

Coping with the Possibility of Terrorist Use of WMD

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WMDC

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By Jonathan Dean, Union of Concerned Scientists

It is generally considered that, if terrorists could gain access to already existing nuclear, biological or chemical weapons -- or in the long run -- to knowledge of how to construct these weapons, they would not scruple to use them with maximum damage. Terrorists cannot be easily deterred by threat of retaliation. Therefore, the potential combination of terrorists and NBC weapons represents a serious danger.

This paper does not propose measures to keep existing WMD or knowledge of how to construct and use these weapons out of the hands of terrorists. These measures are essential. However, the paper suggests that, in addition to a broad range of such measures, a key requirement to reduce the risk of terrorist use of WMD is an organized, systematic campaign, coordinated by a multinational civil society organization, to blunt the appeal of terrorist ideology to its adherents and to potential new recruits. Although the need to counteract terrorist ideology has been widely mentioned, relatively little attention has been given to the questions of how to go about this objective systematically or of who should pursue it.

This paper deliberately focuses on radical Islamist groups in Muslim countries. There are many other terrorist groups in the world, including many in the U.S. But radical Islamists exemplified by al Qaeda and its offshoots represent the greatest danger at this time because of the nature of their motivation and the cultural, social and economic conditions from which they come. Although slow-working, coordinated police and intelligence work and long-term programs of social and economic reform in Muslim countries are all essential means of reducing public support for or tolerance of radical Islamists. Many polls have shown that, although radical Islamist criticisms of national governments are widely accepted by the general public in Muslim countries, only a very small number of young men and women are willing to follow these criticisms to the point of using violence. However, unless the members of this key group can be immunized against arguments urging violence, new terrorists will continue to be recruited. In short, it is essential that social and economic measures be accompanied by a deliberate, enduring, highly coordinated effort to expose the errors and distortions of terrorist ideology and to blunt its appeal to potential adherents.

Other components of an effective program to combat terrorism and to restrict access of terrorists to existing WMD or to means of producing such weapons are well known. Most are under way now. But insufficient attention is being given the need to discredit terrorist ideology and no major civil society organization has been established to research and direct such a program. It would be a major contribution if the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission were to recommend establishing a civil society organization with the program described here.

Al Qaeda and Its Successors

Al Qaeda itself has been severely weakened by military action and arrests through broad cooperation among UN member states. It is unlikely to have the capacity to organized attacks on the scale of 9/11 or to coordinate world-wide terrorist operations. However, its example and its philosophy have motivated radical Islamist militants all over the world, who take their example from al Qaeda and share its ideology. Al Qaeda's danger as an organization has lessened. Instead, it has become a social movement, organized in scores of tight-knit but uncoordinated groups, each with a few activists surrounded by activists and a circle of sympathizers, united less by organizational ties than by the bonds of common belief. None of these organizations thus far have shown al Qaeda's organizing and planning capability and hence its capacity to do damage. This dispersal into a multitude of organizations has made it more difficult to deal with radical Islamists by police methods. But it has also increased the importance of al Qaeda ideology as a principal motivating factor.

An ideology is usually a mixture of transcendental religious values and political approaches and methods designed to carry out these values. It is, in modern terms, a belief system. The way to weaken the appeal of a belief system to believers and would-be believers is to confront them systematically with dissonant or disconfirming information and opinions. Terrorists and potential terrorist recruits should receive repeated, continuing information challenging the central tenets of terrorist ideology. The information should come from broadly known, authoritative sources.

An Historical Point

A brief historical account may illustrate the potential effectiveness of this approach.

In the late 1950s, the U.S. State Department initiated an important change in strategy toward the Soviet Union. Up to the time of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, much of our work was directed at encouraging the population of Eastern European countries to resist their police state governments. The Hungarian rebellion brought the realization that this strategy was very wrong. Soviet police-state control was too great for ordinary political unrest to have effects. Encouraging rebellion without any willingness on the part of the U.S. and other NATO countries to intervene was highly irresponsible and led only to bloody repression. We decided to broaden our strategy and to try to influence communist leaders as well as populations by engaging leaders in dialogue and targeting them in propaganda efforts.

The underlying theory was that the core of the Soviet and Warsaw Pact leadership systems was a small number of true believers, backed by a large group of leaders whose main motive was personal gain. We thought that if we could confront members of the core group with a steam of disconfirming information and opinion contrary to their beliefs, these beliefs would weaken and their system would ultimately

fail. We had in mind a process of deliberately promoting “cognitive dissonance,” a then relatively novel way of describing opinion change.¹

I would argue that, ultimately, this is what happened to the Soviet system, which collapsed almost bloodlessly because, fortunately, Soviet leaders no longer thought it worth fighting for. American efforts were only a tiny part of the gathering torrent of disconfirming experiences affecting Soviet leaders. These were mainly produced by the Soviet system itself, as well as by television coverage from Western countries, mainly Western European.

