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Al Qaeda and the WMD Threat[†]

As the world approaches the first anniversary of the World Trade Centre and Pentagon attacks there has been an interesting wave of alleged new evidence and allegations concerning the potential capabilities of al Qaeda to launch an unconventional terrorist attack using weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Most of these refer to exclusive videotape training material aired recently by CNN, but build upon previous media reports and government leaks. The following is an attempt to separate fact from fiction and assess the likely capabilities of Osama bin Laden's terror network.

The "Superbomb" Manual

To date the most incontrovertible evidence of Al Qaeda's interest in unconventional warfare and related weapons capabilities, have been the dozen or so hand-written volumes that were recovered by a reporter from a private Afghan residence in the early stages of US operations in that country this Spring. According to the news agency that discovered them, the manuals were thematically discrete and ran the gamut of capabilities from high explosive manufacture to include the atomic physics of nuclear weapons. A colleague of the reporter who made the discovery and who himself has been uncovering the subsequent al Qaeda trail informed the author that his employer has spent significant sums not only translating the texts but vetting them with regard to scientific accuracy and authenticity. In his words the expert verdict on the so-called "Superbomb Volume" of the collection demonstrates an acquaintance with nuclear physics and weaponisation know-how which exceeds informations available solely via open sources and declassified scientific texts.

Additionally to this find, since that date, as more and more of Afghanistan has truly come under the control of the Northern Alliance and US Special Forces, more and more of al Qaeda's alleged training sites have been identified and subsequently investigated. It has been reported that at more than one of these previously isolated locations the remains of small sized mammals have been found in conditions that would lead to the suspicion of weapons testing having been carried out upon them. Whilst to-date these remain mostly second-hand reports, the real smoking-gun has come in the last few weeks as CNN aired recordings of new alleged al Qaeda video tapes. In amongst the now more commonplace depictions of small arms training and Close Quarter Battle exercises, has now been added footage of what appears to be a dog being killed through an airborne agent.

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Much has been made of this disturbing clip, but significantly even the news channel's own commentators have diverged significantly from each other in interpretation of the significance of the footage. The fact that the symptoms depicted would lead one to the conclusion that the agent was introduced in the form of the visible smoke emanating from a receptacle close to the animal, it seems likely in the opinion of this author that the dog was killed by means of a tried and tested chemical poison such as cyanide in one of its many air based variants, rather than by an unusual experimental chemical agent or clearly a biological weapon. If this is indeed the case then the video footage may be less shocking than the US administration would want to have the public believe, mostly because of the nature of this poison. Cyanide is one of the least sophisticated or novel chemical agents that one could choose. On the scale of WMD options which places agents such as mustard gas on the bottom rung, anthrax in the middle and radiological and nuclear weapons at the apex, cyanide gas is realistically to be placed near the lower end, as an older generation poison which to be most effective requires the targets to be kept in an enclosed space. It is therefore not a sophisticated or hard to obtain poison.

Asymmetric Ingenuity rather than High-End Weaponry

Unfortunately there remains even now one year after the worst non-state actor terrorist attack of the modern age a large-scale ignorance with regard to weapons of mass destruction. Few lay people are in a position to navigate themselves in the world of agents, toxins, viruses, bacteria, dirty bombs and nuclear devices. Nevertheless there are a few fundamental facts and factors that cannot be denied or ignored. The first is that of expense and know-how. Biological weapons are more expensive than chemical weapons and nuclear weapons are significantly more expensive than biological weapons. In a similar fashion, the level of know-how and specialised facilities needed to produce such weapons lies on an exponential line with nuclear capabilities at the top. The fact that whole nations with sizeable GDP's such as South Africa, Iraq and Israel had or are having difficulty with national nuclear weapons programmes demonstrates this fact. Secondly, the factor most often ignored by the media and armchair commentators, is that bio/chemical weapons need to be weaponised and are only effective if one strides the significant hurdle of dissemination. Despite what the Clinton government-appointed Defence Secretary may have said on American television not too long ago, one cannot achieve WMD-level damage by sprinkling a bag of anthrax spores out the back of a CESSNA aircraft flying over New York. One has to employ sophisticated dissemination technology based upon molecular physics and environmental analyses to guarantee that the agent employed is not adversely affected by such things as gravity, ultraviolet radiation, wind, rain and so forth. This is a challenge scientifically almost - if not more - significant than creating an agent to begin with. It is one thing therefore to kill a tethered mammal in an enclosed space and quite another to infect or injure thousands of human city dwellers.

It is exactly because of these harsh realities that one must reassess the WMD threat and the original September 11th attack. The uncomfortable truth is that the genius and military precision of those attacks is demonstrated exactly by the fact that with this unique plan a small band of terrorists managed to inflict damage in the (lower) range of the WMD scale by using completely non-WMD methods or technologies and at



minimal expense. Western agencies and governments would do well to recognise the fact that it is most likely the imagination of the terrorist cell that it a greater threat than any true WMD capability before they redirect their efforts and before the myth of nuclear or bioterrorism fundamentally undermines the detection and interdiction of more asymmetric yet just as deadly attacks.

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