the infamous letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi imploring him to tone down the violence in Iraq), several of al-Qa'ida's more prominent ideologues (e.g., Sulayman Abu Ghayth) have argued that targeting certain populations of people is not only strategically sanctioned but ideologically justified. In his manual, Abi Hajir al-Muqrin also specifies to the readers in sinister detail the categories of "human targets" that al-Qa'ida wishes to attack. He states:

We should target and kill Jews and Christians. We say to all who fight god and his prophet, we bring you slaughter. In our current reality we should not be deterred by borders or geography, all Muslim dwellings and lands are ours. We should turn the lands of the infidels into a hell as they have turned our lands into a hell. For that, all operational cells should not pay attention to geographic borders as described by the enemies, but aim to transform infidel lands into battlefronts, as they have turned Muslim lands into fields of experimentation for their weapons and inventions. We need to transform their lands into hell and destruction, and the sons of the Muslim nations are capable of this, god permitting.

Clearly, CBRN weapons would be an important and effective means to achieving the goals outlined in this particular passage. Al-Muqrin's manual continues:

The priority in these operations should be given to Jews and Christians with official connection to Muslim lands. It is advisable to start with targeting unprotected easy targets. Priority is given to the dependants of infidel nations that are directly involved in supporting local apostates. For example, in Saudi Arabia first target Americans, then the English. In Iraq, the Americans. In Afghanistan, the Americans. In Algeria, the French. In Indonesia, the Australians. . . .etc.

Categorizing Human Targets by Importance:

1. Jews: they are divided into various degrees by importance. First American and Israeli Jews, then British Jews, then French ...etc.
2. Christians: they are categorized by order of importance as follows:
 - Americans.
 - British.
 - Spanish.
 - Australians.
 - Canadians.
 - Italians.

These groups are further divided into:

- businessmen. For business has global importance in this age.
- diplomats, politicians, intellectuals, analysts, and political emissaries.
- scientists and experts.
- military commanders and soldiers.
- tourists, visiting entertainers, and all which have received a warning from the mujahidin to abstain from or evacuate Muslim lands.¹⁸

CBRN weapons would play an important role in enhancing al-Qa'ida's target selection calculus because, despite their relatively modest killing capability (with the exception of nuclear weapons), their deployment against civilian and transportation facilities is likely to cause significant economic damage. For example, the al-Qa'ida manual for the manufacture of the

previously mentioned *al-Mubtakkar*, entitled *Al-mubtakkar al-farid: Li irsal al-safah al-athiri ila al-kafir al-'anid* (*The Unique Invention: To Deliver the Gaseous Killer to the Stubborn Infidel*), which instructs jihadists on how to manufacture a hydrogen cyanide dispersal device, outlines the following specific locations and facilities where *al-Mubtakkar* can be used:¹⁹

- brothels
- theaters
- markets and shopping malls
- Jewish temples
- dancing halls
- trains (not stations due to camera surveillance)
- schools
- hospitals
- bars and restaurants
- banks and loan facilities
- cinemas
- gyms
- casinos
- churches on Muslim lands
- government offices (security and intelligence)

As this target list demonstrates, al-Qa'ida is not only concerned with causing mass civilian casualties, but additionally in causing considerable economic damage, achieving a symbolic effect, and gaining media coverage by attacking these soft targets. One can easily imagine how significant an attack using *al-Mubtakkar* on trains, subways, or shopping malls would be. Even if the attack only resulted in a handful of deaths, it would surely result in the extended closure of these facilities, a massive search of the facilities, and an expensive period of reconstruction. Such an attack would surely have a significant economic impact on the community targeted and the nation as a whole, for it would necessitate that all similar facilities throughout the country are adequately protected and prepared to deal with such an event. And constant media coverage and political fear-mongering would negatively impact consumer confidence, a key economic indicator.

Another CBRN manual further reinforces this point. The document, entitled "Instances of Radiation Pollution from 1945-1987" and published on a well-known al-Qa'ida website, highlights the group's aim of causing severe economic losses to the United States and its allies. In an effort to cause serious economic damage, the document encourages jihadists to attack the West by employing Cesium-137 in Radiological Dispersal Devices (RDDs). It specifically underscores the economic repercussions of RDD attacks by stating the following:

"The important thing is to disperse radioactive material in a large commercial area so the government is forced to shut down this area, which will cause this country massive economic disruption due to the following reasons:

- the high costs of decontamination of radioactive areas.
- the high economic losses in this large commercial area due to closure.
- subsequent unemployment and loss of jobs.

