THREAT CONVERGENCE: NEW PATHWAYS TO PROLIFERATION?

Terrorist Group Proclivity toward the Acquisition and Use of Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Review of the Terrorism Studies Literature

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Contextualizing the Literature Review

This literature review provides a reference base for researchers contributing to the Threat Convergence Project, an initiative led by the Fund for Peace. The Threat Convergence Project aims to integrate ongoing work in the fields of counter terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and weak and failing states. The evidence base generated through the Project will strengthen the nation’s anticipatory and preventative countermeasures to catastrophic acts of WMD terrorism.

Leading thinkers, gathered under the Fund’s auspices in an April 2006 mapping workshop, adopted a supply-and-demand model of threat convergence. Workshop participants encouraged a detailed examination of the sequence of events that might permit a nuclear attack by a terrorist entity operating in the enabling environments of weak and failing states. A conference convened by the Fund for Peace in November 2006 added depth to the supply-and-demand model; through panel presentations and scenario development, experts identified knowledge gaps and questions for future research. The panel presentations in particular addressed the following dimensions of the threat convergence problem: 1) the risks of non-state actors’ procurement of nuclear materials; 2) the potential for collaboration between state and non-state actors as an avenue to WMD proliferation; and 3) the potential range of motivations and internal rationales that make nuclear terrorism attractive to terrorist groups.

This literature review addresses the third sub-topic, presenting current knowledge on the factors impacting a group’s proclivity toward attacks using non-conventional weapons or WMD. In a departure from the established scope of the Threat Convergence Project, the literature review addresses attacks utilizing biological and chemical agents as well as nuclear materials; as a general rule, the sources consulted for the literature review addressed WMD collectively. The literature review provides a reference on the nuances captured in previous scholarship, taking into account the characteristics and ideologies of specific groups and their targeting strategies, lethality attributed to conventional and non-conventional weapons, and the consequences of a WMD attack favorable to the perpetrators.
Trends Identified in Literature Infer Increased Risk of WMD Attack

Within the last decade, the literature on terrorists’ resort to chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear (CBRN) weapons has witnessed a renaissance. Scholarly and deliberative attention to the potential of a catastrophic attack using WMD is driven in part by specific incidents such as the 1995 Aum Shinrikyo sarin nerve gas attack\(^1\), and evidence of al Qaeda’s desire to develop nuclear capabilities and chemical and biological weaponry\(^2\) along with a May 2003 fatwa justifying use of nuclear weapons against the United States.\(^3\)

*Trends indicate increased risk*

One can infer from a confluence of trends an increased risk of an attack involving WMD. Four such trends summarized by Stern\(^4\) and repeated throughout the literature are that *ad hoc* groups motivated by religious conviction or revenge have surpassed political and separatist groups in frequency and lethality of attacks; the dissolution of the Soviet Union has created a black market in weapons, components and know-how; chemical and biological weapons are proliferating; and advances in technology reduce the difficulty of carrying out a WMD attack. A related trend cited by Sopko is the involvement of organized crime networks in nuclear smuggling and trafficking.\(^5\) Only one of these trends addresses directly the question of motivation, which as Hoffman has observed remains elusive in comparison to studies of requisite technical capabilities and countermeasures.\(^6\)

*Groups’ preference for conventional weapons does not negate need for sophisticated threat assessment*

In assessing the literature, two key questions, as articulated by Cameron,\(^7\) frame the discussion of terrorist motivation: 1) would terrorists want to cause mass casualties; and, if they did 2) would they use nonconventional weapons? In answering these questions, the literature presents a nuanced approach. Rather than treating terrorist groups as a monolithic force, authors qualify their conclusions against the characteristics of specific groups and targets.

The overarching consensus is that *most* terrorist groups will prefer conventional weapons to weapons of mass destruction; nonetheless, the catastrophic consequences of a WMD attack require vigilance. Quoting Hoffman:

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\(^1\) For a comprehensive discussion of Aum Shinrikyo, see Juergensmeyer’s “Armageddon in a Tokyo Subway” and Parachini’s “The Making of Aum Shinrikyo’s Chemical Weapons Program.”


