

## Fighting terrorism - By invitation

## Could worse be yet to come?

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**Whether or not Osama bin Laden has acquired nuclear weapons, Graham Allison\* argues that the world must respond as though he has—and without delay**

AL-QAEDA'S terrorist assault on September 11th awakened Americans to the stark reality of mega-terrorism: terrorist acts that kill thousands of people at a single stroke. In the twinkling of an eye, possibilities earlier dismissed as analysts' (or Hollywood's) fantasies became brute fact. President George Bush rightly and resolutely declared war on Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and their Taliban hosts.

Yet as the American government scrambles to pursue a war for which it had not prepared, it must, in the idiom, "go with what we've got". Assembling an international coalition of very strange bedfellows, acquiring intelligence from sources and by methods it had mostly neglected, and jerry-rigging defences against the most obvious vulnerabilities, it gallops off in all directions. It does so without a comprehensive assessment of the threats it now faces, and lacking a coherent strategy for combating mega-terrorism.

In contrast, Mr bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network have been thinking, planning and training for this war for most of a decade. September 11th demonstrated a level of imagination, sophistication and audacity previously thought impossible by the American, or any other, government. As the press has reported, just a year ago the FBI had assured the administration that it had a "handle" on all al-Qaeda operatives within the United States.

Even in the midst of the exhausting exigencies of the current crisis, responsible leaders must acknowledge the possibility that much more catastrophic terrorist acts may be yet to come. Along the spectrum of mega-terrorism, the worst case would be a nuclear explosion in a large city. Had al-Qaeda attacked the World Trade Centre not with a minivan filled with explosives, as in 1993, nor with jumbo jets, but with a vehicle containing a nuclear device, what would the consequences have been? Even a crude nuclear device could create an explosive force of 10,000 to 20,000 tons of TNT, demolishing an area of about three square miles. Not only the World Trade Centre, but all of Wall Street and the financial district, and the lower tip of Manhattan up to Gramercy Park would have disappeared. Hundreds of thousands of people would have died suddenly.

In a 1995 *Washington Post* op-ed, I warned: "In the absence of a determined programme of action, we have every reason to anticipate acts of nuclear terrorism before this decade is out." I find no reason to revise this estimate today. The question is whether the horror of September 11th can now motivate the United States and other governments to act urgently not only against al-Qaeda, but also on the well-identified agenda for action to minimise the risk of nuclear mega-terrorism.



## How real is the threat?

As the Bush administration took office in January, a bipartisan task-force, chaired by the former Senate majority leader, Howard Baker (now ambassador to Japan), and Lloyd Cutler, a former counsel to the president, presented a report card on non-proliferation programmes with Russia. The principal finding of the task-force is that "the *most urgent unmet national security threat* to the United States today is the danger that weapons of mass destruction or weapons-useable material in Russia could be stolen, sold to terrorists or hostile nation states, and used against American troops abroad or citizens at home." (Emphasis added).

Think about it. Is this proposition correct, or incorrect? No serious analyst has spent more than a day examining the evidence without concluding that "loose nukes" are a first-order threat. Although some would argue that bioterrorism is an equal or greater danger, both count as threats of the highest order. As Mr Baker testified to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in March, "It really boggles my mind that there could be 40,000 nuclear weapons, or maybe 80,000, in the former Soviet Union, poorly controlled and poorly stored, and that the world isn't in a near state of hysteria about the danger."

The danger can be summarised in three propositions. First, attempts to steal nuclear weapons or weapons-usable material are not hypothetical, but a recurring fact. Just last week, the chief of the directorate of the Russian Defence Ministry responsible for nuclear weapons reported two recent incidents in which terrorist groups attempted to break into Russian nuclear-storage sites, but were repulsed. The past decade has seen scores of incidents in which individuals and groups have successfully stolen weapons material from sites in Russia and sought to export it—but have been caught.