- stoppage of general life in that area.
- large compounded problems are to follow due to these losses.

Suggested cities: Las Vegas (the city of fornication and gambling that does not sleep) – New York – London – Sydney – Tokyo – Moscow – Other large tourist cities – and commercial capitals of all infidel nations.²⁰

In sum, numerous statements, manuals, and other al-Qa‘ida documents reveal a fairly consistent pattern of target selection and strategic rationales for those targets. However, to truly understand the WMD threat posed by al-Qa‘ida, it is necessary to examine the differences between the members and followers of this movement, along with their different strategic and operational constraints and objectives.

Refining our Analysis of Al-Qa‘ida’s Targeting

Most observers have described al-Qa‘ida in the generic sense of being a unified, monolithic entity. However, nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, as terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman recently explained, al-Qa‘ida should be viewed as a globally-networked movement with at least four dimensions, each of which has its own distinct set of operational preferences, organizational capabilities and constraints, and attack decision-making parameters.²¹

The first, called “al-Qa‘ida central,” is comprised of leftover leaders of the pre-9/11 organization, ostensibly led by Usama bin Ladin, Ayman al-Zawahiri and a small cadre of others who are believed to be hiding in the mountainous border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan. This dimension of al-Qa‘ida may be actively engaged in commissioning some attacks, directing surveillance and collating reconnaissance, planning operations, and approving their execution. But their most important role in a WMD attack will probably be in providing ideological inspiration and perhaps financial support and some knowledge of strategic or tactical value to others within the movement who have greater operational capabilities and fewer constraints.

At the same time, however, we should be mindful of recent intelligence reports that indicate that al-Qa‘ida central is reconstituting itself in the tribal areas of Pakistan and could in time regain the operational capabilities it once enjoyed during the late 1990s. As the July 2007 National Intelligence Estimate observes, this group “is and will remain the most serious terrorist threat to the Homeland, as its central leadership continues to plan high-impact plots, while pushing others in extremist Sunni communities to mimic its efforts and to supplement its capabilities. We assess the group has protected or regenerated key elements of its Homeland attack capability, including: a safehaven in the Pakistan Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), operational lieutenants, and its top leadership.”²² Perhaps over the long-term horizon, barring any extensive military deployment (by Pakistan or the US) in Waziristan, al-Qa‘ida central will re-emerge as the foremost threat behind a potential WMD terrorist attack.

The second dimension of al-Qa‘ida is comprised of formally established insurgent or terrorist groups like those mentioned above, who have received training, arms, money, “spiritual guidance,” and other assistance from al-Qa‘ida central. These groups are located in dozens of countries across Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. These so-called “al-Qa‘ida affiliate groups”—like Jemaah Islamiyah (in Indonesia), the Islamic Army of Aden (in Yemen), Harkat al-Mujahidin (in Kashmir) and the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group—have been responsible for hundreds of terrorist attacks since before 9/11. Because of these groups’ ideological (and

sometimes logistical) relationship with al-Qa'ida central, we have often attributed these attacks to Usama bin Ladin and his close colleagues, regardless of the absence of any direct command or control linkages. This is precisely what Ibn Ladin envisioned for al-Qa'ida: armed groups inspired to act on behalf of the global movement.

However, the geographically-specific nature of virtually all these groups—that is, with nationally- or regionally-oriented memberships, political agendas, and available targets—poses some constraints on the viability of CBRN weapons. Most of these affiliate groups focus their targeting primarily on the “near enemy” (local apostate or non-Muslim regimes) as opposed to the “far enemy” (the US and the West), and thus a WMD attack would in essence wreak havoc “in their own backyard” and diminish the likelihood of helping the group achieve their political aspirations. For example, if the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group were to carry out a WMD attack in Morocco, they would surely lose whatever local support and operational flexibility they may have within the region. Furthermore, attacks that negatively impact the economic well-being of a group's local support base would make it harder for the group to sustain operations, possibly weakening their ability to conduct future attacks. The same could be said for the jihadists in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Yemen, Libya, Tunisia, and so forth. Thus, while these groups may currently be considered more operationally capable than al-Qa'ida central of conducting a WMD attack, they are only slightly more likely to do so because of strategic constraints, and would have to carefully weigh the kinds of blowback ramifications that do not concern Ibn Ladin, al-Zawahiri, and other members of the stateless al-Qa'ida central.