Let me add here a brief quote from Egon Bahr, Willy Brandt’s chief political advisor and a highly effective practitioner of the approach I am urging here. He says, “Ideological struggle was a central component of Ostpolitik. . . . There is no mono-causal explanation, but the dissolution of the ideological cement that kept the whole [Soviet system] together was surely a central factor. It is quite possible that this was the reason for the astonishing lack of violence. It is probable that, if the ideological structure had been firm, there would have been an explosion with an ensuing massacre rather than an implosion. As it was, rulers who had lost the essence of their beliefs simply did not see any sense in using their power and the weapons at their disposal.”²

I make this digression in order to document that the suggestions which follow can be effective.

¹ The trailblazing thinker on this subject was the psychologist Leon Festinger. His main work, “A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance,” was written nearly fifty years ago, but is still considered an authoritative account of attitude and belief change.

² Egon Bahr, chief adviser to Chancellor Willy Brandt in Supplement 1, “American Détente and German Ostpolitik 1969-72, *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute*, Washington, D.C., 2004, pp. 140, 142.

Al Qaeda's Ideology

Today, al Qaeda's 9/11 attack on the U.S. has gained legendary character in the Muslim world. Al Qaeda itself is in decline. But al Qaeda's example and al Qaeda's ideology live on and inspire others. Al Qaeda's "radical internationalist ideology, sustained by anti-Western, anti-Zionist, and anti-Semitic rhetoric, has adherents among many individuals and groups, few of whom are linked in any substantial way to bin Laden or those around him." This is the view of Jason Burke, a long-time observer of al Qaeda and it is the view of the majority of observers of Islamist activities.³

The core beliefs of the al Qaeda leadership have become well known. According to their own statements, they wish to renew and rescue Islam from the corrupt secularized governments of Muslim countries and to establish a unified Islamic realm based on what they define as original Muslim values and principles. This realm would begin in an individual Mideastern country, but would ultimately extend to all Muslim countries.

When the Muslim masses and especially the Muslim middle classes failed to rise up in support of rebellions against the governments which the Islamists considered corrupt and apostate, like that of the Egyptian leader Anwar Al Sadat whom they assassinated to launch an uprising, radical Islamists concluded that these corrupt governments did not respond to the popular will because they were being propped up by the United States and other Western countries. The latter in turn became the enemy. To eliminate United States and Western influence by force from Mideastern countries became the objective of al Qaeda and its successors who share core al Qaeda beliefs like these.⁴

Al Qaeda leaders convinced potential suicide volunteers that these objectives were essential for the redemption of Islam. They convinced them that striking at the

³ Jason Burke, *Foreign Policy*, May/June 2004; see also the testimony of J. Cofer Black, State Department terrorism coordinator, before the House International Relations Committee, April 1, 2004, summarized by Robin Wright, "Untested Islamic Militants Emerging, U.S. Official Says," *Washington Post*, April 2, 2004.

⁴ There is a vast literature on radical Islam. I am not going to try to document each statement in this short paper. Two sources I have found most helpful are Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam* (Yale University Press, 1990), and the statements of Osama bin Laden and Al Zawahiri:

1. Statement of September, 1996 after return to Afghanistan (www.mideastweb.org/Osamabinladen1.html)
2. Joint fatwa with al-Zawahiri and others, February, 1998 (www.ict.org.il/articles/fatwah.html)
3. Statement of October 7, 2001 following September 11 attack (www.september11news.com/OsamaSpeeches.htm)
4. Al Jazeera TV interview, about October 25, 2001 (www.september11news.com/OsamaSpeeches.htm)
5. Video tape with visiting sheikh, Kandahar area, mid-November, 2001 (www.september11news.com/OsamaSpeeches.htm)
6. Videotape, December, 2001 (www.september11news.com/OsamaSpeeches.htm)
7. Ayman Al-Zawahiri, *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, translation by Federal Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), December 2, 2001. There are several other sources for this revealing document.

U.S. and other Western countries was the most effective way to further the jihad and to give themselves historic significance and respected status in the community of the faithful. They drew on a widespread Islamic tradition that awards high prestige to martyrdom action in hopeless situations and honors the parents and relatives of martyrs.