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**Attempts to steal nuclear weapons or weapons-usable material are a recurring fact**

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A few years ago Boris Yeltsin's assistant for national security affairs, Alexander Lebed, reported that 40 out of 100 special KGB suitcase nuclear weapons were not accounted for in Russia. Under pressure from colleagues, he later retreated to the official Russian line that all nuclear weapons are secure and accounted for, but his twists and turns left more questions than answers. In the mid-1990s, more than 1,000 pounds of highly enriched uranium—material sufficient to allow terrorists to build more than 20 nuclear weapons—sat unprotected in Kazakhstan. Recognising the danger, the American government purchased the material and removed it to Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

Second, if al-Qaeda or some similar group obtained 40 pounds of highly enriched uranium, or less than half that weight in plutonium, with material otherwise available off-the-shelf, it could produce a nuclear device in less than a year. The only high hurdle to creating a nuclear device is fissionable material—an ingredient that is fortunately difficult and expensive to manufacture. But as a former director of the Livermore Laboratories wrote a quarter of a century ago, "If the essential nuclear materials like these are in hand, it is possible to make an atomic bomb using the information that is available in the open literature." An even easier alternative is a radioactivity-dispersal device which wraps a conventional bomb with radioactive materials that disperse as fallout when the bomb explodes.

Third, terrorists would not find it difficult to sneak such a nuclear device into the United States. Recall that the nuclear material required is smaller than a football. Even an assembled device, like a suitcase nuclear weapon, could be shipped in a container, in the hull of a ship, or in a trunk carried by an aircraft. After September 11th, the number of containers that are X-rayed has increased to approximately 10%: 500 of the 5,000 containers currently arriving daily at the port of New York/New Jersey. But as the chief executive of CSX Lines, one of the foremost container-shipping companies, put it: "If you can smuggle heroin in containers, you may be able to smuggle in a nuclear bomb."

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This threat has emerged because, after the cold war, the Soviet Union's nuclear arsenal and stockpile were no longer held behind prison walls. Post-Soviet societies have experienced a remarkable transformation over the past decade, becoming simultaneously more free, more chaotic and frequently more criminalised. The same dynamic that liberated individuals also undermined systems that previously controlled some 30,000 nuclear weapons and 70,000 nuclear-weapon equivalents in highly-enriched uranium and plutonium at more than 100 sites across Russia.

Thanks to extraordinary professionalism on the part of Russian military and security guards, many attempts to steal weapons have been thwarted. The security forces have been greatly helped by far-sighted co-operative threat-reduction programmes, set up at the initiative of Senators Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar, which have contributed almost \$1 billion a year. The American government knows of no case at present in which those who wish to make nuclear weapons have acquired either the weapon, or sufficient nuclear materials to make one. What must worry us, however, is what we don't know.

If Mr bin Laden and other terrorist groups have not so far succeeded in acquiring nuclear weapons, or materials from which to assemble them, we should give thanks for our great good fortune. If they have acquired them, most people will quickly conclude that, under existing conditions, this was bound to happen.

## How serious is the enemy?

Andrew Marshall, one of the few long-term strategists at the Department of Defence, has often warned that "If the United States ever faces a serious enemy, we will be in deep trouble." Al-Qaeda could be that serious enemy.

There can be little doubt that Mr bin Laden and his associates want to acquire nuclear weapons, have been seeking nuclear weapons, and would carry out a nuclear assault were they capable of doing so. Last year the CIA intercepted a message in which a member of the al-Qaeda group boasted of plans for a "Hiroshima" against America. According to the Justice Department indictment for the 1998 bombings of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, "At various times from at least as early as 1992, Osama bin Laden and others, known and unknown, made efforts to obtain the components of nuclear weapons." Additional evidence from a former member of al-Qaeda describes attempts to buy uranium of South African origin, repeated travels to three Central Asian states to try to buy a complete warhead or weapons-useable material, and discussions with Chechens in which money and drugs were offered for nuclear weapons.

Mr bin Laden himself has declared that acquiring nuclear weapons is a "religious duty". "If I have indeed acquired [nuclear] weapons," he once said, "then I thank God for enabling me to do so." When forging an alliance of terrorist organisations in 1998, he issued a statement entitled "The Nuclear Bomb of Islam". Characterised by a distinguished Islamic scholar, Bernard Lewis of Princeton, as "a magnificent piece of eloquent, at times even poetic Arabic prose," it states that "it is the duty of Muslims to prepare as much force as possible to terrorise the enemies of God."

**Mr bin Laden has declared that acquiring nuclear weapons is a "religious duty"**

His *fatwa*, videotapes and interviews offer chilling clues to Mr bin Laden's thinking. In a 1997 CNN interview he observed that "the myth of the superpower was destroyed not only in my mind, but also in the minds of all Muslims," when the mujahideen defeated the Russians in Afghanistan. In his view, "the Russian soldier is more courageous and patient than the US soldier," and the United States—as seen in its withdrawal from Lebanon in 1983 after the deaths of 241 marines, and its precipitous retreat from Somalia in 1993 after 18 special-forces soldiers died—is cowardly about suffering casualties. The attack on the *USS Cole* in October 2000 is a powerful symbol for him: "The destroyer entertained the illusion she could destroy anything," but found herself immobilised by a tiny boat. In his world, "The destroyer represented the capital of the West, and the small boat represented Mohammed."