\(^3\) Bloom, *Dying to Kill*, 173.


\(^7\) Cameron, “WMD Terrorism in the United States,” 166.
Competing motives, such as those raised by religious terrorism, coupled with potential opportunity, e.g., ease of access to both the information and material required to fabricate and employ CBRN weapons—could portend for a bloodier and more destructive era of terrorism in the future. … A combination of unforeseen developments and unexpected technological breakthroughs could launch terrorism on a higher trajectory toward greater levels of lethality and destruction, perhaps involving even CBRN weapons. 8

Stern buttresses the call for concern, citing conclusions of a 2002 Institute for Science and International Security study authored by David Albright, Kathryn Buehler and Holly Higgins, and published in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. Whereas neither bin Laden nor al Qaeda possessed nuclear weapons or the fissile material necessary for production, the authors believed, at the time of the study’s release, that al Qaeda had the requisite capability to build a crude nuclear explosive if the organization were to obtain sufficient nuclear-weapons-useable material. 9 Acknowledging this possibility of CBRN attacks, the articles reviewed encourage more sophisticated threat assessment.

The Question of Lethality Links Motivation and Weapons Preferences

The most quoted pronouncement on terrorists’ desire for mass casualties is Brian Jenkins’ view that “terrorists want a lot of people watching, and a lot of people listening, and not a lot of people dead.” 10 Even after the attacks on Khobar Towers and the Marine barracks in Beirut, Jenkins remained steadfast that “simply killing a lot of people has seldom been one terrorist objective. … Terrorists operate on the principle of the minimum force necessary. They find it unnecessary to kill many, as long as killing a few suffices for their purposes.” 11

Rationale toward mass casualty attacks

In light of Jenkins’ position, why might a terrorist group desire to inflict mass casualties, with either a conventional or nonconventional weapon? First, groups that seek to inflict mass casualties may believe that they are in a weak position and have no bargaining power. 12 Cameron argues that a possible motivation for nuclear terrorism (emphasis added) is the terrorist group’s belief that is has nothing to lose: “If the group felt that it was fading, dissolving into factions, or being usurped for prominence by another group, it might launch an act of nuclear terrorism to regain its stature.” 13

8 Hoffman, Inside Terrorism, 277.
9 Stern, Terror in the Name of God, 258.
10 Jenkins, “International Terrorism,” 15.
11 Jenkins, Likelihood of Nuclear Terrorism, 6.
13 Cameron, Nuclear Terrorism: A Threat Assessment, 135.
Second, groups may mount high-lethality or mass casualty attacks to attract attention from a public that has become inured or desensitized to violence,\textsuperscript{14} with the implication that even spectacular attacks can reach a diminishing point of return. To attract attention, the casualties would necessarily involve victims of interest to the media (such as the children at the daycare center at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building), and achieve a scale to merit coverage of the attack absent prior interest in the perpetrating group or its purpose.\textsuperscript{15}

Third, terrorist groups are slacking in their self-restraint. Hoffman\textsuperscript{16} and Cameron\textsuperscript{17} reference what Hoffman terms the increasing “amatuerization” of terrorism, paired with increased professionalization of its operatives. By amateurization, Hoffman means the loosening, if not removal, of self-imposed constraints which heretofore dictated conservative operations and lethality proportional to the group’s objectives. Professionalization refers to the diffusion of veteran terrorist organizations’ tactical and technological competence across the spectrum of violence.