The al Qaeda leaders and the September 11 participants were also affected by a number of other factors: Despair over sagging economies, high unemployment, poor education, and low technological and scientific achievement in Mideastern countries; widespread feelings of humiliation and decline from past high achievements of Islam throughout the Arab countries; broad acceptance throughout the Mideastern area of the fundamentalist message that the reason for the plight of Mideastern countries is that they and their governments had fallen away from the original principles of Islam; hatred for many ineffective, often corrupt, authoritarian, predominantly secular Mideastern governments, which pay lip service to the tenets of fundamentalist Islam, but are reluctant to put it into practice and often suppress fundamentalists by force; resentment against the U.S. and other Western countries for their claimed arrogance, secular materialism, history of colonial domination, political manipulation and interference in support of corrupt governments and also for Western material success while Muslim governments fail; resentment against the U.S. for its support of Israel; resentment against Israel itself for harsh and humiliating treatment of the Palestinian Arabs, for repeatedly defeating Arab armies and clearly demonstrating the inferiority of these armies, and for prospering far more than Arab countries; and most recently, the U.S.-UK attack on Iraq, which has generated widespread resentment in Muslim countries against the U.S., UK and other members of the Western coalition, has motivated many new volunteers, and will clearly motivate more in the future.

There are many sources of terrorist motivation other than Islamic extremism, for example, the racist extremism of the Oklahoma City bombers in the U.S., or the millennial views of the Aum Shimryko cult in Japan. But only Islamist extremism has the background of negative social and economic conditions, colonial experience, pervasive humiliation from comparison between present misery and past achievements of Islamic societies, a powerful religious tradition with strong, return-to-the-source fundamentalist groups, and brilliant intellectuals to develop a compelling ideology from all these elements. Of the many other terrorist groups in today's world, only al Qaeda and its successors have shown the coherence, determination and energy to do serious damage. Despite the example of Aum Shymriko, only they have the long-term determination to master the production of NBC weapons and use them. They have demonstrated that they are the most dangerous and widespread of all terrorist groups.

What Can Be Done?

Over the years, governments attacked by Islamic terrorists have realized that major social, economic and attitude problems throughout the Muslim world were coming together to form powerful emotional and intellectual trends contributing to Muslim extremism. They realized that, to cope with this development, they had to

tackle the sources – among them, government corruption, stagnant economies, youth unemployment, low status of women, and a pervasive sense of humiliation among Mideastern Muslims arising from comparison of present conditions with the brilliant Muslim culture of the past, a combination which has resulted in widespread hostility and resentment toward more confident and successful foreign countries.

Governments are slowly engaging with this problem and attempting to counteract these factors across a broad front in an effort which will last many decades. As part of this effort, many governments and NGOs are promoting programs of modern secular education designed to counteract the negative effects of some fundamentalist Islamic schools in spreading a message of violent hatred.

All of these efforts are worthwhile, but, unless there is a systematic, active effort to discredit terrorist ideology and undermine its appeal to potential recruits, the objective of limiting potential terrorist use of WMD cannot be fully achieved. Instead, as some terrorist groups are arrested, broken up or their efforts frustrated, new groups motivated by the same ideology will emerge.

My principal recommendation to the Commission is that it support establishing a multinational non-governmental foundation staffed mainly by Muslims with access to funding by governments and foundations, and with sub-centers in Muslim countries. The foundation would have the specific aim of discrediting extremist ideology and undermining its appeal to potential recruits.

The foundation's activities would include promoting the ideas of Muslim theologians and thinkers who oppose fundamentalism, identifying and refuting especially negative fundamentalist practices and arguments, and actively disseminating these contrary views by all possible means including radio, television and the print press.

The day-to-day work of preparing materials for schools might best be carried out by a UNESCO task force with the aim of providing materials for modern, non-religious education at primary, secondary and university levels for both sexes offered to Muslim countries in their own languages. This UNESCO task force, of which at least half the employees should be Arab, Pakistani or Indonesian educators, could develop curricula, recruit teaching staff and establish actual schools.

Modern secular schools are absolutely essential, but they need to be backed by activity which is even more goal-oriented. The foundation whose establishment I am urging to the Commission would, among other things, also act as a professional backup resource for modern secular education, assuring that textbooks, teaching materials and teacher training presented a high degree of information that challenges and contradicts fundamental tenets of terrorist ideology.

When Osama bin Laden, Ayman Zawahiri or other extremist clerics issue a fatwa or pronouncement, this proposed foundation would analyze and refute it in

detail. The objective of the foundation would be to challenge the premises of terrorist ideology on a continuing basis through identifying and presenting authoritative commentators who are broadly known and respected and who will be considered authoritative in the Muslim world.