The third dimension of the movement is comprised of dispersed, ad-hoc groupings of al-Qa'ida adherents who may have (or previously had) some direct connection with al-Qa'ida but are no longer members of any formal group. There are two subcategories within this dimension: individuals who have had some prior terrorism experience, and may have been involved in some previous jihadist campaigns in Algeria, the Balkans, or Chechnya—or perhaps more recently in Iraq—and may have trained in some al-Qa'ida facility, like in Afghanistan, Yemen or Sudan before 9/11. Examples include Ahmad Rassam (the so-called “Millennium Plot” bomber, whose target was Los Angeles International Airport), Kamal Bourgass (who was indicted in the UK for conspiracy to use ricin in a terrorist attack), and Dhiren Barot (who was arrested in the UK after authorities discovered a plot to use radioactive “dirty bombs” in a series of attacks against US financial targets, London hotels, and train stations). All of these individuals had at some point in time trained in jihadist camps in Pakistan, Kashmir, Malaysia, or the Philippines. This category also includes trained but unaffiliated individuals like the suicide bombers who attacked the London underground on July 7, 2005, two of whom are believed to have received explosives training by an al-Qa'ida operational commander in Pakistan.

This dimension of al-Qa'ida is perhaps the most dangerous when considering the threat of WMD terrorism. These individuals may have just enough tactical training to be competent, along with significant personal motivation, and yet lack the geographically-based constraints of the formal al-Qa'ida affiliate groups. They may have the ability to conduct covert operations, or the requisite level of self-discipline and commitment to earn an advanced degree in biology, chemistry, or physics. They may be loosely connected with criminal underground networks—as was the case with the 2004 Madrid bombers—who provide them with access to knowledge, explosives, and other weapons that are useful for conducting basic terrorist attacks, and perhaps even more exotic CBRN materials. And their lack of membership in any formal group could make it more difficult for authorities to gather intelligence about any planned attack.

Further, individuals within this realm of al-Qa'ida may wish to distinguish themselves by acquiring a more sophisticated tactical capability. There is a certain level of competition within the global jihadist movement among groups and members, sometimes fueled by a need to attract greater support and resources from the global community of sympathizers, which may lead them down a path towards CBRN weapons. Competition often breeds innovation, creativity, and other attributes of human nature that can be harnessed for good or, in this case, for potentially catastrophic terrorism. And at the same time, these ad-hoc groupings of al-Qa'ida adherents may be relatively unconcerned about managing perceptions or community blowback, and may not feel constrained by the strategic considerations that influence the tactical and targeting decisions of other elements of al-Qa'ida. Overall, the levels of knowledge and motivation found among groups and individuals in this category suggest a greater WMD attack potential than in the others.

The fourth dimension of al-Qa'ida includes radicalized individuals who have absolutely no direct connection with al-Qa'ida or any other identifiable terrorist group, but nonetheless are prepared to carry out attacks in solidarity with or support of al-Qa'ida's jihadist agenda. Their relationship with al-Qa'ida is more inspirational than actual. They are typically motivated by a shared sense of enmity and grievance felt towards the United States and West, as well as the apostate regimes it supports, and more generally complain about the oppression of Muslims in Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya, and elsewhere.

Most individuals within this dimension of al-Qa'ida have been rank amateurs, lacking any real disciplined training and unable to successfully pull off a dramatic terrorist attack. The likelihood of a WMD terrorist attack from this quarter is thus relatively low, but because of inadequate operational capabilities rather than divergent ideological or strategic considerations. However, one cannot rule out the possibility of a highly-skilled individual becoming inspired by the justifications for WMD violence put forth by al-Qa'ida's ideologues. After all, a primary objective of Usama bin Ladin has always been to encourage and facilitate a worldwide Islamic revolution—to launch a socio-political action movement of global proportion, and to inspire, motivate, and animate radicalized Muslims to join the movement's fight. "Join the Jihad." "Think globally, act locally." These are the core messages from al-Qa'ida's massive strategic communications effort. One can only hope that their messages do not find resonance with an angry, disenfranchised nuclear lab technician or a biochemist with access to some of the world's most lethal pathogens.

