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Nuclear suitcase bombs on the loose

Osama bin Laden introduced himself to the American public on August 7, 1998 through two simultaneous bomb blasts at the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. With over 200 people killed and close to 5,000 wounded, his specialty was clear to see.

Mass-scale terrorism.

Less than two years later, the Saudi millionaire is one of the most wanted men in the world. There are good reasons why, according to Jessica Stern, formerly with *the White House National Security / Nuclear Smuggling Interagency*. Stern believes that the terrorists within the bin Laden network will soon have overcome the technical, political, moral and organizational challenges associated with the use of weapons of mass-destruction. This fact, added to bin Laden's determination, creates an American national security problem with international implications.

In March of 1995, the infamous magazine *Soldier of Fortune* published an article about the arrest of nuclear smugglers in Lithuania. What made this particular incident noteworthy was that the nuclear bombs were small enough to fit in a backpack. According to the article, previous smuggling attempts had been successful in delivering identical nuclear devices to Iraq and North Korea. The article received little attention due to the magazine not enjoying much respect among the mainstream media.

In the summer of 1997, the former Russian General Alexander Lebed told an American delegation of Congress representatives that he during his tenure at the Kremlin had

conducted an inventory of the Russian arsenal of so-called suitcase bombs.

These were tactical nuclear devices (RA-115) that weight about 60-100 lbs., had a detonation force of over 1,000 ton TNT, could be activated within 20-30 minutes without secret codes from Moscow, and were small enough to fit in a suitcase.

According to Lebed, he had only been able to verify the whereabouts of 48 nuclear suitcases of an arsenal totaling 132.

From a purely technical perspective, the existence of small nuclear devices such as these were nothing new or remarkable. The US produced hundreds of small nuclear weapons in the 1960s, *Special Atomic Demolition Munitions*, that weight about 80-100 lbs., had a had a detonation force of about 1,000 ton TNT, and were small enough to fit in a bag.

At first, the Russian government denied the claims made by Lebed. Eventually, it conceded that these suitcase size nuclear devices had indeed been produced and that the security surrounding them might have been less than perfect.

The 84 suitcase bombs missing might perhaps be found in former Soviet republics, or even in the US. In early 2000, Stanislav Lunev, a former officer in the Russian military agency GRU, testified before Congress that some of these nuclear suitcases might have been hidden on US soil during the Cold War.

There are other possible explanations of where some of these 84 missing nuclear devices might be. According to

Yossef Bodansky, *Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare*, bin Laden has since 1996 sought to acquire nuclear capabilities and might have succeeded thanks to the Chechnya mafia. In exchange for 20 million dollars and two tons of Afghan heroin, bin Laden might have acquired tactical nuclear weapons, perhaps as many as twenty, some of which are so called suitcase bombs.

The US finds itself in a troublesome position. bin Laden, motivated by his hatred of the American presence in the Middle East, has clearly demonstrated his capacity for mass-murder of innocent people. In a best-case scenario, bin Laden might potentially be able to acquire the capability to create destruction and death on a scale previously reserved for nation states. In a worst-case scenario, bin Laden might already have acquired this capability.

During the Cold War, the US could deter state actors with nuclear capabilities through the mechanisms of *Mutually Assured Destruction*. What makes a possible terrorist nuclear threat more wearisome is that this deterrence might not work when there is no enemy territory against which to retaliate.

A *Harvard University* study concludes that the best option for the US might be to prevent terrorists from acquiring nuclear capabilities. Because this might be difficult, or maybe even too late, the second best option is for the US to prevent these nuclear devices from reaching its territory. Unfortunately, this might not be a fool-proof option since it's ultimately impossible to stop every incident of nuclear smuggling in or out of a country.

Hence, neither deterrence or prevention might be sufficient policy options vis-à-vis a potential terrorist

nuclear threat. One alternative could be for the US to retaliate against a country that had aided bin Laden. If this is currently a possible US policy response, it's one that has yet become part of the public discourse.

There might be little the US can do to protect itself against nuclear terrorism, with the possible exception of changing its current policy of never giving in to terrorist demands. Changing this policy would not be a prudent political course of action. Yet, since bin Laden has the capacity for mass-scale murder, and potentially the capability as well, the question remains what options the US has available in the long run to save New York City or Washington, DC from destruction.

The possibility of the US changing its foreign policy due to a terrorist nuclear threat is unappealing, not only to the US, but to all states, individually and collectively. That is, if terrorists can change a nation's foreign policy through the threat of mass-scale terrorism, the terrorists will have acquired a *de-facto veto-right* within the international system at the expense of legitimate political actors, such as states and international organizations. This is an extremely unattractive scenario, but so is the possibility of terrorists using nuclear terrorism if a state didn't comply with their demands.

This represents a predicament for foreign policy makers that almost makes one sentimental over the predictable and stable, however bizarre, security the US enjoyed against nuclear threats during the Cold War.

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