As Hoffman explains, in the Cold War paradigm terrorist groups operated under direct control or at the behest of a foreign government, or claimed ethnic or nationalist aspirations. Such groups were conservative in their operations, and slow to innovate in their escalation of lethality, targeting choices, or skill in defeating countermeasures to conventional high-explosive attacks.\textsuperscript{18}

For recently emergent and religiously-motivated groups in particular, many of the self-imposed and technical constraints are beginning to erode.\textsuperscript{19} As Cameron has observed, ideologically-motivated groups adopt a polarizing “us” versus “them” worldview, offering a moral justification for mass-casualty attacks: “If an act, no matter how heinous, furthers the group cause then it must be good by definition. The cause of society’s ills is perceived to lie outside the group, often with the establishment. To destroy the source of those ills is therefore the height of morality.”\textsuperscript{20}

\textit{Why conventional weapons?}

At this juncture, it is useful to remind oneself that correlation is not causality. Whereas evidence exists that the lethality of terrorist attacks is increasing (in terms of frequency, number of fatalities and casualties, and the places and victims targeted), the resort to WMD does not necessarily follow. As Jenkins asserts:

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{14} Hoffman, \textit{An Analysis of Trends}, 20.
\item\textsuperscript{15} Cameron, “WMD Terrorism in the United States,” 167.
\item\textsuperscript{16} Hoffman, \textit{An Analysis of Trends}, 36.
\item\textsuperscript{17} Cameron, “WMD Terrorism in the United States,” 170.
\item\textsuperscript{18} Hoffman, “Some Preliminary Hypotheses,” 46.
\item\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 45.
\item\textsuperscript{20} Cameron, \textit{Nuclear Terrorism: A Threat Assessment}, 135.
\end{itemize}
There is, however, no inexorable linear progression that takes one easily from the currently identified spectrum of potential subnational nuclear terrorists to actual subnational nuclear terrorists, or from the nuclear incidents that have occurred thus far to nuclear actions of greater consequence.\textsuperscript{21}

In Cameron’s words, groups have not achieved their “killing potential” using conventional weaponry.\textsuperscript{22}

Most terrorist groups will weigh choices based on rationality and cost-benefit calculus, posing to themselves the following question: “What can transnational terrorists accomplish through the use of mass destruction terror that they could not accomplish with conventional military and guerilla methods at less risk and cost,” namely “the almost certain increase in public abhorrence of such methods, and the potentially disastrous political reactions arising therefrom.”\textsuperscript{23}

A convincing claim downgrading the likelihood of a WMD attack is that previous, documented attacks employing biological, chemical or radiological agents and isotopes have not achieved mass destruction. The reasons for the inverse relationship between potential and actual harm are many and varied. One explanation, previously discussed, is that “terrorists are technologically conservative, preferring to use tried and true methods to achieve their aims.”\textsuperscript{24} Organizational dynamics may serve to counterweigh bold moves, which could lead to factionalization and defections.\textsuperscript{25}

Applying rational choice theory, Jacobs cites three reasons why terrorists have not yet employed nuclear or radiological weapons: the group can achieve its objectives through conventional means; conventional means employ devices and materials that are easier to obtain; and consequences and outcomes of a conventional attack are known and predictable.\textsuperscript{26} A nuclear attack would violate R. L. Beckman’s \textit{minimum force principle}, and would generate such excessive fatalities, social disruption, and collateral damage that public support or indifference would turn to outrage.\textsuperscript{27} Foxell concurs: “fear of responsibility for a monumentally reprehensible act” would disintegrate any public sympathy for the group.\textsuperscript{28}

Other reasons to eschew WMD in favor of conventional weapons involve factors of capability and feasibility. As outlined by Jacobs:

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{21} Jenkins, \textit{The Potential for Nuclear Terrorism}, 4.
\item\textsuperscript{22} Cameron, \textit{Nuclear Terrorism: A Threat Assessment}, 136.
\item\textsuperscript{23} Mengel, “Terrorism and New Technologies,” 207.
\item\textsuperscript{24} Cameron, \textit{Nuclear Terrorism: A Threat Assessment}, 136.
\item\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{26} Jacobs, “The Nuclear Threat,” 159.
\item\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 158.
\item\textsuperscript{28} Foxell, “The Debate,” 94.
\end{itemize}
Although a functional [nuclear] weapon requires only a small amount of plutonium, obtaining the requisite amount of weapons-grade material, assembling the technical personnel to create the device, equipping a laboratory-shop to build the device, obtaining all the other materials needed, funding the operation and keeping the entire enterprise secret appears to be a series of steps that have effectively prevented any successful attempt.²⁹

The lack of experience in carrying out a catastrophic WMD attack has thus far proven prohibitive; however, the reverse is also true, that one successful attack could spawn imitative attempts combined with one-upmanship. Bloom documents the current functioning of a competitive model within the realm of conventional terrorism, namely suicide attacks. Bloom does not address the potential escalation to WMD, though the competitive dynamics could prove similar.