Equally important, al-Qa'ida-inspired individuals or cells may desire to prove themselves to al-Qa'ida central or simply wish to acquire greater glory (or notoriety) within the global jihadist movement by aspiring to develop a WMD capability themselves or by accumulating and proliferating WMD knowledge for others. This is illustrated in the case of the "Nuclear Preparation Encyclopedia," an extensive manual consisting of multiple chapters compiled by jihadist activists operating under the *nom de guerre* "Layth al-Islam" (Lion of Islam), who states that "I have been studying nuclear physics for two years on various scientific and Jihadi websites."²³ He adds that his posting is "a present to the Emir [commander] of the Mujahideen Sheikh Usama Bin Ladin, God bless him, for the Jihad in the path of God," and that it aims to empower the jihadist community with knowledge of nuclear weapons.²⁴ Following its posting on the *al-Firdaws* jihadist website in October 2005, this manual was viewed by more than 57,000 viewers and received considerable attention in jihadist circles.²⁵

Conclusion

All four variations of al-Qa'ida, as discussed in this chapter, are likely to employ similar tactical and targeting behaviors. For example, suicide bombings will surely remain prominent within their attack arsenal, and their targeting preference will seek to have a strategic, economic and symbolic effect. Operational constraints—including the difficulty in acquiring certain toxins, pathogens, and radiological materials, and the high levels of risks that these items pose to operatives during the planning and preparation stages of an attack—may be a key deterrent for most (but clearly not all) jihadists. Some devices like the aforementioned *al-Mubtakkar* can be readily assembled by jihadist operatives, provided that they can procure the precursor chemicals. And they may also find it useful to identify and use “pre-positioned weapons.” For the attacks of September 11, 2001, al-Qa'ida central modeled its strategy on using “pre-positioned weapons”—no weapons were smuggled into the country, no exotic chemicals or pathogens were needed, and no disgruntled scientists or black market profiteers were involved in that attack. Rather, the success of 9/11 (from their perspective) was the product of commitment, training, funds, flight information, and box cutters. Thus, when considering the WMD terrorism threat, we should certainly be concerned about the vulnerabilities associated with nuclear power plants, chemical storage facilities, bio-technology labs, dams, water protection infrastructure (à la Hurricane Katrina), and railway tanker cars carrying toxic chemicals through or near populated areas or near economically critical targets, particularly those related to energy security.

In the future, al-Qa'ida central may emerge as the most likely threat for carrying out acts of WMD terrorism, especially if Abu Khabab is indeed able to resurrect al-Qa'ida's program to obtain or develop weapons of mass destruction. However, this analysis suggests that currently the most likely threat of WMD terrorism may stem from ad-hoc groupings of al-Qa'ida adherents who may have (or previously had) some direct connection with al-Qa'ida, but are not now members of any formal group. They will likely face greater financial and operational constraints than al-Qa'ida central or affiliate groups, but are also less likely to be constrained by the ideological or strategic concerns about carrying out counterproductive violence. Assuming that they follow the targeting guidance issued by leaders of al-Qa'ida central, they are likely to attack energy, transportation, or other infrastructure targets in the West, but they may also attack these kinds of targets in the Muslim world, arguing that these are the sources of power for an “apostate” local regime. Furthermore, because of globalization and the increasing interdependence among all nations, attacking energy-related targets in the Middle East and Asia would have a strategic ripple effect in the West. And, unlike the regional affiliates or other elements of al-Qa'ida, these ad-hoc groups of motivated jihadists are less likely to be constrained by strategic or ideological “counterproductive violence” considerations, and thus may deploy WMD on Muslim lands regardless of whether or not it would provoke dire condemnation from the Muslim masses.

Our analysis supports the suggestion that future al-Qa'ida attacks are more likely to involve conventional high explosives—whether or not via suicide bombings—than CBRN weapons. Targeting guidance emphasizes economic impact over mass casualties, and jihadists have already become familiar (and had some success) with conventional high explosives, so overall there are relatively few vectors of ideological or strategic justification for taking on the additional risks that would come with WMD. Further, as noted earlier in this chapter, it is likely that only a small minority of CBRN weapons would be useful to jihadists. Overall, within the jihadist world fueled by al-Qa'ida's ideology, there are relatively few groups or individuals with the requisite combination of both tactical competence and strategic freedom to actually benefit

from investing the time, money, manpower, and effort into planning and carrying out a WMD attack.

And yet, all of the available intelligence indicates that members of al-Qa'ida—all dimensions, al-Qa'ida central and its supporters and inspired cells—are keenly interested in acquiring CBRN weapons. Al-Qa'ida central seeks to develop these weapons through the resurrected work of Abu Khabab, and the movement as a whole does so through the proliferation of WMD manuals on the Internet. The economic damage these weapons could inflict would surely aid them in their quest to degrade the strength and political will of the US and reduce our willingness to maintain a presence in the Middle East or to support the “infidel, corrupt regimes” in the region that are the true intermediate-term targets of al-Qa'ida's wrath. While conventional explosives and suicide bombings will remain predominant in the jihadist milieu, it is only a matter of time before their motivations and opportunities converge to produce a WMD attack.