Among other actions the foundation could undertake, it could seek to bring al Qaeda leaders to public trial for crimes against humanity, preferably before an international tribunal organized by the United Nations. The statements of the accused will isolate them and show them as extremists far outside the main Islamic tradition, particularly as regards their attacks on civilians and their desire to establish fundamentalist government by force. The al Qaeda people will almost certainly condemn themselves with their own statements, as the Nuremberg defendants did.

The foundation could bring together core Muslim texts that prohibit terrorist attacks on civilians as well as deliberate suicide. An effort is underway to prepare a legal “indictment” detailing al Qaeda’s violations of Islamic law.⁵ This effort should be supported. The brief should be used in the public international trial of al Qaeda leaders if they take place – and separately given maximum distribution in Muslim countries.

The foundation could also support the work of moderate Islamic theologians to develop an authoritative modern version of Islam that distinguishes universally valid statements in the Koran from sections of the Koran and Islamic tradition urging harsh treatment of heretics, sections whose source can be found in the specific historical circumstances at the time of Mohammed or soon afterward.⁶ A similar process took place when previously respected sections of the Christian Bible, now called apocrypha, were dropped from both the Old and New Testaments.

Conclusion

An effort like this would be only a small part of the spectrum of cooperative police, intelligence, economic and social programs designed to combat radical extremism. At the same time, it would be the essential component and guiding spirit of such programs, at the center of efforts to prevent terrorist use of WMD. If programs like this are applied systematically, over time they will create so many doubters that extremist radical Islam will cease to be an important force. The foundation’s program and purpose would take a long time to implement fully, but its initial effects would be felt rapidly.

The suggestions for activities of the foundation presented here are not exhaustive, but illustrate the kind of approach that could be taken to combat radical Islamic fundamentalism. Each of the suggestions is based on the proposition that the ideas of radical Islamic fundamentalism must be taken seriously and confronted with counter-arguments by an energetic coalition of Muslim and world theologians and

⁵ “Scholars Plan to Show How Attacks Violated Islamic Law,” *Washington Post*, January 20, 2002.

⁶ “Scholars Are Quietly Offering New Theories of the Koran,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2002.

thinkers. This is not a remote philosophical concept. It is the heart of the campaign against terrorist extremists. It cannot be neglected. Nor will it be carried out automatically; it is not a police or military function or even a function of conventional education. It cannot be dealt with by political reform or by the economic development which is vitally necessary in the Mideast. We can stumble on it later, or we can start it now.

That is why I urge the Commission, in implementing its aim to make proposals to limit the dangers of terrorist use of WMD, to advocate the establishment of a multinational non-governmental foundation with the explicit objective of developing methods and measures to undermine the authority and appeal of radical Islamist ideology promoting the use of force and violence. I also hope the Commission will consider it directly relevant to its objective of blocking terrorist use of WMD to urge that ways be found to put the Geneva proposals for a negotiated Israeli-Palestinian settlement to a referendum or plebiscite, or at least an authoritative public opinion poll, of the Israeli and Palestinian publics.

List of published studies and papers

All papers and studies are available as pdf-files at the Commission's website: www.wmdcommission.org

No 1 "Review of Recent Literature on WMD Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation" by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, May 2004

No 2 "Improvised Nuclear Devices and Nuclear Terrorism" by Charles D. Ferguson and William C. Potter, June 2004

No 3 "The Nuclear Landscape in 2004: Past Present and Future" by John Simpson, June 2004

No 4 "Reviving the Non-Proliferation Regime" by Jonathan Dean, June 2004

No 5 "Article IV of the NPT: Background, Problems, Some Prospects" by Lawrence Scheinman, June 2004

No 6 "Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones: Still a Useful Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Tool?" by Scott Parrish and Jean du Preez June 2004

No 7 "Making the Non-Proliferation Regime Universal" by Sverre Lodgaard, June 2004

No 8 "Practical Measures to Reduce the Risks Presented By Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons" by William C. Potter and Nikolai Sokov, June 2004

No 9 "The Future of a Treaty Banning Fissile Material for Weapons Purposes: Is It Still Relevant?" by Jean du Preez, June 2004

No 10 "A Global Assessment of Nuclear Proliferation Threats" by Joseph Cirincione, June 2004

No 11 "Assessing Proposals on the International Nuclear Fuel Cycle" by Jon B. Wolfsthal, June 2004

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No 13 "Needed: a Comprehensive Framework for Eliminating WMD" by Michael Krepon, September 2004

No 14 "Managing the Biological Weapons Problem: From the Individual to the International" by Jez Littlewood, August 2004

No 15 "Coping with the Possibility of Terrorist Use of WMD" by Jonathan Dean, June 2004

No 16 "Comparison of States vs. Non-State Actors in the Development of a BTW Capability" by Åke Sellström and Anders Norqvist, October 2004

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