**Conventional weapons scenario**

Dolnik & Bhattacharjee present the most concrete case for a terrorist group’s favoring conventional weapons over WMD. The authors apply a multi-goal analysis framework to Hamas’s decision-making, incorporating audience factors and the group’s desired perception among its key audiences, in this case the Palestinian people and Arab nation-states. In terms of tactical goals, the authors list several major criteria: technological feasibility, cost-effectiveness, a deterrent effect on Israeli policy, the perception of the group among its key audiences, the group’s self-perception, controlling the risk of adverse consequences, and the ability to defeat counter-measures.

The authors compare three options—suicide bombings, deployment of Qassam rockets, and chemical warfare—against these tactical criteria. The authors’ analysis indicates that the chemical warfare option offers only deterrent value, whereas suicide bombings provide an overall net benefit. An acknowledged weakness of the methodology is that it does not account for combined tactics.³⁰ The authors note that a suicide attack in which a chemical agent were dispersed, or a Qassam rocket carrying a chemical warhead, could surpass suicide bombings alone in overall net benefit.³¹

The authors acknowledge that Hamas’ centralized organizational structure and operational budget would stand in the group’s favor should decide to pursue a WMD option.³² However, the likelihood of Hamas pursuing such a course is further reduced by the group’s reliance on precedents set by Hizbollah; non-religious primary justifications; and impatience with trial and error to gain proficiency with new technology.³³

³⁰ Dolnik and Bhattacharjee, “Hamas,” 122-123.
³¹ Ibid., 124.
³² Ibid., 125.
³³ Ibid., 125-126.
The decision model developed by Dolnik & Bhattacharjee is attractive because it utilizes the group’s own strategic and tactical aims as the benchmark for evaluating options for choice of weapons. The model may be accommodated to circumstances affecting the group over time (such as Hamas’s parliamentary victory), and to assessment of other known terrorist groups. The model may be less well suited, however, to evaluating transnational groups that do not claim specific geo-political aims.

**Why WMD?**

Continuing the discussion of costs and benefits, resort to a CBRN weapon need not lead to mass casualties. As Hoffman notes, such a weapon deliberately limited to a small-scale immediate impact could have a disproportionate long-term consequence, for example by generating fear and alarm at unprecedented levels. Cameron agrees, writing that a group seeking widespread coverage absent widespread devastation or casualties might resort to low-level nonconventional weapons.\(^\text{34}\)

Palfy asserts that the use of nonconventional weapons depends largely on the desired mission outcome.\(^\text{35}\) If the group’s objective is to create casualties, a highly lethal but still conventional form of attack will be preferred. If, however, the group desires to intimidate a state and disrupt its functioning, irrespective of loss of life, then chemical or biological weapons would prove tempting.

In discussing the potentiality of a WMD attack, one cannot discount calculated use to achieve far-reaching psychological effects in the targeted audience.\(^\text{36}\) Stern discusses the potential for economic terrorism, for example a terrorist group’s use of WMD to destroy crops and kill livestock, poison food, contaminate pharmaceuticals, or directly target corporations or other perceived economic icons.\(^\text{37}\) The migration from a conventional to nonconventional weapon would ensure the group or individuals widespread publicity for themselves and their cause.\(^\text{38}\)

Stern speaks to a terrorist group’s desire to recruit and solidify members and audiences of supporters by impressing them with high technology.\(^\text{39}\) In this regard, nuclear terrorism could prove more desirable than weaponizing chemical and biological agents:

> The prestige associated with acquiring a nuclear capability is unmatched by chemical or biological weapons. A nuclear device would set a terrorist organization apart from any other group; would compel governments to take the terrorists seriously; and would represent a “quantum leap” in terrorist attacks.\(^\text{40}\)

Poetically expressed by A. R. Norton, the nuclear terrorist “is a mountain climber who will climb the plutonium precipice simply because it is there.”\(^\text{41}\) Jenkins also alludes to the prestige factor,

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\(^{34}\) Cameron, “WMD Terrorism in the United States,” 168.