Notes

¹ J. Michael McConnell, “Annual Threat Assessment of the Director of National Intelligence for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,” February 5, 2008, p. 7

² Josh Meyer, “Al Qa'ida said to focus on WMDs,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 3, 2008.

³ Ibid.

⁴ This is a catch phrase used—some may say abused—by several government officials, security experts, academics, and comedians to discuss the likelihood of the use of WMD against the United States. Stephen Flynn, in his book *America the Vulnerable*, (HarperCollins: 2004) spoke of containers as “the poor man's missile” and implied that the question is “when, not if” such containers will be used to deliver WMD into the United States.

⁵ For example, see Sammy Salama and Lydia Hansell, “Does Intent Equal Capability? Al Qa'ida and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” *Nonproliferation Review* 12, no. 3, (November 2003), 615-653.

For a thorough analysis of this, see *Teaching Terror: Strategic and Tactical Learning in the Terrorist World*, edited by James J.F. Forest (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

⁷ Bruce Hoffman, “CBRN Terrorism Post-9/11” in *Weapons of Mass Destruction and Terrorism*, edited by Russell Howard and James J.F. Forest, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007).

⁸ John V. Parachini, “Comparing Motives and Outcomes of Mass Casualty Terrorism Involving Conventional and Unconventional Weapons,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 24, no. 5, (September 2001), 389-406.

⁹ This Matsumoto attack did not kill the 3 judges, but did inflict deaths and casualties on neighbors and succeeded in delaying the trial that the Aum thought it might lose. For a list of Aum attacks with biological agents, see David E. Kaplan, “Aum Shinrikyo (1995),” in *Toxic Terror: Assessing Terrorist Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons*, ed. Jonathan B. Tucker, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), 221.

¹⁰ Peter Franceschina, “Anthrax Attacks Remain Unsolved,” *Baltimore Sun*, October 15, 2006, 1. See Russell Howard, “Preface” in *Weapons of Mass Destruction and Terrorism*, edited by Russell Howard and James Forest, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2007).

¹¹ J. Michael McConnell, “Annual Threat Assessment of the Director of National Intelligence for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,” February 5, 2008, p. 7

¹² Al-Suri is a Syrian who spent the 1990s working with al-Qa'ida leaders to train fighters in the use of poisons and chemicals at two camps near Jalalabad and Kabul. Statement made on October 21, 2002.

¹³ Statement made September 28, 2006. MEMRI Special Dispatch Series - No. 1309.

¹⁴ Nur al-Din al-Kurdi, “The Arenas of Jihad,” *Dharwat al-Sunam (Peak of the Camel's Hump)*, Volume 3, pp. 27-28.

¹⁵ Akhu Man Ta'a Allah, “What Else is There to Say About September 11,” *Sawt al-Jihad (Voice of Jihad) Magazine*, Volume 26, pp. 35-42.

¹⁶ Abu Mus'ab al-Najdi, “al-Qa'ida's Battle is Economic not Military,” October 3, 2005.

¹⁷ Abi Hajir 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Muqrin, “Military Sciences – Targets in the Cities.” *Mu'askar al-Battar (al-Battar Camp) Magazine*, Volume 7, pp. 23-27.

¹⁸ Ibid.

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- ¹⁹ “Al-Mubtakkar al-Farid: Li Irsaal al-Safah al-Athiri Ila al-Kafir al-`Anid – The Unique Invention: To Deliver the Gaseous Killer to the Stubborn Infidel,” *al-Firdaws*, October 2005.
- ²⁰ Abu al-Usud al-Faqir, “Instances of Radiation Pollution from 1945-1987,” *al-Faruq*.
- ²¹ Testimony before Congress, *Combating Terrorism Center’s website*, February 14, 2007, available at: http://ctc.usma.edu/Hoffman_Testimony021407.pdf.
- ²² National Intelligence Council, “National Intelligence Estimate: The Terrorist Threat to the US Homeland,” July 2007. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Washington, DC: NIC.
- ²³ “Al-Qa’ida Jihadi Website Publishes ‘Nuclear Preparation Encyclopedia,’” *WMDInsights*, December 2005/January 2006.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Uzi Mahnaimi and Tom Walker, “Al-Qa’ida woos recruits with nuclear bomb website,” *The Sunday Times*, November 6, 2005.