Mr bin Laden cannot doubt that he is now at war. After the 1998 bombings of America's embassies in Africa, according to press reports, a secret presidential finding authorised the CIA to seek him out and kill him under the doctrine of self-defence. The United States launched surprise cruise-missile attacks on an al-Qaeda training camp in August 1998, but Mr bin Laden had left several hours earlier.

## What will al-Qaeda do now?

Mr Bush has declared that the United States wants Mr bin Laden "dead or alive". As the noose tightens around his neck, al-Qaeda's efforts to terrorise America are likely to intensify. Al-Qaeda can be expected to do everything it can to acquire and use every mega-terrorist means within its reach.

When asked by an interviewer why his earlier claims that the battle "will inevitably move to American soil" had produced so little action, Mr bin Laden replied: "The nature of the battle requires good preparation." September 11th signals not only preparation but also a campaign that puts a premium on surprise and seeks maximum terror through dramatic effect. As al-Qaeda concludes that the American-led international coalition may succeed in destroying it, it will become more desperate in seeking to acquire and use all possible weapons of mass-destruction against its adversaries.

## What must America do?

Preventing nuclear terrorist attacks on the American homeland will require a serious, comprehensive defence—not for months or years, but far into the future. The response must stretch from aggressive prevention and pre-emption to deterrence and active defences. Strict border controls to keep out smuggled containers will be as important to America as ballistic-missile defences.

To fight the immediate threat, the United States must move smartly on two fronts. First, no effort can be spared in the military, economic and diplomatic campaign to defeat and destroy al-Qaeda. Simultaneously, the unprecedented international effort of intelligence and law-enforcement agencies must seek to discover and disrupt al-Qaeda sleeper cells and interrupt attempted shipments of weapons.

Second, the United States must seize the opportunity of a more co-operative Russia to "go to the source" of the greatest danger today: the 99% or more of the world's nuclear, biological and chemical weapons of mass destruction that are stored in Russia and the United States. The surest way to prevent nuclear assaults on Russia, America and the world is to prevent terrorists from gaining control of these weapons or materials to make them.



### What the Baker-Cutler report recommends

1. **Make nuclear weapons and nuclear materials safer**  
 Drastically cut the number of sites where nuclear materials are stored.  
 Close vulnerable nuclear-storage sites.  
 Speed up the improvement of security, using the latest technologies, for buildings that continue to house nuclear weapons and materials.  
 Identify, label and seal all warheads and materials, and keep a check on them.  
 Extract highly-enriched uranium (HEU) from Soviet-built research reactors, especially in ex-communist Eastern Europe.
2. **Get rid of all HEU not needed for current weapons**  
 Speed up the purchase of Russian HEU.  
 Get an agreement to make the remaining HEU militarily unusable.
3. **Control excess Russian plutonium**  
 Make an inventory of all Russia's plutonium, and get it in one place.  
 Using those new technologies, improve safety at all places where plutonium is stored.  
 Stop production of plutonium.  
 Buy and/or destroy excess plutonium by blending it as mixed-oxide fuel and burning it in civilian reactors.
4. **Cut Russia's nuclear complex**  
 Shut unneeded weapons plants soon.  
 Pay key Russian nuclear scientists money for "contract research", to prevent the flow of expertise to other countries—and terrorists—seeking nuclear weapons.  
 Provide private capital for businesses that employ nuclear scientists from the "closed cities" of the Russian nuclear complex.  
 Help Russia pay for other long-term safety measures.

The readiest sources of such weapons and materials are the vast arsenals accumulated over four decades of cold-war competition. At the November summit at Crawford, as a central pillar of what Colin Powell, the secretary of state, has called the new "post-post-cold war" partnership, Mr Bush and Vladimir Putin should pledge to make all nuclear weapons and material as secure as technically possible as fast as possible. Their best course would be to follow the recommendations of the Baker-Cutler task-force (see above). Within Russia, the programme should be jointly financed by the United States, its allies in the war against terrorism, and Russia.

In the fog and heat of a frustrating war against an elusive terrorist enemy, to call upon leaders to act to prevent attacks of a kind that have not yet occurred may seem over-demanding. But if we fail to act on this agenda now, how shall we explain ourselves on the morning after a nuclear September 11th?

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