\(^{38}\) Cameron, “WMD Terrorism in the United States,” 167.

\(^{39}\) Stern, *Ultimate Terrorists*, 73.

\(^{40}\) Cameron, “Nuclear Terrorism Reconsidered,” 155.

\(^{41}\) Jacobs, “The Nuclear Threat,” 150.
that in attaining a nuclear capability, the terrorist group imitates governments whose arsenals place them among the world’s major powers, and renders the terrorist group “legitimate” in the eyes of their goal-sharing constituencies.42

The terrorist group’s desire to unleash forces with long-term consequences would also make a WMD device more attractive than conventional weapons. Bunker describes the combination of destruction and disruption, with the former concerning things and the latter concerning bonds and relationships. Bunker observes that “nuclear devices, with their heat/blast, electromagnetic pulse generation, and terror effects can influence both of these target sets,” adding that a small bioterror weapon combining lethal and nonlethal pathogens could achieve the same type of response.43

Adopting a societal perspective, intergenerational bonds may also be vulnerable. A bioterror or atomic radiation weapon could extend collateral losses from the current into the next generation.44 Or alternatively, dispersal of radioactive material (e.g., plutonium in a powered or crystalline state) could shorten life spans, creating a premature intergenerational gap in families and social networks.45

The preceding section on conventional weapons presented the view that organizational dynamics could prohibit a terrorist group’s resort to WMD. The converse can also occur. Before discussing the characteristics of such groups, it bears noting that the decision to pursue WMD arises mostly from group rather than individual psychology. Post presents the paradox that works against the lone actor:

To be motivated to carry out an act of mass destruction suggests profound psychological distortions usually found only in severely disturbed individuals, such as paranoid psychotics. On the other hand, to implement an act of nuclear terrorism requires not only organizational skills but also the ability to work cooperatively with a small team.46 Post agrees with Jenkins that individuals most strongly motivated to commit acts of nuclear terrorism would be the least able to carry them out.47 An exception, cited by Cameron, is that the group dynamics factor is more applicable to secular groups than religious groups or cults, where the influence of a charismatic leader can be decisive.48

46 Post, “Prospects for Nuclear Terrorism,” 92-93.
47 Ibid.
48 Cameron, Nuclear Terrorism: A Threat Assessment, 135.
**WMD scenarios considered**

Presenting four hypothetical scenarios, Foxell offers the strongest affirmative case for a terrorist group’s future use of WMD. As a basis for scenario development, Foxell cites domestic and international law enforcement seizure of core materials, combined with well-rehearsed concerns about lax security and safeguards and weapons or materials smuggling. The scenarios incorporate pragmatic as opposed to apocalyptic motives for the use of WMD. To generate the scenarios, Foxell relied on a proven forecasting methodology developed by the RAND Corporation.

One scenario with several variations is government-sponsored terrorism, in which a terrorist group obtains and deploys a WMD device through its sponsor.49 Foxell builds his case by assessing the capabilities and intentions of state sponsors of terrorism, and has argued that rogue states could wage proxy warfare by wielding nuclear, biological or chemical weapons through the vehicle of terrorist surrogates.50 Countering this scenario, Cameron reasons that fear of retribution from the attacked state and the international community, the potential loss of control over the client group, and reluctance to reduce its own arsenal mitigate against state sponsorship.51

