

Forum: Disarmament Commission

Issue: Preventing the acquisition by terrorists of radioactive materials

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Introduction

Terrorist groups have drastically risen in frequency in the past few decades, and with them comes the increase in use of radioactive materials. These radioactive materials are often utilized in the form of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and have aided terrorist groups in wreaking havoc across the world. These acts of nuclear terrorism have resulted in the death of thousands, and the injury of many more. And yet, radioactive materials capable of such mass devastation are still falling into the destructive hands of terrorists, empowering them to conduct nuclear attacks, some of which may result in incidences of radioactive contamination, consequently destroying their lives as we know it.

Major terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, in possession of sufficient finance and resources have acquired radioactive material on numerous occasions in the past. Osama bin Laden, the founder of Al-Qaeda, has stated himself that al-Qaeda views the acquisition of nuclear weapons and WMDs as a “religious duty”. Due to their considerable supply of resources, dominant terrorist groups are consistently acquiring radioactive materials and hiring scientist to assemble nuclear weapons out of them. Al-Qaeda and ISIS remain a large threat to many countries as they become more and more capable of conducting large-scale nuclear attacks, a theory that EU and NATO chiefs reaffirmed in April 2016 by releasing a warning stating that ISIS was planning to carry out nuclear attacks on the UK and Europe.

There are multiple ways through which terrorist organisations can acquire radioactive materials. The most recurrent way is terrorists stealing or purchasing radioactive materials or finished nuclear weapons on the black market, a platform many governments continuously attempt and fail at terminating. Radioactive materials or nuclear weapons may also be acquired through recruiting nuclear scientists to build explosive devices for them, constructing explosive devices themselves using their own materials or obtaining radioactive materials from a nation-state. The end-result of these methods of acquisition is the same for each one; mass destruction, prompting the urgent elimination of each and every point of access to radioactive materials for terrorists.

Definition of Key Terms

Terrorist

A person or organisation that uses illegal violence and intimidation, usually targeting civilians, to demonstrate their strong religious, political or ideological aims or views.

Radioactive material

A radioactive material such as uranium, thorium or potassium that can occur naturally and is harmful to living organisms due to the radiation it gives off. Radioactive materials can be turned into nuclear weapons of mass destruction.

Weapon of Mass Destruction (WMD)

A WMD is a nuclear, radiological, chemical, biological or other weapon capable of killing or significantly harming living organisms, namely humans, and destroying or damaging man-made structures, such as buildings and natural structures, such as mountains.

Nuclear terrorism

An act of terrorism that is reliant on the use of nuclear weapons and usually involves the detonation of a nuclear device or bomb.

Nuclear fallout

Residual radioactive material after a nuclear blast that is propelled into the atmosphere and later falls down to the ground after the shock wave has passed and the explosion has ended. This is also known as “radioactive dust”, a type of extremely dangerous radioactive contamination.

Radioactive contamination

The presence of radioactive substances that can be found on surfaces or within solids, liquids and gases (including humans). Radioactive contamination is highly dangerous to organisms as the radioactive substances will decay and emit harmful ionizing radiation that can generate health problems, causing radiation sickness, cancer or even death in severe cases.

Black market

The illegal sale of goods that are not permitted to be bought or sold or that are in short supply. Goods on the black market are usually demerit or harmful goods, such as radioactive material, WMDs, guns or drugs.

Dirty Bomb (Radiological Dispersal Device/RDD)

A type of radiological weapon that consists of radioactive material combined with conventional explosives used to disperse radioactive material across a large area, often resulting in nuclear fallout. Areas victim to the effects of a dirty bomb often pose health risks to civilians within its range.

Background Information

Nuclear weapons began to gain recognition as a global safety hazard towards the end of 1945, approximately two years before the start of the Cold War, in which both the United States and Russia tested nuclear weapons beforehand in preparation for upcoming battles. However, the acquisition of radioactive materials by terrorists has only significantly increased in frequency in the past 12 years or so, during which already over 1,200 incidents of illegal purchases or acquisition of radioactive and nuclear materials have been reported.

Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material

One of the earliest treaties on this issue is the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material, adopted in 1980 and implemented in 1987. This treaty focuses primarily on protecting nuclear material and preventing its acquisition by forces other than the government. The convention makes state parties obligated to protect nuclear facilities, as well as nuclear material used in homes, storage and transport. Additionally, it provides steps states should take in the event of missing radioactive material to recover them and prevent them from being stolen or smuggled once more. This treaty is particularly significant as it was one of the first regarding the issue of illegal nuclear material acquisition to be considered and directly addresses the issue at hand. The treaty was signed by 153 state parties.

International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism

As the acquisition of radioactive materials by terrorists has only recently become a pressing matter, most measures to tackle the issue have only been taken within the last decade. Therefore, the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism, also known as the Nuclear Terrorism Convention, is a treaty designed by the United Nations only recently in 2005. It outlines penalties against acts of nuclear terrorism and procedures countries should take to ensure such acts do not occur, thus including procedures to prevent the acquisition of radioactive materials in the first place. This treaty currently has 115 signatories.

The acquisition of radioactive material by major terrorist/militant groups

The increasing supply of nuclear materials on the black market has sparked concern within nations worldwide as the risk of nuclear terrorist attacks rises continuously. In the past decade, large

terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda and ISIS have acquired significant quantities of radioactive material on multiple occasions. However, neither has conducted a nuclear attack as of yet, further making nations anxious at the risk of a random attack at any given time.

Al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda has been actively seeking out radioactive material for the past 15 years, possibly in hopes of coordinating and carrying out a large nuclear attack in the near future. It has been reported that the terrorist group have recruited “rogue” scientists to build dirty bombs for them, thus confirming the rumor that the terrorist group is capable of creating nuclear WMDs. The first evidence of Bin Laden’s plans to carry out nuclear attacks occurred in late 1993-1994, where Al-Qaeda attempted to purchase uranium, a radioactive material heavily used in the manufacture of WMDs. Since then, attempts to purchase or steal radioactive materials have been reported frequently, many of them on account of Al-Qaeda, and are often successful, thus further expanding the threat such terrorist groups pose towards humanity.

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

ISIS, known to many as one of, if not the most powerful terrorist group in the world, have also demonstrated plans to produce and use WMDs. One of their most well-known thefts of radioactive materials occurred in July of 2014, in which ISIS militants seized radioactive material from the University of Mosul in Iraq. The uranium was initially recorded to be an “insignificant threat” and would be difficult to convert into a WMD. However, the theft itself sparked concern within the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and prompted recognition of the issue of lack of strong regulatory controls for potentially dangerous materials.

Consequences of nuclear attacks

The consequences of nuclear attacks range from minor environmental damage to the death and serious injury of thousands. Most nuclear attacks can result in intense health damage to those within a certain radius of the blast and pose an immense threat to humanity as the risk of nuclear terrorism continues to rise. Many health impairments are directly associated with radioactive contamination as a result of nuclear attacks and can negatively impact the lives of many very heavily.

Acute Radiation Syndrome (ARS)

ARS, also known as radiation sickness or poisoning, is a compilation of health effects that occur following exposure to ionizing radiation. The severity of the ARS condition a person contracts is dependent on the amount of radiation they are exposed to. Examples of ARS include radiation

burn, a form of skin damage that can result in “burn” marks or severe redness on the skin, as well as damage to a person’s DNA and bone marrow. The destruction of the bone marrow may result in infections and internal bleeding, which, if critical enough, can result in death.

Radiation-induced cancer

Ionizing radiation has been proven to increase the risk of, or even cause cancer, particularly leukemia, a type of cancer related to abnormal white blood cell counts in the bone marrow. Exposure to ionizing radiation damages cells and DNA, and can cause DNA mutations to occur, which in turn, may result in the development of a cancer. Children are more susceptible to the health hazards of ionizing radiation, and so, are more likely to develop cancer.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Pakistan

Pakistan is home to many nuclear facilities and stockpiles, and is currently known to have at least 80 nuclear warheads. Pakistan has been deemed the most likely country for terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Taliban to attack and seize nuclear weapons from, particularly due to the instability and risk of collapse of the Pakistani government. According to the director of the Pakistan Security Research Unit at Bradford University, Pakistan has already been the victim of at least three radioactive material acquisition attempts just in 2007 and 2008, one of which involved a bombing and, consequently, the death of 63 people in Wah, Pakistan. These attempts to seize Pakistan’s radioactive material have prompted the launch of programs to further improve Pakistan’s nuclear security and prevent the seizure of the country’s nuclear weapons in the future.

Iraq

In July of 2014, ISIS militants successfully seized radioactive material from the University of Mosul in Mosul, Iraq. Although it was deemed an “insignificant threat”, the uranium stolen from the university opened up the possibility for the terrorist group to produce a dirty bomb. In February 2016, a case filled with a radioactive isotope of iridium was reported missing from a storage facility near Basra, Iraq. This iridium also posed the threat of the production and future detonation of a dirty bomb. Many countries fear that ISIS will eventually acquire this iridium, either by having stolen it themselves or purchasing it from the thieves responsible. The theft of both the uranium and iridium acted as a signal that the country was in desperate need of increased regulatory control for materials with potential for mass destruction.

Mexico

In April of 2017, a truck carrying an unknown amount of a radioactive isotope of iridium (iridium-192) through Mexico was hijacked and the radioactive material stolen. This theft triggered the Mexican government into placing 9 of Mexico's 31 states on high alert, stating that the radioactive material is very capable of being manufactured into a dirty bomb. The same isotope of iridium was stolen just a year beforehand, in February of 2016 in Iraq, prompting the idea that ISIS, who were a primary suspect in the theft in Iraq, could very well be the same criminals responsible for the hijacking of this truck in Mexico. Although there is a possibility the theft of this iridium was accidental, and that the thieves were primarily interested in the theft of the truck, the iridium still poses a major threat to the world. Many nations fear terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda or ISIS may purchase these radioactive materials from these thieves, who will most likely have no issue trading the materials for such large financial compensation.

Moldova

Moldova hosts one of the world's largest black markets for nuclear materials, from which many Middle-Eastern terrorist groups acquire their radioactive materials. During the breakup of the Soviet Union, its nuclear materials became scattered across multiple countries, some of which ended up in Moldova, which was once a Soviet republic. Subsequently, a black market for nuclear material emerged, through which there have been incidents of smugglers reportedly trying to sell such materials to buyers, specifically seeking out terrorist groups such as ISIS. Such attempts are usually made by Russian-linked gangs, and usually result in the involvement of the FBI in order to catch the culprits. Despite this, reports of attempted thefts of nuclear material are still circulating, and the country is not much closer to shutting down its black market.

World Institute for Nuclear Security (WINS)

The WINS is an organisation designed to prevent nuclear terrorism and improve world nuclear security launched in 2008 in collaboration with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The organisation serves to develop and share measures to improve worldwide nuclear security, and is therefore the first of its kind. It does so by bringing together countries, international organisations, the nuclear industry and nuclear security experts to allow them to collaborate together to achieve improved methods of security at nuclear facilities all around the globe.

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)

The IAEA is an international organisation that promotes the peaceful use of nuclear material by acting as a global focal point for nuclear cooperation between member states and assisting them in planning and using radioactive material. The IAEA is also responsible for developing global nuclear safety standards and conducting inspections within its member states to ensure they uphold the

standards and regulations set. The IAEA conducted the conference that resulted in the signature and eventual implementation of the Convention of the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material, and has increased its budget to \$30.1 million to aid with the implementation of over 70 nuclear security plans for nations worldwide, as well as securing loads of radioactive material and ensuring its security.

Timeline of Events

May 8, 2002	Jose Padilla, an American citizen, is arrested in Chicago on suspicion of planning to detonate a dirty bomb and aiding terrorist
July, 2002	Chechen rebels steal radioactive materials, possibly including plutonium, from a Russian nuclear power station
September 14, 2005	International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism is signed by 115 members
August, 2008	Militants set off explosions at the entrance points of one of Pakistan's main nuclear assembly points in Wah, Pakistan, killing 63 people
September 29, 2008	World Institute for Nuclear Security launched during IAEA General Conference
July, 2014	ISIS militants seize 40kg of uranium from University of Mosul in Iraq
February, 2015	Undercover agents in Moldova offered large amounts of radioactive caesium by a smuggler who believed them to have connections to the Islamic State
February, 2016	Case of radioactive iridium goes missing near Basra, Iraq
October, 2016	ISIS uses chemical weapons during attack on Kirkuk, Iraq, releasing toxic fumes across the battlefield
December 15, 2016	Security Council adopts Resolution 2325, which includes measures to prevent terrorists and other non-state actors from acquiring WMDs
April, 2017	Truck containing iridium-192 hijacked near Mexico's second largest city

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- Convention of the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material, 26 October 1979 (**INFCIRC 274**)
- International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism, 14 September 2005 (**A/RES/59/290**)
- Measures to prevent terrorists from acquiring weapons of mass destruction, 8 July 2016 (**A/RES/71/122**)
- Non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, 15 December 2016 (**S/RES/2325**)

- Threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts – Preventing terrorists from acquiring weapons, 2 August 2017 (**S/RES/2370**)

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

The most recent and direct attempt to solve this issue occurred on the 15th of December, 2016 through the adoption of the “Measures to prevent terrorists from acquiring weapons of mass destruction” treaty. The document listed regulations and methods governments must abide by in order to prevent terrorists from acquiring WMDs. However, the benefits of this treaty have not yet been revealed as it has only been 10 months since its adoption.

Additionally, Security Council resolution 1540, the earliest version of what is now resolution 2325 (Non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction), was the first of its kind to become a binding international document that obligates member nations to follow measures that prevent the sale and trade of WMDs. Although controversial at first, the resolution was supported and obeyed by most nations, who used it as a guideline as to how to confront nuclear threats and prevent the acquisition of nuclear materials in the first place. Although its effectiveness cannot be directly assessed, the resolution is assumed to have improved nations’ management of issues relating to radioactive material and thus prevented larger crises since its implementation in 2004.

Furthermore, following the events of 9/11, the Commission on the Prevention of WMD proliferation and terrorism was established. The commission was primarily operational for its first two years, during which it held over 250 interviews with governmental and non-governmental experts. In its first year of activity, it released a report in December 2008 that assessed the nation’s current programs relating to the issue and, in its second year, published recommended actions for the U.S. government to take, which included raising threat awareness and government reform. Although the commission was only specific to the United States, the commission served as an example for other nations to take after. The publication of the commission’ report prompted its reauthorization and approval by the U.S. Congress, and the recommendations cited in the report were implemented.

Possible Solutions

Prevention is the first line of defense in ensuring worldwide safety from nuclear attacks. In order to prevent terrorists from acquiring radioactive material, governments must follow a series of measures to guarantee nuclear safety. Firstly, all states should invest in research and construction to upgrade and secure all radioactive materials in nuclear facilities to both prevent unauthorized entry into the facilities and ensure that if such entry does occur, alarms are triggered and personnel are immediately informed. Borders must also be strengthened and secured to prevent the illegal smuggling of radioactive material

between states or countries. Unnecessary radioactive materials should be converted into harmless forms or fuels to ensure that regardless whether they are acquired or not, they pose no threat to mankind.

Secondly, international relations between countries must be strengthened to enhance the cooperation between nations regarding this issue, particularly if a nuclear threat has been issued by a terrorist organisation. Relations can be improved by hosting annual or bi-annual conferences that unite all involved nations and conduct meetings to discuss the presence of or potential for nuclear attacks and how they can be tackled.

Furthermore, programmes or divisions should be implemented under the IAEA with the sole purpose of securing radioactive materials. These programmes can include the hiring of nuclear experts to determine the danger of such materials and how to secure them, allocating IAEA officials to conduct random investigations into particularly vulnerable nuclear facilities to ensure countries and corporations are complying to safety standards issued by the IAEA, and assisting nations in improving their nuclear security at borders, public and private facilities.

Tackling the source of the issue directly – shutting down terrorist organisations – will eliminate the issue as a whole. Although a lengthy process, doing so will ultimately increase not just safety from nuclear attacks, but from terrorist attacks in general. Governments can do so in many ways, one of which is financing research into terrorist organisations to conduct raids to potential terrorist headquarters, as well as shut down websites and social media accounts recruiting members for these terrorist organisations.

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