Second, Foxell presents the religious warfare scenario,52 limiting his discussion to extremist Islamic terrorist groups, and describing the differential impact of previous attacks, had they incorporated nuclear devices or chemical or biological agents. Foxell later expanded on this scenario, posing as a possibility Hezbollah’s use of weaponized Stinger missiles, either delivering a radiological, chemical or biological payload, or substituting the missile’s warhead with a bioweapon container of aerosolized anthrax or botulinum toxin.53 The transfer of weaponized Stingers from Hezbollah to a Lebanese Sunni religious group or non-Lebanese Islamic terrorist groups is another variation.54

In the third economic combat scenario,55 regional economic decline changes the situational assessment and motivations of revolutionary terrorist groups, leading to attacks on oil and water infrastructures. Foxell posits cascading consequences, for example, the conflagration of Middle East regional tensions over water sharing and collapse of the Middle East Peace Process. Civil wars compose the final scenario,56 encompassing use of WMD by domestic separatist groups in the United States (e.g., Black Muslims); attacks on U.S. soil waged by Latin American revolutionary groups (e.g., FARC); and use of WMD by right-wing terror groups.

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49 Foxell, “Previously Discounted Terrorism Scenarios,” 431.
51 Cameron, “Nuclear Terrorism Reconsidered,” 154.
52 Foxell, “Previously Discounted Terrorism Scenarios,” 436.
54 Ibid., 103.
55 Foxell, “Previously Discounted Scenarios,” 438.
56 Ibid., 442.
Group Characteristics Associated with Proclivity Toward WMD Attacks

The most definitive set of characteristics describing terrorist groups with the proclivity toward WMD can be found in Tucker’s *Toxic Terror*, which presented nine validated case studies. Comparing the cases, Tucker identified attributes or exhibited characteristics and patterns of behavior that contribute to the propensity to employ chemical or biological agents for either discrete or indiscriminant attacks. In considering the characteristics, propensity does not necessarily equate with, and may work against, the group’s success. The list, derived from *Toxic Terror*, is recreated below:57

- Tendency to employ ever-greater levels of violence over time.
- Innovation in designing weapons and carrying out attacks.
- Willingness to take risks by experimenting with unfamiliar and dangerous weapons.
- Psychological factors of paranoia and grandiosity (most significant with respect to individual terrorists who act alone or with support of a few followers).
- A system of internal social controls that severely punishes deviation or defection, and an organizational structure that resists penetration by police or intelligence agencies.
- Planning and operations involving either a small group of two to five people or a militant subgroup within a larger organization who are technically skilled and subscribe to the group’s goals and ideology.
- A vague, undefined constituency, which Tucker considers a decisive factor in judging which terrorist groups are most likely to attempt the acquisition and use of chemical and biological agents.
- Defensive aggression against outsiders seeking the group’s destruction, and an apocalyptic ideology translated into myriad goals such as destroying a corrupt social structure, fighting an oppressive government, and punishing evil-doers and oppressors, in fulfillment of a divine command or prophecy from a charismatic leader. [Juergensmeyer suggests that fear of marginality may also be a trigger for defensive aggression.58]

Literature points to extremist ideologies as a likelihood factor

These factors feed on themselves to legitimate mass murder. Tucker’s conclusion is that the greatest threat of a terrorist attack using WMD will emanate from one of three groups: 1) religious or millenarian sects for whom large scale violence is a fulfillment of an apocalyptic prophecy; 2) brutalized ethnic minorities seeking revenge; and 3) small terrorist cells driven by extremist ideologies or conspiracy theories.59

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57 Tucker, *Toxic Terror*, 255-262 and “How Real a Threat?,” 149-150. Several of these factors were cited also by RAND’s Jeffrey D. Simons in a hypothetical profile of a terrorist group most likely to resort to biological weapons. See *Terrorists and Potential Use of Biological Weapons*, p. 17.
59 Tucker, “How Real a Threat?” 149.
It is unclear from the literature whether Tucker reached this conclusion independently, or in consideration of the same view expressed by Sprinzak, who identified the same three types of groups: 1) millenarian cults (faith in salvation via Armageddon); 2) brutalized groups motivated by revenge for genocide, facing imminent destruction without any hope for collective recovery, aided by unrestrained anger and justified in their sense of total powerlessness; and 3) small terrorist cells or socially deranged groups who despise society, lack realistic political goals, and therefore may miscalculate the consequences of their actions. Foxell would add ethnic-cleansing terror movements, “morality terrorists,” and for-profit extortionists. For Foxell, the key underlying factors are expediency, unilateral action, revenge-seeking, and the loss of moral constraints, leading to the desire to annihilate opposing cultural and economic systems.

Tucker’s and Sprinzak’s findings are consistent with Hoffman’s prescient and consistent writings on “holy terror.” In his seminal report on the topic, Hoffman presented his view that “what is particularly striking about ‘holy terror’ compared to purely ‘secular terror’ is the radically different value systems, mechanisms of legitimation and justification, concepts of morality, and Manichean world view that the ‘holy terrorist’ embraces.”

Religious terrorists see themselves as “outsiders” who seek vast changes in an existing order. Moreover, religious terrorists execute attacks for no audience but themselves, rendering irrelevant the restraints that a supportive and committed constituency imposes on secular groups. Within this world view, violence is a sacramental act or divine duty; terrorism achieves a transcendental state of being, and its terrorist acts are not only morally justified, but necessarily expedient in meeting a theological demand or imperative.

Hoffman’s typology is captured in Gressang’s audience-centric analysis emphasizing the factors constraining a terrorist group’s choice between conventional weapons and WMD. Gressang’s analysis rests on three assumptions. First, terrorists are, by their own logic, rational actors, with an ordered, specified and identifiable set of preferences which in turn establish values in the group’s cost-benefit calculations. Second, terrorist groups possess both motivation and expectations for a desirable outcome; a terrorist group pursues a course of action to achieve a goal, which may be more or less realistically attainable. Third, terrorist groups exercise and gain influence through a message, expressed through propaganda of the word or deed, to an appropriate audience. The message may be symbolic, and the group’s audience identification may be subtle.

*Ideology alone is an insufficient indicator*

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62 Ibid., 95.
64 Hoffman, *Holy Terror*, 3.
65 Ibid., 5.
66 Ibid., 2.
68 Ibid., 90.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 92.
Gressang asserts that ideology absent context remains an insufficient discriminator of preference for WMD among terrorist groups, and offers a framework to further narrow the subset. Gressang’s schemata allows analysts to place terrorist groups within a three-dimensional cube, vectored by the type of audience, the message content, and the nature of the group’s relationship with its audience. Groups that address an ethereal audience, lack a reciprocal or symbiotic relationship, and deliver a message of destruction (absent the attendant message of rebuilding) will be more likely to assign WMD a high-utility value in achieving their aims. To be clear, in Gressang’s model, all three factors must be present to raise a group above the threshold at which pursuit WMD becomes a risk. Because the number of known terrorist groups that would meet all three criteria is appreciably small, Gressang places himself among those experts who consider unlikely the use of a WMD in a terrorist attack.

Conclusion

As previously stated, the literature equivocates over terrorists’ resort to WMD. The authors giving higher credence to the threat of a WMD attack acknowledge the difficulties a terrorist group would need to overcome in order to acquire, weaponize, and successfully conduct an attack resulting in mass casualties. Nor do the authors documenting terrorist groups’ preferences for conventional weapons discount entirely the threat of a WMD attack.

A conclusion drawn from the literature is the imperative for improved threat assessment. Mengel, for example, has argued that by combining three sets of concepts—source of stimuli, rationality, and the nature of the terrorist act—one may isolate potentially real threats. The take-away message is that “red light-green light” indicators rest on the quality of data collected to analyze specific terrorist groups, their ideology and motivations, their targets, their messages, their audiences, and their long-term goals as well as tactical aims.

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71 Ibid., 100.
References


Terrorist Group Proclivity toward the Acquisition and Use of Weapons of Mass Destruction:


